

**RICE, REFUGEES AND  
ROOFTOPS**

**AIR AMERICA, INC.**

**BOOK THIRTEEN**

**1972**

**BUDDHIST ERA 2515**

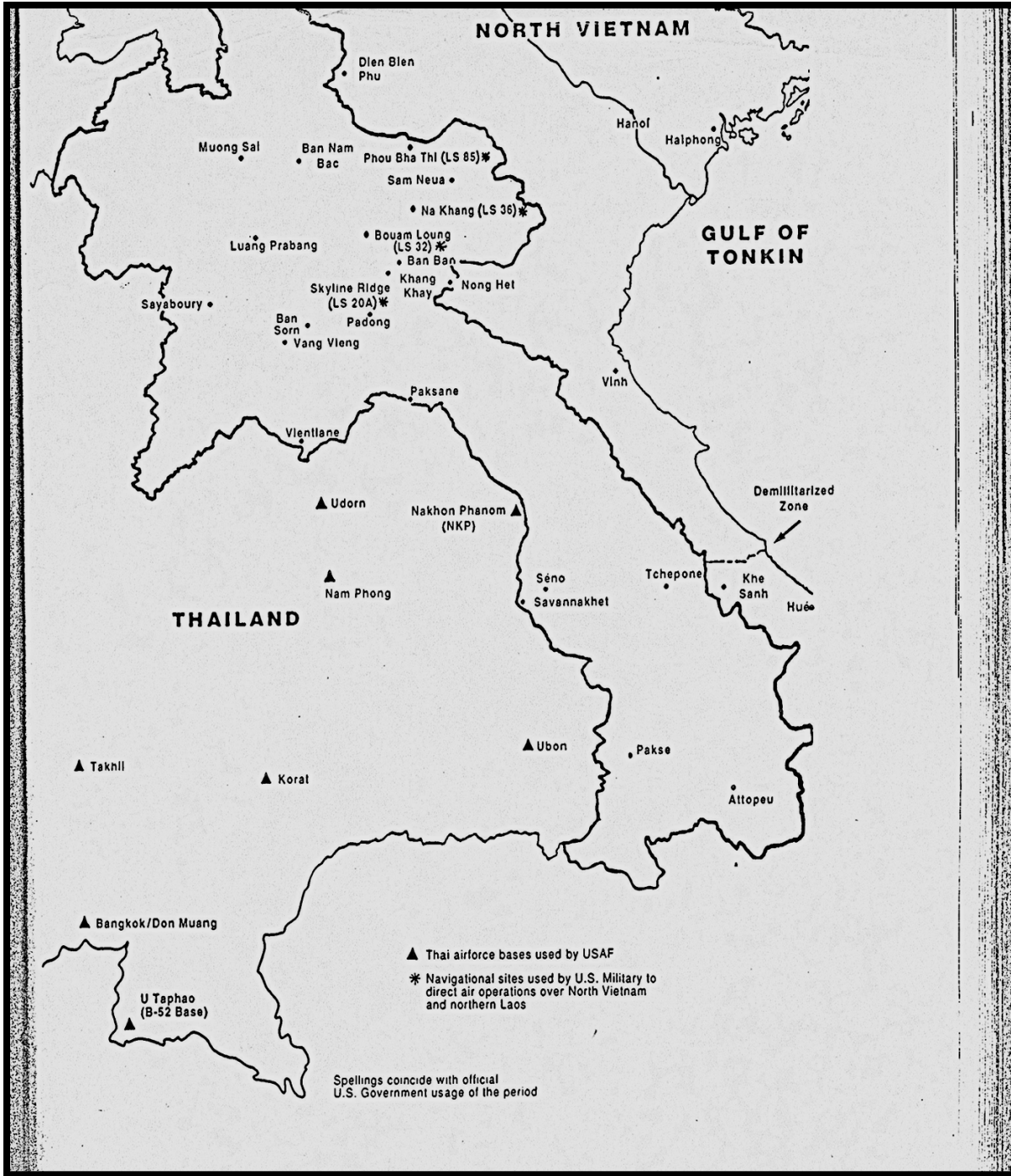
**YEAR OF THE RAT**

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HARRY RICHARD CASTERLIN



Air America baracks cap emblem.



Lodged between Thailand and the two Vietnams the graphic shows principal Mekong River towns and some present and former battleground sites in Laos. Thailand airfields were used by USAF squadrons to bomb targets in Laos and North Vietnam.

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	i
CHAPTER 1 JANUARY	1
Upcountry	2
Phase Two of the Enemy's Plan to Cripple General Vang Pao's Effort to Control the Long Tieng Area	3
Vietnamese Engineer's Diary	25
Counter Moves	27
Udon	38
Udon Air Base Functions	41
The Continuing Battle for Long Tieng	53
Vietnamese Army Military Plans	56
Captain Jim Rhyne's Encounter with Destiny	57
The Long Tieng Meat Grinder	59
A Tenuous Visit	61
Russell's Dash to Freedom	65
Route 7/13	69
Action in the Long Tieng Area	70
Lao Politics	72
Washington	73
Long Tieng	74
Return to the Line	75
Roulette	79
The Road	82
Slightly Lessened Action	83
Western Activity	85
MR-1	86
MR-4	88
Knight Returns to a Much Altered Operation	93
CHAPTER 2 FEBRUARY	97
Diversionary Tactics	100
Musing	108
Knight	116
Beginning of S-58T Compressor Stalls	117
Captain Knight	123
Upcountry	130
CHAPTER 3 MARCH	136
Upcountry	136
The Battle for Long Tieng Resumes	144
Vang Pao's Second Diversion	158
Just a Minute	168
Upcountry	170
A Fellow Pilot is Wounded	171
Tanks Cometh	180

## CONTENTS

The Final Stages of the Enemy Campaign Zulu	192
Ben's Day in the Sun	196
Southern Military Regions	201
Courtney	202
Action in MR-4	207
Ben Relinquishes his Time in the Barrel	211
Xieng Lom in MR-1	214
The Southeast Asian Theater Heats up	222
A Momentous SAR in the South	224
CHAPTER 4 APRIL	231
The End of the Second Battle for Long Tieng	233
Events to the East	238
Home on the Nong Khai Highway	243
Skyline	248
Enemy Plans	252
Washington and Vientiane	254
A Momentous Decision from Langley Headquarters	255
Knight Advances	257
The Airplane Angels Take Another Pilot Home	258
Twenty-Four Hours in the Battle for Skyline Ridge	259
Extra Ordinary Warrior Black Lion Passes	264
Special Project Particulars	265
Jim Pearson	269
Crew Survival Equipment	274
CHAPTER 5 MAY	278
Washington Ruminates	279
Vang Pao Moves Out	280
Knight Continues to Prepare for Return to Management	283
Action in the South	293
A Mission Gone Bad	294
Events in Bangkok	298
CHAPTER 6 MIDYEAR	302
Public Relations for New Employees and Dependents	305
Vang Pao Goes to the States	311
Captain Jim Rausch	312
Action in MR-2 Continues	317
Once More into the Breach	320
Khong Sedone	326

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER 7 JULY	332
Casterlin Reluctantly Joins the Special Project	335
South in MR-4	344
The Mission	347
The Gauntlet	352
Cambodia-Phase Two	354
Back in MR-2	357
Commitment	359
Locating at PS-44	361
A Crewmember Goes Down	376
Welcome Aboard to the Special Project	378
Additional Mission Equipment	382
MR-2	387
Problems at Lima Site-272	389
Otter Losses	392
Vang Pao's Monsoon Offensive Plans	395
Revelations	399
Disclosures	401
Hitting the Road	403
CHAPTER 8 AUGUST	418
Chinese Road Development in MR-1	421
The Third PDJ	424
MR-4	434
CHAPTER 9 THE PROJECT	435
New Ships Arrive	440
Knight and Special Project Training	441
CHAPTER 10 SEPTEMBER	450
Gyrations on the Ramp	453
The Home Front	456
Return to the Field	459
Udorn	461
Ramasun	463
The Project	466
Abbreviated LORAN Description	469
Night Vision Goggle Details	476
Prelude	483
The First Log Mission	488
Special Project Flight Following	491
Lower MR-2	503
Late September Events on the PDJ	505

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER 11 OCTOBER	516
Charlie	516
Additional Efforts	518
Jarina	520
Indonesia Military Assistance Programs	522
Ceasefire Possibilities in Southeast Asia	529
Ernest Moves Toward a Lao Peace	529
The Project	536
The Wiretap and Associated Equipment	538
Saravane	545
The Vinh Tap Mission Unfolds	552
The Chinook	559
Changes in the Twinpac Project	564
Another Tap Attempt	567
Additional Land Grab Efforts	572
Tap Difficulty	576
CHAPTER 12 NOVEMBER	580
Chinook Training	581
MR-2 Action	583
Agency Synopsis of the Monsoon Season Conflict	587
Back on the Line	592
A Can of Worms	593
Juggling Air Assets	604
Pratt and Whitney PT-6 Compressor Stalls and The Fanpac	607
Lao Peace Talks; Signs of Progress	612
Lima-44	617
The Company vs. the Far East Pilot Association	620
MR-2	626
MR-4	627
CHAPTER 13 DECEMBER	630
Finally...Success	633
Excitement on the Bolovens	638
Hot Soup	647
Hook Operations	656
Negotiations	659
Back on the Line	666
Military Losses	672
An Unpleasant Christmas Eve	674
Jarina Carries on	679

## CONTENTS

EPILOGUE	681
BIBLIOGRAPHY	682
GLOSSARY	686
INDEX	

### PHOTOGRAPHS

Skyline Defensive Position	7
Expanded View of the Defensive Position	10
Long Tieng Valley, Positions on Skyline	16
Vang Pao's Stone House Before Attack	21
Destruction at Long Tieng Caused by the Dac Cong Attack	22
S-58T Maintenance at Udorn	40
Aerial View Udorn Facility and Parking Ramp	42
Overhead Air America Complex	43
Air America Administration-Operations Building	44
Air America Radio Room	45
Chief Radio Operator Shane Tang	46
Air America Swimming Pool	47
Air America Facility and Part of the USAF Complex	48
Two Air America Hangars	49
All Three Air America Hangars	50
Air America Cargo Drop on Skyline	63
Smoky Mounng Oum Valley	77
Wayne Knight at his Desk	95
T-28 and O-1E Raven Parking Ramp at Long Tieng	155
Case Officers and Personnel at Long Tieng	162
Air America Hostel at Luang Prabang	164
Two Disabled T-34 Tanks on Road Below Skyline	195
Irregular Thai Troops Defending Long Tieng	237
Bombed and Shelled Central Skyline Ridge	253
Hughes-500 in Front of Air America Hangars	267
Case Officers Kayak, Digger, Ringo	281
Bell PFH at Long Tieng Ramp	291
Jay Allen in Udorn	310
Captain Jim Rausch	314
CJ Abadie, Unk, Jim Glerum	339
Northwest View of PS-44 Housing	367
West View of PS-44 Complex	368
PS-44 on Rim of the Mountain	369
Guard Posts at PS-44	370
Author's S-58T at PS-44	371
The "Hole"	374



## CONTENTS

The "Hole"	375
Acropolis at Athens, Greece	405
The Parthenon on the Acropolis	406
The Author with the Vail Children	409
View from the Hills Above Izmir, Turkey	410
Mary's Shrine	411
Ruins at Ephesus	412
Roman Amphitheater Ephesus and Sonny Vail	413
Back Country People of Turkey	415
Aegean Sea Toward Izmir	416
Saguaro Cactus, Arizona	420
IT&T Night Vision Glasses	443
Side View of H-500 P	445
Front View of H-500P	446
Inflatable Seat Cushion	462
Mel Cooper and Al Cates	524
Mel Cooper and Bill Long	528
Boeing Vertol CH-47C	561
Hydroelectric Dam at Ritaville Ridge	618

## MAPS AND GRAPHICS

Route-54 Alignment	7
CIA Map, 01/03/72, January Area Contention Long Tieng	12
Charlie Pads on Skyline Ridge	17
CIA Map, 01/06, Long Tieng Defense Line	23
_____, 01/07	24
_____, 01/08	26
1:50,000 Trail Alignment Enemy Movement	28
CIA Map, 01/12, Latest Action	34
_____, 01/14	39
_____, 01/13	54
_____, 01/31, Enemy Probes	84
Bolovens Plateau and Surrounding Area	90
Ban Gnik on Bolovens	91
Western MR-4 Khong Sedone	92
CIA Map, 02/05, Long Tieng Area	103
Vang Pao's Diversion Toward Route-4	105
Detailed Plans for Diversion Operations	106
CIA Map, 02/11, Slow Progress of Vang Pao's Troops	112
_____, 02/14, Situation Around Long Tieng	124
_____, 02/24, Vang Pao Forces Eastern PDJ and Route-4	132
Phase Two of Vang Pao's Diversion	143
Government Defense Positions at Long Tieng	147
CIA Map, 03/15, Situation Long Tieng and Sam Tong	160
LZs at Bouam Long and Area	167
CIA Map, 03/23, General Locations of North & South Diversion	169
_____, 03/21, Long Tieng Situation	185
_____, 03/26, Situation Skyline	189
Chinese Roadbuilding Beng Valley	216
Charlie Defensive Positions on Skyline	261

## CONTENTS

CIA Map, 05/18, Khong Sedone	295
_____, 06/17, Government Troops Bolovens and Khong Sedone	329
CIA Map, 07/08, Phou Pha Sai Location	358
Location of PS-44	363
LORAN Map of MR-4	364
First Phase of Phou Phiang Two	397
Chinese Road System MR-1	423
Vang Pao's Five Task Forces, Phou Phiang Two	425
CIA Map, 09/05, Phou Phiang Battlefield	452
_____, 09/09, Vang Pao's Wet Season Offensive	454
_____, 09/18, SGU-22 Retreating	506
_____, 09/27, Attacks on Task Force Bravo	511
Vang Pao's Plans to Interdict Road Systems	519
CIA Map, 10/20, Ban Gnik and Saravane	551
Hughes-500P Track from PS-44 to Vinh Tap Location	555
November Action in MR-3 at Ken Kok and Dong Hene	574
CIA Map, 11/06, Action on PDJ	585
_____, 12/04, NKP and Udorn Air Bases	632
_____, 12/18, Nape Pass	646
_____, 12/10, Little Organized Fighting	673

## INTRODUCTION

*...things are grimmest ever. The whole country is hard pressed."*

Letter Home, 01/09/72.

**S**o began my tenth year of challenging and exciting flying with Air America in Laos. This short preface best describes the battlefield situation in Military Region Two and throughout much of Laos as 1972 began.

Supported by a number of 130mm field canon that far outranged any of our artillery, and commanded by experienced and successful leaders, North Vietnamese divisional regiments and battalions were poised before the collapsing gates of Sam Tong and Long Tieng. For the Royal Lao Government (RLG) and the long-suffering warriors involved, the situation primarily amounted to a battle for survival. The Long Tieng base and its long, colorful history had represented a primary obstacle to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in discouraging the RLG and Major General Vang Pao's Meo soldiers from continuing their protracted war of attrition. The base defenders held, and with the advent of the wet season, the enemy withdrew.

It was a year that marked the Author's transition from a helicopter line pilot and S-58T instructor to participation in the AB-1 Agency (CIA) administered and highly secret Special Project program, designed to conduct long range indigenous team insertions and clandestine intelligence gathering deep into enemy territory. The mostly night flying program kept the Author off the front lines, but presented fresh dangerous and extremely challenging situations. In addition to conducting first time missions, it entailed learning the intricacies of special navigation and night vision equipment. Despite problems, failures, and a few successes involved in the enterprise, I

## INTRODUCTION

became addicted and continued the work throughout my remaining tenure.

Volume thirteen in the Author's ongoing anthology of the Second Indochina War in Laos contains numerous facets that most authors would likely be loath, and seriously challenged to address in depth. The account is compiled of part history, part autobiographical memoir, other pilot or third-party recall, and part reflection. It is a continuation of the Author's attempt to produce a valid and reliable story regarding the many years of ever accelerating conflict, ones he spent participating in the hazardous trenches of Lao airspace as a seasoned Air America combat helicopter pilot.

Since much of the previous Air America helicopter history and information leading up to 1972 is not generally repeated in this book, it is strongly recommended that the reader consult preceding books, or at least the 1971 issue, for background and a more comprehensive reference.

The seeds for this work were sown while working for Air America, Inc. from September 1962 to June 1974. Largely because of Company constraints (threat of termination with cause) regarding taking photographs and maintaining diaries, no special attempts were made by the Author to record day to day or eventful episodes. Fortunately, others were not duly intimidated, or else priceless photographs of the era would not have been preserved for posterity. Since we were cautioned not to converse about the war or what was occurring upcountry (a term used for Laos), as a catharsis to dissipate the emotional aspects of repressing such items, I forwarded semi-detailed letters about certain aspects the war to my parents. Assuming that my letters were being monitored, these missives were necessarily sanitized, essentially innocuous, and dealt with gross generalizations and accounts of some momentous incidents

## INTRODUCTION

in which I participated. As the years progressed, and I despaired of retaining reliable and valid information relating to my job, I began a careful, low-key effort to detail events and snap photographs.

In 1985, close friend, Chuck Frady, lent the Author a book published by English author, Christopher Robbins, written about Air America. Some of history appeared well researched, but most personal accounts were obviously gleaned from "Johnny-come-lately" individuals, having little tenure with the Company, and possessing insignificant knowledge of the actual situation. Disappointed with Robbins' attempt to describe the era, unaware of the enormous task ahead, I resolved to create a more detailed and accurate account of the war. <sup>1</sup>

Even without tangible records, except flight logs to draw on, much of my participation during the early era was indelibly burned into my long-term memory. Recall was jogged and expanded by often skewed recorded history. As a result, years after termination of the Second Indochina War, I found myself relating detailed war stories to friends and family. The recipients, generally others with limited Vietnam War knowledge, considered the narrative interesting. This tended to stoke and encourage my enthusiasm to create something tangible, worthwhile, and enduring for readers, authors, and military history aficionados.

Except for an excellent education at Duke University, I had little previous experience composing lengthy tomes. First, to obtain insight and knowledge about the subject, I had to research available literature regarding Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. This was followed by laboriously fashioning outlines and accounts in my largely unintelligible longhand. Before too

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Robbins' book provided the framework for the action-packed and scenic, but historically inaccurate, movie, *Air America* starring Mel Gibson.

## INTRODUCTION

long it was evident that an improved, more efficient system would be required. A Smith Corona word processor helped, but the state of the art at the time limited the amount of material that could be stored on expensive disks, and an errant stroke of a key could easily wipe out a month's work.

When the Author transitioned to a bona fide home computer that his son Peter built and maintains, the door opened wide to more thorough research. I was able to record all the information and detail required to relate a complete story. Consequently, what had originally intended to be a single book morphed into multiple volumes, individually covering each succeeding year of the war. My long-suffering wife refers to this decades-long project "the never-ending book."

As in previous works, the Author draws heavily on information contained in letters to parents or friends, personal log books, photographs, the Internet, and memory to produce narrative. Photos and maps from the Author's collection, from fellow Air America veterans, and other documented sources are liberally employed to help explain or expand understanding of the various and convoluted situations.

Serving to supplement the linear storyline, particularly when the Author was absent from the battlefield, Internet Email, Google, detailed CIA Bulletins, peer interviews, and other principals' input are included. Sadly, many former participants in the Second Indochina War are no longer with us and are dwindling each year.

In order to fill voids in the timeline, maintain consistency, and a cohesive flow of narrative, other writers' efforts are employed where deemed useful. In order to maintain legitimacy according to U.S. copyright laws, they are duly footnoted or documented when possible.

## INTRODUCTION

Crosschecking information regarding events or participants' recall of the conflict is extremely difficult at this stage in life, but most research and notes were conducted and recorded decades previously, as recorded in footnotes, and filed for later composition. However, as additional information pertaining to the war surfaces, research never ends, and continuous editing is deemed necessary in order to complete a comprehensive story.

Finally, the Author would like to acknowledge and applaud the contribution of the multi-national civilian men and women of Air America, Inc., Bird and Son (B&S), and Continental Air Services, Inc. (CASI) in support of the Lao war. This accolade also includes members of the Central Intelligence Agency, U.S military services, and associated USG agencies (USAID, USIS, etc.), and lastly the third country nationals (Chinese, Filipino, and Thai), who participated as a "face-in-the-crowd" in the Southeast Asian conflict during the lengthy and largely frustrating Cold War era.

For those who failed to make the final cut-RIP. I still visualize some of their faces today.

HRC

*"We all got sick after we came back to Udorn."*

Letter Home, Sunday 01/27/72.

**T**he family trip to Bangkok and southern Thailand was interesting, educational, and enormously therapeutic after my late December shoot down incident on the southern Plain of Jars. Time off allowed by local management after such traumatic upcountry occurrences went a long way toward repairing a person's damaged psyche, engendering Company loyalty, and ensuring lasting tenure.

However, there was a downside to our trip. After returning to the house on the seventh, we found that Pun, our competent maid of many years, had left for home because of a bad cold. Then, during the second week of January both boys developed minor colds. We had travelled to many places, but other than a distinct change in the weather from the warm south to the colder north, I do not know to what germs we had been exposed.

Tuie initially seemed to feel better, and the baby had shifted somewhat. Then, normally the epitome of excellent health, she became quite ill for the first time in our married life. Diagnosed with a strep throat, she developed an alarmingly high fever and failed to eat well. Concerned that the accelerated fevers might abort the baby, the Thai doctor ordered appropriate drugs and full-time nursing. The spare bedroom became her sick room while she was injected with intravenous drips and was constantly monitored. By month's end the problem had run its course, but she was still quite weak and dizzy and required further bed rest.

Our fun was not over. Preordained from the aerosol type microbes in the house, I began displaying symptoms of an incipient cold, and after a flight test (FCF) of S-58T Papa



Hotel Bravo on the 12th, developed a whopper of a chest cold that grounded me for over two weeks. <sup>2</sup>

Floods of the past two years that virtually destroyed the town's main roads, curtailed much commerce, and attributed the name to Udorn as the "Red City" because of copious laterite dust churned into the air was finally being addressed. (The situation became so bad that Captain Ellis Emery terminated his employment and departed for CONUS because of family health problems.) After a slow start, rebuilding had previously begun, but greedy contractors soon absconded with funds, leaving the project in abeyance. Now, to allay unfounded claims that years of airfield construction had caused the flooding and destruction, the USAF provided some money to repair the roads.

With concrete ribbons progressing throughout town, and some roads completed, to everyone's relief, a measurable difference in the dust problem was noted. <sup>3</sup>

## **UPCOUNTRY**

A dismal prognosis for Lao future was being reported in Congress and the media.

***"The military situation in Laos is more critical than at any time since 1962."***

Moose, Lowenstein Report to Congress, 01/72.

***"The end to defending Laos is in sight."***

*Washington Post, 01/02/71.*

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<sup>2</sup> FCF: Functional Check Flight. This was the acronym we used for test flight procedures for a helicopter.

<sup>3</sup> The problem of flooding and consequent road damage was not fully addressed until after the war, when a bypass or semi-circular loop road around the city was built that contained intrusion of seasonal water.

*"U.S. officials say that there is a better than a 50-50 chance the communists will take Site-20A in the next few weeks."*

*Bangkok Newspaper Report, 01/05/72.*

**PHASE TWO OF THE ENEMY'S PLAN TO CRIPPLE GENERAL VANG PAO'S EFFORT TO CONTROL THE LONG TIENG AREA.**

*"After readjusting its forces and completing all necessary preparations, on 31 December 1971 phase two of the [North Vietnamese] Plain of Jars-Long Cheng [Tieng] offensive campaign began. All campaign-level artillery forces and all unit artillery guns were used to shell Long [Tieng], the headquarters of Military Region Two, and Tham Lung Airfield [the place mentioned was actually Lima Site-72-Tha Tam Bleung that blocked the Route-54 road construction to Sam Tong] with direct fire support provided by our heavy weapons.*

*[As the attack unfolded], in the primary attack sector the 148th Regiment opened fire, attacking and capturing Phu [interchangeable with Phou] Moc [the central and western portion of Skyline comprising Charlie Tango (CT), Charlie Whiskey (CW), and Charlie Alpha (CA) landing zones] and then advancing into the Long [Tieng] area. Meanwhile, in the campaign's important secondary sector, the 165th Regiment attacked Hills 1516, 1978, and 1737 [between Sam Tong and Long Tieng], splitting the enemy formation between the intermediate defense line and Long [Tieng]. [As the battle progressed] the 174th Regiment moved from Ban Na to join the 141th Regiment in attacking and*

*occupying Sam Tong.*" <sup>4</sup>

North Vietnamese Campaign Zulu's two-division ambitious goals in Military Region Two were multi-faceted. The North Vietnamese intended to destroy the more important Lao government military forces (Meo, Lao Theung, and volunteer Thai) in the north (MR-2), neutralize General Vang Pao's efforts, and eliminate Long Tieng as a support base for seasonal offensive operations.

Western analysts believed the objective of the North Vietnamese offensive was not to seize all of Laos or replace Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. Military pressure would tend to sway Souvanna toward a more conciliatory attitude whereby he would seek the withdrawal of the Thai military and cease U.S bombing. <sup>5</sup>

After capturing the Plain of Jars (PDJ), two dozen artillery pieces, and many government troops, elements of two North Vietnamese divisions (that eventually totaled twenty-four battalions) immediately began preparing for the second phase of Campaign Zulu-the destruction of Long Tieng and perhaps total capitulation of "neutral" Laos to the communist camp. <sup>6</sup>

Preparing the way, *"subordinates of the 174th and 14th AAA Battalion of the 316th Division concentrated around Ban Na* [LS-

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<sup>4</sup> Colonel Ho Khang, Chief Editor, Military History Institute of Vietnam Minister of Defense, *History of the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation, 1954-1975, The Decisive Victory in 1972*, Volume 7, (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2007). Readers should note that North Vietnamese historians are sometimes at odds with Western accounts of the battle.

<sup>5</sup> Congressional Report from James Lowenstein and Richard Moose, Staff Senate Foreign Relations Committee members who arrived in Bangkok on 01/11/72 for a three-week fact-finding mission. Their previous trip to Laos had occurred during April 1971.

<sup>6</sup> Consistent with the Author's total disdain for communist ideology, even if appearing as a proper noun, except as the first word in a sentence, communist will never be capitalized.

15] and forced [government troops] to abandon that village on 21 December...

...During late December and early January the 165th and 141st Regiments of the 312th Division were located near Long Tieng and Phou Seu [a commanding mountain range located off the southwest corner of the Plain]...Subordinates of the 141st Regiment conducted tactical activities in the Tha Tham Bleung [LS-72] region, while 165th Regiment subordinates carried out attacks in the Ban Hintang area [located in a low valley two miles southeast of Site-72]..."<sup>7</sup>

Outgunned, the situation was grim:

"Since mid-day of 31 December [NVA] 130mm guns have fired more than 300 rounds into the Long Tieng complex. All the ordinance and buildings of the [site's] Lao Air Force have been destroyed and one 105mm howitzer disabled. The airstrip is still usable. But the shelling has caused air operations to be shifted to Ban Son, about 18 miles southwest of Long Tieng.

The [long ranging] 130mm guns were fired from positions just south of the [PDJ]. These sites were struck by U.S. tactical aircraft and gunships on 31 December and 1 January, and the pilots believe they may have damaged three guns. Heavy cloud cover and haze have hampered subsequent strikes.

Ground activity in the Long Tieng area has been limited to scattered clashes. A four-battalion irregular task force, totaling over 1,000 men, arrived in Long Tieng from Savannakhet on 31 December. These irregulars, who have been highly effective

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<sup>7</sup> CIA Synopsis, XXCC, The 1971/1972 communist dry season offensive in northern Laos.  
Over the years, I worked all the places mentioned.

*in south Laos, have been deployed to Tha Tam Bleung and Phou Long Mat, a few miles north of Long Tieng."* <sup>8</sup>

### **VIETNAMESE ENGINEER'S DIARY**

According to North Vietnamese trooper Xuandao, a member of the 316th Division 15th Engineer Battalion, 2nd Bridge and Road Company, who was in the artillery area improving and building a road from the Plain of Jars to Hintang and on to Sam Tong [Route-54], USAF battle damage assessments (BDA) of 130mm gun damage were overstated and inaccurate. <sup>9</sup>

*"Since noon yesterday [1st] enemy aircraft have bombed the 130mm gun firing positions two different times, but our artillery guns emerged safe and intact. The bombs all hit the fake firing positions...The trees and bushes on the mountainsides on both sides of the valley have been knocked down and strewn about, exposing bare dirt and rock."* <sup>10</sup>

Two days later comrade Xuandao observed:

*"Yesterday [3rd] Nam Siem Mountain [location of the ford across the river of the same name] has been hit by massed bombing attacks [likely B-52 planes] two different times. The bombs were aimed at the artillery firing positions and the new road used by the artillery. Our artillery guns have still not*

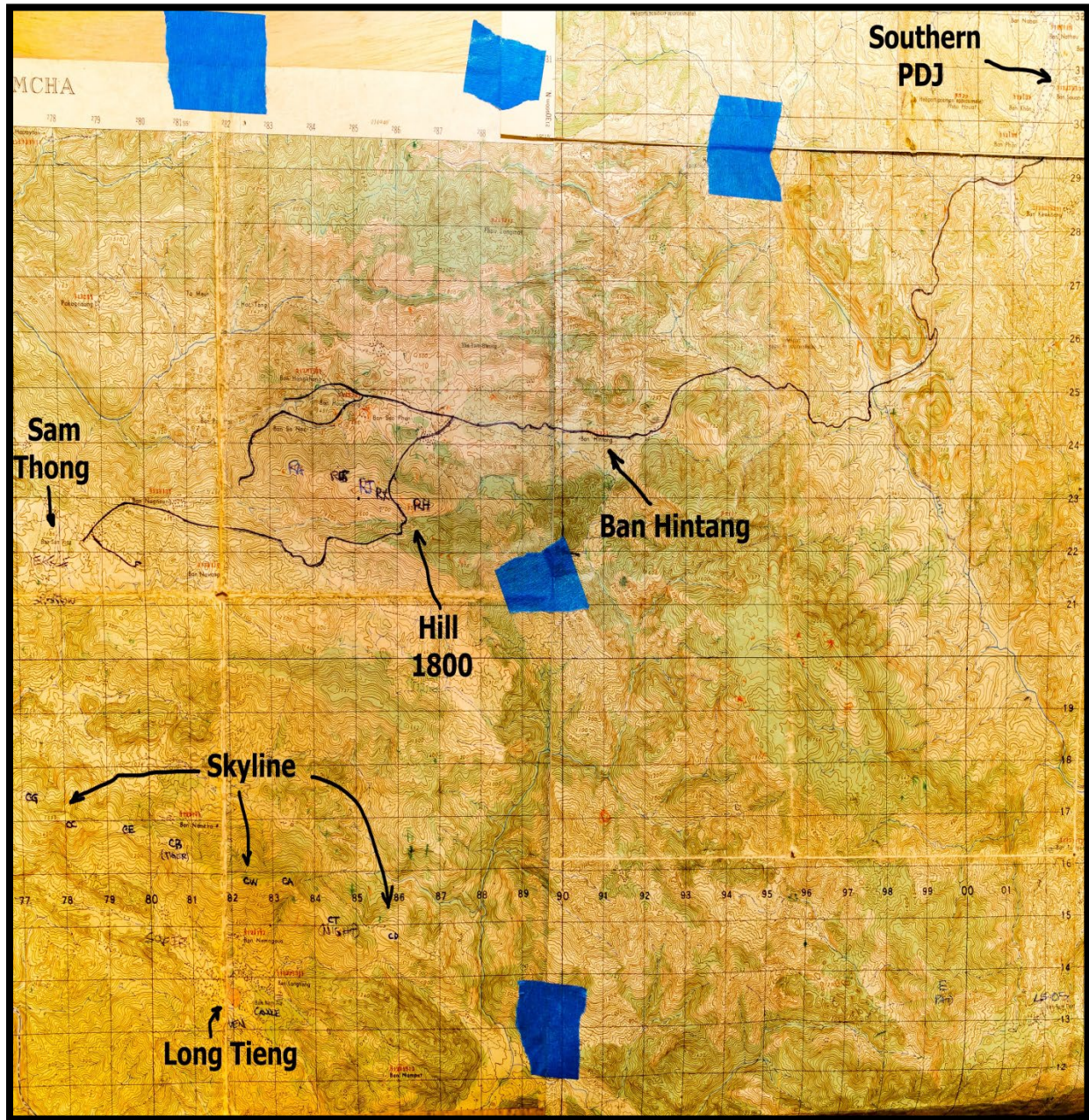
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<sup>8</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: The communists have launched heavy artillery attacks against Long Tieng, but no infantry attack has developed, 01/03/72.

Note: 130mm gun positions were only estimates. They were moved forward toward Long Tieng as necessary and as Route-54 was improved.

<sup>9</sup> 130mm guns: Although less accurate than American howitzers, these weapons had an effective range of seventeen miles, far outdistancing our 155mm guns with only a twelve-mile range. The siege guns had a severe demoralizing effect on the defenders.

<sup>10</sup> 15th Engineer Battalion Xuandao's daily personal diary regarding his participation in Campaign Zulu, 01/02/72. The diary was translated by linguist Merle Pribbenow and forwarded to the Author by former SKY Case Officer James Parker.



Three 1:50,000 maps patched together showing the estimated path of the Route-54 Vietnamese military and logistic road from the Plain of Jars to Sam Tong. The ford over Nam Siem is located at the upper right corner, as were caves on the north side of the mountain used to conceal and protect engineers, combat troops, and 130mm guns that were eventually moved forward to the Hintang area. A number of Thai battalion Delta pads were manned to the north, northeast, and east of Sam Tong of the road's terminus.

Map prepared by former USAF Raven FAC pilot Steve Wilson who participated in the 1972 battle for Skyline.

been hurt but a C-100 bulldozer that was carefully hidden in a ravine was destroyed.

*I don't like spending the day in the cave. If a bomb hits the entrance to the cave, we will be in big trouble. I simply long for the arrival of afternoon, when we go out to work on the road...This is because the new road [to Ban Hintang] has only been bombed by small flights of dive-bombers, and it has not yet been carpet-bombed [by B-52s]."* <sup>11</sup>

After the shelling of Long Tieng, Air America upcountry Flight Information Center (FIC) representative, Tom Sullivan, wisely relocated to Site-272. Late Saturday afternoon he forwarded a report to Vientiane describing the known situation and damage incurred at The Alternate.

*"20A received heavy shelling in various calibers up to and possibly including 130mm. Incoming started at 1530 [hours] on the 31st and continued intermittently until 0630 on the first. Damage and casualties [are] difficult to assess. Initial reports state the main ramp/parking area contain considerable debris; clearing in progress. Air America buildings and equipment received damage, extent unknown. FIC and air operations temporarily located at control tower facility at LS-272. No Air America casualties.*

*At 1500 [hours on the first] I visited [Site] 20A for a survey of Air America holdings. [The] FIC/air operations building suffered extreme concussion damage with all windows and door missing. Customer on scene reports lootings on air operations building. Due to incoming and evacuation, I departed 20A without inspection of [the] FIC room."* <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Comrade Xuandao's Diary, 01/04/72.

<sup>12</sup> Professor William Leary January 1972 Notes. Tom Sullivan reports to FIC Vientiane regarding the Long Tieng situation, 01/01/72.

Two relatively fresh Thai "volunteer" battalions, supported by artillery, faced the anticipated enemy assault on Skyline Ridge. BC-616 located at Charlie Charlie (referred to as Nam Cha by Vietnamese historians) and Charlie Echo positions on the western end, and BC-617 at Charlie Whiskey, Charlie Tango, and Charlie Delta toward the eastern reaches. (These positions were expanded, reinforced, and new ones established and manned by government troops at both ends of Skyline's long narrow ridge).<sup>13</sup>

On 3 January, two fresh government battalions arrived from northwest Laos and immediately deployed to various defensive positions.<sup>14</sup>

Airborne Command and Control Center (ABCCC), the twenty-four-hour day and night C-130 control planes aloft, Cricket and Alleycat, monitored and recorded VHF 125.5 frequency radio calls from indigenous forward air ground personnel (FAG) and attempted to provide them with timely tactical assistance when possible.

Also, on the third Cricket control recorded: Bad Man and Hot Plate both declared troops in contact (TIC). Hot Plate,

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<sup>13</sup> Ken Conboy with Jim Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*. (Boulder, Co: Paladin Press, 1995), 329.

Author Notes: The Author contributed substantial information to Ken Conboy regarding the Special Project program and other subjects of interest relating to the war. He has also found Ken Conboy's book interesting and instrumental as a primer in recall of the era, and establishing himself at events. Information used from Conboy's work has been documented in footnotes.

Skyline's Charley defensive/fighting positions had been manned during the 1970/71 enemy attack on The Alternate. Some positions were still viable, others required substantial reconstruction, and all were hardened with various battle-tested methods (sand bags, logs, overhead PSP, dirt-filled fuel drums) calculated to withstand artillery assault.

Without Thai defensive support at Long Tieng, it is doubtful the ground war in Military Region Two would have lasted as long as it did...and the fate of Laos could have been sealed earlier.

<sup>14</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 01/06/72.





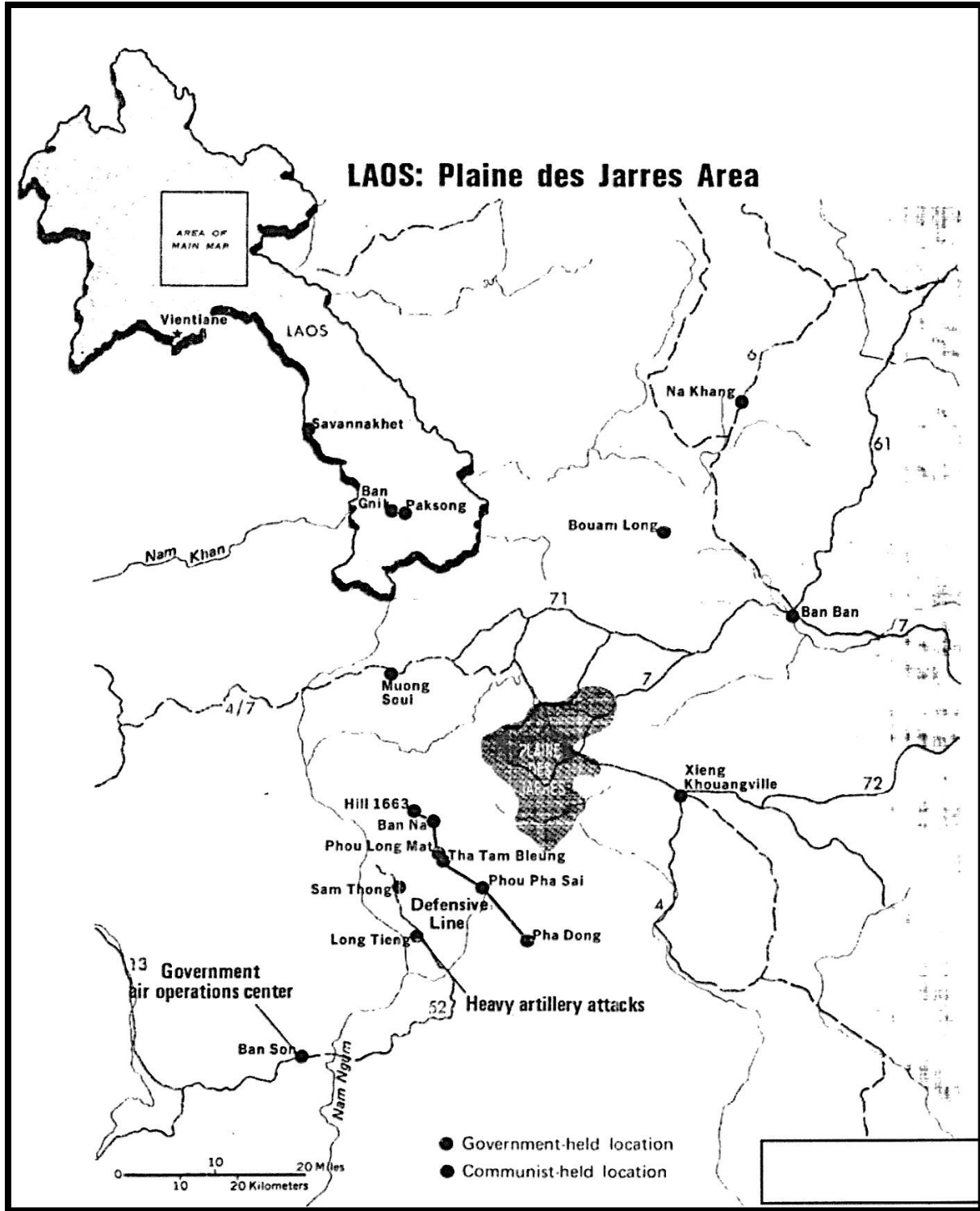
Defensive heavily sandbagged fighting positions and bunkers abounded on western Skyline Ridge.

Parker Collection, 55.



An expanded view of the previous photo showing a defensive perimeter fence, earthworks, shelters from indirect fire, and a reinforced trench line.

Parker Collection, 55.



January area of contention forward of and around Sam Tong and Long Tieng in Military Region Two.  
 CIA Map, 01/03/72.

located on the ridgeline north of the Sam Tong bowl, lost his position at 1945 hours and relocated to a new site. There were no reports of TIC during Alleycat's time on station.

C-130 Gunship Specter-06 reported several hundred AAA rounds from Route-4 in the western Xieng Khouang Ville Valley.<sup>15</sup> Although no large-scale assaults materialized, the enemy probed forward defenses to determine its opponent's strengths.

On the fourth, Tiger Mobile and Black Onion experienced TIC. Poppy lost an outpost on the north ridge of Sam Tong to a ground assault. Green Onion, located south of Site-72, incurred a heavy ground assault, which Specter-14 supported. The weather was declared unworkable.<sup>16</sup>

The Long Tieng area was not the only locale subject to enemy attack. On the third, Pathet Lao and dissident neutralist forces overran a government outpost ten miles east of Sala Phou Khoun, the crossroads of Routes-7/13. Two additional 105mm howitzers were abandoned during the attack.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Maintaining constant Theater and battlefield presence, C-130 ABCCC planes were designated Cricket and Hillsboro (day shift aircraft) and Alleycat and Moonbeam (night shift aircraft). Cricket orbited over Laos one hundred miles north of Udorn, monitoring and coordinating all fighters operating in Laos and North Vietnam. Hillsboro orbited in an area over the Mekong, a hundred miles southeast of Udorn, commanding fighters operating in Laos and the northern part of South Vietnam. Cricket launched at 0530 hours for the northern orbit. Hillsboro took off at 0545 for the eastern orbit. The planes normally remained on station for twelve hours or until relieved by night ABCCC planes.

<sup>16</sup> ABCCC reports in the Long Tieng area for 3 and 4 January. Forwarded by James Parker from his rough, booklet draft of the *Battle for Skyline* provided to the Author. Although exact positions are not always available, activity at FAG positions will continue to be reported as a matter of interest to depict the level of conflict during the battle for Long Tieng.

<sup>17</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 01/05/72.

By the fifth, hundreds of artillery rounds had impacted the Long Tieng Valley, although there was little enemy infantry action during the previous forty-eight hours.

Most large planes, but not Air America helicopter crews, temporarily stopped landing at The Alternate. Measures continued to dispense necessary operations to Ban Son. For uninterrupted control and access to assets staged at Ban Son, COS, Dick Johnson had relocated his headquarters to Site-272.

Along with Air America and CASI planes, Raven Forward Air Controllers (FACs) were operating daily from the newly refurbished airstrip at Ban Son. T-28 pilots operated from Wattay Airport greatly limiting their time over target (TOT) in the Site-20A area.

At The Alternate, subject to artillery fire and deemed untenable, the SKY (Agency) compound on the western hill above the loading ramp had been abandoned, with Hog, Bamboo, and Bag (Jerry Daniels, Dick Mann, and Frank Odum) along with Vang Pao (after he returned from the hospital on the 8th) and his ranking officers repositioned to a hardened command post bunker on the southern ridge.

Other Case Officers (Case Officers Doug Swanson-Cobra and Mike Ingram-Hardnose, Thai advisors) worked and remained overnight (RON) in Thai bunkers at the east end of the runway. Other necessary Agency personnel were transported daily to Site-20A on Air America helicopters from Vientiane, where some crews remained overnight (RON). The men worked the valley until evening, and to minimize potential losses, returned on helicopters to either Wattay Airport or Udorn.

At night a Volpar crew and key individuals orbited overhead to maintain constant radio contact with Case Officers on the ground and relay latest developments. <sup>18</sup>

During the day excitement prevailed for the Bell helicopter crew of Captains Dick Lister and Emmet Sullivan. They were hauling a three-barrel sling load of diesel fuel to the TACAN site located on the high point of western Skyline Ridge. An enemy unit was positioned at the base of the northern forward slope. As Lister climbed toward the position with the sling load, a T-28 pilot prepared to dislodge the enemy with bombs and rockets. As he delivered his ordinance small arms fire struck the aircraft. With the T-28 seriously wounded and black smoke pouring from the engine compartment, the pilot bailed out into what he considered a safe area. However, a strong wind blew him to the enemy side of the ridge. Opting to attempt a rescue, Lister immediately flew to the north side of the ridge. The crew spotted the parachute in a tree, but also noted heavy small arms fire directed at their helicopter.

In order to lighten the ship and enhance maneuverability, Dick attempted to pickle the load dangling beneath the belly, but the release mechanism failed to activate. While hovering out of ground effect (OGE) the Flight Mechanic somehow persuaded a young soldier to step out of the cargo compartment and attempt to kick the barrels off the hook while the enemy continued to fire at them.

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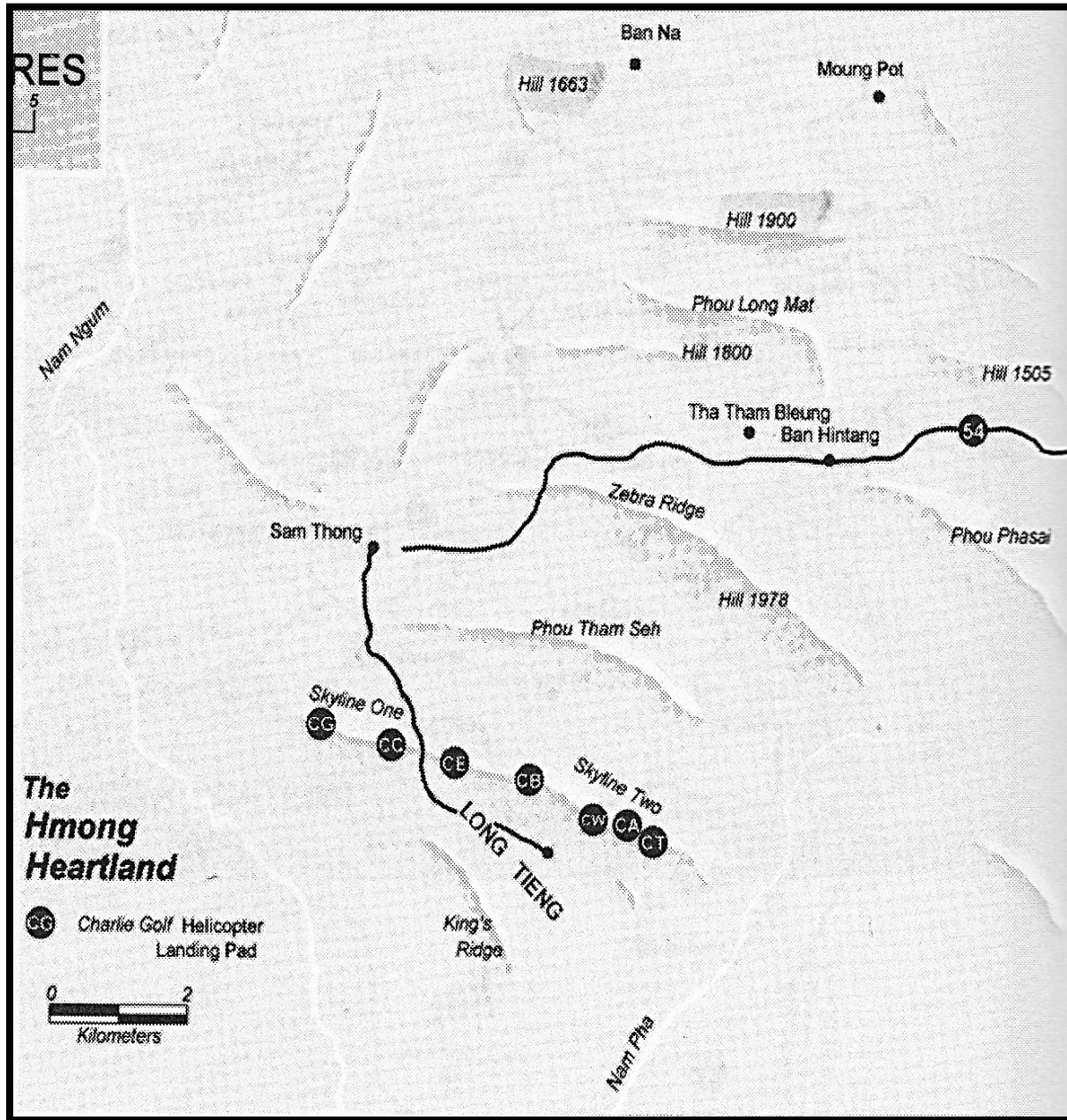
<sup>18</sup> Jim Parker, *The Battle*, 13.

Author Note: During our daily early morning Long Tieng commutes (LTC) the orbiting Volpar crew or a person onboard would relay current military conditions in the valley. If not available, this information was augmented by a Case Officer on the ground reporting the current situation, like shelling and permission to enter the valley. If shelling was still occurring, I would land on the southern ridge, which was theoretically out of range from 130mm guns, then wait, and maintain rotor RPM until cleared into the bowl.



The Long Tieng Valley as seen from the southeastern approach gap, showing the dirt road network used to supply defensive positions and fire support bases on the southern hills. Also seen is the northern and western portions of the long Skyline Ridgeline and the prominent Skyline Drive leading to Sam Tong. Additional Charlie positions (Alpha and Tango) were situated on the ridge's eastern reaches.

Author Collection, photograph provided by Frank Stergar.



Charlie pads located on Skyline Ridge's uneven four-mile length protecting and overlooking the Long Tieng Valley. Supporting Thai artillery batteries were positioned on King's Ridge, toward the southeast end of the valley, and south of The Alternate. Enemy road building units and 130mm guns were located in caves along Route-54 east of Hintang.

Conboy Graphic, 432.



With the SAR blown, Lister hovered back over the ridge and commenced a descent. During this phase, and close to the ground the soldier jumped off. When the load touched the ground, the cranky release mechanism activated. Drums began rolling down the hill in the direction of the courageous trooper. <sup>19</sup>

Consistent with anticipation of an impending enemy assault, on the fifth, to prevent its loss, the conex-box containing the TACAN unit (Channel-108) and other electronic equipment was relocated by a U.S Army heavy lift helicopter from the high point on Skyline to Phou Sang, a 5,000-foot mountain twenty miles south.

During the day, FAGs Bad Man, Bravo 69, Pink Onion, and Tom Tom had troops-in-contact TIC). <sup>20</sup> Raven pilots supported the positions. Later, Hot Dog reported TIC at 1810 hours, then weather precluded air support, and within twenty minutes his unit was forced to relocate.

Black Onion reported heavy attack by fire (ABF) and TIC at 1943, lasting almost two hours. Blue Dragon reported thirty trucks near Ban Na. Spectre-04 supported Blue Dragon. Young Man reported ten tanks near Moung Pot.

Probes and attacks continued throughout the area. The Alternate FAGs--North Star, Brown Dragon, Showboat, Hot Dog, Young Man, and Red Dragon--reported TICs.

Blue Dragon reported thirty trucks in the Ban Na area. <sup>21</sup>

*"Another 130mm field gun barrage hit Skyline ridge overlooking Long Tieng on the night [and morning] of 5-6*

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<sup>19</sup> Emmet Sullivan Interview. It is unknown what happened to the soldier.

<sup>20</sup> FAGs: Forward Air Ground personnel. These men provided necessary information of the emerging situation and requested air support.

<sup>21</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC reports for 01/05/72.

January. As on the previous night, little damage was reported, but the enemy clearly is attempting to zero in on irregular positions along the ridge. [That same night] the [NVA] overran one of the high points between CA and CW following a company-sized assault that killed eight irregulars.

Irregular units [FAGs Blue Dragon and Young Man reported being attacked by four tanks] on Phou Long Mat reported shelling by what they believe was a T-34 tank [from south of Moung Pot].

Photography indicated that the North Vietnamese used at least one [Soviet era] T-34 tank in their offensive on the [PDJ], the first time this tank has been used in north Laos. The rough terrain around Long Tieng would severely limit the tanks maneuverability and it will be difficult for the North Vietnamese to move [T-34] tanks into front line areas [but they eventually did]." <sup>22</sup>

At Moung Nham (LS-63), well east of Tha Thom, FAG Swamprat reported an attack by fire (ABF) at 0300 hours. After a brief but heavy ground attack, the troops began moving southwest. <sup>23</sup>

As during the protracted 1971 siege of Ban Na, Air Force Skyraider pilots (with the generic call sign Hobo at the Nakhon Phanom (NKP)) base were scheduled to support Long Tieng and the resupply efforts twice a day during the nut-cutting period. Because of adverse weather and elusive targets, their tasks were

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<sup>22</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 01/05/72.

Author Note: Ill equipped to destroy tanks, government troops were terrified of enemy armored vehicles.

Ken Conboy, 329-300.

CIA Bulletin, Laos: Intensified enemy ground attacks to Long Tieng area appear imminent, 01/06/72.

<sup>23</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: The North Vietnamese are keeping up the pressure on Long Tieng and its outlying defenses, but no large-scale ground attack has occurred, 01/07/72.

Jim Parker, ABCCC reports from 01/06/72.

William Leary. LS-272 FIC Tom Sullivan situation report to Vientiane.

often difficult. At times passes were conducted on Skyline when cloud bases were almost covering the ridge. This resulted in hairy maneuvers below target elevation, and a high degree of pilot concentration to maintain a safe airspeed. However, when the concerned FAG indicated a bona fide need for support, the situation justified assuming extra risks.

Throughout the seventh, weather was marginal in the Long Tieng area restricting A-1 pilots to low passes on Skyline. <sup>24</sup>

Brown Dragon reported TIC at 2240 hours, and two tanks near the new road leading to Hintang.

Bravo-69 reported for Lonestar that he was experiencing TIC in the Sam Tong area.

Blue Dragon reported seeing eight tanks around the Moung Pot area.

*"The level of enemy pressure continues to rise. [Forty] Vietnamese sappers [infiltrated Long Tieng and] destroyed the last remaining ammo dump [and damaged the CIA compound and the fuel dump] on 6-7 January. The resulting explosions closed the airstrip and hurled shells nearly a mile.*

*Sizeable enemy probes and shelling attacks were reported at almost all outlying defensive positions, including Sam Tong, Phou Long Mat, Phou Pha Sai and Padong, but no major positions changed hands."* <sup>25</sup>

Three dozen enemy sappers raided The Alternate Valley during the early morning. They attacked the SKY compound and Vang Pao's house with B-40 rocket fire. Two light (O-1) planes were damaged and a mechanic killed. One Dac Cong was killed and his body was desecrated by angry villagers. Air operations that

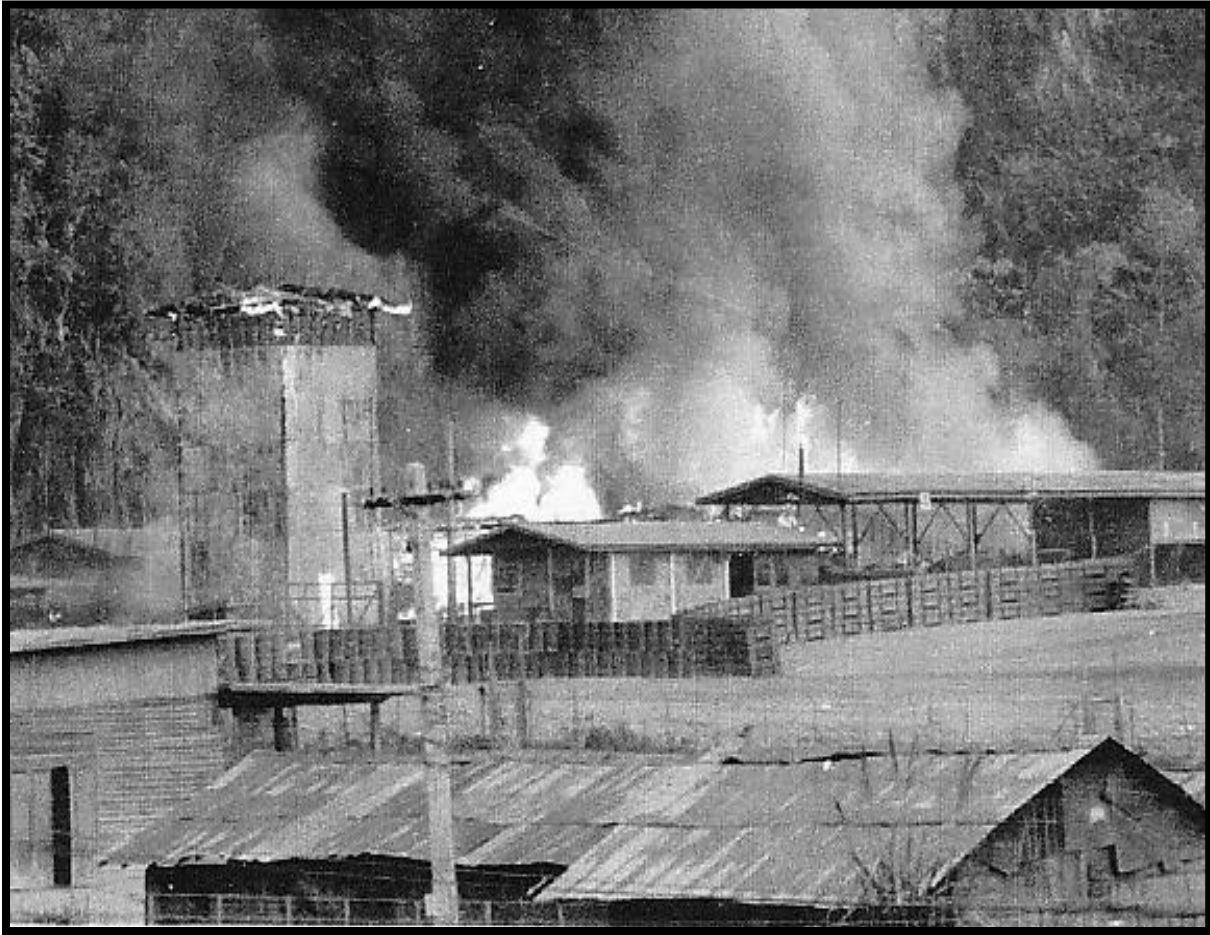
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<sup>24</sup> Former USAF Skyraider aviator 1st Lt. Byron Hukee, *A-1 Combat Journal*, Chapter 2.

<sup>25</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 01/08/72.

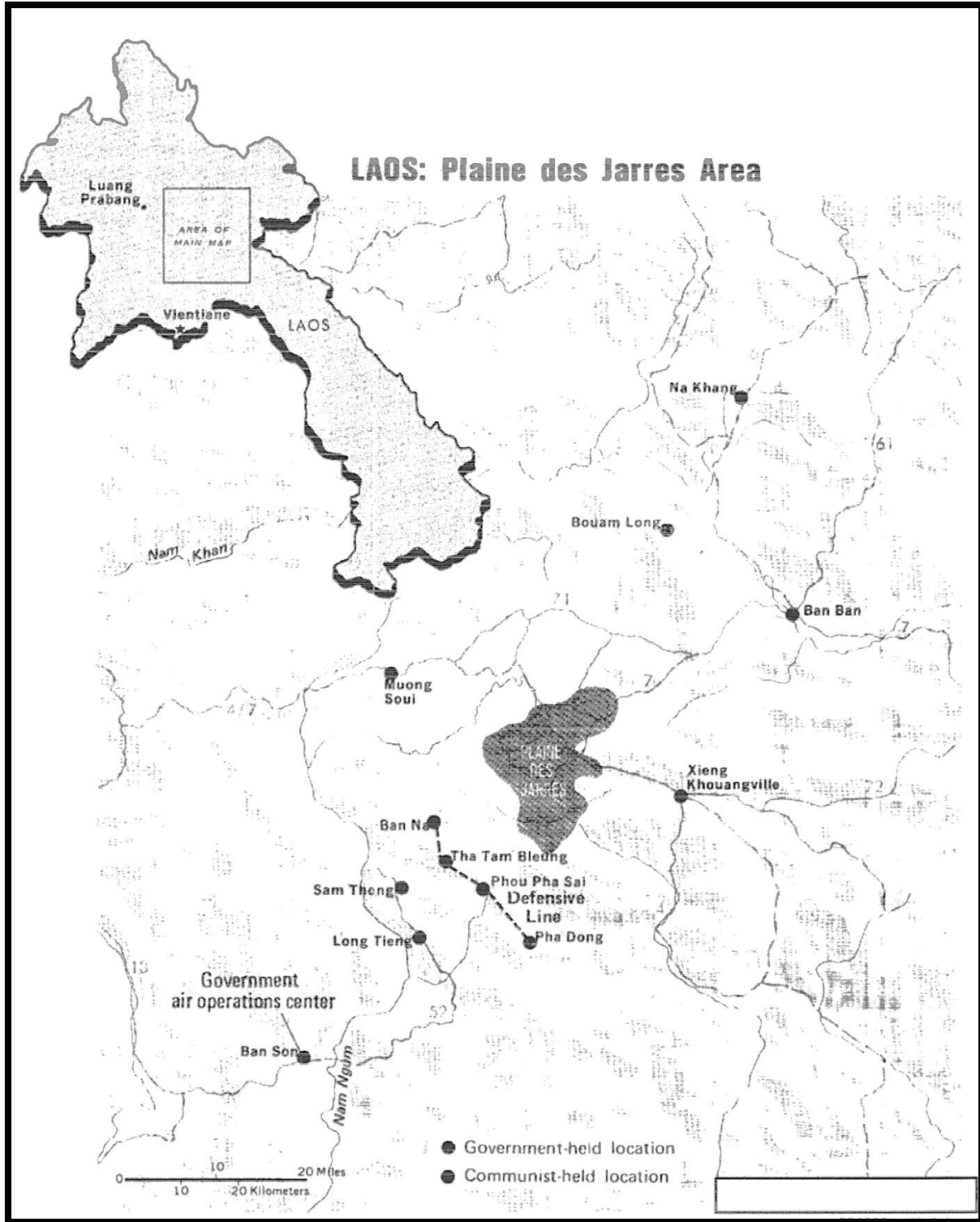


Vang Pao's stone house and headquarters at Long Tieng prior to the Dac  
Cong attack.  
Parker Collection, 59.

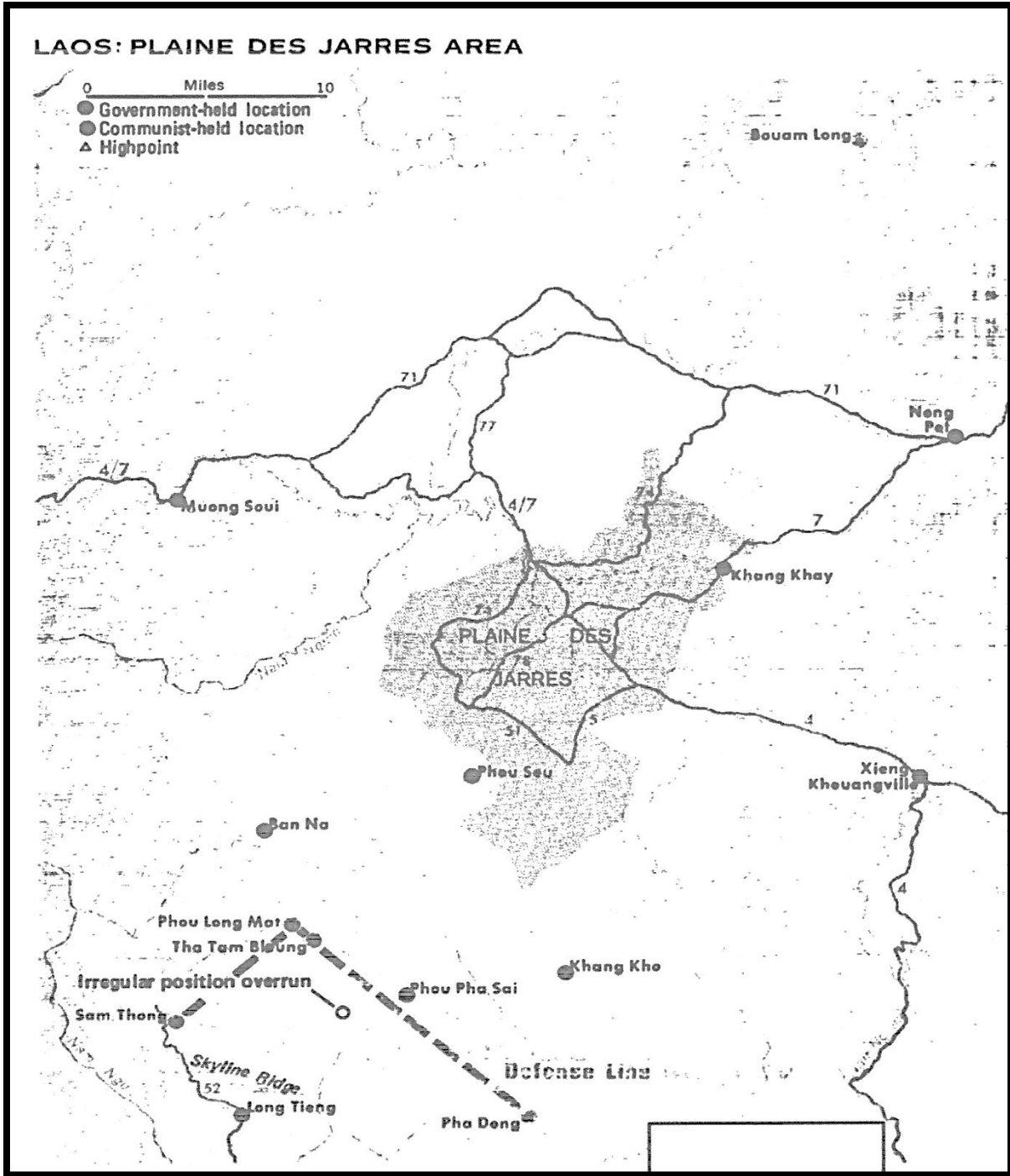


A Dac Cong sapper attack destroyed an ammunition dump on the loading ramp's northwest side. The tall building to the left is Shep Johnson's parachute drying loft.

Parker Collection, 49.



CIA Map, 01/06/71 of the Long Tieng defense line stretching from near Ban Na to Padong. Ban Son at the lower left became a temporary fallback site during the January fighting.



CIA Map, 01/07/72.

included landings by Caribou, Porter, and rotor wing crews resumed by mid-morning. <sup>26</sup>

On the eighth Raven pilots supported TICs for Bad Man, Hunter, Rocket Mobile, LS-20A, and Hacksaw.

At 0430 hours, Bravo-69 reported TIC at an outpost east of 20 Alternate. Spectre-22 supplied flare support, but the position was abandoned. <sup>27</sup>

During the day, the ABCCC controller recorded that Hacksaw's position received an attack by fire and Showboat had TIC. Rainbow located on the ridge north of Sam Tong was receiving incoming when Alleycat arrived on station and was forced to relocate.

At Udorn I stood by at home from the ninth until the eleventh.

*"I haven't been back to work yet...The whole country is hard pressed. I suppose that the enemy can only go so far because of their [extended] supply lines, but the surprising thing is their boldness. Things have looked bad before during this season, but never this bad this early. The rains are a long way off. Also, their weapons are much more sophisticated than ours."*

Letter Home, 01/09/72.

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<sup>26</sup> FIC, Sullivan, 01/09/72.  
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 330.  
Jim Parker, 13.

<sup>27</sup> ABCCC, 01/08/72.



## **ENEMY ENGINEERS ALONG ROUTE-54**

On 9 January comrade Xuandao recorded in his diary:

*"During the past several days we attacked Phu Pha Sai and Sam Tong.*

*We are being hit by carpet bombing attacks and dive-bombing attacks all day and night. There is no pattern to the enemy attacks. Everything has now been exposed and is known to the enemy. He has attacked the road, the artillery positions, and even the caves where our troops are quartered. Nam Siem Mountain, Nam Siem Stream and the Nam Siem Ford have all been pounded. When we travel back and forth between the road and our cave we have to run, crawl, and creep through trees, bushes, and dirt and rocks that have been blasted apart by bombs. One day when we returned to the cave, trees, dirt, and rocks covered the entrance and we were unable to even recognize the entrance to our cave. We have suffered several more casualties."* <sup>28</sup>

*"By 9 [and 10] January 1972 the 174th Regiment had been able to complete the capture of Sam Tong.*

*On 10 January the 165th Infantry Regiment within a short time secured control of Hill 1737 [north of Skyline], thereby completing its assigned task of dividing and splitting the enemy's forces."* <sup>29</sup>

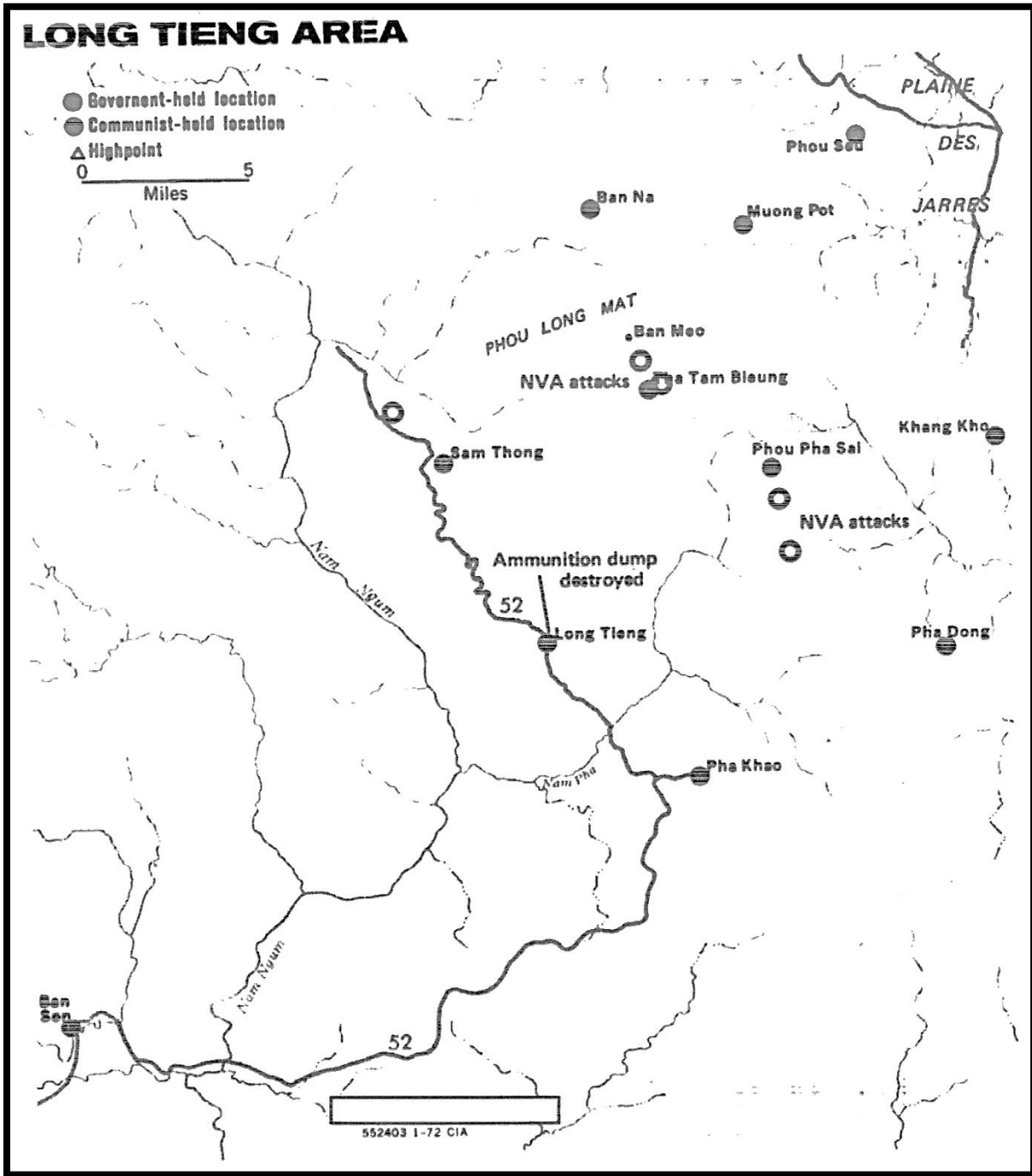
## **COUNTERMOVES**

In order to reinforce friendly forward defenses, three LS-118A Nam Yu battalions (mostly Yao ethnics) were deployed between Long Tieng and Sam Tong. One unit went to Phou Tham Seh

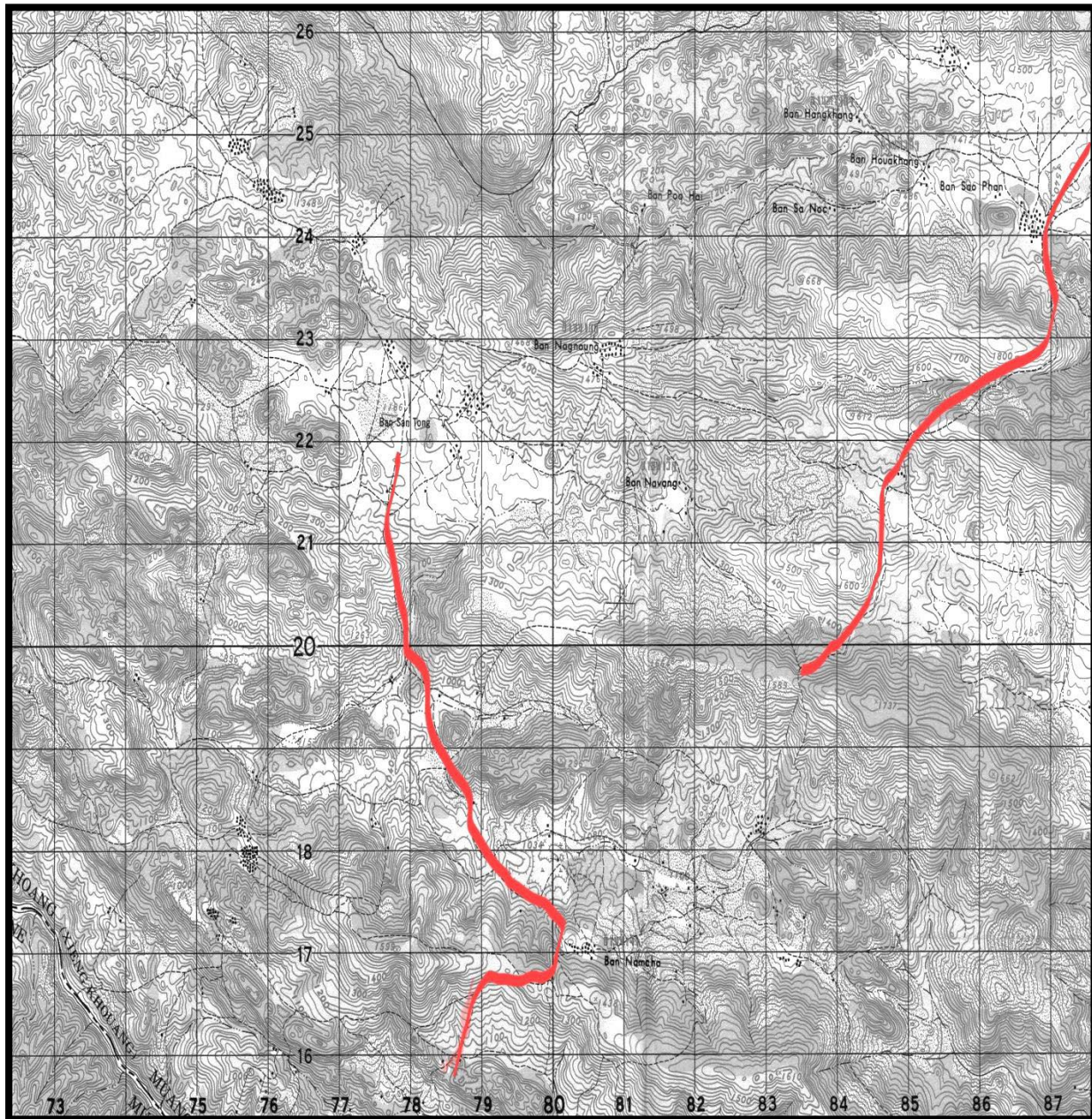
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<sup>28</sup> Xuandao Diary, 01/09/72.

<sup>29</sup> Ho Khang, *The Vietnamese History of the Indochina War*.



CIA Map, 01/08/72 with explanatory notes.



1:50,000 map depicting the approximate alignment of trails (right) the enemy used in their advance toward Long Tieng from Ban Hintang. Hill 1737 is just to the southeast of the path terminus where the Vietnamese established a field hospital and supply depot. To the left is the road from Sam Tong to Long Tieng.

Jim Parker Email, 07/28/17.

northeast of Skyline. <sup>30</sup>

During the day LS-20A and Buffalo Bill had TICs, while Rocket Mobile, Shamrock, Blue Dragon on eastern Romeo Ridge (Zebra), Rainbow southwest of Sam Tong, and Golden Gopher, located between Long Tieng and Sam Tong had attacks by fire. Raven pilots provided support for the friendly positions.

There was heavy ground activity throughout the night in Barrel Roll.

Rainbow reported an eighteen-minute ground assault on his position starting at 1952 hours. Blue Dragon reported an ABF and brief ground assault at 2020.

Far to the north at Phou Cum (LS-50), Slingshot reported a heavy ground assault and ABF at 0420 until Alleycat departed station. At positions on Route-7 in the hills above Xieng Dat and northwest of Moung Soui, Chicken Hawk and Buffalo Bill reported TIC. Fortunately, there was good gunship coverage throughout the night. <sup>31</sup>

*"At the remaining government positions northeast of the Long Tieng Valley, irregulars are reporting frequent ground probes and shelling attacks from elements of the six [NVA] regiments massed in this area. During the past two days, the valley has been attacked by NVA raiding parties...before being driven off.*

*...the North Vietnamese appear to be taking their time in attempting to give the coup de grace to Long Tieng. Traditionally meticulous in preparing for major battles, the NVA commanders may be willing to take whatever losses result from government air and artillery attacks while they ensure that their tactical and logistic preparations are complete. They may*

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<sup>30</sup> Ken Conboy, 330.

<sup>31</sup> ABCCC reports, 01/09/72.

*also be hoping that their continuing pressure on Long Tieng will cause defections in the government ranks."* <sup>32</sup>

Losses accelerated on the tenth, when Tom Sullivan forwarded his report to Udorn and Vientiane:

*"Reports that Sam Tong had enemy in the village this morning with air strikes requested and received. Later: Kayak advised that Sam Tong [is] now unfriendly."* <sup>33</sup>

As ABCCC recorded daily enemy attacks continued on local friendly positions: LS-20A, Bad Man, Slingshot (also TIC), Tom Tom, and Tiger Mobile had attacks by fire. Thunder FSB at Site-20 reported an hour and a half TIC beginning at 1910.

Blue Moon in the Long Tieng area declared TIC from 1927 until 2100 hours.

Rainbow reported TIC and a ground assault on his outpost beginning at 1930 and lasting until 2035.

Golden Gopher endured an hour of TIC starting at 0310. At 0330 Tom Tom had over an hour of 130mm incoming. <sup>34</sup>

*"On 10 January irregular units abandoned Tha Tam Bleung [LS-72] and some nearby positions and withdrew to the south. At last report NVA 130mm guns were shelling these units. The fluid situation in the area will probably make it difficult for other nearby irregular units to attempt to regain the position.*

*The [NVA] have occupied Sam Tong and the Sam Tong Valley. U.S. pilots report numerous enemy troops are active throughout the area, reducing the likelihood that the valley can be quickly retaken."* <sup>35</sup>

East of Ban Hintang the enemy camp had some reason to celebrate:

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<sup>32</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: The anticipated enemy assault on Long Tieng has not yet materialized, 01/10/72.

<sup>33</sup> Bill Leary Notes: FIC Tom Sullivan at LS-272, 01/10/72.

<sup>34</sup> ABCCC Reports for 01/10/72.

<sup>35</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 01/12/72.

*"Our troops have liberated the Phu Pha Sai intermediate zone and have captured Sam Tong.*

*Enemy aircraft are savagely attacking the outer perimeter in order to try to save their forces in the interior. Our company moved out during the night and crossed over the top of the mountain on the other side to new quarters...This area does not have large, solid caves like the kind found on the other side, but there are many small rock caves large enough to hold a platoon...It is closer to D-7 Pass but rather far to the [Nam Siem] ford, but that is better than being on the other side where we were being bombed all day."* <sup>36</sup>

*"Action today centered on Skyline. TIC throughout the day. Status of pads unknown."* <sup>37</sup>

*"The 316th Division began by launching an attack to overrun and capture the Long Tieng base. At that time the 335th Regiment [brought down from Nam Bac to participate in the Plain of Jars operation] was assigned to serve as the 316th Division's reserve force and at the same time it was used to transport supplies directly to our units on the front lines.*

*The regiments of the 316th Division first attack echelon sent a portion of their forces forward to infiltrate and attack the airfield area...However, because the strength of our forces was being eroded by losses, because we had insufficient artillery support, because our supply difficulties increased with every passing day, and because of the constant drizzling rainfall slowed the movement of all our forces, the attack was unsuccessful and our troops had to fall back to occupy and hold a line of high-points including Phu Moc, Hill 1433, and Phou Pha Sai. From this line we launched counterattacks..., creating*

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<sup>36</sup> Xuandao Diary entry, 01/10/72.

<sup>37</sup> Bill Leary Notes: Tom Sullivan FIC at LS-272, 01/11/72.

*conditions to enable us to renew our attack to capture the entire Long Tieng area."* <sup>38</sup>

On the eleventh, enemy regimental units moved on Long Tieng from the north, east, and northeast. In the process they rolled up forward defenses, including the Nam Yu battalion at Phou Tham She, and temporarily displaced Military Region Three and Military Region One troops located between Ban Na and The Alternate. Like clockwork, 130mm rounds continued to impact the Long Tieng Valley and Skyline every hour. Thai artillery countered, but was ineffective because of the range disparity.

Blue Moon, Hot Dog, Gumdrops, LS-20A, Tom Tom, and Slingshot reported TIC to Cricket. Raven pilots supported their needs. Continuous attacking waves of Vietnamese troops surged up Skyline's north slopes, while Thai and Luang Prabang troops fired on the advancing troops. Finally, the enemy invested Charlie Alpha in the center of Skyline causing BC-617 units to withdraw to the valley.

Heavy fighting on Skyline continued during the evening. Ground reports indicated a continuing enemy buildup along Skyline Ridge to the southeast and northern edge of the Long Tieng Valley. Located on Skyline, Base Pay (Sanyan) reported to Alleycat a thirty-minute ABF and ground assault starting at 1915. Also, on Skyline, Crowbar (Suban) reported a twenty-minute ground assault from 1900 hours. Hacksaw reported losing Charlie Whiskey pad and a mortar tube.

With weather unworkable for air strikes into the early morning, Site-20A, Bunker Control (Office-Amnaj located at the Thai command headquarters at the east end of the runway), Spotlight, Base Pay, Rainbow, and Bad Man had TIC.

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<sup>38</sup> From the Robert Sander Collection provided the Author: *History of the 335th Vietnamese Volunteer Army Groups*, translated by Merle Pribbenow.

There was some success in the area. Recorded in Vietnamese military history:

*"On 11 January, after capturing [the] Phu Moc [section of Skyline Ridge], the 148th Regiment quickly advanced to attack Long [Tieng]. However, because of inadequate command and coordination and because its forces had been dispersed rather thinly, the regiment's assault columns were blocked by enemy forces that had massed against them, and we missed our opportunity to attack and seize the objective."* <sup>39</sup>

In the meantime, friendly troops on Skyline Ridge and surrounding defenses were considered in dire straits. <sup>40</sup>

*"Many of the units in outlying positions are isolated and their aerial resupply and medical evacuation are increasingly vulnerable to North Vietnamese firepower. With the Padong-Ban Na defensive line completely shattered, Sam Tong lost, and communist units now in strength in the valleys close to Long Tieng, the government's strategy appears to be boiling down basically to tenaciously defending what it now holds in the hope that the combination of U.S. air power and communist logistic problems will keep the enemy at bay."* <sup>41</sup>

On the twelfth, Pathet Lao radio hastened to prematurely crow that Long Tieng had fallen to communist forces. The Agency was quick to counter that the communist claims were a myth.

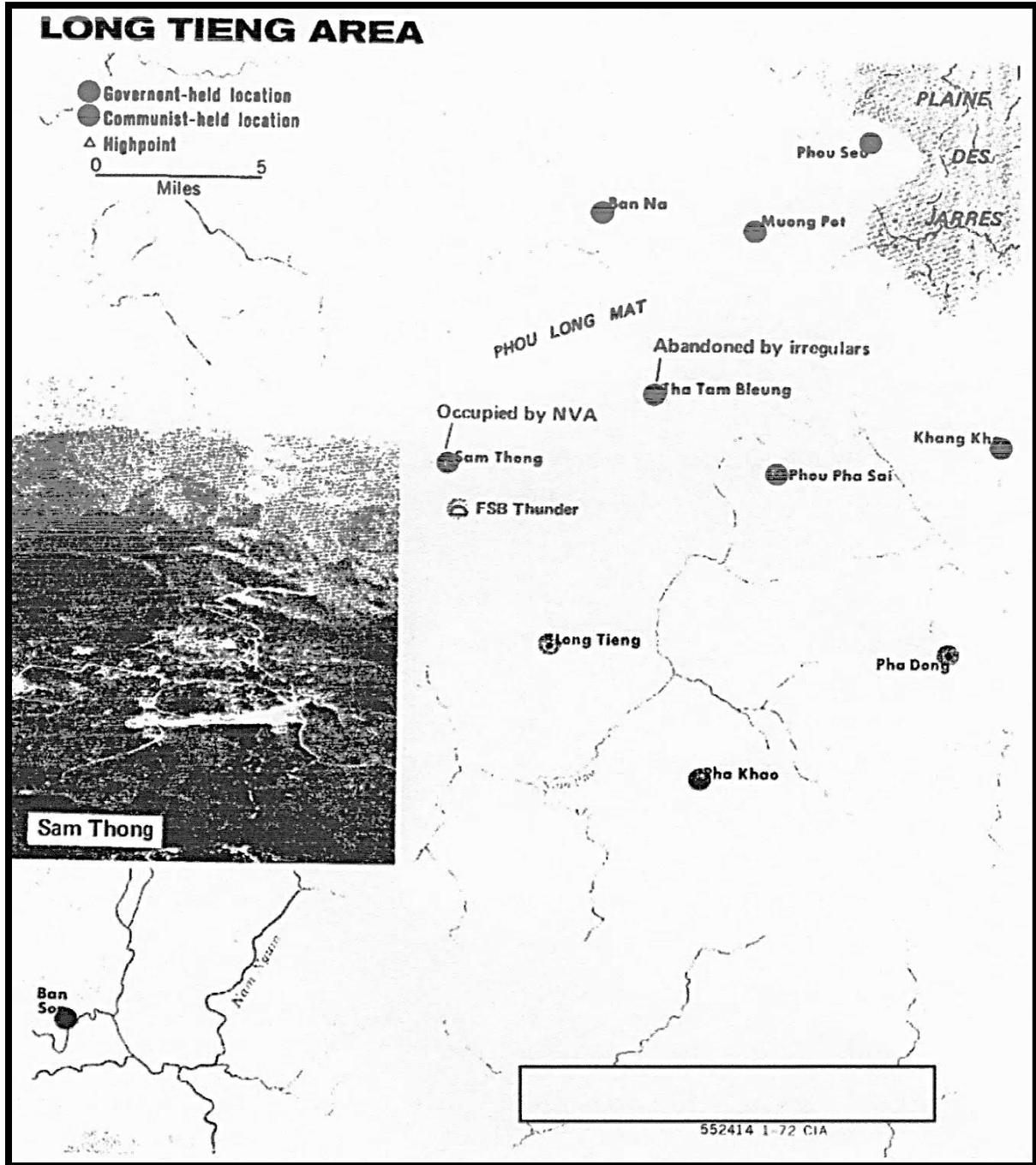
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<sup>39</sup> Ho Khang, *North Vietnamese Military History*.

<sup>40</sup> Sources for 01/11/72:  
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 330.  
ABCCC, 01/11/72.

<sup>41</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: The North Vietnamese continue to breach the government's defenses in the Long Tieng area, 01/12/72.





CIA Map with the latest action, 01/12/72.

*"Despite Hanoi's claims that 'Pathet Lao' forces have captured Long Tieng, the most recent reports indicate that as of the morning of 13 January fighting was still going on in the valley and nearby positions."* <sup>42</sup>

Because of incoming fire in the valley, there were periods when Air America aircraft were unable to land or resupply friendly positions by helicopter.

Since T-28 and Raven aircraft, along with crews, had been rotated to Wattay Airport, air support for Long Tieng was sporadic, largely dependent on weather, and generally limited to sixteen sorties per day.

F-4 assets were used for Barrel Roll support, but AOC Scott had to compete with requests for air in South Vietnam and Cambodia. Dependent on weather in Steel Tiger and Vietnam, sixty sorties per day were considered feasible.

Above all, 130mm gun fire was instrumental in curtailing air operations in the valley. As a result, sorties from Vientiane suffered proportionally.

The gun sites were well camouflaged and protected by heavy AAA, making them difficult to spot and hit. *"Even when a gun was pinpointed and the F-4s broke through the defending fire, their 500-pound bombs were usually too inaccurate to do the job."* If a gun was spotted, a laser-equipped PAVE Nail OV-10 would launch from the Nakhon Phanom Air Force Base to illuminate the weapon for the bombers to strike. However, *"the slow speed and low altitude of the OV-10 made it very vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire."*

*Strikes on Route-54 were similarly impeded by poor visibility and anti-aircraft fire. Most of the fighters had to drop their bombs by LORAN or radar, which did not seriously*

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<sup>42</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 01/14/72.

*interfere with the road building. The gunships were more successful, destroying or damaging 349 trucks in January."* <sup>43</sup>

At Customer request, two daily A-1 flights at 0900 and 1500 hours were fragged from Nakhon Phanom to escort helicopter evacuation missions. The operation was successful. WIAs were identified, helicopter crews assembled, and missions conducted. If the A-1 pilots were not required to expend during a medevac, Raven control then used them for close air support. <sup>44</sup>

With part of the Skyline Ridge lost, GM-30 troops were shuttled from the Zebra (also called Romeo) Ridge to Long Tieng. After assembling and receiving orders, they began ascending the ridge along the Sam Tong Road toward the Charlie Echo junction (the ridgeline from CE west was called The Scarf by North Vietnamese historians) in order to move east and retake enemy portions.

Starting at 1930 hours The Alternate was impacted by seventeen 130mm rounds for a half hour. This was followed by TIC at the eastern end of the runway at 2050. Three more attacks occurred during the late night until early morning (2240, 0020, and 0140). At 0237 an artillery round impacted an ordnance depot, resulting in fires.

Bravo-69 reported to Alleycat that an outpost was lost in the hills south of Sam Tong at 1840. To the east of Site-20, White Dragon was hit three times throughout the night by TIC and ABF.

*"The five [Thai-manned] fire support bases-four in the [Long Tieng] valley [Samson, Hercules, Candle 1 and 2] and one*

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<sup>43</sup> Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos: Staggering to a Cease-Fire*, 355.

<sup>44</sup> Major Jesse E. Scott, U.S. Air Force Oral History Program, Interview-663 conducted at Maxwell AFB by Gallacher and Ahmann, 04/06/73, 82-83.

*just east of Sam Tong [Thunder]-provided support to government forces throughout 12 January.*

*Irregular units performed well both in the valley and along its western ridges."*

*The Ban Son complex was not immune to communist attacks.*

*Air support was extensive and a major factor in keeping enemy units at bay." <sup>45</sup>*

Because of the delay in timetable planning to capture Long Tieng, and unable to advance any further:

*"On 13 January, the Campaign Command Headquarters ordered all units to temporarily suspend their attacks in order to realign our posture and our deployment of attack forces." <sup>46</sup>*

*"To the southwest of Long Tieng, the communists launched a small rocket attack on Ban Son, the new government support base. This may well presage a growing communist interest in this area, which is also the center of the Meo refugee settlements. There is no evidence that any main force [NVA] units have moved into this area, but a threat to Ban Son or the refugee settlement could well cause Meo irregulars to desert the Long Tieng area."*

At the Site-272 refugee camp, sappers struck at 0100 hours using B-40 rockets. During the first twenty minutes of mayhem

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<sup>45</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC reports for 01/12/72.  
Ken Conboy, 330.  
CIA Bulletin, Laos, 01/13/72.

<sup>46</sup> Ho Khang, The North Military History of the Vietnam War.

<sup>47</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 01/14/72.  
FIC Tom Sullivan.

that continued in some form until 0530 hours, they burned the headquarters building and inflicted an unknown number of casualties. <sup>47</sup>

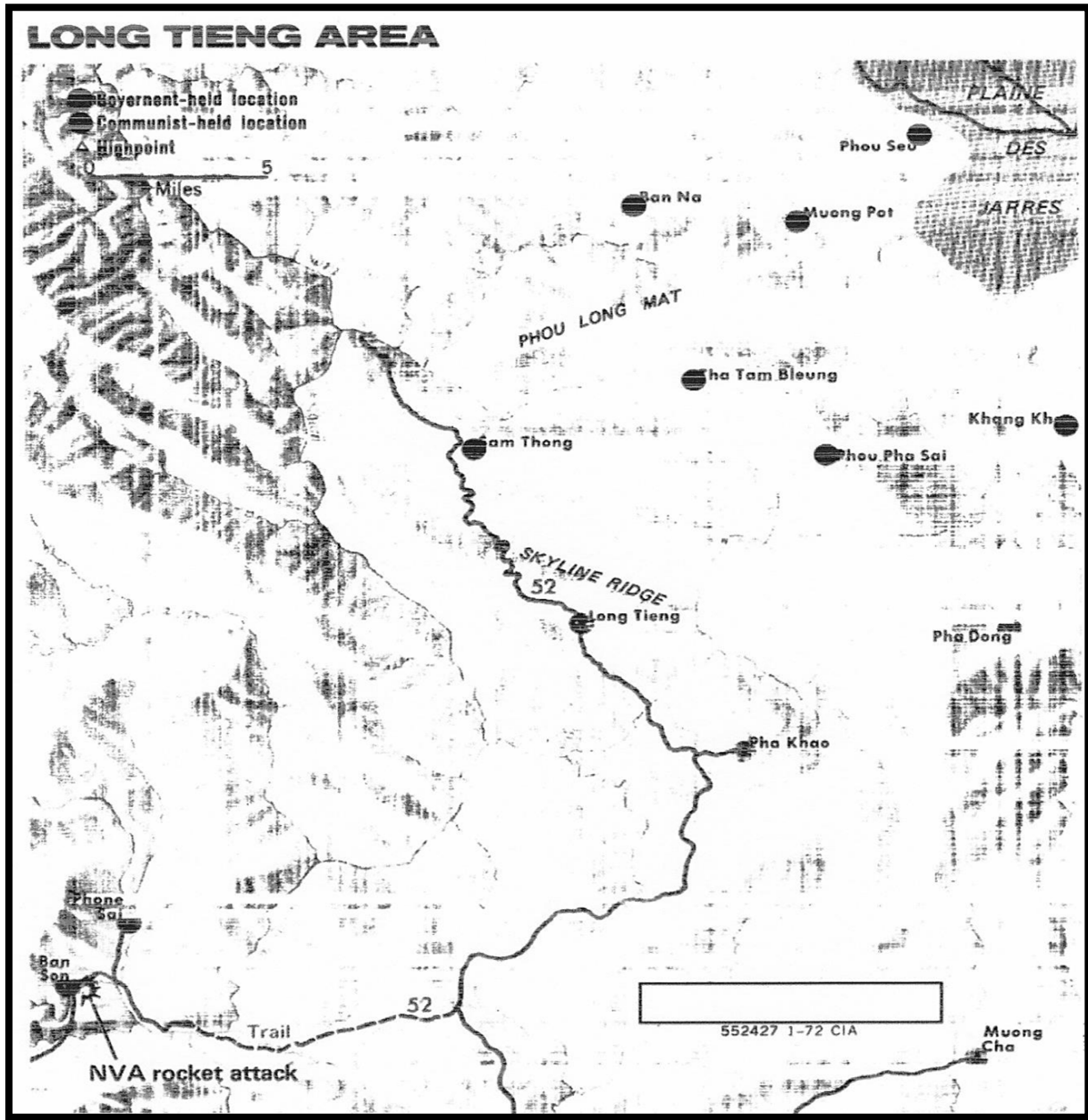
## **UDORN**

On Wednesday morning, the twelfth, I was scheduled to FCF XW-PHB. Despite feeling very bad, half sick with a head and impending chest cold, I managed to struggle through comprehensive test flight procedures that Bob Davis had distributed to those of us involved in the maintenance work. That afternoon, after completing the FCF, I was informed that I was going to undergo instrument training the following day with Herb Baker in the H-34.

This was a total surprise, and would constitute a first in our continuing and casual semi-annual proficiency and night training syllabus. Moreover, I had no idea who first proposed the idea. Without unduly dwelling on the subject, quasi-bastardized instrument flying was something we all accomplished throughout the year. I would be the first to admit that normally, flying an H-34 often required close attention to instruments. Weather and smoky conditions, if not considered bona fide instrument meteorological conditions (IMC) in so-called civilized countries, entailed flying in borderline visual meteorological conditions (VMC).

As I had not had any formal instrument training in years, any skills I might have acquired were history (we did perform ADF approaches during semi-annual night training and an occasional ground-controlled approach-GCA when local traffic permitted). I also knew that I possessed no decent instrument panel scan, and informed Herb of this. Nevertheless, Herb was

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CIA Map, 01/14/72.



Air America's talented ground mechanics were capable of many tasks on various aircraft. A Sikorsky S-58T undergoing day maintenance outside Hanger One. Next to the Twinpac a Bell is being rebuilt.

Author Collection.

upbeat and appeared to look forward to the work. He conducted a little skull work to reacquaint me with current instrument (IMC) procedures and terminology. I had forgotten a lot, but afterward wondered, "Was this trip really necessary?"

The next day I was feeling considerably worse, with the throat and head cold beginning to drop to my chest, so I decided to visit the Air America doctor. On the way to the clinic I encountered Herb Baker in the Administration-Operations building hallway. From the hoarse, congested sound of my voice and peaked appearance Herb knew we were not going to fly that day. It was a good thing, for the training would have required high altitude work and a chance of developing a painful ear block, such as had unfortunately grounded me for two weeks in 1969. The Thai doctor concurred with my miserable state of health, and I was grounded for the next fifteen days, which denied me exciting frontline work.

### **UDORN AIR BASE FUNCTIONS**

Although there were several joint Royal Thai and U.S. Air Force bases in Thailand (Korat, Nakhon Phanom, Ubon, Takhli, Udorn, and U Tapao; sheltering a total of 450 multi-purpose planes), Udorn was considered the most important military and civilian nerve center in the country. Over the years, the Udorn Royal Thai Air Force facility had developed into a sprawling, multi-functional complex that housed the USAF Seven/Thirteen headquarters (along with varied aircraft, equipment and men) and military and USAF intelligence detachments.

Also located on the premises was the Deputy Chief Joint United States Military Assistance Group Thailand (JUSMAGTHAI), the unit that administered the Department of Defense (DOD)-funded military program in Laos, which had relocated from Bangkok to Udorn to be closer to the actual war.





1972 aerial view of the Udorn air base looking, west at the concrete parking-taxi ramp with various kinds of fixed wing aircraft and helicopters (In 1962 this ramp was dusty, red laterite stone and contained potholes). To the left is the extensive Air America complex. Lower left is a portion of the USAF F-4 warm-up revetment. Lower right, two U.S. Army attaché Bells and a Helio Courier. Beyond the ARMA equipment, the taxiway leads to the Customer Q warehouse, CASI parking area, and the two-story Customer-staffed JLD "White House."

*Air America Log, Volume-6, #5, 1972.*

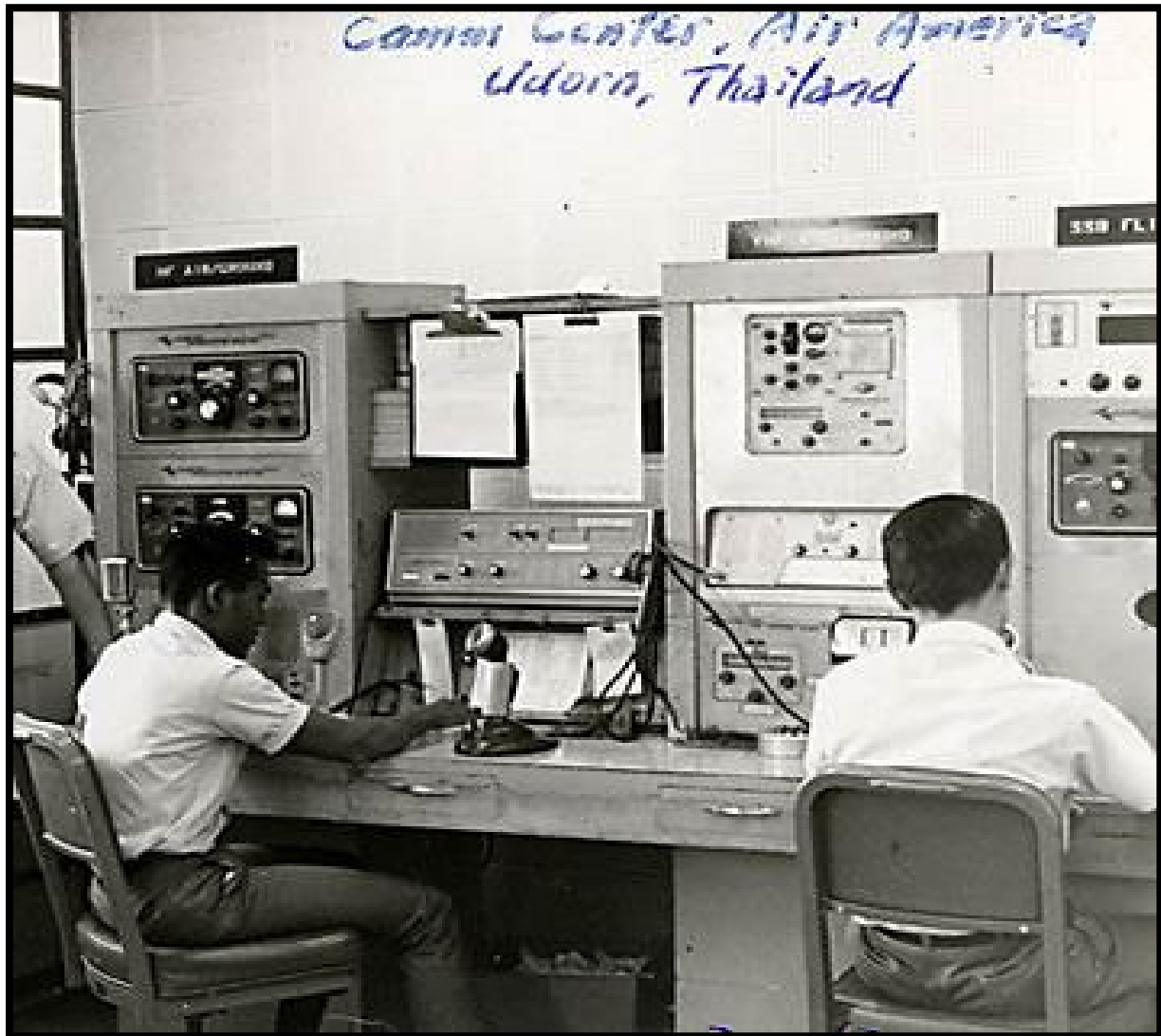


Overhead view of the Air America complex. Three hangars at bottom lower center, shops to the rear abutting the Royal Thai Army compound. Supply buildings center. The Club Rendezvous, movie room, and transient quarters surround the blue pool built with volunteer pilot labor. Combined administration, operations, transportation, medical clinic, and so forth to the left of the club. The Madrivers drainage ditch separates the complex from the parking ramp.

*Air America Log.*



Entrance to the attractively landscaped two story Air America Administration/Operations building.



Radio room in the Operations Department area. Employing UHF, VHF, HF radios, and tap carrier wave (CW) Morse Code, the important facility was manned by Thai and Chinese personnel, and used for flight-following to monitor airborne aircraft, transmit and receive messages from outlying stations, and communication with Air America headquarters in Taipei, Taiwan.

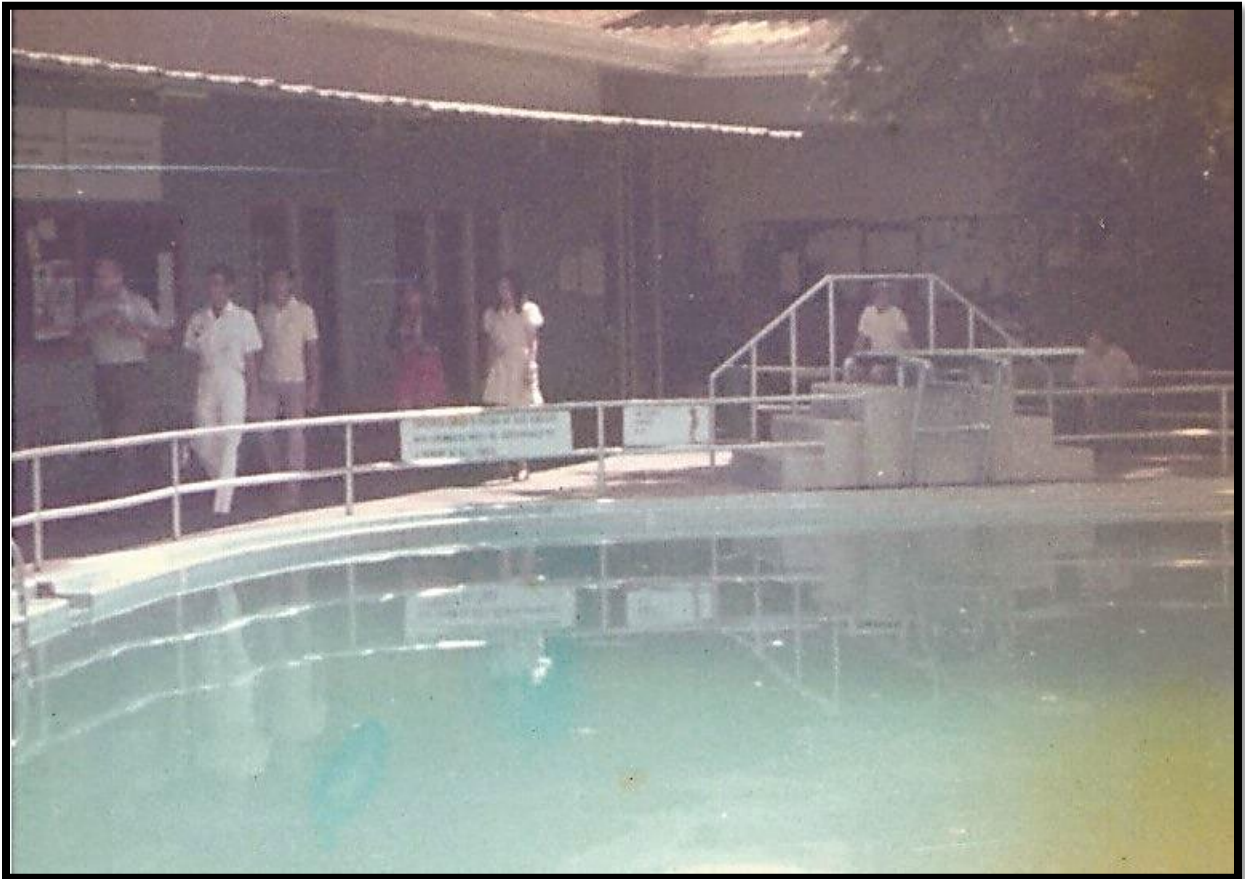
*Air America Log.*



The boss: Shane Tang Chief radio operator at the Air America communications facility at Udorn, Thailand.

*Air America Log.*

A portion of the 75,000-gallon pool at the Udorn Air America facility.





Another view at a portion of the Air America facility looking northwest. The main gate at the right leads to vehicle parking areas in front of the Administration-Operations building, where a new wing was being erected. Along with a lone C-123, H-34 helicopters sit on the parking ramp. Across the ramp is a portion of the sprawling USAF complex containing a myriad of buildings and activities.

Author Collection.



Two of three Air America multi-functional maintenance hangars and ramp, uncommonly devoid of aircraft. Many varied maintenance shops were located to the rear of the hangars.

Author Collection.





Air America not only maintained and repaired its own sizeable aircraft fleet. A separate area with hangars was devoted to performing maintenance contracts for USAF and RLAf equipment such as O-1Es, T-28s, and helicopters. Seen at the top of the photo, a Thai Army base was adjacent to the Air America facility. Flat terrain can be seen further south.

Author Collection.

The Air Commando, Detachment-1, 56th Operations Wing trained Royal Lao Air Force pilots, Forward Air Guides (FAG), and ground support personnel. A small Huey helicopter detachment (with Bob Moberg, Ted Moore, Ted Untalan, and others) was embedded in the Vientiane, Laos, U.S. Embassy as the Army Attaché (ARMA).<sup>48</sup> A U.S. Coast Guard unit operated a long-range navigation (LORAN) low frequency radio signal system to assist air strikes in Laos and North Vietnam.<sup>49</sup>

Almost from the commencement of the Second Indochina War in Laos, American civilians under the aegis of Vientiane Ambassador Godley conducted planning, support, and advisory tasks for the war in Laos; Udorn was the hub for material assistance.

The concrete two-story CIA installation (depending on the speaker, called the White House or Taj Mahal), the Joint Liaison Detachment (JLD), was responsible for the irregular troop program in Laos. Among many functions, including classified black missions like ones generated for the Special Project program, the unit maintained order-of-battle statistics<sup>50</sup> and intelligence-gathering relating to Chinese road building

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<sup>48</sup> In early 1969, the ARMA unit operated one UH-1D from RTAB Korat, Thailand, which the assistant ARMA representative used in Military Region Two. When a second Huey arrived, both ships were based in Udorn. A third Bell, along with a Helio Courier, arrived in mid-1970.

<sup>49</sup> We used this LORAN navigation system with varying degrees of success during both day and night long range Special Project missions.

<sup>50</sup> January 1972 RLA troop levels were quoted at 56,800 FAR/FAN, and 27,000 Lao Irregulars (Thai troops levels were not reported in the Moose Lowenstein account). The enemy force was estimated at 121,000 on up with most devoted to rear services that engaged in road building and hauling the bullets, beans, and bandages to support the forward infantry units.

activity in northern Laos (MR-1). <sup>51</sup> JLD provided some logistic and operational support to Lao and Thai irregular units in Laos. It also performed a liaison function with 333 Headquarters, the Royal Thai Army government unit commanded by DHEP, long based at the Udorn airport to coordinate with the Agency relating to special requirements for Thai units in Laos.

Operating on United States Government (USG) contracts, Air America planes and helicopters, and Continental Air Services International (CASI) planes flew into Laos carrying cargo and civilian and military passengers. Flying supply, medical evacuation, and combat missions, Air America helicopter crews provided the front-line mechanism to conduct the ground war.

Air America employed 2000 personnel with varied talents. This number included 250 Americans, 150 Nationalist Chinese and Filipinos and 1,600 Thai (the last three called "third country nationals").

Along with the Air America facility and management titles constantly evolved. On 18 January, CJ "Ab" Abadie was elevated to Vice President, Udorn, from his previous title of Udorn Base Manager. <sup>52</sup>

To the south of the Udorn base was the U.S. Army Ramasuan Station, the top-secret 7th Radio Research Facility, where enemy radio transmissions were intercepted and monitored, on a huge receiving dish near the railroad tracks and relayed back to Washington by satellite for intelligence vetting.

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<sup>51</sup> Protected by large caliber AAA, the all-weather road in the Nam Beng Valley extended to within nine miles of Pak Beng located on the Mekong River; there was some construction of a spur of the road to Nam Tha and from Nam Tha to Mounng Sing. Other construction activity took place in northern Burma.

<sup>52</sup> Circular, 01/26/72: Abadie was hired as a Sikorsky H-19 helicopter line pilot in 1960 for work out of Vientiane, Laos. He quickly advanced to Chief Pilot of the UH-34D Udorn helicopter program, and over the years moved up through local management slots.

The 379-acre supply depot, called Peppergrinder, which stored DOD military materiel for delivery to Laos on Air America aircraft, was also located to the south. <sup>53</sup>

## **THE CONTINUING BATTLE FOR LONG TIENG**

**"History and violence go hand in hand."**

Author

Despite considerable losses and broad enemy pressure, government troops continued to resist defeat.

*"North Vietnamese troops in the Long Tieng Valley are confined to the south slope of Skyline Ridge and to a few pockets in the village of Long Tieng. A direct attack has not yet developed, although this could occur tonight.*

*Much will now depend on the [NVA] ability to follow up their thrusts of 11-12 January with a major new attack."* <sup>54</sup>

On Thursday, Red Dragon, White Dragon, Hot Plate, LS-20A, and Chamonix FAGs reported attacks by fire. <sup>55</sup> White Dragon, Rainbow, and Stallion had TIC. Raven pilots supported all positions. That evening at 1800 hours, Tiger Mobile, located in the hills east of Sam Tong reported a three-hour heavy ground assault. Unable to hold, his unit moved to a new site.

On Padong Ridge between Phou Pha Sai and Site-05 Gumdrop incurred a late afternoon ground assault. The Alternate received 130mm incoming fire and Bounder Control reported a brief ground and rocket attack. <sup>56</sup>

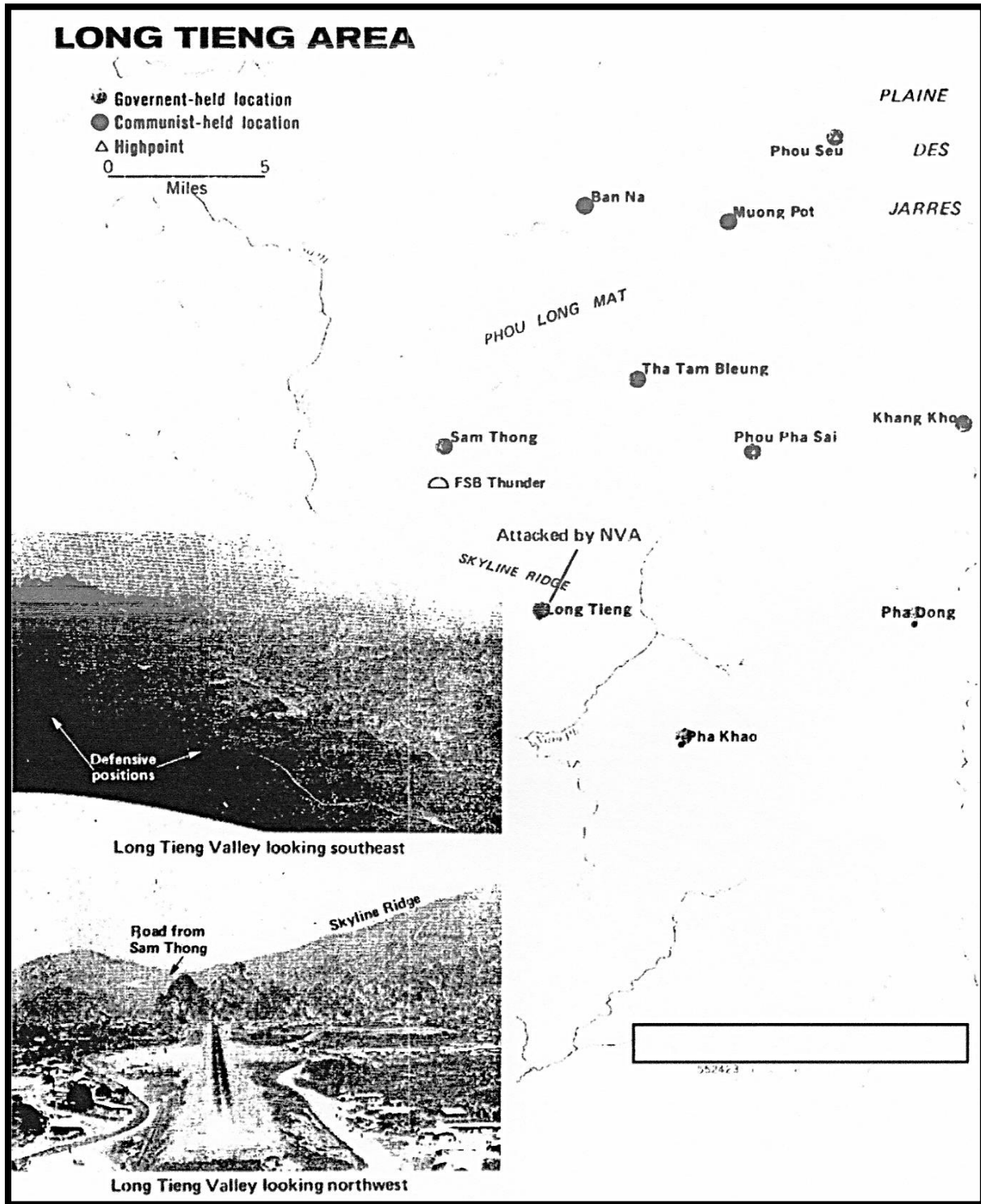
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<sup>53</sup> Lowenstein, Moose report to the United States Congress.

<sup>54</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: The situation in the Long Tieng area remains critical, but irregular troops are still holding on, 01/13/72.

<sup>55</sup> FAG: Forward air ground personnel

<sup>56</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Report for 01/13/72.



CIA Map, 01/13/72.

The following day adverse weather precluded close air support.

Two Thai battalions (totaling 490 men) arrived at Long Tieng. Late in the day, one battalion began moving up the Sam Tong Road toward defensive positions on western Skyline; another battalion moved southeast of the valley. Bolstered by the reinforcements, GM-30 began slowly moving east from Charlie Echo. Bounder Control, Coyote, and Yukon had TIC.

That evening Bounder Control reported that, starting at 2210, LS-20A received a hundred rounds of 130mm fire until midnight. North of Long Tieng, Blue Moon reported early evening TIC. By 2400 radio contact was lost with Blue Moon. At 2022 White Dragon, located east of Sam Tong, incurred an attack by fire. In the Pha Khao area (LS-14), White Rose had a brief ground assault at 0015. South of Site-14, Showboat reported TIC at 0345 hours. <sup>57</sup>

*"Four irregular battalions are being withdrawn from isolated positions in the Phou Long Mat-Tha Tam Bleung area and moved to the western end of [Skyline] Ridge, the only portion presently in government hands. Together with irregular units already in Long Tieng, they plan to attack the [NVA] units now digging in on the east end of the ridge.*

*Much will now depend on the government's ability to move swiftly and on an improvement in the weather, which has lately hampered close air support. If the North Vietnamese have the time to strengthen their hold on the ridge, the government position in Long Tieng would quickly become untenable. The [NVA] have already placed heavy machine guns and a field gun of unknown size on the ridge.*

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<sup>57</sup> Jim Parker ABCCC Reports for 01/14/72.

*The government is trying to pull some of its units closer to Long Tieng either to help defend the base or to screen a southwestward withdrawal.*

*Units from the Phou Pha Sai area have moved to Padong and are to begin a sweep operation toward new positions seven miles southeast of Long Tieng."* <sup>58</sup>

Saturday Blue Moon, Rainbow, Slingshot, and Shamrock had TIC, but the weather was too bad for air strikes. On Skyline, White Dragon reported a brief ground assault at 1855. Twelve miles west of Long Tieng and east of Moung Phun (LS-37), Showboat reported three ground assaults beginning at 1852. Lucky Strike, south of LS-37 had a ground assault at 2100 hours. FAG Bravo-73 is now located at LS-20A. <sup>59</sup>

### **VIETNAMESE ARMY MILITARY PLANS**

*"Between 14 January and 10 March the Campaign headquarters rotated units and realigned its attack formations. The 335th Infantry Regiment moved in to replace the 148th Regiment in defending and holding [the] springboard at Phu Moc-Phu Pha Sai. The 141st Regiment replaced the 165th and 174th Regiments at Sam Tong and on Hill 1737. After turning their respective areas over to the replacement units, the 174th Regiment deployed its forces to build fighting positions to defend the [PDJ] while the 148th and 165th Regiments concentrated their efforts on regrouping, rebuilding, making preparations for battle, learning lessons from their combat experiences, and conducting supplementary training.*

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<sup>58</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: Government forces are preparing to try to retake Skyline Ridge overlooking Long Tieng. The outcome may well decide the fate of the base, 01/15/72.

<sup>59</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 01/15/72.

*During this time, the Campaign Headquarters directed the units to continue to conduct reconnaissance, to prepare the battlefield, to replenish and supplement their logistics stockpiles and technical support, and to build a road from Sao Phan [near Ban Hintang] to Sam Tong.”* <sup>60</sup>

### **CAPTAIN JIM RHYNE'S ENCOUNTER WITH DESTINY**

Typical of our organizations, Air America and the Agency never gave up looking for missing employees. The search for the crew of C-123K 6293 (George Ritter, Roy Townley, Ed Weissenback, and Khamphang Saysongkham), missing in northwestern Military Region One since 27 December 1971, continued.

On 15 January, photo Volpar N9671C launched from Udorn with Bob Main and Jim Rhyne in the cockpit and RH Herald in the cargo compartment with 3,000 pounds of leaflets for distribution in the search area that offered rewards for valid information relating to the downed crew.

The weather was not favorable, so once in the projected search area they commenced a right-hand oval pattern at 13,000 feet to avoid the Chinese road. Rhyne left Main in charge of the aircraft while he went to the rear to assist Herald, who was wearing a flack vest and parachute, in dropping the leaflets through a camera port.

Half the leaflets had been distributed after one orbit. During the second round, Herald heard faint explosions outside 71C. This was followed by a deafening roar when a radar, controlled 85mm or larger AAA round struck in the vicinity of the wing root.

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<sup>60</sup> Ho Kang's account of North Vietnamese military history in the Lao war.



Tending to contain the shrapnel, the remaining leaflets acted like sandbags, which probably saved their lives. The blast and ensuing concussion blew Herald to the rear against the radio compartment. Rhyne, who had been on his knees attending to leaflets, was lifted into the air and spun around by the force of the explosion.

The shell had penetrated the skin of the plane and detonated between the skin and floor. In the aftermath of the explosion Herald observed that frayed wire control cables were still intact, but to preclude further damage, advised Main who was unhurt, to use the aircraft trim tabs for control.

Wounded in the arms, leg, and back, Rhyne was grievously injured and in imminent danger of dying from blood loss. His foot was gone and lower left leg was attached by only muscle. He also had a large chunk of flesh gouged from his hip. Still semi-conscious, he attempted to secure his belt around the leg wound to contain the arterial pumping and loss of blood, but with the use of only one hand, he was unsuccessful. Instead, Herald placed his knee on the pressure point in Rhyne's groin until they reached Udorn. This stopped further major blood loss, but hurt worse than the actual wounds. Remembering the combat adage to "bite the bullet," Rhyne stuffed his mouth with paper leaflets to endure the pain.

Emmet Sullivan was working at Vang Vieng and heard Captain Main's Mayday over guard and subsequent discussion over the Company radio net. He climbed to 10,000 feet in order to converse with Main and provide a psychological boost. After obtaining visual sighting of the Volpar, Sullivan turned south and covered the stricken Volpar for fifteen minutes.

Once at the airport, Rhyne was transferred to the USAF hospital and admitted to surgery. After the amputation, he

remained in the hospital for more than a month. <sup>61</sup> When he was still not recuperating satisfactorily from the deep hip wound, Ambassador Godley arranged a USAF medevac flight to Emory Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia.

Eventually healed and fitted with a prosthetic lower leg and foot, Rhyne returned to Bangkok in July. He was met there by the PIC of 71C and flown to Udorn, where the strong, resolute man soon resumed flying. <sup>62</sup>

### **THE LONG TIENG MEAT GRINDER**

On Sunday Bounder Control, Green Onion, Rainbow, Hot Plate, LS-32, Pink Onion, and Tiger Mobile were attacked by fire. Raven FACs provided support during the day. That night at 2055 on Skyline, both Showboat and Peacock reported brief ground assaults. FAG Ten High reported helicopter lights near the Ban Ban Valley at 2120 hours.

As part of the USAF participation in Barrel Roll, Spectre-10 destroyed sixteen trucks and damaged six. RLAFF Spooky gunships and flareships were also active. <sup>63</sup>

To the west at Sala Phou Khoun FAN and FAR forces had been under siege by Pathet Lao and Deuanist troops since the end of December. On the 16th Skyraider pilot Byron Hukee and his squadron commander participated in a mission escorting helicopters from Vang Vieng to reinforce the 7/13 road junction.

During such missions, *"...the wingman normally [remained] high while the leader made a few 'trolling' passes, trying to get the enemy to reveal their positions by firing on the low*

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<sup>61</sup> Knight Email, 11/26/00. Many of us took turns visiting Rhyne in the USAF hospital to help bolster his morale. After Wayne Knight returned from home leave, he and Abadie visited Rhyne. Neither could provide blood. Ab had malaria in the past and Wayne's blood type was not compatible.

<sup>62</sup> Bill Leary January 1972 Notes: Interview with Herald and Rhyne. Emmet Sullivan Interview 08/29/95.

<sup>63</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 01/16/72.

*flying A-1. Typically, a few passes in a given area were considered by most flight leads as sufficient."* <sup>64</sup>

On the 17<sup>th</sup>, Boulder Control reported receiving thirty-two rounds of 130mm. An hour and forty minutes of TIC took place at Blue Dragon on Skyline, as air strikes destroyed thirteen trucks and damaged five more.

During the day, the first enemy loss occurred since Campaign Zulu began and the Vietnamese invested eastern Skyline Ridge. With the assistance of Thai artillery and B-52 carpet bombing the north side of the ridge, GM-30 and a Thai unit worked their way east and captured Charlie Whiskey. Flushed with victory, but at the cost of heavy casualties, they moved further east toward Charlie Alpha. <sup>65</sup>

Pink Onion, Blue Dragon, Green Onion, Tiger Mobile, Shamrock, Butterfly, Yukon, and LS-20A all reported TICs. <sup>66</sup>

By Tuesday, Charlie Alpha was ours. Most of Skyline strong points were under government control and our side was back in business, but fighting was far from over. On the south ridge of the valley, Rainbow had a fifteen-minute assault starting at

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<sup>64</sup> Byron Hukee.  
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 331.

<sup>65</sup> Jesse Scott, 81. *"It took 24 hours for a B-52 mission to be mounted. We would make our request, consulting with Vang Pao in selecting the appropriate area. Then the request was typed up and passed to Vientiane. It was received in the AIRA office and the [intelligence] people would research back through past intelligence reports to [obtain] any supporting evidence that this would be a lucrative target box. It was drawn up on a 1:50,000 map and taken to Ambassador Godly for his concurrence. Then it was relayed south [to 7/13 USAF at Udorn]. It was taking twenty-four to thirty-six hours. This was worked out and we [obtained] a fantastic response later in the campaign. We were down to twelve-hour responses."*

<sup>66</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC reports for 01/17/72.  
Ken Conboy, 330.

1905. East of Long Tieng, Brown Dragon reported an assault at 2012 hours.

Northeast of Sam Tong, Green Onion reported an hour-long ground assault to the ABCCC control ship at 1800. To the west at Moung Phun Lucky Strike reported an attack, Showboat bore a short assault at 2110, and Red Onion and Pink Onion incurred TIC. <sup>67</sup>

## **A TENUOUS VISIT**

*"Here are some clippings you might be interested in. They have let newspaper people into the main base [at Long Tieng], so I guess there will be a lot of publicity about our end of the war. The reporters damn near got nailed the other day when they got too near the front lines."*

Letter Home, 01/27/72.

For years aggressive newsmen attempted to access Vang Pao's Long Tieng Valley. Rebuffed for obvious reasons, most efforts met with failure, and the precious few who did enter the valley were unceremoniously "ridden out of town on a rail." <sup>68</sup> During times of great losses and refugee movements, news media types were occasionally allowed into Pop Buell's base at Sam Tong to garner publicity and world sympathy against the encroaching communists.

Since the unsettling and newsworthy loss of the PDJ in December, the worldwide press had been lobbying Ambassador

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<sup>67</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC reports for 01/18/72.

<sup>68</sup> Customer Tony Poe was renowned among peers and crews for what bordered on pathological disdain for, and rough handling, of unwanted media with various ingenious methods.

Godley to visit The Alternate to obtain a first-hand look at the battlefield.

On the 19th, providing their news organizations would reimburse the cost of planes and helicopters, members of the *New York Times*, *Associated Press*, *UPI*, and others were granted the first authorized access to the restricted valley. In addition, they were briefed to observe certain classified provisions that prohibited photographing American personnel, revealing names, or reveal government agencies.

*"COS Tovar accompanied the newsmen on a tour of the Ban Son refugee center and the defenses of Long Tieng and Sam Tong, with briefings along the way from Vang Pao and other Lao officials."*

A few enterprising reporters and camera crews desired a closer look at the action on Skyline. Tovar acquiesced to their request.

Driving a Twinpac, Captain Charlie Weitz led a three-aircraft flight to a government position in a Twinpac. John Fonburg was second in a Bell, and SAR backup Jack Knotts was third. Landings had to be timed, since mortar rounds were intermittently splashing at various places on the ridge. Charlie landed and offloaded his passengers at a GM-30 command post pad deemed "safe," where SGU commander Major Chanh would conduct an interview. After Charlie departed, ever a dry humorist, big John radioed, *"Hrump. Hrump. Well, I guess it is my turn [to land]."*

Chanh's elite regiment had suffered twenty-eight KIA and sixty-nine WIA in the previous three days. Despite an ongoing mopping up operation, enemy forward observers quickly noted unusual activity at the command post and the presence of "round-eyes." Within a short time, incoming mortar fire from the east impacted the command post vicinity, prompting the reporters to begin screaming over the radio to be lifted off Skyline. During the short barrage, Major Chanh was wounded by a piece of flying



Air America cargo air drop to beleaguered troops on Skyline Ridge.  
*Associated Press Photo.*

shrapnel. As a medic bandaged his head, Chanh laughed, admitting that a mortar round landed every ten minutes. By then the panicked correspondents decided they had enough news and achieved sufficient frontline battle experience to last a lifetime. Leaving Chanh bleeding profusely from the head, several less humane individuals mobbed the dispatched medevac Bell in lieu of the wounded Lao. Chanh and the remainder of the press were removed later by thoroughly disgusted helicopter crews.

Retreating to the relative "safety" of the king's house on the southern ridge, at the courtesy of a Bell pilot, the reporters casually observed air and artillery strikes on the remaining enemy positions across the valley. They noted unidentified Americans actively engaged in conversation with high-ranking Lao military types. Some Americans wore civilian attire, others were armed and wore camouflage fatigues.

In conversations with Vang Pao reporters learned that the general was confident that the enemy would not take Long Tieng. However, with their supplies estimated to last for one month, they would try until February.

By late afternoon, the stalwart press members opted to depart the valley and return to the calmer atmosphere of cosmopolitan Vientiane, and the delights of numerous watering holes and fleshpots. <sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961-1973* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2006), 444-445, Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 331. Jack Knotts Interview. Undesignated newspaper article contained in the Air America photo album. *The Pensacola Journal*, 01/21/72, Long Tieng, Laos: What was Once a CIA Base is now a Ghost Town...

Later the same day, FAG Booster southeast of Long Tieng reported TIC at 1734. Brown Dragon north on Skyline had TIC at 1800 hours. Tom Tom, Green Onion, Spotlight, Hacksaw, Red Dragon on Skyline, and Blue Moon had TICs. <sup>70</sup>

### **RUSSELL'S DASH TO FREEDOM**

Jim Russell, a World War Two combat veteran, had been flying in the Air America fixed wing program for seven years. Jim, an engaging, interesting person, had purchased a large tract of land in the middle of the Amazon Brazilian jungle that he planned to develop, market shares to willing buyers, and farm when his tour with the Company was finished.

In 1972, the big man flew the STOL turbine engine Porter, a relatively small plane that was utilized by the Customer to work in the trenches, like those of us flying helicopters.

On Thursday, the 20<sup>th</sup>, Jim was assigned to fly Swampat and five other Lao types to Moung Cha (LS-113), located in the long valley southeast of Phou Khao. After landing his turboprop PC-6C N94445 at the grassy strip he was redirected northeast to Ban Tha Si (LS-61), sixteen miles southeast of Tha Thom, in order to look for a suitable place to load refugees. As per SOP, overhead the medium sized valley he ascertained from a ground controller that the area was safe.

Landing, and taxiing to the end of the small strip to position for departure into the wind, he secured the engine. While the passengers exited, he began entering the flight time in the maintenance logbook. Suddenly, an enemy ambush erupted, with a relatively accurate mortar round landing and throwing shrapnel through the fuselage.

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<sup>70</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC reports for 01/19/72.



Survival and common sense now superseded complacency. Entering a realm not often encountered by a line pilot, and often cited as being like "a fish out of water," Jim bailed out the door, only to have another mortar round splash between him and Swampat, knocking both men to the ground. Shooting then commenced, providing a palpable incentive to immediately "get out of Dodge."

They were pursued by shouting enemy soldiers firing their weapons. Adrenaline flowed. After struggling through intertwined bamboo and thickets for what seemed like an eternity, Jim and the group arrived at high rise from which he contacted a helicopter pilot and made a plea for rescue. Then they moved on toward the Nam Mon which provided a clearing thought to be large enough for a helicopter to land.

The crew of UH-34D Hotel-88 was the first to locate the men, but they were unable to perform the rescue. Next, Frenchy Smith and JJ McCauley arrived in Bell 205 XW-PFG. Equipped with an internal hoist mechanism, they hoisted Jim onboard. While attempting to lift Swampat and the indigenous personnel, the hoist cable severed. Fortunately, the crew of Hotel-15 was available to hoist out the remaining people and deliver them to Paksane.

After almost two exhausting hours evading the enemy, the Bell crew delivered Russell to Vientiane with a war story that would make the rounds for a time, and become a bar classic. <sup>71</sup>

It managed to reach the travelling journalist, who promptly broke silence, reporting that a CIA pilot had been rescued from

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<sup>71</sup> Holgar Jensen, *The (Newark) Star Ledger*, 01/21/72. *Downed CIA Pilot Outruns Enemy to Jungle Rescue*.  
Jack Foisie, *Gannet News Service special*, Wins Two-mile Race Through Laos Jungle.  
Professor Joe Leeker, PC-6C N94445, Air America Website. *The Aircraft of Air America*

the jungle. Of course, such media publicity generated queries from home:

*"I have known for some time that the news hounds have been infiltrating your base of operations.*

*Have you met anyone by the name of Holger Jansen or Jack Foisie? They are quite frank in some articles, calling [participants] CIA pilots.*

*I wonder if you know James Wallace Russell, the Texan knocked down and rescued by copter?"*

Letter from Home, 02/06/72.

*"I know Russell. If he had a radio, he would have been picked up hours before, but all the fixed wing heroes refuse to carry survival equipment, so this is what happens.*

*I don't know how he got away with shooting off his mouth the way he did either. Things like this usually aren't publicized...*

*I don't know the newspaper people you refer to and I shy away from them. They usually are nothing but trouble."*<sup>72</sup>

Letter Home, 02/23/72.

*"It is interesting to note that you know people in situations we read about in the news media here. Although not directly concerned it almost seems as if 'We were there.' It brings us closer to the type of endeavor your outfit is doing."*

Letter from Home, 03/06/72.

Rescue work in the same region continued. That same day F-4C, call sign Bullwhip-26 from Udorn RTAFB, was hit by AAA fire,

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<sup>72</sup> From what I heard and read in newspaper articles, there was a discrepancy regarding Russell having a radio. As is often the case, the truth lies somewhere between the two descriptions of the incident.

likely along Route-7 in the Ban Ban Valley. The two pilots eventually bailed out twelve miles southeast of the valley. Bell crews consisting of Nikki Philippi, Lee Andrews and Ron Anderson crewing XW-PFH, and John Fonburg, Bill Phillips, and Bob Noble in 8513F retrieved the airmen at 1655 hours.

A USAF commendation channeled through CPH John Ford reflected:

*"...for their exceptional aerial skill in the rescue of the crew members of an RF-4C, Bullwhip-26 on 20 January 1972.*

*In spite of a known 37mm high threat area and small arms fire, these crew members disregarded their own personal safety to perform a heroic recovery. The quick response to the distress call and actual recovery in near record time were unquestionably instrumental in saving the lives of the USAF RF-4C crew members..."* <sup>73</sup>

The Alternate was no less active than Zone Steel. Brown Dragon on Skyline, Showboat, Bad Man, Shamrock, and Young Man all had TICs. Also, on Skyline, just after dark, Red Dragon reported TIC.

That night Vietnamese forces assaulted the eastern portion of four-mile-long Skyline Ridge. Incurring dozens of casualties during the battle, GM-30 retreated west from Charlie Alpha's commanding heights to Charlie Whiskey. In the process of what was developing into musical hills, they were replaced by a Meo battalion advised by George "Kayak" Bacon.

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<sup>73</sup> Department of the Air Force, Headquarters Deputy Commander (Major General DR Searles), Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force, Thailand, Letter of Commendation, 01/22/72.

James Parker.

Tim Castle's article contained in an Agency Symposium Overview, *Air America, Upholding the Airman's Bond*.

Joe Leeker Humanitarian, SAR.

At the 7/13 road junction around Sala Phou Khoun, Coyote reported that at 1800 a four-hour ground assault along Route-7 began involving enemy tanks. Attacks continued into the morning hours. Stallion reported TIC and AFB at 0355 hours. At Phou Khao, Yukon reported TIC at 2045 and his outpost was surrounded until 2130. West of Long Tieng, Tonto at Phou Mi and Lucky Strike at Site-37 reported heavy ground assaults from 0335 until Alleycat departed. <sup>74</sup>

### **ROUTE 7/13**

The Pathet Lao and associates were busy to the west. At 1812 Chicken Hawk reported a ground assault and attacks by fire (ABF) at Neutralist-held Ban Nam Than (LS-249) south of Moung Kassy [location of a former T-28 strip]. Soon afterward, Moung Kassy was being rocketed.

FAN and FAR troops at the Sala Phou Khoun junction were overrun, leaving behind a battery of 105mm howitzers. This left Route-13 open toward Luang Prabang.

North Vietnamese military archives record action in the secondary front against government troops on Route-13:

*"On the afternoon of 20 January 1972, the units participating in the attack opened fire against the enemy. Enemy troops fought back ferociously throughout the night. No unit was able to capture its assigned objective.*

*On the morning of 21 January 1972 the enemy called in aircraft that savagely bombed our artillery positions and our tanks. In the afternoon enemy helicopters landed reinforcements at Phou Kheung Noi.*

*The situation throughout the entire front was very tense and very difficult. The battle headquarters radioed instructions*

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<sup>74</sup> Jim Parker ABCCC Reports for 01/20/72.

to the units to regroup and consolidate their forces and to encourage their troops to renew the attack and resolutely accomplish their assigned missions. On the afternoon of 21 January (at 1730 hours), after infiltrating into the enemy's rear and realigning its force, the 701st Battalion massed all of its heavy weapons fire in a surprise bombardment against the enemy artillery position at Moc-lang-chang. Enemy force put up only weak resistance and then abandoned the position. Exploiting the victory, the 701st Battalion quickly occupied attack positions, concentrated its fire, and advanced straight into Phou Kheung Noi. The newly-arrived enemy reinforcements had not yet had time to prepare positions and they fled in terror. Thanks to the advantageous conditions created by the 701st Battalion's efforts, the 2nd and 13th Battalion renewed their attacks and captured their assigned objectives. All enemy forces in Sala Phou Kheung [Khoun] fled [south] toward [Moung] Kassy. The 16th Patriotic Neutralist Battalion [formally Neutralist troops who defected to the communist side in 1963] ambush position at Nam [Khene] blocked the retreating enemy forces, killed and captured many enemy personnel, and captured all of the enemy's vehicles, weapons, and equipment." <sup>75</sup>

### **ACTION IN THE LONG TIENG AREA**

White Dragon, the FAG attached to the Meo unit that recaptured Charlie Alpha, reported a ten-minute assault on his position at 0315. At the western throat of Route-4 where the road entered the Plain of Jars, Spectre-10 located a large

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<sup>75</sup> Obtained from the Robert Sander personal archives: *History of the...Vietnamese Voluntary Army Groups...in Laos*, 199, translated from Vietnamese to English by linguist and former CIA Case Officer Merle Pribbenow. The Author has corrected names used in the transcript to those corresponding to the map and with which he is more familiar.

transshipment dock and ramp being used to transfer cargo to trucks.

During the day, Lucky Strike, Brown Dragon, LS-20A, Hacksaw, Rainbow, Thudbuster, Bad Man, and Shamrock all had TIC and were supported by Raven pilots.<sup>76</sup>

In response to FAG reports of TIC, on the evening of the 22nd, Alleycat requested four Spooky and flare ship support. Response and supporting fire was successful.

White Dragon at Charlie Alpha reported almost four hours of TIC starting at 1948 hours. At the same time at Thunder FSB south of Sam Tong, Blue Moon reported enemy contact. South of Long Tieng Showboat had minor late evening TIC. Shamrock, Wild Bill (Wiboon), Black Onion, Young Man, Poppy, and Hot Plate all had TIC.<sup>77</sup>

Enemy units were pressuring Vang Pao's outposts in all sectors. On the 23rd, King Pin, in the hills south of Sam Tong and overlooking the Nam Ngum, reported a twenty-minute ground assault starting at 1910. Later, in the hills south of Sam Tong, Bum Steer reported an attack at 0120. Rainbow reported TIC on an outpost near his position at 1945, and Young Man and Thudbuster had TIC. To the east at Padong, where Vang Pao intended to launch a sizeable counter operation early in February, a thirty-minute assault was reported to ABCCC.<sup>78</sup>

On Monday the mixed battalions of Savannakhet unit GM-30, BG-224 (Meo), and BG-103 (Nam Yu) moved east, clearing the ridge, seizing the helicopter landing zone at Charlie Tango, and limiting the enemy to the eastern portion of Skyline. Despite aggressive enemy attacks, Kayak's Meo battalion assigned defense

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<sup>76</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 01/21/72.  
Ken Conboy, 331.

<sup>77</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 01/22/72.

<sup>78</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 01/23/72.

of Charlie Whiskey and Charlie Alpha held. Blue Moon and White Dragon had TIC. During the day, two Thai battalions returned to Long Tieng from training at Nam Phong.

Early in the morning, Wild Bill on Skyline reported a platoon strength ground attack. At Padong, Gumdrop reported a small probe. <sup>79</sup>

The next day additional Thai battalions arrived at Long Tieng to man new fire support bases and fortify the valley. Whiskey-01 (Narin), Lulu on Skyline, Wild Bill, Black Onion, and Blue Moon positions received attacks by fire. That night Alleycat called out four AC-47 Spooky gunships to counter enemy activity. As a result, no TIC or ABF were reported. Blue Chip requested interdiction at the Route-4/7 junction of Lat Houg. Spectre-05 and Falcon-52 complied with laser-guided ordnance, but were unsuccessful. <sup>80</sup>

## **LAO POLITICS**

The communists always acted in their best interests, particularly when dealing from a position of strength.

*"Lao communist leader Souphanouvong sent a telegram to Prime Minister Souvanna [Phouma] on 24 January reiterating that the 'Laos question' must be solved by the parties involved on the basis of the 1962 Geneva Accords and in accordance with the current situation in Laos...it is unlikely that the communists will have any serious interest in negotiations before they have assessed the results of their dry season offensive. Souvanna...usually resists pressure for talks while the communists have the military initiative."* <sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 01/24/72.

<sup>80</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 01/25/72.

<sup>81</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 02/01/72.

Within three days, another message was received in Vientiane that eventually worked its way through Agency channels to the Lao desk:

*"The message's reference to earlier communist demands indicated that there has been no fundamental change in the communists' negotiating position. It omits, however, any specific call for a U.S. bombing halt in Laos indicating that is was meant to be somewhat more acceptable to Souvanna, who has long insisted that could not agree to such a halt as a precondition to negotiations.*

*The message of 27 January reiterates the long-standing communist formulation that the Lao war must be settled in accordance with the 1962 Geneva Accords and the 'realities' of the current situation. The letter states that if Souvanna adopts an 'equivalent attitude' the communists special envoy would return to [Vientiane] after a six-month absence to 'continue our contacts.' Souvanna has indicated that he is drafting a conciliatory response, although once again affirming that he will not knuckle under to communist demands.*

*The latest message suggests the communists may want to probe for some give in Souvanna's position. As in the past, the communists probably are also interested in projecting a tone of reasonableness at the very time that they are pressing hard militarily [the communist philosophy was always to talk and fight, not necessarily in that order]." <sup>82</sup>*

## **WASHINGTON**

Spinning a web of deceit and deception, communist designs were normally interconnected, overlapping all Southeast Asia

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<sup>82</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: Lao communist leader Souphanouvong's latest message to Prime Minister Souvanna makes a bid to resume a dialogue with the government.



activity. Not fully comprehending the nuts and bolts of the overall situation, the Nixon Administration was continually criticized by outsiders for not accomplishing enough to end the unpopular and protracted war. In order to allay some of the constant disapproval, the President publicly stated that National Security Agency Advisor Henry Kissinger, in lieu of formal peace talks, had organized twelve secret Paris negotiations during August 1971 with Vietnamese leaders. Eight proposals were introduced, beginning with the withdrawal of all U.S and allied troops and all Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos within six months of an agreement...

The talks had appeared promising until October 1971 when North Vietnamese representatives proved intractable, refusing to continue further secret talks. <sup>83</sup>

## **LONG TIENG**

By the 26<sup>th</sup>, several positions on Skyline, lost to the enemy earlier in the month, had been recaptured. Largely because of USAF efforts dropping huge cave-busting iron bombs on suspected artillery positions, enemy 130mm fire had abated and was sporadic during the day. This allowed T-28 fueling and rearming operations to be resumed at The Alternate.

On the evening of the 26<sup>th</sup>, Alleycat launched four Spooky crews.

FAGs Green Onion, west of Phou Khao, and Tiger Mobile, southeast of Sam Tong, reported thirty minutes of TIC starting at 1950 hours. At 2334 Lulu reported hundreds of enemy troops

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<sup>83</sup> Bowman, John ed., *The Almanac of the Vietnam War*, USA: Government, 01/25/72, 297-298.

near his position on Skyline, while Parka, Black Onion, and Shamrock had TIC. <sup>84</sup>

### **RETURN TO THE LINE**

Feeling much better by the 27th and declared fit by the doctor, I prepared to return to the battlefield. In anticipation of difficult work ahead, I posted a letter home:

*"...Don't worry about me as I try and pace myself. At times we are called upon to do things that are quite risky but it isn't all the time. I am getting a bit jaded and don't go too overboard like I used to. The war follows a pattern and as long as you are used to this you can do the job."*

As part of our multi-faceted assignments, we often returned war dead to their home villages. It was never a pleasant task from either an olfactory or emotional aspect. One particular incident late in the war tended to create a negative and lasting impression on me.

Late one morning I taxied to the left side of the runway where, because of the unsettled situation, unwrapped bodies lay ignominiously exposed to the elements. My mission that day was to deliver a very young-looking boy, with a small bullet hole bored through the middle of his forehead, to Moung Oum (LS-22), a large village with an unimproved airstrip located in a narrow valley east of the towering Phou Bia range. An original Meo site, I had landed there many times over the years.

Despite my considerable experience with our troops' injuries and death, and years in the field, I was not completely dehumanized. The vision of that lifeless kid triggered a deep

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<sup>82</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 01/26/72.

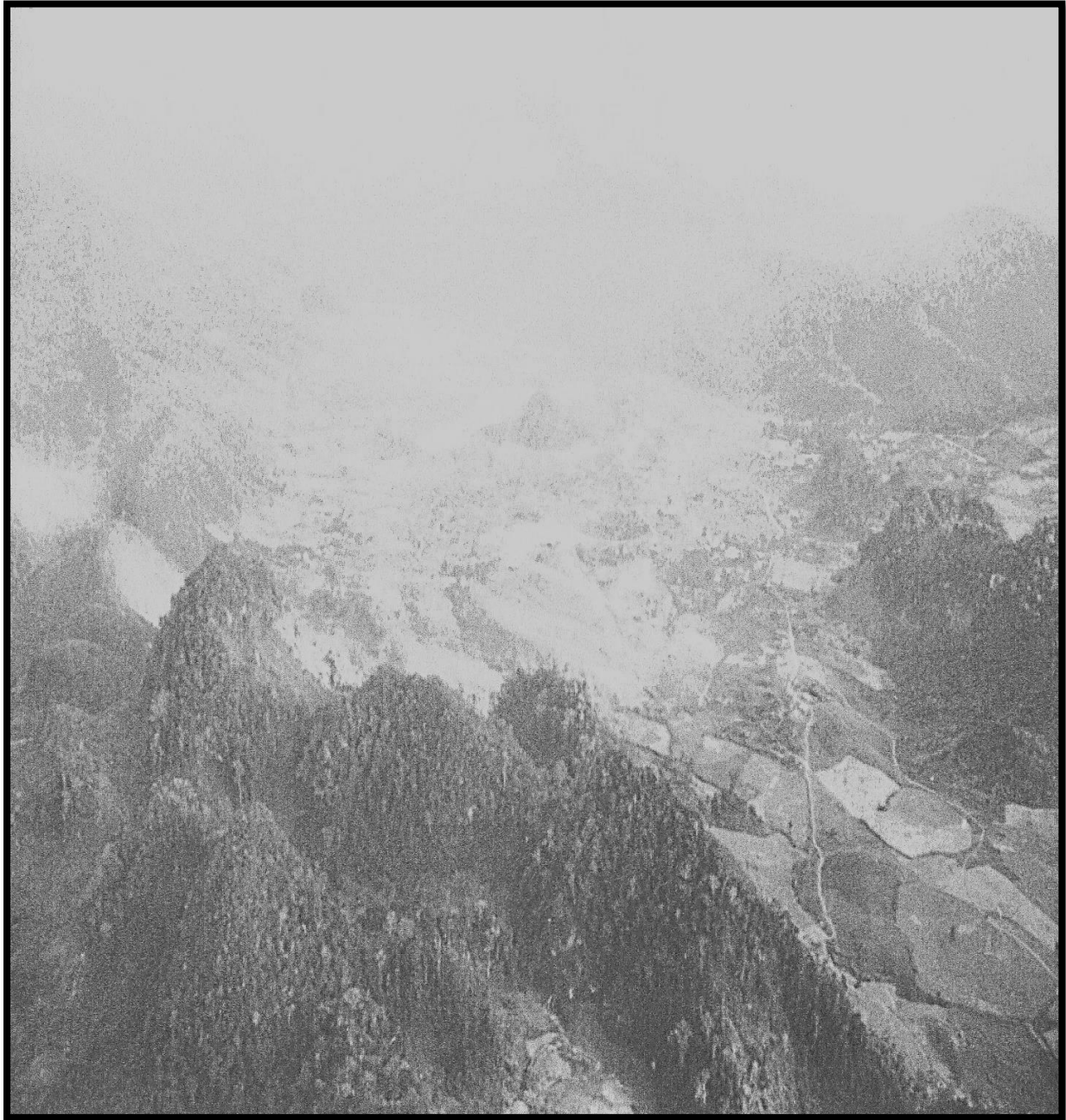
sadness and embarrassment over my participation in the wasteful conflict. The sight also fostered considerable disgust, and I was appalled at being an active accomplice in what had increasingly become a senseless war of attrition. For the first time in what seemed a very long time, I mentally questioned why I continued to work in such a slaughter house that consumed the country's youth. I am sure that being fatigued and having two young boys of my own at home had something to do with my mood at the time.

Landing at Site-22, the stark reality of war surfaced, and I knew exactly what to expect. Reminiscent of past experiences, the family literally threw themselves on top of their thin son's body and wailed. It was a heart-rendering scene prompting, me to depart as soon as I could. At that moment, my enthusiasm for the war waned. I realized that I did not want to see another such scene, and questioned whether I should continue to participate anymore in the bloody war. Of course, I did, but it required a lot of rationalization.

***"The boys on the ground have to realize that we can't help them at all times and they will have to get by the best they can. The trouble is that they are promised that we will help them at all costs [air support, med-evacs, supplies, and so forth]. Well, the hell with that. The enemy is using anti-aircraft guns more than ever before and we just can't cope with them. There is only one person taking care of me and that is me!"***

Letter Home, 01/27/72.

Upcountry, Black Onion, Red Eye, Showboat, Pink Onion, and Thudbuster had TIC during the day. That night Alleycat launched



The Mounng Oum Valley (LS-22) seen during moderate smoky, hazy conditions.  
Author Collection.

four Spooky planes. No ground assaults were reported in the Long Tieng area.

North of the Plain of Jars at Phu Cum (LS-50), Slingshot reported an attack by fire (ABF) and requested air support. The site was not supported because the RLAf pilots were reluctant to venture that far north. (This had been a problem since the inception of the Lao gunship program. Pilots were not confident flying on instruments, and navigators were not especially proficient.)<sup>85</sup>

Early Friday morning, I deadheaded to Wattay Airport, where ships and crews had been RONing, to join Mike Barksdale and Flight Mechanic Velasquez in Papa Hotel Charlie. We soon launched for Ban Son to obtain the latest briefing and load anything going north to The Alternate. If we arrived early during the siege, we would have to wait on the south ridge until establishing contact with the Customer and being cleared to enter the valley.

My twenty sorties consisted of shuttles from Site-272, supplying local Thai FSBs, Skyline outposts, and, sandwiched between A-1 air strikes, retrieving wounded troops. The layoff apparently had not hampered my proficiency skills, and it felt good to be part of the action once again.

Obtaining sufficient water for drinking and cooking was a constant struggle for our troops on the ridge, so we slung two fifty-five-gallon barrels at a time to the pads. One trip almost ended in disaster when I conducted a downwind approach to the Charlie Alpha highpoint. It did not pay to expose the ship to enemy fire from the north slopes, so I generally remained level, or just below the ridge until the last moment before delivery. But this had a downside, for downslope winds tended to affect

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<sup>85</sup> Jim Parker ABCCC Reports for 01/27/72.

aircraft performance. This technique, combined with a downwind vector, created a settling condition driving us into the south slope. I attempted to apply corrections, but was not successful, so I had Mike pickle the load. It was not quite a skivvy changing situation, but very close.

We arrived at Wattay Airport just prior to dark. Replaced by Paul Gregoire, Barksdale continued to Udorn and I remained overnight in the Apollo, the only hotel in the city to boast an elevator. Contrived by management, RON in Vientiane was a bit suspicious, but it did save the Customer one-hour ferry time. More important, it tended to keep the machines in the field. If allowed to terminate in Udorn, logbook squawks would have to be cleared by the following morning, and the complex machines were still developing maintenance problems.

That night Alleycat personnel in the high overhead orbit launched two RLAF Spookys, but only one made it upcountry. The second gunship aborted before reaching its target.

In the center portion of Skyline at Charlie Uniform, Lulu reported TIC at 1902. Whiskey-01 also had TIC. A platoon of Vietnamese attacked a government outpost on the western portion of Skyline Ridge, but was driven off.<sup>86</sup>

On Saturday, after having a quick breakfast at the Air America restaurant and obtaining a sandwich or two for lunch, we launched for Ban Son with a load of fuel drums, then moved north to Long Tieng. All appeared normal in the valley and most of Skyline, resulting in thirty sorties for myself and many more conducted by Paul. During the day Whiskey-01 experienced TIC.

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<sup>86</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 01/28/72.  
CIA Bulletin, Laos, 01/31/72.

**ROULETTE**

The Skyline Roulette technique that I had successfully perfected during previous years to retrieve wounded personnel had positive applications during the current battle for the ridge. Believing that they were going to live forever, instead of digging safe fighting holes into the reverse slope and remaining there, Thai soldiers foolishly exposed themselves on top of the ridge, while cooking their daily rice ration. Consequently, every day there were dead and wounded generated by enemy crew-served mortar and DK-82 recoilless rifles. These casualties had to be extracted (that was part of the Agency contract with the Thai "volunteers"). For pads under attack, this procedure normally took place twice a day when A-1 cover was available.

The FAG at Charlie Tango or another position would radio his medevac request to the Customer, who would then assign a ship for the task. When I was selected, I called the FAG on VHF 125.5 and arranged a fictitious place to land to confuse the English-speaking enemy radio operator, who was certainly monitoring our frequency. Then, I would launch, remain low, and fake a run toward another site. Approaching below the ridge, I would change direction, climb, and pop onto the correct landing zone. I attempted to minimize my time on the pad to seconds, for most were exposed to either some kind of direct or indirect fire. Not wanting to remain in the open any longer than possible, the Thai boys generally cooperated in the loading process, and I was quickly off the pad and diving into the valley. The process was quite stressful, but it was always successful, and I do not recall being fired on while on the ground.

While en route to the Ban Ban area in the morning, Raven-52 experienced an engine failure. The pilot landed six miles south

of the valley, and was retrieved by an Air America crew at 1058 hours.

I took Papa Hotel Charlie back to Udorn for minor maintenance and landed well after dark.

*"In the Long Tieng area, government forces reoccupied a position on the easternmost end of Skyline Ridge. There was no enemy resistance, but a subsequent shelling attack killed the battalion commander and five other irregulars. Air observers have recently reported a new enemy build-up north of the ridge, and irregular patrols report increased enemy activity east and southeast of the Long Tieng valley. The current low level of enemy-initiated activity suggests that the communists may be holding fire while preparing for an all-out, coordinated attack."*

To the north on the 29th the enemy shelled military positions near the airstrip at Luang Prabang.

*"The shelling attack at [Luang Prabang] missed the airstrip and caused only slight damage and a few casualties at a nearby Lao Army headquarters area. No large North Vietnamese units have been detected near [LP] during the current dry season, and most of the fighting in the area has consisted of probing and shelling attacks on irregular defensive positions some 15 to 20 miles north and northeast of the royal capital. The [LP] airfield has been a target of communist shelling attacks in previous years."*

Eight Spooky gunship planes were launched that night. Crowbar east of Sam Tong reported TIC from 1945 until 2130 hours. <sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> CIA Bulletin, 01/29/72, Laos: The military situation around Long Tieng remains relatively quiet. The communists have, however, shelled positions near the Luang Prabang airfield to the north... Jim Parker, ABCCC Reporting for 01/29/72.



My same crew arrived at the airfield to FCF PHC. After one and a half hours of this drudgery, we launched for Site-272. While GM-30 rotated off the ridge for repatriation to Savannakhet, it was more of the same for me at The Alternate and around Sam Tong: Sling loads to "safe" portions of Skyline and wounded evacuations. Following a ten-hour day, we recovered at Wattay Airport and repaired to the Apollo Hotel for sustenance and much needed rest.

During the day Red Onion, Crowbar, and Lulu had TIC, Alleycat launched one Spooky, and Crowbar reported a TIC at 1900. <sup>88</sup>

## **THE ROAD**

Enemy road construction units located, in the "backdoor to the Plain of Jars" area, were under almost constant pressure from the air.

[According to Comrade Xuandao], *"throughout the past several days our entire problem has had to deal with the enemy air attacks as we work to build the road [Route-54] to Hintang. Night and day we have to endure enemy bombs, go out to locate and destroy all different types of delayed action bombs, and bravely cling to the road to enable our tanks, artillery, and supply trucks to move through the interior. Every time the bomb explosions stop, everyone runs out to destroy boulders, set off charges and mines, and fight the enemy in accordance with our slogan, 'courageously and resolutely cling to the road to keep the vehicles moving.'" <sup>89</sup>*

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<sup>88</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reporting for 01/30/72.

<sup>89</sup> Xuandao Diary, 01/30/72.

*"U.S. pilots reported on 31 January that the new road from the southwestern Plaine [through the Ban Hintang corridor] toward the Tha Tam Bleung area is about 80 percent completed." <sup>90</sup>*

Allied air activity seemed to have some effect on the use of enemy artillery.

*"The North Vietnamese have used their 130mm field guns sparingly during the past week. Air strikes are believed to have destroyed some of the guns, but it is not clear how many of the 16 guns detected moving into north Laos in November have been put out of action. The reduced use of the guns could also be caused by a desire to avoid exposing them to air strikes, an attempt to conserve ammunition prior to a major new ground assault, or because the guns are being moved into positions closer to Long Tieng for greater effectiveness." <sup>91</sup>*

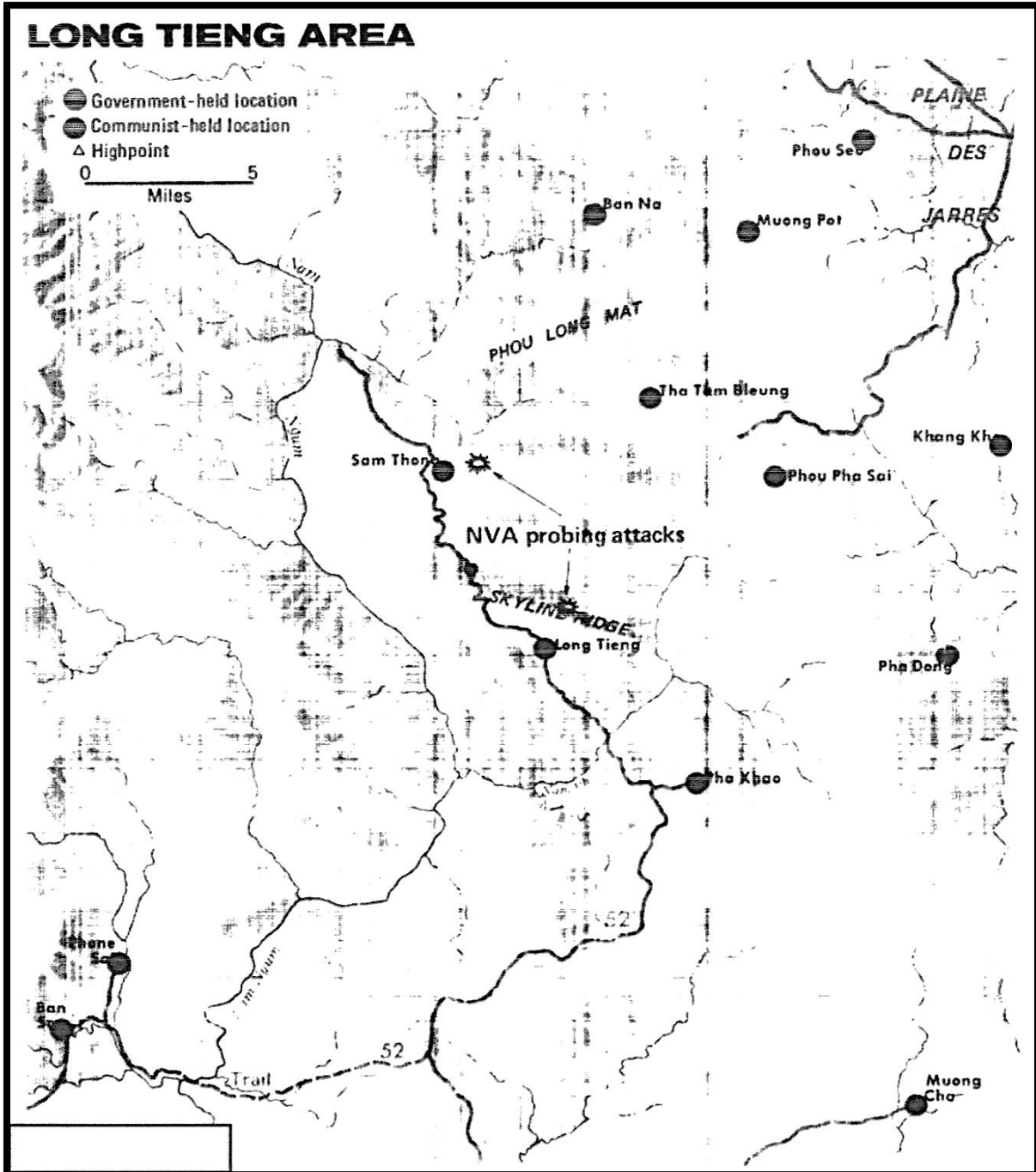
### **SLIGHTLY LESSENERD ACTION**

By the 31<sup>st</sup>, the tempo of daytime ground battles had diminished to the point where we were able to arrive at The Alternate early and immediately go to work. With early morning fog masking their positions, 130mm guns and crews were still present spewing intermittent fire at our Charlie pads. The rounds I saw landing impacted mainly on top of western Skyline near the Sam Tong Road. First a cloud of black smoke was observed rising from the landing point, followed by a huge explosion that reverberated off the mountainsides throughout the valley. It was a scary event to watch, but not anything close to the stress caused from sporadic rocket fire. The incoming fire soon stopped, perhaps because of clearing conditions and the

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<sup>90</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 02/03/72.

<sup>91</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: Military activity around Long Tieng has been light as both government forces and the North Vietnamese appear to be regrouping for a new round of fighting, 02/01/72.



By the last days of January, Skyline positions were in government hands, but enemy probes continued.

CIA Map, 01/31/72.

appearance of Raven pilots who could direct air strikes on the guns.

We spent a full day at Long Tieng logging eleven hours and conducting thirty sorties of worthwhile work, terminating again at Wattay Airport and spending the night in the city at the Apollo.

To a degree enemy infantry was still active, but contact was generally reserved for a brief period of transition between Cricket and Alleycat control aircraft. Lulu had a ground assault, and Crowbar, Wild Bill on Skyline, and Spotlight incurred attack by fire.<sup>92</sup>

### **WESTERN ACTIVITY**

Enemy activity was more prevalent in other areas.

*"After successfully pursuing the fleeing [government] forces, the [NVA] battle command headquarters decided to expand the attack against the enemy."*<sup>93</sup>

*"To the west of Long Tieng, Pathet Lao and dissident Neutralist forces are pressing along Route-13 both north and south of Sala Phou Khoun. On 31 January they overran Kiou Cacham [LS-04], between Sala Phou Khoun and Luang Prabang, and they are harassing Lao Army positions around Moung Kassy.*

[The 2nd and 16th Battalions, together with tank and artillery units, attacked and liberated the Moung {Kassy}-Ban Chieng area, and pushed the enemy down to Pha Hom-Pha Tang.

On the afternoon of 3 February, the 701st Battalion, reinforced by one local force company and one 122mm artillery

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<sup>92</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 01/31/72.

<sup>93</sup> Vietnamese military history.

platoon, attacked and liberated the Kiou Cacham area and pushed the enemy back to the north side of the Nam Minh Bridge.] <sup>94</sup>

*Lao Army units so far have put up little resistance to communist troops considered less able than the main force [NVA] units around Long Tieng.*

*The communist forces are being largely supplied along Route-7 from Moung Soui, and this extended supply line will hinder their ability to follow up their recent gains. On the other hand, their successes may encourage them to continue pressuring government troops in the hope of alarming [VTE] and forcing the government to divert some of its better forces from the Long Tieng area to Route-13."* <sup>95</sup>

*"After 45 days of constant fighting, the [NVA/PL] forces of the Plain of Jars-Xieng Khouang Military Region has successfully accomplished their assigned mission in Campaign Z's secondary sector.*

*Combining attacks with military proselytizing operations, the Military Region's units and Patriotic Neutralist forces had liberated the entire Moung Soui-Sala Phou Kheung area and had advanced and captured Kassy-Kiou Cacham, capturing territory in three provinces (Xieng Khouang, Luang Prabang, and Vientiane) covering more than a hundred kilometers [60 miles] in both length and depth, and creating favorable conditions to enable Vietnamese Volunteer Army forces in the campaign's primary attack sector to develop and expand their attack against the enemy."* <sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> North Vietnamese military history.

<sup>95</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: Military activity has remained light in the Long Tieng area, but communist forces are keeping up the pressure on government units along Route-13, 02/03/72.

<sup>96</sup> Vietnamese military history.

**MR-1**

Long Tieng was not the only hazardous location for Air America helicopter crews to work in the country. With several aircraft having received battle damage in the area, Xieng Lom increasingly became a close second as the most dangerous area to conduct operations.

Captains Tim Woosley, Emmet Sullivan, and Flight Mechanic Ajero were crewing Hotel-77 at Site-69A when the Customer assigned them an emergency mission to evacuate wounded Thai from a landing zone in the especially dangerous northeast quadrant of the Sayaboury Province region.<sup>97</sup>

Tim was at the controls, with two T-28 pilots from Luang Prabang flying escort. The position was especially challenging, affording only one approach path and a requirement to back out of the pad and turn 180 degrees to depart. While WIAs were being loaded, a T-28 was observed trailing smoke following a pass. Then a second T-28 blew up, and the pilot bailed out over enemy territory. At that moment, with the number of passengers onboard, it was not feasible to attempt a SAR.

Tim was unable to clear the landing pad from the right side, so Emmet, who had a more advantageous departure angle, opted to take off, but it would be to the west, over the valley where the T-28s had been hit. While backing out of the pad a 12.7mm round struck the rear of his unarmored seat from less than a hundred yards away. The impact knocked him forward, giving him a nasty looking bruise for months, but he managed to turn and began heading toward Xieng Lom.

He could hear and feel several projectiles striking the helicopter as hits were taken to the engine, main rotor blade,

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<sup>97</sup> At the time, only a few scattered sites were controlled by Lao and Thai irregulars.

and an aft fuel cell. After a few minutes, Tim asked about the engine oil pressure. When Emmet glanced at the instrument console, there was no indication on the gage.

With the ship badly damaged, it was increasingly obvious that further flight could not be sustained, so they landed the helicopter on a trail. Immediately after touching the ground, both engine and transmission seized. The crew and passengers were removed by a backup helicopter crew and ferried to Xieng Lom. <sup>98</sup>

#### **MR-4**

The western Bolovens Plateau, east of Pakse, and particularly Paksong had endured bitter fighting in 1971. Sea-saw battles were waged by government forces to protect Pakse and prevent the enemy from establishing ever-expanding supply lines in order to support their efforts in South Vietnam and Cambodia. Engendered by vicious fighting, many lives were lost on both sides, and participating Lao and Thai forces were only able to hold positions for a time because of uncontested Allied air power efforts.

*"In south Laos, Lao Army units manning positions about five miles west of Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau dispersed after they came under heavy attack on 31 December. They left behind several trucks and three 105mm howitzers which were later destroyed by air strikes. Other Lao Army units pulled back to an irregular position at Ban Gnik, [Route-23] on the western edge of the Plateau."* <sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> William Leary January 1972 Notes: Emmet Sullivan Interview with University of Texas archivist Larry Sall. Joe Leeker.

EW Knight Email, 11/26/00, Tim Woosley later quit over the incident. Emmet Sullivan Tape.

<sup>99</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 01/03/72.

By 2 January, GM-42, which formerly held a position at Ban Phak Kout had retrenched at Ban Gnik. Howitzers from Thai-manned Lightning battery and Allied air tended to temporarily stem the enemy advance. However, the second enemy attack could not be contained, and by the middle of January the regiment departed the field after incurring an enormous number of casualties. <sup>100</sup>

*"In south Laos, the communists are also exerting heavy pressure on a government force that is attempting to block further enemy movement along Route-23 toward the western edge of the Bolovens Plateau. The action is taking place at Ban Gnik, about 12 miles west of Paksong, and as many as two NVA battalions with artillery support may be involved. So far, government casualties are reported to be light, but the Ban Gnik defenders are virtually surrounded, and air support is being subjected to heavy ground fire."* <sup>101</sup>

No longer subject to a government blockade at Ban Gnik, the 9th Vietnamese Regiment moved south toward Lao Ngam to engage Thai forces there. <sup>102</sup>

*"...Lao Army and irregular units on Route-23 west of Ban Gnik came under fire by 122mm rockets on 28 January. No further details are yet available, but it is likely that the communists hope to push government forces back at least as far as the junction of Routes-23 and 231.*

[By the end of January, Vietnamese forces were in complete control of the Plateau, with government units holding positions on Route-23, thirteen miles east of Pakse.]

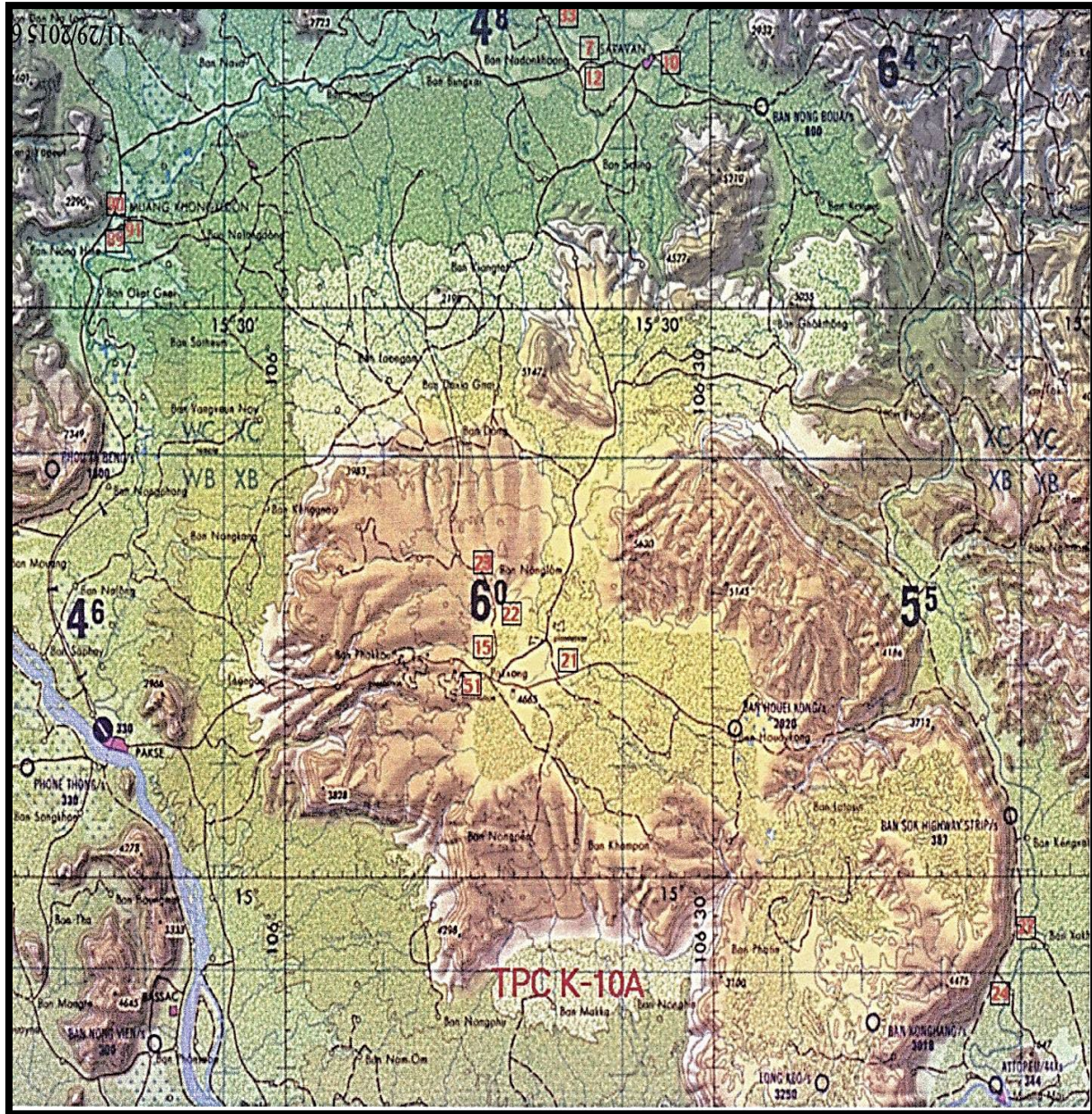
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<sup>100</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 329, 339.

<sup>101</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 01/10/72. Many field reports were not timely.

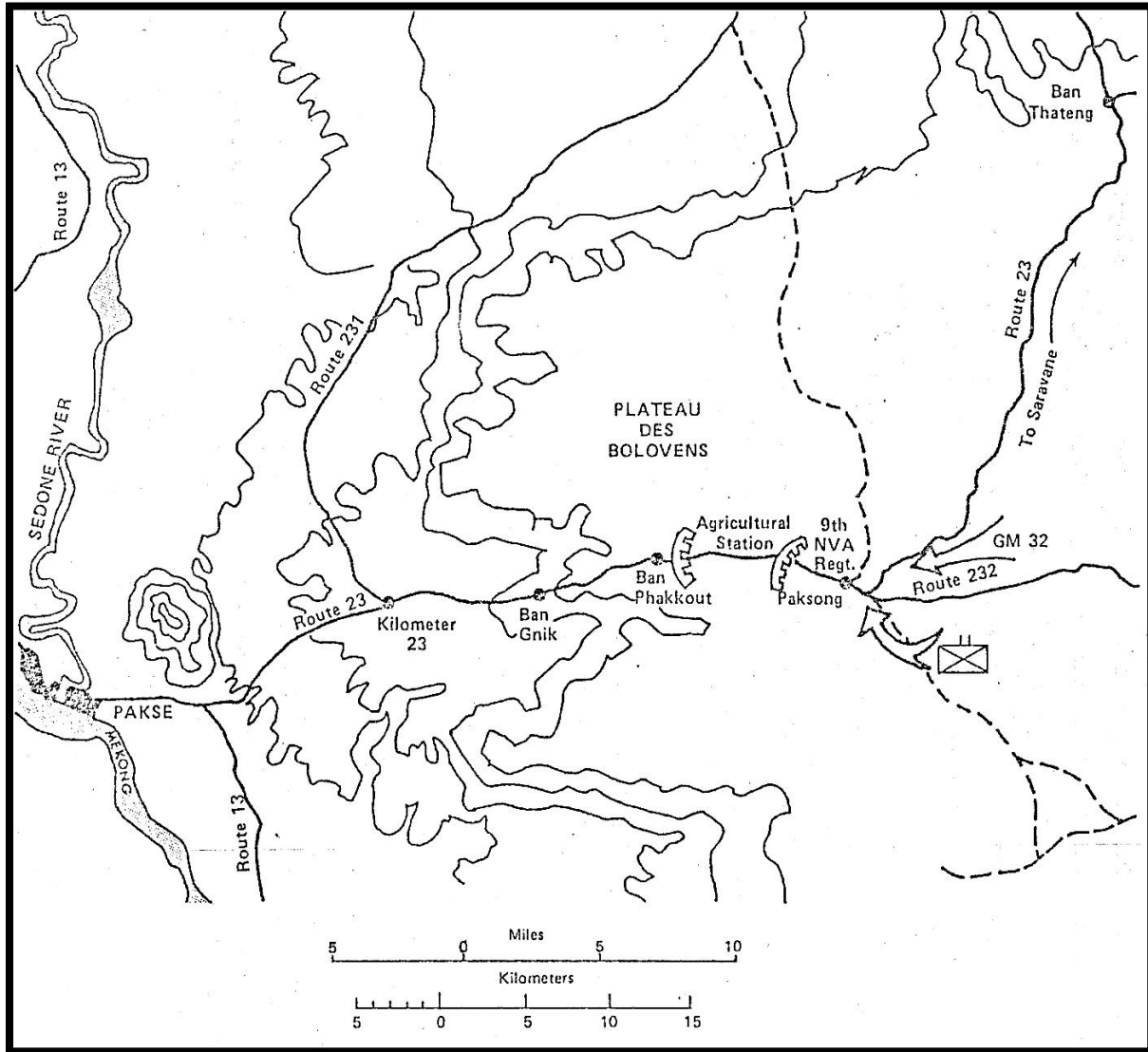
<sup>102</sup> Ken Conboy, 339.





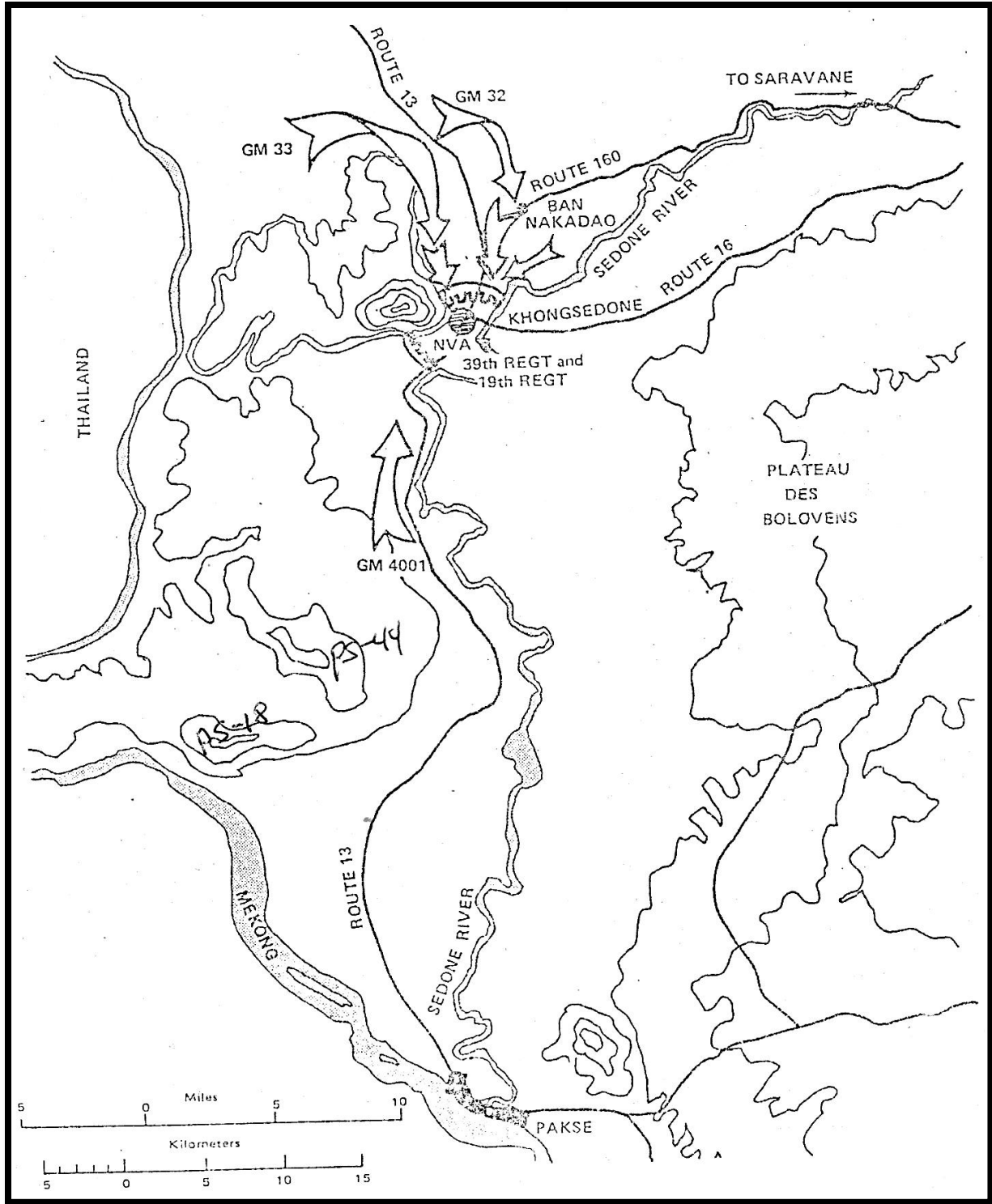
A topographic map of the spacious Bolovens Plateau and surrounding high terrain in Military Region Four. Route-23 extends from Pakse through Paksong, then turns north toward Thateng, on to Saravane, and into the Toumlan Valley. PS-44 is located north of Pakse.

Hukee Collection.



Location of Ban Gnik in relation to the towns of Paksong and Pakse. Phu Batiane (PS-17) or the communications site on "radio mountain" lies north of Route-23 between Pakse and the Bolovens Plateau foothills.

Vongsavanh, 75.



Western Military Region Four and the area depicting the Khong Sedone conflict. S-58T helicopter and fixed wing Twin Otter Special Project and SGU training sites were located south of Khong Sedone at PS-44 and PS-18.

Vongsavanh, 82

*Lao Neutralist forces who had been stationed on Route-231 abandoned their positions on 27 January and apparently are withdrawing to Pakse."* <sup>103</sup>

A communist regiment operating west of the Bolovens captured Khong Sedone (LS-289) during January. Located forty miles north of Pakse (L-11) at the junction of Routes-13 and 16, much like Sam Tong and Ban Son in the north, the town had been used as a fallback site for civilians and government officials when Saravane was constantly under pressure and eventually lost.<sup>104</sup>

Except as a demarcation line separating Military Region Four from Military Region Three, additional loss of territory, and a blocking position for Pakse, the town was not considered that important. However, two sites in the hills fifteen to twenty miles to the south weighed heavily in Agency plans and activities. The first was PS-44, an isolated site chosen for Commando Raider and S-58T Special Project training. South of PS-44, overlooking the confluence of the Nam Mun and Mekong rivers, PS-18 hosted SGU and extraterritorial military training. <sup>105</sup>

### **KNIGHT RETURNS TO A MUCH ALTERED OPERATION**

Wayne Knight had been attending school in California since August of 1970. After completing his education, he was en route

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<sup>103</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: The communists have increased their pressure on government units in south Laos, 01/29/72.

<sup>104</sup> CHECO, *Indochina Monographs*, General Soutchay Vongsavanh (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), RLG Military Operations and Activities in the Laotian Panhandle, 79.

<sup>105</sup> Ken Conboy: *Shadow War*. In addition to these special SGU and Commando Raider training areas, in order to improve the fighting capability of some Neutralist and FAR units, old or new centers were to be built or refurbished. Those selected were at Seno on Route-9 in Military Region Three, Wat Phu (PS-46) downriver from Pakse in Military Region Four, Phou Khao Khouai in the hills north of the Vientiane flood plain, and southwest of Luang Prabang in Military Region One.

to Southeast Asia with his family by late January 1972. They arrived in Hong Kong on the 26th and in Taipei the next day.

Prior to departing on home leave, from what Vice President of Flight Operations (VPFO) Jim Walker, and Systems Chief Pilot, Don Teeters indicated, Wayne understood that all things being equal, he would return to his former chief pilot helicopter (CPH) position upon his return to Udorn. However, there had been management changes, and former USAF and Air America fixed wing Porter pilot Earl Richmond was promoted to VPFO. This fostered an element of uncertainty in Wayne's mind that he would actually be allowed to resume his old job.

While Knight was still attending school, Richmond had posted a letter to him, inviting him to stop in Taipei during his trip back to Thailand. It was a short visit. The young VPFO confirmed that Wayne would definitely resume his former CPH slot, but first he had to fly the line for three months. This would allow Wayne to gain valuable experience and knowledge regarding the current situation and of many new pilots, which he would use to good advantage after assuming the supervisory pilot billet. Wayne agreed this was the best indoctrination into the deteriorating situation the helicopter pilots faced.

John Ford was still exercising CPH duties at the Udorn facility, with Captain Dick Elder assisting him, but John was quietly being targeted for a job in Washington. For some reason, Richmond neglected to inform Wayne of this major detail during their meeting.

The Knight family arrived in Bangkok on the 29<sup>th</sup>, and Udorn Town shortly afterward. Since Director of Maintenance Jack Forney was either on leave or assigned a stint in Taipei or Tainan, the Knights resided in Jack's house for a time while searching for a suitable one for the expanding family. During



A pensive Earl Wayne Knight wearing a new Nomex uniform after resuming his Chief Pilot Helicopter position in May.

*Air America Log, Volume 6, #4, 197.*

time off they moved into a large upstairs apartment on Phosri Road.

Knight was overwhelmed by all the changes since departing for school and could not recall many details of the first days. It did seem like everyone was busier, and considerably more brusque and impersonal than when he left.

There was more than one convivial drinking session with old friends. John Ford, Lloyd Higgins, and Wayne turned on a real "whing ding" one night drinking tequila.

John Ford was only one of three people aware that Wayne was going to replace him. Until the CPH handover, Wayne generally remained away from the office and maintained minimal contact with John. However, John did reveal the presence of an Agency-sponsored Special Project, but few other details emerged until March, when Wayne was informed of the crew's names. Ford indicated that Wayne could involve himself in the highly secret operation if he desired. They did not talk to AB-1 Special Project Manager, Buddy Rogers at this time. Wayne was supposed, for all overt appearances, to be just a returning line pilot, and visits to AB-1, with too much time spent upstairs in the operations building, might belie this attempted subterfuge.

During the line pilot phase prior to reassuming the Helicopter Chief Pilot (CPH) job, Knight believed that he was generally accepted at face value by fellow pilots. Captain Larry Hennesy even attempted to recruit him into Far East Pilots Association (FEPA), the pilot union. <sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> EW Knight Emails, 05/24/00, 11/26/00, 11/28/00, 11/30/00. Captain Jerry McEntee claimed that he had a similar agreement as Wayne-to return to a management billet after his hitch in Nepal ended. However, his agreement was with former VPFO Bob Rousselot, and when he returned to Udorn, current VPFO Malcolm Boyd claimed that he knew nothing of the purported arrangement.

**A**ir America operated twenty-one of the twenty-two UH-34D Sikorsky helicopters in Laos. One was used by U.S. military personnel to train Royal Lao Air Force pilots. Sixteen UH-34Ds were cocooned in storage. <sup>1</sup>

I completed my final day on the flight schedule on Tuesday, the first. Still assigned Twinpac Papa Hotel Charlie, Gregoire, Velasquez and I flew a nine-hour day at Long Tieng, during which, I conducted thirty sorties to various venues that included moving troops to viable landing zones and slinging artillery shells to new fire support bases (FSBs) staged on the south side of The Alternate hills. I was then off the schedule for the next eight days.

*"Four irregular battalions that moved into Long Tieng last week have now relieved irregular units on high-ground positions around Sam Tong. The units suffered moderate casualties as they moved into their new positions."* <sup>2</sup>

During the day the enemy was still somewhat active around Long Tieng. Wild Bill reported enemy probes on his Skyline position as the Raven-22 pilot and Candle artillery fire support base supported him. Thunder fire support base (FSB) reported an attack by fire, while Raven-24 spotted for Thunder counterfire. Cobra FSB received twelve rounds of 82mm fire, as Raven-25 supported the base. Well to the east, at Ban Tha Si (LS-61), Rocket Mobile reported a probe and attacks by fire (ABF). <sup>3</sup>

On the second, Wild Bill reported an attack by fire, with Raven-24 pilot supporting the position. Peacock reported an attack by fire, which Raven-27 supported. A-1 pilot Hobo-20

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<sup>1</sup> CHECO, Aircraft and utilization report.

<sup>2</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos. 02/01/72.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 02/01/72.



experienced engine problems and was able to land safely at 20A. He was removed from the front lines by an Air America helicopter pilot. <sup>4</sup>

The next day, FAGs Peacock, Spotlight, Wild Bill, Lulu, and Crowbar reported ABF. The attacks were short and considered mostly harassing.

Cricket cleared Barrel Roll because of a MiG alert.

When Wild Bill reported an ABF on the 4<sup>th</sup>, Raven-22 and Thai-crewed Thunder FSB supported him.

Then on Saturday, the 5<sup>th</sup>, Wild Bill and Spotlight received incoming 82mm mortar fire, as Raven 27 supported both sites. Meanwhile, Cricket cleared the Barrel three times because of Bandit calls.

On the sixth, Red Hat reported a three-hour ground assault without losing the position. Wild Bill, Lulu, and Slingshot (at LS-50) reported ABF of short duration. <sup>5</sup>

Peacock, Bad Man, and Wild Bill reported ABF on Monday, the 7<sup>th</sup>. Peacock received three assaults throughout the day. Raven-22 and 28 supported him. Raven-22 also supported an attack on LS-05.

At 1630 hours Blue Chip advised Cricket of a possible camouflaged missile transporter (located near Route-7 south of Nong Pet). Nail-47 reconed the area, (but) heavy canopy and dark shadows prevented a visual sighting.

On the eighth, FAG Thudbuster reported an attack by fire on an outpost located south of Ban Tha Si, causing the defenders to abandon the site. He also sustained an AFB on his position and was supported by Raven-52.

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<sup>4</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 02/02/72.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 3 through 6 February [supplemented by additional information from the Airborne Command and Control Center website.

At Long Tieng, Whiskey-01 reported intermittent assaults during the morning of the eighth, and a ground assault on Charlie Delta pad. Ravens 20 and 21 supported the action and no friendly positions were lost. Flying a Hobo A-1, USAF pilot Byron Hukee was present for a helicopter medevac, and conducted strikes in an attempt to ward off the enemy. <sup>6</sup>

Well to the east at Ban Tha Si, Rocket Mobile reported one of his outposts was overrun and twelve men were missing. Lulu, Bad Man, and Peacock reported an attack by fire.

On the ninth, Padong received five rounds of 130mm fire as Raven-22 and 28 supported the site. Sunshine and Bad Man reported attacks by fire, but poor weather prevented air support. Raven-26 and 29 supported a ground assault on Parka's position.

Cricket received a report at 1045 that a CASI C-46 (N67961) was overdue at Ban Nam Luang (LS-313) in northeastern Luang Prabang Province. When 961 was discovered crashed in the hills north of LS-313, a team was inserted and determined that there were no survivors. <sup>7</sup>

*"Fighting along Skyline Ridge broke out again yesterday when irregulars on the east end of the ridge fought a day-long battle, losing four killed and 11 wounded but holding their key position.*

*West of Long Tieng, government forces are regrouping between Moung Kassy and Vang Vieng in an attempt to halt any further southward advances by communist forces on Route-13."* <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hukee, A-1 Journal.

<sup>7</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 02/07-09/72.

<sup>8</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 02/09/72.

**DIVERSIONARY TACTICS**

Enemy military history recorded:

*"After successfully blocking our attacks along the Long Tieng line, the enemy [RLG] hastily regrouped and moved reinforcements into Long [Tieng], raising the size of the enemy there to fifty-three battalions fourteen Thai Army battalions, seventeen Royal Lao Government battalions, and twenty-two Vang Pao battalions with the goal of mounting a counter-attack to retake the positions the enemy had lost.*

*With heavy and outstanding air support, including American B-52s, in early February, the enemy launched a series of counterattacks designed to recapture Sam Tong. Then from 7 February to 3 March a portion of the enemy's forces secretly infiltrated through the jungle and launched a surprise attack that captured Phu Khe, Phu Luong, and Phu Houei Sai Ridges, thereby directly threatening the southern approach to the Plain of Jars.*

*After assigning an appropriate number of forces to block the enemy's counterattack columns, in order to defend and hold the liberated zone, all of our remaining forces would be deployed to attack and liberate Long [Tieng].<sup>9</sup>*

By now General Vang Pao was faced with an estimated twenty-two enemy battalions. Although supported by some Allied air and artillery, ground defensive measures could only do so much to ward off the dire threat to Long Tieng. Other measures had to be implemented. Well known for conducting timely diversions when necessity dictated, during mid-January, Vang Pao, bucking some opposition from Washington but supported by Vientiane embassy officials and FAR leaders, formulated plans to send two battalions to Padong for a 1 February march toward the

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<sup>9</sup> Ho Khang, Vietnamese military history of the war in Laos.

southeastern Plain of Jars. Other units would be delivered to Pha Khao to supplement movement northeast toward Route-4. If successful, the operation would strike enemy supply lines and hopefully draw some Vietnamese attention away from the ramparts at Long Tieng.

During the following days, as the situation moderated somewhat around the contested Long Tieng-Sam Tong complex, Vang Pao planned to include additional units for the proposed maneuver. The movement would tend to strip the Sam Tong area of Meo and Lao troops, but these would be replaced by incoming Thai troops.

On the first, joining a battalion already present at Padong, another unit was shuttled by Air America fixed wing aircraft to Site-5. The buildup continued throughout the week, with additional regiments committed to the operation from Savannakhet. <sup>10</sup>

*"The powers who be"* in Washington--White House, State Department, Pentagon Defense Department, CIA Langley--preferring to use assets to create a defense in depth, were unhappy with the diversionary operation. This was not the first time Vang Pao's operations were challenged by American leaders for various agendas and geopolitical reasons. However, rear echelon types were far removed from the action and divorced from Vang Pao's vast military experience and extraordinary ability to divine and deal with a particularly sticky situation.

The Washington group's consensus was not in favor of the general's plan, and informed Ambassador Godley that the operation represented *"an unacceptable risk to the Lao and Thai*

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<sup>10</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 335.  
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 448.

*forces involved and could lead to a severe military setback in Laos at the time of the President's Peking visit."*

In Vientiane, Godley and his Country Team of experts, which included military attachés and CIA personnel, firmly believed that a preferred and recommended withdrawal from Long Tieng was unwarranted and *"would play directly into the enemy's hands."*<sup>11</sup>

*"The government is continuing to strengthen and redeploy its forces in the Long Tieng area. Four new irregular battalions from Savannakhet are being moved into the Long Tieng area to replace those withdrawn following the recent heavy fighting on Skyline Ridge.*

*The government is continuing to move troops to the Padong area, and by 5 February expects to have some 4,000 [the total number of troops for the operation eventually reached 5,000] there. The remaining irregular forces-some 8,000 troops are deployed around the Long Tieng complex from Sam Tong to the new fire support bases in the south."*<sup>12</sup>

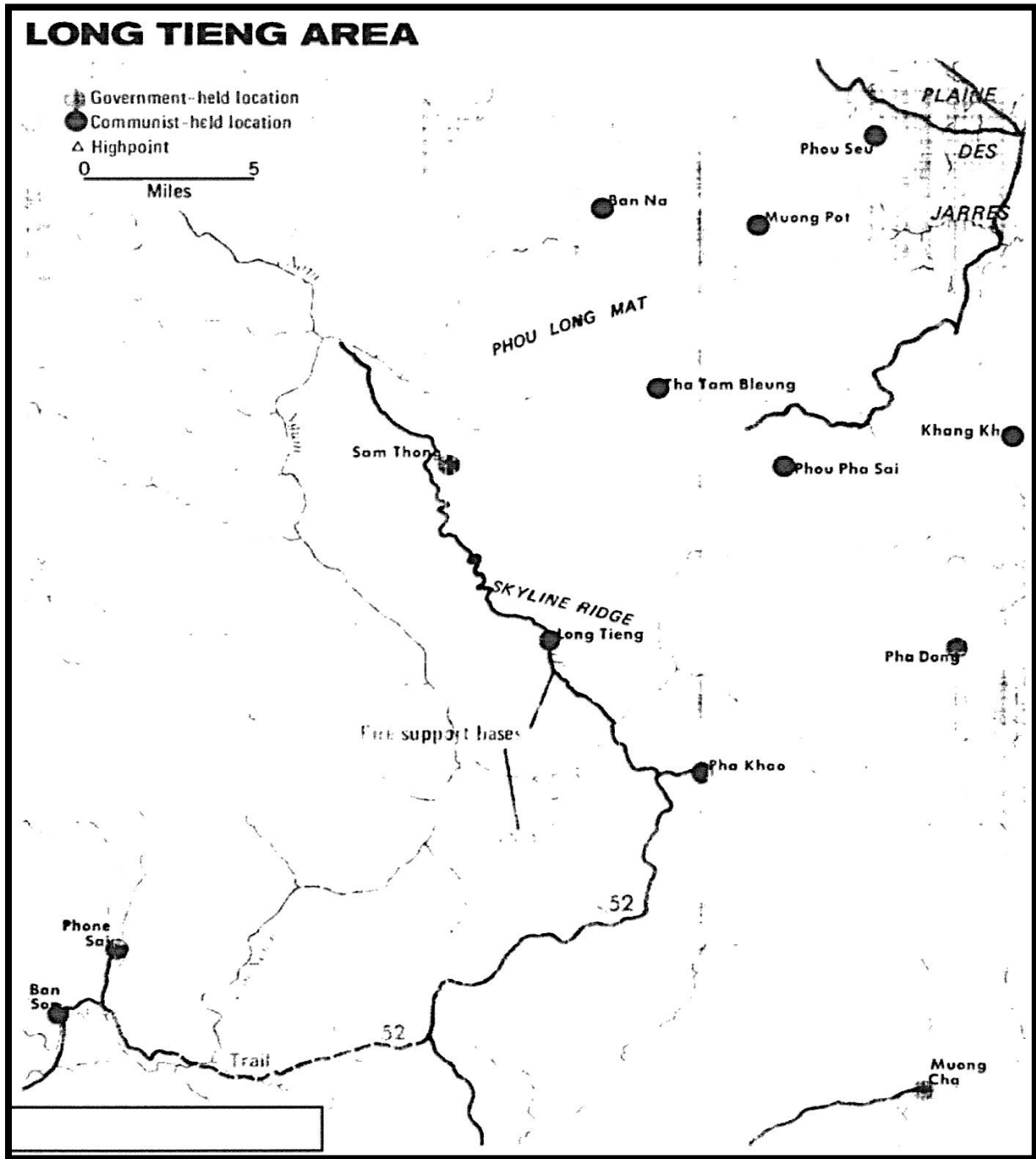
As elements of GM-33 Regiment from Savannakhet arrived at Ban Son (LS-272), on the third, Air America Caribous began shuttling the men to Pha Khao, where helicopter crews delivered them to forward hilltops. (In order to minimize confusion of numbers, other regimental units were sent to Long Tieng for delivery to Pha Khao and Padong (Khang Kho), and were the initial launch sites for the February diversionary operation.)

Despite Company regulations intended to restrict the number of passengers to only allocated seats (thirty), the Customer exercised his option and waved the restriction for this movement. Therefore, loading far more than ever intended, after

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<sup>11</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume 8, Vietnam, Document 21. Message from the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, Vientiane, February 11, 1972. Paraphrased by the Author.

<sup>12</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 02/05/72.



CIA graphic of the Long Tieng area as of 02/05/72.

all the red nylon bucket seats lining both sides of the fuselage were occupied, troops sat on the floor.

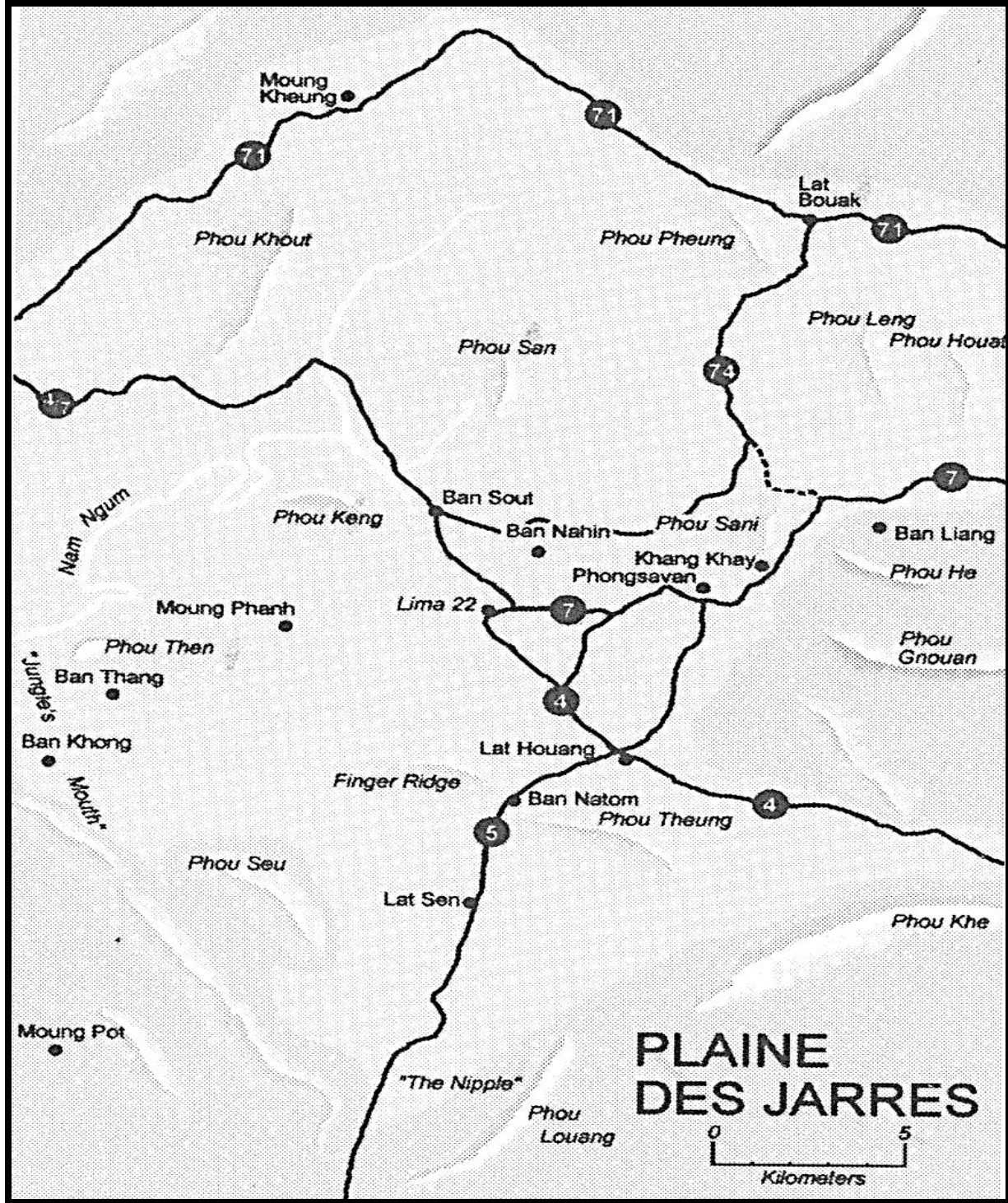
The crew of C-7A 61-2393, PIC Gordon Smith, Copilot DM Houston, and AFS MS "Beetle" Bailey, were conducting the final approach of a third shuttle when disaster struck. Bailey heard Houston report forty knots. For some reason, Smith was uncomfortable with the approach and elected to abort the landing. At the last moment, he retracted the flaps and landing gear. It was too late. Lacking sufficient lift to wave off and go around, 393 pancaked violently into the ground. The hard landing resulted in extensive damage that led to the plane being abandoned, but human damage was worse: Smith suffered spinal injuries, Houston incurred a fractured skull, and Bailey received only minor injuries; but AFD Khamouth Sousadalay was thrown about the cargo area and killed, while thirty-four passengers were injured to some degree. <sup>13</sup>

Despite the incident at Site-14 the task force moved out of the two assembly points on the sixth (Khang Kho, LS-204 across the valley from Padong, was traditionally one launch site used for Plain of Jars operations).

*"On 8 February [the enemy] fired mortars at positions northwest of Padong, the jumping off place for 5,000 of Vang Pao's irregulars who are moving northeast toward Route-4 to harass enemy lines of communication [LOC]. Later in the day, the communists fired about fifty rounds from their heavy weapons-including 130mm field gun fire-into Padong. Little damage was caused, because only small irregular units remain in the area.*

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<sup>13</sup> Professor Bill Leary February 1972 Notes: Interview with kicker MS Bailey.  
Joe Leeker, C-7A, 61-2393.



Area of Vang Pao's February northern diversion toward Route-4 in the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley. Initial goals were seizing the high ground of Phou Louang, Phou Khe, and Phou Theung.

Conboy Graphic, 432.





*So far, the advancing irregulars report little resistance, although their patrols report enemy troop concentrations farther to the north and east."* <sup>14</sup>

Except for the attack on Padong, moving boldly over largely uncontested terrain, by the tenth, forward elements reached the hills of Phou Louang north of Khang Kho. From this objective, the force split into three parts, one remaining in place as a rear guard, another column moving toward Phou Khe (LS-19), a high mountain overlooking the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley, and the last unit marched north toward the high ground of Phou Theung, which commanded the western most portion of Route-4 entering the Plain of Jars. Conducting what could be called a diversion to a diversion, a force from Bouam Long headed over well-worn paths south toward the 7/71 strategic road junction at Nong Pet. <sup>15</sup>

*"Forward elements of one task force are now about three miles from the southern tip of the Plaine, and other units are farther to the south and east. Little resistance has so far been encountered, presumably because the irregulars have not yet moved into any vital areas.*

Vang Pao clearly believes that at this juncture the best defense is a good offense. Rather than digging in at Long Tieng for a costly head-on struggle with the attacking [NVA], he has chosen to divide his 12,000-man force, leaving a 7,000-man contingent to defend Sam Tong and Long Tieng and sending the remainder to probe deeply toward the enemy's lines of communication. Vang Pao hopes to recapture the initiative and rekindle the fighting spirit of his troops, while forcing the

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<sup>14</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: The North Vietnamese appear to be taking steps to counter Vang Pao's new operation south of the Plain des Jarres, 02/09/72.

<sup>15</sup> Ken Conboy, 335.

[Vietnamese] to divert their forces from the front lines to protect their supply corridors.

The operation is, however, a calculated risk. It could so weaken Vang Pao's offensive force that its future usefulness would be impaired should the operation fail to reduce the pressure on Long Tieng. Moreover, the communists could attempt to take advantage of the reduced government strength around Long Tieng and Sam Tong to move quickly against them.

Several indicators suggest that the [NVA] may have nearly completed their preparations for new attacks. Enemy reconnaissance and patrol activity has increased both at Sam Tong and along Skyline Ridge. The new road from the southern edge of the Plaine to Ban Hintang reportedly is motorable, promising to reduce supply difficulties and making it possible to move heavy artillery closer to the base. Much will now depend on whether the irregulars can move with speed and purpose to stir up enough trouble in the rear to divert the [NVA] before they can launch an all-out assault on Long Tieng." <sup>16</sup>

## **MUSING**

Throughout history, civilian micro-management of a war or an organization and formulating important decisions, has rarely been easy or successful. When separated by thousands of miles of oceans and land masses, reliance on often diluted information is habitually skewed by personal or political agendas: do not mess with my turf or break my rice bowl. This was clearly evident within the Air America organization by years of Taipei's higher echelon headquarters' status quo, and pilots are a "dime a dozen" attitude and mismanagement of Air America pilots

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<sup>16</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: Vang Pao's irregulars are moving deeper into the enemy's rear areas south of Plaine des Jarres, 02/11/72.

throughout the Far East that eventually resulted in formation of a system wide Far East Pilot Association (FEPA).

In retrospect, it can be argued that there were many facets involved that led to USG's failure to win in Vietnam and ultimately in Laos, if winning was actually ever the policy. In terms of gross simplification, analytical examination reveals that it was a slightly different matter that required Washington's hands-off micromanaging of daily military affairs. More autonomy afforded to local field commanders to produce timely decisions, and to take advantage of promising battlefield conditions, would likely have resulted in additional success and a commensurately shorter war.

The conflict in Laos was considerably more pragmatic. Conducted by State Department civilian ambassadors, with often opposing goals to that of upper echelon military leaders, it presented a unique situation. Closer to the action and better able to assess the overall picture, the civilian ambassador, and his "Country Team" consisting of both civilian and military advisors, were tasked to manage an ever-widening conflict within specified guidelines. Therefore, the ambassador was often obliged to justify his actions and answer to his superiors at the State Department. Moreover, the military establishment was never completely happy with this civilian arrangement, and sometimes only grudgingly supplied air support.<sup>17</sup>

From the bowels of the Vientiane Embassy, Ambassador Godley forwarded a message to State rebutting Washington's unfavorable early February opinion of Vang Pao's diversionary operation:

*"...the North Vietnamese would like nothing better than to turn Long Tieng into another Dien Bien Phu [French defeat].*

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<sup>17</sup> Rightly or wrongly, the opinion on this subject is solely the Author's, supported by twelve years of observation and experience working in the Theater.

*Their objective is certainly the destruction of Lao and Thai fighting forces in Northern Laos. A second objective...is the capture of Long Tieng. This is indicated by the fact that communist propaganda media have prematurely and uncharacteristically announced the fall of Long Tieng and the defeat of RLG forces in the area.*

*...I believe our most practical strategy is to deploy friendly troops in the way best calculated to deny the enemy both of his goals...We have sufficient forces in MR-2 to create a stabilized military situation of the kind Washington and this Mission desire. Friendly forces have been fighting well. We have evidence from intelligence sources that the enemy's timetable has been disrupted and that his forces have been hurt...[except for action on Skyline] Thai losses have not been unusually high...troop morale is good...The recently launched Padong and Moung Kassy operations were conceived and initiated entirely by the Lao and Thai commanders...*

*As of the moment friendly forces have the initiative along Route-13 and may be able to reoccupy Moung Kassy in the next few days...We do not think the enemy is present in the Moung Kassy area in any strength and believe that Kouprasith's operation can succeed. It is too early to assess the Padong operation... After a slow start it has been moving well. The enemy has not yet resisted but we believe has redeployed troops from the Long Tieng/Sam Tong complex to avoid their being flanked...the pressure against Long Tieng may be relieved at least temporarily."*

The ambassador went on to present a cogent point and to caution his remotely located superiors that, with two operations already underway, a reversal in policy would be detrimental to the cause.

*"...Orderly withdrawal from positions north of Long Tieng will be difficult...Lao and Thai leadership will be confused and discouraged...In these conditions I do not see how a credible defense line could be established south of Long Tieng..."*

*...[it would] produce profound repercussions in Bangkok and Vientiane. The Thai volunteer's program in Northern Laos would disintegrate. Souvanna's position would be further weakened..."*

*...I believe that Washington's instructions would [perpetrate] a dramatic military setback and political disequilibrium in Laos at the time of the President's visit to Peking.* <sup>18</sup>

*...All of us here are deeply conscious of the risks inherent in the present situation. The military tactics we support are those I believe most likely to avoid politico/military reverses..."*

*...Washington agencies should be aware that we do not have case officers with the Padong units which are operating under complete radio silence. The practical difficulties involved in pulling them back, should the Lao and Thai be willing to do so, will pose enormous other problems."* <sup>19</sup>

The next day a message from the Washington group to Godley continued the dialogue:

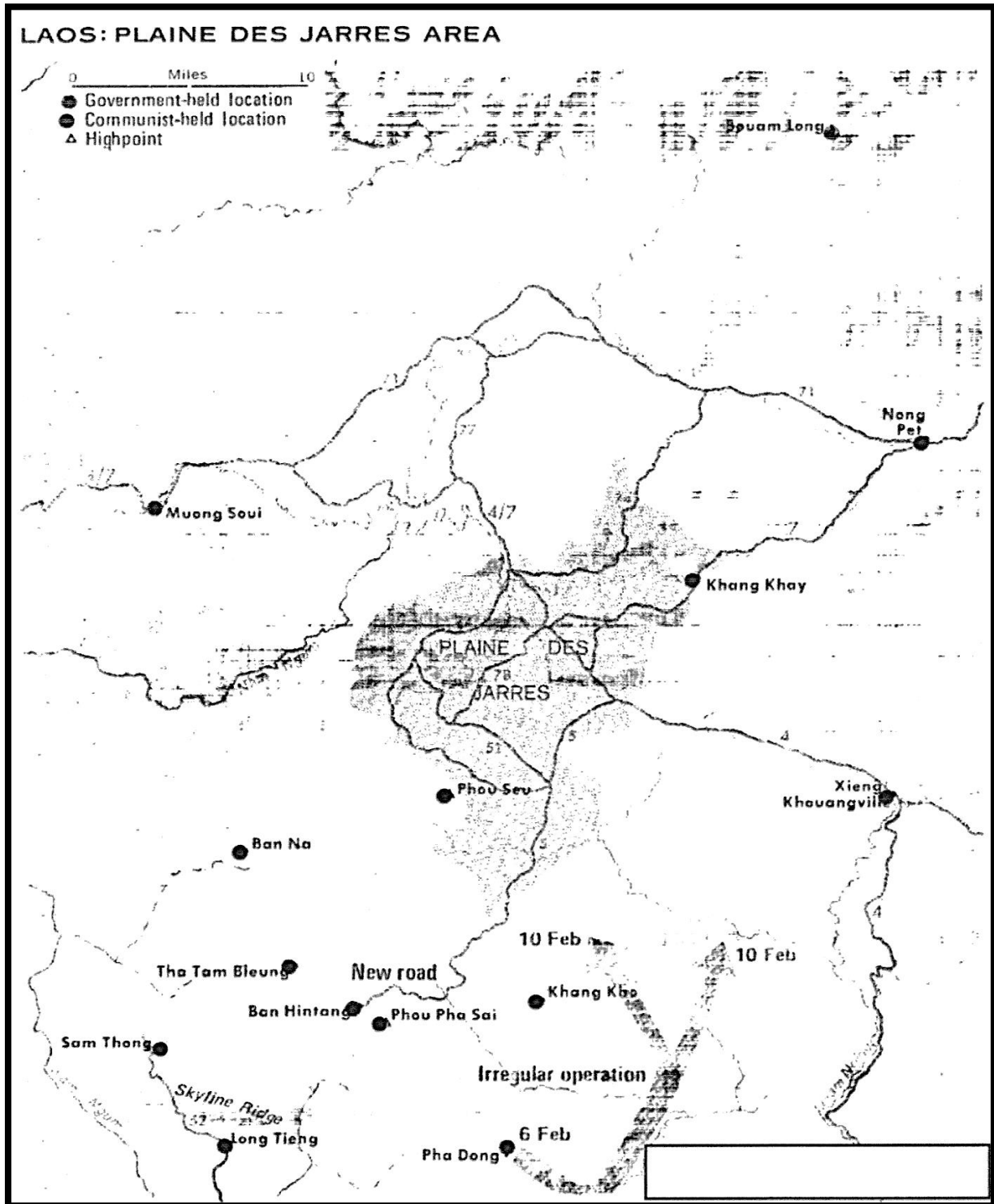
*"Your arguments in favor of your strategy, including continuation of Padong operations, are forceful and we will abide with your judgment on present dispositions..."* <sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bowman, John, *Almanac*, 300: In a breakthrough visit President Nixon went to Peking, China on 21 February. Chou En-lai urged early peace in Vietnam...North Vietnamese leaders feared that China would effect a deleterious deal, as was accomplished at Geneva in 1954...

<sup>19</sup> FRUS, Document 21, 02/11/72.

<sup>20</sup> Washington National Records Center, OSD files: FRC 330-77-0094, 385, Laos, dated 02/12/72.



CIA 02/11/72 graphic depicting the slow progress of Vang Pao's infantry ground diversionary force. It also shows the location (new road) of a logistic artery from the Plain of Jars to supply the Vietnamese troops around the Long Tieng Sam Tong complex.

Not all Washington shakers and movers believed a Lao downfall to be imminent:

*"As you know we have had a series of meetings and exchange of cables on the situation in North Laos.*

*...Washington agencies are nervous because the Lao and Thai have not prepared and occupied defensive fallback positions in the event of an all-out assault on Long Tieng. This concern has been conveyed to Godley although...we must refrain from giving him detailed tactical instruction.*

*...Godley feels that the Laos and Thai forces are well dug in defensively at Long Tieng and if the NVA attack it will be a good fight and not a rout...repositioning forced now to defensive fallback positions would have a more debilitating effect...than whatever outcome of the strategy which is now*

*...The real problem...when the crunch comes Lao/Thai forces being pursued will be almost completely reliant on air.*

[An opinion of MACV and DOD's negative attitude toward the State Department/CIA's conduct of the Lao war was presented.]

*There has already been a drop in tactical air and arc light sorties in North Laos...the densest concentration of NVA forces in all of Indochina [is] now preparing to do battle in [the] south and west PDJ...*

*With three carriers off the Gulf of Tonkin, another on the way, and a fresh squadron of F-4s assigned to the Indochina area, it is inconceivable to me that we could not dedicate a bit more to North Laos..."* <sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> FRUS, Document 23, 02/14/72, Situation in North Laos: Memorandum from John D. Negroponte of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig).



Showing concern, troops of the Vietnamese construction battalion laboring in the Ban Hintang/LS-72 area learned about the diversion operation:

*"We learned that Vang Pao flew in troops and recaptured the Plain of Jars. We are virtually surrounded as the road is blocked at both ends. We continue to build the road to Hintang and Sam Tong."* <sup>22</sup>

*"Faced with the [Vang Pao diversion], the Campaign Headquarters decided that on the one hand it would use an approximately sized force to combat the enemy's counterattack, while on the other hand, it massed forces to renew the attack and move on to Stage 2 to attack and liberate Long Tieng."* <sup>23</sup>

In the hills surrounding the Sam Tong area, on the thirteenth, Crowbar reported a coordinated assault and attack by fire on the Delta X-ray pad twice during the day. Stinger-26 supported the early morning attack and the Raven-22 pilot supported Crowbar later in the morning. Yukon had a brief probing attack on his outpost, Tiger Mobile reported two attacks by fire during the day, and Bad Man also reported an ABF.

On Valentine's Day Raven-25 and 29 supported an assault on Crowbar's position, while Tiger Mobile and Bad Man reported short ABF. <sup>24</sup>

*"Irregular units just north of Sam Tong reported heavy enemy shelling on the night of 12-13 February that forced them briefly to abandon two positions. Seven irregulars were killed and ten wounded.*

*Air observers report that during the past week the [NVA] have also increased their buildup near Skyline Ridge overlooking*

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<sup>22</sup> Xuandao Diary, 02/12/72. Rank and file troops in any army were subject to scuttlebutt and often not privy to timely or accurate information.

<sup>23</sup> North Vietnamese military history of the Lao war.

<sup>24</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 02/13-14/72.

*Long Tieng, and that supplies are apparently being moved from rear storage areas to the front-line units in that area in preparation for large-scale attacks.*

*East of Long Tieng, Vang Pao's 5,000 irregulars are located on the high ground south of Route-4 and are being resupplied [The high ground at Phu Khe (LS-19) was secured on the twelfth]. Their operation is now a week old and has met little resistance; they have not uncovered any supply caches nor caused any damage to North Vietnamese rear support areas. Air observers report that Route-4 is sustaining only moderate activity and that the main communist supply push continues to be along Route-5 on the [PDJ] and its new extension southward toward the Long Tieng complex." <sup>25</sup>*

*"On 15 February irregular units from one task force just south of Route-4 reported several clashes with enemy patrols as the irregulars attempted to move northward [friendly forces reached the southern slopes of Phou Theung on the sixteenth]. Another irregular force holding a 105mm howitzer position on Phou Khe [Lima Site-19] had reported enemy shelling attacks for the past three days but has suffered little damage. <sup>26</sup>*

*The majority of the irregular force is located in the foothills at the southeastern tip of the Plaine." <sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> CIA Bulletin, 02/14/72, Laos: North Vietnamese pressure is increasing near Sam Tong, and heavier attacks in the Long Tieng area appear likely in the near future. Conboy, 335.

<sup>26</sup> Since 1963 we had intermittently used this commanding mountain as a base camp for Meo guerrilla unit harassment, and for Thai-advised artillery crews to interdict enemy in the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley.

<sup>27</sup> CIA Bulletin, 02/16/72, Laos: The North Vietnamese are continuing to react to Vang Pao's operations south and east of the Plaine of Jarres. Conboy, 335.

*...renewed attacks against Long Tieng were expected during the fourth week in February. "However, the attacks were apparently forestalled by an early February pro-government sweep operation southeast of the PDJ...In order to counter this operation, elements of the 2nd Battalion, 174th Regiment [slowly] took up blocking positions in the area of Phou Khe, and units from the regiments' 1st and 3rd Battalion were also sent to the contested area. Elements of the 4th Battalion, 148th Regiment and from the 312th Division also participated in countering the sweep [a total of 11 battalions].*

*NVA counteraction against the task force caused the government advance to slow down; however, the operation apparently succeeded in relieving some pressure from the RLA troops defending Long Tieng."* <sup>28</sup>

## **KNIGHT**

As his helicopter program of choice, Wayne opted to fly the Bell Huey. He had a sufficient seniority number to qualify, and had flown and been certified in Bell equipment for three years before departing on home leave.

On 5 February, Wayne and JJ McCauley commenced recurrent training in Papa Foxtrot Hotel. Two days later they continued training in Papa Foxtrot Juliet, after which Long Tieng commutes (LTC) began for the next six days; Wayne and Jack then flew to Long Tieng in 96W to work seven and a half hours on the ninth. The next day, he and Marius Burke journeyed north in PFJ. (Nine hours and fifty minutes.)

The eleventh was spent working upcountry at The Alternate, and conducting refugee movements from Moung Phun (LS-37) to Ban

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<sup>28</sup> XXCC Agency Synopsis, 1971/1972, communist dry season offensive in northern Laos.

Son. During the day they covered a SAR for CASI C-46F N67961. (Seven plus fifteen.) Then on the twelfth, using the same aircraft, the crew worked Long Tieng, the Padong operation, and Moug Cha. (Nine plus twenty.)

Except for participating in the 961 recovery, the crew worked the next day out of The Alternate and LS-272. (Nine and a half hours.)

Wayne's final day flying with Marius in PFJ was spent at Bouam Long (LS-32) and north of Phu Cum (LS-50) moving refugees around Sing Scha (LS339) and Phou San sites (LS-336). (Eleven hours plus thirty-five minutes.) <sup>29</sup>

### **BEGINNING OF S-58T COMPRESSOR STALLS**

*"We have had trouble with the Twinpac engines. There has been erosion of the compressor sections which combined with other things has been causing stalls. We haven't been flying too much this month as a result of it."*

Letter Home, 02/23/72.

Scheduled by the Operations Department for a LTC, Thursday the tenth was a "dark thirty to dark thirty" day (pilot duty time 0545-2010, fourteen duty hours) FCF of Papa Hotel Delta for me with Dick Graham. The machine never attained a satisfactory airworthy condition, and the long day on the hot flight line netted me only two hours flight time and five landings.

Previous maintenance problems that had waxed and waned since the first Twinpac rolled out of the hanger now took a back seat to what became a frustrating and evolving enigma that was never fully solved or completely rectified during the remaining

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<sup>29</sup> EW Knight Emails, 11/25/00, 11/28/00.

years of Twinpac operations in Laos. We began to encounter high power demand compressor stalls close to the 1,000-engine hour level. The explosion(s), and momentary loss of power was frustrating and unnerving at first, for the stalls were generally unpredictable, and we did not fully understand the cause. Fortunately, the problem was initially limited to one stall, and reduction of power, if possible, was enough to prevent further stalls.

Stumped in the quest to determine the cause of malfunction, all parties pointed fingers at various suspected reasons. Each year the hot season preceding the monsoon presented problems, generating increased laterite dust and debris that sand blasted, eroded, and was highly detrimental to critical aircraft metal--engines, rotor blades, and all moving parts. It was always the worst period of the year, creating negative engine performance and life. This was a given for the R-1820 reciprocating engine installed in the H-34, and led to many engine malfunctions and failures. Air intakes for the Bell Lycoming engines were equipped with filters that somewhat, but not entirely, ameliorated and minimized the compressor erosion problem.

Adhering to the profit motive, the Sikorsky hierarchy at Bridgeport, Connecticut had been motivated to rush the S-58T to the commercial market. Consequently, without giving much consideration to the actual operating conditions in Southeast Asia, in order to jettison harmful dust and debris before reaching the engine compressor sections, company engineers designed an electrically activated particle separator system controlled by the pilot. Largely inefficient in our dust and debris-laden environment, at a time of maximum rotor blade downwash, a mechanical ramp system was intended to divert a partial air flow from the engines, and channel larger particles to outside ports during the period of landing, hovering, or

departure from dusty pads. The two metal ramps installed below the air intake section were slow activating, increased turbine operating temperature (TOT) one hundred degrees, and lowered engine performance when it was most often needed. (For this reason, I suspected that many pilots did not use the system.)

As stalls increasingly reverberated throughout the Long Tieng Valley, often occurring in front of Customers and peers, the situation became embarrassing. A crew might fly to Long Tieng, work one load at either the Romeo or Skyline Ridge, encounter a stall, and then, as was the policy, return to Udorn for a maintenance inspection. Aside from the crew's frustration, this situation was costly from the aspect of money and labor expended on trouble shooting the suspected engine. It was also not conducive to accumulating flight time.

The condition persisted and became increasingly worse. Stalls were lightheartedly referred to as "boomers" by both pilots and Flight Mechanics where "gallows humor" was commonplace. (Certainly, the enemy, hunkered in their rat holes, must have enjoyed the show.) Both Customers and pilots lost confidence in the machines. In the Author's opinion, if it had not been for the Agency's Special Project program, the Twinpac might have been ignominiously scrapped. As it was, the condition fostered stress and anxiety among crews, fearing that the stalls might result in an uncontrollable crash due to the loss of power at an inopportune moment. Once again, we were flying a highly touted machine that did not satisfy the upcountry work schedule or conditions, and caused pilots to be skeptical about both the aircraft and the Maintenance Department personnel's ability to perform. It seemed like we were always at odds.

The Maintenance Department was also frustrated and in a quandary over the issue. Perhaps for the first time, except for not always being able to properly identify the offending engine

section because of cockpit duties, pilots could not be blamed for the problem. There was much troubleshooting. Engines and components were liberally swapped or changed. Daily engine section washes became mandatory at the respective overnight stations. Specifications were checked and rechecked, and Pratt and Whitney's counsel eventually requested.

As the problem continued to evolve, compressor wear, ultimately leading to distorted air flow to the engine, was determined to be the prime culprit. The engine compressor delivered air to a diffuser assembly, which established the combustion chamber input air flow pattern. Too much space at the diffuser-compressor-combustion chamber discharge interface resulted in back pressure and surging under heavy power load. This condition was amplified under high density altitude conditions. <sup>30</sup>

Individual heavily eroded stator and compressor blades at the blade roots were replaced, as were those that did not completely meet specification. At the height of our problems, engines were flown to Canada for "expert" inspection and bench testing. <sup>31</sup> Trust and suspicion of the self-serving manufacturer, reluctant to admit liability, arose when the company indicated that they could discover no problem with the engines. From our viewpoint this was impossible, for the situation could often be duplicated by rapidly increasing power on the parking ramp.

As always, the onus was on helicopter line personnel. We continued attempting to work, but were restricted by unpredictable, intermittent stalling conditions and local management's ridiculous caveat to be careful. Over time we had

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<sup>30</sup> Jack Forney, Email.

<sup>31</sup> Although well equipped to perform most maintenance tasks in numerous shops, Air America possessed no equipment or capability to bench test helicopter components.

endured previous problems with both the UH-34D and Bell engines and associated components, but "fly it but watch it" did not make friends, and was a hell of a way to conduct an operation.

Graham, Leveriza, and I continued testing PHD the following morning. After conducting several standard FCF procedures, the machine met my objective and subjective criteria and we launched upcountry. However, it was noon when we arrived at Long Tieng, and after fifteen local landings we recovered at Vientiane for the night.

We returned to The Alternate on the 12th. Late morning, after nine sorties the number two power section stalled while in a high-power hover maneuver on a Skyline pad. Although it sounded like Thor was hurling thunderbolts, the event was momentary, and unless I unthinkingly reacted, did not require reduction of the collective as per emergency procedures for compressor stalls. S-58T Project Manager Bob Davis had instituted the policy to ferry a ship to Udorn after a stall so that maintenance could inspect the engine for cracks and a probable cause.

As we landed on the Air America ramp about noon, the maintenance line crew was waiting for us and immediately tore



into the engine section.<sup>32</sup> A concerned Bob Davis and I huddled and consulted, while trying to determine the exact conditions and instrument readings at the time of the stall. I related and logged all that I could recall. There was not much else I could do at that point, for I had only previously experienced compressor stalls in a Bell while en route to conduct an emergency evacuation of troops eighty miles east of Savannakhet. It was a hairy, life-threatening experience, and certainly not pleasant flying that distance over contested territory to Lima-39 with a sick engine.

Along with the same crew, I was assigned to fly Delta upcountry the following day. I was very careful with high power applications, and we flew most of the day before encountering another stall. (Seven plus forty-five and twenty sorties.) The stall was disappointing, revealing that whatever maintenance had accomplished did not solve the problem. We were still in the baby-step-infancy stage involving compressor stalls, something

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<sup>32</sup> Troubleshooting a helicopter maintenance problem always began by checking the simplest item and then progressing to the more difficult and labor-intensive items. This method involved changing fuel control units, governors, fuel dividers, and the like before tearing into engine innards.

EW Knight Email, 11/28/00. Jack Forney was really under the gun at this time, although it was really no fault of his own. After Wayne resumed his CPH billet, Jack came to Wayne's office requesting that he order the Twinpac pilots to stop performing the mandated acceleration checks. They were not a valid pre-takeoff check, but had been cleared by Bob Davis. Forney later backed down on this unreasonable request. By discovering stall propensity through acceleration checks, we precluded sending the aircraft upcountry and then bring it back or grounding it after operational stalls on usually the first day out. Forney also bent Wayne's ear about the S-58T pilots not being professional enough to identify the stalling power section. This argument was also retracted. It was easy to identify an offending engine with the acceleration check when only one engine was at speed. Jack became a believer when Wayne demonstrated a stall to him with an acceleration check on the parking ramp one day, and he could not positively identify the faulty power section, even with his eyes glued to the console gages.

that would require much troubleshooting, introspection, and heartburn.

With Delta grounded for more extensive inspection and testing, I was assigned Papa Hotel Charlie with a new Twinpac First Officer, AW Wilbur (DOH-09/23/70). MA Leveriza remained my Flight Mechanic.

Nakhon Phanom A-1E pilots still conducted their scheduled frags for the Barrel Roll with their remaining twenty ships. Time on station was limited because of the two hours required to reach their assigned area, and SAR missions always had priority.

On this day weather was considered marginal for strikes in support of positions north of Skyline and small arms fire was a problem flying under overcasts. Consequently, with so much ordnance slung under the wings, pilots conducted many high-speed passes in order to assess a situation before commencing strikes.<sup>33</sup>

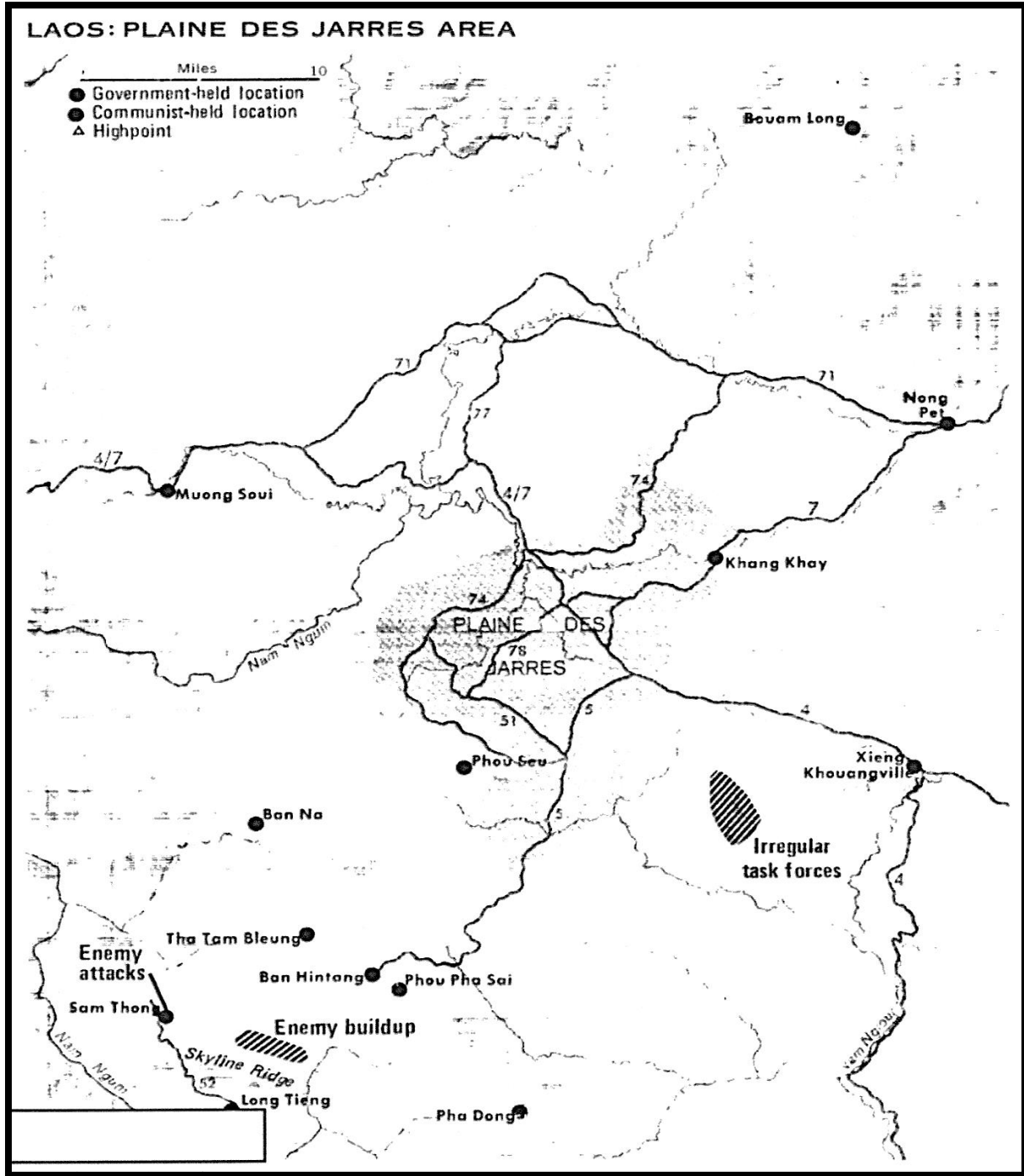
We worked most of the day before a boom occurred (eight plus thirty-three and twenty sorties). Although enduring the stress of anticipating a stall I was almost getting used to them, and wondered if all our ships would encounter the same. If so, then we really had a problem. We recovered at Udorn and relinquished the ship to the maintenance group.

We spent the entire morning of the fifteenth wrestling with Papa Hotel Charlie's lingering problems. Toward noon, lacking satisfaction, we gave up and the machine was towed into the barn.

Charlie was in an up status on the 17th. Dave Cox and I crewed the ship, flying numerous missions around Long Tieng. (Thirty sorties, nine plus twenty hours.) We encountered one stall during the day, but Davis' policy had moderated slightly

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<sup>33</sup> Byron Hukee, *A-1 Journal* for 02/14/72.



CIA 02/14/72 graphic of the gross situation around Sam Tong/Long Tieng and south of Route-4.

to allow work to continue if stalls were intermittent and considered minimal.

With so much work backed up, we remained in the field until the last moment and recovered at Udorn well after dark. The next day I stood by at the field for more than half a day without cranking a blade.

Meanwhile, north of Padong on the 16th, Showboat reported four ground assaults and ABF on his position during the day. Throughout the region, reflecting the increasing resistance to the diversion operation north of LS-05, Hammer (Sangar), Lulu, Slingshot, Pressure (Sares), and Hot Plate reported incoming fire, Gumdrop reported an assault on his position. <sup>34</sup>

### **CAPTAIN KNIGHT**

Wayne returned to the field on the 17th with IP Captain Ben Densley in 35F, as some irregulars, manning positions on Phou Khe and near Phou Theung, pushed farther into the hills overlooking the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley.

By the 19<sup>th</sup>, friendly units had moved into areas around Ban Thakai on Route-4, four miles west of Xieng Khouang Ville. Others were two miles south of Phou Theung. As they continued to secure more territory, both units were encountering increased enemy resistance. <sup>35</sup>

The same day, Ben and Wayne ferried Bell Papa Foxtrot Hotel to Long Tieng. During the eight-hour day, they worked sites at Phou Khe and participated in a multi-aircraft special mission for George, Digger, O'Dell. He wanted them to land at his defilade position on the southwest side of a hill mass for a briefing. Densley did not like the prospect, but Knight, who was

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<sup>34</sup> ABCCC Reports for 02/16/72.

<sup>35</sup> FIC Tom Sullivan Report for 02/19/72.

at the controls at the time, convinced him that it looked feasible. Moreover, he had a high regard for Digger, who had been a USMC officer. Wayne was aware that Ben was unhappy, but also that he was confused about Wayne's status and believed he still had a management connection. In the end, Ben deferred to Wayne. They landed at the site with other helicopter crews and shut down. Digger briefed the group and the mission was completed without incident. (Eight hours.) Wayne RTB Udorn with Bob Halsworth in Papa Foxtrot Gulf.

The next day, JJ McCauley administered a PIC proficiency check with Wayne. This was followed with JJ on the 21<sup>st</sup>, during an upcountry line check in 96W. (Eight plus thirty.) Wayne's final flight for the month involved working Skyline landing zones with Larry Henesy in 35F.

He was then off the flight schedule for more than two weeks while moving into a large apartment on Phosri Road. <sup>36</sup>

Although no one was displaced from the Bell program, the natives were restless, and several of the more vocal union pilots questioned Knight's assignment to Bells. Obligated to achieve member satisfaction, the situation was referred to Far East Pilot Association leaders for a ruling. By the last week in February, FEPA sought to appeal the assignment through the grievance process. The argument presented was that Wayne must revert to the H-34 program because this is where he had last served as a line pilot in 1963.

Not long after Wayne began flying the Bell, a formal letter of objection was delivered to CPH John Ford by the Udorn President of FEPA, Phil Peyton, initiating the grievance process:

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<sup>36</sup> EW Knight Emails, 11/28/00, 12/01/00.

*"This assignment of EW Knight to the 204/205 program at Udorn is in direct violation of the Air America FEPA working agreement, section...which states 'A pilot returning from assignment as a supervisor in flight operations, shall have the right to displace at his former base, class and aircraft type.' Captain EW Knight was a UH-34 captain at Udorn when assigned to supervisor position and only has displacement rights in that program.*

*Since Captain EW Knight is being carried on the daily flight schedule report as a line pilot in the 204/205 program, we request that Captain EW Knight be taken off the 204/205 flight schedule and assigned into the UH-34 program."* <sup>37</sup>

Wayne initially considered FEPA's position unwarranted and wanted to contest it. Then to avoid conflict, he suggested that he fly the H-34 for a time. However, John, who had more experience dealing with FEPA representatives disagreed, saying, *"I'll show you how the system works."* Consequently, he opted for a meaningless, farcical, time-wasting exercise of back-and-forth exchanges in order to frustrate Peyton. Aware that the appeal process would consume weeks, and in the end, FEPA would capitulate, Ford informed Wayne that they would play a game with FEPA regarding the problem, and allow the appeal process to run its course. In the meantime, Wayne would continue to fly Bells, and by then it would be time for Wayne to relieve John in the CPH office. Over a five-week period, there were four appeals and rebuttals. All were allowed a substantial period for response.

The grievance process went forward. By the 22nd a short letter was forwarded to the CPH from Peyton, who throughout the process maintained to Wayne that it was nothing personal:

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<sup>37</sup> Letter from FEPA Udorn to CP/RW Udorn, First stage grievance of Captain E.W. Knight's assignment to 204/205 program.

*"I request that the first stage hearing of this grievance be held at 1400 hours, Chief Pilot's office on 23 February 1972."* <sup>38</sup>

The same day Assistant Chief Pilot Dick Elder answered Peyton's letter: *"Your request for the hearing of 23 February 1972 is denied due to the Chief Pilot not being in Udorn.*

*As soon as Capt. J.B. Ford returns, he will consult with your office for a date and time this hearing can be mutually scheduled..."* <sup>39</sup>

As planned, John Ford stretched out the grievance process:

*"I will be available for the first stage grievance hearing or alleged miss-assignment of Capt. E.W. Knight to the Bell 204/205 program at Udorn at 0900 on either February 28, 1972 or February 29, 1972..."* <sup>40</sup>

The following month CPH Ford replied to Peyton: *"In as much as the Bell 204B/205 program was not in existence during the period prior to Capt. Knight's appointment to the position of CP/RW UTH;*

*And taking into consideration that he was senior enough to be a successful bidder had it been in existence;*

*And that he did in fact fly primarily the Bell 204B/205 during the period from March 1967 through August 1970 when he departed on leave without pay (LWOP);*

*And is presently senior enough to hold a position in the Bell 204B/205;*

*And has not displaced anyone as a result of flying in that program;*

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<sup>38</sup> Letter from FEPA President Udorn to CPH/RW Udorn, Grievance hearing of assignment of Capt. E.W. Knight to 204/205 Udorn, 02/22/72.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from Assistant Chief Pilot, helicopters, Udorn to Captain P.G. Peyton FEPA President Udorn, FEPA letter dated February 22, 1972, 02/22/72.

<sup>40</sup> Memorandum CP/RW Udorn to FEPA Udorn, 02/27/72.

*The CP/RW Udorn finds in favor of Capt. E.W. Knight."* <sup>41</sup>

Two days later Phil Peyton forwarded a message to corporate headquarters in Taipei, Taiwan: *"The reply from the Chief Pilot...on the first stage grievance of program is not acceptable to the association. Therefore, at this time we request to proceed under...FEPA/Company agreement to VPFO level."* <sup>42</sup>

Continuing the exchange, a letter was first received by the CPH office, endorsed by ACP Dick Elder and then forwarded to Phil Peyton: *"Your letter requesting a VPFO level hearing on Captain E.W. Knight's 204B/205 assignment grievance was received by VPFO's Office [Earl Richmond] on 11 March 1972.*

*In lieu of establishing a VPFO hearing on this grievance, the Company's decision is to agree with your request that Captain Knight be taken off the 204B/205 flight schedule.*

*Although FEPA may be technically correct in requesting the removal of Captain Knight from the 204B/205 program under section... of the FEPA Agreement, we note that CP/RW Udorn's position in this grievance is supported by the following:*

1. *The 204B/205 program was not in existence prior to Captain Knight's appointment to CP/RW Udorn.*

2. *Captain Knight was senior enough to be a successful bidder in this program had it been established prior to his appointment as CP/RW Udorn.*

3. *From March 1967 through August 1970 while Captain Knight was CP/RW Udorn he in fact flew primarily in the Bell 204B/205.*

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<sup>41</sup> Letter CP/RW/UTH to FEPA Udorn. First stage grievance of Captain E.W. Knight assignment to 204B/205 program, 03/06/72.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from FEPA/Udorn to VPFO/Taipei, Request for 2nd stage grievance hearing on Captain E.W. Knight's assignment to the 204/205 program, 03/06/72.



4. Captain Knight presently has enough seniority to hold a position in the 204B/205 program.

5. Captain Knight did not displace anyone as a result of flying in this program." <sup>43</sup>

By the end of March, the Chief Pilot's office received the following letter from FEPA: "We see no reason due to the shortage in the 204/205 program, that you cannot use Captain Knight until April 15, 1972. This is not to be taken as precedent in future reference." <sup>44</sup>

By the time the hearings had run their course at the end of April, Knight had moved into the H-34 program for requalification and five upcountry flights. On 24 May Knight began his transition into the CPH office and resumed flying Bells. <sup>45</sup>

## **UPCOUNTRY**

In order to draw additional enemy troops away from the immediate Long Tieng/Sam Tong area, and confuse the Vietnamese even more, a 15,000-pound BLU-82 (Bomb Live Unit) was dropped from the rear of a USAF C-130 near Ban Na on 20 February. The "Daisy Cutter," with a fuse extender attached to detonate the bomb above ground level, was designed to create a multi-helicopter landing zone 1,800 feet in diameter. After effects of the explosion cleared, pre-briefed by AB-1 representatives, helicopter crews delivered an elite commando team into the zone, with the specific task to create an additional diversion. Crews who worked in the area recalled that the landing zone was badly

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<sup>43</sup> AVPFO/DFD Taipei to P.G. Peyton President FEPA Udorn, VPFO level hearing on Captain E.W. Knight assignment grievance, 03/21/72.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from FEPA/UTH to CP/RW Udorn, Captain Knight extension in the 204/205, 03/31/72. This missive might have been a compassionate gesture in lieu of upcountry events on 18 March.

<sup>45</sup> EW Knight Email.

torn up, littered with dirt heaps and severed tree stumps. Therefore, the team was debarked on the spoil, the edge of the bomb blast.

After discarding debris that humans generate, in order to simulate a much larger unit, the troops did not remain long in place. Still, efforts to maintain the subterfuge continued for about a week, with multiengine planes conducting passes and dropping fake supply bundles. <sup>46</sup>

During the late afternoon of the 21st, heavy artillery shelling caused many friendly casualties. Both Showboat and Yukon were wounded during the barrages. Air America crews medevaced the men on the morning of the 22nd. <sup>47</sup>

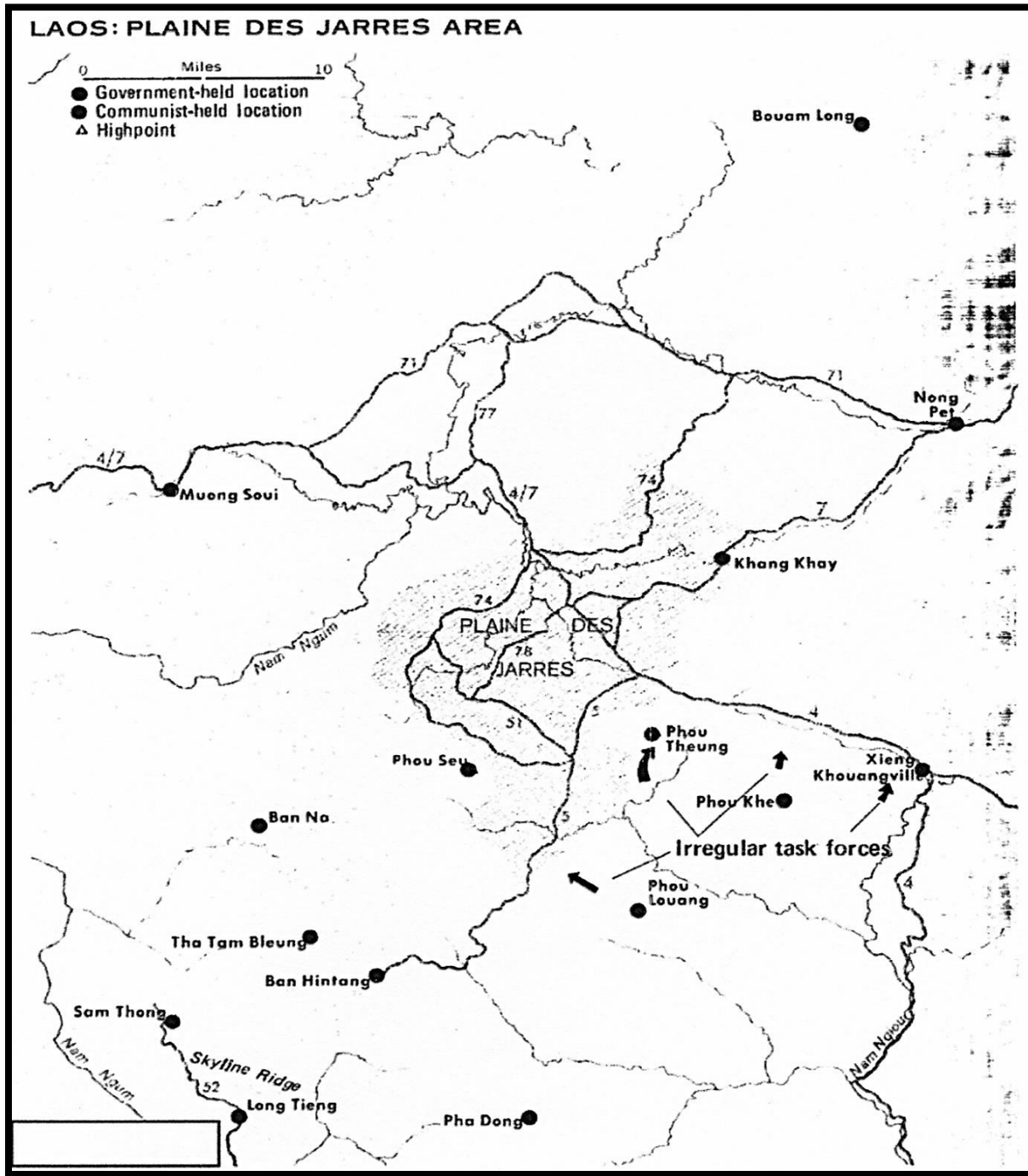
*"In a clear effort to protect vital lines of communication, the communists over the weekend launched sharp ground probes and attacks by fire against irregular forces moving toward the Plaine. One irregular task force that was targeted against a suspected 130mm artillery position on the southwester edge of the Plaine is now tied down in the hills near Phou Louang, while another force has been unable to push on toward the high ground at Phou Theung. To the east, two other task forces have encountered less resistance, but they too have not moved significantly closer to their objectives near Route-4.*

*The irregulars thus far have not directly harassed communist supply movements along Routes-4 and 5, but their presence southeast of the Plaine has forced the communists to divert troops from the Long Tieng area [reportedly 11 battalions]. There is some evidence that communist combat units*

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<sup>46</sup> EW Knight Emails, 11/13/00, 11/17/00.  
Ken Conboy, 336.  
Wikipedia-Internet.

<sup>47</sup> FIC Tom Sullivan Report, 02/22/72.



02/22/72 CIA graphic depicting friendly diversionary forces locations around the eastern Plain of Jars and the Route-4 valley.

in addition to the NVA's 174th and 148th regiments have pulled back to help counter the threat in the rear area.

The tactical situation in the immediate Long Tieng-Sam Tong area continues to improve somewhat as irregular units begin to patrol more vigorously. One small force, for example, has now moved down the north slope of the once hotly contested Skyline Ridge and has probed communist positions to the north."<sup>48</sup>

**"I suppose our air strikes have hurt the enemy as they haven't tried an all-out attack on our base. They are still probing and building roads to its perimeter, so it looks like they haven't given up yet. We are trying diversions to keep them off balance, but they have an enormous amount of firepower that is hard to cope with. We are doomed if the Air Force ever leaves..."**

Letter Home, 02/23/72.

Notwithstanding two diverse diversionary attempts to diminish pressure and future attacks on the Long Tieng complex, belated enemy reactions in the Plain of Jars and Route-4 areas to the diversion were of such intensity that some of Vang Pao's task forces began withdrawing from positions on the 23rd. Still gun-shy and smarting from punishment incurred from remaining too long on the Plain of Jars, to minimize losses, Vang Pao sanctioned a slow, orderly withdrawal. As a result, friendly casualties were held to twenty-nine killed and 138 wounded.<sup>49</sup>

*"Vang Pao's irregulars east of the PDJ are encountering stiff enemy resistance. The North Vietnamese east of the PDJ are encountering stiff enemy resistance. The North Vietnamese have*

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<sup>48</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: Vang Pao's offensive has slowed as communist resistance stiffens near the Plaine des Jarres, 02/22/72.

<sup>49</sup> Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 451.

*reacted strongly to the threat posed by the task force targeted against their 130mm guns and supply caches along the southern edge of the PDJ. Hard hit several times in the past few days, the task force retreated into the foothills east and southeast of the Plaine on 24 February. The other three task forces have made little forward progress and report ground and shelling attacks against them. One of the groups has occupied high ground overlooking Route-4, a heavily used supply artery east of the Plaine, and is directing airstrikes against enemy trucks and supply areas on the road..."* <sup>50</sup>

I was scheduled to stand-by at home on the 23rd. Then, on Thursday, for the first time in almost ten years, I was summoned to the airfield at 2000 hours to conduct late run-ups on Papa Hotel Bravo and Papa Hotel Delta either for upcountry or Special Project work. <sup>51</sup> I was not released from the duty until almost midnight.

On the 25th, helicopters and fixed wing crews began moving a mixed regiment from Nam Yu (LS-118A) and Xieng Lom (LS-274) into Padong, to protect and ease the withdrawal of the diversion forces. <sup>52</sup>

*Xuandao recorded, "Our troops have retaken the Plain of Jars. The road to Hintang has been completed. Last night we escorted and supported the tanks to the foot of Hill 1800 so that we can again attack Sam Tong-Long Tieng."* <sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 02/28/72.

<sup>51</sup> As it was with other employees working closely with the Twinpac, it became impossible to keep me ignorant and completely out of the Special Project loop. By now, as a test pilot who often worked with Tom Deeble and the special electronic LORAN navigation equipment, I knew there was a Special Project program, but possessed no specific details relating to the operation. Of course, because of the high classification involved, I could not discuss this with anyone.

<sup>52</sup> Ken Conboy, 336.

<sup>53</sup> Xuandao's Daily Diary, 02/26/72.

I rolled out of bed early on Saturday the 26th to crew Papa Hotel Delta with Paul Gregoire and Phil Velasquez. We worked all day supporting Long Tieng and Sam Tong positions without incurring any compressor stalls. (Forty sorties during ten plus forty-five hours flight.) After recovering at Wattay Airport in the dark, and conducting the required engine compressor wash, we repaired to the Apollo Hotel.

On the 26<sup>th</sup>, enemy ground and artillery units increased pressure against friendly troops operating north of LS-05 on the 26th. Poppy, Pink Onion, Black Onion, and Brown Panther reported assaults on their positions; Dragon Fire, Whiskey-01, Crowbar, and Lulu reported incoming fire. Raven pilots supported all attacks despite the weather being marginal all-day. <sup>54</sup>

After waiting for weather to clear, we departed the Vientiane Airport for The Alternate. Although we flew over seven hours performing valuable work, the late arrival restricted me to only twenty sorties before returning to Udorn.

Enemy pressure continued north of Padong. While Raven pilots supported the friendlies, Jackrabbit, Green Panther, Lulu, Gold Panther, and Gumdrop reported ground assaults. Dragon Fire, Crowbar, Lulu, and Pink Onion reported incoming fire. <sup>55</sup>

Over the next two days the FIC representative at Ban Son reported that unusually inclement weather prevented major air strikes in Military Region Two.

On leap year, the last day in February, Paul Gregoire, Charlie Brigham, and I crewed Papa Hotel Bravo to Long Tieng. As on the 26<sup>th</sup>, it was a very long day, involving longer sorties (twenty during ten and a half hours). We recovered at Udorn about dark. Despite the increasing maintenance problems during

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<sup>54</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 02/26/72.

<sup>55</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 02/27/72.

the month, I ended with over seventy-six hours, largely attributable to the high time of the last few days, and the welcome absence of compressor stalls.

**I** was off the flight schedule until the eighth.

*"We are going to Bangkok [on the train] tonight so Tuie can see the doctor [Songserm the queen's gynecologist]. We plan to take Peter and leave Rick at home [with the maid and Khun Yai].*

*Pete is a regular rascal as he has been messing with our cameras. I can remember when I took apart one of your [cameras] Dad, so I can't get too angry with him.*

*Ricky's teacher tells me that he is doing so much better since I have been tutoring him...*

*I have been considering coming home myself this year. I would like to bring Ricky with me if Tuie will permit it [she did not]..."*

Letter Home, 03/02/72.

## **UPCOUNTRY**

On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Shamrock reported an assault on one of his outposts. The attack was brief and no friendly positions were lost. Butterfly reported a brief attack by fire. On 4 March, Spotlight and Gumdrop reported incoming fire. The weather in Barrel Roll was unworkable in all areas until 1100 hours. Slingshot reported that one of his patrols had a short fire fight on the 8<sup>th</sup>, while Lulu and Crowbar were receiving incoming fire. Weather in Barrel Roll was unsuitable for fast movers all day. When Raven-27 took a 12.7mm hit while flying over the Vang Pao line to the northeast of Long Tieng, the pilot was able to land safely at The Alternate.

On the 11<sup>th</sup>, Butterfly reported a ground assault and



incoming fire on two of his outposts, as weather precluded visual strikes all day. When Raven-23 and Sandy-03 were both hit by groundfire, they RTB safely. <sup>1</sup>

To the north and northeast of Long Tieng, Vang Pao's largely successful multi-regimental diversion was generally over by 2 March, and all units were on the move south toward southern rally points and safety in the Padong area. The smaller unit from Bouam Long, never having achieved the mission to interdict the Nong Pet junction, also pulled back to garrison. Many of the planned objectives had not been achieved, but despite the advent of adverse weather, and seasonal haze and smoke toward the end of the month, USAF planes managed to strike some caches uncovered by ground troops. Furthermore, the operation could be gauged favorably by the respite and diminished enemy military activity in the Sam Tong-Long Tieng areas, which enabled defenses to be hardened and positions reinforced. Thai artillery and three infantry battalions were added to the mix, making a total of sixteen battalions to defend the complex. FSB Tiger was reestablished at the Charlie Bravo position on Skyline. <sup>2</sup>

The enemy was certainly not asleep, and was planning to resume their offensive on Sam Tong and Long Tieng with six relatively strong regiments. Military Region 959 and the elements of the 316th divisions relocated from east of the PDJ southwest of the Plain. The tactical headquarters unit was located to the hills southwest of Phou Pha Sai. The 312th Division also moved southwest to a point east of the Plain. The

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<sup>1</sup> ABCCC reports.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Conboy, 336.

Jim Parker.

Letter Symington to Fulbright: *"Legislative prohibition against the financing of 3rd country troops in Laos has been circumvented by the Executive Branch...Thailand is becoming increasingly important...The Executive Branch continues to encourage Thai involvement..."*

forward headquarters responsible for tactical control was centered east of LS-72. By 10 March, most units had rallied, regrouped, and were in place ready to attack.<sup>3</sup>

The Vietnamese construction battalion in the Ban Hintang area was still struggling with the difficult and uncompromising terrain:

*"The tank [crew] trying to climb Hill 1800 turned over because the slope of the road was too steep. We had to drive in wooden stakes to form a road on which the tank's tracks could get a grip to climb the slope. We had to try again to 'level the mountain,' or at least to reduce the gradient of the road. The tanks unloaded all of their ammunition and spare parts and other equipment to lighten them for the climb up the slope. We were very happy that three armored vehicles were able to reach the top and move on into Sam Tong."*<sup>4</sup>

During the calm before the storm, Air America Flight Information Center field representative Jerry Connor, located at Site-272, reported to his superiors in Vientiane and Udorn that the previous three days had been unusually quiet on the battlefield.<sup>5</sup> T-28 RLA pilots resumed operations from Long Tieng runway on the fifth.

Prior to this, Long Tieng Area Operations Commander (AOC) Commander Jesse Scott, previously supporting T-28 operations out of Wattay Airport and Ban Son, arrived at The Alternate on the fourth.

Scott recalled that in late February Allied air had succeeded in silencing some 130mm guns. With no large incoming artillery to disturb the valley, Vang Pao lobbied the "powers who be" in Vientiane to permanently reintroduce T-28s to the

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<sup>3</sup> CIA Synopsis, XXCC.

<sup>4</sup> Xuandao Daily Diary, 03/03/72.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Leary, FIC representative report.

base. Scott found himself in the middle of the controversy. RLAF leaders had no problem with Vang Pao's proposal. AIRA objected, but the Agency voted in favor of the request.

Ambassador Godley, AIRA representatives, and the chief of station journeyed north to discuss the issue with Vang Pao and present their negative views. However, as the Author discovered on the Plain of Jars in 1970, Vang Pao was a very persuasive individual, and Godley eventually acquiesced to Vang Pao's demands.

Scott noted when he arrived in the valley that there was considerable shrapnel and debris in the T-28 parking area, which required removal. It also took a week for a C-123 crew to deliver a bomb loader. Until that time ordnance was laboriously hand loaded. In addition, Vang Pao noticed that he was not obtaining full support for his T-28 program, and questioned why Americans were not present to help.

As intelligence was gathered and collated relating to the current situation, principals in Washington noted:

*"It appears that the enemy forces, which earlier had reacted to Vang Pao's [diversionary] operation southeast of the Plane des Jarres, are once again being positioned for attacks in the Long Tieng area. On four and five March, the headquarters, 141st and the 165th Regiments, 312th NVA Division, were located within four miles of Sam Tong and on five March the 148th Regiment of the 316th NVA Division was located approximately 10 miles northeast of Long Tieng, thus approximating their positions prior to the friendly operation.*

*Enemy reconnaissance and tactical activity around Sam Tong have increased over the past several days.*

*Elements of the 335th Regiment continue to operate in the Skyline Ridge area. Additionally, the construction of a road [Route-54] from the Plaine toward Long Tieng and the movement of*

supplies and emplacement of AAA weapons along the road have continued unabated.

Finally, while the 174th Regiment, 316th NVA Division, has not been detected returning to the Long Tieng area, the decrease in the friendly ground threat to the enemy lines of communication makes redeployment of this unit to join in an attack on Long Tieng a distinct possibility...

...Thus far the enemy has not resumed his all-out offensive against Long Tieng. The recent operation by Vang Pao was successful in drawing forces away from Long Tieng and was a commendable initiative...aware that plans are underway for an even more ambitious diversionary operation. While it is difficult to judge from here the full merits and problems of the new plan [the second diversionary operation], I must caution against initiating any new operation at this time that is dependent on U.S. air power for success or prevention of disaster. We are hard pressed even at this time to provide the necessary air power [rumblings of the imminent NVA Easter Offensive in South Vietnam were already prevalent in U.S. military circles]..."<sup>6</sup>

Heartened by the quasi-success of his initial diversionary operation, General Vang Pao immediately went into a Phase Two mode: a second multi-regimental diversion largely patterned after the first.

By the sixth the GMS had reached the southern reaches of the Vang Pao Line. After resting, resupplying, and refitting, the units were divided into two large columns. Predicated on the use of heavy lift helicopters, Task Force Alpha would be lifted to Bouam Long with the mission to move south and interdict the

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<sup>6</sup> FRUS, Volume 8, Document 35, 03/08/72, Vietnam January-October 1972.

strategic Nong Pet crossroad. Bravo, the second group of regiments, would be lifted from Pha Phai (LS-65), nine miles south-southeast of Padong, to high ground north of Xieng Khouang Ville. From there, they would march west toward Ban Tham, in order to disrupt the flow of supplies and enemy operations in the valley.

As usual, because USAF fixed wing and helicopter assets were required for such a large movement, Vang Pao's plans slowly worked their way through local embassy and high-level Washington channels for approval:

*"...asking for early approval of a new diversionary maneuver by Vang Pao's forces. The operation would seek to utilize our advantage in mobility by helilifting sizable elements of Vang Pao's forces east and north of the PDJ in order to divert the enemy from Long Tieng..."*

*Current indications are that it is merely a matter of time until the North Vietnamese attack Long Tieng in overwhelming force. The NVA forces, which countered Vang Pao's earlier diversion southwest of the PDJ, have returned westward toward Long Tieng.*

*The question, then, is whether Long Tieng...is better defended by using the approximately 5,000 irregulars to strengthen Long Tieng's immediate defenses or by the proposed maneuver. If retained at Long Tieng, they could add strength to the defenses and serve as a reserve. But there is a general agreement that Long Tieng itself cannot be held if the NVA put all their force they have available into the effort to take it. The real defense will have to be one in depth using the excellent terrain to the south to delay and extract a heavy price for further enemy advances. This is essentially the strategy we have visualized since the start of the dry season, and Godley has moved to be in a position to implement it.*

Moreover, there is the danger that in static defense the Meo might be destroyed as an effective force, even if the Thai SGU succeed in holding Long Tieng.

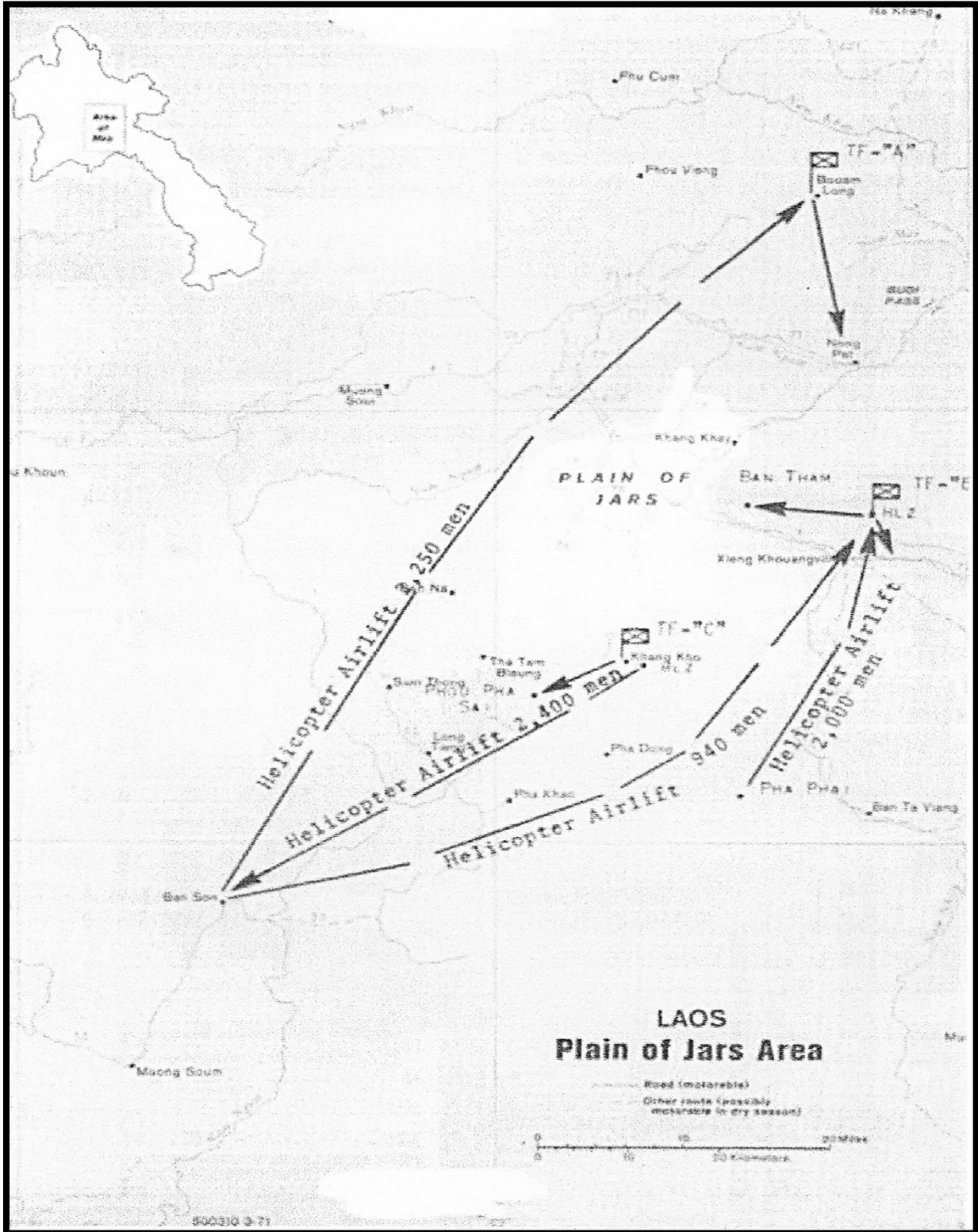
Alternately, the proposed operation seeks to defend the base indirectly by threatening the enemy's [LOC]. That the [NVA] are sensitive to such attacks was shown by their rapid reaction to [VP's] earlier initiative south and east of the PDJ. The earlier effort successfully substituted mobility-where we have a definite advantage-for manpower and ordinance; casualties were light and ordinance expenditures conservative. The new proposal would continue to use [VP's] forces in the mobile role in which they are most effective, retain the initiative, dissipate some of the enemy's energies and supplies in response, and probably cause him to expose more targets to air attack than otherwise.

There is the risk that the enemy may attack a weakened Long Tieng while this 5,000-man force is maneuvering behind his lines and we will face the difficult task of extricating them. But the chances are even that this diversionary effort will take some pressure off Long Tieng and may even thin out the NVA forces there to an extent which would diminish the likelihood of successful assault against the defenses. We believe that this a chance argues for going along with the plan.

The U.S. Commander 7/13 assesses the risk to the 5-9 CH-53 helicopters which would be flying to support the operation as moderate to high from possible enemy reaction in planned landing zones and possible AAA fire along some of the proposed flight paths. Flak suppression sorties will be used to lessen the risk.

All elements of the American Mission concur in the plan, and Ambassador Godley urges early approval so that the helift can get underway no later than March 10...

We believe the likely gains outweigh the costs and risks. The previous operation of this type accomplished the purpose at



Phase Two of Vang Pao's planned diversion.  
Ahern, 452.

*little cost to the attacking force and this one has a good a chance to succeed as the earlier one. Accordingly, we believe we should agree with Godley."* <sup>7</sup>

On the ninth, I worked all day with Len Bevan at the airfield testing Papa Hotel Echo. By the time the machine was airworthy, it was too late to go upcountry. (Two plus forty-five, ten landings.)

The next morning, Mike Lapierre (DOH 09/30/70), Len Bevan, and I ferried Papa Hotel Echo to The Alternate. Since the "balloon" was expected to go up again soon, an abundance of work awaited helicopter crews, and the Customer was reluctant to release us to RTB. We arrived in Udorn at dark, but an FCF of Papa Hotel Bravo awaited me and I did not finish this task until almost 2200 hours. After a nearly sixteen-hour duty day, I was very happy to arrive home to rest and attain some semblance of normalcy.

### **THE BATTLE FOR LONG TIENG RESUMES**

By early March, Route 54 was completed to the Sam Tong valley. Therefore, the [Vietnamese Army] began to move their armor and artillery forward. North Vietnamese military historians recorded:

*"At exactly 0500 hours on 11 March, after an artillery/heavy weapons preparatory barrage and suppression of enemy artillery positions, the assault columns of our 141st and 165th Regiments opened fire to attack and capture Hills 1476, 1468 and 1300 just east of Sam Tong.*

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<sup>7</sup> FRUS, Volume 8, Document 36, Vietnam, January-October. Memorandum from Richard T. Kennedy and John D. Negroponete of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), March 10, 1972. Request for approval to conduct a multi-battalion diversionary operation north and east of the Plain of Jars.



*By 1500 hours that afternoon our troops had secured hills 1476 and 1300, eliminating four enemy battalions from the field of battle. Our victory in this attack created favorable conditions for the campaign to develop the attack by attacking Long Tieng" <sup>8</sup>*

The struggle continued:

*"The [major portion of the] battle erupted on 10-11 March with an artillery barrage followed by infantry attacks on Sam Tong...*

*Gunships, tactical fighters, and B-52s added to the carnage by pummeling enemy forces close to the friendly positions. The battle's smoke and dust mixed with the normal ground haze to limit visibility, and the intermingling of government and enemy units further complicated target identification...During March, B-52s hit 106 targets in the Sam Tong/Long Tieng area, flying 318 sorties...most of the sorties directly supported the ground forces.*

*By the 12th all but three RLA positions had been abandoned by pro-government forces." <sup>9</sup>*

We landed at the Udorn Royal Thai Air Force airport and parked on the Air America ramp. Soon afterward, at 1745 hours, the heavy weapons section of the 312th Division, 165 Vietnamese Regiment 4, 5, and 6th Battalions, situated to the north and east quadrant of Sam Tong, commenced intermittent mortar fire on BC 606 company positions Delta X-Ray, Delta Zulu, and Delta Whiskey; defensive positions located on ridgelines and in hills north, northeast, and east of Site-20. The enemy crew weapon firing position was identified and counterfire requested from Venus FSB south of Long Tieng, along with supporting 81mm mortar

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<sup>8</sup> Ho Khang, North Vietnamese military history of the Laos war.

<sup>9</sup> Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 356.

fire from a position on Skyline. Enemy incoming fire ceased for a short period and then resumed. As recorded in an after-action report by Thai FAG Spotlight (Preecha), it marked the beginning of a long, tense night.<sup>10</sup>

The ground battle commenced just after 2200 hours, when a platoon of enemy briefly attacked the east sector of Delta Whiskey in order to assess defenses and discover a weak point. After fifteen minutes they ceased the probe without inflicting casualties.

Within an hour, an assault began on the west side of Delta Whiskey, with enemy troops investing the HLZ. Supported by heavy weapons, they launched B-40 rockets, and machine gun and small arms fire. Troops in contact continued for thirty minutes, while Thunder and Venus artillery contributed both illumination and high explosive rounds to the battlefield. Enemy small arms and artillery fire continued on DW and Delta X-ray after their troops withdrew from the immediate area. Four enemy dead were discovered later on the HLZ.

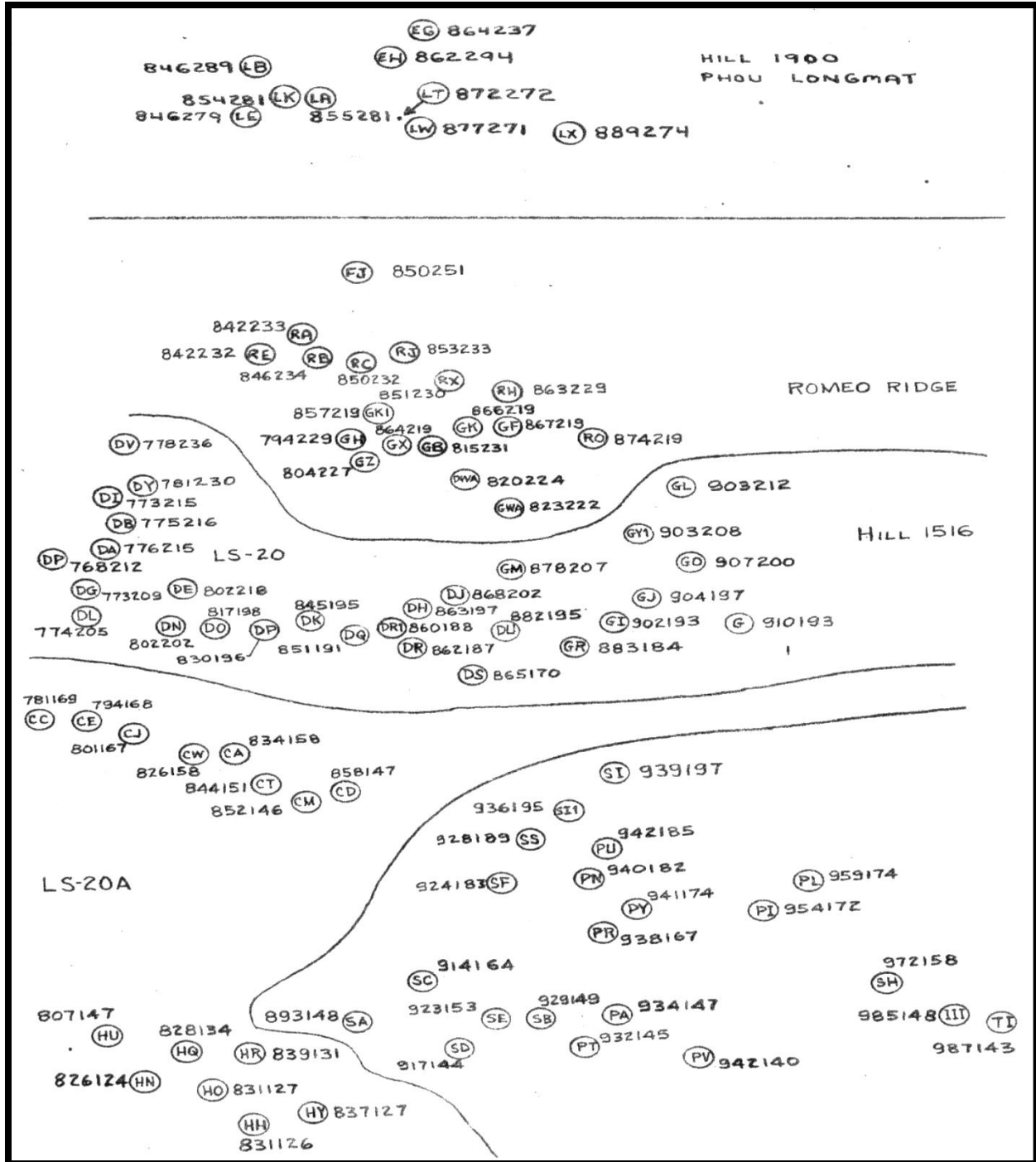
A RLAFF-crewed Spooky gunship arrived at 0405 hours, quieting the situation for about an hour. After reporting Winchester (expending all ordnance), the ship departed station for Wattay Airport. Not long after Spooky left the Sam Tong area, the major enemy offensive began. During the day, Spotlight, Crowbar, Billy Club, and Blue Moon positions endured ground assaults and incoming fire. All their positions were eventually lost.<sup>11</sup>

An hour and twenty minutes after the Spooky gunship departed the Sam Tong area, the persistent enemy resumed heavy

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<sup>10</sup> The Author possesses a limited list of Thai FAG names. Many of these men were still alive in 2015, and conducted yearly reunions in Bangkok, Thailand.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC reports for 03/11/72.



Early government defensive positions located in and around Long Tieng that were lost during the period of fighting. Some Delta pads in the hills to the north (DY, DZ, DX defended by Thai Battalion BC-607) and northeast of Sam Tong (DW, DM defended by B-608) that are not depicted were subject to enemy assaults on 11 March 1972. BC-607 was deployed southeast of the Sam Tong/Long Tieng Road (DT, DF, DN). BC-610 held the high ground west of the road (DT, DF, DL, DE).

Author's graphic provided by the Long Tieng Customer.

DK-82, mortar, and small arms fire on Delta Zulu, Delta Xray, and Delta Whiskey positions. Within ten minutes, an estimated company of enemy began attacking the eastern portion of DW. They extended the assault to the west, after which the entire position was surrounded. Artillery and heavy weapons fire continued pounding both adversaries.

Using B-40 rockets and satchel charges to destroy interlaced barbed wire perimeters, coordinated company-sized attacks began at almost the same time on DX and DZ positions. Concerted friendly resistance prevented the enemy from breaching their defenses.

At sunrise a Nail-36 FAC pilot, flying an OV-10 Bronco from Nakhon Phanom Air Force Base, arrived, but he found the weather unsatisfactory to work. The pilot orbited the area, waiting for a chance to participate in the melee (unlike the O-1 Birddog, in addition to smoke rockets, these ships carried substantial ordnance). Except for incoming artillery, the Bronco's presence was sufficient to curtail TIC activity.

After Delta Whiskey's commander was wounded, the 606 Battalion commander, along with some troopers attempted to transfer from Delta Zulu. Greeted by a number of enemy and unable to proceed, they were forced to return to DZ.

At 0730 hours, Raven-22 FAC arrived to supplement Nail-26. Many targets were identified and some attacked. Within twenty minutes, Nail-26 had expended his entire ordnance, and after reaching bingo fuel, departed for Nakhon Phanom.

Because of continuous incoming and small arms fire, casualty reports were roughly tallied. DX reported three WIA, DW four WIA, DZ two WIA. Enemy killed in action in the immediate vicinity were estimated at over thirty.

Just after 0800 a 122mm rocket impacted the northeast side of DX. This was followed by mortar fire. After requesting an air

strike, Raven-22 indicated that a section of Hobo A-1E pilots was en route.

Replaced by Raven-27, Raven-22 rotated out of the area. Hobo flight arrived, but fog limited visibility and precluded immediate air strikes. A little later A-1 pilots worked north of the Sam Tong defense line and to the southeast, where FAG Billy Club (607 Battalion), on the secondary Delta defense line before the gates of Long Tieng reported many enemy forces.

About 0900, the DZ pad began receiving 120mm and 82mm mortar rounds to the position's southeast quadrant. DX was hit by 82mm mortar and DK-82 recoilless rounds. At DW the enemy continued firing small arms and machineguns. With the situation critical, all three positions requested air strikes to silence the heavy weapons, but TIC and incoming precluded this. Additionally, friendly heavy weapons were unable to support DX and DW. Only Venus battery personnel were able to provide

support.<sup>12</sup>

Flying Bell 204B 12F during a Long Tieng commute, Captains Larry Taylor and Wayne Knight arrived at The Alternate to join in the collective fun. (Nine hours.) Because of the confusing and fluid situation, there was little, if any, current intelligence briefing obtained from the Customer; most information came from fellow pilots working in the trenches, experiencing first hand battle conditions. In general, Charlie November air operations dispatchers, located down-strip on the lower west side loading ramp, merely flashed cardboard landing zone signs until they found one that pilots would accept.

There was abundant action around Sam Tong's perimeter. Delta pads to the north and east side of the bowl received copious incoming. TIC continued all day. Except for early

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<sup>12</sup> Note: The Author met Padom Kittayam (Billy Club) at the Godnoma compound on Soi Mahamit in 1995 during a Udorn family visit in 1995. The encounter took place where the Author formerly lived on Soi Mahamit (the walled compound was then owned by Longmoun Godnoma's son, Toy Godnoma, and used for illegal card games. Toy had worked for GLD, at Nakhon Phanom, Udorn, and spent one week upcountry at Long Tieng).

Padom was born and raised in Udorn Town. Attracted to the Thai FAG program by the lure of money, three times that of a civilian counterpart, wounded provisions, and death benefits that would aid his family, he began four weeks of concentrated USAF ground school combat control training under the auspices of AB-1. This training was followed by seven days of field experience in the Phu Phan Mountains, west of Udorn near Nong Bu Long Phu, directing T-28 strikes.

After completing the required training, he was sent to Pitts Camp for a few months as an interpreter for American Special Forces personnel.

Accepting a one-year tour next as a FAG for the 607 volunteer Thai Battalion, Kittayam arrived at Long Tieng shortly after the Plain of Jars fell to the NVA in December 1971 where he was assigned to the Delta November (DN) position on the western portion of Delta Ridge, located between Skyline and Sam Tong.

He worked with Tagalong and Agency Case Officer "Tiny" (Jim McElroy).

Following The Alternate tour, Padom relocated to Pakse, where he worked front lines around Saravane. He worked for the Project Manager, Electric, and the hard charging Customer, Doug Swanson, who he considered a crazy person.

morning fog, the Thai defenders were supported by Hobo A-1s and Spooky C-47s at night.

The crew of 12F RON in Vientiane to be available early and slice thirty minutes off the ferry time to Long Tieng. <sup>13</sup>

Just after eleven o'clock, conditions worsened at Delta X-Ray. Enemy soldiers were scaling the northeast and east sides of the position. This, plus the inability to expose friendly troops because of the continuous and ever heavier incoming rounds, prompted the First Company Commander to radio the 606 Battalion Commander, requesting permission to evacuate, since his troops were losing the will to fight. The request was denied pending further developments.

Enemy incoming began to have a deleterious effect on troop morale at the Delta Zulu position when the 81mm mortar pit was struck by multiple rounds, disabling the tube and setting off the stash of ammunition. At the time there was no air support available, and with incoming artillery rounds saturating most of the position's, troops sought safety in the hardened command bunker.

Dragonfire (Pissanu), the 608 Battalion position at Delta Hotel received a request to commence counterfire on the enemy gun position to the north northeast.

By 1230 hours, troops at DX, besieged by B-40 rockets and satchel charges, had withdrawn toward DW. The enemy immediately filled the void, and after establishing their mortar and recoilless rifle positions, began the process of reducing battalion headquarters at Delta Zulu. The result was the same as at DZ, with the mortar assembly destroyed and ammunition fires and explosions. All the while, Vietnamese infantry moved ever

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<sup>13</sup> Wayne Knight Email.

closer, using fire and maneuver tactics under the umbrella of crew-served weapons.

An hour later, encountering similar problems at DW, the commanding officer requested permission to withdraw, but the 606 commanding officer ordered him to hold until the situation was no longer tenable.

Battalion headquarters at DZ experienced its own problems. Heavier incoming forced the commanding officer, Spotlight, Crowbar (Suban), S-3, and the Deputy Commander to huddle in the bunker. With no place left to seek safety, troops began to withdraw south and west. Within fifteen minutes the commanding officer also departed, heading toward Delta Hotel-608 Battalion with his troops. The northern and eastern sectors of Sam Tong were now partially in enemy hands.

During the withdrawal the troops were closely tracked by enemy DK-82 recoilless rifle and 82mm mortar rounds. This was supplemented by small arms and machine gun fire. Incoming continued, while the troops spread out and sought temporary hiding places within the Delta Hotel perimeter. Before the troops had time to sufficiently dig in, Singha headquarters at Long Tieng ordered a counterattack to retake DZ. Even if the demoralized troops possessed the will to attempt this, it was impossible, for a mortar position was hit, resulting in explosions. At this point, enemy units attacked the east portion of the HLZ.

Meanwhile, the rout was not complete along the forward Delta defense line. A Raven FAC directed strikes on DX, DZ, and southwest of DW to cover the friendly withdrawal. Many enemy troops were killed by air (KBA) and friendly shelling that was later confirmed by returning troops. They also observed enemy spread out around the valley south southwest of DZ.



Rendered virtually ineffective by enemy mortar and machine gun fire, Thunder artillery battery crews began pulling back toward Skyline at 1430 hours. Lulu, Hacksaw (Phichest), and Parka positions reported heavy incoming, as Ravens, Nails, T-28s, and U.S. Tacair supported all friendly positions. Raven-23 and Sandy-03 were hit by ground fire, but both RTB without further incident.

During the fracas, enemy gunners supported their troops with heavy 130mm fire. Preventing some medevac missions, ninety-four shells were recorded on Skyline and in the Long Tieng Valley. Causing further confusion, an enemy crew-served DK-82 team reached the eastern portion of Skyline and began firing at the runway.

Since the first week in March, Major Jesse Scott had observed that enemy gunners had been retargeting Long Tieng. With forward observers occupying advantageous positions, they assigned target numbers to the artillery storage area, the artillery batteries, and other choice targets. Aircraft were dispersed behind the karst and none were lost. However, the ammo dump was hit on the 12th, effectively ending T-28 overnights there. The RLAFF operation again reverted to Wattay Airport.<sup>14</sup>

At 1425 hours the enemy began to attack Delta Hotel (DH) from the north and east. Spooked friendly troops began to withdraw from their forward positions, then then Billy Club was informed that the Delta Charlie (DC) and Delta November (DN) (BC-607) positions were occupied by the enemy. This information caused further panic among the rank and file, and men began pulling back from forward positions. Fire intensified, and Spotlight informed the battalion commander to begin moving west

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<sup>14</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 03/11/72.  
Major Jesse Scott Interview.

toward the 610 battalion at Delta Tango. With the enemy in hot pursuit, the men began scrambling down the high ground, preparing to cross the Sam Tong Valley. While en route to Delta Tango, they were ambushed from prepared positions, and had to seek shelter in abandoned trenches.

An hour later, after some discussion, it was decided to attack the enemy as a means of reaching their goal. They crawled toward the enemy position, but were soon discovered. Besieged by heavy fire, they withdrew to the trench line, where continuous fire pinned them down. Sounds of battle were heard from the north and northwest as other units attempted to retreat and achieve the relative safety of high ground.

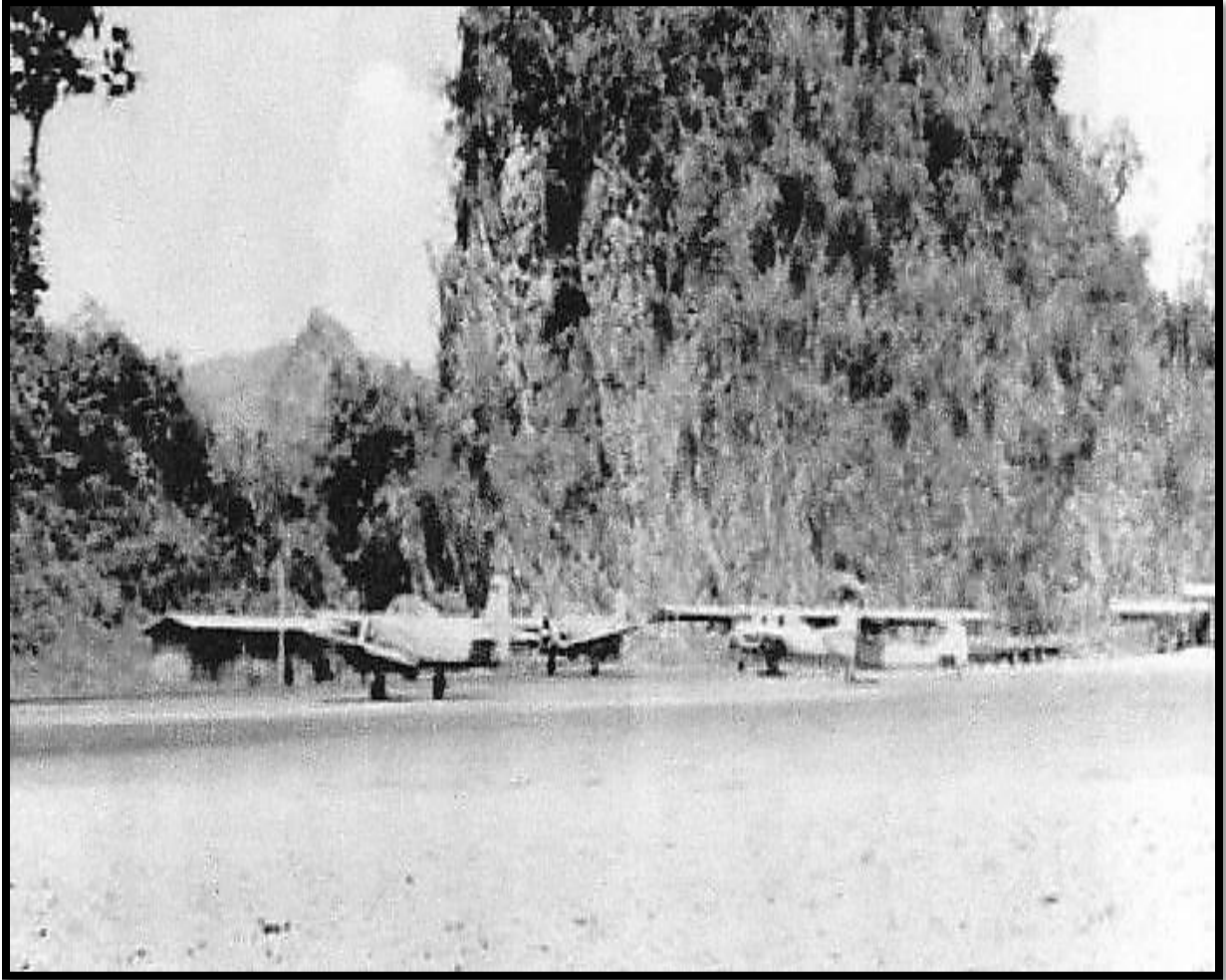
Firing 60mm mortar rounds, the enemy was intent on thoroughly reducing Thunder battery, located at Victor India (VI). Toward dark, infantry were heard casually walking west toward the already abandoned VI.

After eight o'clock, while a Spooky gunship crew strafed the area, the few men left from Spotlight's group moved north. They arrived at another trench line and established a temporary defense perimeter.

At this time, B-52 crews began unloading bombs east on abandoned positions at DI, DH, DZ, DX, and DW. With the sound of explosions reverberating throughout the bowl, and earthquake-like tremors pervading the area, the men became very excited and, like moles, burrowed deeper into their respective holes.

Rain began falling at 0125, greatly aiding the men's stealthy progress toward Delta Tango. Reduced to only sixteen survivors, they evaded enemy moving north and northwest throughout the area.

Just before 0500 hours, sounds of weapons and small arms were heard from DT as the enemy commenced their attack.



The T-28 and O-1E Raven parking ramp afforded a modicum of protection from limestone karsts prior to the Dac Cong sapper attacks and 130mm shelling.

Parker, 101.

At 0725 a firefight ensued, after which the group began running at "high port" toward Delta Tango. Under fire for most of the way, two hours later, all arrived safely at the position to swell and replenish troops, who had already departed for safer climes.

Throughout the day, troops from other forward positions arrived at DT. ABCCC crews were quite busy on the 12<sup>th</sup>, receiving reports and forwarding information. Weather was declared unworkable for visual strikes by fast-movers after 0930 hours, and for slow-movers after 1030. Wild Bill reported a ground assault with incoming, and Butterfly reported a ground assault on one of his outposts.

Spotlight, Bum Steer, and Long Tieng reported incoming where the ammo dump was hit, resulting in many spectacular, but destructive, explosions, while Raven-29 supported an assault on Charlie Charlie pad.

Toward evening, as Alleycat assumed the assigned orbit, Lonestar reported incoming fire. <sup>15</sup>

Low flying Air America helicopter crews, not restricted by low overcast conditions were very active during this period. Attesting to the large amount of work, Taylor and Knight flew over eleven hours on the 12th and 13th. When available, many medevacs were conducted with A-1 escort, and the friendlies were moving around attempting to survive and evade enemy, who were permeating the area. <sup>16</sup>

The action was exciting for the Skyraider pilots as well:

*"I came close to busting my ass over there...Strike in marginal weather with Zeke [this was after completing a primary mission escorting Air America helicopters on a medevac]...On one*

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC reports for 03/12/72.

<sup>16</sup> EW Knight Email.

*pull off, I got into the clouds headed toward a ridge...I pulled up and the airspeed got down to 80 knots...I added full power and bunted over...I was still in the clouds and when I broke out I was in about a 20 degree dive and had made it over the ridge with not too much to spare..."* <sup>17</sup>

On the 13<sup>th</sup>, Spotlight moved from Delta Tango (DT) to Delta Echo (DE) and waited for evacuation. However, recoilless rifle fire impacted the landing zone, so the FAG had to relocate to Delta Foxtrot (DF). By 1415, helicopter crews began evacuation of thirty-one WIA to the Ban Son hospital.

Spotlight arrived at Long Tieng at 1545 hours and filed his detailed report at Kumpha's Singha (Thai) headquarters. He estimated fourteen KIA at DZ, DX, and DW with an additional 240 men missing. Enemy casualty estimates were substantially higher.<sup>18</sup>

Butterfly, Lulu, Bullet Head (Arin), Knife, Lulu 01, and Lulu 02, along with Long Tieng, reported incoming. <sup>19</sup>

The enemy commenced a coordinated attack on Skyline. In the morning, Meo unit BG 224, occupying the Charlie Alpha (CA) highpoint, was overrun and withdrew after an attack-by-fire and infantry assault. Attempts by Thai soldiers later in the day to retake the position failed to dislodge the enemy.

Lulu 01, Lulu 02, Knife (CT LZ), Bum Steer, Bullet Head, and Peacock reported incoming and TIC. A Lao T-28 was shot down over Skyline. The pilot bailed out and was retrieved by the crew of H-34 Hotel-90. <sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Byron Hukee, *A-1 Combat Journal*, Chapter-4, 03/12/72.

<sup>18</sup> Spotlight situation report regarding action around Sam Tong from 10-13 March 1972. One can only assume that other FAGs experienced equally harrowing battlefield events.

<sup>19</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC reports for 03/13/72.

<sup>20</sup> Jim Parker ABCCC reports for 03/14/72.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 336.

*"An irregular [Meo] battalion abandoned two defensive positions on Skyline Ridge overlooking Long Tieng following a communist mortar attack on 14 March. Some communist troops have evidently occupied the positions and government efforts to retake them have thus far failed. The remaining positions on Skyline have also been shelled, but the irregulars manning them have held their ground.*

*The North Vietnamese are also shelling the Long Tieng valley.*

*Poor weather conditions have curtailed air strikes against the enemy gun positions north of the government complex."* <sup>21</sup>

*While Sam Tong was disappearing down the tubes, I was generally out of the picture. Moreover, our Twinpac program was in shambles, denying us normal flying time upcountry.*

*As I wrote to business partner, Don Valentine, in Steamboat Springs, Colorado on 8 March:*

***"Flying is slow for my program at present, as the PT6-3 engines are not holding up well due to the dirt-dust erosion factor. At 1,000 hours the compressor blades become so eroded that we experience engine stalls [from disrupted air flow] with a resulting loss in power. This is a little touchy at 6,000 feet on a small pad when the enemy might be launching a mortar at you. If the Company spends the money to repair the worn blades we will be back in business."***

*On the 13th, flying three hours and ten landings, I worked the entire morning and early afternoon on the ramp FCF XW-PHC. Sometimes it took several days of intense effort to produce an*

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<sup>21</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: Fighting continues in the Long Tieng area, 03/15/72.

airworthy ship. The next day I spent half a day at the field on duty without cranking a blade.

*"Vang Pao has moved 120 fresh irregular troops from Padong to attempt to retake the positions on Skyline Ridge. If the communists dig in and move up reinforcements quickly, Vang Pao may find it necessary to divert more of the troops he had planned to use in operations in the communists' rear areas.*

*To the northwest, irregulars holding the three remaining positions in the Sam Tong area have reported no significant activity since 11 March."* <sup>22</sup>

### **VP'S SECOND DIVERSION**

Enemy historians recorded:

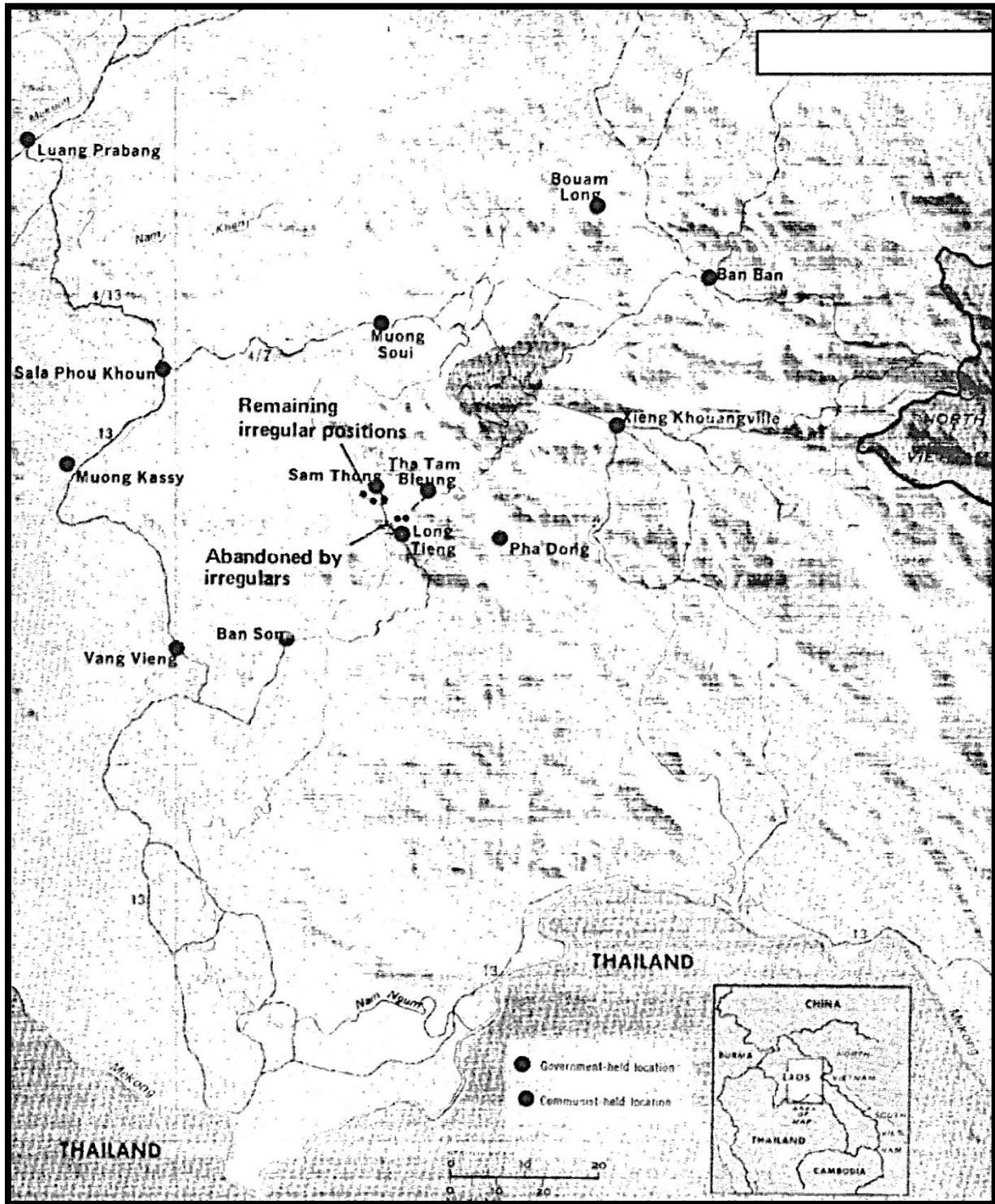
*"Faced with our attacks on Sam Tong, Nam Che [CC pad], Phou Moc [CT, CW, CA pads] and Long [Tieng], the enemy relied on his defensive fortifications to fight back and hold the springboard areas, while at the same time he moved six mobile groups to launch a wave of counterattacks out into the areas of Ban Lao 2, the Nong Pet three way junction, Phu Hoc, Phu Nhu, Phu He, and the Route 7A area northeast of the [PFJ] to threaten our rear areas, destroy our supply stockpiles, and cut our supply line. In the face of this new enemy scheme, the Campaign command headquarters ordered the 174th Regiment, supported by local forces and rear area defensive forces to block the enemy's attack columns. At the same time, the Headquarters massed its forces to mount a decisive attack against Nam Cha-Phu Moc aimed at annihilating a large number of enemy troops."* <sup>23</sup>

While Vang Pao's troops regrouped in and around Padong

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<sup>22</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 03/15/72.

<sup>23</sup> Ho Khang, Vietnamese military history of the Lao war. Sites mentioned often did not coincide with those on our maps.



CIA Map of the Long Tieng-Sam Tong area situation, 03/15/73.

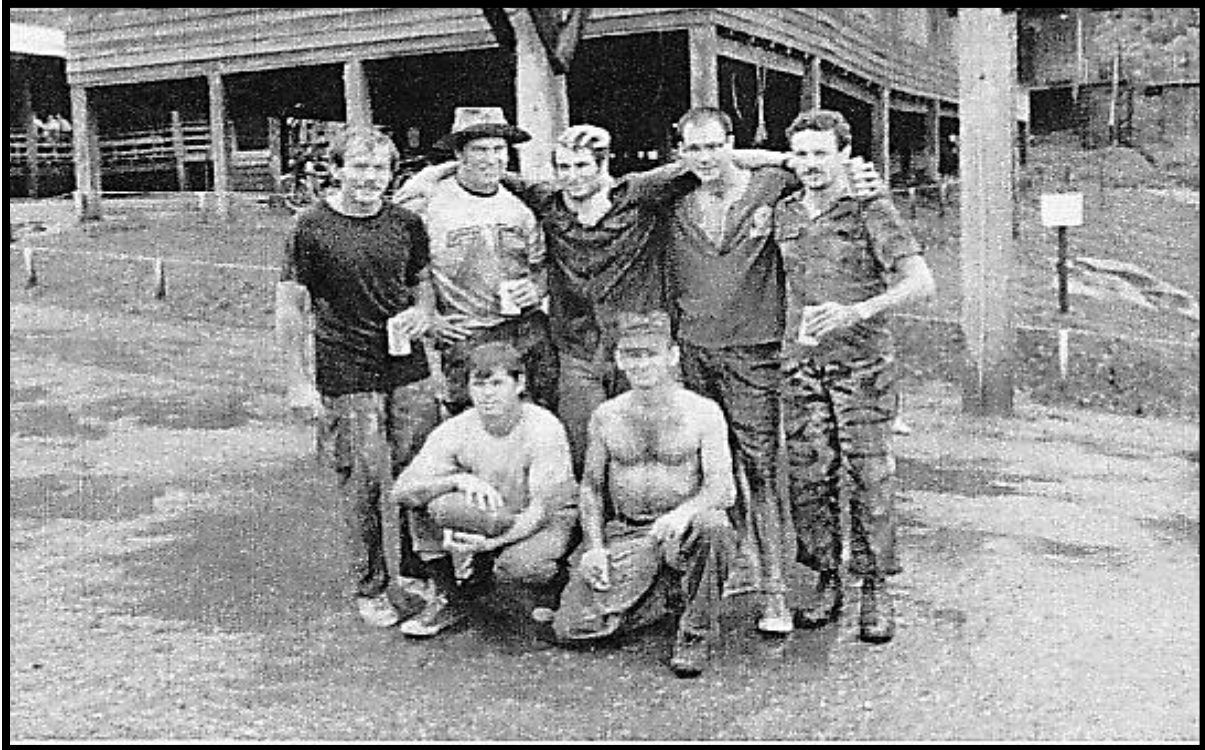


(Khang Kho-LS-204 and Pha Phai-LS-65), after the first semi-successful diversion, holding to the tenet, "strike when the iron is hot," Vang Pao's plans immediately moved forward during the first week in March to conduct a similar operation. This time, however, the plan was slightly modified to provide additional emphasis on severing the Route-7/71 junction at Nong Pet. The northern task force (Alpha), consisting of three regiments, would be airlifted to Bouam Long by USAF CH-53 crews, while another (Bravo), consisting of two Meo Group Mobiles, lifted to the hills north of the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley.

However, a multi-day delay ensued awaiting approval for the operation from "shakers and movers" in Washington, mostly because of a clouded situation on the DMZ border between North and South Vietnam. (This activity would soon be manifested by what developed and was later named the Easter Offensive in South Vietnam.) By the time approval for airlift and strike aircraft was obtained, the enemy had retrenched and begun their offensive on Sam Tong.

One Savannakhet regiment lifted to Site-32 from Ban Son began assembling at Bouam Long on the 14th. Men in the two additional Savannakhet GMs at Phou Khao, disgruntled at the length of time they had spent in the field and desiring to go home, refused to relocate north on the 15th. In the end, only half the regiments were lifted to the launch site, with the rest delivered to Ban Son, and then flown back to Military Region Three.

By the 18th, Alpha Task Force troops at Bouam Long were assembling to move south, but by the next day some troops, exhibiting reservations regarding the operation, once again rebelled. After considerable cajoling and promises, the men moved out. By 30 March, along with a local Meo GM, they were entrenched in the hills overlooking their objective.



Taking advantage of rare slack periods at Long Tieng, a mixed group of unkempt looking Case Officers and other personnel pose in front of the SKY housing area. Standing to the rear, Hardnose, Ringo, Kayak, Moose, and Bamboo. The two kneeling are unidentified.

Parker Collection, 71.

East of Padong, Task Force Bravo forces were lifted from the Pha Phai (LS-65) site to northern hills overlooking Route-4. Grouping on Phou Gnouan by the 20th, units prepared to move toward Phong Savan along Route-7 on the eastern Plain of Jars. Within a few days, forward units had moved halfway, and were four miles from the objective.

Without essential air support, which was diverted to address the enemy's Easter Offensive, and a decided lack of enemy response to the attempted diversion, the operation failed to achieve the desired results and was terminated.<sup>24</sup>

*"On 14 March the 335th Regiment conducted a heavy weapons bombardment of Phu Moc. The enemy defenders were forced to flee and our troops took Phu Moc [on Skyline], but on the 16th the enemy launched a counterattack that retook Phu Moc."*<sup>25</sup>

On Wednesday the 15th, following FCF of Papa Hotel Charlie, Demartini, Tom Neis, and I crewed Charlie to The Alternate to participate in medevac tasks and resupply still viable pads (twenty sorties, seven plus hours) before returning to Udorn for the night.

Vietnamese construction forces endured their own brand of problems on the Sam Tong Road, but persevered:

*"Aircraft attack the road [Route-54] all day and all night. We engineers continue to cling to the road to allow our tanks and supply trucks carrying rice and ammunition to reach the interior. During the months it has spent building the road, the battalion has accomplished its mission of building a road from Ban Phon [a small hamlet on the southern edge of the PDJ] all the way to Sam Tong. The officers and men of the battalion have experienced and endured combat in keeping with the engineer*

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<sup>24</sup> Ken Conboy, 337-338.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 451, 453-454.

<sup>25</sup> North Vietnamese military history of the Lao war.

*tradition of 'successfully clearing the road' in spite of untold hardships and sacrifices."* <sup>26</sup>

The next morning, we launched in the same Twinpac for Long Tieng (forty sorties, eight plus forty hours). Among others making the trip were Wayne Knight and Roger Cook in Bell 35F (almost eight hours). After supporting measures to retake Skyline, at day's end, both of us were assigned to RON at the Luang Prabang hostel in order to work at Bouam Long the following morning. This became standard operating procedure to be closer to the work area, save ferry time for the Customer, and to keep a ship in the field.

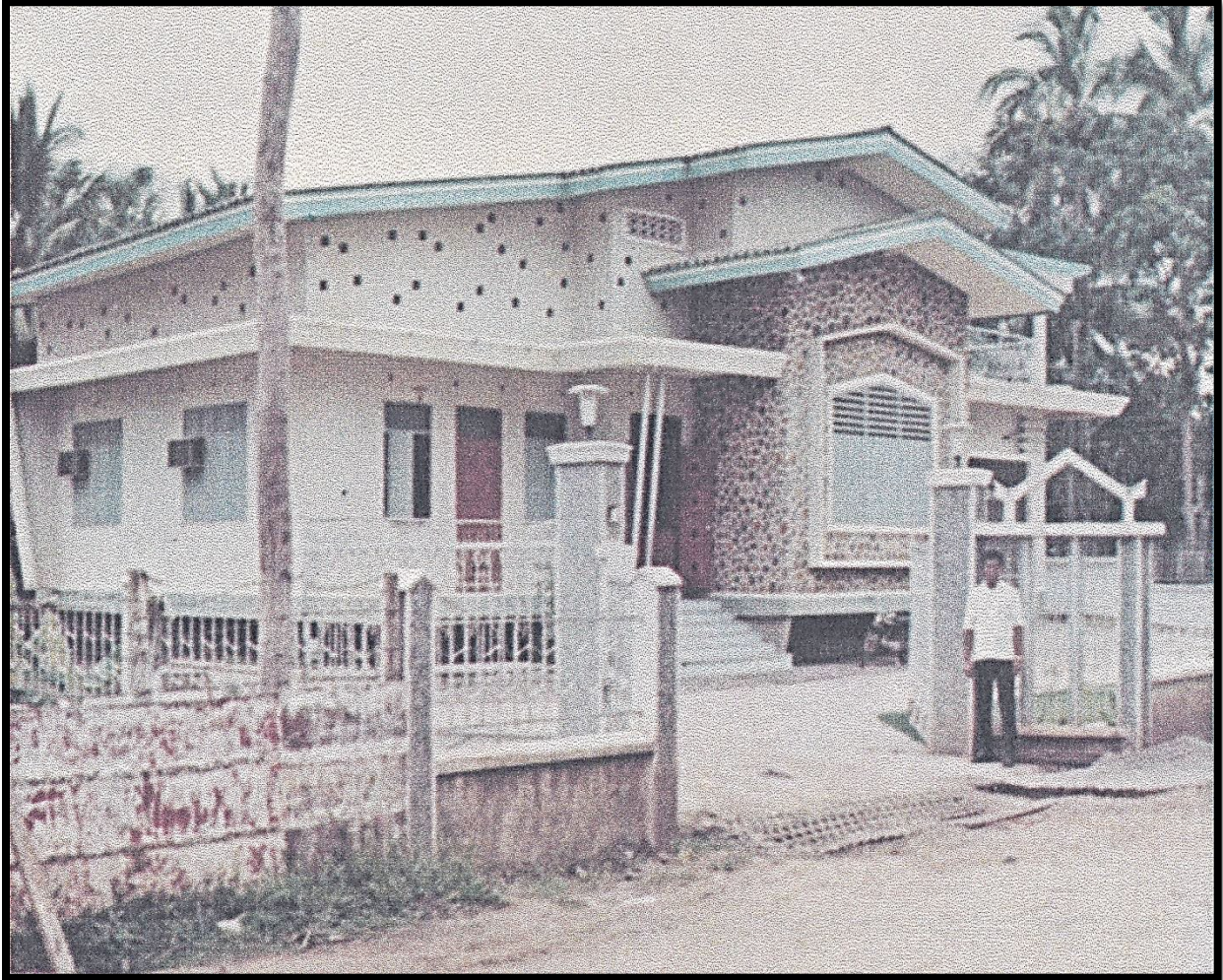
During the day, while we were supplying local pads and supporting Task Force Alpha, the enemy continuously fired 60mm mortar shells from an old village in the Sam Tong bowl at Delta Tango and Delta Echo (FAGs Friendly and Wild Bill). Airstrikes by slow and fast movers, and shelling by Venus FSB, failed to stop the shelling. Additional mortar fire was observed from the abandoned Delta India (DI) and Delta Zulu (DZ) pads and from the northeast.

Before dark, North Vietnamese Army units maneuvered from the foot of Sam Tong's northern ridge lines across the runway toward DT. With friendlies observing the movement, heavy mortars were employed in defense with good effects. From Long Tieng, Venus battery's 155mm howitzers also supported Thai forces on the southern ridge.

That night, the distinctive engine sound of tracked vehicles was heard from Route-54 northeast of DT. Wild Bill reported this to Bounder Control at Long Tieng headquarters and to the aloft Alleycat control plane, but no one did anything

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<sup>26</sup> Xuandao Daily Diary, 03/15/72.



The Air America hostel at Luang Prabang, Laos, with hostel manager, Abdul, standing beside the gate.

Air America Log.

about the report. Wiboon asked Alleycat's radio operator the kind of aircraft that could follow up on his report. After the American claimed ignorance, Wild Bill inquired what kind of aircraft possessed an infrared heat seeking capability. The Alleycat controller indicated that he would check with Stinger and Spector. There was no further action regarding the matter.

Then Wiboon radioed Boudner Control asking to talk to Cobra, but was informed that he was not available for an unspecified reason. Despite heightened concern, no enemy armored vehicle attack occurred that night. <sup>27</sup>

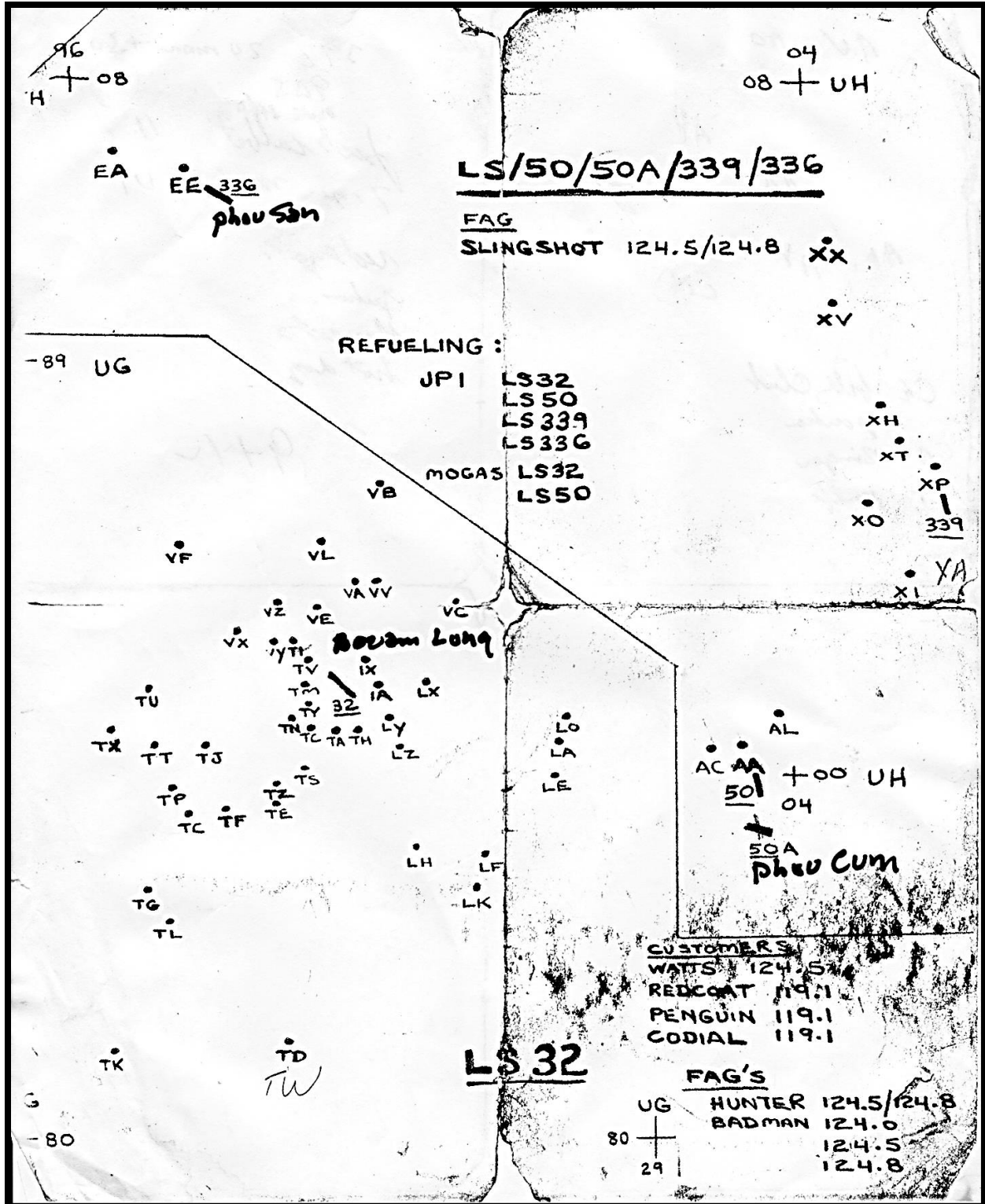
Consistent with the Udorn Operations Department standard operation procedure (SOP), after breakfast and equipped with a bag of sandwiches, our two crews were driven by the duty Jeep driver drove across the Nam Khan Bridge to the airfield.

Even though Bouam Long was located more than seventy nautical miles to the east of Luang Prabang, it was a considerably shorter distance than a flight from Udorn or Vientiane. Since we had to traverse a considerable expanse of enemy or "no-mans-land," I flew at altitude through the smoke and haze, while paralleling the Khan River as a reference point. Reaching the Sop Khao four rivers checkpoint east of Phou Cum (LS-50), I deviated southeast to Site-32. Despite all my prior experience in Laos, I could not recall previously covering this exact route.

While Savannakhet troops lifted to the site three days previously prepared to move south toward Nong Pet, other Lima-39 units arrived by STOL aircraft from Phou Khao (LS-14) and began assembling. Since they were not quite ready to march, we supplied numerous defensive positions liberally sprinkled

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<sup>27</sup> Memorandum for Chief of Unit Long Tieng, 1830 hours, 03/16/72, 1, 9.  
EW Knight Email delineating his March flight time with comments.



Graphic of Bouam Long area's numerous landing zones distributed to helicopter crews by the Customer in order to aid in expediting resupply missions.

Author Collection.

throughout the complex. For me, this amounted to forty sorties (nine hours plus forty-eight minutes, less ferry time).

Knight and Cook flew about the same amount of time as our crew, and recovered at Wattay Airport for the night. I did the same, but was told to park Papa Hotel Charlie at the airport and deadhead home on Hotel-70.

"[In regard to the northern and eastern diversion]...Vang Pao's task forces are moving into positions to threaten the communists' lines of communications. Advance elements of a 1,500-man task force are now about ten miles south of Bouam Long while a 1,300-man force is moving toward the foothills of the Plaine. The communists are trying to counter Vang Pao's offensive with Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops already in this area. Thus far there are no signs that they intend to divert troops pressing the attack on Long Tieng." <sup>28</sup>

Recorded two days later:

"To the east, advance elements of one of Vang Pao's [diversionary] task forces [in the Xieng Khouang Ville area] are about three miles from Phongsavan, once a major enemy storage area.

Elements from the other force [from Bouam Long] have reached the high ground overlooking Nong Pet, at the junction of two important communist supply roads." <sup>29</sup>

### **JUST A MINUTE**

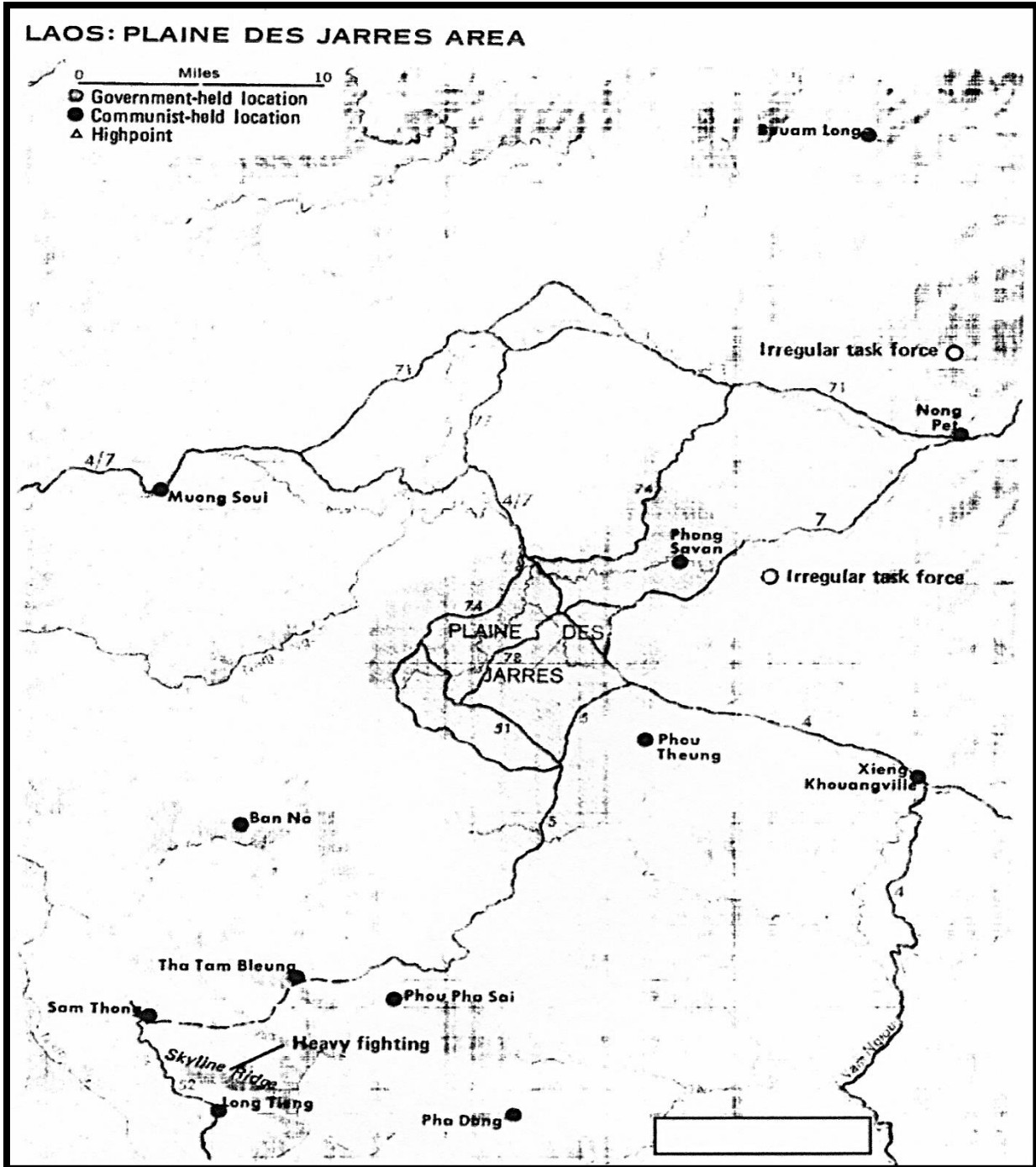
After arriving at the airfield late, an unwanted surprise awaited me in the CPH's office.

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<sup>28</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 03/21/72.

<sup>29</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 03/23/72.





CIA 03/23/72 graphic showing the general locations of Vang Pao's northern and eastern diversionary units.

*"...I was informed that I was transferred to H-34s for a time. Evidently the Company is in a bind because the Twinpac engines are sick and they don't have enough H-34 pilots to cover all requirements. The whole deal is shady and I am mad as hell. The union is looking into it but I don't know if anything will come of it. They have disrupted our seniority system completely. It makes no difference to them that I am one of the very senior pilots in helicopters. It just furthers my distrust of them.*

*They [management] did this to me in 1969.<sup>30</sup> I thought it was over now that we have an association, but I was wrong..."*

Letter Home, 03/21/72.

I was probably more confused over the move to H-34s than any other consideration. Granted, S-58T power sections were stalling frequently and not much actual work was obtained from them. In fact, a Flight Mechanic joke at the time circulated about getting an S-58T ground tug to fly, so all the Twinpacs would follow. Special Project work quietly took precedence over all other, so fewer crews were required in the regular program.

As a senior pilot and instructor pilot, the move was a supreme blow to my inflated ego.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, for the second time, I was not consulted if I would be willing to revert to the

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<sup>30</sup> The switch occurred during the first Plain of Jars operation while I was flying the Bell. Emergency procedures and aircraft systems were very different, and I was uncomfortable with the latter. Making matters worse, I sometimes flew both helicopters during the same day. I objected to this and the issue was resolved after I had an emergency in a H-34.

<sup>31</sup> An alphabetical listing of S-58T pilots at the time: Baiz (FO), Barksdale (FO), Casterlin (IP), Collard, Cox (FO), Davis (Project Manager), Demartini (FO), Edwards (IP), Gregoire (FO), Hendryx, Higgins, Hunter, Hutchison, Johnson, Kanach (SIP), Lapierre (FO), Pearson, Peyton, Purvis (FO), Stevens, Thompson (FO), Webb (IP), Weitz, Wilbur (FO).

H-34. This was not the shop-worn military mentality of "needs of the service." Where was the respect?

After FEPA mulled the situation over, as it related to the Articles of Association, I believe the downgrading issue was placed on temporary hold for further discussion and a final decision. Something worked, for I remained in the S-58T program.<sup>32</sup>

In the meantime, pending resolution of the grievance, I attended Drex Morgan's UH-34D ground school in the upstairs portion of Hangar One during the next two days, in preparation to transferring to the program.

### **UPCOUNTRY**

While we were attempting to supply positions at Bouam Long, crew served 60mm and 81mm mortar fire hit Delta Tango, Delta Echo, and Delta Foxtrot pads overlooking Sam Tong. Heavy caliber artillery fire also impacted DT. Both slow and fast movers attacked enemy mortar positions. They also supported TIC situations, and suspected tank sites. Strikes were unsuccessfully conducted on the evacuated Thunder battery in order to silence enemy 105mm and 4.2mm mortar fire on Skyline positions.

With Cricket the controlling ship aloft, Wild Bill requested Stinger or Spector gunships for nighttime support. Stinger-23, an AC-119 gunship equipped with infrared gear, arrived at 1700 hours. One tank was destroyed, but four others managed to escape when Stinger had to RTB. No other gunships arrived to provide assistance that night.

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<sup>32</sup> As of 2 March 1972, the FEPA membership roster contained names of fifty-four Sikorsky UH-34D, thirty-seven Bell 204/205, twenty-four Sikorsky S-58T pilots, and seven fixed wing pilots.

Enemy shelling continued early in the morning on DT, DE, and DT pads. Duels ensued from both adversaries, and counter fire from Venus FSB and F-4 pilots wiped out one 57mm recoilless rifle position. Despite all attempts to quell enemy fire, 82 mortar, DK-82, 120mm, and 130mm artillery continued impacting the area from many directions. Suspected tank guns participated in the fracas.

Thais assigned to the front lines deemed air support inadequate during the day. It was also difficult to obtain fire support from Venus and Tiger batteries because of conflicts with air traffic. <sup>33</sup>

### **A FELLOW PILOT IS WOUNDED**

Following a night at the Apollo Hotel in Vientiane, on Saturday Wayne Knight arrived at Wattay Airport at 0630 hours. While awaiting a fresh crew of Captain M.R. Braithwaite and Bob Noble, he breakfasted with other flight crews at the Chinese-managed Air America dining facility. Afterward, Wayne proceeded to the Flight Information Center (FIC) for the latest briefing, where he discovered that TIC had occurred at Charlie Charlie (CC) and Charlie Gulf (CG) on Skyline.

The crew departed north in 35F at 0725. After skirting Ban Son because of ground fog, they arrived over The Alternate at 0820. Since other crews had preceded him by an hour, he contacted Don Henthorn, the PIC of Hotel-62, for a current briefing. Don advised Wayne of TIC at CC and CG positions; also of early morning shelling at Charlie Echo (CE) and Charlie Bravo (CB). Henthorn added that he had just been waved off by FAG Ringer (Thirdsak), while attempting to land at CB.

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<sup>33</sup> Memorandum prepared for Chief of Unit Long Tieng for 03/18/72.

Before landing, Knight attempted to contact the Customer on VHF frequency 118.1. After three attempts, Hog (Customer Jerry Daniels) answered. Wayne asked Jerry for the tactical situation and a work assignment, and was advised to contact Bounder Control on the appropriate frequency. Unable to contact Bounder, Whitetop (Chuck Campbell) answered, who advised that CC and CG were receiving sporadic fire. As far as he was aware, there were no other outstanding problems. Chuck advised Wayne to land at the Charlie November loading ramp and again attempt contact with Bounder for a work assignment. Prior to landing, Bounder established contact with 35F, saying to work as directed by personnel located at Charlie November.

Skyline Roulette commenced. After terminating at CN, one of the loaders held a cardboard flash card indicating a mission to Delta Echo. Wayne rejected this assignment, because the tactical situation there was not good the previous night. Then CC, CG, CB, and Delta Lima (DL) were quickly flashed in succession. Knight refused to accept any of those proposed.

The next cardboard sign displayed by the dispatcher read Charlie India (CI), which Wayne accepted. He delivered an external sling load to the pad and returned to CN without incident. CC and CG cards were again flashed. Frustrated, Knight waved the dispatcher to the side window of the helicopter, advising him that CC and CG had both experienced TIC, and CB and CE had been receiving incoming rounds. It was impossible to service these pads at the time. The man noted these problem positions on a piece of paper, and then dispatched him to Charlie Romeo (CR). Since he was not familiar with the position, he questioned PIC Chuck Frady in Hotel-77 as to its location. Frady complied and indicated that CR was Tango Charlie that morning. He had recently landed there without a problem.

An uneventful trip was conducted to CR. After takeoff, Bamboo (Dick Mann) radioed, asking for a pickup of the commander and one other man at Charlie Tango. Unsure about the pad's status, Knight again sought Captain Frady's opinion. Chuck replied that all was quiet. After landing at CT, eight soldiers attempted to bull rush their way onto the helicopter. On Noble's advice, Knight departed after loading two men. He then contacted Bamboo about the mobbing, who said that he would investigate using the FM radio 67.30 frequency.

The CC card was again flashed at CN, which Wayne readily refused. The next assigned mission was an external load to the highest point on Skyline at Charlie Alpha (CA). Earlier, he had heard Frady quiz Bounder Control regarding security at Charlie Alpha. Since Chuck had delivered supplies there with no problem, Wayne shuttled in a load. Except for excessive debris throughout the landing area, there was no visible problem.

Still hoping to nab a pilot in a weak moment, the loader held up a Delta Lima signal. Disgusted, Wayne again refused. The next assigned load was Charlie Bravo (CB). Chuck Frady had just landed there and considered everything fine. Not convinced of the viability of the site, and wanting additional input, Wayne contacted Whitetop, advising him that Don Henthorn had briefed him about recent incoming at CB. Campbell said that all was now well at the site. The mission was uneventful. On the return leg to CN, he was advised over the radio that the crews of Hotel-77, Hotel-62, and 35F were slated for a 0945 mission. This would be briefed at CN by Tagalong.

Wayne landed at 0925, leaving time for one more trip before the briefing. The Charlie Echo sign was displayed. Knight considered this mission acceptable, for he had previously heard Captain Frady delivering loads to the pad, located just east and adjacent to the Skyline-Sam Tong Road junction.

While previously supplying Skyline pads, Knight had developed a successful technique. Winds were normally from the west, and if properly utilized, enhanced lift. If he could approach the ridge with a front-quartering left wind, he could almost terminate in a hover without using any lift-destroying anti-torque pedal. Conditions warranted using this method, and in retrospect, Wayne attributed it to saving his bacon and provide the extra power to depart the impact zone. <sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Author Note: Skyline Roulette-As the military situation in Laos measurably worsened after February 1970 and 1971, increasingly there had first been an insidious strain in Customer/Air America pilot relations. This became more apparent as combat situations continued to deteriorate. The southern Pakse (L-11) region, always considered by pilots the "resort" area to fly, collapsed. However, nowhere was the lack of rapport and animosity felt than at the besieged Long Tieng complex. Sometimes I believed we should give it all up and withdraw to the foothills just short of the Vientiane plain.

The local Customer was tasked and pressured from various sources (Vang Pao, FAR, Embassy, their AB-1 superiors, etc.) to perform. Pilots were also tasked to function, but had a natural desire and obligation to remain alive and preserve their aircraft and crew. Nasty comments directed at some PICs like, *"You are paid to die,"* by naive or new Customers had no place in the Theater, or were not conducive to bonding among wartime comrades. No Customer like Tony Poe arose to fill the void after his departure from Long Tieng in 1965. New Customers, a majority, who were former sergeants from Vietnam, possessed little concept regarding our specialized operations. Some merely did not care. Others wisely reconsidered their positions after realizing that, *"One could not argue with success."*

With a reasonable pipeline of UH-34s still available vs Bells, and having exhausted the supply of "throttle-twisting" old timers, the Company had no option but to hire a younger generation of pilots. Most had at least a year of military experience in Nam, but never achieved a good feel for the much different work Laos demanded. Greed was prevalent with some individuals. Many harbored other agendas. Moreover, in lieu of the older generation's preference for alcoholic beverages, casual recreational drug ingestion entered the equation.

Much of the work at Long Tieng was performed by some of the most senior and experienced Air America pilots flying Bells and S-58Ts. But these sometimes-abused machines were aging, experiencing maintenance problems, or in short supply. Consequently, H-34 crews were employed to fill the gaps. Many of these missions were flown by a newer breed of pilots, who unfortunately lacked the luxury of learning how to develop good mountain techniques while flying solo or during calmer times when mistakes were not fatal.

The CE permanent signal was prominently displayed. While still a minute out on final approach he observed Frady in Hotel-77 departing CE after depositing an external load. Wayne was also hauling a sling load consisting of 759 pounds of fresh food. On very short final, Knight commented to First Officer Braithwaite that the zone was devoid of any personnel. Braithwaite concurred, but added that he could see three loads deposited by the Hotel-77 crew.

Wayne continued the approach to a hover and allowed the aircraft to weathervane into the wind. As the load touched the ground and the release mechanism--the manual pickle switch was on the cyclic--activated to release the load, all hell broke loose. Loud automatic weapon fire was heard from the right rear. Amid smoke and debris, bits of instrument panel began flying around the cockpit. Braithwaite screamed, and Noble, who was prone on the cabin floor nursing an abrasion on his right cheek, was screaming "*get the bleep out of here!*"

Experiencing an adrenalin rush like no other ever during a time of extreme duress, Knight believed the end was in sight for them, but in lieu of remaining at the site in a maelstrom of bullets, Wayne immediately reacted, pulling pitch, and pushing the nose over to dive off the ridge. At that moment, he was unsure of whether they would be able to clear the ridge's lip, or instead, crash, and roll down the hill--but this was secondary to survival.

Although wounded by unsightly, superficial, but bloody cuts to his face, Braithwaite began apprising three other aircraft in

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During the more active dry-season period, we did not RON at Long Tieng. I referred to the daily activity as Long Tieng commutes (LTC). It was stressful flying. One had to rely on sketchy Customer reports and suspect FAG assessments regarding a fluid situation. It was not a good environment, particularly for any young, aspiring pilot--and where good judgment and experience was always paramount.



the area of the 35F incident. Knight followed with a lousy Mayday that failed to resonate in his headset. Other pilots advised an immediate landing; others wanted to know Wayne's intended landing spot. Wayne attempted to respond to the questions on both VHF and UHF, but again heard nothing in response.

He was also monitoring engine instruments for impending problems, so there was initial uncertainty as to when and where a forced landing might be necessary. <sup>35</sup>

Wayne noticed that he was wounded in the left leg, but, likely in shock and addressing the task at hand, felt no overriding pain. While looking down at his hemorrhaging leg, he noticed a hole in the cyclic stick and realized that the damage was the reason his radio transmissions were not heard. By this time, with all things being equal, Wayne shouted across the center pedestal to his copilot that they were going to land at the Charlie November loading ramp.

Following a successful landing, a customer representative applied a compress to Knight's leg. Then Braithwaite and the Flight Mechanic from Hotel-77 assisted him to the ship for transfer to the LS-272 hospital. <sup>36</sup>

After Frady landed at Ban Son with 35F's crew, Braithwaite and Knight were ushered into the Singha dispensary, where they were administered medical assistance. Wayne's four-inch wound was sutured with eight stitches by a Thai doctor wearing a

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<sup>35</sup> In retrospect the crew realized the enemy had erred in directing fire at the cockpit. Had they waited and fired into the engine or transmission areas, the ship would probably have been disabled.

<sup>36</sup> EW Knight Email, 11/08/00. Before leaving the Bell at Long Tieng for another crew to ferry to Udorn, the 300-pound armored seat was examined. The metal displayed three hits, one believed to have been a 12.7 projectile.

battle helmet. Braithwaite's bloody face was cleaned and his twelve facial cuts, lacerated left lower lip, and right knee treated. Then the crew boarded C-123 617 for a short trip to Udorn, where Wayne was driven to the USAF hospital. After looking at his wound and the stitches, medical personnel only rewrapped the injury.

Wayne was off the flight schedule for two weeks while healing and recovering from the incident's trauma.<sup>37</sup>

After returning to the field on the 30th, Knight was assigned to deadhead to Wattay Airport and fly PFG with Ron Zappardino at Long Tieng. During the preflight, after mounting the roof of the helicopter to inspect the transmission and rotorhead assembly, his leg wound opened and began to bleed. Wayne thought he would have to abort the flight. However, the

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<sup>37</sup> EW Knight Incident Statement slightly paraphrased by the Author from his pilot file regarding the 35F, 03/20/72. Mailed to the Author by Knight-received on 06/22/00.

EW Knight Emails, 06/24/00, 10/23/00, 11/08/00, 12/01/00, 12/03/00.

The lengthy statement was the longest one Knight ever wrote, but it was composed with a purpose. Quite a few people were unhappy with the way things were being done at 20A. Pilots, by their willingness or reluctance to visit a site, were being used by some Customers as agents to determine site security. Often, when one pilot turned down a site, this mission was held in abeyance until another pilot arrived. It was difficult for new pilots under pressure to accept dicey missions. Wayne was asked by individuals in AB-1 to describe the incident in as much detail as possible.

Author Note: Playing one pilot off against another had also been a standard technique employed by Udorn management in the past when trying to send a particularly cranky H-34 upcountry. One helicopter required test flights by eight different pilots before being released.

In response to my Email quip that it was a hell of a welcome back, Wayne philosophically responded, *"Had it not been me, it surely would have been someone else who came to grief in this chaotic time. It worked out as well, as it could have and was an unexpected occurrence that either he or [Earl] Richmond did not foresee when making the decision to fly the line prior to resuming the CPH slot."*

bleeding soon ceased and he continued to march. <sup>38</sup>

Taking a break from Rex Morgan's H-34 ground school, I happened to be in the operations building at the exact time that Wayne limped in. By that time, word of the shooting incident had made the rounds of the compound. Aware of the contention between the man and FEPA leaders over the questionable seniority issue and his Bell billet, I felt shamed and sad that all our years in the saddle had come to this, more so now that one of our own had been wounded in combat.

Like most incidents worthy of note, depending on the originator, there are generally many conflicting versions containing half-truths. According to Thai Case officer Mike "Hardnose" Ingham:

*"Knight landed on the wrong Skyline pad. The one where he tried to drop his load was an abandoned pad that was located at the point where the road from Sam Tong to Long Tieng crossed Skyline Ridge. He was actually supposed to be delivering the sling load to a pad a couple of hundred yards further east...an NVA jumped out of hole and discharged an entire AK-47*

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<sup>38</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/01/00, 12/03/00.

Later someone, perhaps Chuck Campbell, told Wayne that the enemy who had shot Wayne were there to secure the area for tank crews intent on attaining the Skyline crest. That his experience caused the introduction of tanks to be curtailed.

Author Note: This is still bandied about today and has some validity.

magazine."<sup>39</sup>

As soon as Hardnose was aware of the incident, he journeyed to the position and dispatched a Thai patrol to the pad where the event occurred. A firefight ensued, so additional Thai troops were sent to help. The battle raged all afternoon against the North Vietnamese company. Nineteen enemy troops were killed and one captured during the engagement. Several Thai were lightly wounded. During interrogation, the enemy prisoner indicated that his unit had been dispatched to occupy the abandoned Thai position and support an impending heavy T-34 tank attack on Skyline and Long Tieng. In preparation for such an assault, Hardnose had Thai engineers emplace anti-tank mines along the road between Sam Tong and The Alternate. Unfortunately, enemy engineers were also primed and ready to clear the road for their vehicles.

### **TANKS COMETH**

*"On 18 March the 141st Regiment reinforced by four tanks attacked Vanh Khan (Scarf) Ridge [west of the Charlie Echo junction]. The enemy defenders fled, We killed or captured a total of 140 enemy troops."*

*From 18 to 20 March the 165th Regiment conducted a siege attack against enemy force at Ta Can, but because of the rugged*

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<sup>39</sup> Bill Leary 1972 Notes-Ingham 01/07/93 Interview. Hardnose speculated that the enemy infantry unit was under strict orders to remain quietly in place and support the impending tank attack, but human nature being what it was, the soldier who fired on 35F could not overcome a temptation to destroy an easy target. This may have been the case, but raises the question, why didn't the trooper shoot at Captain Frady who had dropped three loads prior to Knight? Unfortunately, Frady has passed and is not available to add to this narrative. Because Knight's statement was composed and forwarded directly after the incident and details were fresh in his mind, although Ingham's recall should certainly not be discounted, it is the Author's contention that Wayne's statement should assume precedence.

*terrain and because our siege ring was not tight enough, we were only able to kill or capture a total of 30 enemy troops.* <sup>40</sup>

At 1600 hours, an enemy daylight attack commenced in order to neutralize all of remaining resistance in and around Sam Tong, and in preparation to moving on Long Tieng.

At the same time, five enemy PT-76, T-34 tanks, and four armored personnel carriers were sighted at the south end of the Sam Tong strip. They began moving toward various assigned targets. Wild Bill reported this development to the Raven-24 FAC, Bounder Control, and Cricket ABCCC. The Raven pilot attempted to adjust Venus fire on one tank that was moving rapidly toward Delta Tango, but the effort proved unsuccessful. A protecting unit of enemy infantry also surged across the runway toward the Thai position.

With apparently little or no serious planning or specific coordination to ambush and ward off heavy armor, attempts to stop or slow such vehicles with 81mm mortar and 75mm recoilless rifle fire proved fruitless. (No anti-tank rounds were available.) Moreover, no anti-tank mines had been implanted on the road between the airstrip and the southern defense line.

As the behemoth machines closed on Delta Tango, one was destroyed by a gutsy trooper firing one of only two M-72 LAW rocket launchers. Wounded immediately, his attempt to shoot at a second tank failed. The other LAW launcher proved defective, marking the final ability of the defenders to kill tanks. With only an hour of daylight remaining, T-28 pilots from Long Tieng arrived late to the battle, and their weak efforts in the valley netted only minimal vehicle kills.

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<sup>40</sup> North Vietnamese Army History of the Lao war.

At Delta Tango, forced to revert to their weapons at hand, Thai soldiers shot ineffective M-16 rifles at the tank gunners. Gunners were replaced as soon as they were disabled or killed.

A pair of T-34s arrived close to Delta Tango and fired on the inadequately reinforced bunkers. After these were reduced, the men scrambled into trenches, where they collectively tossed two dozen grenades at a tank. The tank was set afire. Another tank was perched on top of battalion headquarters raking troops exiting bunkers with machinegun fire.

Since 1600 hours, the Delta Foxtrot pad had received 175mm rounds. This covering fire continued until 1800. One tank moved between Delta Foxtrot and Delta India and began firing at Delta Echo pad. Just prior to dark, at 1800 DF experienced a light ground attack from the south.

During this period, FAGs Whiskey-01, Sunshine, Poppy, Wild Bill Dogwood, and Bum Steer reported coordinated attacks on their defensive positions.

As the dire situation spun hopelessly out of control, Thai troops wisely began withdrawing along the defense line, away from the tank and infantry offensive. Noting that people from DE were withdrawing, DF soldiers began evacuating toward the west to join with men from DE and DT. During the process of escaping the carnage, Wild Bill tumbled and fell to the road. Both injured and dazed, he was largely ineffective as a FAG for a time.

Surviving Thai troops, along with their wounded, moved west away from their positions. They surged over hills and down slopes at dawn toward the Nam Ngum, in order to obtain water. Once away from immediate danger, to expedite movement, the troops split into smaller groups, with various units heading in disparate directions. Some arrived at the river on the 19th.

Others, carrying wounded, struggled through the harsh terrain, not arriving until the following day.

At day's end, FIC Connor reported to his superiors that Sam Tong and all perimeter pads were lost. There was no contact with Wiboon, Wild Bill, and Dogwood. They were later located. <sup>41</sup>

During the vicious fighting, three enemy tanks were disabled, but at a heavy price:

*"We massed our forces to attack Sam Tong, Ta Can, Nam Cha, Phu Moc, and Long Tieng. Meanwhile the enemy also threw everything he had into holding us off in order to improve his battlefield posture...the enemy reinforced his forces on the scene, relying on his prepared defensive fortifications to resist and hold onto his spring-board..."* <sup>42</sup>

Charlie Charlie pad (Nam Cha) was reported lost. Charlie Alpha defenders had enemy at the east end of the position during the day. Charlie Golf had enemy just outside the wire perimeter. The rest of the positions received cargo drops from C-7A Caribou crews and Twin Otters.

In order to obtain current situational information, Captains of all participating aircraft were advised to contact the LS-20A Customer and FAGs on the 118.3 VHF frequency. To the south, enemy reconnaissance units were spotted. <sup>43</sup>

During the laborious trek away from harm's way, Billy Club established contact with a fixed wing pilot, who indicated that the men would be evacuated by helicopter if a suitable landing pad could be located. We had conducted operations along the river during previous years, so it was relatively easy to

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<sup>41</sup> Mike Ingham recruited Billy Club.

<sup>42</sup> North Vietnamese military history of the Lao war as translated by Merle Pribbenow.

<sup>43</sup> Bill Leary 1972 Notes, FIC Connor, 03/19/72.

identify a spot where helicopter crews could safely land and take off.

Mid-morning of the 21st, some of the men were lifted to either Long Tieng or Ban Son. Other units remained in place in order to create a barrier to enemy river incursions toward Long Tieng. <sup>44</sup>

With nothing but Thai artillery and desultory Allied air strikes remaining to impede them from moving south, enemy forces continued moving toward Skyline. On the nineteenth, Charlie Alpha, Charlie Charlie, Charlie Whiskey, and Charlie Gulf locations were either attacked or lost. Raven FACs supported TIC at Whiskey-01's position.

The enemy continued pressure on Thai Skyline positions. Boulder Control, Hornet, Snap (Sawai), and Small Man experienced coordinated incoming and ground assaults on the 20th. During fierce fighting, Charlie Charlie pad was lost and then reclaimed.

20A received some incoming 130mm fire the previous night and again during the day. Charlie Delta, CT, CB, and CE drop zones were considered no overriding problem for air drops, but in the past some pilots dropped from too high an altitude for the type parachutes attached to the loads. <sup>45</sup>

The next day, Whiskey-01, Hot Plate, Blue Moon, Hot Dog, Hornet, Poppy, Boulder Control, and Snap all experienced TIC and incoming fire. <sup>46</sup>

*"[Thai] irregulars still hold seven positions on [Skyline] Ridge, but have been thwarted in their efforts to dislodge*

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<sup>44</sup> Memo for Chief of Unit Long Tieng-Billy Club account. Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 337.

Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports, 03/18/72.

<sup>45</sup> Jim Parker ABCCC Reports for 03/20/72. Leary 1972 Notes, FIC Connor.

<sup>46</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports, 03/19, 21/72.



communist troops from two positions on the central portion of the ridge. Communist attacks against the western ends of the ridge continued on 20 March, but the irregulars held their ground. A [NVA] prisoner captured in the recent fighting claims that elements of the 312th Division were [poised] to assault the western sector while two regiments of the 316th Division struck to the east.

The North Vietnamese also may be preparing to launch some harassing attacks from the south. An irregular unit on 20 March clashed with small numbers of [NVA] troops moving northwest toward Long Tieng." <sup>47</sup>

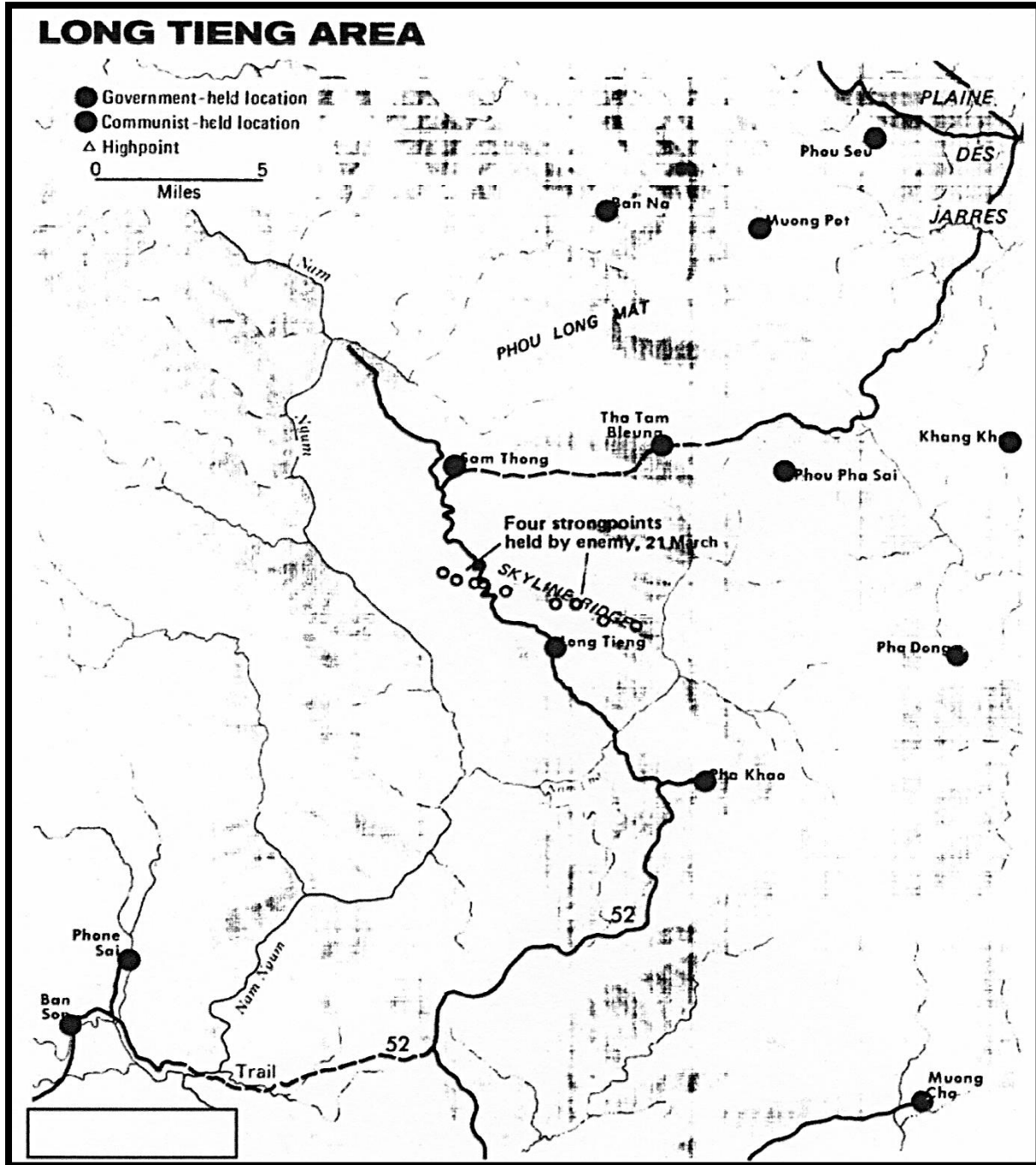
"Intense fighting continues on Skyline Ridge. On 21 March NVA troops drove irregulars from another position on the western end of the ridge. Of nine major strong points on Skyline, four are now held by the communists.

Government forces are regrouping to launch a counterattack before the communists can use their toehold to cover the movement of troops and tanks from Sam Tong area. There are signs that tanks may already be approaching the ridge from the north. The communist positions on the western edge of the ridge also threaten the irregulars holding blocking positions on the Nam Ngum.

The irregulars who have been defending Skyline Ridge during the week-long battle have fought with considerable tenacity, but it seems questionable that they can hold on indefinitely without major reinforcements. Although Vang Pao is trying to move two fresh battalions into the area, heavy enemy fire has thus far prevented them from landing at the Long Tieng airstrip.

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<sup>47</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: Heavy fighting is continuing on Skyline Ridge, 03/21/72.



CIA 03/21/72 map of the Long Tieng situation.

*The communists have also paid a heavy price in the protracted fighting."* <sup>48</sup>

*"Irregulars temporarily reoccupied two positions on the western end of [Skyline] on 22 March but were forced back by enemy mortar and artillery fire. Government artillery fire and air strikes forced the communists to withdraw from their positions on the center of the ridge, but these have not been reoccupied by the irregulars.*

*[Following a rest and refit in Thailand], over 600 fresh government reinforcements [Thai Regiments BC-601A and 602A] arrived in Long Tieng on 22 March. This force should bolster the morale of the irregulars defending the base and increase Vang Pao's flexibility in organizing his defenses and launching counterattacks. Some 550 [Thai] troops have also arrived from the Sam Tong area, but many of these presumably will need some rest before returning to combat."* <sup>49</sup>

When Jackrabbit, Tiger Mobile, Telstar, Poppy, Rocket Mobile, and Whip reported TIC and incoming fire, Raven FACs 24, 21, 27, and 29 supported the TICs.

At the time Cricket control departed his assigned orbit in preparation for a hand off of airborne control to Alleycat, enemy troops on Skyline Ridge held the CG, CC, CW, and CA pads.<sup>50</sup>

With timing a key element before the enemy could consolidate its gains and proceed with plans to clear the Long Tieng Valley, the recently arrived Thai battalions, supported by two others, commenced a counterattack on selected Skyline positions considered significant to the battle. During the process, Charlie Bravo (FAG Ringer), a former position shielding

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<sup>48</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 03/22/72.

<sup>49</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: North Vietnamese and government forces continue to struggle for control of Skyline Ridge, 03/23/72.

<sup>50</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 03/22/72.

the road junction between Sam Tong and Long Tieng was recaptured.

Most American and Thai principals strongly suspected that enemy tanks would precede any major attack into Long Tieng proper. Looking ahead, Customer Thai advisor Hardnose, cognizant of the destruction that less than a handful of tanks did to Thai defense bunkers and personnel on the Sam Tong perimeter, arranged to have M-19 anti-tank mines and an installation team delivered to the Alternate. Soon after arrival a helicopter crew ferried the items and technical personnel to Charlie Bravo landing zone. Mines were implanted along the road at night, close to the CB position. <sup>51</sup> On Thursday, Ringer, Jackrabbit, Poppy and Tiger Mobile reported TIC and incoming fire. <sup>52</sup>

Following the two days of UH-34D ground school, between the 21st and 22nd, I remained at the airfield all afternoon without cranking a blade.

Apparently, the reverting issue was still being contested and assessed by FEPA and local management. Early on Friday the 24th, I was again flying Twinpacs. Mike Lappiere, Flight Mechanic Tom Neis, and I ferried Papa Hotel Delta to Long Tieng for a day on the frontline. During a long day supplying the ongoing operation in and around the area, amid haze and foul weather condition, we participated in one Special Mission on Skyline. The work load was so heavy that we did not leave The Alternate until well into the twilight hour. Arriving at Wattay Airport after dark, we experienced maintenance problems. Since it was too late for assistance from Udorn, I ate dinner and

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<sup>51</sup> Ken Conboy, 338-339.  
Jim Parker.

<sup>52</sup> Jim Parker ABCCC Reports, 03/23/72.



caught a ride home on Caribou 392 (nine plus thirty-five, forty sorties).

Cowhide (Witayote at CT), Lulu-02, and Shamrock reported TIC with incoming fire. LS-20A also reported sporadic incoming fire. Raven FACs 28, 29, 27, 23, and 24 flew in support. Weather remained marginal until 1100 hours, when it became totally unworkable for air strikes.<sup>53</sup> I was scheduled to standby at home on the 25th.

The next day, when Rocket Mobile reported incoming and heavy TIC on his Skyline position, Raven-51 and T-28 pilots provided air support.<sup>54</sup>

*"The North Vietnamese are holding their positions on Skyline Ridge despite persistent government attacks. Vang Pao's irregulars this weekend assaulted enemy positions on the western and central portions of the ridge, but were turned back by enemy fire.*

*...accurate air strikes and artillery fire have caused heavy enemy casualties...the irregulars have not suffered heavily in their attacks."*<sup>55</sup>

Early on 27 March, Dave Cox, Leveriza, and I deadheaded to The Alternate on C-7A 441 to crew Papa Hotel Echo. Following a Customer briefing and preflight, we continued the landing zone and artillery base supply process that included some medical evacuations to the Site-272 hospital. During the day we experienced two compressor stalls that necessitated our return

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<sup>53</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 03/24/72.

<sup>54</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 03/26/72.

<sup>55</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 03/27/72.

to Udorn after dark (nine plus forty-five, thirty sorties).<sup>56</sup>

Lulu-01 reported TIC and incoming fire to ABCCC control, but adverse weather hampered air operations until 1300 hours.<sup>57</sup>

Tuesday morning, after more than two hours FCF of Papa Hotel Charlie, Cox, Velasquez, and I returned to The Alternate. Weather prevented Allied air strikes at Skyline, but as was standard for helicopters, we were able to work locally during almost all but the worst weather. Just prior to dark we repositioned northwest to Luang Prabang for work at Bouam Long the next day. (Eight plus ten, thirty sorties, one plus ten night).

The Raven-24 FAC supported brief TICs at Red Cow and Hot Plate.<sup>58</sup>

*"Sharp fighting was reported in several sections of the country over the weekend, with the most important actions taking place near Luang Prabang. Morale among military leaders in [Luang Prabang] appeared to be low. The Army Chief of Staff, General Ouan[e], expressed doubt that the government could redress recent communist gains in the capital area despite growing reinforcements from other military regions. [There was speculation that this move was an apparent enemy diversion attempt to divert some SGU forces from the southern Military Regions in order to ensure smoother troop and vehicle transition along the Trails to South Vietnam to support the Easter Offensive.]*

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<sup>56</sup> Compressor stalls were frustrating. Despite the Maintenance Department's extensive investigation and considerable information gathered relating to compressor stalls, the problem persisted. Relating to intermittent stalls, Bob Davis' policy of working the complete day and returning to Udorn at the end of the day continued. Bill Leary 1972 Notes: FIC Connor: On the 28th, 441 was hit by a 12.7mm round in the right wing while dropping cargo at 600 feet over the Charlie Tango pad.

<sup>57</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 03/27/72.

<sup>58</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Report for 03/28/72.

*The King apparently believes that the NVA intend a siege of [Luang Prabang] and is concerned about arranging airdrops of food and supplies. [As during similar flaps] he is determined to stay at the capital.*

*[Military] analysts were in a quandary as to what the enemy action around Luang Prabang hoped to achieve; perhaps suppress airfield military activity. A concerted siege of Luang Prabang seemed unlikely from past restraint shown by the enemy against large population centers and particularly the royal capital."* <sup>59</sup>

The next morning, we departed the hostel early in the duty Jeep for the Lima-54 airfield. After conducting a detailed preflight to ascertain that there had been no overnight sabotage on our machine by spies or infiltrators, we launched for Site-32.

There we helped support the waning stages of Vang Pao's attempt to divert enemy from the battle at Long Tieng. The two-pronged operation had moved close to both the northern and eastern goals (Nong Pet and Phong Savan). Without much supporting air, and opposed by local Pathet Lao and Vietnamese units, the operation stalled and was eventually terminated.

With an operation in the hills to the south overlooking Nong Pet, where we had developed pads since the first Plain of Jars operation in 1969, and Site-32's Meo warlord, Cher Pao Moua's, more than forty-five landing zones in and around Bouam Long, there was more than enough work to keep us busy. To expedite our efforts, willing local hands helped with refueling our thirsty bird and loading tasks. During the day, what we came to expect as inevitable happened—a compressor stall, which according to standing SOPs, headed us for home (twenty-five

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<sup>59</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 03/29/72.



sorties, nine plus forty-two, but much of this logged flight time was ferry from Luang Prabang to LS-32 and to Udorn).

### **THE FINAL STAGES OF THE ENEMY CAMPAIGN ZULU**

As described by Vietnamese military historians, "Ban Nam Cha [the forward portion of Skyline Drive and the immediate ridgeline] was a powerful enemy defensive area with a network of integrated, solidly fortified defensive positions held by one battalion of Vang Pao's troops. To carry out the Campaign Command Headquarters' order to attack Nam Cha, the 165th Regiment reinforced by one tank platoon of T-34 tanks was assigned responsibility for the primary attack sector, while the 1st Battalion 335th Regiment was given responsibility for the second attack sector.

Savage fighting raged throughout the day on 29 March. By 2400 hours, the 165th Regiment was only able to capture five of the seven hillcrests in the Nam Cha area. Because of inadequate coordination between the two attack sectors and because we failed to tightly surround the enemy, the enemy forces were able to fall back, consolidate its hold on high point 1438 and block our advance.

[In a coordinated attack] on 29 March the 148th Regiment attacked Phu Moc and also ran into problems. After one day of fighting, our troops still had not been able to open a breach in the enemy's perimeter so that we could launch our assault. The enemy massed ferocious fire-power against our forward assault force, inflicting heavy casualties on our soldiers. [As a result], the regiment was forced to temporarily suspend the attack and pull back to the rear to regroup.

On 2 April, enemy reinforcements [Thai BC-604] together with the enemy forces on High Point 1438 launched a counterattack that recaptured the Nam Cha area.

*The failure of these two attacks meant that the Campaign Command Headquarters goal of inflicting heavy losses on enemy forces was no longer attainable. This meant that the opportunity for our forces to advance had disappeared. The Campaign Headquarters concluded that we no longer had a chance of success. [Therefore], after securing the High Command's approval, the Campaign headquarters realigned its forces and shifted over to the defensive, digging in to defend the intermediate line and the [PDJ]. On 6 April 1972 the Plain of Jars-Long Tieng offensive campaign, which had lasted for almost four months came to an end."* <sup>60</sup>

The adverse weather hampering air operations on the long ridge above the Long Tieng Valley failed to prevent enemy attacks. Thai FAGs Witayote-Cowhide, Tiger Mobile, Lulu-01, and Sangar-Hammer reported TIC and incoming. Raven FACs 24 and 22 and T-28 pilots provided support. Raven-21 supported Cowhide, Raven-27 and A-1 pilot of Hobo 24 supported Lulu-01.

When The Alternate also incurred heavy incoming fire, Raven-24 and gunship Stinger-21 supported the site. <sup>61</sup>

That night, after enemy engineers removed most of the mines the Thai team had imbedded in sections of the road from Sam Tong, three or more Soviet style T-34 tank crews rumbled noisily toward the Skyline Road junction. While Hardnose monitored the situation, a Spectre gunship entered the equation and acquired a heat signature on the onboard infrared electronics screen. However, unable to visually observe a specific tank because of extensive cloud cover and smoke, as per strict USAF rules of engagement (ROE), the crew was not permitted to fire with the devastating cannon and mini-gun assets at their disposal.

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<sup>60</sup> Vietnamese history of the Lao war as translated by Merle Pribbenow.

<sup>61</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 03/29/72.

Despite Ingham's explanation that there were no government forces present in the tank area, and ardent pleas to shoot, the pilot in command still refused help.

The tanks continued in column until reaching a point a hundred yards forward of the Charlie Bravo pad. After a 75mm recoilless rifle crew fired one round at a tank, the gun and crew were immediately silenced. As the tanks proceeded toward the main position, terrified Thai defenders began abandoning the Charlie Bravo (CB) site. Fortunately, the lead T-34 ran over a mine that shredded the treads. It was stopped. The second armored vehicle attempted to swing around the disabled leader, but also contacted a mine that destroyed a tread. With the path blocked by the two monsters, and as another tank backed off and departed the field, gutsy 85mm gunners in the two forward tanks continued to fire their entire load of ammunition before departing downhill on foot toward their comrades.

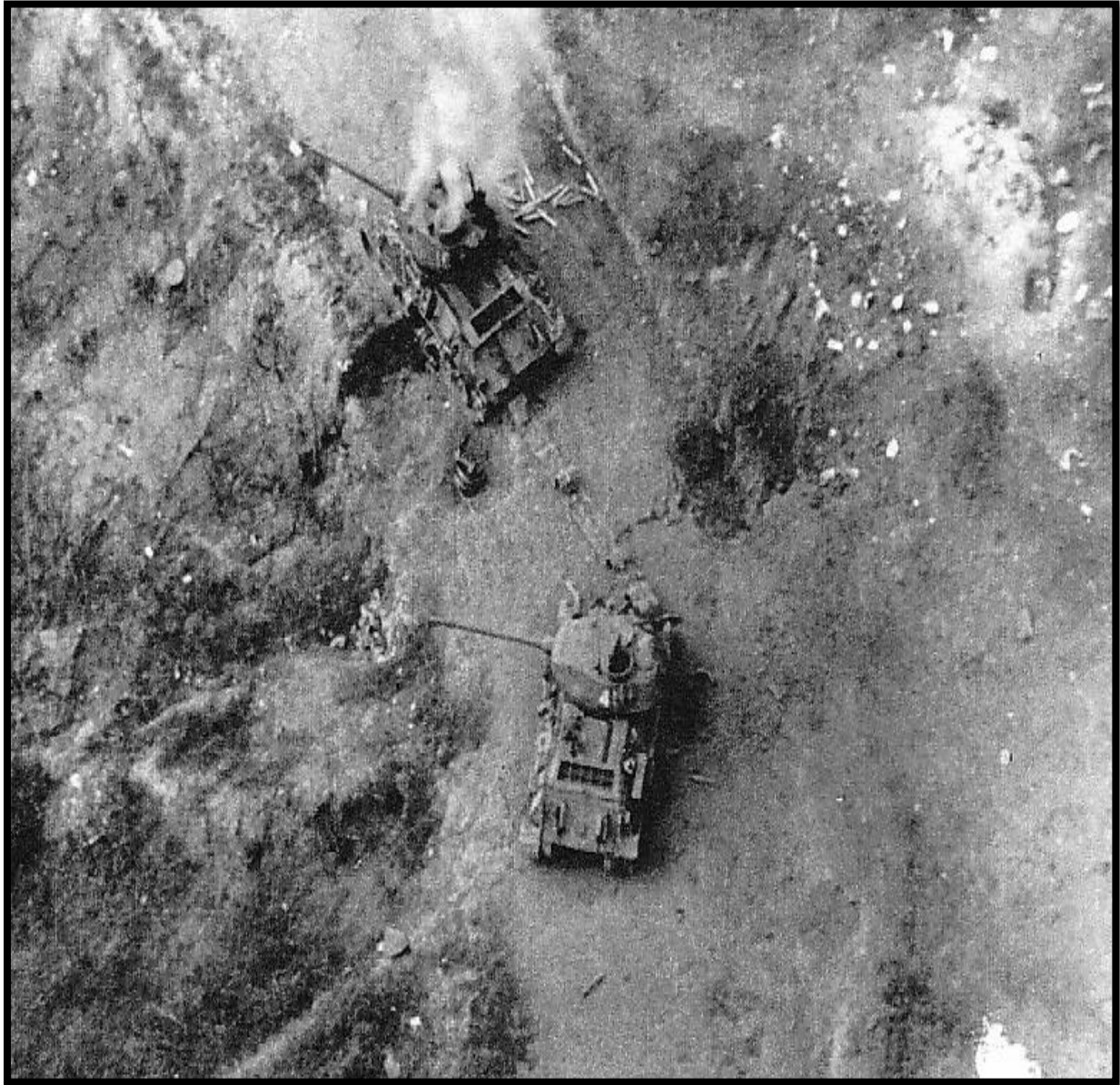
It had been a long night for Skyline defenders. After T-34 gunfire diminished and then ceased, Charlie Bravo defenders realized that the immediate threat was over and resumed their positions. With termination of the tank attack, personnel in the Long Tieng Valley lived to fight another day.

Not long after the failure of the tank attack, the chief of station at Vientiane anticipated another offensive maneuver from the sixteen Vietnamese infantry battalions, supporting armor, AAA, and artillery pieces to capture Long Tieng. But despite losing some positions, a final assault never occurred.<sup>62</sup>

I stood by at home on the 30th, while weather was considered unworkable in The Alternate area to accomplish visual

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<sup>62</sup> Bill Leary 1972 Notes: Interview with Thai Advisor Mike Ingham. Ken Conboy, 338-339. Jim Parker. Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 459.



Overhead view of two disabled Vietnamese-crewed Soviet type T-34 tanks on the Sam Tong-Long Tieng Road just below the Charlie Bravo and Charlie Echo defense positions on Skyline Ridge. Note the shell casings next to the still smoking tank.

Jim Parker, 68.

air strikes until 1230 hours. On Skyline Ridge Spike (Rabin), Tall Man, and Hammer reported incoming fire, as Raven-24 and 23 supported the positions. LS-20 received sporadic artillery fire, and one medevac took place on Skyline during the day. <sup>63</sup>

On the final day of March, with weather still restricting air operations, Thai battalions began moving along Skyline from both the east and west. Cowhide, Wildcat, and Booster reported TIC and incoming fire, as Raven-27, 22, and 23, along with RLAFF T-28s and Hobo 24 and 25, provided support.

LS-20A also reported incoming, which Venus battery crews addressed with counterfire. Friendly troops now controlled the CC and CG pads on western Skyline, while the enemy still held the central portion of the ridge. <sup>64</sup>

After spending the entire day standing-by at home, Friday was an FCF day working on Twinpacs Papa Hotel Charlie and then Papa Hotel Bravo.

### **BEN'S DAY IN THE SUN**

Almost all former Air America helicopter pilots still wandering the earth can narrate at least one or more stranger-than-fiction-story calculated to scintillate even the most jaded and doubting individual regarding feats, both negative and positive, of Air America personnel. However, of the myriad of rotorheads who flew for the Company in Laos from 1960-1974, Ben Van Etten marked the sole pilot to enjoy an enforced vacation in the unfriendly country of Burma, after becoming lost (or merely disoriented, in aviator parlance). Ben was working in northwestern Laos and was committed to landing in the socialist country due to a lack of fuel. As a result of the error, Ben

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<sup>63</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 03/30/72.

<sup>64</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 03/31/72.  
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 339.

became the brunt of bar talk, jokes, and received the pejorative moniker of Burma Ben. <sup>65</sup>

On the same day that Wayne Knight was wounded on Skyline Ridge, Captain Van Etten, First Officer BJ Ruck, and Flight Mechanic Jim Nakamoto were scheduled to ferry Hotel-70 to Pakse for a six-day RON. Their navigation task during the height of the smoky season, when forward visibility in the region was reduced to a mile or less, was somewhat alleviated by the requirement to drop off other helicopter crews in Savannakhet. After refueling at Lima-39, he could proceed south to Lima-11, using the Mekong River as reference (even during such limited horizontal visibility conditions, a pilot could normally observe the ground and check points by looking straight down or at slant range).

Ten minutes out of Savannakhet, Ben heard King SAR controller broadcast an urgent request in the blind over the UHF 243.0 frequency for any Air America helicopter crew in the area to assist in rescuing a downed airman. For various personal reasons, this appeal normally triggered almost universal participation. A downed airman could be any one of us at any time. Employing the "what goes around, comes around" philosophy, one could not continue to work while consciously aware that an American or fellow aviator of any nationality was in dire jeopardy.

Ben, who had already conducted two successful pilot rescues, indicated that he would be available after landing at Savannakhet and refueling. He was provided a discrete radio frequency for Sandy One, the on-scene commander.

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<sup>65</sup> For the complete Van Etten story, see Book 11, 1970. Van Etten was also called "Gentle Ben" by peers for reasons, inspired by a tame bear in a television series 1967-1969.

After launching and climbing to 3,000 feet, Ben contacted the Sandy-One A-1 pilot. He learned that a two-man OV-10 FAC crew, Nail-21 out of Nakhon Phanom had been downed to the east over a portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail system, near the Catcher's Mitt checkpoint, a particularly hot area. Van Etten was advised to proceed east, orbit short of Route-23, and await further instructions. <sup>66</sup>

While Ben approached the area, he overheard the Sandy One pilot talking to the downed airman. As enemy patrols were searching for him, in the narrow window of opportunity, timing now became an overriding consideration in the rescue attempt. Ben requested coordinates, and was somewhat relieved when the A-1 lead refused to provide these, adding that two HH-53 Jolly Green crews were inbound to conduct the rescue.

Soon the lead Jolly PIC checked in with an estimated time of arrival (ETA) of fifteen minutes. Within a short time, Sandy-One's wingman observed ground fire being directed at his leader and apprised him of the fact. Ben was fairly certain he was close to their position, but was unable to see anything because of the dense smoke.

Next, the two rescue ships found a questionable excuse to return to the Nakhon Phanom base. Aware that he was now the only game in town, Ben again asked for the downed airmen position. Again, Ben was put off, and informed that lead was making another area pass. It was an unwise decision, for the next transmission stated that his plane was hit and on fire.

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<sup>66</sup> Common in accounts of his many past events, Ben Van Etten modified his story slightly over the years. Ben's original statement was provided to the Author in 1995, when he was assigned as the Fifth Army training instructor pilot and advisor to the Louisiana National Guard at Lake Front Airport, New Orleans. At this time, he stated that Route-9 was the SAR point.

Ben knew the area and wanted the pilot to turn to 270 degrees and cross the road before punching out. This would help minimize a potential AAA threat and enhance an almost immediate retrieval process. The pilot, however, said he was heading south and bailing.

Since no visual sighting was obtained, Ben used Hotel-70's UHF homing equipment to obtain the position of the distressed A-1 pilot. The directional needle showed the stricken plane to be generally 080 degrees from the helicopter. Like the old West's Seventh Calvary, at this juncture Captains Bill Johnson and Dave Ankerberg arrived in an H-34 to assume a backup role for Hotel-70.

Ben's entire crew was in agreement to continue with the new SAR, so he descended to tree top level. Then, with his heart thumping wildly in his chest, he tore across the wide road, at or above maximum allowable speed (VNE), toward the original fix. The seconds necessary to cross death highway seemed like an eternity, but no groundfire was heard or observed.

The crew soon spotted fire and black petroleum smoke emanating from the crashed plane. Now the A-1 pilot, using his survival radio, called on the emergency frequency indicating that Ben was heading directly toward him.

SAR missions are rarely without risk anytime, and this proved no exception when the pilot was observed hanging in a tree. Despite attempts to hover over the tree, and Nakamoto's efforts to maneuver the hoist cable to the pilot, dense foliage and branches prevented contact with the pilot.

At this point, there was a large explosion above Hotel-70. Ben was not sure if the 37mm fire was directed at him or at Sandy-Two, who was in a tight orbit above him.

After the first rescue attempt failed, the Air Force pilot rappelled to the ground and moved toward an open area. While Ben



hovered overhead, and Jim lowered the cable, another explosion was heard.

Already low on fuel, the extraction had taken in excess of thirty minutes, and by the time the pilot was safely onboard, the low warning fuel light had been illuminated for several minutes.

Ben radioed King with the information that he had Sandy-One onboard, and had begun an egress of the area. King rogered the information and advised him not to directly cross the road, but head south toward Saravane. Unable to comply because of the low fuel state, a westerly route was the only option. After Ben cleared the AAA threat, the other helicopter crew joined on him. Together they discovered and landed in a suitable farmer's field, believed devoid of enemy influence. He had previously radioed Church Bell, Ken Hassel Air Operations Customer at Savannakhet, to have a barrel of 115/145 H-34 fuel delivered to his anticipated location.

While fueling the front tank, Ben apprised the A-1 pilot that since he had not been paid 10,000 dollars for his last rescue, he was going to take him to Pakse, where he would be turned over to the correct authority in order to receive the bonus. Of course, this was all a joke, derived from an ongoing myth, but the unknowing pilot, happy to be out of harm's way, had no issue with this reasoning.

Upon landing at Lima-11, the pilot was delivered to the Air Force representative. <sup>67</sup> Then Ben and Byron reported to Customer Jim Butler, "The Gray Fox," who most pilots considered straight

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<sup>67</sup> Captain Leon Lashomb later informed Van Etten that the A-1 pilot, incensed that the Jolly Green crews had failed to attempt rescuing him, refused to fly back to Nakhon Phanom with them.

in his briefings and current intelligence, and were informed that there was to be a mission on the Bolovens that afternoon. <sup>68</sup>

### **SOUTHERN MILITARY REGIONS**

During early 1972, the military situation throughout Laos' military regions was not encouraging. For several months, most action in Military Region Three was centered around Dong Hene (LS-54), a contested town on Route-9 between Moung Phalane and Seno (L-46). Depending on the pressure, the situation was very fluid, necessitating units and teams to move about the area.

On 23 January, east of Dong Hene, Blue Man reported TIC, and Raven-21 and RLAFF T-28 pilots out of Savannakhet supported him. At 1510 hours, Team Zero-8, nine miles north of Keng Kok, and south of Dong Hene reported TIC. Enemy forces were chasing the friendlies from a village. Raven-31, T-28s, A-1s, and fast movers expended ordnance in support.

On the 27th, Space reported an attack by fire and 122mm incoming at 0750 hours. Eight miles south-southeast of Dong Hene Brown Man reported TIC at 1004. A village twelve miles north of Dong Hene was hit by mortar fire. A Raven chased enemy forces away, but the village was left burning. Four trucks were destroyed and seven were damaged.

On 2 February, when Hillsboro, the daytime ABCCC control C-130, arrived on station to cover Military Region Three and Military Region Four, Brown Man had a TIC. Raven-33 reported the weather near Brown Man was not suitable for fast movers. When the weather cleared, Raven-33 worked T-28s against enemy concentrations in the area.

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<sup>68</sup> Captain Van Etten Interview at the Author's house 12/03/94. Ben Van Etten statement *Rescue* provided the Author during early 1995. Ben also submitted his story to the Air America website, 04/15/2000.

On the sixth, at 1143 hours, four miles east of Dong Hene and north of Route-9, Blue Man reported TIC. Raven-32 supported him, and casualties were evacuated by helicopter crews later in the day.

An armored Vietnamese battalion took Dong Hene, along with a government SGU unit staged east of the town, on 7 February.

Within three days Team BG-304 reported TICs, and was supported by the Raven-30 FAC. He reported a platoon size force of enemy in the area. Six tanks were reported in the Dong Hene area. There was no bomb damage assessment (BDA) reported.

### **COURTNEY**

While recuperating from a serious knee injury incurred during the Stergar/Byrne Hotel-39 crash on 3 September 1972 in Sedone Valley of Military Region Four, GM Case Officer Don Courtney was first reassigned to light duty tasks, and then to responsibility for the BG camp at LS-235, comprised of the local defense unit, small intelligence teams, and two reserve battalions. <sup>69</sup> He was still at the base in 1972 when most of the Lima-39 GMs were in Military Region Two helping Vang Pao retain Long Tieng, or in other regions. When the enemy conducted serious movements toward Dong Hene in late January, the two Site-235 reserve battalions were installed in defensive positions several miles west of Dong Hene in order to block advances along Route-9 to Seno.

Don had not flown as a passenger in a helicopter since the three-way hydraulic valve accident, and recalled his first three rides with trepidation. The first incident occurred while

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<sup>69</sup> Located northwest of Savannakhet, off the beaten path, this remote site was an original T-28 site for General Ma's T-28 operations. We also conducted road watch team Trail operations from this position.

extracting a small team with a H-34, when the main rotor blades contacted a tree limb. The aircraft flew without incident en route to home plate, but damage to a rotor tip cap created a disconcerting howling sound, like wind blowing over a hole in a flute. Although relatively innocuous, the event did nothing to bolster his morale or love of helicopters.

The next flight was even more memorable. An Army attaché (ARMA) requested to fly over the Dong Hene area in order to identify the make of an enemy tank reputedly put out of commission by air strikes. Don went along on the U.S. Army UH-1 Huey to first look at the tank, but to primarily inspect his reserve battalions.

The Huey pilot began descending as he approached the west side of Dong Hene, causing Don to feel apprehensive. Nearly overhead what was left of the town, tracer rounds began whizzing past the front, the sides, and above the helicopter. The Army crew in the cockpit adjusted their armor plate shields, slumped down in their seats and conducted a hard-right turn away from the ground fire. During the steep bank, Courtney stood up and took a photograph of the tank from the right cargo door. The T-34 tank was upside down minus a turret, but the shiny ring on which it turned was exposed. (During the heat of battle the attaché forgot to take a picture.)

While still airborne, no immediate damage was discernable to the helicopter from internal inspections and instrument checks. As they flew west to deposit him at the reserve battalion position, Don asked the crew, *"Have you guys ever been shot down?"* Both laughed. One said, *"Twice,"* and the other pilot answered, *"Six."* Then, in an attempt at comic relief, Courtney said, *"Well, let me out of this thing."*

Two hours after being dropped off, Don was onboard an H-34 headed to Savannakhet. Suddenly, the ship began jerking left and

right in sharp pulses. Unsure of the exact problem, the Captain indicated that he could not carry a passenger until the issue was resolved. Don was discharged at Seno, where he happily waited until a CASI Porter pilot arrived to ferry him home. The H-34 crew told him later that the problem was related to a loose bolt that moved around and lodged in places where it did not belong.

That same evening, Raven-30 pilot Jim Jaeger was celebrating in the American club. He had been working the Dong Hene area and was above and south of the Army ship when the fire commenced. He observed four 12.7mm guns lined up to the front of the approaching helicopter. All the weapons began firing at the same time. As the Huey pilot turned south, he flew over 300 enemy firing AK-47 rifles; it was truly amazing that there was no battle damage to the helicopter. Jim worked a flight of T-28 pilots equipped with napalm canisters. First, the four 12.7mm guns were destroyed, and then the enemy troops were addressed with resounding success. Having been his best day for BDA as a FAC, Jim enthusiastically uttered, *"I'm gonna troll with you guys again!"* Don shared the man's joy, but hoped he was never onboard an aircraft during similar circumstances. <sup>70</sup>

On the 14<sup>th</sup>, Brown Man reported TIC, which was supported by Raven-33 and T-28s. BDA was negative.

Two days later at 0300 hours, Hudson Bay, six miles north-northwest of Dong Hene, reported TIC and that he was withdrawing to the west. Dirty Man reported TIC and withdrew to a position

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<sup>70</sup> Don Courtney Emails, 03/07/16, 03/18/16.

O-1 Birdog: *"Don Roach was the chief of Ravens and T-28s for a time in Savannakhet. From these guys, I got damaged hard bombs destined for disposal because of stripped threads in the fuse hole. Finally had seven of them concealed in trees around LS-235, rigged to fire remotely when the [anticipated] attack came. It never came, and I wonder if those bombs are still up in the trees. My very own private Arc Light."*

three miles southwest of Dong Hene. Casualties were evacuated by helicopter.

On the 19th at 0010, ten miles north of Seno, Green Lion reported TIC and was supported by Raven-33. At 1405 Brown Man reported TIC and was supported by Raven-32, as fifteen trucks were destroyed and fifteen damaged.

The next day there was no ground activity reported. Twenty-eight trucks and seventeen more were damaged. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, Green Lion reported a TIC. The following day, Raven-30, 32, and T-28 drivers flew cover for casualty evacuations three miles southeast of Dong Hene, resulting in three trucks destroyed and twelve damaged.

Wednesday the 23rd, the weather was intermittently workable in Steel Tiger. Raven-32 supported TIC three miles south southwest of Dong Hene. At 1630 on the 24th, Young Man evacuated his casualties from two miles west of Dong Hene. Raven-33 and T-28 pilots flew cover. Four trucks were destroyed and three damaged.

On Friday, at 1210, Young Man reported TIC five miles north of Dong Hene. The following day, Brown Man reported an attack by fire and received support from Raven-33.

Team BI-19 had TIC seven miles northeast of Dong Hene.

The 27th Young Man, Brown Man, and Blue Man's forces converged on and attempted to recapture Dong Hene. The endeavor was supported by Raven-30, 32, and Lao T-28 pilots.

Fighting in areas south of Done Hene erupted in early March.

On 3 March, BC-201, six miles northeast of Keng Kok, received incoming from a position seven miles to the north. Raven-40 supported the battalion, employing T-28 pilots and fast movers.

Visibility was poor in the area on the 10th due to hazy conditions. BC-201 reported contact with a company-sized force.

To the east, Arc Light strikes in the Ban Karai Pass were successful.

Brown Man experienced TIC three miles southwest of Dong Hene, which was supported by Raven-30 and T-28 pilots. Two days later, starting at 1225 hours, Commando Raider had TIC for two hours four miles southwest of Dong Hene. Raven-33 supported with T-28s and fast movers.

On the 13th Commando Raider had TIC at 1805 hours. Enemy strength was estimated at two platoons. He was supported by Raven-30 and T-28 pilots. At 1630, BC-201 reported TIC ten miles south of Dong Hene.

On the 21<sup>st</sup>, Young Man had TIC at Commando Raider's position. Raven-30 broke the TIC with Lao T-28s at 0930 hours. Four trucks were destroyed and one was damaged. Weather was marginal with cloud and visibility restrictions on Wednesday the 22nd.

BC-201 had TIC seven miles south of Dong Hene from 1035 until 1100. Raven-30 supported them with T-28 assets. Jungle Lion and Han Souk reported TIC: Two trucks were destroyed and two damaged.

Friday the 24th, three miles south of Dong Hene, Blue Man, Red Man, and Young Man experienced TIC. Fighting continued from 0445 until 1400, as the friendly units moved west under the cover of Raven-33.

Team 19-BI had TIC during the morning of 30 March. When Hillsboro arrived on station early, the team had already experienced several casualties and it was still supported by Spooky-13. By the time the first Raven pilot arrived, the enemy had broken contact and withdrawn. Ravens worked the area around 19-BI all day and the area remained quiet.

Late on the 28th, while delivering six passengers to a ridgeline landing zone near Dong Hene, Captains Tim Woosley and Izzy Freedman were hit by a DK-82 round. The electronics compartment of the H-34 to the rear of the cabin section was impacted and began burning during the ensuing explosion. A successful autorotation was effected into a rice field. The crew and passengers safely exited the aircraft, while the ship was consumed by fire. Tony Byrne retrieved the survivors and ferried them to Savannakhet. <sup>71</sup>

### **ACTION IN MR-4**

On 21 January weather was workable except along the eastern ridges. Five miles north-northeast of Saravane, Raven FACs 44 and 45 discovered numerous trucks. Twenty-four were destroyed and two damaged.

The next day, the weather was workable, except again along the eastern ridges. There was no significant ground action, but six trucks were destroyed. The weather was workable in all areas on the 23rd.

On 3 February at 0645, Counter reported that his position was surrounded. Raven-40 flew in support but the weather was unworkable for strike flights. Raven-40 also supported Team-67 during a TIC along Route-23, two miles northwest of Ban Gnik.

On the 8th, as Raven-43 supported TIC near Ban Gnik, two trucks were destroyed and three damaged.

On the western Bolovens Plateau, leaving few other forces in the area, Neutralist forces had withdrawn from Ban Gnik toward Pakse during late January. Pakse Agency advisors and FAR

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<sup>71</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 02/09/72.  
ABCCC MR-4 Reports for the period.  
Bill Leary March 1972 Notes: Interview with Izzy Freedman.



staff immediately cobbled together a plan for three FAR battalions to seize the lost position.

On 11 February, under adverse weather conditions, the first load was delivered east of the objective by USAF Jolly Greens, and was met by fierce opposition. As a result, the operation was soon terminated.

At 1100 on the 26th, Team-73 reported an attack-by-fire south of Route-23, and were then supported by Ravens-43 and 46.

South of the Bolovens Plateau, three miles east of Route-231 and near Route-23, at 0800, Team-76 reported TIC, which was supported by Raven-46. Also, south of Route-23 toward Pakse, Team-73 reported TIC at 1200. They were supported by Raven FACs 43 and 46. Raven-46 worked U.S. Navy fast movers and Lao T-28s on a TIC two and a half miles east of Khong Sedone on Route-16. Four trucks were destroyed and three damaged.

Twenty-eight February at 0800 hours, Black Ant reported TIC eight miles southeast of Khong Sedone. The unit was supported by Raven-40. At 0930, Team-54 reported TIC five miles south-southwest of Khong Sedone. The team was supported by Raven-40 and T-28 pilots. Nine trucks were destroyed and three were damaged.

On 3 March, Black Ant, who was moving at 0615, reported over an hour of TIC southeast of Khong Sedone. He was supported by Raven-45 and T-28 pilots, who bombed and strafed fifty enemy troops in the open near Keng Nlao. A TIC at Khong Sedone was supported by Ravens-42 and 45 directing jets and T-28s.

Counter had TIC at 1700 hours, which was supported by Raven-45 and fast movers. Counter reported that his position was critical and he was expecting tank attacks. Ten trucks and four were damaged during the period.

By 6 March, under the threat of Vietnamese troops moving further west along Route-23 and enveloping their rear defense,

Thai FSB Lightning relocated to a point near the Route-23/231 junction. Sensing a kill, Vietnamese infantry, supported by T-34 tanks, rumbled toward Lao Ngam. In response to pressure and heavy concerted attacks, the Thai battalions pulled back toward Lightning battery.

Taking advantage of the deteriorating RLG situation, the enemy sent forces southwest toward Phou Batiene, the prominent mountain near Pakse. Reaching Route-23 and the intersection of a river on 9 March, they were soon met and stopped by a GM regiment. While a request was issued to principals in Military Region Three for reinforcements, this effort temporarily relieved the intended threat to Route-231.

On the 12th, in the Bolovens highland area, Black Bat reported a light TIC at kilometer-18 on Route-23. Team GM-41 had light TIC at Klick-21. With the assistance of T-28s and jets, Ravens supported BV-43 movement to Klick-21.

The following day along Route-23, starting at 1615 hours, Black Bat reported twenty-minute TIC at Klick-18. The enemy unit was estimated at platoon strength. Raven-40 FAC worked T-28s to suppress an attack by fire along Route-231. Six trucks were destroyed and six damaged.

The afternoon of the 24th at 1658 hours, Raven-41 declared an engine failure. Bulldog relayed the American FAC's position east of Phou Batiene (radio mountain) and west of the Route-23/231 junction. The Raven crew was rescued by the crew of Hotel-45.

By the third week of March, a much-diminished infantry GM from Whiskey-3 Savannakhet, which had endured a January pummeling on Skyline Ridge, arrived in Military Region Four by Air America fixed wing shuttles. The two battalions ascended the narrow macadam road in vehicles, where jungle growth tickled the roadsides, to FSB Lightning's position at the Route-23/231

intersection. Quickly disembarking, they began marching overland toward Lao Ngam. Encountering little opposition, after about two weeks, Lao Ngam was reached and held for three days. With this goal accomplished, the units began withdrawing to Pakse and repatriation to Military Region Three.

Enemy forces were spread out in both Military Region Three and Four. On 18 March, a FAR company was attacked, and incurred casualties, from a company of enemy troops at La Kheng Pheng (LS-159) on Route-13, well north of Pakse. The enemy withdrew and was spotted by a Raven FAC in a local village where they were stopping civilian vehicles and forcing the occupants into the village. Ravens flew over the ville all day and observed no indication that the enemy intended to leave. Friendly troops were introduced, and made contact under the cover of Raven-40 and T-28s. The troops requested air strikes, which the Raven FAC denied because of the proximity of civilians. The Military Region Four commanding general ordered the T-28s to strike, so the Raven pilot briefed the Lao pilots on the location of the villagers and enemy. Strikes were initiated and ground teams linked up on the east side. The Vietnamese still showed no immediate sign of leaving the area, but they departed during the night leaving thirty dead.

Despite the minor success achieved by the Savannakhet battalions, the enemy 9th Regiment still controlled much of Route-23. To break this hold, a Savannakhet GM was lifted to a landing zone south of Ban Gnik in early April, after which they moved toward the 9th's headquarters. Before long, supplies and other accruements of war were discovered. Contact was made, with resulting casualties. The pressure worked. Despite incurring considerable losses, after a week, radio intercepts revealed that the enemy had withdrawn nine miles to the east of Lao Ngam.

By mid-April, the operation was expanded to include three regiments. Two units would move east along Route-23 and a third north along Route-231 from Lao Ngam.

Upon entering Ban Gnik, the troops were appalled by the bodies littering the area from January fighting. This sight, fatigue from beating the brush for three weeks, and heavy casualties, caused GM-32 to withdraw toward Lao Ngam.

Except for a FAR unit remaining at Lao Ngam, the operation ended on the 24th. Except for a weak attempt by the FAR unit, the enemy 9th Regiment soon returned to the outskirts of Lao Ngam and chased the government troops five miles down the road. <sup>72</sup>

### **BEN RELINQUISHES HIS TIME IN THE BARREL**

The 18th continued as a fun-free, action-packed day. Three H-34 crews assembled in Jim Butler's Air Operations office for a briefing. The mission was one that had been repeated many times. Thai soldiers were on the move away from enemy shelling. with thirty wounded. When they reached a "safe" place for helicopter evacuation, they would call.

As senior man, Ben Van Etten was designated as flight leader. Should it become necessary, as per established SOPs, the third aircraft would act as SAR cover for the other two.

At that point, young Jim Lewis, a particularly aggressive Case Officer, with the call sign Sword, entered the room. No one was happy at his appearance, for Jim, cut from the same cloth as Kayak (George Bacon), had an adverse reputation with Air America crews, often telling them anything to accomplish his goals. Naturally, this modus operandi fomented a high degree of suspicion and distrust.

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<sup>72</sup> Ken Conboy, 340-341, 349.  
ABCCC Reports for the period.

The plan to retrieve the wounded was not complex. Sword would ride with Ben. After being dropped off at the landing pad, he would cull wounded troops, while Ben orbited overhead waiting to be called in. Continued trips depended on success of the initial pickup.

Late afternoon, fifteen minutes after launching, the group reached the landing zone. The correct signal panel, a white "O", was prominently displayed and numerous soldiers were evident in the area. Amid a storm of dust created by Hotel-70's downwash, Sword disembarked on the landing pad, and Ben returned to orbit with the other helicopters.

After five minutes, the first lift was ready. Ben again landed in a large cloud of dust that could be seen for a considerable distance. Expecting the worst, he maintained 2800 RPM and a small amount of collective pitch in case he had to depart quickly.

As litters and walking wounded were being loaded, an explosion was heard behind the aircraft. Ben elected to wait a few seconds before departing, to allow Sword time to climb into the cabin section.

The first shell had been a ranging round. The second was accurate, splashing in the middle of the troops crowded near the cabin door. Ben, who was looking down at the loading process noted: *"The concussion and noise from the impact were instantaneous, but the resulting mass of bodies being thrown in all directions seemed to happen in slow motion."*

Because of the heavy load and high-density altitude, it took some time to achieve translational lift and climb airspeed. During the transition phase, another round exploded under Hotel-70.

Sword Lewis had entered the cabin section with a nasty shrapnel wound. Outside the aircraft, a wounded Thai clutched

the right wheel strut. He was not the first person to attempt this extreme method of "getting out of Dodge," and most such events normally ended with unfortunate results for the clinger. But in this case the man would live to fight another day. Flight Mechanic Jim Nakamoto heroically leaned out the cabin door, seized the trooper's shirt, and dragged him inside. It was close to twilight when the group reached the Pakse airfield.

With two exciting incidents under their belts, Ben and his crew had skated that day. After securing in the parking area, small holes were noted in Hotel-70's fuselage, but nothing deemed serious. Before repairing to the Air America hostel for a couple of cool ones, they learned that an identical mission would continue the following morning after the Thais moved to a safer area. <sup>73</sup>

### **XIENG LOM IN MR-1**

Xieng Lom (LS-69, LS-274 in Military Region One), a twelve-mile valley oriented northeast-southwest in western Sayaboury Province, was always a strange and often dangerous place for helicopter pilots to work. Assigned to support the area after a RON at Nam Yu or Ban Houei Sai, the broad valley was often inundated with copious ground fog in the morning. <sup>74</sup> Of late, the region had been an especially hazardous place for airmen, especially after the enemy seized the Beng Valley, and Chinese laborers were in the final stages of completing a multi-year effort to create an all-weather road to the town of Pak Beng on the Mekong River. Moreover, during previous months a Lao C-47 and an Air America C-123 had been shot down, with the loss of

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<sup>73</sup> Continuation of Ben Van Etten's 18 March 1972 Statement.  
Ben Van Etten Interview at Author's house, 12/03/94.

<sup>74</sup> The Author recalls having to land on exposed hilltops overlooking the Xieng Lom Valley to wait for the sun to burn off lowland fog.

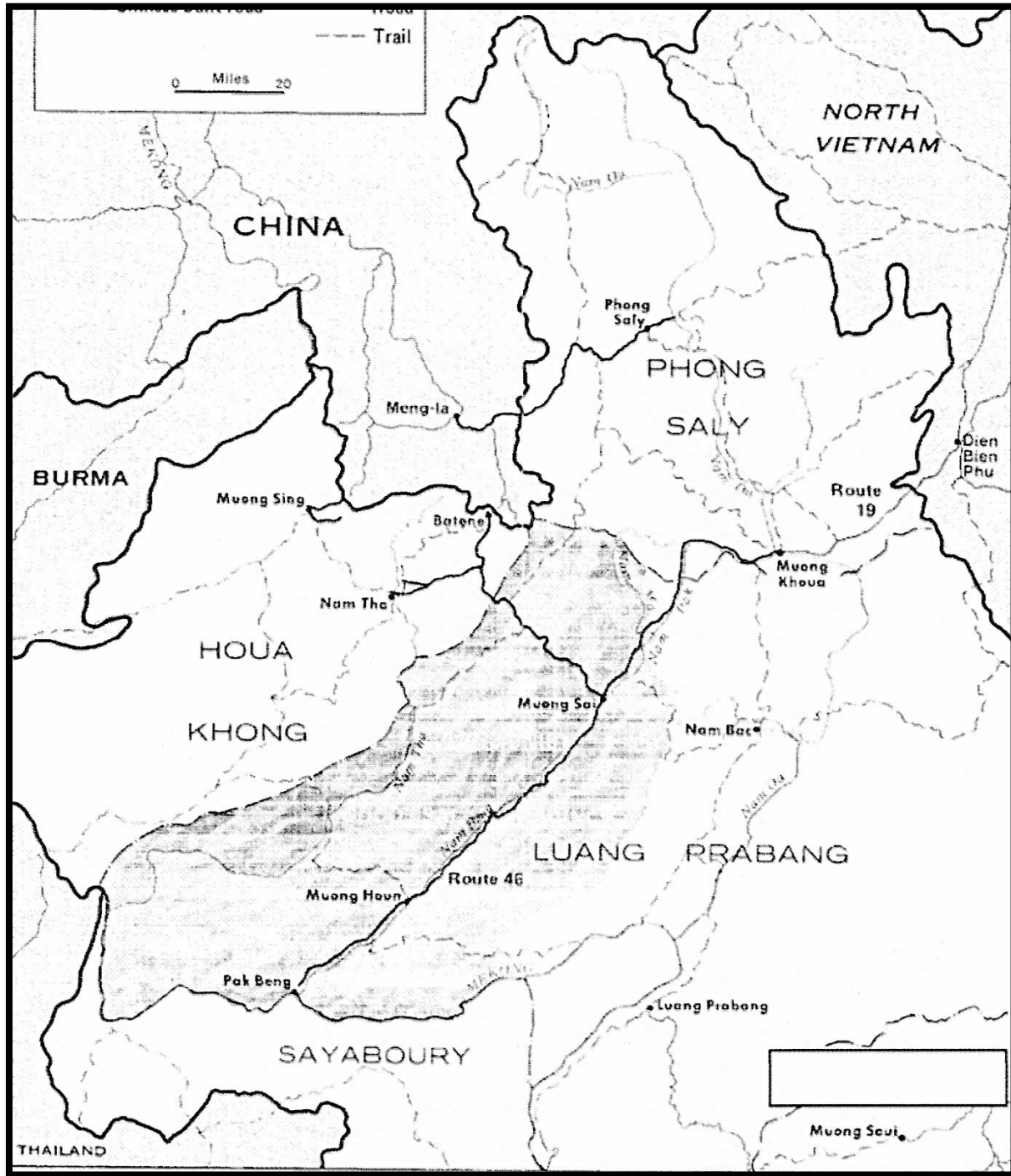
all the crew. During the same month, Jim Rhyne had been grievously wounded by large caliber AAA fire, while flying over the new road in a Volpar that was air dropping leaflets soliciting information about the missing C-123 crew.

With much of the terrain north and south of the Mekong River occupied by unfriendly types, parts of the province were used by Pathet Lao and Vietnamese as infiltration routes into Thailand's Nan Province, where they could indoctrinate, recruit, and organize tribal clans (Meo, Yao, and others) in communist methods. For this reason, the Thai government had increased Border Patrol Police (BPP) outposts along the common border. Sanctioned by a worried Royal Thai Government in Bangkok, elite Royal Lao Army (RLA) units had long been active in the Xieng Lom area, defending and training locals to ward off communist inroads into the region.

Most recently, in response to the more aggressive stance of hostiles across the river, units from Thai battalion BC-615, armed with two 75mm mountain pack howitzer guns, had taken up positions on hilltops south of the Mekong, and relatively close to the Chinese road terminus at Pak Beng. Deemed unacceptable, the enemy had been shelling one of the positions for a week.

Largely surrounded by natural terrain barriers of mountains and rivers and unfriendly types, the Xieng Lom Valley was akin to an island butting up against the northern border with Thailand's Nan Province. Pathet Lao inhabited northern mountains along the Mekong River. One ridge to the west was held by Pathet Lao.

An area of relative lawlessness, Chinese bandits and exiled Shan tribals proliferated throughout the area. Each group was intent on controlling his fiefdom. There was often conflict between opposing parties.



Chinese roadbuilding of Route-46 in the Military Region One Beng Valley northeast of Xieng Lom in Sayaboury Province.  
CIA Bulletin.



Captain Emmet Sullivan observed a major firefight one day twenty miles west at the base of a hill. Confusing the action, principals wore either loin clothes or uniforms. No one actually knew exactly what was going on, only that of the four different factions, all would indiscriminately fire at a helicopter.

Xieng Lom was also a prime source for opium traders to obtain trained military types in order to protect stashes and accompany the drug caravans. It was relatively easy to hire people, especially when the RLA paid a measly fifteen dollars per month, as opposed to the opium traders going wage of a hundred dollars.

Beginning on 16 March in Hotel-53, Captain Fred Fram and Gary Connolly had been conducting normal operations in the Ban Houei Sai-Xieng Lom area. Suponchai and another Thai pilot crewed Hotel-54. Emmet Sullivan worked as a solo pilot in Hotel-73.

Three days later, during the morning, Customer "Burr" Smith, also known by all as "Mister Clean" because of his bald head and uncanny likeness to the commercial detergent character, informed the crew that a northeast position in the hills near the Mekong, lately under siege, had been attacked the previous night and was surrounded by enemy.<sup>75</sup> Another position not far to the west was also threatened. Smith readily admitted that he did not believe landing at the first position was viable at the present time, and wanted the crews to retrieve troops from the second location. While waiting for T-28 pilots from Ban Houei Sai to arrive to provide cover for the operation, as senior pilot, Fram elected to split the crews in order to have a

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<sup>75</sup> Burr Smith had worked at the Phu Khao training and prisoner interrogation camp and as Vang Pao's advisor at Long Tieng for a long time before being assigned to Xieng Lom during June 1971.

bilingual Thai in each ship to communicate with ground troops in case of trouble.

Joining with the T-28 pilots over the landing zone, working under overcast and smoky conditions, H-34 crews conducted several shuttles between the site and Xieng Lom. Attesting to the dangerous conditions around the pad, during the final lift, the remaining soldiers climbed out of perimeter foxholes and literally crawled to Fram's helicopter.

Having completed the lifts by early afternoon, Smith approached the crews, wanting the pilots to evacuate WIAs at the first landing zone. The request was not well received, for the Tangos had departed for Ban Houei Sai to refuel and were not expected back before 1500 hours. Pressure to conduct the mission mounted. Without adhering to accepted SOPs, Fram and Connolly, who had already been notified to RTB Udorn that afternoon, which would require more than a two-hour flight, perhaps more in the adverse weather, elected to head for the pad. If the T-28 drivers arrived to link up, and a coordinated plan for the mission could be formed, then they would attempt the evacuation. If not, they would return to Xieng Lom, refuel, and head for Udorn. Escorted by the Thai pilots, the latter occurred. So far, replacement H-34 crews and an aircraft had not, and would not, arrive to replace Hotel-53 that day.

When assigned to relocate to Xieng Lom Emmet Sullivan and Fred Alor had been working the Houei Sai area delivering salt to landing zones. The downriver flight necessitated navigating with less than one-mile visibility.

After arrival, constituting the last game in town, Smith, who was under pressure from the Thai commander to get his men out, briefed Emmet on the wounded pickup. Emmet, who had already endured a near death experience in January in the Xieng Lom area with Tim Woosley, was leery of Burr Smith's briefings, which

were often badly skewed, misrepresented some aspects of the actual situation, and were calculated to appear feasible. Even though he was single pilot crewed, which violated SOP tenets, and T-28 escort was likely unavailable, for what could be considered a Special Mission, Emmet agreed to the mission.<sup>76</sup> His Flight Mechanic Alor concurred. Emmet then briefed the two Thai pilots, who volunteered to serve as his SAR aircraft, and would accompany him at 1,500 feet AGL.

With 12.7mm guns purportedly located on the southwest sheer slope, Emmet planned a Mekong River approach to the 3,800-foot pad from the north. He would intersect the Mekong upriver, turn west, and then remain masked by the sheer mountain walls, while flying down river through the narrow gorge that was only 300 yards wide at some locations. At the appropriate spot, he would conduct a right climbing turn and pop into the landing zone on the southeast side before the enemy could react. (This is what I called an up and over technique while making approaches to challenged Skyline pads.)

Given the assumed situation, Emmet's plan should have worked, but Smith's intelligence was faulty. The three 12.7mm guns had been relocated. On short final, when he was rounding out to land, all hell broke loose. The deadly rounds soared directly up at him and hit the machine at a right angle. He

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<sup>76</sup> During the midst of our intense SAR period (mid-1964 through mid-1965) and following Captain Billy Zeitler's August 1964 shoot down and hairy survival east of Lima Site 95, Special Mission SOPs were developed and constantly refined to protect crews and foster a reasonable chance of survival without jeopardizing the mission. In general, despite management's pessimism, these guidelines worked well when followed, and contributed to our success and longevity. Even the USAF wisely adopted some aspects of our SOPs for their own SAR missions.

Of course, special circumstances and Customer pressure sometimes warranted abrogation of SOPs, which resulted in unwanted consequences. However, presented a situation and known facts, it was always the individual Captain's final decision to attempt or defer a mission.

immediately smelled gasoline and feared the magnesium clad aircraft would blow up. After flying down the short ridgeline, he dove for the valley, even momentarily considering landing in the Mekong for survival.

Responding to Emmet's plight, Captain Suponchai radioed him, saying he was streaming a vapor trail. He wanted to know if he should make a Mayday call. The Thai pilots then called for T-28 support and trailed Hotel-73.

Still smelling copious fuel, Emmet maintained speed, fearing that if he slowed down the spewing fuel might contact the hot exhaust stacks and cause an explosion.

While heading toward Xieng Lom, he noted the cockpit was in complete disarray. Most instruments were either destroyed or non-functional. Two wires hung down from the damaged overhead circuit breaker panel. Attesting to the destruction the large caliber fire had wrought, he could look down thorough four holes in the floor and see the ground. Moreover, one tail rotor pedal was bent. On a personal level, he had numerous nicks and scratches bleeding throughout his body from the flying cockpit debris.

Barely able to see three ridges to the front because of the smoke and haze, Emmet continued to use dead reckoning for a mile toward Xieng Lom. Then he noticed that the fuel gage needle was rapidly going south. The gage, which originally registered 800 pounds of fuel, now showed almost nothing. He alerted Fred that they were not going to make Xieng Lom and to gather all their weapons and ammo.

Nearing the third ridge, with the ground looming upward, engine noise ceased from fuel starvation. Within six minutes of being hit, he had lost all fuel. He entered autorotation and looked for a landing spot. Notwithstanding the poor horizontal visibility, Emmet spied a likely area and landed on the side of

a hill. The auto to the tiny spot, where the tail wheel was twelve inches from the slope and main rotor blades three feet from the forward slopes, was one of the best he had ever accomplished.

After radioing Udorn on the Company high frequency net and talking to Dick Elder, who wanted to know how bad the aircraft had been hit and if it could be flown out, Emmet climbed to the ground. He hastily assessed battle damage and stopped at 173 holes. Hotel-73 was a mess, leaking oil, gasoline, and hydraulic fluid.

Then, as the Thai pilots arrived, a small enemy unit emerged on the top of the hill and began shooting. As bullets splattered the ground around Sullivan and Alor, lacking a place to land, Suponchai placed the right landing gear against the slope and excitedly shouted for them to board. Emmet was reluctant to leave his crippled ship, but the enemy was still shooting. In response, he backed up toward the hovering H-34, while blindly firing his Uzi toward the top of the hill. Thinking that he was accomplishing something, he attempted to reload the weapon, but his hands were shaking badly and he was too nervous to insert a magazine. At this point, Alor reached out, plucked him into Hotel-54, and the area was vacated.

Fifteen minutes south, cruising at altitude, Fram and Connolly had heard Emmet talking to Suponchai during the early phase of the mission. Hearing the Mayday report, Captain Fram reversed course to help, but by this time the drama was over. The crew of Hotel-73 had been retrieved and were on the way to Xieng Lom. The next day, after T-28 pilots prepped the area and temporarily silenced the AAA threat, Dave Kendall led a H-34 flight and evacuated the wounded Thais.

Danger continued, however, as Porter Captain FG Connelly, with two passengers was hit fifteen times by small arms fire in

the same location as Emmet's encounter. He incurred a minor wound to his large toe and landed at Xieng Lom.

Later that morning, H-34 crews shuttled part of a Thai battalion into the Hotel-73 site. The area was secured, but during the night an enemy patrol had conducted further damage to the ship. The Thai battalion was eventually directed northeast to relieve the besieged riverside positions.

(Hotel-73 was lifted back to Udorn by a CH-54 military Skyhook on 6 April 1972. However, considered too badly damaged to repair, Hotel-73 never flew again.)

Happy to be alive and appreciative of the Thai crew's recovery, whom he considered heroes for their participation, Emmet delivered a flock of chickens to a Buddhist temple in their honor. He also presented Fred Alor with a bottle of his favorite liquor.

For his part, perhaps feeling a bit cowed over the incident, Burr Smith sent Emmet several eight by ten black and white photos of the Hotel-73 site. <sup>77</sup>

### **THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN THEATER HEATS UP**

Toward the end of 1970, despite the American troop drawdown in Nam, the war was proceeding unsatisfactorily for the North Vietnamese in their effort to conquer the South. Failure of the 1968 offensive, and the second mini-TET offensive, had largely ruined the in-country Viet Cong infrastructure, and the

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<sup>77</sup> Emmet Sullivan 19 March 1972 account to the Author on 09/04/95. Sullivan claims the incident was partly his fault and partly Smith's. Let the reader decide...

Bill Leary 1972 Notes: Sullivan to Larry Sall, curator of the Air America archived at UDT Richardson, Texas.

Bill Leary 1972 Notes: Fred Fram account of the 19 March 1972 incident.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 319-320.

Cambodian incursion disrupted the normal logistic mechanism for troop support in southern South Vietnam. But it was the 1971 Lam Son 719 operation that convinced the North Vietnamese military leaders that a huge conventional offensive was necessary to once and for all achieve their goals. Therefore, early 1972 was selected as a timetable for incursion into South Vietnam with massive infantry and armored assets to bring the war to a conclusion. With typical Asian rationalization, even if military success was not achieved, the effort would certainly reap a positive position in negotiating a settlement and attaining other choice benefits.

Such a buildup of men and materiel did not go unnoticed to Western military planners. For months, Western and South Vietnamese forces were well aware that a large offensive was pending. The only question remained where and when it would occur. <sup>78</sup>

One poignant example of the impending sea change leading up to the enemy offensive was the appearance of additional surface to air missiles (SA-2) and radar-guided AAA guns in southwestern North Vietnam, and along the entire Lao logistic trail system. Portending a distinct threat to slow movers conducting trail interdiction, this led to a proposed installation of sensitive electronic equipment that would alert cockpit crews to enemy ground radar along with the direction of the threat. <sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 673-674, 676, 680.

<sup>79</sup> Earl Tilford, *The United States Air Force: Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia* (Washington D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1980) 122.

Author Note: As part of the S-58T night mission equipment package, this radar detecting gear was installed in the Twinpacs flying Special Project missions in high threat areas. Difficult to interpret, signals received often provided confusing information to those without sufficient experience with the gear.

The uncertainty of the offensive's timing was answered when the battle commenced at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) on 30 March. Five hundred T-34 and T54 Soviet type tanks, artillery, and 150,000 combat ready North Vietnamese troops eventually participated from several incursion points. To this number were added in-country Viet Cong units. <sup>80</sup>

What would later be labeled the Easter Offensive continued at various intensity levels for almost six months. Several American innovations largely curtailed the North Vietnamese ability to continue the conflict in the South, although enemy action reduced U.S. air interdiction on the Trails and much of Laos in general. Granted, some communist gains had been achieved, particularly at An Loc, but failure to attain their overall goals led North Vietnamese leaders to the realization that the war would drag on with huge losses in materiel and men, unless realistic negotiations were conducted in Paris. <sup>81</sup>

### **A MOMENTOUS SAR IN THE SOUTH**

Attesting to the proficiency of added enemy weaponry, and high threat to slow moving aircraft on the Trails, Spectre-13, an AC-130A gunship, was shot down by a surface-to-air missile (SAM) during the early morning hours of 29 March. Based at Ubon RTAFB, the gunship was engaging truck traffic eleven miles northwest of Tchepone area when hit. A MiGCAP F-4 pilot, who observed the incident, saw no parachutes in the pitch-black darkness, only a ball of flame when the plane struck the ground. SAR efforts continued for several days, but none of the fourteen crewmembers was identified or rescued. <sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> John Bowman, *Almanac*, 302.

<sup>81</sup> Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 706.

<sup>82</sup> Recovery of crew remains would have to wait for decades, when forensics experts were allowed to search for downed airmen in Laos.



Bad luck continued when another Specter gunship was downed:

*"On 31 March the SAR for Spectre-22 was concluded at 0930. All fifteen crewmembers were picked up. The Jolly Greens picked up thirteen and Air America picked up the other two. There were no serious injuries reported. During Moonbeam's time frame, area denial munitions validation for a 10 nautical mile radius around XC5729 and XC8022 was given. Both CBU and BLU-52 were utilized during the SAR within the designated area. Nail-18 was on-scene commander, however, Raven-40 personally spotted and supported 10 of the survivors and did an outstanding job in the rescue effort..."* <sup>83</sup>

March 30 marked the second of six gunships either damaged or destroyed during the month. While attacking Trail traffic in eastern Military Region Four (designated Steel Tiger), Spectre-22, a C-130E model, began receiving 57mm AAA at 2145 hours. <sup>84</sup> The AAA fire increased, and within fifteen minutes one round hit the underside of the nose section. A second shell impacted the right wing in an area between the number three and four engines. A substantial fire ensued and the captain alerted the fourteen members of his crew that they were cleared to bail out.

While the PIC wrestled to gain control of the wounded Hercules, the copilot and a 105mm gunner bailed out. About the same time, the pilot turned southwest and was flying "balls-to-the-wall" for safer territory. During the maneuver, he radioed the crew to momentarily delay leaving the ship. In the elapsed time between the issuance of the first bail alert until the second, crew members were separated by forty miles. The first two men landed near the Sihanouk Trail Route-16/96 road network,

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<sup>83</sup> ABCCC reports for the Spectre-22 SAR.

<sup>84</sup> As opposed to the C-130A vehicle killer, the C-130E carried a 105mm howitzer in addition to standard 20mm Vulcan cannon and 7.62 mini-guns.

and the supply center at Chavane. The second group was loosely concentrated relatively close to Saravane. Both places were considered denied areas.

The Mayday call immediately triggered a Theater wide response from military SAR assets from both Thailand and South Vietnam for an operation that soon became one of the largest rescue operations to date.

Designated as standby mission control ship, King-27 launched from Korat. Arriving on scene before 2400 hours, the King crew began the primary task of assembling forces, coordinating assets, and ascertaining the exact number of survivors. Already working on the latter, Spectre-01 and 20 (later 21) passed information regarding survivors to King. In order to communicate with and identify the total number of men on the ground, and remain cognizant of the current enemy situation, numerous night-equipped Nail FACs rotated in and out of the area throughout the long night and morning. Should night extractions be warranted, Sandy close air support and night recovery-equipped Jolly Green HH-53 helicopters were available and jet pilots provided cover. <sup>85</sup>

With numerous Air America H-34s and crews available in both Pakse and Savannakhet, as was normal procedure between the two organizations, a prearranged Air America resource was alerted and requested to contact crews to participate in the SAR. After work many Air America pilots, in order to relieve the daily accumulated stress, swilled beer, or ardently sought other

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<sup>85</sup> David Preston, Email submitted to Donna Inman, Internet, *The Loss of Spectre 22*. According to Preston, who was mission commander in King 27, the following aircraft were used in the rescue operation: seven Jolly Greens, eight Sandys, three Kings (one tanker, one reserve), eleven strike flights (seven expended ordnance), four B-66s, six F-105s, 13-14 Nail FAC's, three Ravens, three H-34s, four Spectre types, one Stormy (F-4 reconnaissance/FAC), and other support aircraft (numbering up to a hundred aircraft).

worldly pleasures. Understandably, few helicopter drivers were sober, some were already in bed, and others, for various reasons, refused to fly that night. Captain Al Cates, working at Pakse since the fourteenth, and Chuck Frady, recently returned to the Company after taking a sabbatical, had not indulged in drink and were available. Rounding out the crew of Hotel-45 was Flight Mechanic Jim Nakamoto. The crew was in the air before midnight.<sup>86</sup>

Solo Captain Bruce Jachens and his Filipino Flight Mechanic had been working Hotel-59 at Savannakhet for several days. It was quite late when a telephone call was received on the Customer crank type field phone at the Air America hostel, requesting volunteers to participate in the Air Force SAR. Bruce, who had already consumed a beer or two thought a moment, and then elected to launch.

Somewhere north of Pakse Bruce and Al joined. After contacting King on the appropriate radio frequency, they were advised to maintain strict radio silence and stand-by for further instructions. With nothing else to do, the pilots orbited the inky blackness. With barely any starlight available, and anticipating the worst scenario, they attempted to suppress their demons and anxiously monitored the unfolding saga.

Eventually with the western and eastern Spectre crew members accounted for, and no immediate threat to their

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<sup>86</sup> Except for ferry flights to Udorn, flying at night in a single engine H-34 was not considered a wise practice and not readily condoned by most pilots. A shoot down or maintenance failure, necessitating a forced landing would likely not be addressed by rescue forces until the next day, and if crew injuries were sustained...Sometimes emergency conditions arose that warranted such action, but this was very rare, particularly a SAR in a hostile area that could be deferred until daylight. One exception the Author recalled occurred during the early morning hours at Moung Soui. The night operation resulted in a crash and considerable damage to a Bell because of ground fog.

wellbeing, King elected to delay attempted rescues of the main group of thirteen men until false dawn, when light would provide a safer environment for the SAR teams to work. Al and Bruce were informed that their services would not be required and to RTB Pakse. This was fine with the two Air America crews, who repaired to the hostel in the early morning and retired.

Still excited from the mission, unable to obtain restful sleep at such a late hour, Bruce arose early and prepared to return to his normal work area at Lima-39. Before he could launch, the Customer advised that the Air Force again wanted H-34 crews for a rescue attempt.

Three Air America crews prepared to takeoff in the role of SAR (including Emmet Sullivan, somewhat recovered from his night of debauchery in town). Air force rescue operations were well under way in the area where most of the Spectre-22 men were closely located, and the least enemy threat existed. All thirteen crewmembers were retrieved without incident--the first man at 0830, the last at 1030 hours--by four Jolly Green crews under Sandy cover, and were delivered to Ubon RTAFB.

For unknown reasons--the Jolly's perhaps too busy, low on fuel, or the fact that the two crewmembers on the ground to the east were in a particularly hazardous area--Air America crews were selected for the eastern mission. In addition, Air America pilots were considered more knowledgeable as to terrain features, "safe" routes in and out of the area, were paid a phantom sum of 10,000 dollars for a successful pickup, and a

myriad of other reasons.<sup>87</sup>

Despite being separated from the main group, the two men to the east were well covered by F-4 pilots the previous night. Except for sounds of construction heard by gunner Jacobs to the east, the men on the ground noted very little enemy activity during the night.

Like with the first group, SAR activity moved into high gear after first light. Within thirty minutes of arrival, after spotting an individual near Sergeant Jacobs, Nail OV-10 pilots began striking areas around the gunner and dropped Gravel anti-personnel mines. After learning of the hammering noise to the east, they destroyed the structure. The strikes continued for over two hours. The Nails were replaced by Sandy pilots, who continued the bombing and strafing to establish and maintain a zone of safety around the gunner.

Halfway into the en route phase, Hotel-59's battery caught fire. Flight Mechanic Jimmy Nakamoto managed to extinguish the flames, but burned his hand in the process. Not deterred by the incident, the crew continued to march.

Nearing the area, contact was made with the SAR assets and the downed crewmen. Since the copilot was injured and nearest to the H-34s, in order to minimize time and effort, Al Cates easily made the first retrieval.

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<sup>87</sup> The tidy sum of first 1,500 and then 10,000 dollars cited for a successful Air America pilot rescue was first bandied about in Navy and Air Force squadrons sometime in 1964-1965 by a young Air Force briefing attaché (AIRA) attached to the Vientiane embassy, in order to boost morale of pilots when military SAR units were not yet available. The claim was manufactured and totally false but, like something erroneously entered in a computer was not easily deleted. The rumor persisted until war's end, was embellished, and is even believed today in some quarters. Smacking of a mercenary act, the inference that we placed monetary gain ahead of an airman's wellbeing grated on those of us who, time and again, placed our lives and machines in jeopardy to accomplish the difficult and hazardous work.

About 0930, while Bruce Jachens prepared to descend for the second man, Emmet in the SAR ship dragged the area and observed enemy troops sitting on top of a bunker. After climbing back to altitude, he advised the A-1E pilots of the sighting and then Bruce to make his approach from the southwest. <sup>88</sup>

Because of the gunner's location Jachens' task was considerably more difficult than what Cates encountered, and required more concentration and pilot technique. While Hotel-59 hovered out of ground effect toward a narrow ledge, A-1 drivers deposited smoke or gas between the downed man and the enemy. Adding to Bruce's problems was the danger of a billowing parachute. After this was resolved, Bruce moved over the man, nearly blowing him over with the rotor downwash. Familiar with the standard Air Force jungle penetrator, the man was unacquainted with the antiquated horse collar that was still part of the H-34 rescue equipment. After figuring out the mechanics of the hoist apparatus, he was soon established in the cargo compartment of Hotel-59. However, he was confused by the foreign looking man in the ship, and wondered who had picked him up with the unfamiliar, unmarked helicopter.

The Air America crews began the long trip back to Pakse with their valuable cargo: two more pluckees. En route, the Flight Mechanic gave Jacobs his canteen and a tuna fish sandwich Bruce had brought from the hostel kitchen.

Instead of continuing directly to Ubon, an interim stop was ordered at Lima-11 to check the condition of the injured copilot

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<sup>88</sup> Upon departure from the C-130, the airspeed far exceeded the 150 knots recommended for bailout. Egress points were also different, the gunner leaping off the open rear ramp and the copilot a less advantageous port. Moreover, any bailout from an aircraft is chancy from the aspect of landing in harsh jungle terrain-trees, rocks, uneven land, and so forth. Such contact was not kind to the soft tissues of the human body.

at the local hospital. The H-34 pilots repositioned for fuel and awaited orders for the day's work.

Within a relatively short time, the men were on the way across the river to Ubon in a Jolly Green helicopter. At this time the gunner learned it had been Air America personnel who rescued them. They landed after 1200 hours, ending what had been the largest successful rescue in the history of the long war.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Robert Jacobs, *A Night to Remember: "Spectre 22" Rescue*, originally recorded in detail early April 1972.

Davis Preston, *The Loss of Spectre 22*.

*Pacific Stars and Stripes*, Fifteen Gunship men Rescued from Southern Laos, 04/03/72.

Al Cates 02/29/96 phone call to the Author regarding the Spectre-22 incident.

Al Cates Email, 03/10/98.

Al Cates, *The Easter Egg Hunt From the Air America Perspective*, Article appearing in the *Air America Log*.

Emmet Sullivan, Interview 08/29/95. Emmet's account and participation in the rescue conflicts somewhat with Cates' recollection.

**T**he see-saw battle for control of Skyline Ridge continued, as neither side was willing to relinquish hard won gains.

Early on the first day of April, Mike Lappiere, Flight Mechanic Gary Gentz, and I drove Papa Hotel Charlie to Long Tieng. Thai units encroached the ridge from the east and west, and with fierce battles underway to recapture the central portion, there was a lot of work for us helicopter crews (eleven and a half hours, forty sorties).

We landed at Udorn prior to dark, but a test flight of Papa Hotel Bravo for Special Project work awaited me. This kept me occupied until nine o'clock. By then, I had exceeded normal crew duty time. According to flight time-duty regulations the Company and FEPA were attempting to emulate, this necessitated a full day of rest from inclusion on the schedule.

Wayne Knight also went upcountry on the first with First Officer Ron Zappardino in Papa Foxtrot Gulf, and was assigned work at LS-32. In addition to supplying the artillery-scarred hill mass defensive positions, they supported the final days of the diversion operation in the hills north of Nong Pet.

After almost ten hours, they terminated at Luang Prabang and RON in order to position for the next day's work at Bouam Long. The crew continued this process until the third, when they recovered at Wattay Airport for the night. <sup>1</sup>

By now, the enemy was preparing to withdraw:

*"The rainy season has begun. Thieng, our platoon commander, says that since the rains have started, we will have to retreat.*

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Knight flight time reports for April 1972. These will be recorded, but not footnoted.



*That is how things are on the [PDJ] battlefield. Only during the dry season can we transport supplies and attack the enemy. But during the rainy season, we have to withdraw and keep withdrawing..."* <sup>2</sup>

Scratch Kanach, Phil Velasquez, and I ferried Papa Hotel Bravo to Long Tieng on the 3rd. It was the first time I had flown with Scratch in some time, although we had shared other periodic upcountry route checks to satisfy Company requirements (nine plus fifteen; thirty sorties). <sup>3</sup>

Ringer (Thirdsak, located at Charlie Bravo) and Cowhide (Witayote) reported ground assaults on their positions. Raven-24 and 28 directed T-28 pilots supporting the pads. Telstar also reported a ground assault. Booster, Peacock, Hercules FSB, Venus FSB, and LS-20A reported limited incoming fire. <sup>4</sup>

We recovered at Wattay Airport, and Scratch returned to Udorn. In keeping with management policy to keep a ship in the field, extend our upcountry working day, and reduce ferry time by an hour, I RON at the Apollo Hotel.

Tuesday morning, after a short weather hold, Stan Thompson, Phil Velasquez, and I ferried Bravo to The Alternate. Wayne Knight, Wayne Lannin in Bell PFG, and other helicopter crews also made their way a hundred miles north.

Since marginal weather confronted us, we only managed to fly five and a half hours (thirty sorties), the average time for other pilots that day. Despite the adverse conditions, we

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<sup>2</sup> Xuandao Daily Diary, 04/02/72.

<sup>3</sup> I have no definite knowledge, but perhaps Scratch Kanach was evaluating me as a Special Project candidate. Without actually knowing what all the equipment was for, simply by conducting test flights and osmosis, I was intimately associated with the advanced electronic equipment installed in the Twinpac, like LORAN-C.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Parker ABCCC Reports for 04/03/72.

participated in a Special Mission north of Route-4 in connection with the termination of Vang Pao's second diversion.

At 1105 hours, a Lao T-28 crashed just short of the Site-72 strip. No parachutes were observed, and Dragon Control later confirmed both crewmembers were killed. <sup>5</sup> At the end of the day, we terminated at Vientiane and RON with numerous other crews.

On the 5th, taking advantage of much improved local weather conditions, Thompsen, Velasquez, and I managed to fly close to eleven hours (forty sorties). We had to work carefully around Venus artillery barrages on Charlie Alpha and Charlie Whiskey to support the two Thai battalions' movement toward the center of Skyline. Countered by heavy enemy fire, the attempt was not successful and necessitated intermittent Skyline Roulette for Hardnose. We repositioned to Luang Prabang by dark for work at Bouam Long the following morning.

### **THE END OF THE SECOND BATTLE FOR SKYLINE AND LONG TIENG**

Yet unknown to us, the major enemy dry season offensive was over, but considerable danger remained for combatants and aircrews. The battle for Skyline continued for a time, while hard core Vietnamese units were tasked to remain in place and die to maintain cover for the main forces withdrawing north.

*"The attack on Sam Tong has ended. Only the 335th Regiment has been left behind to defend Phu Pha Sai, while everyone else is pulling back because there is no supply route now, so there is no rice or ammunition."* <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Parker ABCCC Report for 04/04/72.

<sup>6</sup> Xuandao Diary for Wednesday 04/05/72. Because of the requirement for every available aircraft to counter the enemy offensive in South Vietnam and bombing in the North, enemy forces slowly departing the Long Tieng area had little to contest the movement.

"On 6 April 1972 Campaign Z, the [lengthy] offensive against enemy forces in the Plain of Jars-Long Tieng areas ended. During the course of the entire campaign, joint Vietnamese-Lao forces had eliminated more than 7,000 enemy troops (including 3,300 Thai troops) from the field of battle, had captured 1,137 prisoners, had shot down and/or destroyed 143 aircraft of all types, and had captured 30 artillery pieces, 106 mortars, and thousands of infantry weapons. The campaign had accomplished the mission set for it, recapturing the strategically important [PDJ] and the enemy's intermediate defense line. Moung Soui had [been] liberated [along with] a number of areas from Sala Phu Khoun, Kiou Ka Cham, Ban Na and an area along Route-13 with a total of almost 10,000 civilian residents." <sup>7</sup>

"The Plaine of Jars-Long Tieng offensive campaign won a victory of important strategic significance. It dealt a heavy blow to the American scheme of using Thai mercenary soldiers as the core force to, alongside [Vang Pao's] special army troops and Lao puppet army troops, to seize and occupy the Laotian liberated zone, and dealt the Thai puppet army troops a blow from which they could not recover.

The campaign's victory created a new situation in which the balance of forces favored the Lao revolution, and it lured the enemy's main forces to concentrate in the Plain of Jars-Long Tieng [area], thereby creating conditions that allowed us and our Lao allies to step up our operations in other sectors and liberate many large areas.

In terms of campaign tactics, the outstanding feature of the offensive campaign was that from the very start of the

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<sup>7</sup> History of the 335th, 766th, and 866th Vietnamese Volunteer Army Groups...researched and translated into English by linguist Merle Pribbenow, and provided to the Author by Robert Sander.

*campaign we made maximum use of the elements of secrecy and surprise to launch simultaneous attacks in all sectors. Using massed combined arms tactics, our attacks caused the enemy's forces to quickly disintegrate. As a result, in just four days, we had completed our assigned mission and brought Phase 1 of the campaign to an end. This created an important transformation in the balance of forces between the two sides, which provided the basis for the campaign's future development.*

*The campaign was also a success in terms of its tactical guidance. Each unit closely combined attacks with blocking operations, deep penetration assaults surrounding and dividing the enemy's forces in order to annihilate the enemy's troops. The success in our tactical guidance helped to defeat the enemy's tactics of falling back and consolidating, blocking our attacks, and secretly infiltrating to attack our rear, thereby enabling the Campaign Headquarters to constantly maintain the initiative in commanding and controlling the campaign.*

*...After the campaign ended, the 316th Division's 148th and 174th Regiments, the 335th and 866th Independent Regiment, the 27th and 41st Sapper Battalions, the 242nd Artillery Battalion, two 37mm AAA battalions, two anti-aircraft machinegun battalions, one tank battalion, and the 15th and 25th Engineer Battalions were assigned to conduct the Plain of Jars-Xieng Khouang-Moung Soui Defensive Campaign. Lao revolutionary armed forces [Pathet Lao and Deuanist Neutralists] participating in this defensive campaign totaled seven main force army battalions, one tank company, one battery of towed field artillery guns, one battery of man-portable artillery guns, two anti-aircraft machinegun batteries, one engineer company, four local force companies, and local guerrillas.*

*This was a defensive campaign using rather large forces that was designed to defeat the enemy's land-grabbing offensive*

during the 1972 rainy season, to protect and hold the liberated zone, to maintain our strategic posture in northern Laos, and to protect the right flank of Tri Thien and northern Central Highlands of our 1972 [the Easter Offensive] strategic offensive in South Vietnam to allow these campaigns to advance and secure victory." <sup>8</sup>

As AIRA air liaison officer at Long Tieng, Major Jesse Scott later observed:

"...when the [NVA] invasion of South Vietnam started, air assets dried up. But Vang Pao seemed to understand. He realized there were larger problems than his. We were fighting the same enemy, and he didn't seem to mind...the enemy did pull one division [elements of the 312th Division] back off of us and sent it south...

We got some early rains, for about a week and a half which [was] too early for the rainy season. Their new road (Route-54)...got muddy, washed away and trapped one of their 130mm guns. That plus their planned invasion of South Vietnam, I think expedited their pullback from Long Tieng and so effectively the pressure was off Long Tieng at that time.

They were very coy [regarding] this withdrawal. They continued to walk troops during the day down the road which would give us the indication...that possibly they were pulling back. But their radio transmissions held up. There was no decrease in message traffic...so they probably had been gone two weeks before we actually sensed it...

A combination of friendly intelligence and helicopter capability was employed to rapidly deploy troops out of harm's

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<sup>8</sup> Ho Kham, North Vietnamese Military History in Laos.  
Author Note: Granted, Phase One of the Zulu Campaign was a highly successful operation, but it appears that some rationalization entered Vietnamese military history in the Phase Two battle for Long Tieng, which was not equally successful.



Irregular troops defending the Long Tieng complex.

way. One tactic devised by talented people at Long Tieng kept troops safe from human wave assaults. HH-53 crews would place a company of irregulars on Skyline high ground near large numbers of enemy.

The enemy was very methodical about preparing attacks. Leaders down to squad leader level would be thoroughly briefed and practice an operation on a sand table. Moving troops and medical units to the front portended an attack. With intelligence types noting this and other activity that an enemy attack was imminent, troops would be lifted to another position. This would confuse them and disrupt their plans for about two weeks and cause them to retrench and plan for another operation." <sup>9</sup>

## **EVENTS TO THE EAST**

***The President "does not want to hear any more rationale-he wants action."***

FRUS, 04/08/72.

In response to North Vietnamese incursion at the demilitarized zone (DMZ) on 30 March, and coinciding with North Vietnamese leaders' decision to withdraw from the gates of Long Tieng, President Nixon and his advisors consulted from April 3 to 5, in order to plan the next move in Southeast Asia. Even though his advisors opposed politically unacceptable

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<sup>9</sup> Jesse Scott, 101-102.

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 355. After the bombing of North Vietnam resumed on 6 April, only an occasional aircraft divert was assigned to Barrel Roll for Van Pao's operation. Consequently, the enemy was able to depart north from the Long Tieng battlefield with minimum air harassment.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 459.

intervention, Nixon ordered U.S. Naval and Air Force assets to be instantly and dramatically beefed up to address the North Vietnamese massive offensive that intended to conclude the war. The executive order also authorized B-52 attacks on the enemy south of the nineteenth parallel and [previously suspended] Arc Light support for the Long Tieng defenders.

The former was intended to send a clear message to North Vietnamese and Soviet leaders that USG was deadly serious and the attacks in South Vietnam had to cease. The latter action by B-52s and Tacair was intended to placate Thai leaders, assuring them that measures were underway to fully support Thai troops at Long Tieng.

Establishing management and responsibility of the air and naval campaign with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and local commanders, the mandate ultimately thwarted a successful Vietnamese invasion, and resumed bombing of the north, which would be called the Linebacker One operation. Rules of engagement (ROE) were also modified to allow strikes on previously restricted areas around Hanoi, and the mining of Haiphong harbor. Generally concentrated on lines of communication, these strikes included bombing ports, roads, bridges, storage depots, electric plants, and industrial facilities.

With regional weather finally clearing, the U.S air counter offensive got underway on the sixth. This had an immediate impact in Quangtri Province, where the communists were rolling up the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). After the strikes, slackening of the North Vietnamese offensive was evident. Further damaging the enemy offensive, by the ninth, several hundred air missions pounded enemy concentrations and missile sites above and below the DMZ.



With the long-planned operation in motion, and yet undeterred by the American response, another communist front was created in the Central Highlands by troop cross border movements from Laos and Cambodia.

On the 10<sup>th</sup>, B-52 crews began bombing the North for the first time since November 1967. They raided areas around Vinh, with particular emphasis on missile sites. Adverse weather hampered strikes the following day. Five days later, B-52s struck at Hanoi and Haiphong facilities, the first attacks there since November 1968.

On the 20<sup>th</sup>, employing standard communist tactics of talk and fight, delegations in Paris proposed resumption of the bilateral peace talks on the 27<sup>th</sup>.

The struggle continued both on the ground and in the air...<sup>10</sup> Despite various geopolitical and military aspects unraveling in the Southeast Asian Theater, for those of us serving in frontline trenches, our world was not radically changed; our participation in the conflict continued to be business as usual. Moreover, we had heard stories about the TET offensive and siege of Khe Sanh in South Vietnam, and had experienced two nasty battles for Long Tieng. Although not all situations could be considered equal, we were somewhat attuned to the changing conditions and had learned to accept the exposure and survive.

We worked for most of the day at or around Site-32, recovering at Wattay Airport after dark (eight plus fifteen, thirty sorties). Even with the ever-present compressor stall

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<sup>10</sup> Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War*.  
John Bowman, *Almanac*, 304-307.  
FRUS, Volume-8, Vietnam, January-October 1972, Document-71, 04/08/72.  
Message from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Moorer) to the  
Commander in Chief Pacific (McCain) and Commander Military Assistance  
Command Vietnam (Abrams).

problem, which did not occur during this RON, the two power sections went a long way toward bolstering my confidence in the machine, and I did not mind flying long distances in the dark.

We recovered at Wattay Airport along with Wayne Knight, who had been flying Papa Foxtrot Hotel at Long Tieng with First Officer Veasey.

My crew was modified slightly on the seventh, with Flight Mechanic Chuck Low replacing Phil Velasquez. I had not flown with Chuck since our ignominious 20 December encounter with the enemy on the southern Plain of Jars. Low was a soft-spoken, very quiet person, who deferred to authority (yes sir, Captain). However, beneath this thin veneer, Low was a competent, courageous individual I could count on to take the initiative and do the right thing at the right time during times of hostility. In general, we had excellent Flight Mechanics, but not all were of the same caliber as Chuck. I did not know it yet, but the extent of his expertise was also recognized by others and he would become an integral part of the Special Project program.

I had a good day at The Alternate, flying ten hours and logging fifty sorties (depending on the difficulty of the task, Thompsen also flew somewhat near that number). We recovered at Wattay Airport.

The next day, Captain Knight and Wayne Lannin flew Fox Hotel at Long Tieng. They logged almost the same time as I had and recovered at Luang Prabang for work the next day at Site-32.

While Knight worked at Bouam Long, my crew and I supported troop and artillery movements both in the Long Tieng bowl and on Skyline (nine plus twenty-five, twenty sorties). BC-620 was moved to Charlie Echo on Skyline. FSB Tiger was moved further west to Charlie Gulf by a heavy lift helicopter. Candle FSB was established in a protected area off the southeastern end of the

valley. For added safety, Venus was moved south of the King's villa.

Thanks to U.S. military heavy lift helicopter capability available each day, two 105mm howitzers were positioned in the valley, where enemy forward observers normally could not see them at night until a gun fired. Then, after a rapid-fire mission, the gun would be airlifted or towed by a vehicle to another position.

During the day, Tonto reported a ground assault, Raven-28 worked U.S. strike aircraft in support of his position. When Lulu and the LS-20A radio operator also reported incoming fire, Raven FACs-24, 20, and 22 supported the positions. While Knight RON in Vientiane, we RTB Udorn at dark. Wayne then returned to The Alternate the next day with Bunlue (ten plus ten).

Anticipating scheduled time off (STO), it marked his last day flying the Huey as a line pilot, and on the flight schedule, until the 23rd. His situation with FEPA had almost run the course of appeals and rebuttals. He was disgusted initially over the entire course of action, but it was a perverse feeling, for he secretly relished the process, aware that in the end he would win and thoroughly enjoy the last laugh. <sup>11</sup>

Operations in Laos had not been kind to our people. Over the last fifteen months, eleven Air America crewmembers had been killed in the line of duty. The very definition of flying connotes hazardous operations, during which seconds often make the difference between life and death. I recalled a preflight class at Pensacola, when the classroom instructor shocked everyone, uttering a standard cliché, "*Look to your right and to*

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<sup>11</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 339.  
Jesse Scott, 102-103.  
Jim Parker, ABCCC reports for 04/08/72.  
EW Knight Emails.

*your left. These individuals will not be alive in the future."* We were young and indestructible, so no one believed the man at the time, but looking back over my flying career, the statement proved statistically correct. Mechanical problems, pilot error, and wars certainly took a toll on aviators. In fact, during my early years with Air America, learning of the loss of several former squadron mates from HMM-261 prompted me to discontinue my subscription of the *Marine Corps Gazette*.

On Saturday the eighth, while taking low level photos of a Porter that had crashed in a rice paddy in the east-northeast area of Ban Xieng Lom, Captain Len Wiehrdt, a former USAF colonel, struck a tree, damaged a wing, and crashed. During the impact Wiehrdt was killed and his two Lao passengers were seriously injured.

Emmet Sullivan was working out of Ban Houei Sai that day when alerted to deliver a team to the crash site for accident victim recovery. Unless the weather was good, one could not fly directly over the hills to Xieng Lom, and sometimes it required a flight through Thailand. Emmet made several trips between the two sites. There was no enemy action, so he shut down in the area while investigators and a recovery team went to work. He then hauled a body bag to Ban Houie Sai. <sup>12</sup>

### **HOME ON THE NONG KHAI HIGHWAY**

Earlier in the month, Ricky developed throat problems again, so we took our son downtown to a Thai doctor, who had previously treated him. The next day he developed an allergic reaction. He showed signs of this for a week, and during this period his throat infection became worse since he was only

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<sup>12</sup> Joe Leeker PC-6C, N152L.  
Bill Leary, April 1972 Notes.  
Emmet Sullivan Interview.

treated for the allergy. Then the doctor discovered his liver was swollen and a trip to a specialist in Bangkok was warranted. After extensive testing and investigation, two doctors in the capital could find nothing seriously wrong with him. Luckily his immune system and regenerative powers were effective. His body repaired itself and he recovered by the end of the month.

Despite Tuie's complaining of pain and discomfort, Doctor Songserm at the Bangkok Nursing Home indicated that she was normal and the baby, who the fortune teller and midwife insisted would be a girl, was low, impinging on her pelvic region. She had put on a little weight and was all of 110 pounds with a belly that protruded, like a large watermelon. I joked that she would have to use a grocery store market basket to support the protrusion. Since the doctor still believed the baby was due on 6 June, we planned to return during the last week in May.

With health issues resolved, and following an abbreviated stay at the first class Montien Hotel, we boarded the night train to Udorn.

On the 14th, as was customary, I drove the Ford station wagon to the airfield in the afternoon to check my mailbox, the FIC map for upcountry developments, and the CPH office for any other scuttlebutt circulating the compound or the American community.

The annual Songkran celebration from thirteen through fifteen April marked spring's traditional rebirth. It coincided with the Thai New Year making merit by venerating temple monks and respecting elders. Songkran was also a water festival, during which young town and village people had fun spilling water on each other.

The festival often assumed bizarre and unnecessary characteristics, especially when Thai army lads drove through town in six-by-six trucks laughing and enjoying throwing water

on town folk from fifty-five-gallon drums. It could be dangerous. During this period, it was wise to remain home or away from main thoroughfares, and avoid riding a motorcycle, or in an open vehicle.

Work at the Air America maintenance facility was a twenty-four-hour-seven-day process. Shift changes normally occurred at 1600 hours. In order to deliver the workers to town, three busses were lined up on the right side of the Air America access road in the afternoon.

As I proceeded along the road at about twenty miles-per-hour, I observed a small Thai boy dart out between two busses. He held a silver bowl, occasionally threw water at people, and retreated back between the busses. An idea suddenly flashed through my mind that a dangerous situation might develop if he emptied his bowl and ran across the road to replenish it at his house. Against this scenario, I was determined to remain vigilant.

Despite all my prognostications, tragically, this is exactly what happened. When I was abeam the child, he suddenly bolted in front of the Cortina and we clashed. Alarmed, I jammed on the brakes, but following a thump he disappeared underneath the bumper. Shocked, I had visions that I had killed or badly maimed him.

My heart almost stopped beating. I exited the car anticipating the worst possible situation. Then, scared to death, the five-year-old child emerged from under the car, popped to a vertical position, and dashed smartly into the trees toward his home. I was amazed and relieved, marveling that miracles still do happen. However, I could not consciously leave the scene without checking the boy's condition, so I parked and followed him to a cluster of children. Within the group were adults who, seemingly unconcerned, were busy playing cards.

After a cursory inspection, except for a few contusions and nasty lump on the boy's head, it appeared that he was not badly hurt. Nevertheless, I still wanted to have him looked at by a doctor, so, without parental objection, I took the boy and his father to the Air America clinic. Doctor Ma verified my diagnosis but added that because the boy was not a dependent, he was unable to treat him. Instead, he recommended that I drive him to town and have his head X-rayed. While still in the Operations building I learned from Transportation Department personnel that there had been other near misses with the family's children lately, with one hit by a bus. It did not seem like the mother assumed any responsibility for her nine kids' welfare. Perhaps she wanted them to be hit by a vehicle for the money she could obtain from those with "deep pockets."

The boy's father accompanied me to the X-ray clinic where a female technician obtained images of the boy's skull. While we waited for film development, only aware of what she was told by the father, she commenced a tongue lashing at me for my part in the incident. Without knowing the full story, she insisted that I was at fault, and I should provide the father with a large sum of baht. There it was again--all about money. It seemed that was all Thai people thought about. I was not happy over her attack, but because of her gender, I listened patiently, but silently wanted to thrash her severely about the head and shoulders.

To everyone's relief, the X-rays were clear, without evidence of fractures, swelling, or potential brain damage. I was still concerned over the incident and conveyed to the father through the technician that I would take care of the child if there were any future complications.

Having sown the seeds of greed, the father still wanted my money. From previous encounters with local people over my dog Caesar's antics when I lived on Soi Wat Po, I was well aware

that a little baht would go a long way toward solving all the ills of the world. But in this case, I had shown more than good faith. I had gone the extra mile, offered to care for the child should it become necessary, and then there was the matter of principle.

Disgusted, I drove them to the house, explained the situation to my wife, and let her dicker with the man. Hearing the facts and what had transpired, she became quite angry, particularly over the man's demand for money. Well, I don't believe that he had ever previously dealt with a feisty little girl from the south. <sup>13</sup> In the end the, matter was completed that evening. I presented the father with 300 baht and assumed no further liability for the boy or his family.

I considered myself very lucky that day and like my December shoot down on the Plain of Jars, had been waiting for something like this to occur for years. Driving in Thailand was inherently risky as two sayings alluded: if a foreigner drove a car "he had one foot in jail", and "if you were not born in Thailand, and became involved in an accident or incident, no matter who was at fault, you were wrong." Enhancing the overall problem, it seemed to me Thai people were too pragmatic, not particularly caring what happened in their lives. Religion and superstition were prevalent throughout northeast Thailand's society. Moreover, fatalism to the point of being absurd seemed to prevail, manifesting in the belief that everything in life was Buddha's way and he would protect them in the end. <sup>14</sup> Nowhere else was this more prevalent than on Skyline Ridge at Long Tieng, where some Thai soldiers, exposed on high ground,

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<sup>13</sup> Normally peaceful, Tuie's anger was stoked when she discovered that the woman had been playing cards and not monitoring her children.

<sup>14</sup> The thoughts are purely the Author's from years of interfacing with the Thai people and observing northeast Isan's society and culture.



insisted on cooking rice rations in the open, when doing so in defilade would have minimized and eliminated many injuries and deaths from enemy crew served weapons.

I knew that no rationalization could absolve me of the accident, but some things cannot be avoided in life; they just happen. Even if I was crawling along at five mph, I do not believe that I could have stopped the car in time to avoid the child dashing into me. Nevertheless, I vowed to increase my awareness when driving, and hopefully avoid any further incidents.

No one was immune from the Thai curse. Wayne Knight was driving a Mercedes 200D that he had purchased from Dick Crafts from Bangkok to Udorn. His wife Lai, Steve Stevens, and Beng Bengston were in the vehicle. He was cruising along a built-up levee system just north of Korat, when he noticed a little girl guiding a water buffalo with a rope through its nose. The two were walking along the Friendship Highway on the steep levee bank. Wayne first slowed, but then accelerated when it appeared that she had the beast under control. As they passed, the buffalo jerked free. His head hit the car's front left-hand light. Spinning from the impact, the animal's rear end struck the left rear door. In the process, he rolled over the little girl. After the group conducted a cursory examination, she appeared to have a broken leg, but was fine otherwise. They loaded her into the car and drove her to a small village where Lai explained the situation. The mother severely chastised the girl. Out of compassion for the family, Knight left 300 baht and they departed as friends.<sup>15</sup> There were other more severe incidents that were not resolved as quickly or as amicably.

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<sup>15</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/03/00.

**SKYLINE**

Despite the enemy decision to leave The Alternate problem for another day because of the impending rainy season and other geopolitical events "across the fence," the determined men remaining to cover the withdrawal still presented a respectable account of themselves. Hence, the vicious struggle for Skyline continued.

On the 10<sup>th</sup>, with the assistance of another Thai unit, Charlie Charlie pad on the western ridgeline was retaken. Red Hat, Wild Bill, and Tonto reported ground assaults on their positions, and Raven-51, 28, 26, and Lao T-28 pilots supported the positions. When Cowhide and Stringbean reported assaults against the Charlie Tango (Counter) and CC (Booster) pads, Raven-28 worked T-28s in support. Then LS-20A and Sting Ray FSB reported short-duration attacks by fire, and Raven-28 supported the positions. <sup>16</sup>

There was trouble east of Padong:

*"Government units late on 12 April abandoned all positions near Tha Vieng [LS-13], southeast of the [PDJ], according to a preliminary report heavy [NVA] artillery and ground attacks reportedly caused extensive casualties, and the government troops are retreating in disorder."* <sup>17</sup>

On Tuesday, Red Hat reported a ground assault, and Raven-53 worked T-28 assets on the position. Then weather was unworkable on the 12th and ground activity was very light. But the following day Bullet Head (Arin) reported a ground assault on his position, while Raven-22 supported him. When Can Do and

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<sup>16</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC reports for 10-11 April 1972.

<sup>17</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos. This exposed position had changed hands many times over the years.

Ringer reported incoming fire, they did not receive support because of adverse weather. <sup>18</sup>

On the 14th, upcountry Flight Information Center (FIC) representatives Sullivan and Connor forwarded a report to Vientiane and Udorn that friendlies trying to secure Charlie Whiskey and Charlie Alpha pads had suffered approximately five killed and thirty-one wounded.

*"Enemy has a kill zone around both CA and CW pads using small mortars, and friendlies got caught in these zones. Raven pilots reported the Raven and A-1Es working this TIC received no ground fire, but T-28s took heavy small arms."* <sup>19</sup>

Thursday, Vang Pao authorized a counterattack to flank the enemy and sever the logistics arteries leading toward Long Tieng. Doing this would prevent supplies from reaching already water-deprived frontline troops and further enhance subsistence problems. In order to implement the maneuver, Kayak and BG-224 departed from western Skyline, intersected the Nam Ngum and began a slow semicircular trek around Sam Tong to achieve the projected goals. <sup>20</sup>

I went back to work on Friday the 16th. After deadheading to Vientiane on Hotel-52, I joined Charlie Weitz and Chuck Low in Papa Hotel Delta. Charlie was due a semi-annual route check, but that was secondary to the large amount of work at The Alternate. Calculated to command the area and prevent enemy from

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<sup>18</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC reports for 04/13/72.

<sup>19</sup> Bill Leary April 1972 Notes.

<sup>20</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 343.  
Jesse Scott.

using them as forward observer or firing positions, Meo outposts dotted most of the valley high points.

We were supplying one of several karst pads overlooking the parking, loading, refueling ramp, when Weitz bumped the left main gear on a jagged limestone outcropping while hovering to deliver the sling load. Granted, it was a minor clash with the rock, but I was not impressed with his careless performance. Moreover, Charlie was not the smoothest pilot I had flown with. In addition, I had no way of knowing if he was preoccupied, and wondered if his drinking activities in Udorn had finally caught up with him. In deference to his seniority, leadership, and stature, we did not discuss the incident. <sup>21</sup>

We had an excellent day, logging ten hours and thirty-five minutes (I conducted forty sorties) and recovered at Wattay Airport at dark.

The next day I crewed Papa Hotel Charlie with Mike Barksdale and Charlie Brigham. It was even busier at Long Tieng with forty-five sorties and nearly eleven hours logged. The front lines were still quite active. During the day on the western ridgeline, Cowhide and Wild Bill reported ground assaults on their Skyline positions. Raven-20, 28, A-1E pilots Hobo 20/21 and Lao T-28s supported the positions. <sup>22</sup> We recovered at Wattay Airport at dark and I caught a C-7 Caribou (1-2392) ride to Udorn.

Sunday was spent at the field conducting a proficiency check (one plus thirty) with Captain Lloyd Higgins, and testing Papa Hotel Echo (two plus twenty), perhaps getting the machine ready for a Special Project Mission that night.

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<sup>21</sup> Charlie could have been fatigued, as I was not yet aware of his nighttime activities in the Special Project program.

<sup>22</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 04/17/72.

At The Alternate, Cowhide, Snap (Sawai), Ringer, and Swamp Rat all reported incoming fire. All areas were supported either by Raven FACs or fire support bases. Starting at 0710, Kneecap reported 250 rounds of incoming fire on 19 April. Raven-53 and Lao T-28 pilots supported the position.

The following day, Booster at CC and LS-20A reported incoming fire, which Ravens-21, 27, Venus FSB, and Hobo-44/45 supported. Starting at 1556, Barrel Roll East was cleared of slow-movers for thirty-five minutes because of blanket Bandit calls.<sup>23</sup>

### **ENEMY PLANS**

After two weeks of marching north across the Plain of Jars from the Ban Hintang area, by 20 April, under adverse conditions, Comrade Xuandao's construction company reached the Nong Pet intersection, and had established a mountain camp on the left side of the Route-7/71 split.

*"...on the other side of the mountain is the rear base of the truck battalion and the Front's K3 supply storage. The company was briefed on our new mission: 15th Engineer Battalion and 25th Engineer Battalion will pull back to the rear to maintain and protect the transportation supply route from Nong Pet into the [PDJ] and to Sala Phou Khoun [road junction]. We will maintain the main road arteries to allow our artillery and tanks to move, we will build defensive fortifications, and we will participate in the fight against the enemy using engineer weapons.*

*Initially, 2nd Battalion will be responsible for maintaining the road to Ban Ang [L-22, the Xieng Khouang air*

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<sup>23</sup> Jim Parker, ABCCC Reports for 18-20 April 1972.



A bomb and shell-altered landscape on the central portion of Skyline Ridge and northern surrounding areas after months of enemy shelling, B-52, and Allied tactical air strikes.

strip]...It is raining, the road is muddy, and the enemy continues to attack us ferociously. At night four or five truck convoys still manage to make it through." <sup>24</sup>

### **WASHINGTON AND VIENTIANE**

Meanwhile, the decision by Washington shakers and movers earlier in the month to allow B-52 strikes in Military Region Two, despite a need in South Vietnam to counter the enemy incursion, was believed to be curtailing enemy activity. Doubtless this provided a positive effect on Case Officer Kayak and his band of merry men's progress toward the critical line of communication (LOC), plunging into the Hintang Valley from the Plain of Jars.

*"The recent Arc Lights that you have placed in MR-2 seem to have broken the enemy's back. We are not positive...but there are several indications that the enemy is pulling back his cutting edge and could be undertaking a withdrawal, particularly of his heavy equipment, from its immediate area north of Long Tieng. Tacair in the last two days has been extremely effective and even the relatively few sorties have gotten have destroyed at least two 130mm guns, two tanks and damage another heavy field piece which has not been positively identified.*

*...I am not submitting any request for Arc Light strikes today for I believe that these highly effective weapons will probably serve us better in [South Vietnam] or some other area. I am, however, requesting through 7/13 Air Force that we receive a blocking belt package on the extremely vulnerable portion of the new road [Route-54] just off the 'Nipple' of the southern PDJ. If this belt can be put in expeditiously, I believe we will*

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<sup>24</sup> Xuandao Diary, 04/20/72.

*bottle up in the Tha Tam Bleung-Ban Hintang area heavy equipment which we can then clean up at our relative leisure."* <sup>25</sup>

On the 21st, after forty-five minutes of intensive testing, Paul Gregoire, Bill Long, and I crewed Papa Hotel Delta to The Alternate. Leaving the aircraft on the ramp at dark, I deadheaded to Udorn on Bell 204B 1196W. (Seven hours forty-five minutes, thirty sorties).

### **A MOMENTOUS DECISION FROM LANGLEY HEADQUARTERS**

For almost four years, a controversy had been festering and brewing in CIA's upper echelon levels relating to the value and prudence of retaining and maintaining Air America, and the Agency's huge airlift assets in Southeast Asia. <sup>26</sup>

With American assistance in South Vietnam unwinding, more media coverage of the Southeast Asia operation than ever before, an increasingly unwieldy organization tipping the scales, and increasing congressional pressure to reduce military-related costs, CIA Director Richard Helms elected to divest ownership of Air America and Southern Air Transport. It was decided that Air America would be retained until the end of the Theater wars.

Except for a system dislocation of pilots already underway, those of us in the trenches knew nothing of the CIA's 21 April mandate. Knowledge of this might have fostered serious negative morale issues and a wholesale exodus of crewmembers from the Theater.

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<sup>25</sup> FRUS 1969-1976 Volume 8, Vietnam, Document 87, 04/19/72. Message from the Embassy in Laos (Ambassador Godley) to the Commander, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (Abrams).

<sup>26</sup> At one time the Far East arm of Air America (Air Asia, Civil Air Transport) was considered the third largest airline in the world in terms of equipment and personnel. This also included the Southern Air Transport propriety.



The pressure to reduce costs in Southeast Asia because of the Symington congressional ceiling on military spending was widespread. Therefore, the Department of Defense contacted Deputy Chief Thailand (DEPCH), who in turn communicated with the Air America Vice President of Operations in Taipei, Taiwan, in requesting cooperation minimizing or eliminating requirements not mission-essential. A goal was set to reduce the inventory by one million dollars by 1 July 1972.

Following the decision to wind down proprietary interests, an Air America directive was forwarded to managers to compile a list of assets for sale. National Security Council member Manny Kaufman oversaw a list compiled of parent holding company Pacific Corporation's assets. When Air America resources were tallied and appraised, it was discovered that most of the aircraft were bailed at one dollar per year. The only saleable Company assets included government contracts. These were worth millions, but all were classified.

Washington delivered the lists of various assets to Lockheed, McDonald Douglas and other defense contractors for bid. A copy of the list became known to Agency members, who were understandably upset because the contracts were so highly classified, and not for public or commercial disclosure. They demanded that the lists be returned so that a sanitizing process could be initiated. Consequently, a highly embarrassed Manny Kaufman was required to scramble to reacquire asset booklets.

CJ Abadie submitted additional information regarding the Udorn base, indicating that, by June 1972, approximately four million dollars had been spent developing the bricks and mortar facilities at Udorn. This was exclusive of aircraft and equipment. All the work had been performed by local Thai sub-contractor companies. During fiscal 1972, 93,300 revenue-generating helicopter and fixed wing contract hours were flown

for the Lao effort, and supported by the Udorn base. <sup>27</sup>

### **KNIGHT ADVANCES**

The Wayne Knight/FEPA grievance was finally resolved during the third week in April, when Knight reverted from the Bell to the H-34 program. He attended Drex Morgan's ground school, and then had a local second in command check in Hotel-88 with IP Don Henthorn.

Two days later Knight went upcountry with Don in Hotel-90. *"Don was extremely talented with the cyclic and collective, as good as any, including Scratch Kanach."* However, he had varying degrees of respect for Don's judgment. Don was a check pilot, and should have been more conservative. On one occasion, Knight gave Don an area check in the Moung Soui area. Don conducted heavily loaded approaches to a very restricted and elevated pad with a side flare to a landing (Herb Baker also demonstrated this to me one day). Don made these landings beautifully, but it was a show-off gesture, meant to impress Knight. Concerned, he challenged Don, asking if he taught this kind of maneuver. When Don replied in the negative, Knight asked if he was merely attempting to impress him. *"Well, yes, sort of."* Then he smiled. He was a very good pilot, but a cowboy. After logging over nine hours, they secured at Luang Prabang.

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<sup>27</sup> William Leary, April 1972 Notes that included an interview with Air America (CIA) Corporate Attorney Larry R. Houston. Houston had structured CIA ownership of Air America so that it was deeply embedded behind five corporate veils.

#### *CHECO*

Emmet Sullivan Interview. Sullivan claimed to have known Kaufman. CJ Abadie statement regarding the Udorn base: Ab failed to mention that a great deal of early work on the swimming pool and other projects was performed by volunteer Air America employees, i.e. pilots, mechanics and laborers. Also, that Base Manager Ben Moore was instrumental in much of the facility development.

Because of a Special Mission requirement, flight time the next day was only a little over two hours. On the 27th they relocated to Site-20A from Luang Prabang to work local landing zones. (Six hours twenty-six minutes.) <sup>28</sup>

### **THE AIRPLANE ANGELS TAKE ANOTHER PILOT HOME** <sup>29</sup>

Following a mission on April 23rd, Lloyd Randell arrived at Long Tieng with nine battle damage holes in his Porter. Air America Ground Mechanic Dan Williams recalls one hole the size of his fist. It was not the first time Randell returned to the base with battle damage. Concerned, Dan cautioned Lloyd to be careful. In reply, Randell said the enemy would never get him.

Randell's luck ran out the following day. While flying in adverse weather en route from Ban Son (LS-272) to Moung Cha (LS-113) with nine passengers in PC-6C N391R, he crashed into a mountain near Nyot Mo (LS-312). Four passengers, including Randell, were killed (Randell was not wearing his shoulder harness). The Bell crew of 12F located the crash site and ferried five hurt and uninjured survivors to Site-272.

In response to the latest in a string of Air America fatalities, the assistant vice president of flight operations (AVPFO) in Taipei sent a long message to all chief pilots in the field for dissemination to all flight crews. He basically recognized the numerous dangers involved in the Southeast Asia operation. These included:

*"...the most difficult environmental conditions in the world considering the combination of remote, mountainous terrain, absence of modern navigation/communications and air traffic control facilities, active presence of hostile armed*

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<sup>28</sup> EW Knight Emails.

<sup>29</sup> An allusion to *Seven Spanish Angels* recorded by song writer and performer Willie Nelson and Ray Charles.

*forces, absence of adequate means of reporting and forecasting the varied seasonal weather and winds, and marginal airfields and landing zones, to name a few examples."*

The AVPFO went on to implore all involved to assess dangerous situations and act accordingly to avoid further losses incurred since 1 January 1971. <sup>30</sup>

### **TWENTY-FOUR HOURS IN THE BATTLE FOR SKYLINE RIDGE**

Commando Raiders based at Pha Khao, under the guidance of Dick "Bamboo" Mann, were introduced to ridgeline hostilities on the 24th. The troops surged up the northern slopes toward Charlie Alpha, but were soundly rejected and turned back by a few dedicated and deeply entrenched enemy. <sup>31</sup>

While Commando Raider units struggled to achieve positive results at Charlie Alpha, other parts of Skyline were active for the numerous Thai battalions staged there. Starting at 1300, and continuing sporadically for four hours, BG-609 at Charlie Tango received six rounds of heavy weapons fire from an unknown location.

At 1310, Booster's position at Charlie Charlie (BG-603) received eighteen 82mm mortar rounds from the Sam Tong area. Firing continued until 1530 hours, but no friendly casualties were noted. Soon afterward, a 75mm recoilless crew member, while firing at the suspected mortar position, had his leg blown off

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<sup>30</sup> Bill Leary 1972 Notes with Dan Williams interview.

Joe Leeker, PC-6C, N391R.

TELEX from AVPFO/DFD Taipei, 04/25/72.

The recognition of our problems by Don Teeters and others from the head shed was vastly appreciated by the pilot force, but as always, they were not fully understood by the remote echelon. We were involved in a hot war and were under pressure by the Customer to perform whatever mission was proposed. Moreover, for years many of us were motivated to carry out any and all Customer tasks.

<sup>31</sup> Ken Conboy, 339.

by the gun's back blast. Three hours later, Charlie Charlie received ten 82mm mortar rounds.

To the west of CC, Charlie Gulf (BG-617) received twelve mortar rounds at 1445, with no reported casualties. FSBs countered suspected enemy positions. Also, to the west at 1830 ten 82MM rounds splashed on Charlie X-Ray.

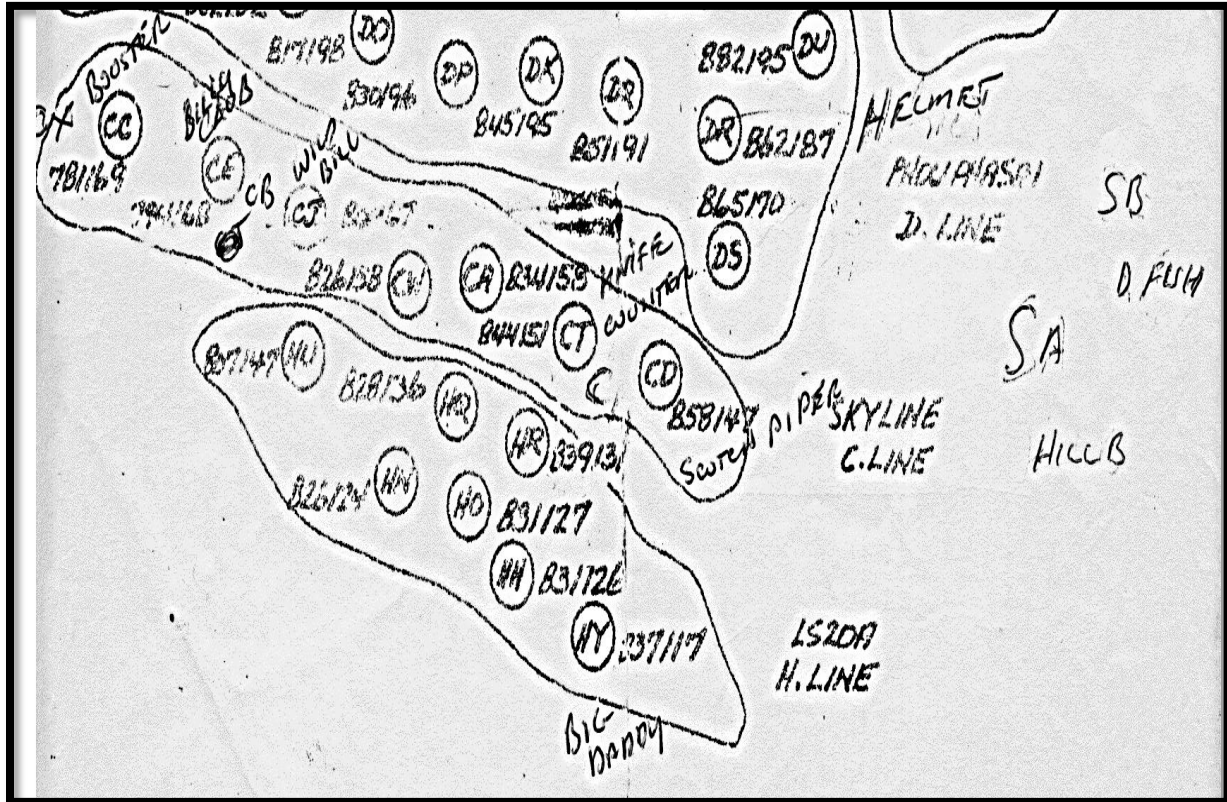
Next to Charlie Bravo near Skyline Drive, the road to Sam Tong, at 1510, seven rounds of 82mm rounds hit Charlie Juliet (BG-620). Casualties included one serious WIA and one minor WIA. At 1700 hours, five rounds of DK-82 recoilless rifle fire impacted Charlie Tango (BG-601) to the east of Charlie Alpha, without sustaining casualties. Counterfire, employing 4.2mm mortar shells, achieved no known results.

BG-620 at Charlie Echo and Charlie Juliet received two rounds of 60mm mortar and eight rounds of 82mm at 1700 from the north. A recoilless rifle was observed firing at Charlie Charlie, so artillery was directed at the gun.

BC-602s two positions at Charlie Bravo and Charlie Foxtrot were quiet for twenty-four hours. Elements of the battalion patrolled the slopes of the ridge and returned to their positions without incident.

To the west, BG-616 had fifty 4.2mm mortar and artillery fire from the north. Counterfire artillery on the enemy positions was ordered with unknown results.

Southern ridge positions were not exempt. Between 2000-0100, Whiskey-01 reported five 82mm rounds from the west. An enemy company was also observed. Action continued throughout the night and into the early morning of the 25th. BG-613 remained in security positions at the western end of the Long Tieng valley. At midnight, BG-613 units located on karst formations observed moving flashlights on the southern slope of Skyline Ridge. The commanding officer believed enemy sappers were moving into



Charlie defensive positions located along Skyline Ridge from the Long Tieng-Sam Tong Road junction to the east. They include some FAG call signs. Thai occupied Hotel pads were located on the southern ridge of the Long Tieng bowl and to the southeast of the Long Tieng Valley. North and northwest of Charlie ridge lie the enemy controlled Delta ridge and the Sam Tong complex. One 105mm howitzer was placed at the Charlie Bravo pad.

Author's Customer provided helicopter pad designation to assist in supply missions, 10/14/72.

the Long Tieng Valley, so he dispatched patrols to comb the base of the ridge. No enemy was discovered, leading some to believe these were enemy forward observers.

At the opposite end of the valley, BG-614 remained in security positions and reported no enemy activity.

At 0100 hours, FAG Counter (BG-601) at Charlie Tango received four rounds of DK-82 fire. The battalion established overnight positions east and west of the main location. No enemy activity was noted. BG-620 defenders at Charlie Echo observed two enemy troops walking up the road toward CC position at 0130. Mortar fire was directed at them. At the same time, patrolling was accomplished by BG-614 from Hotel Mike on the southern ridge.

Unmarked mines from previous engagements became a problem. At 0500 hours, Beech Nut (Wild Bill) at CJ (BG-620) reported that while his unit was returning from patrol a trooper tripped a mine and was killed. A unit from BC-618 was patrolling northeast of Charlie Delta when they encountered and engaged a platoon of enemy at 0830. The Vietnamese fled and were pursued until the patrol entered a mine field that killed one man and seriously wounded two others. Artillery and mortar fire was directed in the direction of the fleeing enemy.

At 1030, BG-609 (Hotel Kilo) conducted a sweep through five villages without enemy contact or discovery of cached items. By 1400, no significant enemy activity was reported in the area.

There was no lack of heavy firepower available, and more fire support bases were being prepared. Seven 105mm and seven 155mm operational howitzers were staged at various locations to provide support for the Skyline battle and counterfire against enemy artillery. Candle FSB's (signal Red Tango) two 105mm guns were located near the south gap in the Long Tieng bowl. Tiger's one 105mm was at the Charlie Bravo complex on Skyline Ridge.

So as not to concentrate artillery pieces and to position them outside the range of the enemy's 130mm guns, Hercules (Foxtrot Bravo) and Samson's (Foxtrot Hotel) eight guns were emplaced at hardened points six miles south of the valley and the Nam Pha. Venus-1's 155mm piece was staged in The Alternate Valley and moved to five separate locations designated A through E as the situation dictated. Two other Venus 155mm tubes (2-HEA, and 3-HEB) were located in defilade on the valley's south ridge. Firing a mix of high explosive (HE) and white phosphorus (Willy Pete) rounds, all FSB participated in fire missions except Venus-1. <sup>32</sup>

Since fighting waned appreciably and Skyline Ridge was in government hands, by 7 May, two new complete FSB batteries, Superman (105mm howitzers) and Mercury (155mm howitzers), were developed at the western portion of The Alternate bowl. <sup>33</sup>

With the annual rainy season approaching the Lao Theater, gross changes to the enemy offensive became more apparent to Western analysts. By the 26th, intelligence indicated that the enemy was staging trucks containing ground artillery at Khang Khay in preparation for departure to North Vietnam. There was also relatively good intelligence that the 312th Division would soon depart the PDJ battlefield in order to participate in the South Vietnamese Easter Offensive.

Not all Vietnamese units planned to depart Military Region Two. Four regiments intended to remain in positions throughout the monsoon season. The 335th and 148th Regiments staged southwest of the Plain of Jars, the 178th was lodged on the

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<sup>32</sup> Task Force Vang Pao situation reports filed 24/1300-25/1300 April. Reports include a synopsis of action around Skyline and Long Tieng area. These included reports from Tall Man (Case Officer James Schofield), Tiny (Jim McElroy), and FAGs No Man, Tagalong, and Tom. Fire Support Base Daily Sitrep, 04/25/72.

<sup>33</sup> Ken Conboy *Shadow War*, 353, Fn 2.



Plain of Jars, and the 866th Independent Regiment to the north near Site-32. <sup>34</sup>

Following Arclight strikes on Skyline's northern slopes, on 28 April Dick Mann's Meo raiders, with the assistance of AC-119 gunship crews, conducted a nighttime bid to recapture Charlie Alpha. By morning they were successful against a handful of diehard enemy. <sup>35</sup>

In Udorn, probably because I was bumping up against the maximum preferred Company monthly flight time of one hundred hours, I was delegated to performing local FCFs. This exercise began on the 25<sup>th</sup>, working on Papa Hotel Alpha during the late afternoon until 1900 hours.

### **EXTRA ORDINARY WARRIOR BLACK LION PASSES**

On 28 April Agency operative Wilbur "Wil" Greene, aka "Black Lion," died on the U.S Air Force base hospital operating table from complications of a serious liver ailment. All who knew Wil well indicated that he did not smoke or drink.

Ill for some time, Greene had previously had his gall bladder removed. Before stitching him up, the Air Force surgeon in charge of the operating room failed to note a sizeable lesion on one lobe of his liver. After the incision was sutured Greene returned to work as Chief of Operations at the Agency Savannakhet unit. Before long, a serious infection and sepsis developed, prompting him to return to the Udorn hospital, where he expired before doctors could open him up. The living legend,

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<sup>34</sup> XXCC, CIA Synopsis, 1971/1972 communist dry season offensive in northern Laos.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 343.

<sup>35</sup> Ken Conboy, 339.

and a well-respected person, had prematurely expired. <sup>36</sup>

I could not recall seeing Wil for some time and that was at Pakse. No longer RONing at The Alternate, we were too busy to press the flesh during the long "balls to the wall" days. At the time, Greene appeared healthy and was joking with a friend. I liked Wil and felt that our connection to my cousin Robert T. Anderson somewhat linked us. Naturally, when I heard that he had passed, I was curious and asked a few questions. One person, perhaps a Customer or a doctor, indicated that traces of rat feces were discovered in Greene's blood. It was a sad, ignominious end for a courageous, superior warrior. <sup>37</sup>

### **SPECIAL PROJECT PARTICULARS**

Following a welcome day off the schedule, I resumed FCFs. I flew Papa Hotel Yankee with Phil Velasquez and other Flight Mechanics for the next four days. Papa Hotel Yankee had begun life with Air America as UH-34D Hotel-79, one of our line ships later transferred to Taiwan to comply with Customer requirements. After the conversion to an S-58T by mechanics at the large Tainan, Taiwan, maintenance facility by August 1971, this sixth Twinpac was registered 727 with the call sign Red Band. Not intended for use as a field ship, the Customer sequestered the machine for training and a special mission

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<sup>36</sup> Earning his bones at PS-22 on the eastern rim of the Bolovens Plateau, former Special Forces officer, Wil Greene, was considered an outstanding, "hands on" Case Officer who had no qualms about escorting his men in our helicopters on aggressive road operations. He was assigned his permanent nickname for courageous exploits as a Case Officer with his Pakse unit at the forward Phou Nok Kok site overlooking Route-7 in the Ban Ban area during the action-filled 1969-1970 Plain of Jars operation.

<sup>37</sup> Don Courtney Emails, 08/28/02, 04/30/16, 05/01/16.

involving six senior Chinese Nationalist pilots from the CNAF 34th Squadron. <sup>38</sup>

I was not apprised of any particulars at this time, but it was obvious to me that the machine was destined for highly classified special work, as the ship was being rewired and refitted with cockpit and electronics compartment provisions to accommodate LORAN-C equipment. There was also an extra hole cut in the console on the pilot side of the cockpit to accommodate an unspecified instrument.

Before arriving in Thailand in April 1972, 727 was re-registered as XW-PHY. Since Yankee displayed all the characteristics of a standard S-58T, except for black side letters on the lower side nose section common to all our ships, it looked exactly like any of our other five Twinpacs, and could be flown anywhere in our region without unduly arousing suspicion. Such ploys to conceal actual activities, as employed in various front organizations and swapping or duplication of aircraft registrations, were often used by the Agency to confuse interested parties and mask highly sensitive black operations. <sup>39</sup>

Also, during April, Air America Udorn received two Hughes-500 helicopters (N353X and N354X), ostensibly to use for medevac and transport missions. The U.S. Army used these ships (called a Loach in Army aviation) in South Vietnam to conduct reconnaissance and low-level flight missions to draw ground fire and identify enemy positions for gunship crews to engage. On our level, we wondered about the reason for these ships, and why now? The machines were an unwanted addition to our inventory,

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<sup>38</sup> Air America Captains Bob Hitchman and Bob Mahaffey were among those who conducted this training at the Tainan facility.

<sup>39</sup> Front: According to the Wikipedia website a front is an entity set up and controlled by another organization for other means. Air America, billed for world consumption as a humanitarian organization, was a prime example of an Agency front to implement USG policy.



One of two Hughes-500 helicopters received into the Air America Udorn inventory as a cover for the Agency Special Project activity.

*Air America Log*, Volume 6, #5, 1972.

since they only carried three passengers beside the pilot, had no fuel gage, and appeared quite fragile. <sup>40</sup> However, what we did not know at the time was that the ships were introduced as decoys to provide cover for classified, specially equipped Hughes-500Ps that would soon arrive in the Theater as principals in a top-secret mission. <sup>41</sup>

On 11 April 1971, an article appeared in the *Pacific Stars and Stripes* revealing some attributes of the new helicopter that was called "The Quiet One" by some individuals.

*"The Hughes Tool Company announced Thursday [8 April] it has developed the world's quietest helicopter on a hush-hush basis.*

*The firm said military security prevented disclosure of the precise extent of the noise reduction in the modified Army OH-6A light observation helicopter but said high-ranking Defense Department officials described it as 'dramatic.'*

*The chopper [a despised word in the Author's vocabulary] is a four-place turbine-powered craft which has been used for scouting in the Indochina fighting. It was developed as a research project by the company's aircraft division in Culver City, California.*

*The announcement said the modified helicopter was scarcely audible even when flying directly overhead.*

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<sup>40</sup> This was illusionary, for the fuselage was shaped and manufactured like an egg. In a crash, the aircraft was designed to roll, enhancing pilot survival.

<sup>41</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 383.  
Joe Leeker, UH-34D, H0tel-79, S-58T Papa Hotel Yankee, H-500, N353X, N354X.

Bill Leary April 1972 Notes. Beside management types Wayne Knight and Bob Davis, crews who eventually flew the machines were Nikki Fillipi, Izzy Freedman, Ken Wood, Don Overfield, and Larry Hennesy. Fillipi allowed the Author to fly a machine to PS-44 from Pakse one morning. I found that it was a very sensitive helicopter compared to larger S-58T equipment.

*Hughes vice president...said the quiet helicopter would have civilian as well as military application.*

*The noise abatement was achieved by slowing down engine and rotor speeds to as little as 67 percent of normal in-flight levels.*

*One blade was added to the main rotor and two blades to the tail rotor to maintain the necessary lift and thrust. In addition, a muffler was installed to quiet the rear of the jet engine exhaust and the entire power plant was blanketed with sound proof material to reduce whine.”<sup>42</sup>*

### **JIM PEARSON**

Senior fixed wing Captain Jim Pearson had been deeply involved in the Udorn Agency Special Project. On 7 January 1972, Jim and First Officer Clyde Morehouse--Clyde was not a member of the Special Project--without being apprised of the reason, departed Vientiane in N5662 for Taipei, Taiwan.<sup>43</sup> At the time 662 was the only Twin Otter equipped with both the Texas Instruments APQ-115 terrain following radar (TFR) and LORAN C. Fitted with long range tanks, they refueled at Pakse and then proceeded to their destination. (Ten plus fifteen, thirty-nine

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<sup>42</sup> *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, Volume 27, Number 100, Sunday edition 04/11/71, Shush-h-h That's a Whirlybird.

<sup>43</sup> Compartmentalization was Special Project manager's policy to contain and maintain secrecy. Helicopter and fixed wing crews were generally briefed separately for missions.

minutes night.) <sup>44</sup>

Upon arrival, Jim was briefed separately, and Morehouse was taken to a hotel. Working as a solo pilot, Pearson continued on to Hsin-Chu (Poppa Oscar NBD PO) on the 8th. Hsin-Chu was located along the Taiwan straits, southwest of Taipei. The 555 Chinese squadron base north of Taichung engaged in its own particular brand of Special Project or black activity. At Poppa Oscar (RCPO), Pearson was met by a small group of Chinese, and informed that he was there to check some of them out on the aircraft, and to conduct training on the terrain-following radar system (TFR) for night low level missions.

Training commenced the same day. At times, weather at the base was zero-zero, perfect conditions to demonstrate the TFR system's positive attributes, and foster confidence in the already-seasoned pilots. (Nine hours, two plus twenty-four night, thirty-eight landings.)

The following day, Jim conducted automatic direction finding (ADF) and ground-controlled approach (GCA) instrument work with the commanding officer, a colonel nicknamed "Skinny," who had conducted overflights and deep penetrations into Mainland China. Another pilot was nicknamed "Tiger." (Nine plus twenty-three, three hours night, four instrument, and thirty-six landings.)

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<sup>44</sup> Ken Conboy, 381.

James Pearson Email, 10/17/16.

Jim Pearson Far East Pilot Association (FEPA) log entry for 7 January 1972.

Jim Pearson's FEPA logbook entries indicate Twin Otter 662 was in use by 4 November 1971. The Author recalls the dark blue aircraft on the Air America ramp with Captain Pete Parker proudly standing alongside. With Texas Instrument's technical representatives, Plummer and John Zagrodnik, monitoring the TFR system, Jim Pearson conducted training. Over several weeks, Pete Parker, Jim Rhyne, Don Romes, Ben Coleman, Paul Broussard were checked out and some night Trail missions conducted.

Training continued. Over a four-day period, the participants logged ninety-one takeoff and landings.

Satisfied that he had performed his assigned job, on the 12th, Jim returned to Taipei, retrieved First Officer Morehouse, and returned to Vientiane to resume "normal" work (ten plus thirty-nine). <sup>45</sup>

Pearson thought he would never see or work with the Chinese pilots again. However, on 17 January, without benefit of a briefing, he was instructed to proceed in 662 to PS-44 and conduct terrain-following radar (TFR) night navigation training missions. The same Chinese pilots--Yu and Liu--from the 555th were at the site, ready and waiting for further training. The first day of field training was employed as a confidence building warmup period, and to get used to landing on a rough field, unlike those prepared ones used in Taiwan. Yu conducted seven landings; Liu four. (Eight hours.) <sup>46</sup>

After some daytime work on the 18th, the first intended night TFR training session nearly marked their last. The Otter was completely topped off--including wing tanks--to present the pilot with a particular aircraft feel, that on landing, could cause the PIC to land short. Thirty minutes after departing the hard-sandy strip at PS-44, and descending to 195 feet above ground level (AGL) to commence TFR training, the radar malfunctioned and a decision was made to RTB.

Jim, who was observing from the passenger compartment because of the lack of an IP jump seat installed in the entrance to the cockpit, went forward to re-brief the two Chinese on what to expect with the almost full fuel state. He stressed that because of a unique tendency to stall at a much higher speed,

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<sup>45</sup> Jim Pearson, FEPA logbook entries for 7-12 January 1972.

<sup>46</sup> For the approximate location of PS-44 in Military Region Four refer to the maps on page 90 and 92.



not to slow indicated air speed below seventy knots, and to be aware of a heavy nose condition. Then, without benefit of an instructor pilot jump seat straddling the cockpit entrance, he returned to the cabin section to watch. Either Yu did not fully comprehend the instructions, or he chose to ignore them, for as he approached the runway's east end, the aircraft stalled, and hit short below the strip in an unfinished area full of short tree stumps. The plane bounced and jinked crazily through the maze of stumps, eventually ending up on the runway. Cringing, Jim feared the worst, but investigation revealed absolutely no damage. After disembarking and a critique with the ChiNats, Pearson returned to Vientiane for TFR repair.

While the equipment was being repaired, Jim returned to PS-44 the next day. He conducted low level flight and numerous landings (thirty) with Liu and Yu to ensure no repeat of the near miss the previous day. (Nine hours, two hours night.) He RON at PS-44 with the pilots and Customer.

Liu and Yu's low-level training continued on the 20th (seven plus eleven, five landings). Jim returned to Udorn for reinstallation of TFR equipment, which consumed the next day and was dedicated to this chore.

After returning to Military Region Four and conducting some logistic flights between Pakse and PS-44, local training resumed. During forty-four minutes TFR work with Liu and Yu, equipment malfunction occurred again, necessitating a return to Udorn for repair. (Six plus forty-nine.)

The next day, before proceeding to PS-44 in 662, two local flights were conducted from Vientiane to check the TFR operation. Results were satisfactory and Pearson managed nearly three hours TRF training with Liu and Yu, with one plus fifty occurring at night.

The Customer was becoming concerned at the slow pace of training for the two Chinese, so, with the electronic equipment working properly, accelerated training commenced on the 24th, with ten plus twenty-five TFR work, three plus twenty-four at night. Further training was relatively normal, but with increased low-level flights and proficiency demands on Liu and Yu. This included night drops at designated drop zones on the 26th and 28th.

Logging a total of 123 landings, low level and day-night TFR training continued until 3 February. At that point, without any explanation, the exercise suddenly ceased. Pearson departed the site and never saw Liu or Yu again. Since he was the only IP qualified on terrain following radar equipment, he was certain that the project had been terminated. Actually, his gut feeling convinced him that the two Asian men were never particularly happy flying low-level flights at night. <sup>47</sup>

On Friday 28 April, I continued all-day FCFs of Papa Hotel Yankee with Flight Mechanic Greg Burch. (Two plus forty.)

The next day was a half-day repeat of previous FCFs. However, in addition to Flight Mechanic Charlie Brigham, after a FCF of over an hour, electronics expert Tom Deeble joined us to evaluate the efficacy of the newly installed LORAN-C equipment. (Two hours.) A pleasant person, Tom was very helpful with explanations, and after cautioning me to remain quiet about what we were doing, clarified items regarding the equipment to which I had not been previously privy.

By osmosis and visual cues, over time I was becoming more aware of the "Sneaky Pete" work to which our program was

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<sup>47</sup> Jim Pearson Emails, 05/02/98, 05/09/98, 06/14/98.  
Jim Pearson logbook entries for 17 January to 3 February 1972.  
Joe Leeker, The Twin Otter and Jim Pearson's recollection of the Special Project.

subjected. However, without actually or fully realizing it, I was becoming inexorably drawn into a spider web of silence and Agency machinations that even though I had no taste for cross-border operations, would ultimately result in my active participation in Special Project operations. <sup>48</sup>

The final day of April, Bill Long and I continued testing Yankee. (Two plus twenty-five.) At the end of the day, I had the utmost hope that the ship would not be subject to the compressor blade and stall problems our other engines had experienced.

### **CREW SURVIVAL EQUIPMENT**

During the early days of the Udorn Air America operation, Company-issued survival/safety equipment was bulky, antiquated, in short supply, unsatisfactory, or nonexistent. That we obtained any, often relied on hand-me-downs from Customer-USAF channels, or personal items brought from former squadrons. Some equipment was scrounged from Special Forces White Star teams by other means, or brought from Nam by crews arriving from that region. Equipment obtained by the Air America Supply Department was generally delivered in poor condition (dirty, oil-stained flack vests), and lacked the state of the art necessary for crew survival.

As the war escalated and our outstanding participation in SAR work was recognized by the U.S. military, newer more functional equipment became part of our supply system. Survival

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<sup>48</sup> The Teledyne LORAN-C prototype equipment was installed on a metal pedestal in the space between the pilot and copilot seats. Used for long range navigation, the system employed pulse-type transmissions emitted from ground installations in Thailand and South Vietnam. Lines of position signals were received by onboard equipment and displayed in red digital numerals. When the readout was applied to LORAN charts, an accurate track of aircraft position could be determined. This special navigation feature will be explained later in more detail.

vests were introduced the included pockets for radios, flares, mirrors, and other items. These were later upgraded as better equipment worked its way through the military system.

At one-point in the conflict, ballistic flight helmets became a mandatory part of our inventory. The heavy item, which had a tendency to pull one's head forward and down, initially caused a headache. It took some getting used to, but it was proven to provide some protection from shrapnel and small arms fire. Like other lighter crew helmets, it incorporated clear plastic and Polaroid visors for eye and face protection against shattering windscreens and intense sunlight.

Despite the occasional upgrading of our equipment, we were never officially allowed to carry weapons in order to cope with the hostile environment in Laos. This Company policy continued for many years until a Bell crew was shot down on the Plain of Jars and survived only by the use of personal arms. After that, the Agency introduced the Israeli Uzi submachine gun, which became an integral part of the Air America supply inventory at Udorn. <sup>49</sup>

Helicopters, inherently a maintenance nightmare, incorporate numerous moving parts subject to wear under less than desirable operating conditions. These parts had a tendency to malfunction or fail at inopportune times, which often resulted in forced landings. Despite the autorotation feature common to helicopters, an uncontrolled crash could result in a fire. The Sikorsky UH-34D fuselage was manufactured mainly out of magnesium, a light metal, that when ignited, furiously burned into white ash. Adding to the saying that a H-34 was a flying

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<sup>49</sup> By that time, most crewmembers carried a variety of weapons upcountry. Although not Company policy, as long as there was crew discretion employed, a wink-wink attitude prevailed at Udorn. The Author began carrying a 22 Ruger revolver early, then an M-2 carbine, and lastly a more potent and durable Soviet type AK-47 assault rifle.

bomb, the R-1820 reciprocating engine consumed a highly volatile mixture of 115/145 aviation gasoline that readily burned and was not crew friendly in a crash.

Turbine engine helicopters were somewhat different. In order to minimize fires after a crash, kerosene-based fuel with a high flash point, like commercial Jet-A or military JP-1, was used. This had been instigated by Air America President Paul Velte, Chief Safety Department Doug Dreyfus, and many others. At one point there was an economy push to change the fuel to cheaper J-5, with a much lower flash point, and available through the U.S. military system. This change was resisted by higher ups and we continued to use Jet-1 in the Bells and Twinpacs.

Further steps were taken to protect us in the event of a fiery crash. This took the form of uniforms made from flame resistant Nomex, a product marketed by the DuPont Chemical Company in 1967. Doug Dreyfus was the driving force behind the change from polyester cloth uniforms, which melted and burned into one's flesh during a fire. Doug put a lot of effort and public relations into its usage, as every time he arrived from Taipei, he displayed yet another version of the Nomex material that was originally tested by race car drivers in 1966.

Gray Nomex uniforms eventually became a reality. Trousers were double layered to take advantage of air space that provided additional protection. The long-sleeved shirts were very uncomfortable, hot and sticky in the tropical environment. The condition was somewhat better if exposed to a breeze and during the cooler season. The material also emitted a sweet odor that I never could exactly identify.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The odor could have been apricot.

Despite crew objections, it was mandatory to wear the new uniforms. Later, over Dreyfus' objections, short sleeved shirts became available for hot season wear, and helicopter crews had the option to wear them. Popular Nomex gloves were later issued.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> EW Knight, 12/03/00.

*"Early May reports from RLA military region headquarters at Long Tieng indicated that combat activity there had dropped to the lowest level since the beginning of the dry season, and that Skyline Ridge had successfully been retaken by government forces."* <sup>1</sup>

**F**ollowing an early FCF of Papa Hotel Alpha, on 1 May Mike Lappiere, Deak Kennedy, and I crewed Papa Hotel Yankee (PHY) to Wattay Airport, where we obtained an early lunch. Then we continued on to Long Tieng where, with most of Skyline Ridge back in friendly hands, the situation appeared more relaxed. Indicative of this, a C-130 crew landed without incident. Moreover, support facilities were being refitted for soon-to-be initiated T-28 activity. <sup>2</sup>

We worked until dark and recovered at Wattay Airport (Seven plus forty-three, twenty-five sorties). To my knowledge, this was Yankee's first upcountry trip and field shakedown for the work anticipated in the Special Project.

The next morning, we had to wait for weather to clear in The Alternate bowl. After finally arriving and flying four plus hours (twenty sorties), the inevitable happened, a compressor stall. I did not know the machine well and was both surprised and disappointed that a Twinpac not previously in the Udorn inventory displayed the same problems as our other five ships. It caused me to wonder if something must be inherently wrong with the Pratt and Whitney PT-6 engines.

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<sup>1</sup> XXCC, CIA Synopsis.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Leary Notes, FIC Tom Sullivan report for 05/01/72.

We recovered at Udorn after dark and placed the machine in the Maintenance Department's hands to conduct their magic. <sup>3</sup>

### **WASHINGTON RUMINATES**

How to proceed in Laos appeared to be the question of the day during the Henry Kissinger-led discussions of the Washington Special Action Group in early May. <sup>4</sup> Lack of funds seemed to be the primary subject on the docket. In response to Ambassador Godley's query regarding courses of action, and emphasis on harassing the enemy in southern Laos, as opposed to the north, it was noted that due to the lack of adequate funding, operations had to be deferred until the new fiscal year. Current financial resources were very close to the annual Symington-mandated ceiling. There was absolutely no chance of obtaining any increase prior to July.

As to enemy dispositions in Military Region Two, portions of two North Vietnamese divisions were either in place or becoming available (two regiments of the 312th Division and the entire 335th Division). Seventh Air Force was currently looking for one regiment of the withdrawing 312th along Route-7. It was speculated that the 316th Division had incurred fifty percent casualties during the battle for Long Tieng and was also withdrawing.

The discussion then centered on Vang Pao's intentions during and after the enemy pull back from his defense line. It was believed that the aggressive commander would certainly seize the initiative and press toward the enemy, but the lack of

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<sup>3</sup> This was the final time I flew S-58T XW-PHY. After being determined airworthy, the ship was relocated to PS-44 for highly classified Special Project work that will be explained in later chapters.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Kissinger had returned from unproductive secret negotiations with North Vietnamese leaders in Paris, France.



current funds would prevent any expensive large-scale operations like the former year on the Plain of Jars. It was noted that a small operation was already underway in the direction of Phou Pha Sai.<sup>5</sup>

### **VANG PAO MOVES OUT**

Regardless of Washington's rear echelon trepidation and quandary as to what actions to allow in north Laos, Vang Pao's wet season push to regain territory was already underway. By the end of the first week in May, George Bacon's battalion, secretly embarked on an end run since mid-April, reached former commanding defensive positions on Phou Long Mat with minimum resistance.<sup>6</sup>

Enemy intelligence was aware of Kayak's battalion movement toward the edge of the PDJ, and commanders initiated steps to limit the advance. The 335th Regiment and other enemy units were alerted. Orders were issued to prevent further government expansion from hill top 1975 to Hill 1900 on Phou Long Mat and northern points overlooking Site-72.

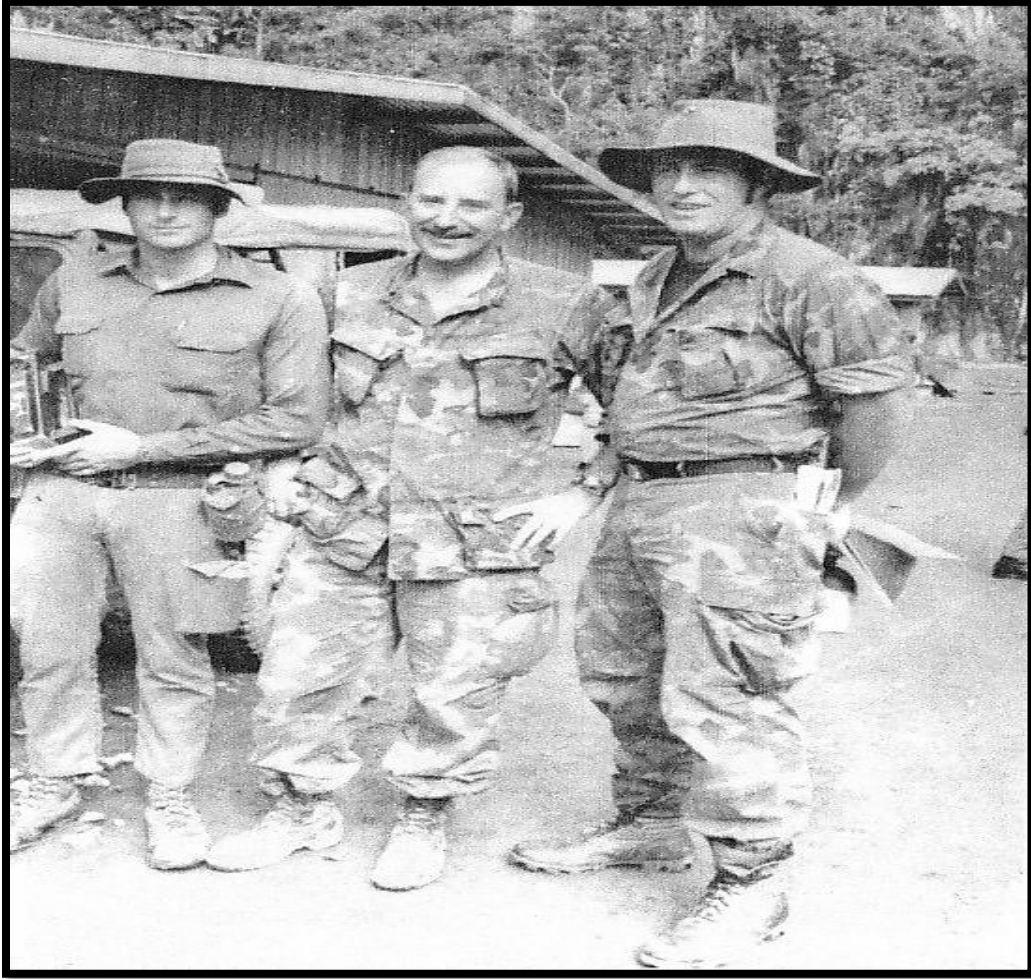
At the same time, like a train in motion, six Thai battalions moved north toward Sam Tong. By the 11<sup>th</sup>, the town returned to government hands. In less than a week, one light and one heavy howitzer FSB were established there, with intentions to support operations to retake the northern defensive Vang Pao line.

The high point at Phu Pha Sai, lodged at the northwestern end of Padong Ridge, overlooked the newly-constructed Route-54. The position was considered a prize possession of the Vietnamese

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<sup>5</sup> FRUS, Volume 8, Document-119, Minutes of the Washington Special Action Group Meeting, Washington, May 4, 1972, Vietnam.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Conboy, 343.



Field Case Officers Kayak (George Bacon), Digger (George O'Dell), and Ringo (Tom Mathews) at Long Tieng.

for intelligence purposes, and an excellent front-line site. Moreover, if held through the wet season it would constitute a launching point during the next dry season offensive. Consequently, ejecting enemy from the position became a prime objective to regain the eastern defensive line around Long Tieng. In order to effect this goal, five battalions--Meo, Yao, and various tribals from Nam Yu and Xieng Lom--gathered in several areas in and around Padong. On the 8th, the same day Thai forces launched toward Sam Tong, these mixed units maneuvered along the nine-mile-long ridge toward Phu Pha Sai, and toward the main elements of the 335th Regiment. Contested, the advance was slow. Realizing that they were outnumbered by Vang Pao's troops and prevailing air strikes, an enemy unit removed a page out of Vang Pao's diversionary playbook, attacking and seizing lightly-defended Padong. Coping with the new threat, after five days moving northwest, elements of the Phu Pha Sai task force reversed course to address the problem at Site Five.

*"...government irregulars have made little progress in their campaign to retake the hills southwest of the [PDJ]. The four [five] battalion task force that has been trying to move toward Phou Pha Sai, a strategic high point overlooking the Plaine, has suffered numerous casualties, and some units have pulled back."*<sup>7</sup>

By the 18<sup>th</sup>, Padong was back in the fold and the task force resumed the offensive to capture Phu Pha Sai.

As a 19 May letter from President Nixon to Ambassador McMurtrie Godley attested, Washington was pleased with the American efforts in Laos:

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<sup>7</sup> CIA Synopsis, XXCC.  
Ken Conboy, 343.  
CIA Bulletin, Laos, 05/18/72.

*"The communist dry season offensive in Laos has been blunted this year, largely through the tireless efforts of your Mission. You have done a tremendous job under difficult conditions and I want to express my deep appreciation, on behalf of the American people, for the distinguished leadership you have displayed in this critical situation..."*

Before twixing his personnel regarding the letter, Ambassador Godley responded to the president's letter on 8 June:

*"Your most thoughtful and generous letter of May 19 addressed to me is tribute to the men and women of this Mission who showed such devotion to duty during a very difficult five months.*

*It is therefore with great pride and gratitude to you, Mister President, that I have taken the liberty of transmitting your views to the American members of the Mission, and to the employees of Air America and Continental Air Services who carried out with such gallantry their responsibilities to our government..."*

Within a week the memorandum was sent by the Air America Vice President of Laos to the Company President in Taipei. <sup>8</sup>

### **KNIGHT CONTINUES TO PREPARE FOR RETURN TO MANAGEMENT**

On 1 May Wayne continued his temporary H-34 transition façade with Don Henthorn in Hotel-74 at Pakse. One trip took them to PS-45, a Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) training camp, located thirteen miles south of Lima-11 on the northwest side of

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<sup>8</sup> Memorandum from Ambassador Godley to All American Employees of the Mission, 06/10/72.

Godley letter to President Nixon, 06/08/72.

Inter-Office Routing Slip, VP, Laos to President Taipei, 06/14/72.

Author Note: I do not recall reading any memorandum relating to this communication.

the Mekong River. <sup>9</sup> Another was to Phou Batiene, an early FAR intercept-radio site three miles northeast of Pakse. There was at least one infiltration mission that included three H-34 crews inserting troops in the Bolovens northwest foothills. The crew RON at the Company hostel.

The next day, the crew worked local landing zones, and Wayne rode back to Udorn with Mick Prulhiere in Hotel-92. That flight marked the end of Knight's line flying duties. From the fourth through the twelfth, he was in Taipei for briefings and a prelude to resuming his former chief pilot job. Considered a relaxing period, he golfed with assistant Vice President Flight Operations (AVPFO) Don Teeters and enjoyed dinner at several homes.

Prior to assuming the CPH slot, his mind set was fine. The FEPA harassment had no effect on his performance. Even FEPA President Phil Payton was still friendly, assuring him that there was nothing personal in the grievance action.

Following his return from Taipei, there was not a lot of transition work or briefings upon assuming the Chief Pilot position. John Ford did not remain long before proceeding to Washington for other duties, but he did introduce Wayne to Special Project Manager Buddy Rogers. <sup>10</sup>

Dick Elder had been the ACPH for some time. and likely assumed that he would be next in line for promotion to the top job. When it was first announced that Wayne would be the new CPH, Elder asked Ford if Wayne's regaining the job had been preordained. Knowing that Elder was understandingly miffed, Ford informed Knight that he would probably have problems with Dick,

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<sup>9</sup> These training camps were staffed with U.S. Army Special Forces advisors, who prepared the troops for cross border operations.

<sup>10</sup> EW Knight signed my May 1972 Crewmember Duty Report in the Chief Pilot spot.

and he could remove him from the ACPH position before Wayne took over if he desired. Knight indicated this was not necessary and he would attempt to work with him.

They remained in the same office for a short time, but the ensuing resentment was just too great, and Elder became progressively difficult to get along with. Relations were strained, and Dick became very active in FEPA. In June, when Wayne informed Elder that he wanted his resignation, all was amicable, and it remains so today. <sup>11</sup>

On the 23rd, Jerry McEntee administered Wayne's H-34 PIC proficiency check in Hotel-91. After the flight check Wayne FCF 35F. Returning to the FCF routine, he tested XW-PFG on the 24th. On the last day of the month, he serviced local landing zones with Jim Sweeney in Gulf at Long Tieng. (Eight plus zero nine.) Leaving the aircraft at Wattay Airport, he returned to Udorn.

On the seventh and eighth, outstanding Flight Mechanic Gary Gentz, other ground mechanics, and I spent mornings testing XW-PHB.

The next day, along with Gentz and First Officer Ray Purvis, I was scheduled early to work Bravo at Long Tieng. Supplying newly-developed and already-established FSB positions, I flew forty sorties and supported troop movement to recovery territory. (Ten plus twenty-five.) We recovered at Wattay Airport for RON in Vientiane.

The Long Tieng commute continued on the 10th. Slingsing prepared loads of artillery ammunition and shuttling troops, we again supported Vang Pao's consolidation efforts and Thai FSBs. (Forty-five sorties and more than eleven hours flight time.)

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<sup>11</sup> EW Knight Emails, 11/13/00, 12/01/99.

Author Note: Dick Elder was an intelligent, good person. However, at times he could be a high-strung, demanding, opinionated individual, who reluctantly suffered fools.

Landing after dark, we spent another night in the administrative capital.

Thursday was partially different, in that we conducted a Special Mission to the west-northwest near Xieng Dat (LS-26). The mission limited the amount of time logged (seven plus forty) because of briefings and coordination with our A-1 escort. This exercise was conducted to complement General Vang Pao's northern and eastern forays into enemy areas, and attempts to restore his extended defense line.

After more than two dozen sorties, despite all maintenance's work in re-blading compressors and changing components, and my testing, one of Bravo's power sections stalled. It was disappointing, and provided evidence that there were just too many factors involved in the ongoing compressor stalling problem. We landed at the Air America facility well after dark.

Because of our late arrival, we were not scheduled to depart Udorn until mid-morning of the 12<sup>th</sup>, when Purvis, Gentz, and I ferried Papa Hotel Echo upcountry to continue the supply work in and around The Alternate. After thirty sorties and six plus fifteen hours, I secured Echo at Wattay Airport and deadheaded to Udorn on Hotel-86.

Captain Mike Jarina, returned from an extended home leave, flew a local combined two-hour FCF and refresher flight with Marius Burke and Flight Mechanic Israel in 35F. The following day, Mike and Marius ferried 35F to The Alternate, where they spent the day supporting movement to expand defenses. (Forty sorties, eight plus forty hours.) Leaving the Bell on the ramp, they deadheaded to Udorn on 576.

On the fifteenth, Jarina, Burke, and Tod Yourglich crewed Papa Foxtrot Gulf to Long Tieng, where after a long day (nine plus fifty), they RON at Vientiane.

Tuesday morning, while I spent the entire day testing Papa Hotel Alpha and Papa Hotel Delta with Leveriza, the crew of PFG returned to The Alternate, where they supported operations to the west at Phou Da Pho (LS-103) in the northern foothills of the Long Pot area. Like those scattered throughout the southern Plain of Jars, this site revealed several ancient stone jars on its slopes. Also bolstering Vang Pao's northwest flank, they worked at Ban Nam Thao (LS-161), located ten miles northwest of Long Tieng on the west side of the Nam Ngum, and close to Ban Nong One (LS-101). After flying almost ten hours, they secured at Wattay Airport for the night.

On the 17<sup>th</sup>, my struggles attempting to upgrade Papa Hotel Alpha and Papa Hotel Delta to an airworthy condition consumed my day. Flight Mechanic Charlie Brigham assisted.

Meanwhile, JJ McCauley replaced Burke in Papa Foxtrot Gulf. Together, the crew returned upcountry to work at the recently recovered Sam Tong and Ban Son. After logging eight plus forty hours, they RON at Vientiane. The next morning, the same crew returned to LS-272 and began moving people between Long Tieng and LS-103. At day's end they again RON in Vientiane (seven plus twenty). <sup>12</sup>

After consolidating their move into Sam Tong, Thai units marched east to regain positions on Zebra (Sebra or Romeo) Ridge, where they would oppose elements of the 174th Regiment. <sup>13</sup>

At mid-morning on the nineteenth, I was summoned to the field to standby for a flight upcountry. All ships were needed to support the push forward in order to resume occupation of former northern defensive ridges and hilltop positions.

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<sup>12</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews. Mike had arrived in Udorn during mid-1965. His information has been beneficial and essential in filling in narrative gaps when the Author was absent from the field.

<sup>13</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 343.



When Papa Hotel Echo was towed out of the barn to a spot on the parking lot, Captain Scratch Kanach, Flight Mechanic Deak Kennedy, and I climbed onboard with the intention of going upcountry. This was not to be. Within ten minutes of starting the engines and engaging the rotor blade system, the engine chip detector light illuminated on the number two power section. After securing the ship and waiting for the engines to cool, sufficient metal was found on the magnetic plug to warrant further investigation in the hangar. Already late, we had to abort our plans.

The Jarina, McCauley, Noble crew resumed efforts around The Alternate, Ban Son, Phou Da Pho, and Mounng Cha (LS-113), the refugee and troop training center southeast of Phou Bia. The men recovered at Udorn. (Eight hours.)

The next day, after a short FCF of XW-PHE, I was reassigned Papa Hotel Bravo. DeMartini, Gary Gentz, and I subsequently ferried the machine to The Alternate. During the day, we shuttled recently-arrived Savannakhet GM-30 troops from Long Tieng to Padong for a resumed effort to retake Phou Pha Sai. In support, two 155mm guns were lifted by U.S. Army heavy lift crews to artillery pits at Charlie Tango, where they could hurl shells toward Phou Pha Sai, Romeo Ridge, and beyond. Arriving at Wattay Airport after dark, we RON in town after logging over eight hours and ten sorties. Flying 96W Jarina, McCauley, and Yourglich remained local for slightly less than one hour.

Sunday morning, First Officer Dave Cox replaced DeMartini as we resumed Long Tieng work that included shuttles to Padong and supply missions to local positions. We again RON in Vientiane, where Flight Mechanic Greg Burch waited to replace Gentz.

On the 22nd, we returned to The Alternate. Along with other crews, Mike Jarina, Larry Taylor, and Phil Velasquez were there

in 96W to help support the multi-battalion push toward Phou Pha Sai from Padong. Attesting to the high level of activity during nine hours and twenty minutes, Mike logged sixty-seven landings. In eleven plus forty-five hours of flying, I logged forty sorties. Somewhat fatigued from the intense work, everyone RTB Wattay Airport after dark.

The same day Vietnamese engineer comrade Xuandao wrote in his diary:

*"For the past several days enemy aircraft have bombed us ferociously. The enemy is launching his rainy season counteroffensive. I have seen infantry troops coming and going in great numbers. The 174th Regiment has replaced the 335th Regiment in its positions defending Phou Pha Sai, and our battalion's 1st Company has been attached to 174th to help it defend the position there."*

Two of Xuandao's friends assigned to 1st Company were killed on 2 June while defending Phou Pha Sai. <sup>14</sup>

The following morning, I joined Jim DeMartini and Flight Mechanic Bill Long in Papa Hotel Alpha. During another long day, I conducted fifty personal sorties before returning to Udorn (ten plus thirty-five). Flying seventy-three landings (nine plus fifteen hours), Jarina far exceeded my effort, with shuttles in the LS-103, Pong Hai (LS-361), and LS-161 areas west of Phou Long Pot.

Mixed government battalions in and around Padong moved out toward the Phou Pha Sai high ground. They would be opposed by two Vietnamese battalions from the 148th and 174th Regiments,

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<sup>14</sup> Xuandao Diary, 05/22/72, 06/02/72. The latter is the final input the Author has relating to Xuandao's harrowing recorded experiences in Laos.

who had relieved the battle weary 335th Regiment. <sup>15</sup> Access to the area was much easier for enemy forces since completion of Route-54 from the Plain of Jars. In addition, an alternate route wound east from Xieng Khouang Ville, south along Route-4 to the intersection of the Nam Siam, and west toward Phou Pha Sai, where numerous caves, formed over eons of erosion by streams and normal weathering, laced the base and face of the long massif, and afforded cover and concealment. At least one cave was so large that it would accommodate up to a battalion of men. Such caverns were also present to the northeast, north, and west. <sup>16</sup>

On the 24th, Captain Jarina, Taylor, and Velasquez departed Wattay Airport very early in Bell Papa Foxtrot Hotel for The Alternate. Flying a combined 117 landings, they supported the movement on Phou Pha Sai. <sup>17</sup> As a diversion to the Padong operation, enemy artillery resumed, unleashing a shelling attack of fifty rounds against the Long Tieng base. Logging ten plus forty hours, the crew recovered at Wattay Airport.

The next morning, Mike Jarina and crew headed north in Hotel. During a very long, active day (eleven hours, 122 landings), they supported the Phou Pha Sai operation from Padong to VII landing zone. Despite friendly efforts, enemy defenses proved too strong to penetrate. At dark Mike recovered at Wattay Airport.

The first ship to depart the Vientiane airport each morning was designated the "Early Bird." The task was multifaceted, checking en route weather and the up-to-date situation at The

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<sup>15</sup> CIA Synopsis, XXCC.  
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 344.

<sup>16</sup> The enemy was adept at using caves to avoid detection, air strikes, conceal crew served guns, and movement of large numbers of troops.

<sup>17</sup> Mike Jarina logged a combination of cockpit occupant landings; I only logged my individual sorties.



Bell 205 XW-PFH on the ramp at Long Tieng with partial crew and troops.

Alternate, and delivering some Customers. Now, flying Papa Foxtrot Juliet, Jarina, Heible, and Noble were the "Early Bird" designee on the 26th.

The enemy had not forgotten Long Tieng. While the crew conducted seventy-six landings and ten plus forty hours, five artillery rounds landed in the valley. As darkness enveloped Laos, they secured at the Wattay Airport ramp reserved specifically for helicopters.

Again designated "Early Bird" the following morning, the same crew launched north. Even though incoming rounds splashed around the area from 1130 to 1730 hours, they managed to work, obtaining the same number of landings and almost the identical flight time. During one period, Mike was informed that rockets were landing and to avoid the down strip sling load area. When an inbound pilot called requesting the current situation, Mike told him the area next to the loading pad was being hit. Another pilot piped up, *"Stupid, don't start spotting for the enemy."* The man was entirely correct, and Mike readily acknowledged this fact. After another RON at Vientiane, finished for the month, Jarina deadheaded to Udorn on 292. <sup>18</sup>

The Alternate "Early Bird" assignment was also shared by other crews RONing at Vientiane. Jack Knotts departed at dawn one morning in a Huey. Upon his arrival, a C-130 aircraft was idling on the upper ramp. As Jack entered downwind, he noticed a Helio Courier pilot on final approach. Because of the ability of the STOL plane to stop in a relatively short space, the pilot normally landed long and immediately taxied into the parking ramp. This time the technique almost produced an accident.

The Pilot, BJ Singleton, was surprised when his plane was caught in the C-130 prop wash and thrown into the air. Still

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<sup>18</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

moving, BJ clobbered the engine and landed on the opposite side, where the parachute rigging area was located.

Knotts had known Singleton in Saigon, where he was known as an ace pilot. After Knotts secured his helicopter, he walked to the coffee shop in a bunker against the karst. BJ was sitting inside, with his hands shaking badly. <sup>19</sup>

*...Vang Pao's irregulars are beginning to make progress in their effort to recapture the hills southwest of the [PDJ]. Advance elements of an irregular task force have moved to within three miles of Phou Pha Sai...*

*Units from another task force have moved from Sam Tong and occupied hills four and five miles to the east."* <sup>20</sup>

Despite the CIA's somewhat optimistic bulletin, at month's end, the Phou Pha Sai task force was still stalled in its endeavor to eject the enemy. To the west, two Thai battalions were also unable to make substantial progress at Phou Long Mat.<sup>21</sup>

### **ACTION IN THE SOUTH**

*"The Lao Army battalion garrisoned at Khong Sedone withdrew to positions about one mile south of the town after the communists shelled the main camp and communist ground troops overran a nearby outpost. <sup>22</sup> Most of the town's 2,500 inhabitants have fled, and a small force of police and armed civilians is expected to withdraw shortly.*

*Small [Vietnamese] and [Pathet Lao] units have shelled and probed Khong Sedone in the past, but the town has never before been in enemy hands. A [NVA] rallier claimed in April that the*

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<sup>19</sup> Former Air America Captain Jack Knotts Interview.

<sup>20</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 05/30/72.

<sup>21</sup> Ken Conboy, 344.

<sup>22</sup> Graphic located on page 92.

*communists did not intend to hold the town if the government pulled out.*

*By attacking Khong Sedone, the communists [three battalions from the 39 Regiment] probably hope to forestall rainy season forays by the government into the Bolovens Plateau. The loss of the town cuts the government's principal route north from Pakse. Government leaders in south Laos presumably will order troops currently in reserve at Pakse to recapture Khong Sedone."* <sup>23</sup>

### **A MISSION GONE BAD**

After securing for the evening, H-34 helicopter pilots at Pakse were advised that there would be a briefing for a Special Mission at 0730 hours the next morning in the 713 Customer's office.

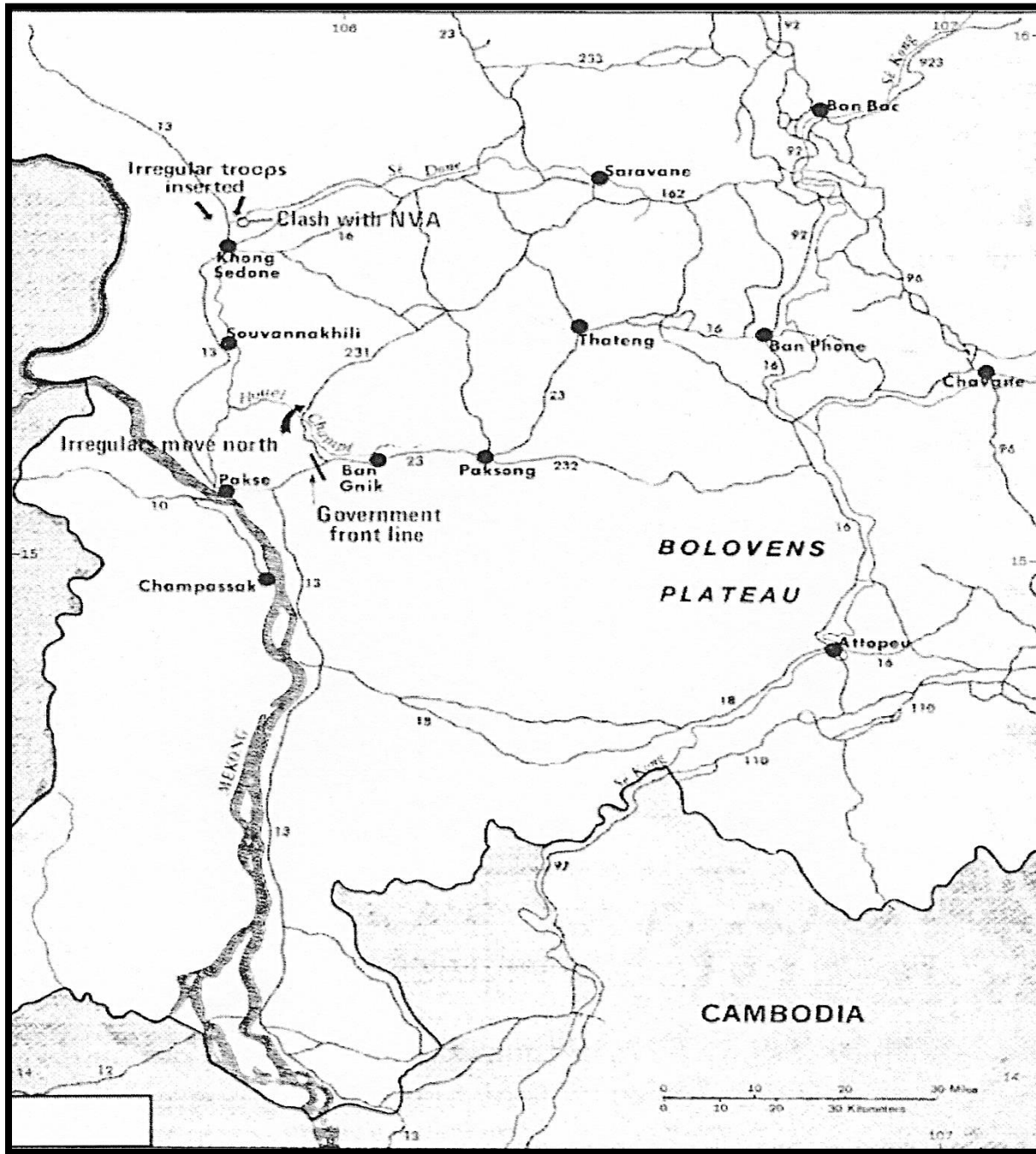
Cockpit crews from Hotel-92 (Tony Byrne, Bill Johnson), Hotel-45 (Joe Lopes, Bill Collier), Hotel-59 pilots, and the Lao crew from 9320 assembled at the appointed time. In addition, the Continental pilot from Porter 53X was present. He would carry a Customer and a local, who would coordinate with ground troops.

The mission was relatively simple, but a bit vague, and lacking in the detail normally presented in previous missions. Three H-34 crews would load ten troops each from a landing zone six miles south of Khong Sedone on Route-13, and shuttle them to the Phou Khong high ground, a mile west of, and overlooking Khong Sedone.

Dissatisfied with the briefing, Captain Byrne, senior pilot and flight leader, asked pertinent questions normally included in a briefing. Not much more information was revealed, except that not long before, the enemy had chased government troops off

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<sup>23</sup> CIA Bulletin, 05/18/72, Laos: The government is abandoning Khong Sedone, a provincial capital in south Laos some thirty miles from Pakse.



CIA map of Khong Sedone and lower Military Region Four, 05/18/72.



the landing zone. Currently, no known enemy were located at the WC8323 pad or on the hill mass. Other questions were answered, "I don't know."

Troop pickup was scheduled for 0900 hours, but was delayed until 1000. Without explanation, another delay extended the launch until 1400.

With Hotel-92 in the lead, 9320 second, Hotel-59 the third troop carrier, and Hotel-45 the designated SAR ship, the group arrived and approached the first landing zone. While Byrne prepared to land, T-28 pilots, controlled by the Raven-41 FAC, headed toward the drop-off point to recon and conduct dry runs on the second landing zone.

The armada moved out toward the north with twenty-eight troops onboard. While en route, Byrne was advised that there were two DZs--the main pad, and a more open area surrounded by trees west of the landing zone. He elected to land on the latter.

Having arrived as a new hire in 1965, Byrne was considered an "old timer," one who had seen it all, and would not blindly enter a controversial objective without first assessing the situation. Therefore, because there had been some doubt as to the viability of the pad and the current situation, he first simulated a landing to draw potential ground fire should any enemy be present. Satisfied that the landing zone was clear, he landed.

The enemy was patiently waiting. Immediately after touching down, small arms and mortar fire enveloped the area. Byrne immediately grabbed a "handful of throttle" and departed to the south, heading toward lower ground. Having incurred battle damage, he reported in the blind that the engine was cutting out, and began a rapid descent toward an open rice paddy. Simultaneously, Hotel-45 followed Hotel-92 to the ground.

After a hard landing, the right air-oil oleo strut collapsed and Hotel-92 sagged to the right. Instead of waiting until the rotor blades stopped rotating, perhaps concerned about a potential fire, Flight Mechanic Fred Alor (DOH 09/13/68) and the troops exited the ship. Alor was struck by a low blade and killed. One Lao soldier was also hit in the back and injured. <sup>24</sup>

While Lopes remained at the controls of Hotel-45, Captain Collier and Flight Mechanic TL Adger (DOH 09/21/70) aided Byrne and Captain Johnson in moving Alor and the Lao soldier to Hotel-45. Additional equipment from Hotel-92 was transferred to the SAR ship. The Lao trooper was delivered to the PS-18 hospital and the crew of Hotel-45 RTB Lima-11. From there, transportation was arranged for them and Fred Alor's body to Udorn.

Some blame for the loss of an aircraft and crewmember was accorded the Pakse Customer, after it was discovered from pilots who had previously worked in the Khong Sedone area that some pertinent information regarding the landing area was misrepresented or left out of the briefing. <sup>25</sup>

The situation at Khong Sedone failed to improve.

*"Two [Vietnamese] battalions [from the 39 Regiment] on 28 May encircled three under strength battalions moving toward Khong Sedone from the east. By the end of the day the government commander could account for less than half of his 660 men. An attempt by a fourth battalion to take the mountain just west of the town was also thwarted by [NVA] troops.*

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<sup>24</sup> A few Flight Mechanics had a proclivity to depart an H-34 before landing during questionable approaches to mountain landing pads or immediately after accidents. This technique was sometimes successful, but often had unintended consequences. We were taught in flight school that in the case of ground resonance, the safest spot was inside the aircraft to avoid flying debris.

<sup>25</sup> Joe Lopes and Bill Collier statements in regard to the incident at L-11-19 May 1972, 05/25/72.

*The communists may be planning to turn on the heat farther south near Pakse city. A recent rallier claims that five infantry battalions plus some artillery and armor units will soon attack the Lao Army [and Thai] units at the junction of Routes 23 and 231.*

*Meanwhile, twenty-seven miles south of Pakse on the left bank of the Mekong, a government garrison has abandoned Phiafay town [located at the western terminus of Route-18 from Attapeu] after an alleged [Pathet Lao] attack.”<sup>26</sup>*

### **EVENTS IN BANGKOK**

*“We are here waiting [at the Montien Hotel].<sup>27</sup> I have two weeks off, but the doctor says that the baby isn’t ready yet. He still thinks it will be June 6th...Tuie is very large and there is some speculation that there might be two [babies]. I doubt it, but would not be unhappy as this is the last time [we will have children]...Our family is large enough. We will let you know as soon as it happens.”*

Handwritten Letter Home, 05/27/72.

We had left Udorn for Bangkok on the 24<sup>th</sup>, in anticipation of the birth of our third child. We had planned ahead. Sometime before, we had arranged for Tuie’s Filipina friend, Rose Malana, to supervise the house and care for the boys while we were in

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<sup>26</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos: Communist forces have dispersed government units attempting to retake Khong Sedone, a provincial capital 30 miles north of Pakse, 05/30/72.

<sup>27</sup> At the end of May, after being located for nine years on Patpong Road, Air America moved their personal offices to the new Dusit Thani Hotel on Rama-4 Road. It was a luxury, highly modern hotel with fine aromatic woods in the rooms. An extra attraction was a baby elephant kept on the outside grounds. We later stayed there twice until the Air America discount was reduced to a week, and then returned to the upscale Montien where the discount was never reduced and the staff was always more than friendly to us.

Bangkok. Her husband had been assigned to Cambodia to work, and she had returned to Manila, which necessitated her return for a short time. I did not want Ricky to miss any more school, and Peter, who was a handful, really needed someone to watch him. Uncle Cha's youngest daughter, Tokay, was still at the house going to school and helping out.

After Rose arrived from Manila, PI, and was briefed on the most important items regarding the house and children, we departed for Bangkok on the night train (I had long since given up driving the car to the city). For some reason, perhaps not wanting to be subordinate to someone she did not know, our maid of many years quit.

After a week of waiting, Doctor Songserm at the Bangkok Nursing Home alerted us that there were no labor signs and estimated at least another week before the birth. The baby was large and Tuie was very uncomfortable, so, as some surgical work was planned anyway, the doctor recommended a caesarian birth procedure. We agreed, and the operation was scheduled for the first.

**"Amanda" was born at 9:16 PM on Thursday 1 June** [we did not name her immediately].

Handwritten Letter Home, 06/05/72.

Tuie was in the operating room a long time. I had asked to be present, but because of the planned surgical work, was not allowed to view the birth. I was getting worried, until I finally received the word, and was allowed to view the baby, who was placed in an incubator as precaution for twenty-four hours. She appeared healthy, with lovely, clear skin and a full head of black hair. She was active, sucking her thumb a short time after her birth. While I was looking at her, Doctor Songserm pushed

through the double doors of the operating room and walked to where I was standing. His white surgical apron was soaked with blood. I was alarmed, but he reassured me that Tuie was fine.

Tuie was quite groggy for two days, so I went to Udorn to check on the boys and events at the house. Apparently, Rose was doing well, and even the dog appeared well fed. However, the house was out of water, as the annual rainy season was tardy, which resulted in a dry town reservoir and area lakes. Consequently, water had to be trucked in from whatever questionable source was available.

Confident that Rose had all aspects in the household duties covered, I took Pete back to Bangkok. We really missed the boys, and I needed company. Besides, Tuie would be quite happy to see him. Thai Airways conducted daily flights to Bangkok via Nakhon Phanom and Ubon. Pete did fine for a while, and then vomited because of turbulence caused by mid-afternoon thermals.

After we were settled in the Montien, we walked three long blocks to the hospital. Walking was not bad in the morning, but a little warm in the afternoon. Tuie looked somewhat better, but she had trouble moving about the room. Because of blood loss during the operations and anemia, the doctor wanted to administer a unit of blood. However, fearing hepatitis or some other disease, I refused to authorize this. It appeared that she would need to be in the hospital at least another week, so, with my STO fast drawing to a close, I would have to solicit more time off.

For five days, four-year-old Pete and I made the journey twice a day to see Tuie and the baby. During this period, Tuie suffered a setback, becoming quite ill, and required twenty-four-hour nursing.

Amanda was taking four ounces of milk from her mother, supplemented by powdered milk. Like the boys at their birth, she

had developed some jaundice, but improved by the 10th. I had to standby to possibly transfer my blood to her. It was then that I learned that the condition all our children developed had something to do with our blood types. I was aware of a positive-negative reaction, but this did not apply in our case. Tuie was O-positive and I was A-positive. I was informed that a certain percentage of children with parents having these two blood groups developed jaundice after birth. Pete had developed serious jaundice shortly after birth, but the clods at the Bangkok Christian Hospital never mentioned a word regarding the blood type disparity.

By the 12<sup>th</sup>, Tuie was cleared to go home. She was told to take it easy for some time. After I paid the hefty hospital bill, we took the night train north.

When we arrived home, Rose Malana was gone. Youthful Tokay said that her husband had arrived from Cambodia and spirited her away. I was confused and a bit angry that she had left before we arrived, until I heard that some Filipinos in the community were implying that she was a house girl for us. This must have eventually gotten back to her husband, who decided to do something about it. People can be cruel.

Tuie began to hemorrhage a little after we returned home. This required more bed rest, with her only activity restricted to feeding Amanda, who was developing nicely. By early July, Tuie managed to venture carefully downstairs once or twice a day.

**C**PH Wayne Knight began H-500 training in N535X with Izzy Freedman. (One plus forty-two.) Wayne already had obtained a smattering of ground school and had flown the machine once during a courtesy familiarization flight, while attending a helicopter association conference (HAC) in California.

The two standard configured Hughes helicopters based in Udorn were merely decoys for a clandestine Special Project cross border operation still in the early training phase, but soon to commence in southern Laos. <sup>1</sup> There were five line pilots assigned to fly the H-500. Three were Nikki Filippi, Izzy Freedman, and Larry Hennesy. All were former Bell pilots who had bid grandfather rights to remain in Udorn and prevent reversion to the H-34 program.

In order to maintain the ruse, Wayne had to keep the aircraft flying in operational areas. however, because of the helicopter's weight and cargo limitations, many 713 Customers wanted nothing to do with them. Costs were derived from their air budget, and those not in the know about the true reason for their presence, believed the Air America scheduling department was taking advantage of them. Knight sometimes found himself in a difficult position, insisting that a Customer use a Loach for the day. At times, he was forced to inform them to call a superior to explain the reason.

Although the machines were exposed to all work locations, they were assigned mainly to Military Region Two. They were frequently used for recon, and sometimes as a command-and-

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<sup>1</sup> A highly interesting operation in which the Author would participate.

control ship, with a Case Officer onboard. The Long Tieng unit had the largest operating budget of all the military regions, and could easily absorb the expense of these largely unwanted machines. All things considered, Knight believed the Hughes Program to be a gross façade, a travesty impacting diligent pilots who assumed they were contributing to a valuable mission.<sup>2</sup>

The H-500 was not entirely useless. USAF Raven FAC Steve Neal was piloting an O-1 Birdog on the morning of 12 May. Following a briefing at The Alternate, and after acquiring a local to point the way and communicate with ground forces, he headed north toward the northeast corner of the Plain of Jars near Route-7.

While nearing the area, smoke began pouring from the cowling and under the instrument panel, indicating engine problems. Reversing course, Neal assumed a southerly course, and another Raven FAC working Military Region Two, Gregg Wilson, began flying toward him.<sup>3</sup> Copious smoke persisted, so Steve secured the engine. The smoke ceased, but by shutting down the engine he was confronted with landing on the Plain and all the hazards involved in coping with enemy forces. Taking the lesser of evils, he restarted the engine and obtained sufficient power to extend his glide.

Approaching the southeast corner of the Plain of Jars, Steve deftly maneuvered along a narrow draw between high mountains that were occupied by the enemy. Then the engine seized. He was fully committed to a dead stick landing into an overgrown rice paddy, well concealed by six-foot-high Kuni

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<sup>2</sup> EW Knight Email, 02/03/01.

<sup>3</sup> Gregg Wilson was later stationed at the Belle Chase mixed military guard facility in Saint Bernard Parish, Louisiana. When an article appeared in the local newspaper featuring some of his exploits while a FAC in the Pakse region. I attempted to contact the man to obtain more information, but was unsuccessful.



grass. Aircraft momentum carried the plane into one side of the paddy berm at an angle, crumpling both wings.

Suffering a lacerated knee, but otherwise largely unhurt, Steve and the indigenous passenger moved 300 yards from the aircraft. By this time Wilson was circling overhead. He had contacted the Customer at Ban Son and was informed that a H-500 pilot was in the vicinity, only minutes away, and was headed his way. Using his survival radio Steve directed the Loach pilot to his position through Wilson, and a successful extraction was conducted. <sup>4</sup>

The Hughes Program was not without incidents. On the second, Director of Engineering Bob Davis (DIENG), who was in charge of FCF crews, the Quality Control Department, and the only supervisory pilot qualified in the Hughes-500, was giving Wayne a training-proficiency check in 35X. While demonstrating a touchdown autorotation a rotor blade flexed, severing a portion of the tail boom and rendering the anti-torque system inoperative. <sup>5</sup>

Because there was no uncontrolled spinning to the right normally associated with such a tail rotor malfunction, the occupants were not immediately aware of the damage. It was only when Bob transferred control of the aircraft to Wayne that he discovered there was no tail rotor control. He looked out the open door and observed the tail rotor stopped and the assembly hanging at a ninety-degree angle. Bob, a stickler for precision, had trouble reconciling that he had chopped off the tail rotor boom.

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Leary 1972 Notes: Telephone Interview with former Raven FAC Steven Neal.

<sup>5</sup> EW Knight Emails, 08/11/00, 12/05/00.  
Author Note: H-500 autorotations looked hairy to the outside observer. Full touchdown was achieved following a ninety-degree flare to zero ground speed followed by a fuselage level configuration.

The helicopter was quickly repaired, and by the fourth Izzy and Wayne were on their way to Long Tieng to work. They serviced local landing zones (eight plus eight) and recovered at Wattay Airport that night. Wayne then returned to Udorn on the first available aircraft.

That concluded Knight's H-500 exposure for the month. He resumed normal CPH duties and conducted UH-34D proficiency checks for Arnesen in Hotel-87 and Roger Cook in Hotel-44 on the 10th. This activity continued the following day with Bart Jealous (06/07/71) in Hotel-59. Frank Stergar's proficiency check took place on the 17th. The rest of Wayne's month was consumed by office work and Bell FCFs. <sup>6</sup>

### **PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR NEW EMPLOYEES AND DEPENDENTS**

An excellent, lengthy handout was distributed by the Air America Woman's Club that provided a wealth of information for newcomers regarding Thailand, its living conditions, and flavor of the time in Udorn. It read in part:

Thailand has a fast-growing population. Census was taken in 1946 and 1956. Of the estimated thirty-five million [people]; ninety-five percent were Thai, three percent Chinese, and two percent other. The country is still predominately agricultural. It excels in producing and manufacturing gems, silver-artifacts, bronzeware, the finest hand-woven Thai silk and cotton, teakwood carvings, lacquerware, and dolls. The cement and fishing industries also predominate.

Personal firearms are not permitted in Southeast Asia as per the laws of Thailand and Air America regulations.

All U.S. forces personnel and their dependents, Department of Defense civilian employees, U.S. contractors operating in

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<sup>6</sup> EW Knight flight activity and comments for June 1972.

Thailand on a permanent or temporary basis are subject to USG currency regulations. Air America is a U.S. contractor. All personnel are cautioned to exercise care in converting U.S. dollar instruments into the purchasing media of Thailand. U.S. dollars are to be used only at U.S. government facilities and not for purchasing goods on the Thai economy.

Udorn is situated on a low plain and has a population estimated to be around 70,000. The town is located 245 air miles north of Bangkok. The climate is generally hot and dry. The base is located four miles from the center of town.

Approximately 350 American and European employees reside in Udorn, many who have their dependents with them. In addition to Company employees and dependents, there are U.S. government and missionary-religious groups residing in Udorn. The social life of the foreign community, with the exception of the U.S. military, is centered primarily in the Company sponsored Club and facilities. Three bowling alleys in Udorn have league bowling, and a newer hotel, the Charoen, provides night club facilities and entertainment (the Yellow Bird Lounge).

The Company maintains a small clinic in the Air America complex with three qualified doctors and five nurses. Most modern drugs are available in the clinic. The Company doctor is on call at his house. Employees who are seriously ill or injured and require hospitalization may be admitted to the USAF hospital or may be evacuated to Bangkok. Medical and emergency dental treatment can be obtained at the USAF hospital. The charge is thirteen dollars per visit and sixty-one dollars a day for in-patient care. The Company sponsors a medical insurance plan for employees in cooperation with the American International Life Assurance Company. The Company pays for coverage. The employee pays for dependents. There is also a medical plan for the Bangkok Christian Hospital.

Air America operates a modern air-conditioned school which offers a Stateside type classroom program for grades one through twelve. The employees have to pay for this education with a seventy-five percent reimbursement, except kindergarten.

Housing in town is subject to Thai property laws; anything installed or fixed becomes the property of the landlord unless a waiver clause is initiated.

Town tap water must be boiled for five minutes and filtered or allowed to settle before drinking. Processed and filtered water is available at the Air America facility for employees to take home. Water during the dry season sometimes is scarce. Acute shortages may occur, so in order to keep the base operating, it may be necessary to ration or even curtail the practice of allowing employees to take filtered water home.

Power in town is 220 voltage, fifty cycles with fluctuating voltage. Dependability is still limited, although it has been improved since the commencement of operation of a large hydro-electric dam (Nam Pung Dam) in nearby Khon Kaen Province. A household step-up-step down transformer is necessary to operate any appliance that requires an even supply of current. A three-quarter ton air conditioner costs thirty-five dollars to operate. A homeowner needs to periodically inspect his electric line to verify no one is tapping into the wires. Pay bills monthly to prevent this theft.

Small bottles of butane are available in local shops for three dollars and fifty cents. The gas usually lasts two months.

The market price of appliances is higher than in the country of origin. A VHF television station is located in Khon Kaen, a considerable distance from Udorn. Reception is fair. Programs are in Thai; an English sound track on FM is difficult to receive. The USAF television and radio stations are limited

in output to the base (shielded) and cannot be received off base without special antennas.

Good cooks are rare among servants, but some with knowledge of cooking can be employed to do the laundry and general housekeeping at wages from thirty-five dollars per month for a family of four.

There is no public telephone service from the Air America facility to town except emergency lines.

Fresh vegetables and fruit are available in season. Pork, beef, and chicken are available. Shopping at the morning market for local products is generally done by servants due to the early hours (0600) one must shop to insure getting fresh products and the language difficulty, which would be encountered by foreigners at the market. All American employees and their spouses are presently authorized use of the USAF base exchange to purchase most non-rationed items. Air America has a country store offering canned food and liquor for employee purchase.

Most local restaurants do not always meet American standards in quality or cleanliness but the ones serving western food produce acceptable meals. Most occidentals usually have their meals at home or at the Company sponsored Club Rendezvous.

The Company provides a limited supply of leather boots for flight crews. Heavy duty clothing is not required since uniforms are furnished by the Company to all flight crews and ground maintenance personnel.

The Company sponsored Club Rendezvous is the focal point of recreation for our employees. The two bars and the dining room are comfortable, well-designed, and air conditioned (not mentioned is the Animal Bar). A modern circular swimming pool is available for employees and their dependents. A handball court, tennis court, and steam room are available. Whenever movies are

available schedules are posted on the bulletin board. All members and guests are welcome.

Transportation to and from Air America is provided by the Company for working schedules. Leased buses have a daily schedule between Udorn and the airfield. On certain crowded trips, dependents and off duty personnel are not permitted to ride. Japanese motorcycles are dangerous to use due to road conditions and the lack of traffic regulations (and discipline) in Udorn. Tax on regular automobiles is 135 percent of manufactory's list price. Motorcycle transportation is cheap if you don't get Honda rash. Town bus service is an adequate fare of fifty satang. Taxi fare is five to ten baht from any point in Udorn to the center of town. Pedi-cab samlors cost one to five baht. It is picturesque but slow, and with the way truck, cab, and bus drivers operate, it can be dangerous. This danger increases at night because samlor drivers do not activate their lights because it causes them increased difficulty in pedaling their machines.

Hotel room rates range from three dollars per day for a room with a ceiling fan, Thai style one-holer (squatter type) toilet, and shower with no hot water to a single room with air conditioning for seven fifty to eleven dollars a day. The Baht exchange rate fluctuates from twenty-to-twenty decimal eighty-three for one U.S dollar.

Each employee must have an Air America identification card. You will relinquish your passport in the Personnel Office so that the Company can obtain a one-year Thai Stay Permit.

The number of religious ceremonies and festivals that annually occur in Thailand is very great and the majority of them are during the dry season when tourists prefer to visit the country. Many of these festivals are both picturesque and quaint



Air America teacher Jay Allen dressed in the uniform of the day in Udorn town.

Allen Collection.

to Western eyes and appeal strongly to the mind of those who love pageantry and vivid colors.

A final note stated. "This is their country and they have the same feeling of pride in their nation as you do in yours. Respect the people, respect the nation, and respect their customs." <sup>7</sup>

### **VANG PAO GOES TO THE STATES**

During late May, Major General Vang Pao took a break from the action and accompanied Chief of Station Hugh Tovar and Case Officer Jerry Daniels to Washington. During a White House meeting, the general was asked by Henry Kissinger why he had not commenced his annual monsoon season offensive. This surprised Vang Pao, as he had been constrained from advancing for some time. Now, probably because of ongoing peace negotiations with North Vietnamese delegates and a requirement to show strength, Vang Pao was given the green light to proceed with his offensive plans, and was assured of all the support he required.

A rainy season offensive had previously been discussed by Washington agencies. Not all involved were convinced that an offensive would be wise or even feasible. There was the Symington Amendment ceiling to consider, which rendered large aggressive operations impossible until the new fiscal year beginning on 1 July.

The general also met with principals at State, Department of Defense, and Congress, with varying opinions regarding an offensive. <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The abridged information provided in the handout contrasts greatly from the early days of privation in Udorn in 1962. For an eyewitness comparison of conditions, see the Author's previous books.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 461.



After the exercise in Washington, Case Officer Jerry Daniels accompanied Vang Pao on a tour of various places in the USA. Among several places, they visited Jerry's hometown at Missoula, Montana; Disney World in Anaheim and San Francisco, California. At the end of June, his last stop was Hawaii, where he visited the CINCPAC headquarters.<sup>9</sup>

### **CAPTAIN JIM RAUSCH**

During early June, Thai troops from the Xieng Lom area and a Royal Thai Army (RTA) regimental combat team combined in a pincer operation to retake two Lao border villages. Located twenty miles northwest of Xieng Lom, they had been captured earlier by one hundred communist party Thailand (CPT) forces.

Several days of adverse weather and casualties slowed, and then stalled, the operation's advance, instigating the RTA unit's withdrawal into Thailand. With the remaining battalions exposed, one unit was surrounded. In response, Unity Commanding Officer Pichit dispatched an elite seventy-man team with a 75mm pack howitzer and 81mm mortar to establish a FSB and enable the besieged unit's breakout.

On the 12th Hotel-85 Captain Jim Rausch (DOH-01/10/68) was assigned to medevac wounded from Ban Houei Lao (LS-147, five miles north of LS-177). On final approach, one bullet hit Jim in the head, instantly killing him. Like other unfortunate helicopter pilots, a "one shot Charlie" had successfully struck again. Thai copilot Disoum assumed control of Hotel-85, vacated the area, and landed five miles south at Ban Mounng (LS-177). Further medevac attempts at LS-147 were aborted pending further

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<sup>9</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 353, fn 9.

investigation.<sup>10</sup>

Jim Rausch, a tall, well spoken, obviously well-educated individual, was considered a fine pilot by his peers. Although a little vocal at times, he was popular with Club bar patrons. All of us pilots were subject to the hazards of aviation and hostile action in Laos. Up to the time of his death, Jim had arguably survived hairy incidents that were somewhat beyond those experienced by the average helicopter pilot.

Flying with Emmet Sullivan, he had been onboard Bell helicopter 11 Foxtrot during a routine training mission in South Vietnam, when a practice autorotation went bad and assistant chief pilot Jim Campbell was killed because of a faulty lap belt. Rausch was also injured, and the recipient of new set of pearly white teeth.

Another time, Jim told me that he had been hit by a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) round in the tail rotor pylon of his helicopter, while working on the Bolovens. The projectile had not exploded; missing critical components, it merely created a one-foot hole in the pylon.

Captain Frank Stergar witnessed the event. Working with Rausch and Dick Theriault, they were sitting on the ground in trail at a new site northwest of Paksong. Frank was busy talking with his co-captain regarding the poor technique of remaining light on the struts that raised the cabin floor a foot or more. The technique, often used in a hot zone to expedite departure should it be required, slowed troop embarkation and impeded loading litter patients.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ken Conboy, 320.

According to CPH Knight, Disoum's next flight was his PIC check.

<sup>11</sup> Many UH-34Ds were equipped with steps in order to assist embarking passengers into the cargo compartment.



Captain James Rausch

There was no firefight or any other hostile activity at the moment. But Rausch's ship was suddenly hit by an RPG just below the tail rotor arc. Rausch immediately departed, with Stergar in trail as escort. Pulling alongside, Stergar was horrified when he observed the large hole and fully expected the pylon to separate before they reached Pakse.<sup>12</sup>

USAID representative at Ban Houei Sai, Mac Thompson, recalled Rausch as a very friendly person. He spoke fairly good Thai, which was rare for any pilot. Mac never had much occasion to go into Ban Houie Lao, perhaps three times with John Kerns. Mostly ethnic Lao lived in the area. Mac did not observe any hill tribe types, but they most certainly were present. The local people were not unfriendly to the RLG, merely disinterested in current events.<sup>13</sup>

Chance, timing, and fate sometimes display aspects in unusual ways. Prior to Jim Rausch's demise, Emmet Sullivan and Jim were on STO together at the new Dusit Thani Hotel in Bangkok.<sup>14</sup> At the end of their STO they journeyed to Udorn on the same plane and went into the scheduling office to obtain their next flight assignment. Operations Manager Maurice Cocchi scheduled Jim for Pakse, and Emmet to Lima-25. Having had a bad experience in Military Region Four recently, Jim objected. Therefore, an understanding Sullivan, who also had his share of bad combat experiences at Xieng Lom, switched work locations with him.<sup>15</sup>

School teacher Jay Allen rode to the Air America facility with Rausch on the day he departed on the Ban Houei Sai RON. Jim was chatting about his Kawasaki motorcycle that he called the

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<sup>12</sup> Frank Stergar Email, 06/08/96.

<sup>13</sup> Mac Thompson Email.

<sup>14</sup> Jim had helped train Emmet when he was transferred to the H-34 program.

<sup>15</sup> Emmet Sullivan Interview.

"Widow Maker." He also drove a funny-looking sports car that looked like a capsule. <sup>16</sup>

When Rausch, originally a Los Angeles native, initially arrived from Saigon, CPH Knight thought he might have a chip on his shoulder. Still, he liked the man. Captain Knight noted that Ted Cash used to ride Jim with racial jokes that could have been construed as a little more than a joke. <sup>17</sup>

Captain Bruce Jachens escorted Rauch's body to his home in the States. Sometime later, Rausch's sister arrived in Thailand and reputedly created an issue over her brother's death. Claiming Jim's death was a violation of his civil rights, and Air America was responsible, her agenda seemed somewhat incredible. The nature of our job was that each and every one of us was equally subject to hostile action and possible death at the hands of our enemy. Her arrival and purported hearsay produced a good story that Jim doubtless would have enjoyed. <sup>18</sup>

Until the 21<sup>st</sup>, Thai units in the LS-147 area fended off the enemy. The following day, the Hunter Killer Team joined the besieged troops and ushered them to the safety of the FSB. Hot on their heels, the FSB was surrounded and a decision was made to extract all the men and the crew-served equipment. However, still gun-shy from the incident on the 12th, both Air America and the USAF refused the mission. After Pichit parachuted into the site and demonstrated that there was no threat, he arranged

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<sup>16</sup> Jay Allen Interview.

<sup>17</sup> EW Knight Email.

<sup>18</sup> As opposed to the 1950s, during the 1960s one saw changing attitudes in America and a racial mix in organizations. Although Air America hired less than a handful of Negro Flight Mechanics, Rausch marked the first Negro helicopter pilot in our group, but he was well accepted. However, my personal opinion was that coloreds were quite unlucky in aviation. Both Boston and Willy Parker had been badly burned in crashes. Fixed wing pilot Clarence Driver was lost in a C-123 crash and now Jim Rausch was killed during a medevac mission.

for Thai White Horse gunship support for an extraction, and the troops were lifted out by CH-3 Knives. <sup>19</sup>

### **ACTION IN MR-2 CONTINUES**

On the 10th, Mike Jarina, Braithwaite, and Flight Mechanic Casio departed Udorn for Long Tieng in 12F. Despite a shortened day, they managed sixty-eight local missions and recovered to Wattay Airport after dark (seven plus thirty-five).

The following day the same crew, except for Bobby Barrow replacing Casio, worked at The Alternate. It became an eventful day when a T-28 pilot was reported down at the "Jungle's Mouth," north of Ban Na on the edge of the Plain of Jars. It became an expedited SAR, with no weaponized escort aircraft available. (At this stage in the war, except for divers, there was little cover.) There was a Raven FAC equipped with smoke rockets trolling when Jarina arrived in the area. Initially, neither saw the downed T-28 or a parachute. Then they spotted the pilot. He had followed some phone wires into an abandoned Pathet Lao training camp. Mike effected the pickup.

Following a successful recovery some Air America pilots asked a rescued pilot for his personal weapon, usually a .38 caliber pistol. That was how many obtained their weapons. However, this particular individual would not relinquish his handgun. After recovering at Long Tieng, the man dashed away from the helicopter, without even turning around to thank Mike for his recovery. After a long day and seventy-two landings, the crew of 12F recovered in Udorn. (Eleven hours.) Mike then returned to the field in PFJ on 13 June. <sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ken Conboy, 320.

<sup>20</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

"[With Vang Pao away in the States] *the situation in north Laos remains essentially unchanged. The communists still hold the most important high ground positions northeast of Long Tieng, and government forces have made no serious attempts to dislodge them in the past several days. The government's strength in this area had been temporarily reduced by the withdrawal of several battalions for rest and refitting.*" [Thai battalions BC 601A, 602A, 613, 614 were ferried out of Long Tieng to Nam Phong, Thailand. After a short rest period they were returned to Pakse.] <sup>21</sup>

While I stood by at home attending to parental duties, Jarina went upcountry in Papa Foxtrot logging eight hours and fifty-four landings. The next day Mike returned to Long Tieng in the same Bell. Logging eight plus fifty hours, he RTB Udorn an hour after dark.

I was scheduled to depart for upcountry with Chuck Low in Papa Hotel Delta, but several maintenance problems precluded this, and the day ended up in FCF work. The number one power section NG system was fluctuating beyond acceptable limits, and the tail rotor pedal rate was malfunctioning. By the time the ship was considered airworthy, it was too late to launch north. Tomorrow would be another day.

After twenty-three days, on Sunday the 16th, I finally returned to the field in Papa Hotel Delta. First Officer JE Ferris (DOH-06/24/70) and Phil Velasquez rounded out my crew. Except for some advances in occupying forward defensive positions, but little success in clearing all the hills, I did not observe much change in the military situation. I conducted thirty sorties, supplying positions around Phou Pha Sai, the

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<sup>21</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 05/17/72.  
Ken Conboy, 344, 353 fn-7.

Thai firebases, and sundry other work. We recovered at Wattay Airport more than an hour after dark. (Ten plus thirty-five.)

The same drill continued on the 17<sup>th</sup>: travel a short distance from the Apollo Hotel to the airport by Company bus, stop at the Company-sponsored restaurant for a quick breakfast and sandwiches, obtain a briefing in FIC, and launch. The day went well until the enemy decided to lob two mortar rounds at us while supporting positions forward of Skyline. Neither was particularly close, but it was a good wakeup call, confirming that they were still present, active, and intent on maintaining their hold on the area between Long Tieng and the Plain of Jars. Toward the end of the day, I switched ships to XW-PHE, targeted to return to Udorn for maintenance. (Total logged ten hours forty-five minutes including one plus ten night, and thirty sorties.) Jarina likewise managed to fly a full day.

After being towed to the parking area following overnight inspections and maintenance work, I spent the morning and early afternoon FCF Echo with Tom Neis.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> Mike Jarina deadheaded to Wattay Airport on Hotel-88 to command Papa Foxtrot Hotel. Since adverse weather precluded movement north, he remained in Vientiane.

The next day I boarded Caribou 1-2389 early for a thirty-minute flight to Wattay Airport in order to fly Papa Hotel Alpha. Although the "Early Bird" ship of Jarina, Veazy, and Ueda managed to fly four plus forty-two hours, the weather was still poor for work. Consequently, my crew of DeMartini, Leveraza, and I remained in Vientiane.

The 21<sup>st</sup> was highly productive. After arriving at Long Tieng, I conducted fifty sorties to local positions, and recovered at Wattay Airport with eleven plus twenty-nine hours. Chuck Low then replaced Leveraza. Flying nine plus fifteen



hours, Jarina, Veazy, and Oeda also participated in the Long Tieng war games.

Thursday morning, we were designated one of the Early Birds leaving the airport for The Alternate. The forty-five-sortie day turned potentially deadly at one point. While I was supplying Kiwi, the newly formed 105mm FSB with a sling load, a mortar round splashed near Romeo Juliet, located about midway along the several-mile-long Zebra ridgeline. Even though a little disconcerting, I could not fault FAG Sunflower for not alerting me of the potential danger, for I knew an enemy radio operator was more than likely listening to our radio transmissions. In order to survive, we often faked radio calls and landings to keep them off balance, sneak into a hot area, and quickly deliver a sling load. However, they were privy to our bag of tricks and attempted to take advantage of an almost stationary target. We chocked in at Wattay Airport with eleven plus forty-seven hours and one plus forty-three night. Still flying Papa Foxtrot Hotel, Jarina and crew flew nine-plus forty-five during the day.

Rockets fell on The Alternate during 23 June. I suppose it was the enemy's way of alerting us to the fact they were still in the area and capable of nasty deeds. Moreover, it was difficult to identify a hidden rocket that was primed with a chemical pencil, and timed to go off sometimes hours after being emplaced. Undeterred by the danger, we eked out nine plus forty-five hours and thirty sorties.

### **ONCE MORE INTO THE BREACH**

No two days at The Alternate were exactly the same, but Saturday proved to be a distinct deviation from the norm, and what occurred became quite an eventful experience. Late that afternoon, Chuck Campbell asked me if I would proceed to the

north side of Phou Pha Sai and investigate a report of a T-28 pilot downed in the area. There was no further information or briefing that he could provide: just go and see what we could do, but be careful. More and more the war had evolved into that kind of scenario. Go do this for me, without fixed wing reconnaissance, escort, or backup helicopters. Moreover, in Vang Pao's absence, the mission was clearly calculated to show resolve and to satisfy the general's T-28 pilots that we had their welfare at heart.

By this time, in the linear state of affairs, even the hardest charging Case Officers were becoming more realistic, aware that the war was all but over, and sooner or later our services would no longer be required. For this reason, they did not push us too hard, generally presenting mission details as they knew them, and hoping that we would work the situation out with a measure of safety. Given all the variables involved, I reasoned that this symbiotic relationship worked well. All things considered, the mission seemed like a fool's errand, but it was flight time. Therefore, as the only ship available for the task, we launched single ship with no escort. The job was like that sometimes.

I entered what I thought was the area in question at a reasonable altitude, and then began a sweeping recon around the north side of Phou Pha Sai, but far enough away from the mountain to avoid potential ground fire. My search area was restricted to a narrow divide between that mountain and a lower northern range that we formerly called the back door to the Plain of Jars, where a commanding Victor pad had been located. I was reasonably sure that although fighting had been ongoing for some time to seize the high ground, there were no friendlies in the area. Although Route-54 reputedly snaked close to the defile, I did not see it because of heavy ground cover.

For some time, there was no evidence of smoke from a crashed T-28, a downed pilot, or other T-28s orbiting the area. Then I spotted a green camouflaged parachute spread out on the left side of the valley floor. Although a fairly good indication of a downed pilot's presence, the chute was still not a positive identification, for the enemy certainly had the same parachutes obtained from other downed aviators. As I continued to circle, a short man, dressed in an olive-green flight suit, darted out from rocky concealment on the northeast side of the Phou Pha Sai foothills. He quickly bundled the chute, and immediately disappeared into the mountain's recesses, indicating that he was possibly under duress. There was no wave of recognition or radio transmission on Guard frequency. Still not a conclusive sighting, it was a better indication of the presence of a friendly pilot on the ground. I elected to descend to a lower altitude to further investigate, and attempt a pickup if feasible.

I had been conducting this SAR business for years, and had learned the hard way not to blindly enter a situation without first evaluating all visual cues and consulting my gut feelings. From the "pilot's" hasty action retrieving the parachute and seeking concealment, there most certainly must have been enemy around. If we simply dove into the bottom land, we might not have sufficient maneuvering room to evade ground fire or escape. Consequently, the scenario did not come close to my criteria of favorable odds that would lead to a successful outcome.

There were too many negatives involved. I was a single ship. It was late in the afternoon, and I had not heard any radio communication for a long time. Once I was deep in the divide and shielded by mountains, no one would hear a distress call. Moreover, my instincts told me that the entire problem smacked of a typical enemy trap, something with which I was

intimately familiar. I was troubled that I had no definite knowledge of the anti-aircraft crew's location which had brought down the T-28. Yes, there were many unknowns involved in this situation. Still, if indeed there was a fellow airman on the ground, I felt obligated to attempt a rescue. And, as always, time was an overriding consideration.

After consultation, First Officer Jim DeMartini and Flight Mechanic Chuck Low agreed to attempt the SAR. Helping to make my decision, from his reputation and my experience with Low, I had the utmost confidence in his ability to accurately and independently judge a situation, and his expertise as a gunner.

To enhance our chances of success, I decided to employ a technique developed over the years to tempt the enemy into tipping his hand during just such a situation. Aware of inherent human nature and man's strong impatience, I would simply descend in slow, gradual racetrack orbits. Then, if anyone was waiting on the ground to fire at our ship, theoretically he would not be able to stand my slow descent, and would eventually take a pot-shot, while I was still out of effective range. I instructed Chuck to keep his eyes peeled and cleared him hot to fire at will. Then I started down.

My developed sixth sense and instinct for trouble once again proved correct. Before long gunfire rang out, reverberating off both hillsides, and I could hear the characteristic ping of a round penetrating the ship. Then, as during last December's battle incident on the southern Plain of Jars, pounding AK-47 fire from Low's weapon added to the din. It was sweet music to me, justifiable retribution for enemy aggression. Thank you very much for exposing yourself, comrade. That was enough action for me. I immediately pulled pitch and reversed course, heading southeast for altitude and the nearest safe friendly site at Padong.

After I secured Alpha, Low conducted a thorough inspection for battle damage and determined we had only been hit by one round in the fuselage. Although a nonsmoker, I bummed a cigarette from Low, and walked around the immediate area for a few minutes to unwind. I was never affected while conducting cockpit duties, but once securely on the ground following such an incident, I generally experienced wobbly knees. At times like this, it was important for me to be alone to reflect on my mortality. *Damn the war and its complexities.* It was too late to be killed or maimed, especially after my third child had just entered the world and increased my parental responsibilities. (The same thing had happened south of Na Khang in May 1966 just after Ricky was born.)

Time and again over the years, I had served my time in hell. Once again, I had been fortunate. Had I elected to dive into that narrow divide, as some of my less experienced peers might have done, we surely would have been hosed from a cleverly devised trap that the enemy was so adept at setting. In such a confined area, it would not have taken many troops to bring us down. We might have been hit by crossfire from both sides of the forested hills, with nowhere to go but to the ground, or to low level flight over a gauntlet of enemy held terrain.

After reflection, it was time to return to the saddle, to fly, and forget. Back at Long Tieng White Top seemed non-committal when I told him what had happened. We conducted a little cleanup work and then RTB Wattay Airport for the night. (Nine hours, twenty-five sorties.)

Years later, a la Paul Harvey, I learned "the rest of the story" in Jane H Merritt's voluminous book, *Tragic Mountains*, featuring the Meo. Apparently, Lieutenant Yang Pao was conducting his fifth mission striking gun positions on Phou Pha Sai that day, when he heard a noise in the propeller area,

followed by an explosion and fire in the cockpit. Using the advanced Yankee ejection seat, he punched out. Drifting to the ground, he heard ground fire directed at him, and his plane exploding. Badly burned in the face, and hearing North Vietnamese voices, he concealed himself. His T-28 friends remained overhead providing cover.

He recalled that the helicopter pilot got very close to him, and then, after being hit, flew away. After the ship departed, six North Vietnamese converged on Yang. Like all downed aviators, the enemy treated him badly, as they did all downed aviators. He was marched to the enemy-held east side of the Pha Sai Mountain range, where they followed a small river, and just before dark the group arrived at a large cave. The cave reminded him of a busy market place and Yang was surprised that it housed at least 1,000 people. The cave had many beautiful paintings on the walls.

After three days in this area, he was moved northwest. He and his guards walked for two weeks, past the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley close to the border, and Yang was incarcerated near Nong Het, where he was interrogated and tortured. After many years, Yang Pao was released. <sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Jane Hamilton Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret War in Laos, 1942-1993* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993), 287-288.

Note: Ms. Merritt's story in *Tragic Mountains* was close enough to the Author's actual incident that it was likely the same one that the crew of Papa Hotel Alpha experienced. Although interesting, there were some errors in Merritt's account, i.e. the date provided for the downing was 26 June 1972 as opposed to 24 June. Secondly, I never observed any T-28s orbiting the area, nor was radio communication established. Designed as a training aircraft, the T-28 was never known for endurance, and the flight probably departed for Long Tieng or Wattay Airport sometime before I arrived. Although hostile circumstances and lack of information precluded a rescue, I extend my apologies to Yang Pao for not making a more earnest attempt to rescue him from enemy clutches that day.

Mike Lapierre replaced DeMartini and we returned to The Alternate in Alpha. Following twenty-five sorties, with the long RON period over, we landed on the Udorn parking ramp with eight hours in the logbook. I was happy to get home for a few days rest and enjoy a little time with my family.

On the 27th and 28<sup>th</sup>, Mike Jarina was back on the line at The Alternate, flying 13F with Phillips and Ueda, and then with Veasy and Andy Anderson. Mike finished the month upcountry, flying 96W with Phillips and Anderson at Long Tieng and Bouam Long, before returning to Wattay Airport for the night. (Eleven hours.)

### **KHONG SEDONE**

With the war stabilizing somewhat in Military Region Two, emphasis shifted to Military Region Four. Since losing Khong Sedone during the third week in May, government efforts to recover the town had failed.

*"[On 15 June] four fresh battalions [from GM-32 Regiment] were airlifted to [Ban Koutlamphong, PS-47 from the PS-18 training camp] seven miles north of Khong Sedone, the provincial capital that was lost to the communists in mid-May. Elements of this force suffered light casualties on the first day pushing through several [NVA] blocking positions.*

*An additional four irregular battalions [from GM-33] were airlifted to the west of Khong Sedone on 16 June and presumably will move to the high ground overlooking the town. [The two-pronged advance was intended to squeeze the enemy.]*

*Government units have also begun an effort to clear the communists from the area northwest of Pakse. Four irregular battalions that had been in reserve along Route-23 are moving north parallel to Route-231 and have now crossed the Houei Champi stream. This thrust along the western edge of the*

*Bolovens Plateau should prevent the [NVA] from diverting the 9th Regiment toward Khong Sedone. It should also reduce pressure on the Lao Army units holding defenses near the intersection of Routes-23 and 231."* <sup>23</sup>

Not all Military Region Four operations were conducted without problems, or were accurately reported. Captain Emmet Sullivan's version of a USAF helicopter air assault was one example.

Because of his knowledge of the area, Emmet was selected to lead the Air Force helicopter crews into the landing zone. Against this end, he briefed the crews at Ubon RTAFB. He instructed them not to cross the Sedone River because of a known enemy AAA threat, and to remain low level on the west side of the river. (Curiously, the enemy had divided their forces with artillery and AAA units on the east bank of the Done River, and infantry on the west bank.)

Arriving at PS-47, the first CH-3 Jolly Green, flown by a former desk-bound colonel pressed into helicopter work, failed to slow sufficiently on final approach. Seeing his error at the last moment, the pilot decelerated violently, and struck the tail boom, which caused the large helicopter to flip inverted. The number two Jolly pilot, realizing he was too fast, went around. In doing so, he climbed to 300 feet over the trees and was impacted by AAA fire while in a left turn. The third PIC landed hard. Four went around and landed safely. The net result: several troopers were burned or killed. The chaos caused by pilot error constituted a black eye for both the Air Force and the Agency.

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<sup>23</sup> CIA Bulletin, 06/17/72, Laos: Government forces are attempting to retake territory in the south.  
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 350.  
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 473.



Emmet was furious. The Air Force pilots had not paid strict attention to his briefing. He returned to Pakse to debrief Air Operation officer, Jim Butler, known as the "The Gray Fox." During a monumental tirade, Sullivan stated that Air America crews should have done the job. Butler agreed, but rightly stressed that Air America did not possess sufficient airlift capacity.<sup>24</sup>

Elements of GM-32's remaining battalions pushed south about a mile before being stopped by the enemy. Allied Tacair strikes later contributed to further movement south toward Khong Sedone.

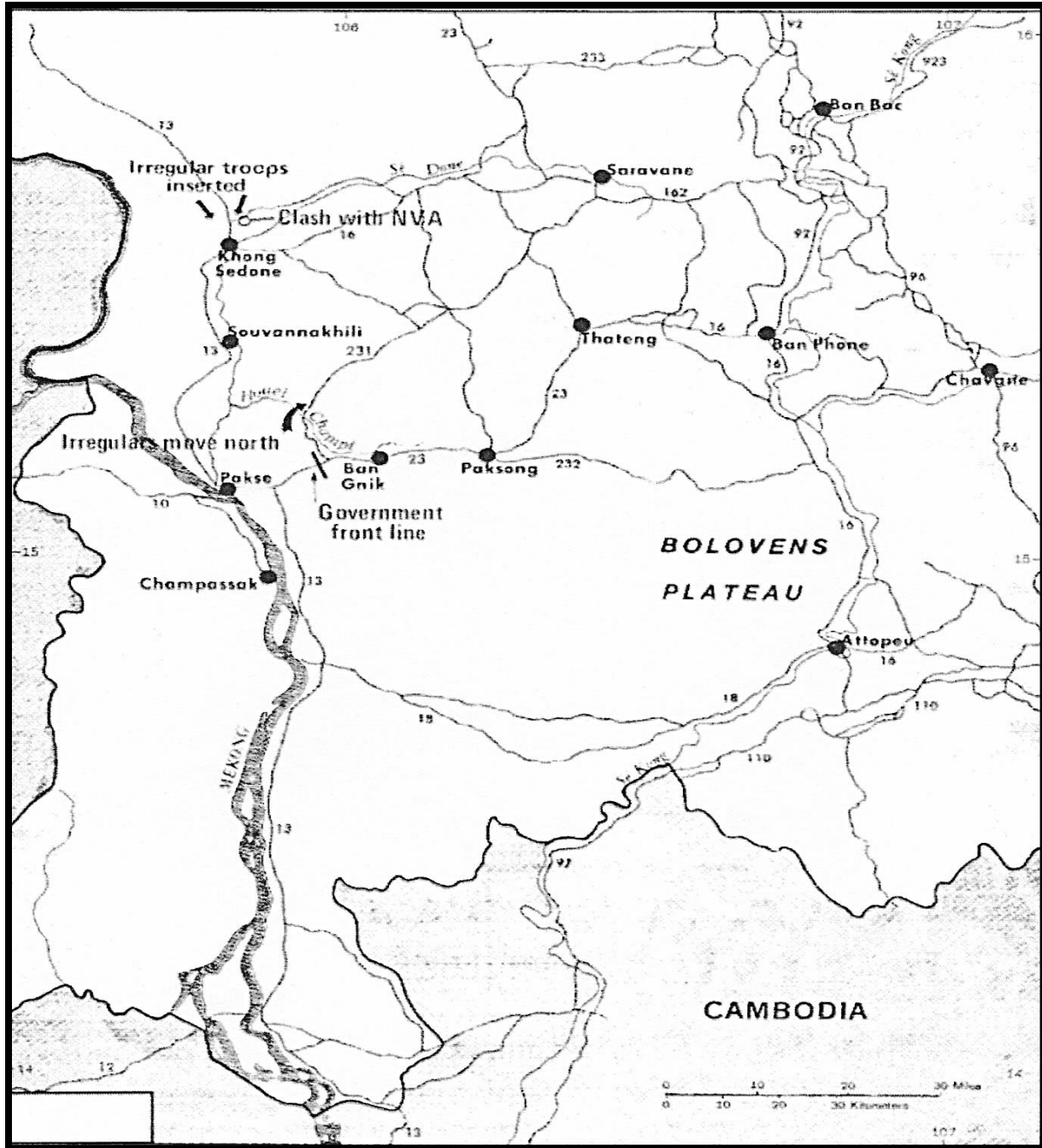
The following day, GM-33 battalions were inserted into low ground eight miles northwest of Khong Sedone. They were masked by hills west of PS-47. Movement then commenced with two battalions progressing south toward Phou Khong, a two-thousand-foot mountain overlooking Khong Sedone. The remaining battalions marched toward the junction of Route-13 and 160.

Within two days, the first group reached the heights of Phou Khong, where they were greeted by heavy mortar and artillery fire. The enemy stiffened its ground defenses, and the second force failed to attain its goal at the junction, a little more than three miles north of Khong Sedone. The situation was little changed during the week.

By Saturday the 17th, GM-32 reached a point on Route-13 about four miles north of Khong Sedone. By the 19th, regimental elements entered Ban Na Pong and soon continued down Route-13 to an empty Khong Sedone, as the enemy had withdrawn to the west.

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<sup>24</sup> Emmet Sullivan Interview. Although the incident may not have been exactly as portrayed by Sullivan, USAF helicopter pilots with much less experience in the Theater were often quite arrogant and not willing to listen to an Air America pilot briefing. The Author experienced this first-hand while briefing CH-3 pilots at Long Tieng for a mission to recover the Phu Cum (LS-50) site. Moreover, unwilling to admit mistakes or pilot error, USAF reports were whitewashed or later designed not to impugn the service's reputation.



CIA map showing the approximate disposition of troops on the Bolovens Plateau and around Khong Sedone, 06/17/72.

Satisfied with achieving occupation of the provincial town, no pursuit was attempted.

On the 29th I deadheaded to Pakse on C-7A Caribou 392 to join the crew of Beng Bengston and Chuck Low in Papa Hotel Bravo. Like the Hughes-500, Twinpacs were assigned to the area in order to cloak Special Project day and night training in the hills at PS-44. By the time I arrived, mixed Twinpac/H-34 briefing operations were already underway to support government troops at Khong Sedone with supply and medevac missions. Because of incoming and AAA threats from the east, and enemy forces to the west at the southern foot of Phou Khong, a direct flight thirty-two miles north from Lima-11 was not advisable. Therefore, in staggered flight, we elected to skirt the verdant and fallow rice paddy land next to Route-13, and fly a westerly route over the mountains at low level and high speed until reaching Phou Khong, high ground controlled by our forces. At that point, still maintaining the masking technique, we dove down the east side of the hill just above the treetops until reaching the GM encampment. Used to flying missions at altitude above enemy fire, I was a little excited initially, for it was the first time I had used this procedure. <sup>25</sup>

We accomplished three such Special Missions without incident that day before repairing to the Air America hostel for the night. (Four hours, five sorties.)

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<sup>25</sup> Low level flight was not a new or unknown technique of operating in medium to high threat areas. I knew Archie Clapp's Westcoast based HMM-362 squadron had employed treetop flight during operations in South Vietnam shortly after we helped offload the squadron into Soc Trang from the USS Princeton in April 1962. What I did not learn until working for Bell Helicopter International (BHI) in Iran, the technique was called "Nap of the Earth" (NOE). We eventually had to discontinue this method when the enemy reclaimed the high ground overlooking Khong Sedone.

The next day we performed two Special Missions to road networks east of the Bolovens. Unable to fly directly over the Plateau, we tracked north and then east at altitude. I had not flown much with Beng, and noticed how badly his hands shook while he attempted to light his pipe. At the time I did not know it was a nervous affliction and not a drinking problem, nor was I aware that his nickname was "Shaky" with his H-34 peers.

As I retired that night, I was convinced Pakse had not changed much for producing low flight time. (Four plus forty-five.) Briefings and waiting for T-28 escort took care of that.

On 1 July I was relieved, and spent the entire day waiting for a ride to Udorn. This took the form of Caribou 12369, which arrived at the base close to the dinner hour.

**G**eneral of the North Vietnamese Army Giap's plans for a high technology offensive, matching that of his opponent, was abundantly revealed during the 1972 Easter Offensive. In order to accomplish his goals, North Vietnamese tanks outnumbered South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) armor and additional long-range artillery and AAA were introduced to the South. Admittedly, Giap's campaign was thoroughly planned, but the offensive was eventually defeated because of considerable allied air power that prevented the massing of large numbers of troops and strong ARVN defense measures. <sup>1</sup>

***"South Vietnam was saved by a combination of ARVN tenacity, United States air power, and NVA inadequacies and mistakes."***

Although hostilities continued in South Vietnam, because of the Haiphong Harbor mining operation, and severing of the land bridge into China, by July the North was almost completely devoid of Russian and Chinese military assistance.

Indicating overwhelming failure, 100,000 North Vietnamese had been lost in the South, along with 450 tanks and only estimates of huge numbers of artillery and vehicles.

After several months of fighting, pragmatists within the communist government and military admitted that they had been dreadfully wrong in attacking South Vietnam. The offensive did not attain intended goals, it was obvious that there would be no quick victory, and the only way to conclude the war and cause the U.S. to vacate South Vietnam was by conducting serious no-

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986) 229.

nonsense bilateral negotiations in Paris. This began again on 19 July and continued into August. <sup>2</sup>

The disappointing North Vietnamese action in South Vietnam, and northern leadership decisions likely had a residual effect apparent in Lao politics:

*"In a message to Souvanna Phouma dated 2 July, Lao communist leader Souphanouvong suggested that it was time to resume [peace] discussions and proposed to return his special emissary, Souk Vongsak, to Vientiane. The Lao Government believes that the message is in response to Souvanna's proposal of 1 July that Souk return. In any case, both sides seem willing to renew talks.*

*Souphanouvong's message did not indicate whether the communists were prepared now to make any fresh proposals. It does not include the usual demand for a U.S. bombing halt throughout Laos before substantive negotiations on a settlement, but the message states that 'an immediate end to U.S. intervention and aggression in Laos' is necessary.*

*Souk left [VTE] last August for 'consultations' in Sam Neua, claiming that the government's offensives in the [PDJ] and in the south were primarily responsible for his departure. At that time, neither side had shown much willingness to compromise, and little progress had been made toward setting up substantive talks."* <sup>3</sup>

About the time American anti-war activist Jane Fonda arrived in Hanoi to provide her twisted brand of succor to the communists for U.S. participation in the war, Souvanna Phouma

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<sup>2</sup> Phillip Davidson, *At War in Vietnam*, 705-706, 715.

<sup>3</sup> CIA Bulletin, 07/08/72, Laos: The Lao communists' special envoy apparently will return soon to Vientiane to resume discussions about peace talks.

accepted Prince Souphanouvong's proposal to resume bilateral talks intended to terminate the hostilities in Laos. <sup>4</sup>

Mike Jarina, Phillips, and Anderson crewed 96W to The Alternate on the first. During a very long day, incoming was received at Long Tieng. They RON at Vientiane with eleven plus fifteen hours. The next day, Jarina deadheaded to Udorn on Twin Otter 662. The following morning the crew returned to Site-20A for the day and returned to Vientiane for the night with ten plus nineteen. Jarina then deadheaded to Udorn the next day on twin Otter 662. <sup>5</sup>

While Jarina et. al. were upcountry, CPH Wayne Knight began evaluating USAF Sikorsky CH-53C 1627 for heavy lift capability and the application to Air America operations upcountry. Along with Air Force officer Hoffman as PIC, both Scratch and Wayne flew the machine from the right seat for one plus fifty-five, with forty-five minutes right seat time. <sup>6</sup>

When Wayne returned from home leave, both Air America and the Customer were interested in heavy lift aircraft to mobilize upcountry artillery units moving howitzers from place to place on high ground. As a Customer-driven agenda, AB-1 arranged a familiarization flight with local USAF CH-53 squadron officers for senior helicopter pilots. (This had also occurred in 1970, but the effort was not pursued.)

Wayne was not sure that there was a serious effort to obtain and use the helicopter, but he was quite impressed with the machine. At the same time, he was aware that it was not configured to perform the largely logistic role that was

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<sup>4</sup> John Bowman, *Almanac*, 317, Negotiations began on 17 October and continued throughout the year without conclusive results.

<sup>5</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

<sup>6</sup> EW Knight Email, 11/02/00, 11/05/00.

required upcountry. It had good speed, very good range, but only a modest sling load capability in the hills.

All CH-53 aircraft were configured for SAR work. The main problem was that they were so heavily armored that, even with no payload, they all but equaled maximum gross weight. They would have to be modified and stripped drastically to be of any use in hauling material or performing sling load work in Laos. Moreover, the USAF had a pipeline supply problem, and support for high hour operations would have been iffy at best. Consequently, it would have been more sensible to bolster the UH-34D fleet or obtain U.S. Army Chinook CH-47s. <sup>7</sup>

With the war winding down, it was not simply a question of this aircraft becoming available. Along with the Chinook, the CH-3 was just one of two potential heavy lift helicopters interested parties were considering for Air America operations.

Wayne conducted an evaluation of Crawford in Hotel-45 on the fourth. <sup>8</sup>

### **CASTERLIN RELUCTANTLY JOINS THE SPECIAL PROJECT**

During early July, I tentatively began my tour in the Agency's helicopter Special Project program. Of all my time with Air America conducting various modes of interesting work, missions presented by the Special Project marked the most challenging and worthwhile. It revealed latent talents that I was unaware I possessed.

My participation would last until April 1974. Since we were more or less pathfinders in this especially difficult

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<sup>7</sup> Jack Forney Email.

<sup>8</sup> EW Knight Email, 06/12/00, 11/05/00. The scale tilted toward obtaining the Chinook for upcountry operations. With preparations underway to receive the ships in October, on the 23rd, Wayne took two U.S. Army Chinook IPs, Joe Probst and Max upcountry in PFG for an area familiarization. (Four hours forty-two minutes.)



clandestine work, our pioneer efforts were liberally fraught with failure, and resulted in few palpable achievements. However, we continuously learned from our errors and glitches, which contributed to some valuable successes. During this period, I flew at night much of the time, and essentially lost contact with "normal" operations in the various military regions. However, the war was quickly winding down in our theater, and frenzied land grabs typified action prior to the 1973 peace agreements, which resulted in static defense in many areas. <sup>9</sup>

From the advent of early helicopter road watch and intelligence missions, over the years, Air America and the CIA folks at the AB-1 White House had always generated some kind of clandestine activity, but nothing on the scale that evolved toward the end of the Southeast Asian conflict. By then, rotary wing infiltrations and exfiltrations were considered tame compared to intelligence gathering operations conceived and

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<sup>9</sup> Land Grab: Oudone Sananikone, *CHECO Indochina Monographs, The Royal Lao Army and U.S Army Advice and Support* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1979), 143.

Royal Lao Government policy intended to hold onto what was already controlled. They attempted to expand holdings in regions that were habitable and contained good, arable land. They would concentrate on rice-producing regions in the Mekong Valley and the Bolovens Plateau. The government would hold the Sam Tong-Long Tieng line, and attempt a limited advance into Xieng Khouang Province.

demanded by Washington superiors. <sup>10</sup>

While I was on home leave during the summer of 1970, Bob Davis invited me to visit CEO George Dole's office in Washington to help evaluate the Bell 212, a twin-engine helicopter being considered for long range missions. Afterward, using a plethora of data charts, Bob briefed--and bored me--extensively regarding the merits of the Sikorsky S-58T, another twin-engine helicopter. Therefore, I actually had a hand in the early program without knowing the ultimate use envisioned for the machine. Consequently, at the time, I thought that longer, quieter road watch missions were the ultimate goal. <sup>11</sup>

Because of tight governmental funding impacting every USG agency, the helicopter Special Project program evolved slowly. (Leading the way with electronic equipment, the Twin Otter plane

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<sup>10</sup> To the Author's knowledge, we never interfaced or cooperated with Saigon's Studies and Operations Group (MACV SOG) cross border operations. In order to prevent unintended conflict between trail watch units and SOG operatives, separation of the groups was maintained throughout the Trail system. After the Cooper/Church congressional amendment was signed at the end of 1971, prohibiting U.S. troop entry into eastern Cambodia or Laos, much previous intelligence information was lost regarding enemy activity in both countries. The void in intelligence gathering, in the form of taking prisoners, emplacing sensors, and wire taps on the Trails, continued to diminish in April 1972 when SOG was disbanded.

Without proper documentation, it is the Author's contention that the Agency Special Project intended to replace or supplement at least a portion of SOG's departure.

<sup>11</sup> In retrospect, my 212 evaluation was merely a Company façade to placate the Bell helicopter hierarchy. From the beginning, because of increased payload, range, and reduced noise level as opposed to the Huey, the S-58T was programed by the Agency for extra clandestine work in areas we rarely ventured.

had been active in this business for some time.)<sup>12</sup>

Maintenance problems had to be identified and eliminated from initial Twinpac conversions. It was not until three months after the first S-58T began flying in March 1971, that the silver and blue birds were repainted olive green, and sliding armor was retrofitted to cockpit windows that Special Project operations were finally ready to commence in earnest.

For security purposes and ease of management, the program's initial crew cadre was small. CPH John Ford was active, along with Scratch Kanach, Lloyd Higgins, and Charlie Weitz. Gaza Eiler and Bill Long were early Flight Mechanic participants. AB-1's Jim Glerum,<sup>13</sup> Pat Landry's assistant, was the head Customer in charge of the Special Project. Jim was eventually replaced by his subordinate, Buddy Rogers.

I was at the airfield one afternoon, checking my mailbox and afterward the following day's flight schedule at the Operations in the Administration building counter, when Captain Lloyd Higgins intercepted me. Indicating that he had something important to discuss with me, we repaired to the pilot briefing room across the hall from the Operations Department area.

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<sup>12</sup> During fiscal 1972 extraordinary efforts were required to remain within the Symington ceiling and accomplish all objectives. Therefore, Air America and Continental flying and maintenance services were consolidated under one Department of Defense account. Among other proposed ways to save money the number of combat sorties were reduced; Air America was downsized, and Vang Pao's and Thai irregular troops were financed through DEPCH.

I was not privy to funding for Agency clandestine work, but suspect some caution was exercised even though considerable backdoor contingency money was generally available.

<sup>13</sup> Ken Conboy & Dale Andrade *Spies and Commandos* (Kansas: University Press, 2000) 255.  
"Since 1968 [probably replacing the vacuum created at AB-1 when Bill Lair left] Jim Glerum had been Deputy Chief at the CIA's Udorn headquarters that oversaw paramilitary operation in Laos."



Festooned with fragrant jasmine leis, AB-1 officer Jim Glerum (right) is flanked by CJ Abadie and an unidentified Customer (center).

*Air America Log.*

Sometimes when at the airfield late for one reason or another, I had noticed that the room was used for Champagne popping activities, attended by people from AB-1 and fixed wing Twin Otter crews. Vaguely aware that black operations were a continuous activity, I was curious, but was aware that any pointed inquiry would be ignored.

Lloyd, a gruff, older type, with whom I initially flew at Luang Prabang when he first arrived in 1965, was not one to unduly mince words. He came directly to the point. He asked if I was willing to join the S-58T Special Project program. Of course, conscious that something clandestine was brewing for a long time, I was both curious and interested. It was impossible to be so intimately involved in S-58T program FCFs and not be aware that there were extracurricular nighttime activities taking place. Too many items I had worked with pointed to that fact-i.e., cockpit configuration unlike normal activities, LORAN electronic equipment, and unusually late out-of-the-ordinary FCFs.

Not intent on causing waves, even though curious, I had not made inquiries and had maintained my counsel. Since being hired, this was Company policy. Do not ask questions, leave upcountry events upcountry, and when in Udorn, do not converse about the war publicly or in the bar. This was often difficult to achieve, for prior to the formation of the FIC Department, the bar had been a primary conduit for theater information pertaining to enemy disposition for those of us who were scheduled to work in the area. All the information one could obtain was essential to individual survival. This was important, because upcountry Customers were not always present, cognizant of, or free to divulge the current enemy situation in areas where we were tasked to fly. Pilots who flew over, or worked in, denied areas often were more conversant with AAA weapons and enemy

concentrations. As to the Special Project program, it was well cloaked in secrecy. I could not recall any public talk or speculation regarding the operation. Of course, I was not privy to what was said in a crewmember's home.

After considering Higgins' blunt question, I realized that there must be a Special Project opening, and I was surprised that I was even being considered. I thought everyone was well aware that after my two-day SAR stint in North Vietnam's Son La/Na San Valley during June 1965, I made it quite clear that I was loath to cross the border for any reason. Also, with the current shooting and mortaring incidents in the Long Tieng area under my belt, and the recent birth of my daughter Amanda, additional risk taking did not seem a logical or intelligent activity to pursue. Hence, I was not keen about joining the small unit, and was more than a little suspicious regarding Lloyd's proposal and the possible motives involved.

Recognizing my reservations, and without launching into excessive details regarding the operation, Lloyd was quite persuasive in soliciting me to join the elite, hand-picked group of crewmembers. I asked the inevitable question: why they would ever want me in their program. He indicated that the group desired a conservative factor, which they believed I would introduce. This extended to the Customer. It was a strange comment, and I did not completely comprehend the statement at the time, but let it pass.

Lloyd continued that I maintained excellent FCF credentials in the machine, a good working relationship with the Udorn Maintenance Department, and it was well known that I was a thorough instructor and was highly proficient in published and unpublished S-58T emergency procedures. He added that I also possessed an inquiring mind, and regardless of a person's

status, would question anyone if confused regarding an issue <sup>14</sup>

Citing high morale and unit cooperation, Higgins specified many positives as a member of the team. He correctly reiterated something that I was already aware of, that the Lao war was winding down and people were being displaced wholesale. Indeed, even with my low seniority number, and without my consent, I had been summarily bumped into the H-34 program in the past, until FEPA curtailed this move. While a member of the Special Project, I would not be subjected to anything like this again. "Normal" work was daily becoming more hazardous, especially around the Long Tieng defensive perimeter. Although flight time would not be as high as before, here was an excellent means of avoiding the ongoing meat grinder, remain active while maintaining decent pay, and fly with motivated, like-minded individuals.

Lloyd continued by indicating that Special Project pilots participated closely with the Customer in both mission planning and execution. This, in itself, was a huge and impressive step forward. Except for the mission in which I had briefed, led, and conducted for Long Tieng COS assistant Zack to retake Site-50, Customer-crew mission planning would mark a first for me. As

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<sup>14</sup> Perhaps because of ever expanding black operations, and the excessive danger involved, there was a reappraisal of the program about this time and a modicum of conservatism was required to ensure success. Additionally, I was unaware that Charlie Weitz was opting out of the Special Project. There were several reasons accorded for Charlie's departure. Scratch Kanach believed it was the result of a flawed night mission launched from Vang Vieng (L-16) to the Plain of Jars that became a living nightmare for participants. This greatly angered Charlie to the point of his quitting the Project. Scratch also added that departing the Project was a private issue between the CPH, Customer, and Weitz. (Wayne Knight last flew with Charlie at PS-44 on 7 August.) Decades later, I asked Charlie at the Air America reunion in New Orleans why he left the Project. His brief answer was that he and Phil Peyton had formulated plans to introduce and develop a computer-board manufacturing company in Singapore. Motives are often convoluted, and perhaps the correct answer lies somewhere between the two explanations.

portrayed, the Project was a joint effort. Moreover, having flown with each other for years, program members highly respected and trusted their peers. In general, we would not be flying as much as before, but there would be adequate compensation in our FEPA-guaranteed basic agreement and Customer mission pay, which was stated at 500 dollars per mission. In addition, training and operations were considered more relaxed, equipment was judged to be the very latest and advantageous for success of the job, and the S-58Ts would always be maintained in top condition before launching. In general, everything had to be almost perfect or the mission would be aborted. I had to laugh when Lloyd referred to this aircraft requirement as "Gold Plated."

He further divulged that the work entailed mostly night flying to provide an added edge for mission success. There were some changes in techniques. Unlike other Special Mission SOPs for road watch operations, there would be no prior reconnaissance or cover aircraft employed to escort us during missions. Two aircraft were normally programmed for missions and we would provide our own cover for a SAR eventuality. However, unspecified Otter crews would be available at times to assist us with weather checks and other pertinent tasks.

Lloyd's upbeat spiel and offer was very tempting. I was interested, but largely unconvinced that the strange missions I envisioned were in my league or to my liking. Besides, working mostly at night was completely foreign to me. When I voiced this, Higgins indicated that sufficient training would enable me to obtain the required proficiency, comfort, and confidence level to perform the job. I wondered.

While Higgins patiently waited for an answer, I contemplated the proposal for a few minutes and then informed



Lloyd that, if accepted, I would try it for a while, and we mutually agreed on an abbreviated trial period.

#### **SOUTH IN MR-4**

With an unspecified Special Mission planned in the South, our timetable was short. There was a narrow period for reflection to weigh the pros and cons of the new and even more challenging work. Naturally, I could not confide my doubts and fears to my wife because of the confidential and sensitive nature of the work.

We began my transition to the Special Project program on the fifth of July. Higgins, Low, and I were scheduled for an extended RON in Pakse for training and a mission.

I was retrieved at the house by a Transportation Department B-bus driver and delivered to the Air America facility before eight o'clock. We were assigned XW-PHE for the flight, but the machine first required some attention for minor problems. Apparently, Jack Forney thought we were spending too much time before launching, so he stormed onto the ramp and began sarcastically harassing us. Without even trying, Jack was like that, and he possibly was unaware of the requirement for a vetted "Gold Plated" S-58T for missions, or he simply did not care. Not wanting to create a scene or divulge anything classified, we calmly accepted the abuse. Knowing Lloyd's ego and proclivity to unload a tirade of expletives on any maintenance personnel who questioned his judgement, I was very surprised at his patience. Was this the same person who bad-mouthed Twinpac Maintenance Superintendent Steve Nichols one afternoon over a minor maintenance item?

During the long trip to Lima-11, we conversed about crew coordination and LORAN C navigation proficiency. I had never received any formal schooling on the equipment, but had obtained

some basic knowledge from my FCFs, riding with technician Tom Deeble during electronic checks, and Scratch's input about nanoseconds, a term I had never heard before. So, a lot of our work would begin and remain OJT. Part of the exercise was to determine if Lloyd and I were compatible in the cockpit. I had only flown with him once at Luang Prabang in the fall of 1965 during his early area familiarization. At that time, he frankly admitted that much of his Navy career had been spent with an anti-submarine squadron hovering a Sikorsky over water and dipping sonar buoys. Consequently, he was deficient in mountain flying techniques, and after much instruction and coaxing, this fact became abundantly evident by his poor performance. Now I supposed that he had obtained adequate experience over the years, and was a proficient aviator when working in Laos.

After a late arrival at Pakse for what would become eight days in the field, we switched Papa Hotel Echo with Scratch Kanach for XW-PHB. We flew the machine for less than an hour and then repaired to the Air America hostel, located on the east part of town, for the night.

The next day we again practiced crew coordination. Using the LORAN line of position (LOP) overlay map, and canned flight paths, we continued to assess the LORAN equipment accuracy for an hour and a half. I knew that I was being equally assessed and evaluated by Lloyd. During the period he was pleasant enough, but I knew Lloyd; he could be very cranky and unreasonable at times. I recalled one evening at the Long Tieng Air America hostel when he thought the roast chicken was uncooked and unmercifully chastised the cook. I considered the food fine and was embarrassed for the youngster, and thought Higgins could have addressed the situation more tactfully. Remembering the harsh living conditions we were subjected to in the early days without hot water, insufficient food, and rat-infested billets,

we old timers were easy to please and somewhat perplexed that more recent arrivals did not appreciate the wonderful amenities we enjoyed.

That night after dinner our two crews Jeeped to the Customer's headquarters to receive a briefing regarding the following day's mission into Cambodia. Here it was, despite my past record of achievements, this would constitute a genuine hands-on test. It was my first time to become so closely involved with the Pakse Customer. I had worked fairly close with Flynn Perry (code named Woodchuck), but, if it was even established at the time, Flynn never invited me into the "inner sanctum."

After abbreviated pleasantries, we were shown maps, overlays, aerial photographs, and provided LORAN coordinates of the projected landing zone. Since Lloyd would be conducting navigation and I would be doing all the flying, I did not record the mission coordinates. There would be no fixed wing weather recon or combat escort. We were entirely on our own.

It was obvious that the mission would take us deep into Cambodia's remote eastern reaches for the first time, although H-34 crews had conducted a few short penetrations in the past. The flight would require the use of a 150-gallon fuel tank that was securely plumbed to the left side of the fuselage. Depending on judicious fuel management, this extra turbine fuel would extend our range to five plus hours flying time. It was all very interesting and confusing, but without knowing our mission's intent, I considered it just another long-range operation and

looked forward to the experience. <sup>15</sup>

## **THE MISSION** <sup>16</sup>

At the appointed time, we launched eighteen miles south along the west bank of the Mekong for Wat Phu (L-107, PS-46 along Route-14), Ban Nongsa (LS-446 area near the mountains) that was an active regional FAR training center advised by U.S. Special Forces personnel. I was aware of the presence of a camp, but had never previously landed there. <sup>17</sup>

We shut down to top off with JP-4 fuel drums we had brought from Lima-11, and were immediately greeted by youthful looking

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<sup>15</sup> Ken Conboy's early 1995 letter to the Author, with additional information regarding my input for his book *Shadow War: CIA's Secret War in Laos*. From a newspaper clipping from June 1972, the U.S. was concerned that Vietnamese units were infiltrating tanks down the Ho Chi Minh Trail system for use in South Vietnam. (They had lost many tanks and needed more to support their offensive.) Conboy's comment: *"In June, the Easter Offensive was starting to sputter out and the introduction of tanks was something that might restart the communist offensive. By that late hour, MACVSOG had already closed down, so there was very little allied ground reconnaissance being conducted in eastern Cambodia. That might be the reason they had Air America [helicopter crews] lift a team into that area. The communists owned about 25 kilometers from the border into Cambodia and used this corridor with impunity.*

*Also, you remember seeing tank treads-which might have been what the team was looking for...I would be willing to bet they were looking for tanks..."*

<sup>16</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/06/00. Wayne was cognizant of the mission after a short briefing from Buddy Rodgers. He never ventured into Cambodia himself except for early ferry flights to Saigon for contracted H-34 heavy maintenance (IRAN).

<sup>17</sup> Ken Conboy Letter to the Author: *"By this time (until June 1971), the Agency had stopped training Cambodian Toro teams at PS-18. There was a Cambodian team on Kong Island, but it did only shallow reconnaissance forays on foot. Your team seems to have staged somewhere around Wat Phu, which at that time hosted a contingent of U.S. Special Forces advisors to the Royal Lao Army."*

Author Note: I had no knowledge of earlier forays into Cambodia, but Ken Conboy states on page 284 of his book that S-58T crews delivered Toro teams into Stung Treng and Ratanakari provinces in 1971, where they remained for a month reporting on enemy traffic.

Americans dressed in military fatigues, but devoid of military insignia or unit identification. Their demeanor was definitely military, but they could easily have been Agency people, or more likely U.S. Army types seconded to the Agency.

While the hand fueling process proceeded, eight heavily laden troops formed beside our aircraft. The same number assembled at Scratch's ship. From their appearance, I was unable to ascertain if they were Lao, Cambodian, or a combination of the two.

After entering mission coordinates into the LORAN set, and once again establishing that equipment was working as published (a correct present position) we ensured two-way radio communications on all our radio frequencies (UHF, VHF, and FM) before we launched. We would maintain strict radio silence throughout the entire mission, unless an unusual circumstance or emergency situation arose. Lloyd was the navigator operating the equally cranky LORAN reception, and I was the right seat pilot, who would land first at the landing zone.

We proceeded down the river at medium altitude. So often in the south as opposed to the north, the weather was perfect for that time of year. We passed east of Kong Island--a large landmark in the Mekong River I had not visited or seen in years--and then altered course southeast over uninhabited forested hills, until entering desolate Cambodian flat lands pimpled by low hills and broad rivers.

During the long trip Lloyd began encountering problems with the LORAN set, so radio silence was momentarily breached and Scratch assumed the lead.

Just when it seemed like we would never arrive at our destination, we passed over indisputable tank tread markings that crisscrossed in a network of dirt trails. I wanted to ask Scratch if he or his second pilot Bob Mehaffey confirmed my

sighting, but our self-imposed radio silence precluded this. Incipient boredom ceased. Now it was obvious that we were indeed deep inside Indian country, and with positive signs of enemy presence, we could expect anything. As a compartmentalized Lao participant, except for the occasional SAR, I was not concerned with, or especially knowledgeable about, the war in South Vietnam. I did realize that the tasks we performed were part of the overall war effort, and what little I did know was gleaned from *Newsweek* or *Time* magazines, a Bangkok newspaper, or often-skewed scuttlebutt.

Finally, a broad, low plateau loomed ahead in the distance. Since there seemed to be numerous landing areas available, I continued my approach. Then I noticed a couple of tin-roofed hooches in the distance, situated on the west rim of the low mesa. They were not that close to my intended landing area, but it was disconcerting, for signs of habitation were never included during our briefing. To better assess the infil area, I elected to perform a recon, dragging the rocky terrain in a racetrack pattern to look for additional potential problems.<sup>18</sup>

While I was conducting the recon, many thoughts flashed through my mind. One was that the hooches might be summertime abodes for Cambodian Buddhist monks, much like those I had seen in Thailand. Appearing unconcerned, Lloyd said nothing, so I thought he approved the maneuver.

Satisfied that there was no one in our immediate landing zone, I picked the most level spot and carefully landed among the rocks, discharged the troops, and departed. Scratch followed.

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<sup>18</sup> In later years, Scratch Kanach, who was orbiting to the east of the plateau, indicated that he spotted what he had considered empty trenches and foxholes, while I conducted an approach. Because of the self-imposed radio silence, he never mentioned anything.

While I was in a left-hand turn, intending to retrace our track toward Laos, Lloyd unloaded invective on me. During a vicious tongue lashing that only the grouchy man was capable of, he let me know in no uncertain terms that I had royally screwed up by going around and not landing immediately. This was a fallacy, and diametrically opposed to what I considered sound piloting technique. Unsure about the landing site, I had observed a potential problem and acted on it. While soliciting my participation in the Special Project had Higgins not indicated they wanted a conservative person? I was just exercising my judgment taking precautions before committing to a landing at an unknown landing zone. It was not the time or place for a pi--ing contest so I did not rebut Higgins' diatribe.<sup>19</sup> Nor did we converse much. Since I was being evaluated, I thought my perceived actions in the landing zone would be appreciated. Now I was convinced that any further participation in the project was ruined. Remaining calm I really did not care, as I knew exactly who I was and certainly did not need abuse from anyone--certainly not Lloyd. Moreover, I could always return to line flying where I was the boss, respected, and my word was law.

The return trip to Pakse was equally lengthy and boring. Since there was no requirement to land at Wat Phu, and due to the lateness of the day, in order to conserve time and minimize distance we assumed a shortcut directly over the twenty-five-mile mountain mass located on the east side of the Mekong in the extreme portion of Laos. As this area included a portion of the extensive enemy trail system, there was some risk involved in traversing the area, one I had always avoided in the past.

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<sup>19</sup> Lloyd Higgins always worked in a different helicopter program than me, so we never flew with each other and he was really not aware of my methods and procedures in conducting a job.

In July, sunset occurred about 1847 hours, so we began logging night time at 1817. The flight became exciting when the red fuel warning light flooded the cockpit and alerted us to doubts as to our true fuel state. Even with our low fuel state, factoring in the two power sections was reassuring.

Until observing the dim lights of Pakse in the distance, the final portion of our flight was conducted in inky darkness. After flying more than five hours, we landed and secured on the ramp at 1927. Following the relatively incident-free extended journey over enemy territory, I was happy to again be in semi-safe and familiar territory, and on the ground at Pakse. (Six plus ten, one plus ten night.)

At the debriefing we mentioned observing vehicle tracks prior to reaching the plateau. Not commenting, the Customer informed us that there would be an unspecified interval until the equally challenging phase two mission-the retrieval of the intelligence team

The following day, Lloyd and I swapped seats and concentrated on cockpit LORAN C training. Using area LORAN maps crisscrossed with lines of position, we flew over pre-plotted routes with discernable waypoints plugged into the equipment. Although conducted over familiar territory, it was excellent practice, and I was becoming more proficient with the modern means of navigation. For his part, Lloyd never again referred to the previous day or his blistering counsel. I suppose my patience and silence regarding the matter reassured him that I would never again make the same mistake. Moreover, in a "what goes around comes around," or "pay-back" scenario, I had critiqued him in 1965 for conducting a poor approach to a hilltop, during which I had to take the controls to prevent a crash, and I never mentioned this to anyone.



## THE GAUNTLET

The Khong Sedone area was still heavily invested with enemy forces. Given this situation, the GM-32 Regiment was ordered to attack the 39 Vietnamese Regiment at the abandoned FAR camp located near the southern base of Phou Kong. Concurrently, GM-33 was instructed to depart Phou Kong positions and move onto the Route-13/160 junction at Ban Na Pong. <sup>20</sup>

While waiting to retrieve the recently inserted Cambodian team, and to justify our presence at Lima-11, our services were offered to the Pakse Air Operations unit for "normal" work. This included Khong Sedone missions. In addition to conducting two such missions with H-34 crews that day, we also delivered groceries and personnel to the PS-44 base.

Successful resupply of Khong Sedone by fixed wing air drop had become increasingly problematic and hazardous when, on 2 July, a CASI Twin Otter was damaged by a 23mm AAA round, and the Lao kicker lost a portion of his left foot. <sup>21</sup> Therefore, it was deemed more advisable to conduct missions by large numbers of helicopters.

Because the heights of Phou Kong were no longer controlled by our forces, we could not safely traverse the western hills and descend the eastern slopes into the town as before. Therefore, future missions were flown thirty miles north at low level nap of the earth (NOE) altitude to avoid AAA fire from the east bank of the Se Don. Akin to some missions at Long Tieng that I called "Skyline Roulette," I referred to these Khong Sedone missions as "The Gauntlet."

Because of speed differences, escorted by Lao T-28 pilots, staggered flights of S-58T and H-34 crews proceeded to the

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<sup>20</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 351.

<sup>21</sup> Bill Leary July 1972 Notes.

destination in intervals of trail formation alongside or over Route-13. Flying at low altitudes became a stressful occupation while anticipating potential small arms fire that would seriously disrupt our resupply and wounded evacuations. Even though we still afforded choice moving targets, high speed flight at or below the tree tops helped diminish danger from all weapons except small arms, as it was reported that AAA weapons were considered unable to depress their barrels low enough to hit us. Open areas near the town afforded minimum masking, so the final few minutes until reaching the landing zone were somewhat nerve racking. To diminish the chance of incurring damage from mortar fire, ground exchanges were rapid. Remaining low after launch, and conducting immediate 180 degree turns to the south, kept us away from the river and out of the enemy shot pattern. To my knowledge, with the techniques employed we managed to complete the job without anyone incurring battle damage.

Case Officer Sword (Jim Lewis) accompanied us on the first run to bolster our spirits, review maps, and plan tactics with his GM officers. Harboring an agenda, or perhaps a death wish comparable to his peer Kayak, Jim Lewis was not well liked by H-34 pilots, who often accused him of misrepresenting enemy strength and dispositions. I really did not know the man well, but had the distinct impression that he lacked a good feel for the immediate situation.

There was a lot of joshing and goodwill at the hostel that night while reliving our exploits that day.

Monday, the tenth, was quite boring while waiting for word from the Customer to mount up for another mission to Khong Sedone. Since the attack had commenced on enemy units to the southwest, we were held in abeyance until medevacs and resupply missions were required. At the appropriate time, accompanied by

Lao T-28 pilots, we resumed our gauntlet flights up Route-13. Nearing our objective, the T-28 pilots veered off to strike the enemy camp. (One plus twenty, two sorties.)

### **CAMBODIA--PHASE TWO**

The next morning, we participated in a Sword resupply and WIA retrieval mission to Khong Sedone. It was conducted without incident.

The team we infiltrated into Cambodia had some method of communication with the Customer to which I was not privy--long range high frequency radio or contact with high flying aircraft. Past experience had proven that sudden requests for extraction were an indication that a team was under duress and immediate action on our part was necessary. With this in mind, we were summoned to the Customer's office during the early afternoon for a briefing that lacked any useful information, and was essentially without merit.

After topping off all fuel tanks and establishing that our machines and equipment were working properly, we launched directly down river for Cambodian territory. Uninhibited by human weight and equipment of the first mission, we flew at high speeds, intending to complete the roundtrip task before nightfall. Weather was not as kind to us as on the seventh. Despite layered and gathering storm clouds, altitude was maintained and deviation from our intended direct track minimal.

This all changed when we reached the plateau. Low clouds and fog inundated the area, precluding sighting recognition signals or the positive identification of men. I made an approach and began a high-power slow flight over the former landing zone. Black rocks and boulders looked more abundant and formidable than I had recalled, and caused me a sense of consternation. The fog and mist deepened, and visibility became

more of a problem. Therefore, with no team members in sight, I waved off attempting to remain in ground contact (VMC) and began a left-hand racetrack pattern to continue the search. (I knew Lloyd was probably gnashing his teeth in disapproval.)

During my downwind leg, the team popped red smoke that mixed immediately with white swirling fog. Scratch was the first to spot the men. He landed and loaded the first group, while I slowly hovered where I thought he had landed and waited my turn. Satisfied that his charges were safely in the cabin, Kanach launched and disappeared into the cloud layer. After entering clear airspace, he radioed his position, while loitering and waiting for us to join on him.

I hovered cautiously and then moved slowly ahead, eventually spotting the remaining troops through breaks in the mist. As the men scrambled onboard Bravo, clouds moving over the rocky terrain became denser. It was a lonely feeling and not much fun to be working so deep in unfamiliar territory, sitting on a plateau enveloped in clouds and visible moisture.

Within a relatively short time, and alerting Lloyd to help monitor my instrument takeoff (ITO), I launched and penetrated the clouds. Breaking out within a reasonably short time, I began searching for Scratch.

After join up, with only half a fuel load remaining, we maintained reasonably high speeds to the northwest at moderate altitudes. The trip to Wat Phu to drop off our people for debriefing and a polygraph examination was uneventful, and after four hours mission time, we arrived at Pakse just prior to dark. It was my last flight into Cambodia. The Customer debriefing was cursory and thanks noted.

That night after supper, washed down by a couple of refreshing beers, I retired to reexamine what had transpired during the day and the two Cambodian missions. I still harbored

doubts regarding my participation in the Special Project. The work was so unlike what I had conducted in the past, and was not consistent with my cautious standards and methods that had seen me through many years and scrapes. Despite my reservations, everything now depended on Lloyd's evaluation of my performances. Despite his mellowing and admonitions that I was fine, I wondered what he would actually relate about my performance and I was doubtful about being retained.

We conducted two missions into Khong Sedone on the twelfth without incurring groundfire or incoming to affect our operations. However, there was a lot of standby time involved while missions were briefed and coordinated with available air assets.

With so much time off during the RON period, I walked to the corner shop which, bracketed by two heavily wooded streets, was located on a small triangle of land near the Chinese hotel. There, for breakfast, I had often enjoyed bowls of delicious hot/spicy chicken and yellow yam curry soup ladled over sour noodles. The concoction was so filling that I rarely required lunch. The shop had been run by a Vietnamese couple with two young boys, who I watched grow over the years.

Upon reaching the former noodle shop, I was informed that the family no longer conducted business there. The only information I could obtain was that they had moved to another part of town. I was curious, and further inquiries at Henri's drink shop revealed that the couple's two grown sons had been killed by a Pathet Lao patrol on Route-13 while driving near Thakhet. It smacked of the reality of war. After learning this sad fact, I was upset, almost sorry that I had bothered to inquire about the family.

Since the Cambodian mission was complete, and my presence no longer required, I was recalled to Udorn. I deadheaded home on Caribou 430 arriving at almost 1700 hours.

## **BACK IN MR-2**

*"...the government is attempting to revive its offensive to recapture the [Phou Long Mat] hills southwest of the [PDJ] by moving four fresh irregular battalions into the Tha Tam Bleung valley. They will attempt to dislodge the communist troops entrenched on Phou Pha Sai, a highpoint overlooking the southern Plaine."* <sup>22</sup>

Savannakhet's SGU Regiment, GM-31, arrived at The Alternate early in July. Almost immediately they were briefed on a wet season plan to heli-lift them to Hill 1800 on Phou Long Mat. From there they would continue east to the old Victor pad--the backdoor to the PDJ--where they would install heavy weapons to harass and control vehicle and foot traffic on Route-54. Somehow, the enemy learned of the plans, so, to prevent losses, the regiment abandoned helicopter lift plans, instead walking from Sam Tong toward Site-72. Arriving by 5 July, they retook the Hill by the second week in July. For a time, further progress was stymied by intense monsoon rains and enemy fire. <sup>23</sup>

On the second Mike Jarina and his crew of Phillips and Anderson departed Wattay Airport in 96W. They worked the entire day in and around Long Tieng, RONing again at Vientiane (ten plus twenty-nine). With GM-31's heli-lift to Hill-1800 cancelled, the next day Mike deadheaded to Udorn on Twin Otter 662.

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<sup>22</sup> CIA Bulletin, 07/08/72, Laos.

<sup>23</sup> Ken Conboy, 344.



Deadheading to Wattay Airport on 556 to RON, Jarina returned to the fray on the eighth in order to fly 12F the next morning.

He and his crew of "Pappy" Wright and Willy Parker flew to Long Tieng to support the recent movement of GM-31 to Phou Long Mat, and of troops in the Padong area who were still attempting to evict the enemy from Phou Pha Sai. (Nine plus twenty-eight.) After recovering at Wattay Airport Mike deadheaded to Udorn on 96W.

### **COMMITMENT**

On the basis of the equipment used, the coordination and professionalism displayed by participants of the Cambodian mission, I elected to become a full-fledged member of the Special Project group. While I was off the schedule and visiting the office, Wayne handed me a strongly worded form with an Air America letterhead. It was obviously constructed with ample attorney legalese and finesse intended to firmly and officially enmesh me in the Special Project. These Company forms were rare, and over the years I had only signed one issued by the Security Department and another in early 1970 prior to Charlie Gabler's super-secret Dien Bien Phu mission.

By design, or not considered worthwhile, until now, many items had not been covered in Higgins' briefing. The CYA form read, without explanations:

***"I hereby accept assignment to the Agency Special Project based at Udorn, Thailand.***

***It is my understanding that acceptance of this Special project assignment will require me to perform any and all flying missions as directed by the Company or its customers.***

***It is mutually understood that such flying assignments are within the operating limitations of the aircraft being used and***



that such missions will not violate basic safety concepts. All phases of normal aircraft operations such as night flying, night and/or day drop missions, instrument flight and low-level operations are considered to be within the Special Project operational parameters.

Further, I understand that in the event I no longer wish to be assigned to this Special Project I must request release from it in writing.

In order to provide adequate crew coverage for this Special Project the Company (Air America, Inc.), may retain me within the Special Project for up to ninety (90) days from the date of my request for release. This ninety (90) day release period may be shortened at the option of Air America, Inc.

Security information imparted to me at my entry into the Special Project and acquired during the assignment will be kept in confidence and discussed with no one outside this Special Project.

The attached statement of compensation and rules of employment govern such conditions while assigned to the Special Assignment and replaces the (appropriate nationality) 'Compensation & Rules of Employment' pamphlet in its entirety except as specifically set forth in the attached statement [not provided by the Author]. All the foregoing is understood and acknowledged."

Despite some confusion as to the wording in the last

paragraph, I signed and dated the agreement.<sup>24</sup> Wayne witnessed the signing, allowing me entry into inconceivable future operations that were both highly challenging and often unnerving. In fact, they were so unusual as to make the Cambodian excursion look like child's play, and just another long-range trail watch mission.

### **LOCATING AT PS-44**

The fifteenth marked a first for me as a recently vetted and bona fide member of the Special Project. After checking into operations at 0745 and gathering my flight gear and AK-47 bag, Lloyd and I deadheaded to Pakse on DHC-6 Twin Otter 662, with Captain Jim Pearson and Don Romes, with intentions to prepare for an unspecified mission. Like the Cambodian mission, I would soon discover that Agency people wasted no time in preparing for complicated missions that I rarely could envision.

Following lunch at the Air America hostel, Lloyd Higgins, Greg Burch, and I assumed command of Papa Hotel Alpha, and

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<sup>24</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/06/00, 07/05/01. The Special Project form went to AB-1 and copies likely to the Company in Taipei. Despite being a Special Project participant, Wayne never signed such a form. He suspects that his previous witting classification overrode a requirement for him to agree to any security clauses.

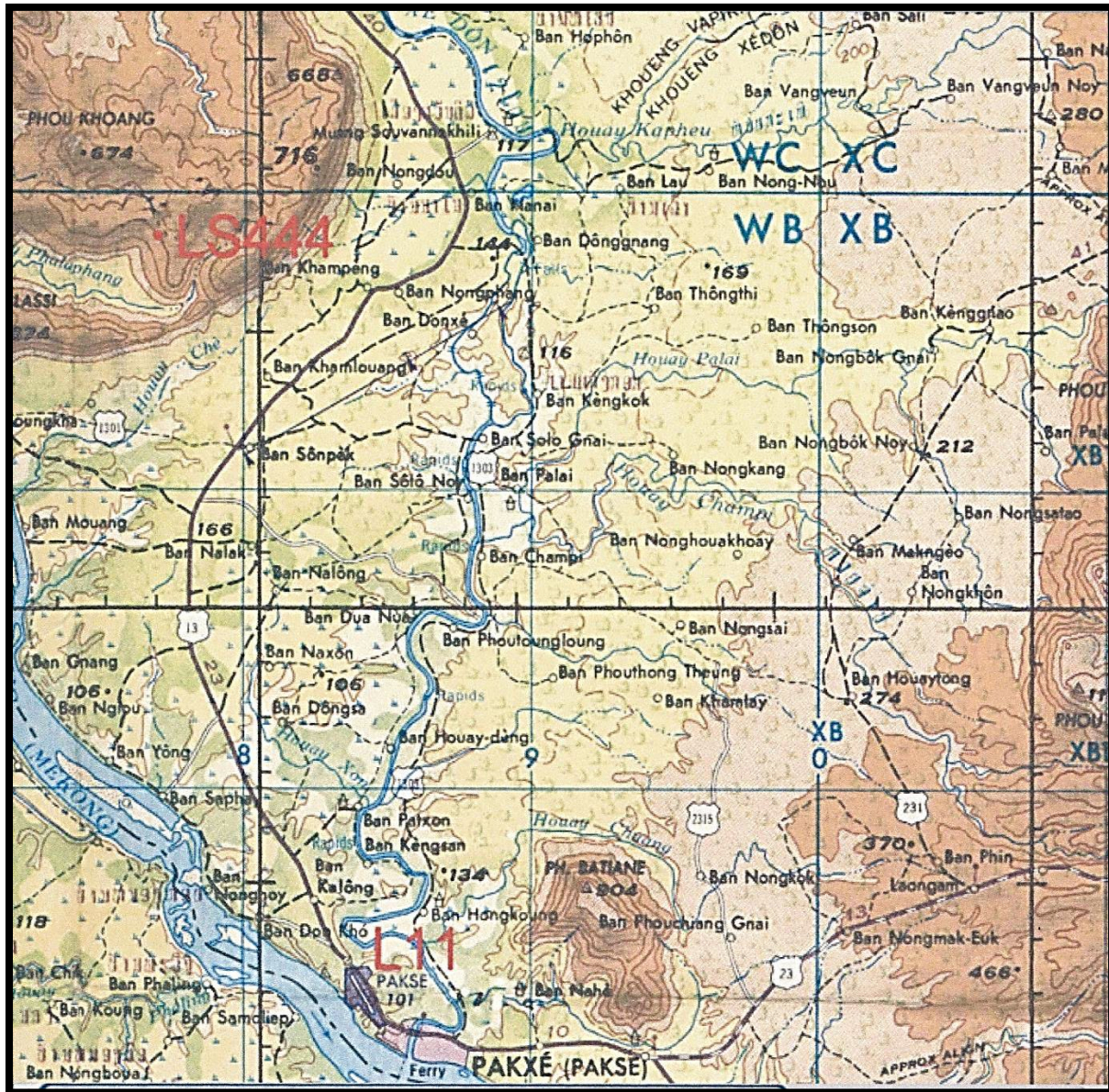
Note: We would never become rich flying in the Special Project, and likely earned less than a regular line pilot. However, it was something new, exciting, challenging, and certainly a labor of love. In addition to receiving normal base pay, hazardous, night, per diem, and deadhead pay, because risks were considered equal, all crewmembers received a 500 dollar per mission stipend. However, perhaps because government taxpayer money and oversight were becoming tighter in the "guns and butter" environment, I was to learn later that certain caveats were attached to mission remuneration. Pay was based on actually launching into the target area. Training and prepositioning to forward sites did not count, nor did aborted or no-go missions. As always, like the road watch program and SARs, this largely depended on Customer and CPH evaluation of the situation.

conducted some LORAN training in the local Lima-11 area. We then recovered at PS-44 to work and spend the night. <sup>25</sup>

What would become my home away from home for the next several months, PS-44 was located on a sizeable plateau fifteen nautical miles north-northeast of the Pakse airport. The sprawling Phou Khouang massif generally stretched ten miles north-to-south and eight miles east-to-west. Surrounded on three sides by steep, plunging cliffs and heavy forested woods, the remote site was carefully selected for its natural terrain and lack of surveillance by anyone on the flat lands. The small complex, including housing and ancillary buildings such as laundry and generator sheds was carefully positioned on the edge of an elevated southern-oriented finger consisting of rocky sandstone bedrock that pointed to a ravine streambed a thousand feet or more below. Further separating the commando training site from observation or potential hostility were a wandering ravine, rocky ledges, sheer walls, and additional wooded mountains to the east and southeast. The entire three-mile section culminated at eastern cliffs that plunged precipitously into the Sedone River Valley and Route-13. Further isolating the plateau area, rough terrain generally stretched in all directions. Indeed, the degree of difficulty negotiating harsh terrain was such that the only reasonable route march for enemy forces to the base was envisioned from a portion of the western area. Still, recalling the unexpected disaster at the "impregnable" heights of Phou Pha Thi by highly trained and motivated Dac Cong commandos, defensive measures were not lax. Interspersed among the trees, and liberally scattered around the northeast area, were troop housing and several strategically

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<sup>25</sup> The Air America Air Facilities Data site book. PS-444 (PS-44) is listed at UMT coordinates WB7798, 1,800 feet AGL, and with a runway orientation of 07/25.



The approximate location of the PS-44 (LS-444) Commando Raider and S-58T Special Project training base in relation to the Mekong River, Pakse, Route-13, and the Sedone Valley.

Joint Operations Graphic UMT Map in the Author's possession.



placed thatch guard shacks, manned by handpicked FAR soldiers tasked to constantly guard the perimeter. Should additional help be required, twelve miles west-southwest at Phou Lat Seu (LS-418) and PS-18, lay a FAR training base. Although our camp was only fourteen miles south of the current fighting west of Khong Sedone, our area appeared to be as isolated and secure as one could possibly manage. Still, I wondered how many people of various factions were aware of its existence and purpose, and the ultimate security.

Normally only visible from the air, three wooden tin-roofed buildings sat on the lip of the plateau, ostensibly disturbing its pristine scenery. The largest structure defined the dining, sleeping, and recreation quarters. It was originally built to accommodate two S-58T crews, essential Customers for raider training, logistics, those administering mundane daily tasks, the current field project, and a small household staff.<sup>26</sup> Beside interior storage areas, bedrooms, and the sizeable dining area, a small screened porch faced northwest. To the rear a portion of the building jutted out, forming a short-stemmed "T." This projection was the kitchen. Separated from the main building by about fifty feet was the laundry shack. A third, smaller building almost equidistant from the second was used to house the generator and general-purpose items. There was yet another building which I never saw.

Interestingly, outside, amid batches of scrub grass, patches of the rocky sandstone plateau had been weathered and

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<sup>26</sup> Formally in charge of all sling load loading and parachute drying and repacking operations at The Alternate, Shep Johnson was now in charge of the Commando Raider team training at PS-44; Don Stephens, originally a honcho working at PS-22 on the eastern rim of the Bolovens Plateau and other training billets, managed the facility. Various technical personnel from the States rotated through PS-44 from time to time, as did Special Project Managers Jim Glerum and Buddy Rodgers.

finely eroded over the centuries to form fine, bright white Pensacola-like sand. (Following one RON, I took a box of sand home for my children to play with.) Looking enough like the real thing, and in order to preserve the site's secrecy, in the future when asked where I was going, I answered to "The Beach." Never explaining the meaning, I am sure the statement confused a lot of people.

At the time of our arrival, several Chinese Nationalist pilots from the Republic of China's (ROC) Air Force's clandestine 34th Squadron inundated the crew quarters in order to hone their helicopter training for a classified mission to which I was not yet privy.<sup>27</sup> In addition to the Asians, two former U.S. Army pilots, now Air America Captains, Dan Smith (DOH-04/28/71), and Lloyd Lamothe (DOH-04/01/71, who, for obvious reasons, I called the giggler) were present as IPs to monitor and train their charges in a special aircraft that was either not yet at the site or was kept under wraps during the day. Although I had not been, and would never be, fully briefed on the highly classified mission, the scenario pointed to the fact that as non-round-eye Asians, the Chinese men had been introduced to the equation as a measure CIA often employed to effect plausible deniability in the worst-case situations--a crash or capture of crew while in enemy territory.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See the history of clandestine Chinese and Jim Pearson's involvement in the PS-44 environment.

<sup>28</sup> Decades later, I learned the extent and value of the mission while writing and communicating with Ken Conboy. Since mission manager Jim Glerum had provided information, I considered secrecy of the mission passé.



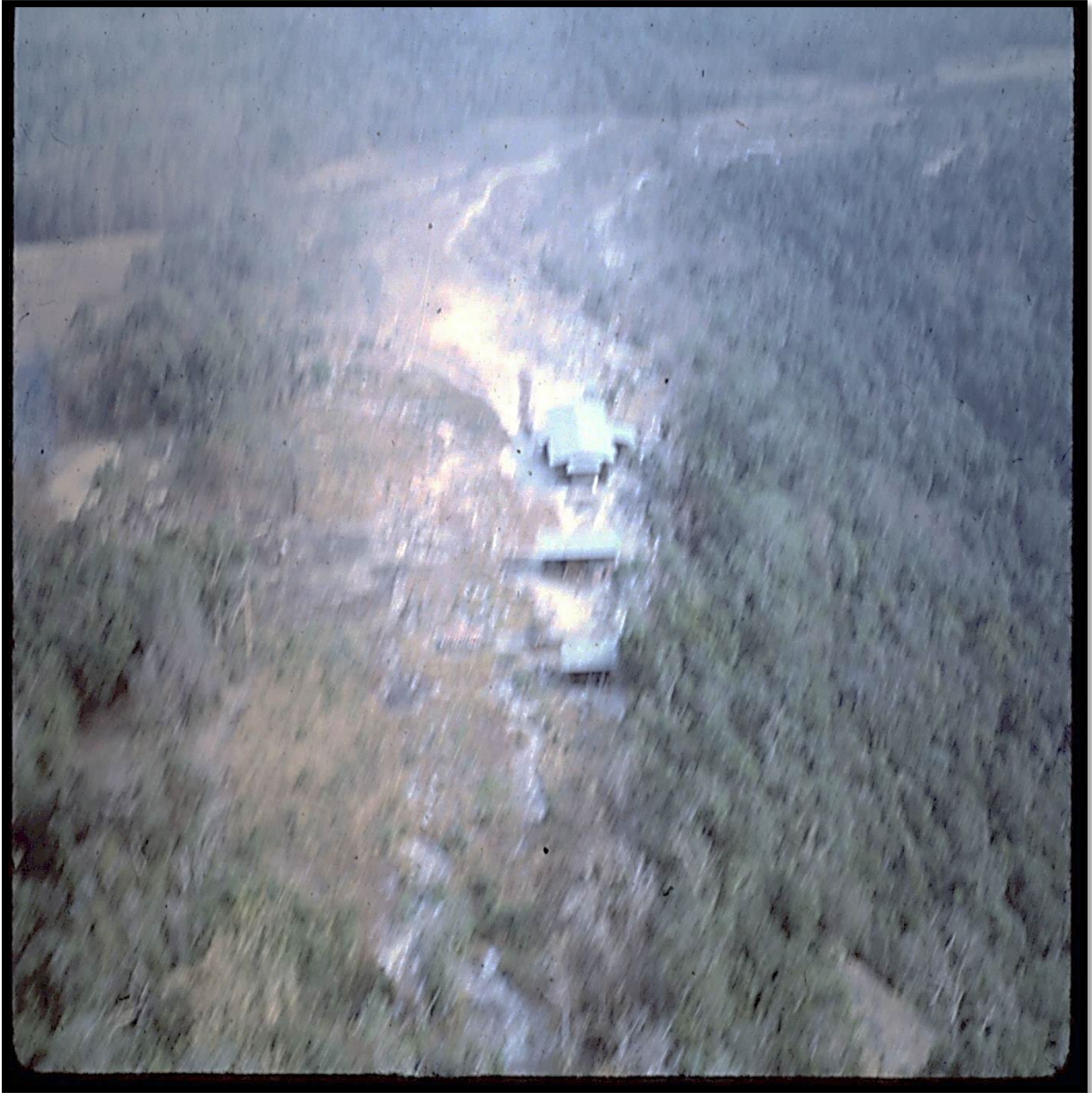
Northeastern aerial view of a portion of the PS-44 infrastructure and the surrounding harsh terrain.  
Author Collection.





Westerly view of two main buildings in the PS-44 complex. Open portions of the rocky Phou Khouang plateau are visible interspersed among stands of medium sized trees. One of the trails from the main building leads into the forest, where a hangar concealed the two specially-built Hughes-500P helicopters. As a bonus, the shadow of the Author's airborne S-58T is seen against the wooded cliff in the lower portion of the photo.

Author Collection.



A blurred aerial view showing the main PS-44 buildings proximity to the lip of wooded slopes that plunged into a streambed ravine.

Author Collection.



A view of PS-44 looking northwest. Northeast of the main buildings guard housing and posts are visible along the plateau's eastern rim.

Author Collection.



Author's S-58T (Snotnose) parked at "The Beach" amid low scrub grass and white sand. The facility's gravity-fed water tower sits in the distance to the left next to the crew and messing quarters.

Author Collection.

A few elite pilots from the Chinese squadron had already received both Twinpac and LORAN C training in Taiwan on XW-PHY by Air America Captains Bob Mehaffey (DOH 05/21/66) and Bob Hitchman, and the Asians were currently present to undergo realistic field training. <sup>29</sup> As a new guy in the program, I asked no questions, remaining quiet and observing. The Chinese men seemed at home, grinned, and were pleasant and friendly. The Customers were equally friendly, and attempted to make me comfortable. Even though the atmosphere reminded me somewhat of a fraternity house, it would take some time acclimating before I would feel totally part of the team. It helped that the food served was good.

Later, while flying Papa Hotel Bravo for two hours to include a one-hour night flight, Mehaffey briefed me on the reason for my presence. I had been selected by the Customer to conduct a series of daytime LORAN exercises with a key Chinese pilot, and to teach and fine tune him in emergency procedures. During our session, Bob directed me into a semi-confined area

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<sup>29</sup> Author Note: Much to my relief, Bob Hitchman, who from past dealings, I neither respected, trusted, nor wanted any association with, was absent, having recently returned to Taiwan. Hitchman was relieved from his Saigon CPH job during June 1971. A 2 June 1971 Memorandum from Systems Chief Pilot (SCP) Don Teeters to Vice President of Flight Operations Walker (VPFO) stated: *"...Due to his rapidly changeable attitude of favoritism, pursuance of prejudice, and sour personality traits, the morale of most of the [Saigon] pilots under his supervision is very low. As Chief Pilot, he is very insistent that line pilots adhere to rule and regulations set forth by the Company, however, he is one of the most consistent violators of these regulations.*

*An evaluation of Captain Hitchman's performance, good and bad, leaves no recourse other than recommending he be removed from supervision..."* EW Knight Email, 12/09/00. Bob was not fired, merely temporarily in limbo looking for a job that would suit his skills. He found this when the Agency was looking for a reliable, senior, well-qualified rotary wing person to fly and instruct indigenous personnel in Twinpac XW-PHY.

selected for its similarity to the actual cross border mission site. LORAN navigation missions would be flown in and around the area, terminating in what was called "The Hole." Flying a mission profile during the day was no problem, but constituted a bit of a challenge at night. Nevertheless, that is what our training session entailed. First, familiarize principals with daytime aspects of the mission, and then concentrate on the difficulties of night work, when any extraneous factor other than the norm could seriously jeopardize the mission. Since I was reasonably new to rigorous night flying, a process that required ultimate crew coordination and required additional training, I wondered if the designated training would constitute an exercise in the blind leading the blind.

Selected by seasoned and knowledgeable Customers, like Shep Johnson, to emulate a reasonably accurate mission profile, "The Hole" was located four miles southwest of PS-44 in a ravine, housed in a rocky streambed and surrounded by low trees. It was adjacent to the Houay Phalaphang, a small stream that wound through the area.

After completing our work, I RON at PS-44. The barrack rooms were brimming with excess people, so cots were erected in the area normally reserved for dining and recreation.

The next day, following a detailed briefing, I began training an intelligent Chinese pilot in canned LORAN navigation and published emergency procedures. The tall, likable man arrived well prepared and was very professional and proficient. In fact, he navigated considerably better with the LORAN C than I could at this point, and I discovered that I could do little to improve his navigational skills. Still, as ordered, we went



"The Hole," a practice streambedded landing zone similar to that of the proposed cross border mission.  
Author Collection.



Another daytime photo taken from almost directly overhead "The Hole".  
Author Collection.



through the motions. After instructing him in all the emergency procedures in the pilot manual, several additional ones I had experienced, and having him perform to standard, I was satisfied. Afterward, I wished that all my instructor work with pilots was as easy.

Later in the day, in order to relieve some pressure on overcrowded conditions at PS-44 and some maintenance problems that required addressing, Lloyd and I were advised to RON in Pakse. (Three plus seventeen, five sorties.)

### **A CREWMEMBER GOES DOWN**

After securing the aircraft at the airport, I began walking toward the radio shack when I noticed a green body bag lying in the baking sun awaiting transportation to Udorn. I intercepted someone who briefly related part of a story about how Emmet Sullivan had flown into the vicinity of a known 12.7mm gun and been hit, resulting in the death of his Flight Mechanic. Appalled, I was momentarily tempted to unzip to top portion of the bag to see if I knew the victim. However, aware that the man had been shot in the head by a large caliber round, the thought of a grisly sight dissuaded me.

During early June, the only government force to the east blocking enemy access to Pakse was a Thai fire support base near the Route-13/23 junction. Over the next two months the FSB was augmented by additional Thai battalions, and another FSB was established. With these supporting arms in place, efforts commenced to advance up the road toward Ban Lao Ngam, without much success. <sup>30</sup>

On the sixteenth, Bob Caron and Emmet Sullivan, with his crew of Captain Jess Hagerman and Feliciano Manalo in Hotel-52

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<sup>30</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 351-352.

were assigned an emergency medevac mission at a hot landing zone approximately seven miles east of Pakse and two miles south of Route-23. The landing zone was under sporadic attack, precluding a tight overhead approach. Therefore, flying the lead aircraft, Caron darted into the landing pad low level, landed without a problem, retrieved wounded and climbed to 1,500 feet to await Sullivan's extraction attempt.

Sullivan and Hagerman saw smoke rising from the landing zone, so Emmet descended to treetop level some distance from the destination and then commenced a ninety-knot flight toward the area. Realizing that they were straying off course, Hagerman pointed to the right side. Looking right and left, Emmet observed a wall of tracer fire, sort of like a stream of water flowing toward the helicopter. (With every fifth round a tracer, one can only imagine how many rounds were fired at Hotel-52.) Sullivan immediately turned away, increased speed, and began to climb instead of remaining low and effecting nap-of-the-earth (NOE) flight to safety.

During the maneuver, the ship was hit. Concerned, Jess radioed over the intercom, "*Manny are you alright?*" There was no answer. At the same time, Emmet felt something strike his leg. It was a portion of Manalo's skull.

Without a Flight Mechanic to assess aircraft damage, Sullivan could only imagine how much battle damage they had incurred. With a full load of WIA Caron was already en route to Pakse and unable to help. However, hearing the fracas, Captain Bob Mehaffey was inbound from PS-44 in a Twinpac, and followed Hotel-52 into Pakse.

Inspection revealed that the ship had been impacted by one 12.7 shell that penetrated the left fuselage, deflected,

striking Manalo behind the right ear, and instantly killing him.<sup>31</sup>

Monday, we worked all day ferrying supplies to PS-44 and attempting to whip Bravo into shape. Once serious training began at PS-44, we did not participate in the Khong Sedone operation. After flying one plus three-five and ten sorties, we retired for the night.

### **WELCOME ABOARD TO THE SPECIAL PROJECT**

Chief Pilot Wayne Knight, although aware of the expanding program and having presented me with a Company security form, was not an active member of the Special Project when I joined. Outgoing CPH John Ford had briefed Wayne about the program and recommended that he might want to become involved once he felt comfortable settling into his management slot. Taking John's briefing under advisement, Wayne was initially very busy reorienting to the job and dealing with FEPA matters (FEPA was only a fledgling organization when he departed for school). By July, Knight had already started dealing with Deputy Chief of Base at AB-1, Buddy Rodgers, who through his initiative and realistic insistence believed that it would constitute a considerable degree of difficulty for him to assist in the Special Project and not become actively involved. Wayne agreed.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Emmet Sullivan Interview, 08/29/95.

Bill Leary July 1972 Notes: His interview with Jess Hagerman. Hagerman intimated that FEPA rules establishing seniority procedures enabled Sullivan, a former Bell pilot in Saigon with little H-34 time, to become PIC over more experienced H-34 pilots. He further stated that Sullivan, who generally worked and had a number of incidents in Sayaboury Province, was relatively unfamiliar with the enemy situation in Military Region Four.

<sup>32</sup> EW Knight Email, 08/30/00.

On 17 July, Wayne was at the controls of XW-PHA with Scratch Kanach on the way to PS-44 for his initial introduction and participation in the Special Project.

While cruising at 8,000 feet twenty-six miles northeast of Roi Et, Thailand, west of the Phou Pan Mountains, heavy vibrations were felt, a brief grinding sound heard, and a burning odor detected. <sup>33</sup> This was followed by a complete tail rotor failure.

At altitude and cruise airspeed over flat terrain, and with numerous rice paddies below, Wayne conducted an excellent autorotation into a rice paddy (VC0586) and incurred no aircraft damage. After some time on the ground, leaving Alpha in place, the crew was ferried to Udorn on the rescue helicopter.

Later Maintenance Department investigation revealed mating surfaces on the forty-two-and-a-half-degree tail rotor angle gearbox had sheared, resulting in an intermediate shaft coupling failure. Apparently, Tainan workers had coated the overhauled angle gearbox with a zinc oxide, incompatible with the surfaces of the engaging plates.

On the 24th Hank Edwards administered Wayne's second in command (SIC) proficiency check in Papa Hotel Alpha. Two days later, Wayne and Pogo Hunter flew to T-439, the Nam Pong Dam area south of Udorn, to support Thai irregular GM training. <sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Years earlier, the Author was concerned about a burning paint smell while working an H-34 in the Na Khang area. Initial investigations by the Filipino Flight Mechanic revealed nothing. The odor prevailed. Frustrated with the Flight Mechanic's apparent lack of concern and inability to discover the problem, I finally decided to check the aircraft myself. After shutting down and folding the tail pylon, we discovered the drive shaft tail rotor output coupling bearing from the forty-two-degree gear box had nearly disintegrated.

<sup>34</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/05/00, 12/06/00, 12/08/00.

We continued the FCF of Bravo on the 21st, but gave up after only thirty-five minutes.

During the day, after vigorous attacks by fire, GM-32 troops drove the enemy out of the former FAR camp southwest of Khong Sedone. Leaving the low ground, the Vietnamese withdrew to the heights of Phou Khong. <sup>35</sup>

At month's end the CIA reported:

*... "irregular forces have managed to consolidate their hold on Khong Sedone, but elements of the North Vietnamese 39th Regiment are still stubbornly defending the surrounding area.*

*On the Bolovens Plateau, elements of the [NVA] 9th Regiment have thwarted governments attempts to push east from the junction of Routes 23 and 231. During the rainy season last year, government forces attempted to retake Paksong and establish a presence on the central portion of the Plateau; they presumably will attempt to do so again this year. In both the Khong Sedone and western Bolovens areas, the communists are striving to tie down the government forces and prevent any threat to the infiltration corridor to the east."* <sup>36</sup>

On the nineteenth, although the machine was not completely right, we worked a little. After lunch we returned to Udorn, arriving early after 1500 hours. (Three hours plus forty minutes, two sorties.)

Marking a quick turnaround, the next morning we were picked up very early to FCF Papa Hotel Charlie and ferry it to Pakse. there Lloyd and I continued LORAN navigation mission profile practice. With PS-44 still overwhelmed, in deference to other principals, we recovered at Pakse and RON at the Air America hostel. (Seven plus twenty, twenty minutes night.)

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<sup>35</sup> Ken Conboy, 351.

<sup>36</sup> CIA Bulletin, 07/31/72, Laos.

In the morning Lloyd and I continued training in Papa Hotel Charlie. I also conducted a Company-mandated proficiency check. (Four plus five, ten sorties.)

Prior to flying with Bob Mehaffey in the afternoon, using a Customer's typewriter, I wrote a short letter home to the folks to compensate for the lack of communication because of my time in the field, and to apprise them of my current plans to journey home for a short personal and business visit.

*"It looks like I might be delayed a bit initially on the trip. I have been away most of the month and haven't had much time to square things away at home. I should start my monthly time off the 24th if all goes well..*

*I still plan to visit Vail in Izmir, [Turkey], as this is a golden opportunity to see some of that area. [Carleton Harry Vail "Sonny," a boyhood friend, was a major in the USAF, and as part of a NATO mission was stationed with his family at Izmir.] I may still make it home on the first of August but don't be disappointed if I am not. I will still have the same itinerary as before so plan on me being home for about two weeks..*

*Tuie seems better although we haven't been back to the doctor for a checkup yet. I will try to work this in before I leave.*

*We have started Amanda on rice gruel and she seems to be thriving..*

*Rick is still being tutored and loves it. He actually starts his homework by himself sometimes..His disposition is still good, but I can't understand why mine isn't any more [war exacts a toll on people].*

*Peter is more active all the time with the resulting bumps which scares the hell out of Tuie. He will be more of a problem as he doesn't mind well..."*

Then as a postscript:

***"I am writing this from the jungle."***

Letter Home, 07/21/72.

That afternoon, logging instructor time, I conducted the identical semi-annual proficiency check with Bob Mehaffey in Papa Hotel Alpha, and at the same time attempted to determine which cockpit crews would be more compatible for missions.

While we were working, a CASI Porter pilot flying PEN disappeared on the Plateau. A SAR commenced and the plane was eventually discovered. It had struck a tree and crashed, killing the pilot. <sup>37</sup> After the SAR, we returned to Udorn.

### **ADDITIONAL MISSION EQUIPMENT**

I checked into the Air America facility at 1320 hours, prior to departing to Savannakhet for a night mission. Three of us were ushered to the corner of a hangar, where electronic specialist Tom Deeble, who I had worked with during LORAN testing, and someone else from AB-1 waited to brief us about certain aspects of the XE-1 LAWS radar missile and anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) detection device. Tom possessed a record provided by the Agency that played tones of three types of enemy radar-Firecan AAA, Fansong missile guidance, and the Spoon Rest early warning signal. In spite of listening to the tones twice, it was all so new to me that I was all but overwhelmed by the material presented. But that was the Special Project: fast and furious, accomplish all tasks yesterday.

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<sup>37</sup> According to former CASI pilots Hank Bour and Les Strouse, the pilot had a Korean wife and there were matrimonial difficulties. *"From the guy's personality and some other things observed, was that it could have been half deliberate."*

It was obvious that the exhaust or white corkscrew trail of missiles could not be seen at night, therefore the need to determine if we were being acquired and tracked, and if so, to take evasive action. Naturally, I thought that if we had to deploy this super sensitive gear on our ships, then we were venturing into a very dangerous area, a place we should not be.

The LAWS missile/radar detection receiver was installed on a horizontal leg of our landing gear. The device had a four-antenna array. Each antenna was oriented to one inter-cardinal compass point (45, 135, 225, and 335 degrees) referenced to the helicopter's line of flight.

This acquisition apparatus sent signals to equipment in the electronic compartment section behind the cabin section, and from there was relayed to an instrument installed in the instrument console in the cockpit. (This was the hole I had previously described.) It was designed to generally inform us of radar targeting, a potential threat, and its direction. A missile threat was described by bearing and a tone.

A six-page confidential handout provided by the Agency further described the high technology electronic system. The information is offered in an abbreviated form for better understanding:

*"The model XE-1 receives and displays to the aircraft pilot or other observer information concerning the radar environment about the aircraft. The set responds to those hostile fire control tracking radars usually associated with hostile fire control tracking radars in the S, C, X, and K frequency bands...and provides visual and aural indications of the presence and direction to the emitters. Non-threat radars are generally excluded.*

*The device accepts missile guidance radar signals in the L band...When a signal is correlated with a tracking radar signal,*



*the equipment identifies the combination as an activated SAM [surface to air missile] radar complex. The visual and aural displays are uniquely identified to warn the crew that an emitter has become a potential threat.*

The reception coverage was 360 degrees in azimuth.

The visual display was direction type-radial strobes, length proportional to the received signal amplitude (strength). Angle is proportional to the received signal relative bearing.

A missile threat was identified by radar strobe indication and missile alert lamp flash. A unique audio warning tone was superimposed when a missile threat was identified.

Instructions followed in the handout for operation of the equipment..

*"The XE-1 performs the direction-finding function by amplitude comparison of the signals induced in a four-antenna array..*

*The [cathode ray tube] (CRT) display is controlled by an eight-element memory unit. Each element controls the display of all signals in one of the eight sectors. To activate a memory unit, the incoming signals in that sector must meet the established threat criteria-threshold signal level, pulse width, pulse repetition rate, and pulse train persistence. The signals arriving in each sector are sequentially scanned at a normal sector dwell time...At the conclusion of the dwell period the presence of a signal, or signals, which meet all the threat criteria activates the appropriate memory element-all signals originating in that sector which meet the threshold level and pulse width criteria will be displayed."*

There were two modes of operation available to the cockpit crew. First, the discriminator switch off, which allowed the equipment to operate at maximum sensitivity and processes and display all radar-type signals intercepted. Second, with the

discriminator switch on, processing of signals was limited to those which met the threat criteria and the equipment displayed only the signals occurring in a sector in which the presence of threat-type signal were identified. (In low radar-emitting areas, it was recommended to maintain the switch off to reduce LAWS sensitivity.)

It was also recommended that in high threat areas to turn the volume control knob to high, as it was possible to hear the threat radar signal before it was displayed on the CRT, especially if the threat radar set was at low power output.

Without any realistic means to practice actual threat radar signal inputs, the handout was mostly gibberish to me. It would have to be real time OJT in the field, and I hoped that Lloyd was more conversant in the subject and equipment than I was.

Following the XE-1 briefing and after performing several aircraft and equipment checks, in the late afternoon Mehaffey, Burch, and I crewed Papa Hotel Delta to Savannakhet. Lloyd deadheaded to Lima-39, where Scratch waited with Papa Hotel Charlie. As our mission was scheduled for the 23<sup>rd</sup>, after a briefing that included photos of the landing zone, we repaired to the Air America hostel.

After a final briefing for the long-range mission to the Ho Chi Minh Trail system, we repaired to our respective ships: Scratch Kanach, Bob Mehaffey, and Chuck Low in Papa Hotel Charlie and Lloyd Higgins, Greg Burch, and I in Papa Hotel Delta.

After repositioning to the Commando Raider team site, Chuck loaded the men into Charlie. Even though we were the designated SAR ship, we loaded a few troopers. The plan was to arrive at the landing zone, which lay in a saddle between two high points, a little after dark. Prototype night vision glasses were new to our theater. There were not many in the Agency's inventory at

the time, and these were closely guarded and shared with crews in the fixed wing program. For this reason, and the fact that I was not checked out in the usage, Scratch was the only person equipped with a pair. However, not comfortable or confident with the device, he was reluctant to use them and generally opted for a last light landing. <sup>38</sup>

After ascertaining that the ships were mission ready, the landing zone LORAN coordinates were programmed into the sets. It was not quite 1800 hours when a final radio check was conducted, indicating we were ready to launch.

We headed northeast for well over an hour. The dark cloak of night had already begun to envelop eastern Military Region Three. In the glooming, a light show over the trails caught our attention. Lloyd turned on the LAWS set and began fiddling with the switch. As with most missions deep into enemy territory, a certain amount of nervous tension began to pervade the cockpit, directly proportional to proximity of the landing zone and the unknown. In the distance we could barely see the saddle so indelibly fixed in our minds from aerial photographs. Then the LAWS began to indicate radar activity from our twelve and two o'clock, as strobes probed our position on the gage. We were so new at interpreting LAWS signals that confusion prevailed as to what we were actually observing and how detrimental it was to the mission and our ultimate safety.

Finally taking the initiative, Lloyd broke radio silence informing Scratch that we should abort the mission. Since we

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<sup>38</sup> Preferred by both pilots and Customers, late afternoon or last light missions had been in vogue for many years. The method afforded teams the cover of night to consolidate their positions or move to an advantageous point to accomplish their mission. From a pilot aspect, there were both positives and negatives. There was considerably more masking and concealment in the dark. However, should something happen out of the ordinary, the degree of difficulty was considerably more elevated recovering a downed crew in the dark.

were so close to our objective, I was shocked, and unprepared for this pronouncement. Caution was the watchword of our SOPs. Everything--the machines, the crews--had to be perfect prior to and during the mission. Therefore, there was no objection to Lloyd's recommendation, as the missions were already sufficiently hairy without introducing extraneous problems to the equation. I was new to the program and still learning their methods, but quickly realized that this thinking formed a common thread in Scratch's and Lloyd's mindsets, and was part and parcel of every mission. As my time in the Project elapsed, I discovered that Lloyd was the more conservative, and would abort at any sign of potential trouble. Moreover, even though I was driving the ship, in reality, I was not in command.

After dropping our charges off at Whiskey Three, we repaired to the Savannakhet airfield and the Air America hostel. (Three plus five, four sorties.) I did not say anything at the time, but wondered exactly what I had gotten myself into by joining the Special Project band.

The next day we conducted another long, but abbreviated day mission to the Trails, and recovered at Thakhet. (Three plus one-four. four sorties.) While the ships were being fueled, we switched crews. Scratch departed for PS-44, and we recovered at Udorn. (One plus forty-five.) Scheduled for STO, it was my last helicopter flight until 6 September.

## **MR-2**

*"General Vang Pao, appreciating present weather conditions [in] MR-2 and [the] fact the enemy [is] well entrenched in caves and bunkers, concluded that it [was] not worth [an] expected high casualty rate for irregulars to continue bold frontal attacks without special Tacair and ordnance-particularly Paveway missiles to destroy caves and bunker complexes.*

*He views the present objective [is] to protect Long Tieng pending return [of Thai] GM's from training [in Thailand] and favorable weather. [Vang Pao] will protect Long Tieng by maintaining pressure on [the] enemy's main line of resistance in the Ban Hin Tang and Phou Pha Sai areas. He feels that by maintaining pressure on their storage areas and the terminus of the Route-54 major LOC into the Long Tieng/Sam Tong area. The enemy will be forced to react with forces currently in a logistics and route security posture on the northern and eastern plains and along Route-7 and 72. [This] will give [the general] a better chance to achieve a strong foothold on the northeastern plains from which he can support a heavy concentration of battalion sized mobile spoiling operations between Ban Ban and Nong Het."* <sup>39</sup>

Mike Jarina deadheaded early to Vientiane on 556 to crew Bell 205 Papa Foxtrot Gulf with Harold Thompson and Casio. At 0930 hours, and attesting to the palpable danger that still prevailed around The Alternate, while supporting Delta Ridgeline north of Skyline, two mortar rounds splashed midway along the ridge at the Delta Papa pad. Three hours later up to ten rounds fell on Thai positions in the Sam Tong area.

Mike was no stranger to dodging either enemy incoming or friendly outgoing fire. One time in the past, he was flying low over a Skyline fort (the safest place to cross) headed toward Site-20. Out of habit, he looked down and observed a puff of smoke. This was followed by a mortar round exiting a mortar tube and lifting in front of him. Unaware of how close the round had

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<sup>39</sup> Memorandum for the Record, 07/27/72, MR-2 Rainy Season Plans. The meeting was held in Udorn on 26 July. Attending were the Chief of Base, Pat Landry, Chief of Unit, Dick Johnson, General Vang Pao, and General DHEP (THEP).

come to his ship, he held his breath and said to his cockpit companion, *"This is it!"*<sup>40</sup>

When he returned to Long Tieng, he complained to the Customer. Unconcerned, they said, *"Well, the troops have to fire the mortars to keep in practice."* Considerably upset over the incident, with little near term avail, he complained to Burr Smith about it at a party.

After initial close calls in the early days of friendly artillery fire, pilots became more careful and procedures were initiated so no ship was nailed by friendly fire. It was important to make positive radio contact with the FAG to cease all firing. However, there was often a time lag, and it was not always possible to react quickly. For this reason, there might be a long loiter time while firing was terminated. It all added to the stress of the job, particularly during the visibility-reduced smoky season.

That night Jarina and crew RON at the Apollo Hotel in Vientiane. (Ten plus forty, forty minutes night.)<sup>41</sup>

### **PROBLEMS AT LIMA SITE-272**

Misfortune beset Ban Son. A POL (petroleum, oil, and lubricants) had been set on fire, destroying massive stockpiles. Initial reports reached Vientiane that the POL fire had been set by Pathet Lao infiltrators. Investigators discovered that a local man had entered the POL area seeking kerosene to fuel his lanterns. It was assumed that he had a lighted cigarette in his mouth. This, plus the presence of gasoline fumes, ignited, blowing both the interloper and fuel to smithereens.

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<sup>40</sup> Mike could have recalled Cotton Davis' premature demise on Skyline in 1979.

<sup>41</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

In January, because of incoming artillery and rocket fire at Long Tieng, the majority of CAS operations had been shifted to the Ban Son refugee site. The movement involved all but two Agency officers. As a safety option, the Ban Nam Moh (LS-207) medical facility, located fifteen miles south of Long Tieng, was also moved to LS-272. Some air traffic problems, mostly parking and loading space availability, had been generated.

Mixing CAS and USAID refugee program personnel marked the first time in ten years that the two programs ever worked closely together at the same site. Meo soldiers and their families were inherently intertwined during the Laos war. This required a large measure of cooperation between the two U.S. agencies. For this reason, they always shared air and materiel assets, and generally cooperated on the mundane level. However, Sam Tong and Long Tieng operations were strategically separated by Skyline Ridge, and the programs did not meddle in the other's primary agendas.

Personnel obtained several porta camps to use as offices. USAID representative Blaine Jensen warned the station chief not to position them alongside the river because the local people indicated occasional flash floods occurred there. However, the advice fell on deaf ears of the new Chief of Unit.<sup>42</sup>

On 20 July, the inevitable happened. A deluge of regional rain caused a flash flood to overflow the river, damaging villages and part of the runway. Most of the buildings along the stream were washed away, including vehicles and heavy equipment. Pallets of heavy ammunition were strewn down the lower valley. As a result of the flood logistical and cargo airdrop operations were temporarily moved west to Vang Vieng.

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<sup>42</sup> Blaine Jensen Letter: Dick Johnson had been replaced because everyone knew that Dick could not work in a combined operation out of Site-272.

For several reasons Ban Son had never been a particularly adequate location from an operational viewpoint. There was "an overabundance of refugees, overstrained medical facilities, and susceptibility to heavy fog." Hampering operations, during part of the year--mainly the cool season--fixed wing planes were unable to land until 0930 hours. For this reason, all CAS military support operations were later moved to Vang Vieng. <sup>43</sup>

Because of heavy rains and adverse weather, Mike Jarina and Cliff "Wagon Tongue" Hendricks only flew 96W two hours and forty minutes in support of LS-272. The next day was even worse for flight time. Delayed from launching on flood relief, the crew of 96W did not leave Wattay Airport until late. Most of the 1+35 flight time involved en route ferry. They again RON at the Apollo Hotel.

By the 22nd, weather had substantially improved, allowing Mike, Larry Price, and Ueda to help relocate critical items to Vang Vieng. Remaining away from Udorn, the crew RON in Vientiane. The same crew worked at Long Tieng on Sunday, and RON at Vientiane (Seven plus thirty.) The final day of Jarina's time upcountry was spent working out of The Alternate. The crew recovered at Udorn. (Nine plus five.) <sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Blaine Jensen Letter. Blaine added that in Laos both sides were generally maintaining a status quo because sporadic ceasefire talks leading to a peace agreement was the ultimate goal. He further pontificated, "*If South Vietnam had not fallen, you would see today a divided Laos [somewhat similar to] the cease fire line [of May 1961]. Cannot predict what would have happened to the Meo or where they would have gone. But [relying] on slash-and-burn agriculture, they would have run out of mountains...*"

William Leary Notes, 10/07/72, Francis Starner, Far Eastern Economic Review.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, footnote 354, 20.

Janes Parker.

<sup>44</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.



Since all maps and supplies were lost in the LS-272 flood, by 7 August a temporary Air America FIC was being established on the flight line at Vang Vieng. <sup>45</sup>

### **OTTER LOSSES**

Jim Pearson was involved in the Special Project and pilot training of new men during all of 1972.

The second Twin Otter, N5662 had arrived in Vientiane on 4 November, 1971. The plane was equipped with a Texas Instrument APQ 115 terrain-following radar (TFR), LORAN, and other equipment for clandestine night and weather-related resupply work. <sup>46</sup> Initially Jim Pearson and Pete Parker were the only pilots checked out to fly the aircraft. At first, Jim had orders that whenever 662 flew on secret missions, he would be the only one to fly it. This was acceptable to him, since the numerous missions fostered a hundred hours per month. However, other pilots complained, as they were sharing only one plane, while Jim flew this one.

Jim's superior, Jim Rhyne, had given him his orders prior to going on home leave. Jim's first impression of Rhyne was that he should be very careful of him because of his close rapport with the AB-1 Customer. However, this assessment was erroneous, for Rhyne proved to be his "White Knight." Once he was in the Special Project, Rhyne supported him without question in each and every endeavor. Pearson could not have been prouder working with anyone as he was with Rhyne.

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<sup>45</sup> Bill Leary August 1972 Notes, FIC Sullivan, Vang Vieng.

<sup>46</sup> Bill Leary with Ted Mauldin. "TFR was used on missions when it was necessary to avoid enemy radar. There were four settings: 188 feet, 250 feet, 500 feet, and 1,000 feet. 500 feet was comfortable, but you could be picked up by radar...Mauldin experimented with the TFR during the day to learn the limitations of the equipment. It worked OK if you planned carefully. You had to know where you were, so a lot of time was spent on plotting courses..."

Rhyne's supernumerary was Gene Hughey. As de facto Chief Pilot of the program, Jim approached the Customer to allow him to train additional pilots to fly 662. They refused. He was the only one they wanted. Finally, Hughey, who was out of the loop, called Jim into his office and upbraided him for hogging all the flight time. After Jim explained the situation, Hughey approached the Customer, and his lobbying paid dividends, allowing Jim to train more pilots.

Jim attained his Instructor Pilot status in the Twotter, because at eleven hours and forty-five minutes, he and his Air Force instructor almost crashed into a mountain.<sup>47</sup> After terminating the flight, the military IP informed Jim that he was now the instructor, as he was quitting before he got killed.

With Jim IP, Pete Parker, Don Romes, and Ben Colman began eleven hours training. The specification was that the men were not to be involved in Special Project flying, only to conduct point-to-point flying without STOL work.

Jim Pearson continued to brief Rhyne, who gave him orders regarding the individuals acceptable for the Twin Otter program. Unfortunately, the aggressive types Jim wanted were not available because of the seniority clause in the FEPA contract. Jim rationalized, for according to Rhyne, he believed they would not participate in STOL operations. Regardless of Rhyne's good intentions, it did not take long before the newly checked out pilots began conducting STOL missions. Anticipating this eventuality, Jim insisted on the pilots conducting three landings into Bouam Long. Upon completion of this, considering it a fair acid test, Jim exited the plane for the man to make a solo takeoff and landing.

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<sup>47</sup> Twotter: Slang the pilots used for the plane.

Unfortunately, during the course of the next two years, the "airline types" introduced into the program managed to prang two of three DHC-6s. One resulted in the fatality of both pilots.

Pearson was already on home leave on 25 July when Ben Coleman, John Glover, and Thanom Khanthaphengxay were killed in N5662 on a resupply mission to a pad in the hills of the Site-72-Phou Long Mat area. The only survivor on the DHC-6 was AFD S. Kingkland.<sup>48</sup>

Weather was adverse, with a low ceiling impacting the hills north of Long Tieng. Although a pilot error finding was determined the probable cause, the exact reason for the crash was never determined.

*"There were three Otters trying to drop that morning. [Continental Air Services (CASI) Captain] Bob Clark went in first. He approached the "V" leading to the valley, realized that he could not proceed [any further], and made [an exceptionally] sharp turn below the clouds [that triggered the stall warning horn].*

*Coleman followed close behind. He also had to [conduct] a sharp turn [to remain VMC] below the clouds. Clark saw the plane hit the ground."*<sup>49</sup>

Case Officer Mike Ingham (Hardnose) "was in a chopper in the area. [He] went in right after the accident with [his] Thai

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<sup>48</sup> Jim Pearson Emails, 04/30/98, 05/02/98, 05/24/98. Pearson recalled, "All things considered, they were blameless, as the airplane was very easy to fly. It was just where we had to operate it that proved disastrous. The last Otter brought in to replace N5662 was N6868 and it was retrofitted with TFR installation." Pearson's first flight in this plane was 13 September 1972.

Pearson's FEPA flight crew log revealed that he had given Ben Coleman a one hour and twenty-three-minute proficiency check in 9EX around the Vientiane area on 16 July 1972.

Joe Leeker, DHC-6 662.

<sup>49</sup> Bill Leary 25 July Notes, Interview with Jim Rhyne. Jim believed Coleman flew through Clarke's severe wing vortex and turbulence that possibly initiated a stall.

*operations assistant Python [Small Man] and the Flight Mechanic from the chopper. [They] got Coleman out of the wreckage. He was still alive when we put him on the chopper but died on the way to the hospital. As we got him out, he kept telling us that he could not breathe and that he wanted to sit up. I think that his chest had been crushed. The copilot was obviously dead and firmly trapped in the wreckage, so we made no attempt to get his body out. The [American] kicker's foot was trapped in the wreckage and we had a hell of a time getting him out. As the area we were in was not secure, avgas was all over the place, and the electrical system of the plane was shorted out and arcing, I entertained thoughts of cutting the kicker's foot off. Fortunately, it did not come to that."*

The next day S-58T Captain Scratch Kanach delivered Stan Wilson, Al Reagan, and a small team of mechanics to the crash site. The team recovered whatever sophisticated navigation electronic equipment remained onboard the ship and the copilot's body, Cockpit TFR and LORAN equipment was removed for "normal" work. <sup>50</sup> That same day, after the weather improved, Mike Jarina and Wilbur worked Papa Foxtrot Hotel at Long Tieng and RON Vientiane. (Five plus ten, forty minutes night.)

On the 27<sup>th</sup>, the same crew departed Wattay Airport during the late morning. Working late, they recovered well after dark at Wattay Airport. The next day, Mike deadheaded to Udorn on Caribou 430.

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<sup>50</sup> Bill Leary July 1972 Notes: Interviews with Mike Ingham and Stan Wilson.

Author Note: Ben Coleman was a gentleman, who always had time for a humble helicopter pilot.

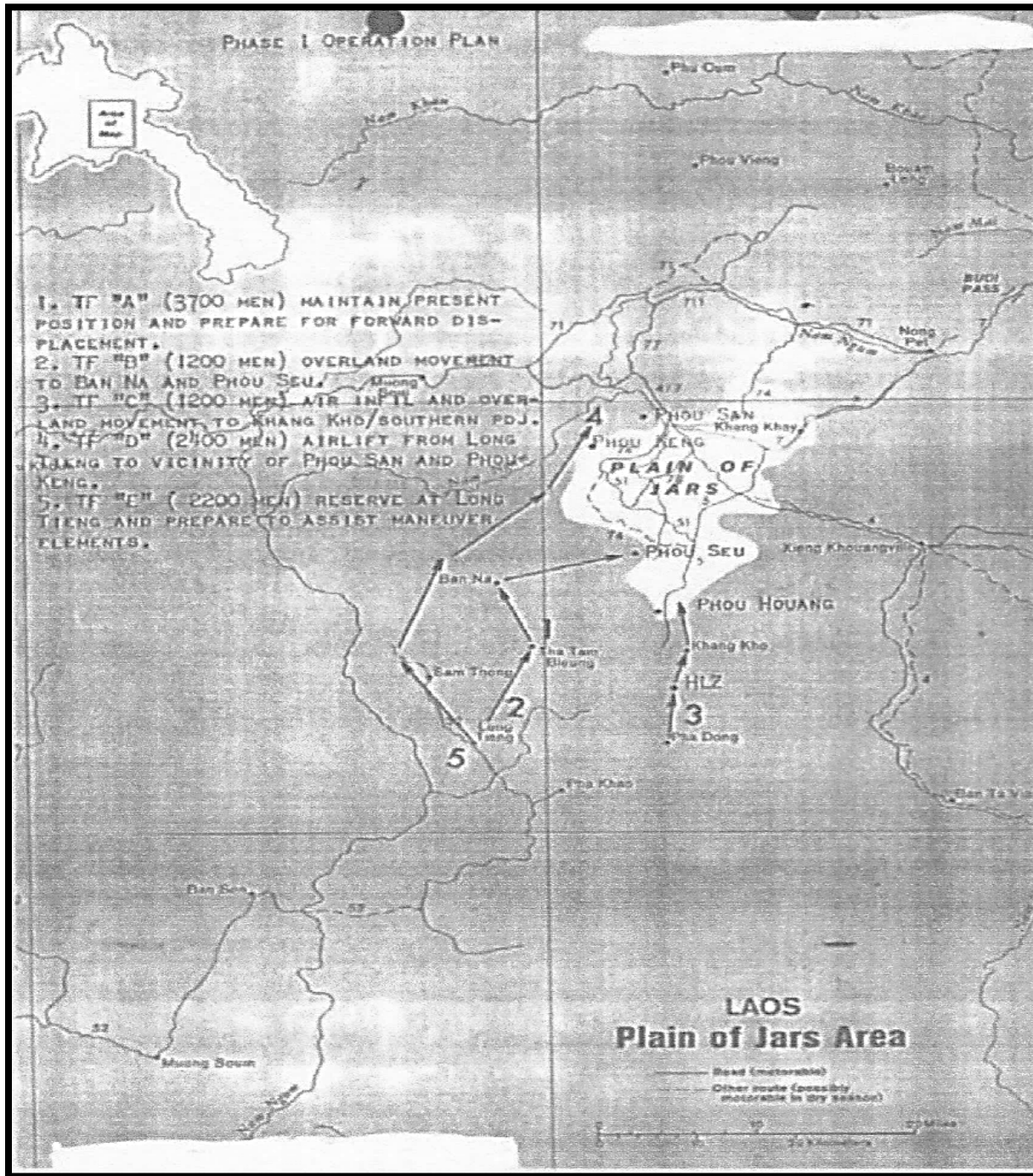
## **VP'S MONSOON OFFENSIVE PLANS**

Plans for the annual wet season offensive were devised and fleshed out at the 26 July high level meeting in Udorn. They were not unlike the many offensives General Vang Pao had launched in past years. Subject to change and modification, depending on weather and Tacair resources, the two-phase operation that relied first on overland and then helicopter movement, would tentatively begin on 15 August and continue into mid-September, when two additional GMs from training in Thailand would be available.

Vang Pao's battalions would be facing a fatigued and combat-challenged, but well established 174th Regiment strung out from Ban Na to Ban Hintang, to Phou Pha Sai. Other Vietnamese regiments still in the area were the 335th (east of the Plain of Jars), the 148th (off the southern Plain), and the 866th.

Rapid movement toward objectives, by Military Region Two irregulars familiar with the terrain, was considered essential for the operation's success. While Thai forces maintained pressure on Ban Hintang and Phou Pha Sai and provided homeland defense, GM-23 would march from Padong to Phou Louang (Task Force Charlie); GM-22 would thrust north from Long Tieng to Phou Long Mat (Task Force Bravo). Moving on, they would initiate a feint at Ban Na, and then turn east toward Phou Seu, which, if captured, would serve as a base for Plain of Jars operations. These movements were calculated to require enemy reinforcements to be rushed south from units on the northern Plain. Then, with enemy forces somewhat depleted in the northern sector, Jolly Green helicopter crews would move GMs 21 and 23 into the vicinity of Phou San and Phou Keng (Task Force Delta).

Phase Two included five movements programed to commence in September. Smacking of past offensives, GM 24 and 27 at Site-32



Vang Pao's Phou Phiang Two first phase August monsoon season plans to divert Vietnamese regiments in preparations for retaking the Plain of Jars.

Ahern, 464.

(Task Force Echo) would move south toward the Nong Pet Route-7/71 junction in order to draw Vietnamese units out of the Phou Pha Sai area. GM's 24 and 27 would be heli-lifted into old pads north of Route-72 overlooking the Xieng Khouang Valley to strike the road and move toward Nong Pet.

Leap frogging terrain would continue. Another helicopter sorties would lift a Military Region One GM to secure landing zones around Phou Keng and Phou San to allow an existing GM to move into Ban Thang airfield and form a reserve.

Two GM's, one Thai and one SGU, deployed on Phou Houang and Phou Seu, would attack the Plain of Jars, striking Phou Theung and moving north against LOCs and artillery positions.

A newly formed GM-28, separated into three units, would conduct mobile operations along Route-72, Route-7 east of Ban Ban, and Route-6 north of Ban Ban.

Envisioning the Vietnamese departure, eight Thai battalions would be tasked with the defense of eight commanding mountain tops. Some sites were familiar from the second Plain of Jars operation, some were new: Phou Seu, Phou Keng, Phou San, Phou Theung, Phou Khe (south of Xieng Khouang Ville), Phou Kouat (north of Route-7), Phou Leng (north of Khang Khay), and Phou He (east of Khang Khay). Since the concept of permanent fire support bases had failed, a mobile artillery concept was proposed. The 155mm guns would be prepositioned on and off the Plain of Jars by an Army CH-54 crew, or along Route-54 by vehicles.

Always confident, especially since his recent visit to the USA where he received high level assurance of USG support, Vang Pao believed his third PDJ offensive would succeed. <sup>51</sup> However,

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<sup>51</sup> Never called the third Plain of Jars operation, the plan was not successful.

citing a disclaimer, Vang Pao insisted that he would require sufficient Tacair, T-28s, B-52s, and vehicles to tow artillery pieces to and from the Plain of Jars should heli-lift not be available. <sup>52</sup>

Within days the CIA reported:

*...“the government’s half-hearted effort to restore the hills southwest of the Plaine des Jarres has ground to a halt. Irregular forces attempting to move toward Phou Pha Sai, the strategic highpoint overlooking the [PDJ], have not advanced for the past several days because bad weather has limited air support. Government units that has been on the ridge just south of Phou Pha Sai returned to Padong after an attack by small [NVA] forces.”* <sup>53</sup>

## **REVELATIONS**

Consistent with the Agency’s intention to wind down Air America’s resources and operations, and become more transparent, President Hugh Grundy conducted a presentation to the Thai Supreme Command in Bangkok divulging ample information (much sanitized) regarding the Company. Also present at the presentation was Paul Velte, from Washington headquarters, and Bangkok Regional Manager Dave Hickler.

Following a Company documentary film, Grundy began his talk by saying that Air America was incorporated in Delaware during

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<sup>52</sup> Memorandum for the Record, meeting at Udorn, 07/27/72. Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, The air support plan specified that 7th Air Force supply twenty F-4s and six A-1s for the ground advance and ten F-4s to strike supply areas and LOCs. Four AC-119s would assist at night with an AC-130 to patrol LOCs. One B-52 strike was requested per day with additional strikes if necessary. Dozens of T-28 sorties and AC-47 gunships were envisioned, 07/25/72.

<sup>53</sup> CIA Bulletin, 07/31/72, Laos: Government forces have made no new progress in their efforts to recapture territory lost during the dry season.



1950. The Company was owned by the Pacific Corporation, with Paul Velte as the current President. A subsidiary, Air Asia, Inc. was located in Taiwan since 1955. Air America owned and leased a number of aircraft and occasionally performed a flying contract. The principal undertaking was at the extensive aircraft maintenance depot at Tainan in southern Taiwan, where 3,000 people were employed. The organization provided support services such as engine and accessory overhaul for Company aircraft and performed under subcontract some maintenance contracts, F-4 overhaul and repair. It also operated a training school for aviation technicians.

Grundy went on to say that Air America is an aviation company offering contract services. The principle endeavor is flying. Secondary is aircraft maintenance services. Thirdly is aviation-related services such as construction and operation of air bases, installation and operation of navigational aids, and weather reporting networks, air cargo handling, advisory and training services, and professional personnel services.

A large amount of Air America's business revolved around providing services to various agencies of the U.S. Government. The Company also furnishes services to other governments and "private" companies like World Airways Airlift International, Southern Air Transport, Continental Airlines, and so forth.

Operations are worldwide, but largely in the Orient.

Combined Air America and Air Asia employ 9,000 individuals. The Company owns or operates 150 aircraft of eighteen types, including forty-two helicopters and currently flies 16,000 hours monthly.

In Thailand, Air America, under contract with the Department of Defense (DOD), conducts flying services from and operates an aircraft maintenance base at Udorn. At Bangkok, Air America has smaller contracts with the Royal Thai Government

(RTG) for advisory training services, and with USAID for flying services from Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

Air America trained and employed Thai citizens. Between 1962 and 1972, Thai employment had increased from 160 to 1,006 people, and third country nationals had decreased to 220. Thai border patrol individuals received formal aviation training at Tainan. Air America employed sixteen Thai pilots, ten captains, Thai engineers, accountants, technical inspectors, plant supervisors, and maintenance foremen.

Then the president switched to an ongoing and more controversial subject about recent news releases falsely accusing Air America of traffic in illegal narcotics.

*"For many years Air America has employed a professional company police force dedicated to the prevention of smuggling of contraband of any nature. In recent times this force has been reinforced and crews and cargo being thoroughly and regularly inspected at strategic points [our RON bags were checked randomly or sniffed by dogs]. Air America was engaged several months ago by USAID Laos to establish a narcotics control force to serve the U.S. and Lao governments in narcotics control in Laos. More recently it was engaged by U.S DOD to establish a similar force at Udorn."*

CJ Abadie added, *"Within our Security Department we have the capability of assisting in the control of illicit traffic in narcotics by means of our Security Inspection Services (SIS) consisting of three U.S national supervisors and twelve specially trained Thai inspectors plus a German Shepard dog also*

*pecially trained for this purpose."* <sup>54</sup>

## **DISCLOSURES**

Warts continued to appear, to impact worldwide and national opinion, and to create even more opposition to USG's participation in the Vietnam War.

During the month, United Nations Secretary General Kurt Waldheim disclosed that he had received information that apparently confirmed that U.S. planes and Naval vessels had deliberately damaged flood-preventing dikes and critical river barriers in North Vietnam, essential to flood control during the rainy season.

The North Vietnamese repeatedly claimed that their dikes were deliberately bombed at twelve separate places since U.S. air and Naval attacks had resumed above the 20th Parallel in May.

Countering the allegations, the U.S. Defense Department, President Nixon, and Secretary of State William P. Rogers asserted that any U.S. strikes against the dikes were accidental, and that any purported damage was deemed insignificant. Nixon described Waldheim as well-intentioned, but naïve, asserting that the dike controversy was a deliberate attempt on the part of North Vietnamese leaders to create an extraneous issue, to divert attention from 'one of the most barbaric invasions of history' (the Easter Offensive).

The dike bombing accusation stimulated former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark and other peace adherents to visit North

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<sup>54</sup> Remarks by Air America President Hugh Grundy to the Supreme Command of Thailand at Bangkok, Thailand. The controversy continues today over Air America's assumed participation in the Southeast Asian drug trade. Although this assertion has never been proven, it is an issue that periodically arises and that some muckrakers refuse to abandon.

Vietnam as a member of the International Commission of Inquiry into U.S. War Crimes in Indochina, to investigate alleged U.S. bombing of non-military targets in North Vietnam. His visit stirred intense controversy among the public at home. Like movie star Jane Fonda's visit, everything was closely choreographed by Vietnamese public relations experts for maximum impact on world opinion. Clark reported over Hanoi radio that he had observed damage to hospitals, dikes, schools, and other civilian areas. <sup>55</sup>

### **HITTING THE ROAD**

We normally went home once a year for a month or so to visit and share our children with my elderly parents. Therefore, since May, before Amanda was born, I had been planning home

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<sup>55</sup> John Bowman, *Almanac*, 318.

Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 862. Not long after being released in 1973, former prisoners confirmed the widespread use of torture in the prisons. Some were tortured for refusing to pose in photographs with touring antiwar groups. Ms. Fonda said the POWs were liars for making such claims; one POW had his arm and leg broken because he refused to meet with Ms. Fonda.

Hank Edwards Email, 05/09/99. In answer to Jane Fonda being honored as the Woman of the year, Jeanne Doogs asking-Honor? Jane Fonda? For What?-wrote to media editors: "*Jane, in black pajamas stepped off her Aeroflot jet in Hanoi with 'greetings' from revolutionary 'comrades' in America. On this trip, euphoric Jane, surrounded by applauding Vietnamese soldiers took her notorious joy ride aboard a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun whose sights were normally trained on American planes. Jane volunteered to make ten propaganda broadcasts over Radio Hanoi, aired July 14-22, squarely aimed at demoralizing American servicemen. These broadcasts were played over loudspeakers day and night continually over Hanoi Hilton POW camp. POW's were rounded up to appear in a press conference with Jane Fonda-prisoners who refused were tortured, some executed.*"

Author Note: Granted, most people were war-weary, but what many individuals failed to comprehend was that the war was conceived and perpetrated by North Vietnamese leaders, and that collateral damage always occurred by ordnance that generally had no eyes. Moreover, believing civilian buildings were off-limits to U.S. bombing, they were used to store munitions, missiles, and other tools of war. In addition, and seemingly a double standard, where was the hue and cry of North Vietnamese war crimes against the people of South Vietnam?

leave. Since Tuie would be unable to travel with a new baby, I originally wanted to take Ricky with me to see Mom and Dad, but this was scotched by Tuie. Depending on the flight schedule and Special Project, I decided to travel the European route, stop in Turkey and visit Sonny Vail for a short time in late July, and then continue to JFK Airport for a month at home, then Steamboat Springs, and Scottsdale, Arizona.

Before departing for Bangkok, I had Abadie's assistant, Dick Ford, countersign a check for travelers' checks. Requiring a medical examination, Tuie went along with me. This did not take long, and she was declared fine, so I obtained money from MS Michael, the Company authorized money changer, for Bangkok expenses and for Tuie in my absence.

With airline tickets in hand, I departed Don Muang Airport on the evening of 28 July for Athens, Greece.

Arriving early Saturday morning, I was informed that Turkish Air to Izmir, Turkey, was delayed, as this was the day the plane was thoroughly cleaned and polished. With nothing to do until the afternoon, I elected to taxi to the Acropolis, a historic location erected to glorify the gods of ancient Greek history. Famous for the first recorded democracy in world history, I had enjoyed a smattering of this culture in Mrs. Smith's sixth grade class in Maxon school. Also, while a senior at Duke University, I had selected a semester of Greek literature in Professor Rose's class. Aside from the guaranteed "A" the class generated, I found Rose's teaching technique and Homer's *Iliad* immensely interesting.

Arriving at the foot of the small plateau overlooking the city, I was confused by the Greek drachma, so I held out a handful of coins for the driver, hoping that he would not stiff me too badly.



An ascent trail led from the parking lot to the Acropolis on the outskirts of Athens, Greece.

Author Collection.



Ancient ruins of the Parthenon, temple to Greek gods, on the Acropolis.

Author Collection.

Walking the grounds of the gods of the first known democracy proved a great experience. There were no restrictions, and one could wander anywhere and touch anything.<sup>56</sup> A small museum perched toward the rear of the complex that housed and displayed nose-less statues and artifacts that had been unearthed in the area. Before leaving for the airport I descended to the agora ruins, a former market place near the northwest base of the Acropolis.

Sated with Greek historical ruins, I returned to the airport. As I climbed the terminal steps and was about to open one of the doors, I was assaulted and nearly trampled by a herd of undisciplined people from a flight that had just unloaded. This did nothing to endear me to either international travel or the Greeks.

Finally, the Turkish aircraft was towed from the barn to the terminal and we boarded the sparkling machine for the relatively short flight across the Aegean Sea.

I arrived at the Izmir airport late, and after a bus ride into town, I searched and found no one at the Vails' apartment. After a frustrating wait, we were reunited and I spent the next five days with the Vail family in the four-thousand-year-old city that was both modern and reeked of the old ways.

Following a tour in South Vietnam as an O-1 Birddog FAC, Hood, a member of the Sixth Tactical Air Force was assigned to a

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<sup>56</sup> During my second visit to Athens after being evacuated from a revolutionary torn Iran in 1979 by a USAF C-141 and leaving the Islamic revolution behind, in order to preserve the stones, one could no longer enter the impressive Parthenon.



NATO detachment on an accompanied two-year hitch.<sup>57</sup> The spacious Vail apartment was located on a main road overlooking the bay. Izmir was hot and humid in July and without central air conditioning it was difficult to sleep. A fan helped, but tended to just move hot air around.

I became acutely aware that Anita was a very restless person. Typical with many American women living overseas, she did not have enough to occupy her time and generally hated the Turkish experience. A military wife's attitude and ability to curry the favor of her husband's superiors to enhance advancement was important for regular officers. In Anita's case it was easy to see that her non-participation in USAF events was hurting Sonny's Air Force career.

We either ate at the apartment with the children or at open air cafes on the street. Food was good and the Turkish wine excellent. One night the U.S. drug enforcement agency (DEA) couple from upstairs joined us for steaks that Hood grilled on the balcony. Full of interesting stories, but without revealing classified information, the husband regaled me with some of his interdiction exploits, during which Turkish drug enforcer officers blew away the perpetrators.

Vail worked most days, while Carla attended school and his young blond-haired son Michael wandered the local neighborhood. I was surprise at this, but Anita said the locals loved the

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<sup>57</sup> Hood: Carleton Harry "Sonny" Vail's mother's maiden name was Hood, so this was collectively deemed an appropriate nickname name for him by our SSS group. We also took names from a dog-eared paperback book, *Gangs of New York* that we found on the USS Walleston, an abandoned barge partially immersed in Sandy Hook Bay, New Jersey. Names temporarily assumed from the book were "The Rat," "Dopey Benny," "The Dago," "Slobbery Jim." The Author took "Little Augie." Augie stuck and is still remembered and used by close friends. Using assumed names was so much fun that, while undergoing aviation training in Pensacola, I often used the alias August Jesus Krueger the Third (AJK III), while dating young lovelies.

fair-haired boy, took care of him, and assured his safety. And I saw evidence of this friendship.

Everything was so new to me. As I walked throughout the area, I continued to be impressed by the culture and local color.

One day Sonny and I motored eighteen miles south to the historic ruins at Ephesus, a former Roman city on the Aegean where Christ's disciple Paul preached, taught, and wrote many letters to those in the region and that were preserved in the Holy Bible. We first visited a small hovel purported to be the final place where Mary, mother of Jesus Christ stayed before passing.

The Ephesus ruins were relatively unspoiled, with no visible signs of recent reconstruction, tourist-tailored sound and light shows, or commercial enterprises. There were no guides. No information pamphlets. Everything was left to the individual's imagination. Granted it was the middle of the week and we were early, but we were generally the only visitors present. Eons of sea erosion had encroached on the sizeable Roman baths, formerly fed by terracotta piping. Attesting to some archeological work, murals and mosaics abounded the walls and floors of decaying buildings. Fluted columns lined wide stone ways thrusting straight through the complex. I continued to snap photos, especially in the well-preserved open-air amphitheater. I had never visited one of these before and took great delight wandering the thespian stage and adjoining rooms.

While Hood was at work, Anita and Judy, the DEA's wife, who had a car and I journeyed west into the hilly hinterland to visit ancient villages that retained considerable charm, looked like something out of the ancient world. Unbelievable to me, the ladies had never taken the opportunity to venture out of Izmir



The Author and Vail children riding on a horse drawn cart in Izmir,  
Turkey.  
Author Collection.



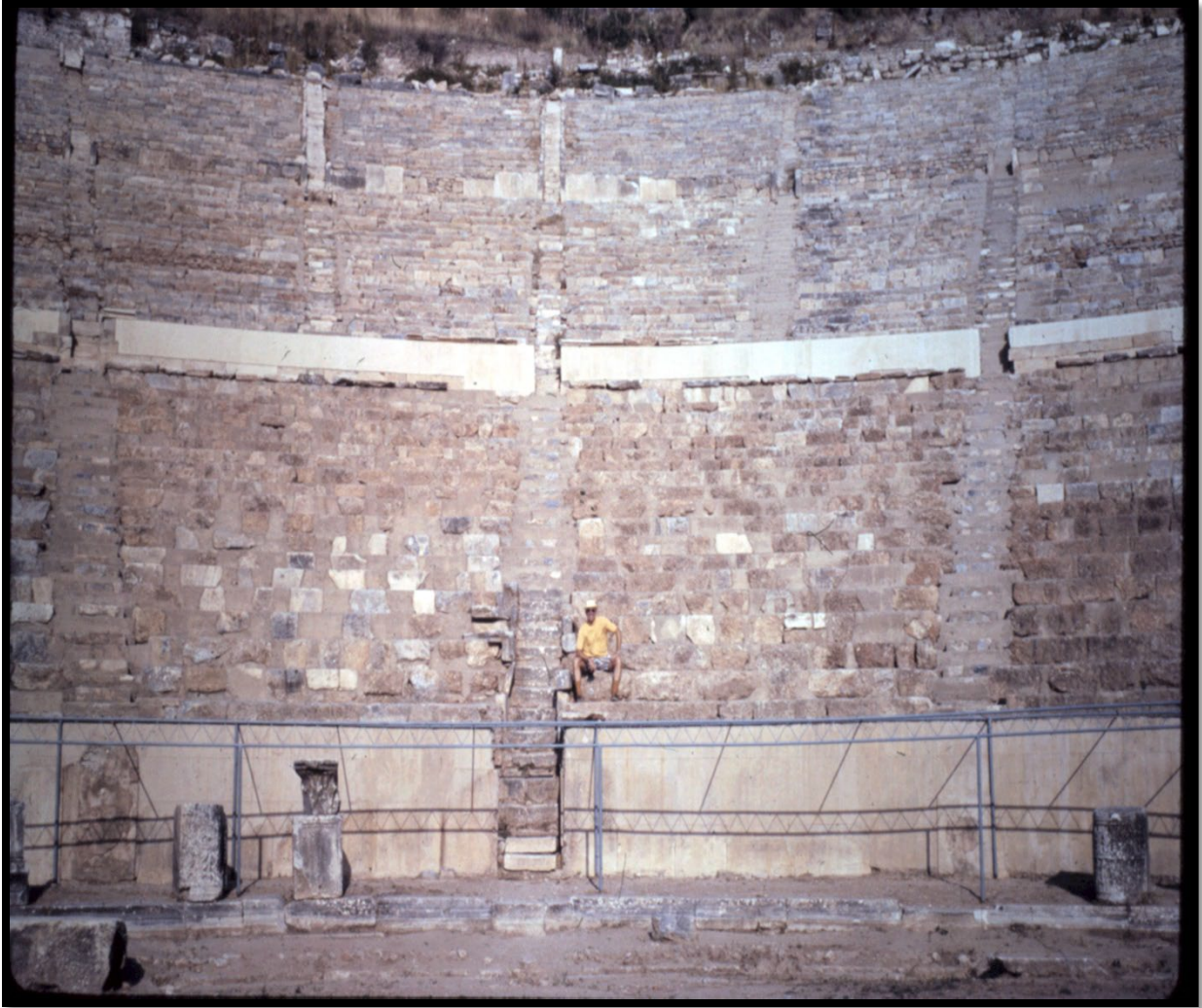
A view of the Aegean Sea from hills overlooking Izmir.  
Author Collection.



Shrine of Mary, the venerated mother of Jesus Christ.  
Author's Collection.



A long Roman road of paved stones lined with remains of ancient shops and temples at Ephesus, Turkey.  
Author Collection.



Sonny "Hood" Vail enjoying the hard stone seat in the Roman amphitheater at Ephesus, Turkey.

Author Collection.

to sightsee. Further enhancing the experience were quaint cobblestone streets and vendors selling wares from pushcarts. Some unemployed Turkish males hunkered alongside shops, watching us suspiciously through dark, deep-sunken eyes. Scary? Threatening? Perhaps, but this probably stemmed from the fact the girls were wearing Bermuda shorts in a Muslim world separated from the more secular cities where women were considered inferior to the male of the species. Hungry, I found an open-air corner shop where I enjoyed a satisfying bowl of lentil soup. Not willing to take a chance eating local food the girls begged off my invitation to join me in the repast. It was an indeed enjoyable and educational day.

Another day Hood drove us to a beach house across the bay that he and a friend rented and shared for the summer. As boys in New Jersey, we had developed a love for skin diving along the Jersey shore and at Leonardo where his parents owned a beach house on Sandy Hook Bay. Therefore, it was natural that we spent a few hours scouring the fabled shallow Aegean Sea with a face mask and snorkel. The uncontaminated, azure water was clear, and it was easy to see encrusted amphora wine jars on the ocean bottom. However, no scavenging was allowed, for the government mandated that stipulated artifacts like the ancient clay jars were off limits to anyone but authorized individuals. I had to be satisfied with a random touch or two.

My interesting and educational visit was over too soon and on Thursday, the third, I took leave of Turkey and the Vail's hospitality to continue my long journey home.





Local Turks pose near a back-country wagon containing consumables.  
Author Collection.



View from the Vail summer house across the Aegean Sea toward Izmir.  
Author Collection.

**H**ome was relaxing, a vacation I sorely needed after the difficult year in the trenches. I was so comfortable I told Dad that perhaps I should quit Air America and come home. Unaware of the stress involved in my work, he realistically countered that I was making excellent money and should continue to work in Southeast Asia. Other than mentioning that I was doing some different work, I did not divulge anything about the Special Project, a subject I would not discuss with anyone outside the program.

The leave passed too quickly and it was soon time to depart for Phoenix and Scottsdale, Arizona. Looking for life after Air America, one of our H-34 Captains Dan Carson, who had been injured in an H-34 crash, was involved in land and strip mall construction projects in the Phoenix area. Along with local businessmen, he was soliciting investors for limited partnerships. Always looking for interesting and potentially rewarding tax-advantaged investments, and already involved in a Harbor Hotel partnership with Tex McGill in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, the concept appealed to me. Consequently, trusting Carson's judgement, in June, I sent a sizeable check to the Great American Resources Company for a four percent interest in the project.

Dan was waiting for me at the Phoenix airport. Except when I transitioned through Las Vegas on my way overseas while in the Corps, I had never been to the southwest or Arizona before and was not impressed by the extreme heat and relatively flat terrain. However, residents of the upscale Scottsdale community, nestled in the shadow of Camelback Mountain, were somewhat sheltered from the harsh climate by living in single story, thick-walled, sandy colored stone houses cooled by central air-

conditioning. Swimming pools also afforded temporary relief from the heat. Differing from lush property in the eastern United States, the sandy soil and lack of water discouraged most people from developing or maintaining lawns.

We visited the office of Howard Kale, chief developer of the partnership mall. Howard presented a glowing picture of the need for such projects, and predicted a good future for those who invested in them.

After viewing the property of the proposed mall, Dan drove me outside town into the desert proper, where the thick, needled arms of state protected Saguaro cactus thrust toward the sky. We continued into the hills during the late afternoon. In the subdued light, while winding along ribbons of dark asphalt through deep canyons, pleasing beautiful colors of red, pink, and purple dotted the hillsides and shocked my senses. That night we enjoyed supper in the hills overlooking Phoenix, where a smog layer was visible over the city.

Another day we continued sightseeing, visiting Jerome, a hundred miles north of Phoenix. The area was formerly a gold, silver, and copper mining center, but after the ore played out, it became just another abandoned western boom town.

Other motor trips were conducted to areas where indigenous Indian tribes lived and catered to the tourist trade. All in all, it was a pleasant trip, one entirely different than expected.

Flying on Western Airlines, I departed for Los Angeles on the 29th. Since I was travelling on heavily discounted space available tickets, I was forced to wait at the LA airport until the last minute before boarding the Transworld Aircraft. It was well worth the wait, for I was upgraded to first class on the first leg to Hawaii.



Saguaro Cactus.  
Author Collection.

Arriving in Bangkok, and anxious to see Tuie and the children, I cashed a check with the money changer, and left for Udorn on the train the following evening.

*"I had a long wait for the aircraft in LA, but patience was rewarded and I was allowed to board at the last moment as there were many other standbys. What a racket TWA has.*

*The rest of the trip back was uneventful. Incidentally, we have lost the TWA discount, perimeter fare and all. It seems that they are all dropping off one by one."* (Our fringe benefits were no longer as beneficial, particularly after the CAT crash in Taipei.)

Letter to Dan and Ellen Carson, 09/17/72.

### **CHINESE ROAD DEVELOPMENT IN MR-1**

*"The Chinese are making improvements to Route-46 between Moun Houn and Pak Beng [in the Beng River Valley] during the current rainy season. According to [aerial] photography of 8 July, they are building bridges, and widening and realigning the road. And they have built three anti-aircraft weapons sites on the hills outside of Pak Beng. There is no evidence that he Chinese are preparing at this time to extend their road net into the Nam Ou River Valley [north of Luang Prabang], where some survey work took place earlier this year. No appreciable progress was noted on the other major road construction projects between Moun Sing near the Sino-Laotian border and Nam Tha."*<sup>1</sup>

August reporting in northwest Laos revealed:

*"Reports from recent defectors indicate that this area is administered in essentially the same manner as other parts of the country that have been under communist control for some*

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<sup>1</sup> CIA Bulletin, 07/18/72, Laos.

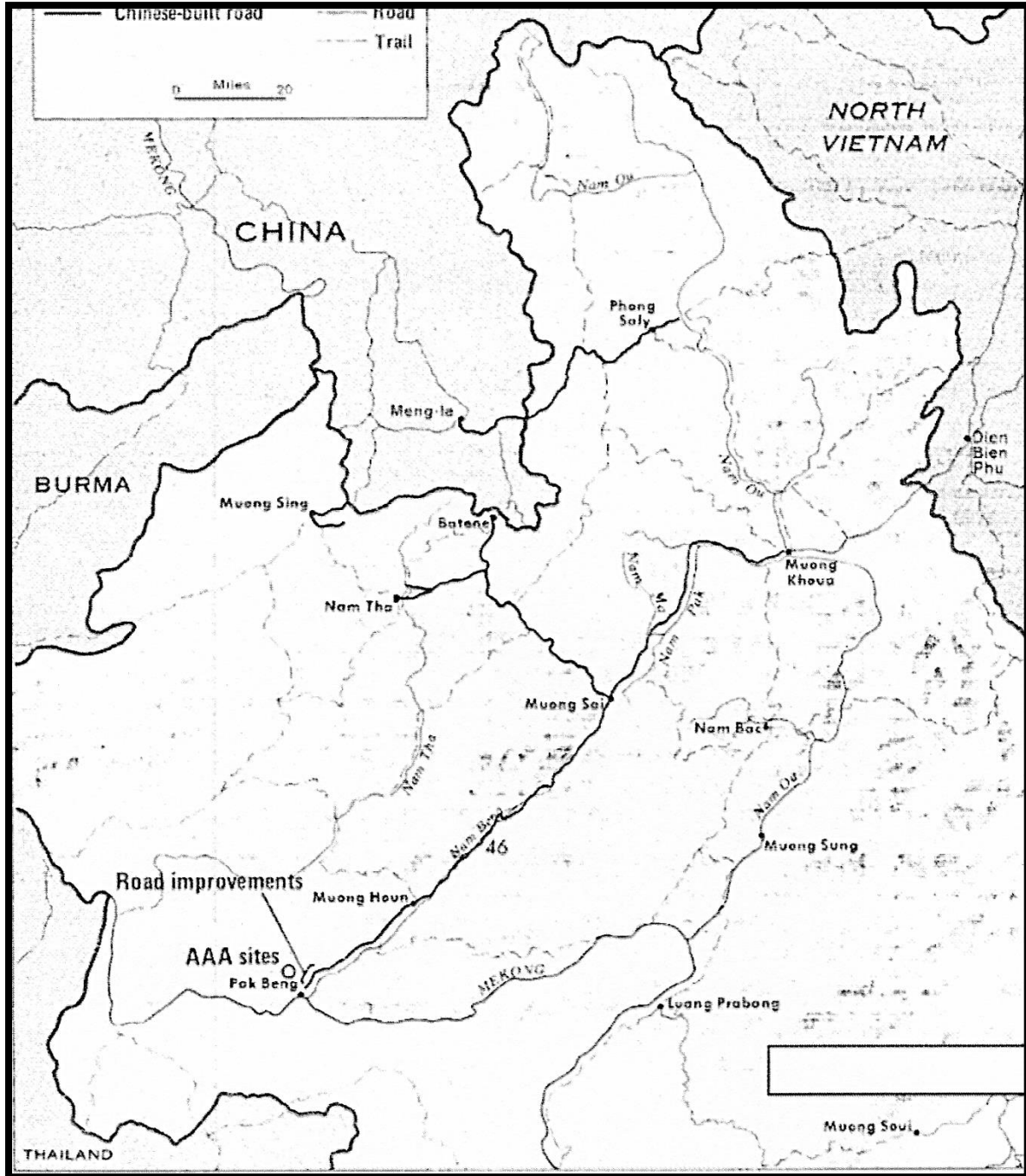
*time. Most of the defectors came from western Luang Prabang Province, which the communists call Oudomsai Province. Oudomsai is administered by a Lao province chief and his subordinates who are in charge of districts and sub districts or villages. North Vietnamese advisers assist the Lao at the provincial and district levels. Lao officials are authorized to act independently in a few matters, but most require the approval of the senior North Vietnamese adviser.*

*North Vietnamese advisers also assist Pathet Lao battalions and some companies. In addition, small [North Vietnamese] units sometimes operate with [Pathet Lao] units against government troops.*

*The Chinese, in contrast, do not seem to venture far from their roads. They provide no advisors to the Lao communists in Oudomsai Province, use only their own people for road construction, levy no taxes on the villagers along the road, and do not require the locals to perform portage of other duties. Contact is limited to activities designed to cultivate good relations, and in some areas where Chinese aid stations provide medical attention to the Lao. On occasion, Chinese construction crews use their equipment to help local clear fields.*

*The defectors are not able to provide any real insight into the reasons for the Chinese road building projects. Lao communists push the line that the projects are part of agreements negotiated in the early 1960s between Vientiane [Phoumi Nosavan and Souvanna Phouma] and Peking. The propagandists stress that the Chinese are not a threat, that they have no intention of annexing any territory or staying permanently, and that the Chinese activities are designed to assist the Lao people by preparing transportation routes.*

*Hanoi is using a portion of these roads [from Dien Bien Phu] to supply their forces in northwest Laos. Their trucks*



Chinese constructed road system in Military Region One's northwest region.

*CIA Bulletin.*



*enter Laos from North Vietnam on Route-19 and may proceed as far as Moung Houn on Route-46. Most supplies are destined for the small number of [Vietnamese] troops in western Luang Prabang and Sayaboury provinces. Some are portered into Sayaboury for use by the insurgents in Thailand. This is the clearest evidence to date that the North Vietnamese use the Chinese built road to supply the Thai communists."* <sup>2</sup>

### **THE THIRD PDJ**

While I was still enjoying a month's leave, despite Vang Pao's plans to commence Phou Phiang Two by the 6<sup>th</sup>, the operation was still not fully sanctioned by State and Defense Departments. The reluctance to support both phases of the operation was especially prevalent in relation to the proposed Plain of Jars offensive that was considered too aggressive at this stage in the long war, and a plateau too far.

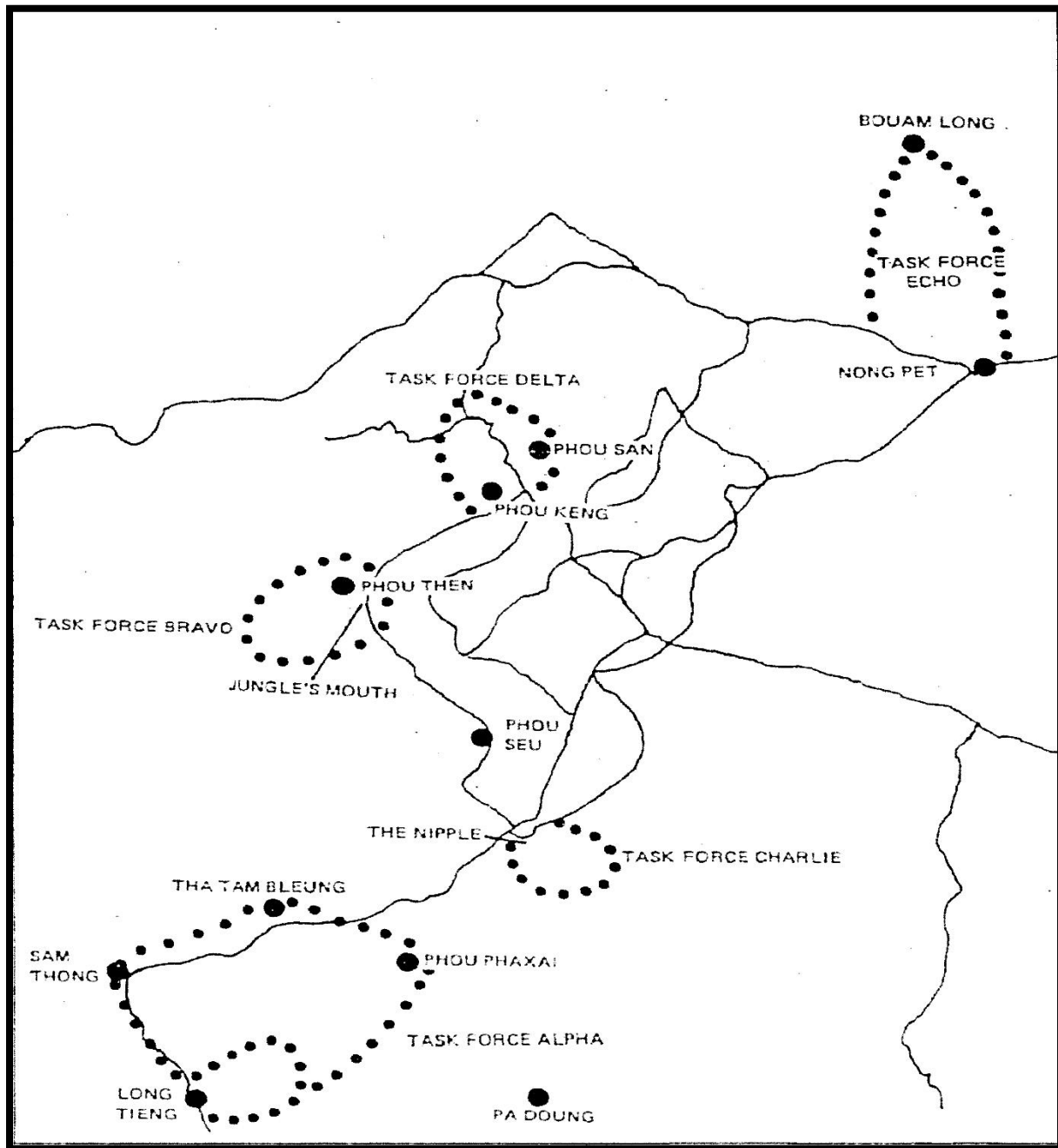
Delay was such that Phase One, Thai and Meo intentions to stymie Vietnamese efforts between Long Tieng and the Plain of Jars, was not wholly approved by all parties until 12 August. Moreover, approval for Phase Two's battle plans was still in abeyance. Despite Washington's lack of complete support, Vang Pao, ever the pragmatic warrior, and never one to allow bureaucratic red tape to thwart his operations, went ahead with his monsoon season offensive. <sup>3</sup>

Captain Wayne Knight and Pogo Hunter flew to Long Tieng in Papa Hotel Alpha on the 1st. Vang Pao's troops were moving east toward Phou Pha Sai from established ridgeline positions north

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<sup>2</sup> CIA Bulletin, 08/04/72, Laos-China: The Lao communists and their North Vietnamese allies evidently continue to govern in northwest Laos despite the presence of Chinese road-building and infantry forces.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Ahern, Undercover Armies, 462-463.



Relative locations of Vang Pao's five mixed ethnic task forces during the Phou Phiang Two offensive.

Anthony, *War in Northern Laos*, 358.

of The Alternate. While working one of these pads, although Wayne had previously heard pilot discussions regarding boomers, he experienced his first compressor stalls. There were a series of three very rapid booms, sounding like a large weapon exploding underneath the helicopter. Until checking with the Flight Mechanic, they initially thought the explosions were mortar rounds, as most of the pads were subject to incoming fire. <sup>4</sup>

As neither pilot had monitored the instruments throughout the entire takeoff phase, the offending power section could not be determined. Hence, frustrating maintenance, nearly all ships returning to Udorn with stall gripes indicated uncertainty regarding the offending engine. <sup>5</sup> Knight and crew RTB Udorn. (Ten hours.)

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<sup>4</sup> EW Knight Emails, 11/30/00, 12/01/00, 12/08/00. Some compressor stalls were confusing. When I experienced my first series of severe compressor stalls at altitude in a Bell near the enemy trails eighty miles east of Savannakhet, until checking the instruments, I thought AAA was bursting near the aircraft.

<sup>5</sup> Because of the abruptness of a single stall, it was not always possible to determine which power section was the culprit. Moreover, there were degrees of stall: Burps, loud prolonged ones with power, multiple blasts, and the sort. Multiple stalls were generally easier to identify. Cockpit instruments usually told the tale. Cockpit scan was important. Most operational stalls occurred during high power acceleration and at altitude (until compressor blade erosion advanced unabated). Reduction of power always stopped the stall. Throughout my entire AAM tour I suspected there were a few pilots who rarely checked or cross-checked instruments (divided cockpit attention). With the luxury of two pilots in the cockpit, one man should have been closely monitoring instruments during power applications. The lack of attention points to the fact that crew coordination was not always the best. During the early days when stalls were new and concerned pilots RTB Udorn, the policy morphed into "fly it, but watch it." It was an unpopular plan, but the alternative was no S-58T program. Maintenance Director Jack Forney was really under the gun at this time, and his normally sour disposition and biting tongue increased proportionally. Jack constantly complained about the pilot's inability to identify the stalling section. As the engines continued to deteriorate, in time it became possible to induce a boomer on the ramp or upcountry almost at will by conducting an acceleration check. Since one could generally operate upcountry by gentle power application, this was really a license to steal for an individual who was not particularly interested in flying.

The enemy proved more entrenched and resilient than expected to Task Force Alpha's efforts to move on Phou Pha Sai. Troops on Romeo Ridge found it impossible to march east toward their objective. On the sixth, two GM battalions in the hills on the north side of the Site-72 valley were attacked and scattered westward. These reversals influenced Vang Pao's decision to cancel the Ban Hintang and Phou Pha Sai offensives, instead concentrating on holding current positions. <sup>6</sup>

Flying Papa Foxtrot Gulf, Mike Jarina, Thompson, and Bob Noble entered the fray on the seventh. They supported the thwarted troops north of Long Tieng and recovered at Wattay Airport for the next three nights. (Ten plus twenty.) Working around seasonal weather, for the next two days the crew shuttled incoming troops and supplies from Vang Vieng to The Alternate in anticipation of the imminent offensive. (Nine plus forty-three-and thirty-eight-minutes night; six plus twenty-five, one zero five night.) On the 10th Mike and Bob worked The Alternate and recovered at Udorn. (Eight-plus thirty-five, thirty-five night.)<sup>7</sup>

That summer Meo GM's 21 (Case Officer George "Digger" O'Dell) and GM 22 (James "Mule" Parker) were rotated to Pitts Camp in western Thailand for refitting and eight weeks of fine tuning for the Plain of Jars operation. Long time warrior and Lao legend Tony Poe was one of the trainers at the facility. The regiments returned to Military Region Two by early August.

By the 11th it was GM-22's (Task Force Bravo) turn to move out. With sufficient helicopters available to save time and leapfrog troops over rain-soaked terrain, Parker's regiment was heli-lifted to Than Heup (LS-238) seven miles northwest of Ban Na. From there they planned to continue east to the "Jungle's

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<sup>6</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 346.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

Mouth." Moving overland, by the 15th the task force reached their objective and "established positions on the high ground, along the end of a ridgeline overlooking the western edge of the [PDJ]." Some forays were conducted on the Plain, but old buried mines and the threat of encountering Vietnamese discouraged further patrolling. Instead, the troops hunkered down in defensive positions, awaiting the inevitable enemy response and an opportunity to clobber them with friendly air.

With the Vietnamese in no rush to attack unless presented with optimum conditions for success (generally foul weather when friendly air was ineffective), the Meo battalions enjoyed some respite from a major offensive. Nevertheless, air attacks continued during the day on suspected enemy positions. Biding their time and conserving troops, the enemy restricted their probes to the cover of darkness.

Eventually, Task Force Bravo was attacked in force during reduced visibility. Initial assaults were repulsed, but artillery and air could not stem the attacks, and the Meo defenders withdrew toward Ban Na. <sup>8</sup>

Two days after Bravo commenced movement to the initial point, GM-23 (Case Officer Hambone) pathfinders from Task Force Charlie boarded Bell helicopters at Padong and were inserted ten miles northeast at Ban Pha (LS-239). After securing the soggy landing zone, during heavy rains the main force was delivered to the site by Air America and USAF helicopter crews, where they prepared to march west seven miles to Khang Kho, and then north to the Nipple, the traditional southern gateway to the Plain.

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<sup>8</sup> James Parker, *Codename Mule: Fighting the Secret War in Laos for the CIA* (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 106, 108-112. Ken Conboy, 346, 348. Bill Leary 1972 Notes, Interview with Jim Parker.

On the 15<sup>th</sup>, GM-24 (part of Task Force Echo with George "Kayak" Bacon as the unit's Case Officer) began marshaling for action at Bouam Long. The following day, the regiment began a twelve-mile southern trek over rain-soaked mountain trails toward Nong Pet. Within two days a portion of Site-32's GM-27 regiment followed.

*"The government has airlifted additional irregular forces-numbering approximately 900 troops from Long Tieng to Bouam Long...These forces reportedly are slated to participate in offensive operations in north Laos, but no date has as yet been set for their deployment."* <sup>9</sup>

On the same day, stalled Task Force Alpha was ordered to move out again toward the objective. Attempts were disappointing, and only minimal success was attained.

*"In the past few days, three irregular battalions have reported only light clashes with [Vietnamese] troops in moving to the western edge of the Plaine. Elements of the other three-battalion task force involved in the current government offensive also engaged the enemy in scattered contacts in occupying Khang Kho and several other high ground positions in the vicinity of Phou Houng on the southern tip of the Plaine. On 19 August, however, these forces were stalled temporarily by communist troop concentrations and by poor weather that precluded the use of air strikes.*

*The communists undoubtedly are closely monitoring the developing tactical situation around the Plaine, and their resistance most likely will stiffen soon. For the moment, however, they may be more concerned with retaining control over their key high-ground positions in the Phou Long Mat-Tha Tam*

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<sup>9</sup> CIA Bulletin, 08/21/71, Laos.

*Bleung [Site-72] sectors, despite the presence of irregular forces to their rear."* <sup>10</sup>

Delta, the fifth task force (GM-22 and 26) consisted of the largest number of men, and had perhaps the most difficult mission: to move on Phou San and Phou Keng. Because the USAF would not commit their CH-53s unless a landing zone was secure, a night insertion of Meo pathfinders was planned, to be followed by airdropped Commando Raiders. Special Project talent was used. On the evening of 20 August, employing night vision glasses (NVG) with the illumination of a quarter moon, and LORAN equipment, a senior Special Project Captain (likely Scratch Kanach) and his crew delivered the small team, along with Case Officer "Hog" Jerry Daniels, to Moung Kheung (L-109) located on the northwestern portion of the Plain of Jars near Route-71. Then with LORAN coordinates provided by the S-58T crew and various illumination signaling devices by the men on the ground to positively identify the DZ, during the early morning of the 21st, a C-130 crew dropped a large commando unit to secure the landing field. All paratroopers arrived in good shape.

Early morning at dark thirty, along with Digger, the 1,000-man GM-21 was shuttled thirty-five miles north from Long Tieng to the landing zone. However, adverse weather interceded, delaying GM-26's (Case Officer Arkansas) movement south toward Phou Keng and GM-21's thrust east toward Phou San for two days.

Bill Nelson sent a secret message to Managing Director Paul Velte on 25 August, commending the two helicopter crews participating in the insertion:

*"I would like to express my sincere thanks and admiration to your aircrews that made possible the airborne infiltration of*

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<sup>10</sup> CIA Bulletin, 08/21/72, Laos: Vang Pao's forces thus far have not encountered any major enemy resistance in their advance toward the Plaine des Jarres.

*Laos irregular forces deep into enemy territory north of the [PDJ] on 20 August. Flying at night over enemy controlled territory in less-than-favorable conditions, two S-58T helicopter [crews] successfully inserted a small 'pathfinder' team that acted as a reception party for airborne troops who were later parachuted.*

*There were several factors that made this difficult mission even more hazardous. During the helicopter infiltration the lead S-58T pilot experienced problems with his long-range navigational system, but continued the mission until the system could be restored. On the return flight the second helicopter lost its automatic stabilization system and artificial horizon instrument, making flight under the prevailing instrument conditions extremely dangerous.*

*Without extremely well-qualified and professional aircrews this mission could not have been accomplished. The positive attitude and dedication of those crews to their assigned missions continue to be the hallmark of our operations in Southeast Asia..."*

*Although not as dramatic, the offensive continued.*

*"Advance elements of a multi-battalion task force on 22 August began moving toward the [PDJ] from Bouam Long...The task force presumably hopes to force the [Vietnamese] to divert some of their troops from the Plaine to protect these vital routes.*

*Several other irregular battalions have been airlifted to a landing zone near Phou Keng, a strategic hill [mass] overlooking the northwest Plaine. The North Vietnamese fired mortar [rounds] at the helicopters landing government troops, but caused no damage or casualties.*

*The other task forces participating in the offensive continue to encounter sporadic resistance. One force is regrouping on the western edge of the Plaine while awaiting*



additional orders from Vang Pao. Three battalions attempting to move from the southeast have not tried to dislodge communist troops from the ridge at the edge of the Plaine because bad weather has limited air support.

General Vang Pao thus far has committed about 6,000-7,000 of his indigenous tribesmen to forays against the Plaine. In addition, elements from the 4,200-man [Thai] force that since May has been holding positions east of Sam Tong have begun to test the [NVA] defenses in the hills near Tha Tam Bleung. The [NVA] have five infantry regiments near the Plaine." <sup>11</sup>

Finally reacting to the government incursion, exploiting the advantage of numerous road networks on the northern PDJ, Vietnamese forces began movement west toward GM-21. By the 28th, enemy tanks began pummeling both factions of the task force. Losses were heavy in both friendly regiments.

"[NVA] forces shelled and attacked several irregular positions on three sides of the Plaine on 25-26 August. In the most serious action, irregulars were forced to abandon two positions near Phou Houang and are now regrouping about three miles to the south. Other sharp clashes occurred near Phou Keng, Phou Then, and Tha Tam Bleung.

Three additional irregular battalions have been lifted into positions near Phou Keng, to reinforce the three battalions that have been stalled there since they were deployed nearly a week ago. The combined force has now begun the move toward its objective on the Plaine's northern edge.

The government's 15-day-old offensive has made scant progress despite the fact that the communists offered little resistance until two days ago. Several days of bad weather

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<sup>11</sup> CIA Bulletin, 08/24/72, Laos: Vang Pao is committing additional troops to his offensive in the north.

*hampered tactical air support and resupply flights, without which the irregulars had shown little inclination to advance. Only the task force moving south from Bouam Long toward communist supply lines [Routes-71 and 7] northeast of the Plaine had advanced appreciably before an improvement in the weather on Saturday led to a successful assault on Phou Then, a hill overlooking the Plaine's western edge."* <sup>12</sup>

A pragmatic operation from the start, Phou Phiang Two was loosely coordinated as to mission objectives. Further exacerbating the aggressive operation was the fact that, by design, task forces were widely separated to maximize the effect of depleted forces and spread out the enemy. Consequently, the task forces were unable to adequately support each other. When the enemy failed to react as expected (they had seen the encirclement and Plain of Jars scenario before), the operation began to crumble. Moreover, foul weather that restricted friendly close air support, inevitably contributed to collateral damage, and the youth and inexperience of the Meo units tended to greatly disrupt the operation's intended goals. <sup>13</sup>

Flying 12F, Mike Jarina, Wayne Lanin, and Phil Ortillo went upcountry on Sunday the 27th to support Vang Pao's operation. Despite the bad weather Mike and his crew worked ten hours, one plus thirty night.

The same day, we lost C-123K 55-4555 (Triple Nickel) and the crew of Bill Reeves, Joel Gudhal, Praves Satarakij, and Thongkham Khamanephet. Loaded with 13,500 pounds of ordnance and

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<sup>12</sup> CIA Bulletin, 08/28/72, Laos: Vang Pao's offensive to recapture the Plaine des Jarres is encountering its first determined communist resistance.

<sup>13</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 347-348.  
Bill Leary, 1972 Notes: Interview with George O'Dell.  
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 357.  
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 463.

five passengers, the plane crashed into a hill north of Ban Nammeui in bad weather while en route at 1650 hours from Vang Vieng to Long Tieng. The ship burned to ashes. The next day, after determined cool enough to begin the grisly recovery work, a H-34 crew ferried a team to the unprepared crash site. From a hover, the team was lowered to the ground to remove remains of the crew and passengers.

Jarina and his crew continued working the Long Tieng area on Monday (eight plus thirty-five). On the 29th, Jarina, Heible and Parker flew very little in Papa Foxtrot Juliet and 12F. With improvement in the weather, the Bell crew worked over ten hours, recovering well after dark. The final day of August, the crew worked 12F at The Alternate (nine plus fifteen). <sup>14</sup>

#### **MR-4**

While Vang Pao's Phou Phiang operation was underway in Military Region Two, government success was being achieved around Khong Sedone. The Vietnamese 39 Regiment had been largely decimated, and Moung Wapi (PS-14), ten miles northeast of Khong Sedone, retaken on 12 August.

To the east, the enemy still held the Bolovens Plateau. The only change of significance occurred when Thai FSB Tani, consisting of two 105mm and two 155mm howitzers, was established halfway between Lao Ngam and the Route 23/13 crossroad. With this support in place, a Thai unit moved out. <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

<sup>15</sup> Ken Conboy, 352.

**P**atterned along the World War Two Office of Strategic Services' (OSS) construction, the Central Intelligence Agency's 1947 charter was originally tailored to create an elite intelligence gathering entity. Because the 1954 and 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos prevented U.S. military participation in the Lao war, to circumvent the system, conceal operations from those not aware of the situation, and to counter North Vietnamese aggression--the Vietnamese never admitted to having troops in Laos--USG delegated policy to the Agency in order to conduct a relatively quiet, but effective, paramilitary operation. This effort initially began small, requiring few people, but as the Theater war escalated, morphing from small guerrilla unit operations into large regimental battles, considerably more American principals were required to advise. Consequently, secrecy from the American people could no longer be maintained.

Despite the change to the original intent of the Agency's charter, the organization was always responsible for gathering cogent intelligence data, collating, and conducting comprehensive analysis, and disseminating this information to high level Washington leaders to enhance collective decision making. Pertinent information was derived from many sources that included: USAF U-2 and SR-71 reconnaissance flights, detailed photo coverage provided by Air America pilots flying Volpar 42Z, drone overflies of denied areas, reports from spies in the field, captured prisoners, SOG cross border penetrations, radio intercepts, communication wire taps, and the sort.

The use of relatively unsophisticated wire taps attached to tape recorders to gather intelligence data was not new. Originally effective, they had been employed for years with

varying degrees of success along the Ho Chi Minh Trail system and by indigenous cross border teams launching from Nam Yu (LS-118A in northwestern Military Region One Province) into Yunnan Province, China.

As the American portion of the war measurably decreased in South Vietnam by design, and desultory negotiations were underway in Paris, it became essential that our chief diplomats, such as Henry Kissinger, were apprised of real-time North Vietnamese leaders' short-and long-term intentions in both South Vietnam and Laos. Because of the absence of spies or other means of obtaining pertinent information, this clandestine technique was considered only possible from wiretap information from within North Vietnam.

An exhaustive search by those assigned to this aspect of an extensive intelligence gathering project code, named Main Street<sup>1</sup> (generically called the Vinh Tap), eventually revealed a primary multiplex communications line that thrust through a rough, remote area about fifteen miles southwest of Vinh, North Vietnam. A choice spot, located in the bend of a tributary of the Song Ca, divorced from prying eyes and access from anything but foot or bicycle traffic, it was first selected from reconnaissance photographs, and deemed perfect to mount a clandestine helicopter borne tap operation. <sup>2</sup> Technologically advanced hardware to tap the line and relay information through a solar powered antenna to an aircraft aloft was either on the drawing board or already in the inventory. Elite Commando Raiders were in training and willing to perform the job. The only remaining challenge was a suitable aircraft for delivery.

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Chiles Email, 06/06/07.  
Wayne Knight Email.

<sup>2</sup> UMT coordinates were never available to the Author.

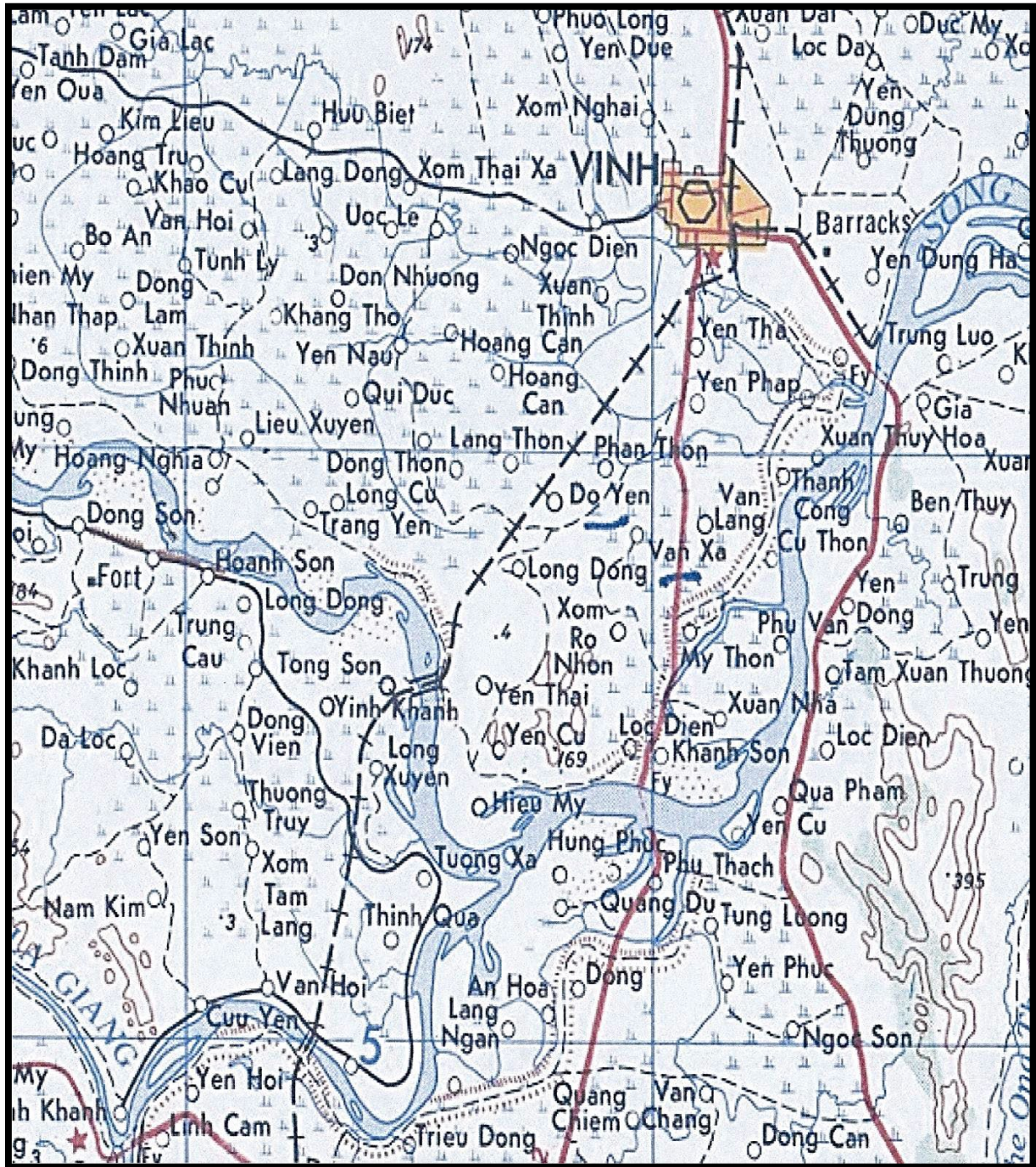
The concept of employing a relatively silent helicopter to accomplish special black missions was developed from earlier year think tanks. It was addressed by geniuses at the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), a government organization that first presented the world with the Internet.<sup>3</sup>

Helicopters are inherently noisy machines, and most helicopters of the period could easily be heard by individuals miles away on the ground. Whirling rotor blades that disrupted air, the piston chugging of a UH-34D reciprocating engine, or the high-pitched turbine and transmission whine from a Bell or S-58T, contributed to the din. Moreover, rotorcraft generally maneuvered through the air with all the speed of a semi-energized snail. Therefore, in order to satisfy requirements for a faultless clandestine intelligence mission, a rotorcraft had to be developed for relative silence, speed, maneuverability, range, visual acuity at night, and state of the art navigation systems. In addition, the machine had to accommodate sufficient men, equipment, and fuel to complete the mission and safely return to base. In order to overcome the intelligence void, our leaders needed all this to be accomplished yesterday.

With these factors defined, various helicopters were assessed to create the perfect delivery system. During the late 1960s, Hughes Tool, a company that produced the OH-6A "Loach", was selected for the task. The finished product, designated Hughes-500P, saw the light of day during April 1971. The machine was a marvel of technology. Modified from a standard H-500, all that was humanly possible was accomplished to reduce noise and still retain a viable airframe capable of performing a mission.

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<sup>3</sup> The Israelis were also interested in quieting helicopter noise footprints by angling main blade rotor tips to reduce noise created by vortex forces. This was also done to the H-500P blades.



1:250,000 map showing the multiplex communications line (black) stretching southwest from Vinh.

Jim Chiles Collection.

To enhance this requirement, an extra blade was added to the four main rotor blades to slow RPM, and hence sound. Extra tail rotor blades were added for the same reason. Sound suppressing items were attached to the engine housing. The helicopter incorporated other attributes. Some components, including the main rotor hub and main transmission, were reinforced to accommodate increased torque produced by the water-alcohol injection system, which was installed to increase power for heavier takeoff weights. <sup>4</sup> Internal cargo area fuel tanks were installed for greater range. Pods were attached externally to both sides of the lower fuselage and the belly to house state-of-the-art LORAN and inertial guidance navigation equipment, and a forward-looking infrared system (FLIR) that produced thermal images on a cockpit screen. This "Buck Rogers" equipment was calculated to enable a crew to fly nap-of-the-earth (NOE) into enemy territory at night without discovery. Infrared landing lights were installed for subdued illumination with the night vision goggles, and special paint was applied to the fuselage to camouflage and confuse radar waves. <sup>5</sup>

Two U.S. Army helicopter instructor pilots, with Vietnam flying experience and a high degree of proficiency--Dan Smith and Lloyd Lamothe--were selected to participate in the Hughes-500P program. After two months of intense testing and training in a classified area of the western American desert, the American IPs, technicians, and the two H-500P aircraft were airlifted to Tainan, Taiwan, in the fall of 1971, where they would be employed to train senior Chinese pilots who had already gained experience flying a standard H-500. Ground and flight

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<sup>4</sup> Before introduction of the C-123 K models that used wing tip jet engine pods, the engine cooling mixture used was called ADI, a manual injection mixture of water and fish oil.

<sup>5</sup> Special Project Manager Buddy Rogers showed me the helicopter and explained all these benefits one evening at PS-44.



training continued unabated for several months until June 1972, when the ships were airlifted by a C-130 crew to the heavily guarded inner wire compound at Takhli, a remote, clandestine operation airfield northwest of Bangkok, Thailand. In order to provide exposure and a modicum of cover for activity of the special ships, two H-500 helicopters were already being flown throughout Laos by four Air America pilots. <sup>6</sup>

### **NEW SHIPS ARRIVE**

The two H-500Ps continued their worldwide journey to Pakse via Taiwan and Takhli, Thailand in July. Twin Otter pilot Jim Pearson was at L-11 late in the day, preparing for a night mission, when a C-130 crew landed and handlers began unloading two tarpaulin-covered helicopters. Air Operations officer Jim Butler (The Gray Fox), who monitored the operation, informed Pearson that he would lead the aircraft and crew to PS-44 when the ship's rotor blades were unfolded and they were ready to launch. At the same time, Jim met two pilots wearing green U.S. Army Nomex flight suits with Air America pocket patches. The two men constantly attempted to convince Jim and his copilot that they were bona fide Air America personnel.

In the interim, Pearson and his copilot departed for supper at the Air America hostel. Shortly after they returned to the airfield, with the ships and everyone involved ready, the crew

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<sup>6</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 382-383.

Ken Conboy & Dale Andrade, *Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam*, 252-253.

James R. Chiles, *Air America's Black Helicopter: How the CIA Tapped the Phones in North Vietnam*, *Air and Space Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2008, 63-64.

Jim Chiles Emails, 06/02/07, 06/04/07, 06/05/07, 06/06/07, 06/07/07.

Author Note: As a participant and eyewitness to the mission, the Author contributed heavily to Ken Conboy's account in *Shadow War* and to Jim Chiles' 4,000-word article in the *Air and Space Smithsonian Magazine*.

completed their part in the aircraft transfer to PS-44. Then they continued to Nong Saphong (LS-235, also listed in the Air Facilities book as Keng Ka Boa) in Military Region Three to conduct classified nightly resupply missions. <sup>7</sup>

### **KNIGHT AND SPECIAL PROJECT TRAINING**

Despite the former month's maintenance problem resulting in a forced landing in a farmer's field near Roi Et, Wayne Knight eventually arrived at PS-44 in Papa Hotel Delta on the 6th. He and Charlie Weitz were slated for LORAN and night vision goggle training. Sometime prior to his arrival, a ChiNat crew had crashed landed one of the H-500Ps during a night training session. For this reason, and their overall inability to implement flexibility to different variables, all the Chinese were summarily returned to Taiwan. This decision voided the plausible deniability factor the Agency preferred in favor of

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<sup>7</sup> Jim Pearson Emails, 04/30/98, 07/03/16, 07/14/16. July 2016 phone call to Jim Pearson. Jim indicated the Hughes-500P's arrived at Pakse sometime prior to his home leave in late July. Jim was absent when Ben Coleman crashed around Site-72 on 25 July. Therefore, it is conceivable that the two ships were already at, and hangared at, PS-44 when I RON there on 15 July.

There is some contradiction as to how the ships arrived at PS-44. From past and present Emails, 12/01/00, 12/03/00, 06/30/16 former helicopter Chief Pilot and Special Project participant Wayne Knight believes the two ships were flown from Takhli to PS-44, with Scratch Kanach participating. He believes this information was derived from CJ Abadie, not always considered a particularly reliable source in later years. *"Ab was not really cranked into the whys and wherefores of the Special Project. I [Wayne] did make a real effort to keep Abadie briefed on all projects...His knowledge would have been very general. His visits to the Taj [Mahal, AB-1] were uncommon, although he got along well with Buddy Rogers and Jim Glerum, he did not get along with Pat Landry at all..."*

During the Author's phone conversation with Jim Glerum, Jim could not recall when the H-500Ps arrived at PS-44. Despite the inconsistency in the quest to be as accurate as possible, the Author chooses to use Pearson's eyewitness and convincing account.

more reliable American round eyes for the Vinh phone tap operation. At this time, Wayne met Smith and Lamothe, who would be the primary crew for the mission.

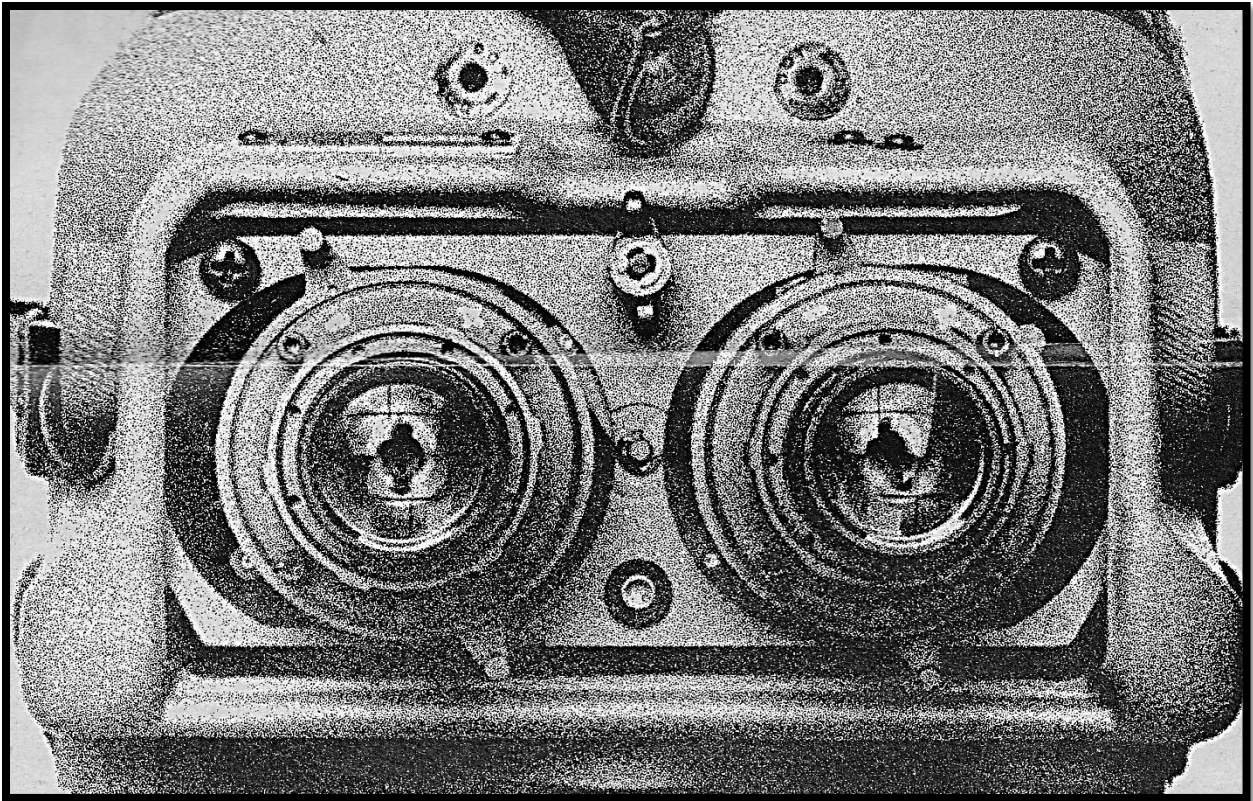
There were two Twinpacs normally positioned at the site during the training period. Beside crew training, the ships were there for Customer evacuation in case the base was attacked by enemy forces. Knight never got to know the H-500P crew or associated technicians and Customers well. They had their own briefings to which he was not invited.

That night Wayne and Charlie focused on more than two hours of night vision google (NVG) training. Treated like gold bars, the SU-50 night vision glasses were a pair of four prototype units AB-1 people kept secured in the White House air conditioned safe when not in use. The International Telegraph and Telephone Company's (ITT) electro-optical division of Fort Wayne, Indiana, had developed the NVGs under contract with the Department of the Army, U.S Army Electronics Company Night Vision Laboratory at Fort Belvoir, Virginia (binocular electronic contract DAAK02C009). Under subdued light they would detect light in near-total darkness and then electronically amplify it through image intensifier phosphorous tubes that produced a green field. <sup>8</sup> They had been in limited field use by the U.S. military since November 1970, and the following year by Air America fixed wing crews in the Special Project.

Because they were scarce, expensive items, generally only one pair of goggles was issued to a cockpit crew for practice or

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<sup>8</sup> Because of a red-out condition and other adverse side effects after about an hour of use, I was skeptical as to the long-term effects on one's eyes. Therefore, I copied the statistics off a data plate and sent them home to be placed in the safety deposit box in the bank should I incur any future problems.



Front view of the ITT night vision goggles.  
Commercial ITT advertisement for the National Retinitis Pigmentosa  
Foundation as seen in *U.S. News and World Report*.

actual missions. <sup>9</sup> Moreover, depending on the mission priority, they were often shared with fixed wing crews. Strapped to ballistic combat flight helmets that were already heavy, Wayne found the NVGs hefty and uncomfortable. The device's long longitudinal arm had a tendency to pull one's head down, placing more of a strain on the aviator's neck and causing a headache over long periods. There were pros and cons involved in using the goggles. Wayne found the most difficult aspect of flying with them was descending from altitude and the void before they achieved effective vision. Of course, they were considered more reliable as familiarity with them increased.

Wayne's first trip into the Hole that night was memorable, full of anxiety and anticipation. While Charlie wore the goggles, Knight monitored the rheostat-controlled red illuminated instrument gages. Completely blind to outside obstacles, he instantly understood that an abundant amount of trust and confidence in the cockpit mate was necessary for this kind of Special Project operations. (Eight plus twenty-four hours, two plus eleven night.)

The next day, Wayne and Charlie continued day training in LORAN and mission profiles (six plus ten). <sup>10</sup> That evening after supper, because Buddy Rogers wanted him familiar with what the

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<sup>9</sup> Buddy Rogers informed me the prototype night vision goggles cost 11,000 dollars a copy. Hank Edwards Email. During his last two years in the Army (1964-66) Hank help test night vision goggles and FLIR equipment for the Fort Belvoir, Virginia Research and Development unit. During an overcast night during a waning moon phase, he and his crew member flew south to Camp AP Hill away from all ambient light. They followed the Rappahannock River at 300 feet above ground level in pitch dark. He was impressed by the ability to see boats or anything else on the river.

<sup>10</sup> This was Knight's last flight with Charlie Weitz in the Special Project. Charlie left the program shortly afterward.



Right side view of a U.S Army version of the relatively silent H-500P showing additional drive components, reinforced skids, and external pods for housing navigational and associated equipment.



Front view of the mission-oriented Hughes-500P displaying side pods containing sensitive electronic navigation equipment. The pod underneath the belly was reserved for the forward-looking-infra-red (FLIR) system.

pilots were doing, Knight was escorted down a path to a small hangar concealed among the trees in order to fly an hour or so in the H-500P with mission PIC Dan Smith. <sup>11</sup> It was not Wayne's first time at the controls of a Hughes. While on leave in California, courtesy of Hughes technical representatives, Wayne had received a familiarization flight in the H-500. He also received several hours training in the machine at the Udorn facility, and at least one day's exposure in the field upcountry. For this reason, the only internal item totally new to him, except for some H-500P cockpit configuration, was the FLIR equipment. He was highly impressed with the system as a navigation assist and a search tool, but largely unimpressed with landing and takeoff restrictions. A camera was mounted below and behind the pilot's seat, which presented an entirely new perspective for viewing the touchdown location. The flight was conducted in the early evening. Though totally dark on the plateau, the terrain, devoid of trees or other vegetation, and still warm from the day's lingering residual heating, stood out clearly. Hill shapes were well defined and very white. Cooler areas were darkened in various shades of gray. It was obvious to Wayne that a great deal of hands-on experience would be necessary to become comfortable using the FLIR system. In order to maintain the strictest secrecy, Wayne elected not to log the flight.

On the eighth, continuing to enhance cockpit crew coordination, Wayne and Lloyd Higgins flew Delta during the day (four plus twenty). The same crew conducted day and night training with two hours NVG familiarity. (Five plus fifteen, two ten night.)

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<sup>11</sup> The H-500Ps were hangared during the daytime to avoid discovery by Soviet satellite overflights.



After supper and another day's training session, on the 10th Wayne and Lloyd ferried Papa Hotel Delta to Udorn. (Eight ten, two plus twenty night.) Three days later Knight, Higgins, and Davis flew Papa Hotel Alpha locally. (Two plus twenty-five, one twenty-five night.)

On the 24<sup>th</sup>, Scratch Kanach and Knight were tapped for a special night mission from PS-44. Weather in the target area prevented its completion in Papa Hotel Charlie. After aborting, they RTB PS-44 to RON. (Four plus twenty-seven.) The road watch team mission was successfully performed the next night, after which the crew returned to Udorn. (Six plus zero four.)

As missions backed up, because of the emphasis on the Vinh tap preparation and often non-availability of the maintenance-challenged S-58T, Wayne talked to Buddy Rogers about employing a Bell 205 for the Special Project as a supplement to the Twinpac. Therefore, XW-PFJ was configured with the latest LORAN equipment, the used number readouts, rather than the older stacked array, but the Bell was mainly intended for use as a liaison tool and perhaps a backup ship.

At the time, Rogers was planning to establish solo aircraft operations in areas where enemy contact was not expected and flight following through the LORAN system would be closely monitored by the Customer. On the 30<sup>th</sup>, the opportunity arose to use a single Bell when a night insertion on the extreme northeast edge of the Bolovens was planned. Four members of a road watch team would relieve and replace an existing team.

After convincing Buddy that the mission was suitable for a single Bell, Wayne and Larry Price launched for PS-44 (one of five times he journeyed there in a Bell). The mission was successful. While Wayne flew with the aid of NVG, Price

conducted LORAN navigation. Although successful, it was the last  
single Bell mission. 12

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<sup>12</sup> EW Knight Emails, 08/27/00, 08/28/00, 08/31/00, 12/06/00, 12/18/00, 12/19/00-flight time for August 1972, 12/08/00, 07/03/01, 07/05/01, 07/03/16.

**E**ven before September arrived it was obvious that General Vang Pao's wet season five-task-force offensive was not achieving expectations.

*"In the most serious reversal, heavy [NVA] ground attacks and shellings dispersed the irregular task force that had been operating north of the [PDJ]. Thus far, some 600 to 700 troops from this force have worked their way to other irregular positions near the Plaine's western edge. Most of them have since been evacuated. Other irregular forces assigned to this group reportedly are continuing to filter back to friendly lines in the same area. Almost all of them evidently will need some medical treatment.*

*Northeast of the Plaine, the irregular task force from Bouam Long-it had been advancing toward communist supply lines near Nong Pet-has also encountered stiff opposition. Three of its battalions pulled back late last week in the face of heavy communist attacks. At last report, the task force commanders indicated that they were still determined to move toward their objectives.*

*The communists are also keeping the pressure on the two irregular task forces operating south of the Plaine. In the past few days, [North Vietnamese] units have launched ground attacks against and sporadically shelled elements of the task force located in the Tha Tam Bleung sector. The irregulars have managed to hold their positions. Elements of the other southern task force, which is in the vicinity of Phou Houang, had several clashes on 3 September. Two battalions were forced out of their positions and withdrew slightly to the south to regroup.*

*The weather continues to have a crucial effect on Vang Pao's current campaign. Bad weather prohibited any extensive air*

*support for the ill-fated northern irregular task force; it also hindered resupply missions. Conditions have since improved and 105 air strikes were conducted on 3 September in support of irregular units deployed around the Plaine.”*<sup>1</sup>

From a micro-level perspective, on the northwest Plain of Jars Delta's two regiments were attacked and scattered by enemy tanks. Errant bombing, tropical disease, and harsh terrain also took a disastrous toll on men and morale. Moving south, survivors rallied near Ban Na, or individually made their way back to Long Tieng.

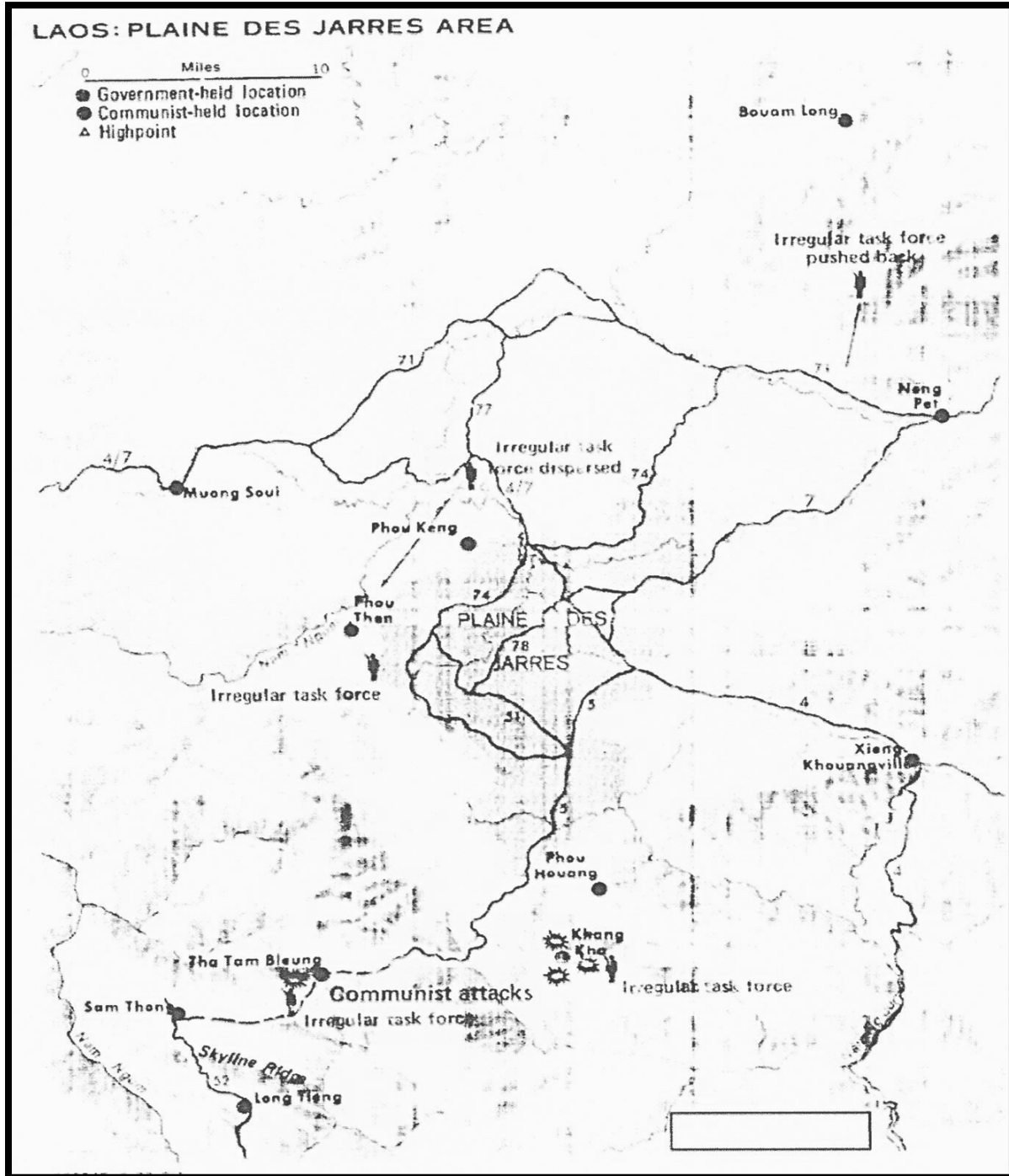
Alpha's forces made little progress toward Hintang and Phou Pha Sai. Charlie had been attacked near the Nipple and withdrew to safety in the hills of Khang Kho. It was almost two weeks before the task force resumed marching toward the southern Plain.

Bouam Long's Task Force Echo arrived close to Route-71. The enemy was waiting, and by the fourth Echo was withdrawing into the northern hills. Five days later, they resumed the offensive, only to be accidentally bombed by T-28 strikes. On the 15th another bombing accident killed and wounded additional troops, effectively ending this phase of the operation.

Bravo showed some encouragement. With the aid of heli-lifted assets, fresh BC-619A troops were deposited on Phou Then (Hill-4452), commanding the western ground around Ban Thang and Moung Phanh. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, GM-30, just arrived from Savannakhet, was lifted to help support Mule's GM-22 near Ban Thang. In tandem with this movement, USAF helicopters hauled two 105mm howitzers to the Ban Thang airfield. This fire support base

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<sup>1</sup> CIA Bulletin, 09/05/72, Laos: The government's offensive in the north has suffered some sharp setbacks.



CIA map of the Phou Phiang Two battlefield, 09/05/72.

became known as Santi (November November-Spike). <sup>2</sup>

The Plain of Jars operation generally continued to be dismal:

*"Only one of the four remaining task forces is currently moving toward its objective. The force, which six days ago had been pushed back by strong communist attacks, on 7 September advanced to positions about five miles northwest of Nong Pet [the site we generically called the 7/71 split], the junction of vital communist supply lines to the [PDJ].*

*The remnants of the irregular task force that was dispersed north of the Plaine on 30 August have been withdrawn to Long Tieng, where they will be regrouped. Thus far, about one third of the irregulars in this unit have returned to government lines. The task forces west, southwest, and southeast of the Plaine have clashed sporadically with the communists in the past few days, maneuvering into better defensive positions rather than making any effort to move toward the Plaine. Low morale and sickness continues to trouble government forces. <sup>3</sup>*

On the first, Mike Jarina and Willie Parker worked twenty sorties on the Plain of Jars out of Long Tieng. Landing after dark, they rotated 12F to Udorn. (Ten plus thirty-five, one-hour night.)

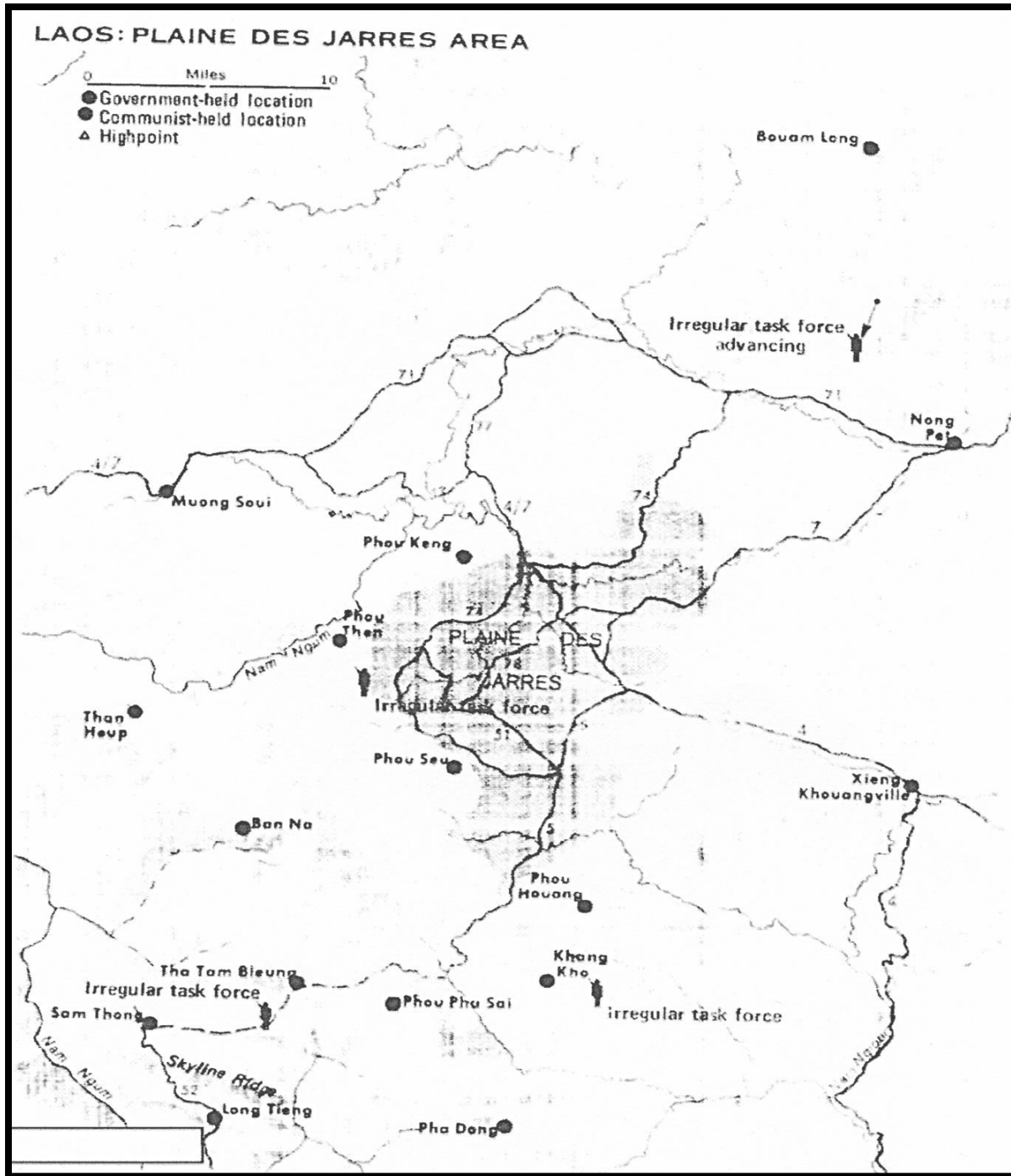
### **GYRATIONS ON THE RAMP**

While I was recovering at home from jet lag, Wayne Knight and Tom Moher experienced a harrowing incident on the helicopter parking ramp. Early on the morning of the third, FCF chief Moher entered the Club dining room in an agitated state as Wayne was

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<sup>2</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 348.  
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 465.

<sup>3</sup> CIA Bulletin, 09/09/72, Laos: The government's operation in northern Laos continues to make little progress.



CIA map of General Vang Pao's wet season offensive as of 09/09/72.

eating breakfast. Tom, who could be quite mercurial at times, was engaged in a running battle with maintenance while attempting to bring XW-PHC to an airworthiness state, and wanted Knight to accompany him to the flight line to witness the latest foul-up. Wayne resisted, saying that Tom was in charge of the FCF crew and should sort out the problem by himself. When Tom persisted, not even aware of the precise nature of the complaint, Wayne reluctantly followed him to the ramp.

Moher was engaging the rotors as Wayne climbed into the left seat. Tom pointed to the ragged tip path plane with the primary servo off, indicating an unbalanced rotor blade system. As Wayne was attempting to snap his restraining harness, Tom turned off the auxiliary servo. The resulting rollover was horrifying. Only one main gear lifted off the ground, but the hard-over was enough to tip the aircraft on its left side.

*"The aircraft was crawling over the tarmac on stubs of broken blades and chasing one of the line maintenance personnel, as he crawled to get clear. Tom was uninjured, but in his haste to exit the right side, he stomped all over Wayne causing his only injury in the form of cuts to his back."*

The incident was similar to what Flight Mechanic John Timmons had experienced years before in an H-34 when switching off the auxiliary servo. Timmons, who had a lot of bogus flight time with Captains he had flown with, was the sole non-pilot allowed to conduct H-34 engine starts and rotor engagements. Timmons' initial instinct was to hover, instead of turning the switch back on. A concern of many for some time, further run-ups except by a pilot were forbidden.

Even though color coding of hydraulic and lubrication lines had been instituted to preclude incidents like this, this particular occurrence was caused by sloppy maintenance and the



total failure by the Quality Control Department to properly check the work. <sup>4</sup>

Mike Jarina, Cliff Hendrix, and Bobby Barrow ferried 35F to The Alternate on the fourth, to support the unwinding Plain of Jars operation. Working up to the last minute, they recovered at Wattay Airport after dark. (Ten hours, one twenty-five night.)

On Tuesday, the identical crew returned to the same work from Long Tieng. Some of the day's activities involved shuttling members of GM-31 from the Phou Long Mat area to Site-20A, in order to be flown to Savannakhet for rest and reconstituting units. Other work entailed evacuating Meo from the Plain. The crew of 35F RTB L08. (Ten plus fifty-five, fifty minutes night.)

### **THE HOME FRONT**

Since arriving in Udorn, I enjoyed the benefit of a few days off the flight schedule in order to rest, re-acclimate to a different way of life, and assess what had occurred upcountry, and with the Special Project in my absence. Moreover, with the Papa Hotel Charlie incident, there were fewer aircraft to fly for the pool of Twinpac pilots. While at the airfield I found that there was a movement in the pilot group to support Father Lucien Brouchard's missionary work in the hills of Laos, so I donated a hundred-dollar check to the pastor for his good work.

Without our consent, FEPA levied another hundred dollars on association members, hiring a law firm in Washington to counter

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<sup>4</sup> EW Knight Emails, 06/24/00, 06/26/00, 12/17/00, 01/30/01.

Author Note: As per the Air America agreement with the Thai government Chinese and Filipino employees were to be replaced with "qualified" Thai personnel. Despite our fears that they were not capable of handling the job, some proved themselves to be very good workers. One lead mechanic was both enthusiastic and outstanding. Despite an ASE instructor referring to the Thai workers as "plant life," I was very impressed by the girl working in the avionics shop, who repaired my balky flight helmet receiver.

Internal Revenue Service (IRS) attempts to disallow our tax-advantaged overseas status, especially the cherished bona fide residency clause that allowed qualified individuals a 25,000-dollar exemption from the Form 1040 gross income. Originally, the main focus of the witch hunt began with Air America personnel in Vientiane, Laos, but now we were also being challenged in Udorn since we were not considered subject to Thai income tax.

The entire exercise appeared foolish, for, unlike Congressional members, we did not write and enact laws, and had legally been claiming the exemption for years without question. Moreover, the benefit was one method USG used to encourage American citizens to work overseas and compete for worldwide contracts with other countries who never taxed their overseas workers' wages. We were certainly not "fat cat" movie stars establishing foreign residency and living in luxurious European villas at U.S. taxpayer expense, while avoiding taxation. In fact, with creature comforts reduced to a minimum, even excluding the danger of indigenous diseases, we forfeited many stateside benefits and creature comforts to work and live overseas.

Politics being what it was, without being fully aware of, or caring about the implications of what he was attempting to accomplish, Tennessee's Democratic Senator Albert Gore had been attempting to disallow the overseas worker's tax exemption each and every year. It was like the grade school teacher punishing the entire class for one student's infraction. Granted, we certainly were a very small constituency and posed little or no threat to Gore or his cronies, but until now he had failed to change or modify the law. Scuttlebutt revealed that an unattractive IRS female, attempting to make a name in the

federal organization, had begun the investigation. <sup>5</sup> Somehow, perhaps because the war in Southeast Asia was rapidly unwinding, and Air America was no longer considered a sacrosanct organization, it was now much easier to attack us than in the past. There was also belief among some in our group that pressure was increasing because of the pilot association.

I had not been contacted by an IRS agent yet, but if the IRS won its case and my residency exemption was excluded, and no grandfather rights were allowed, then I might be assessed three years back taxes in the amount of forty to fifty thousand dollars. The bottom line of the entire argument pointed to the fact that, with no annual exemption allowed in the tax code, it would no longer be worth remaining overseas. <sup>6</sup>

***"In your case I do not see how the IRS can reverse the original decision on your residency. In all these years past nothing was objected to on your tax payments, so I think your Company should supply legal support to battle for justice."*** <sup>7</sup>

Letter from Home, 07/20/72.

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<sup>5</sup> Marius Burke Email. The corpulent IRS lady stirring the pot in Vientiane had originally been a Peace Corps representative who joined the IRS after her overseas tour. She was familiar with the substantial sums earned by Air America employees and persuaded the IRS to send her back to Southeast Asia, investigate, tax people, and attempt to stir up trouble.

Knight Email. Wayne never had any tax problems. His forms were prepared by the family accountant in Phoenix, Arizona. Later, when the Laos operation was shut down, Wayne was jokingly accused of fleeing to Australia for tax reasons, but there was no truth to this allegation.

<sup>6</sup> I do not recall the particulars, but FEPA's lawyers eventually won the case and our tax exemption remained intact. Retaining our Bona Fide residency status must have taken some time to resolve, for as late as May 1973 I wrote a hundred-dollar check to the American Employees IRS Fund.

<sup>7</sup> Dad did not fully understand that the Company rarely supported the pilot group. That was the reason FEPA was formed.

**RETURN TO THE FIELD**

*"The war at our end is still a mess. I have already been to work and flew 60 hours in six days and was quite tired at the end of it. It is hard to get muscles tuned to the vibrations again."*

Letter Home, 09/12/72.

On Wednesday the sixth, I checked into the Air America facility at dark thirty to resume upcountry flying. Special Project work was on hold because optimum conditions were not right for night operations, or the aircraft priority had temporarily switched to Military Region Two because of the critical situation.

Assigned Papa Hotel Bravo, I met First Officer Dan Zube (DOH 10/23/70), a fairly new arrival from the Saigon Bell program. Like others in our program, he had downgraded from a Bell Captain and was senior enough to bid a First Officer slot in the Twinpac. I found Dan a competent, very pleasant, easy-going individual. In addition, I developed a lot of confidence in him as a pilot, and he later became an integral part as my favorite navigator in the Special Project operations. Phil Velasquez rounded out the crew as our Flight Mechanic.

Supporting Vang Pao's current disappointing operation, I conducted thirty sorties. At day's end, we recovered at Wattay Airport, as we would for the next five nights. (Ten plus fifty-one.)

Captain Mike Jarina left Wattay Airport in 35F with Mike Barksdale and Bobby Barrow. Since dislocations were an ongoing process in all flying programs, Barksdale, along with other less senior First Officers, had been bumped from the S-58T program to the Bells.

At Long Tieng they were assigned to continue working to support and recover Meo from the Plain. At day's end they switched crews with 13F and ferried the machine to Udorn. (Eight plus forty, forty minutes night.)

Continuing the Military Region Two operations with a Long Tieng commute, we worked to recover sick, lame, and lazy troops, and to shift others into defensive positions. This included a Special Mission, which I had not participated in for some time. After thirty sorties, we recovered at Vientiane. (Eight plus forty-four.)

Friday found us back on the front lines doing our best to help support the continuing mess in any way possible. (Ten plus fifty-one.) On the ninth we were assigned to the never-ending work. (Thirty sorties, ten plus thirty-eight, twenty-one night.)

Deadheading to Wattay Airport on 686, Mike Jarina joined Wayne Lanin and Demindal in Papa Foxtrot Hotel for a day at The Alternate. They recovered at Wattay Airport. (Eight plus forty-five.)

After being delayed by early morning fog, Sunday found us again at Long Tieng, attempting to quell communist gains, stabilize the situation, and perhaps turn events in our favor. Already, a fresh SGU regiment from Savannakhet was arriving at the airfield to bolster GM-22 advances at Ban Thang. When assembled, the Lima-39 unit would be lifted on the 11th. We RON L-08. (Eight plus fifty-two, twenty-five sorties.)

There also were stirrings at Khang Kho to resume movement toward the Nipple and the southern Plain of Jars. Flying Papa Foxtrot Hotel, Mike Jarina, Wilbur, and Demindal shuttled bullets, beans and bandages to Site-204 from Padong stockpiles. After recovering and securing Hotel at Wattay Airport, Mike deadheaded to Udorn on S-58T Papa Hotel Delta. (Eight plus twenty-eight.)

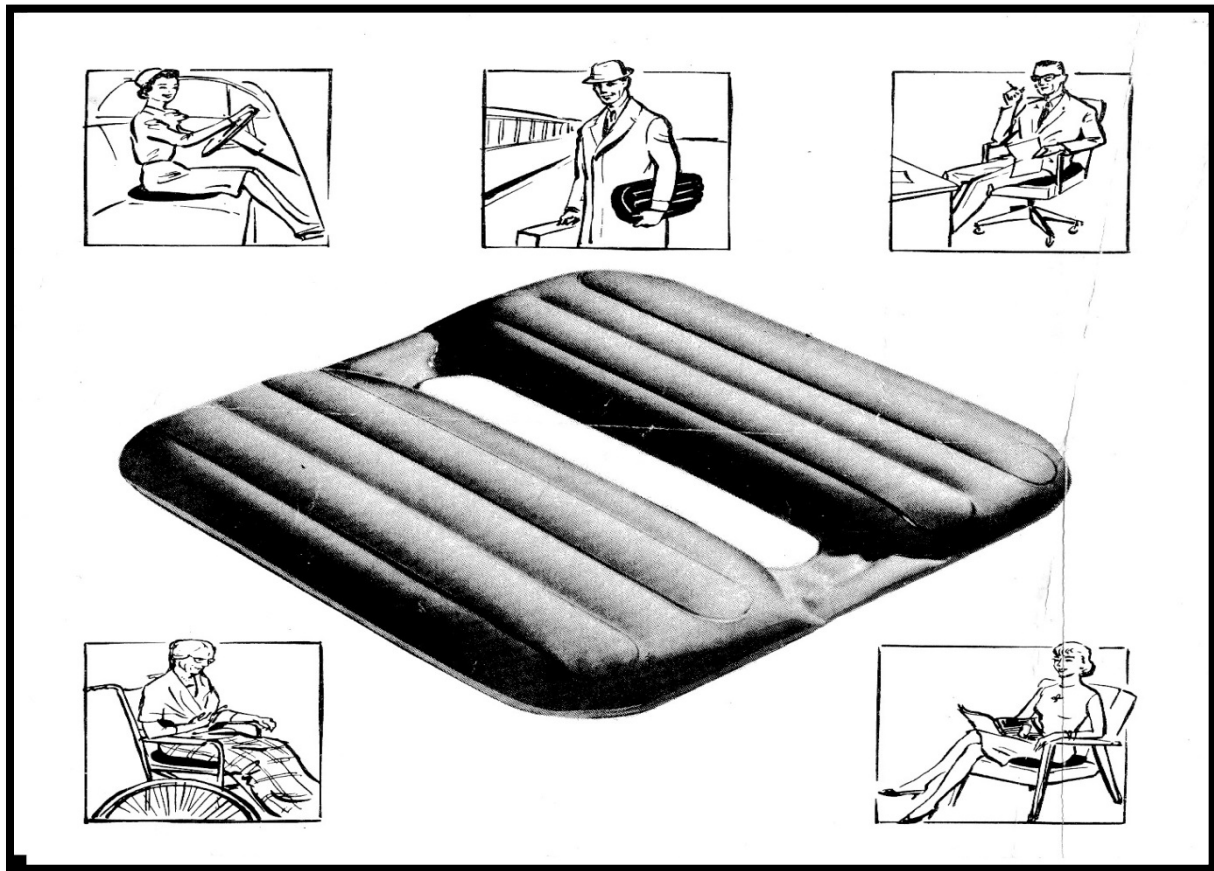
Bill Long replaced Velasquez as Flight Mechanic on my Bravo crew. During thirty-five sorties (my portion for the day), along with many other helicopter crews, we hauled GM-30 and Thai artillery men to forward positions on the western Plain of Jars. Then, after six long days in the field supporting the war, I was relieved and deadheaded to Udorn on Papa Foxtrot Gulf. (Ten plus fifty-two, forty-five minutes deadhead.)

## **UDORN**

*"The boys like the cowboy clothes. Rick is in first grade and likes it. Peter has started playschool and he seems fond of it. They both have slight colds as does Tuie. Amanda must be growing but doesn't seem to be gaining a lot of weight...She seems to be easy to take care of. She sleeps all night from six to six."*

A valve on my inflatable seat cushion had failed. Because of the hard cockpit seats theoretically designed to support a pilot's back from "G" forces during a crash, flying helicopters for ten or more hours a day was tantamount to torture to a very tender and important portion of the body. Many methods were used to ameliorate the problem. Some pilots used a donut shaped inflatable cushion with a center hole. In order to save my buttocks and back from pounding vertical helicopter vibrations in the H-34, I originally used a flat, foam-filled parachute pack cushion with a longitudinal slit to relieve pressure on the backside. While flying the Bell I had filled in the bucket seat depression with a towel.

Two summers previously, while on home leave in Plainfield I had purchased a two-section bladder type seat cushion in the Williams shop on Park Avenue. The salesman was absolutely correct when he said that the cushion, with a vertical void



Seat cushion advertisement for the Better Sleep Inc. New Providence, New Jersey.

between the inflatable portions, was much improved and more popular than the donut. I found that the bladder perfectly fit the H-34 seat, definitely provided greater comfort to my thighs and buttocks, and afforded more uniform support than a ring.

Because I missed and needed the cushion to preserve both butt and back, I asked Dad to visit the Williams store, purchase a new one if still available, and send it APO mail to me. <sup>8</sup>

*"Your long-awaited letter arrived today and we are happy that you got back all in one piece and found everything and everybody in good shape. I figured you would have to catch up with a backlog of work and 60 hours in six days sort of proves it. Trust your butt did not become unbearable. I will look into procuring a new cushion from Williams and if procurable will ship it over to you."* <sup>9</sup>

Letter from Home, 09/20/72.

## **RAMASUN**

Located several miles south of Udorn town on the north side of the Friendship Highway, this facility had originally housed the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) infantry battalion during the May 1962 Nam Tha, Laos, flap when lack of space and rains threatened to flood areas at the Udorn air base. With some infrastructure in place, the area was later employed as a super-secret location for a U.S Army signal corps. As the facility expanded, and accepted outsiders we originally went there with Bungorn's boyfriend, Army Captain, Bob Comey to bowl in the air-conditioned alleys. We also ate in the dining hall and played

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<sup>8</sup> Letter Home, 09/12/72.

<sup>9</sup> The new seat cushion arrived in October.



slot machines in the bar area. Although sometimes difficult, and by appointment only, one could call home from the facility.

The Nisagonrungsee family owned a sizeable portion of land directly across the main road. It was used to raise tapioca plants by a sharecropper family, who split the profits with Khun Yai. Hot mint bushes also grew wild on the property. I was partial to this tangy leaf that was so delicious when mixed with chopped meat and onions, and served over rice.

With the Vietnam War deescalating, formerly dark, then opaque, classified information was being gathered by the media and disseminated to the American people. Relative transparency became a common element, and the Ramasun operation was not exempt.

On 14 September, an article appeared in the *Washington Post* regarding Ramasun, its functions, and the potential danger of the facility being attacked by hostile forces:

*"The modest defenses of this secret intelligence base are a source of worry to the U.S. soldiers stationed here, who also feel that there is a danger of a world-wide security compromise if the base ever falls.*

*On base is a maze of wire and steel rods laid out over an area larger than a football field. Local people call it the elephant cage. [The huge structure could be seen from the highway and railroad train.] It houses one of the most important intelligence-gathering operations the U.S. military is conducting in the Indochina War.*

*An electronically tuned all-frequency, all directional antenna, the elephant cage picks up walkie-talkie conversations in North Vietnam or China as easily as a pocket transistor picks up local radio stations. The central listening post for American radio intelligence operations in mainland Southeast Asia, it is*

also one of the most vulnerable American military installations in Thailand.<sup>10</sup>

Ramasun's more formal name is the Seventh Radio Research Field Station. It is about a mile by two in area. In addition to its giant antenna [array], it has permanent concrete buildings and a staff of 1,200 [men].

In addition to being a radio-monitoring post, Ramasun is also a communications center, dispatching radio traffic throughout the war theater. One of its most important roles is providing American fighter bombers attacking North Vietnam with almost instant intelligence about the location and battle plan of airborne MiG fighters, as well as the position of friendly aircraft.

Manned by an elite crew of Morse code interpreters, linguist crypto analysts, and other intelligence specialists from the Army Security Agency and Air Force Security Services, Ramasun is one of the most important examples of secondary American military installations in Thailand.

Despite its importance, Ramasun has long had only modest defenses until recently, just a cyclone fence patrolled by civilian Thai guards, and no bunkers.

[Currently] the command is increasingly worried about a sapper attack [and deficient security]. Ramasun's relatively small size plus its important mission make it a likely object of attack. If the elephant cage was knocked out it would stop the air war.

In the last six months things have begun to change. Practice alerts have been called about twice a month and M-16 rifles broken out. Approximately 20 bunkers have been built

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<sup>10</sup> Scuttlebutt indicated the facility had instant communications with Washington through orbiting satellites.

around the perimeter. A second cyclone fence is being built inside the original one.

Despite improved defenses there is much skepticism about Ramasun's ability to withstand a serious sapper attack. Most army personnel live off base.

The biggest obstacle to defense [of the base] may be the men who man [the facility]; [they are] young enlisted men selected from the brightest and best-educated U.S. Army and Air Force [types]. Most have no combat training or [actual battlefield] experience. [Consensus is] there would be general panic in the event of an attack." <sup>11</sup>

## **THE PROJECT**

On Thursday the 14<sup>th</sup>, I deadheaded to Pakse on 681 to join Scratch Kanach and Deak Kennedy crewing Papa Hotel Echo. Scratch picked me and my RON gear up at the airport and we flew twenty minutes to PS-44 (also logged as Lima-444 that had no name in the Lao Air Facility Data book) to conduct night training. The first item I noted since the last time I was at the site was the absence of Chinese pilots and supporting personnel. I was informed that the Chinese pilots had been repatriated after a very expensive H-500P accident, confirming the Agency's long-standing reservations about their ability to successfully

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<sup>11</sup> Mike Morrow, *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, 09/14/72, *GI's at Secret Base: Plenty of Time to Worry*.

The article is mostly intact as Morrow wrote it, but the Author did change or add some information. There were certainly limits to the information that was divulged to Morrow, and the article was probably vetted for sensitive information.

Although not exactly the same circumstances, the article reflected the complacency and lack of training that prevailed at Phou Pha Thi (LS-85), Laos before that site fell to a communist Dac Cong attack with loss of American life. Fortunately, Ramasun was never lost.

perform the important cross border mission. <sup>12</sup> As a result, a high-level decision had been made to use an all-American crew of Dan Smith and Lloyd Lamothe, and us for SAR coverage.

For personal reasons, Scratch wanted me for his copilot during future missions. He did not indicate why, and I was reluctant to ask. Perhaps he did not feel comfortable with previous pilots or Lloyd's vetting of me, had convinced him that I was ready for this kind of demanding work. Scratch and I had flown together during H-34, Bell, and S-58T training, proficiency checks, and at least one previous trail watch mission. We came to know what to anticipate and expect from the other, even during times of combat-induced stress. Both born and raised in the same New Jersey culture, we understood and respected each other. I think that I might have felt more comfortable flying with Scratch because he seemed to live a charmed life, and his reputation as an outstanding helicopter pilot was universal. I would have liked to have him as a good friend, but, like me, he was reticent to encourage close relationships and preferred to keep his own counsel. The loss of several pilots over the years may have had something to do with this feeling.

Except for instructor training, I normally did not operate from the left seat. Uncomfortable, and foreign, I do not believe I would have considered doing this with anyone except Kanach. I would have preferred to fly as PIC, but Scratch insisted that he wanted me to handle the difficult function of LORAN C navigation, and any in-flight emergencies that might occur during the course of our activities. Because of potential systemic errors inherent in any complicated electrical

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<sup>12</sup> The skids of the damaged H-500P were mounted in the concealed hangar as evidence of the third country national's inability to perform to Agency specifications.

equipment, I would be tasked to the upmost of my ability to back up the LORAN readout and course direction indicator (CDI) while monitoring and correctly accessing the proper flight track on the LORAN map to a target. Although I had long been exposed to LORAN navigation equipment, I had never undergone formal schooling. However, I had learned how to operate the gear through observation, conversations with Tom Deeble, and OJT with Lloyd Higgins. In this new capacity, I would have to study and acquire the finer points of the LORAN system in order to perform the high degree of competence deemed necessary to achieve mission success. Except for switching seats with Higgins during July training sessions at PS-44, while merely PIC, my job had been to fly. For this reason, I was never particularly interested in the equipment's operation, and had not learned all the system's "nuts and bolts."

Before long I discovered that the object of the current RON was intensive night, LORAN, and NVG training for an imminent Sam Neua Province mission. Once a mission had been proposed and approved by Langley Headquarters, we devoted all our time to it, and our ground and flight training became intensive. That was one reason for employing the isolation of PS-44. Divorced from prying eyes, there were no extraneous items to divert our attention and impinge on us.

Scheduled for the night of the 17th, a faux, but authentic-looking log, crammed with radios, batteries, food, weapons, and other supplies, was to be delivered to a Sam Neua road watch agent in the field. Our task was to land and unload the item in a specific location south of, and close, to Route-65. (Route-65 was a main logistic and communications artery connecting with Route-6 northeast of Sam Neua, and stretching thirty-six miles east to the North Vietnamese border. Because of its perceived importance to intelligence experts, the road would constitute

the focus of our attention for several months.) To aid us, LORAN coordinates were provided and aerial stereoscopic photographs of the landing zone were available for us to study. For maximum stealth, the mission was planned as a night insertion, so we had to hone our night flying skills. We would also be employing ITT prototype night vision goggles, an entirely new feature to me. Operating the LORAN navigation system was a very exacting business, and as I had been away from the work for over a month, I was not overly confident that I would be able to comply with the requirement. Because of numerous LOCs containing vehicle-mounted AAA guns, it was not feasible to fly blindly around the Sam Neua area during the day or night. Moreover, my training period was quite abbreviated. Time and performance during actual conditions would be the judge. <sup>13</sup>

### **ABBREVIATED LORAN DESCRIPTION**

Long range navigation techniques were introduced for World War Two bombing missions. It was called LORAN A. Current LORAN C employed similar principles by employing ground transmitters to aid in navigation to a designated position and back to the starting point.

LORAN C, a pulse-type, passive electronic system, used synchronized low frequency radio signal output from three stations to obtain a position fix anywhere in the coverage area. LORAN C equipment received, analyzed, and operated from these transmissions.

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<sup>13</sup> I was slowly coming to understand that people working in the bowels of the AB-1 building were convinced that we were ultra-super pilots, capable of accomplishing any and every mission required of us, with little or minimum training. Because many missions were relatively untested or new, from numerous failures, they would soon learn that this was not the case for all participants.

In Southeast Asia, widely spaced LORAN C chains employed a master station and three slave transmitters, which were erected by U.S. Seabees and maintained by U.S. Navy technicians. The master station was located at Sattahip, Thailand; the X slave at Lampang, Thailand; the Y slave at Con Son off the southeast coast of South Vietnam; and the Z slave at Tan My on the northeast coast of South Vietnam. <sup>14</sup>

The difference in time of arrival of LORAN pulses was a measure of differences from the receiver to each of the stations. The locus of all points having the same observed difference in distance to a pair of stations forms a hyperbola and is called a line of position (LOP). <sup>15</sup> The intersection of two or more LOPs defined receiver (aircraft) position.

The master station at Sattahip broadcast a series of coded pulses which the LORAN receiver could identify as the master station. A secondary station waited a precise interval and then broadcast eight pulses. The difference in time of arrival to the two groups-TDA (time distance)-at any LORAN receiver in the area determined each receiver's line of position. The second station, after a longer time delay than the first, broadcast its own eight pulses. The difference in arrival time between the master and this station-TDB-located the receiver along a second LOP oriented to a different direction.

When the two grids were superimposed on a chart, the receiver position (the aircraft) was located at the intersection of the two lines. If accurate and applied to the LORAN chart, it would show an aircraft's exact position over the terrain.

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<sup>14</sup> Anthony Thornborough, *USAF Phantoms Tactics, Training, and Weapons* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1988), 23-24.

<sup>15</sup> LOP: The curve of all points having the same difference to a pair of stations.

(Although conducted in subdued light, map reading was still the standard, read right and up technique.)<sup>16</sup>

Depending on relative geometry of the receiver and triad stations, LOPs could intersect at differing crossing angles. Therefore, during mission planning it was imperative to choose the most advantageous station chains for maximum intersection at the landing zone--SHX, SHY, SHZ were the station LOPs in our area--and to ensure the optimum crossing angles of ninety degrees, while avoiding any consisting of less than thirty degrees. If landing zone coordinates were not selected correctly, there was no hope of ensuring the system's accuracy. Using baseline extensions with only small changes in time distance represented large distances--often several hundred miles--with resulting degraded accuracy.

The LORAN system in the helicopter consisted of a control display unit (the black box), receiving computer unit (housed in the electronics compartment to the rear of the cabin section), and an under-the-aircraft antenna, with a separate antenna coupler. The antenna coupler provided impedance matching and bandpass amplification for received signals. Easily accessible, it also was checked frequently, or changed when we experienced problems. The receiver computer unit processed incoming signals and computed navigation data, as well as other system test and evaluation data. Signals were delivered through wire bundles to the instrument panel-mounted course deviation indicator (CDI) to provide steering information to selected waypoints or to the landing zone. The control box display unit allowed copilot interface with the system, and displayed all navigation and self-test functions.

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<sup>16</sup> We used LORAN C Special Operational Chart-1-250,000, April 1967-overprint compiled by the Aeronautical Chart and Information Center October 1971)



LORAN inputs to the receiver were configured into numerical characters. These were read by the copilot from the control box as digital TDA (time distance alpha) and TDB (time distance bravo) in nanoseconds. (Our LORAN receiver was mounted between the two cockpit seats.)

Although touted to being far superior to human eyeball or dead-reckoning (DR) techniques, we were aware that there were distinct limitations to the LORAN navigation system. In order to avoid surprises, like emergencies, it was incumbent to know the nature of these limitations before they occurred. We would encounter other problems not previously addressed during actual night missions. If of a sufficient degree to cause aborts, these glitches would have to be analyzed and addressed by us while en route, or later by electronic experts who supposedly knew their business. Often this took time.

An inherent systemic computation error was supposed to be somewhat less than thirty feet. Signal tracking error could be from one hundred to 500 feet. Because of this, we tracked in nanoseconds, instead of microseconds, which cycled very fast. As a result, it was often difficult for the operator to maintain his concentration and monitor the rapidly-changing display.

Dynamic lag induced by turning the aircraft or changing speed could result in errors of up to fifty feet. To counter this possibility, we planned a protracted straight in approach, while monitoring the countdown to the landing zone. This was followed by visual identification overhead the site, and then an immediate reversal to the spot.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> At point zero, Scratch preferred to overfly the target, then slowing, conduct a circular standard 90/270 instrument type reversal to reposition directly over the landing zone. He encouraged me to practice this maneuver during training. The procedure seemed satisfactory for non-hostile locales, but could introduce a certain risk for areas of enemy LOCs adjacent to the target.

A cycle error fostered by weak signals could be encountered because we worked at the extreme end of LORAN chain stations propagation viability. The receiver might track the wrong point, which could result in a time difference error of almost ten microseconds: one mile in position and ten miles in nanoseconds. When apparent, the only procedure to use during this condition was to reconfigure the receiver by turning it off and then on--called rebooting in today's computer parlance.

Since we worked in the dark and were unable to use geographical coordinates or visual fixes, we used TDA/TDB readouts rather than latitude/longitude coordinates to determine our position over the ground. Signal propagation variations could present a major problem. As we flew low level close to the landing zones, when experiencing LORAN problems, we speculated that surrounding limestone mountainous terrain might be disrupting the signals.

Because adverse weather could interfere with a low frequency signal, we operated in good weather as much as possible.

We would later discover that one formerly unforeseen problem would occur from man-made sources, such as power generation equipment. This was an enigma that caused several mission aborts and Customer-crew acrimony for some time. <sup>18</sup>

What it all boiled down to was that LORAN navigation, although considered an excellent means of flying to a distant destination during optimum conditions, was not always reliable during actual missions. Murphy, the aviator's nemesis, being who he was, always lurked around the corner, and any one of the LORAN limitations, or a combination thereof, could impinge on

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<sup>18</sup> The power source that caused us problems was an enemy radar van located on Route-6, or one of the feeder routes not far from our mission track.

mission success. Had I somehow known what would occur, I might have reconsidered the opportunity to perform LORAN navigation work.<sup>19</sup>

Because there had been problems with personnel not fully understanding how to use LORAN equipment, several months later the Superintendent of the Electronics Department issued a memorandum to crews regarding a simplified check list for LORAN C.<sup>20</sup> The material stated that before operations one had to ensure the proper position of switches on the mode control unit mounted between the two pilots.

On the display control unit, the present position was selected, the destination select switch off was off, and the report code positioned as required. This feature functioned like a flight-following or a communication system to the Customer...

After engine run-up, the overhead LORAN circuit breaker was pushed in and the power switch on the mode control set to normal.

The lamp test switch on the mode control unit was then activated to check illumination of the lights, and to ensure that eights showed up on the display control.

To load the computer with mission information, the display switch was set to destination one (D-1). Then coordinates derived from the LORAN map were programmed, and the enter button depressed. This was immediately followed by the blinking of the digital readout, indicating that successful insertion into the onboard computer memory had been accomplished.

Within several minutes, the receiver acquired the ground signal (called initialization) in the present position switch mode. TDA and TDB lamps on the display control illuminated. When

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<sup>19</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 379-380.  
Description from the TDL-711 LORAN Micro-Navigator.

<sup>20</sup> JG Popejoy, January 1973.

the destination select switch was rotated to D-1, the warning flag on the instrument panel course deviation indicator (CDI) disappeared. The deviation pointer deflected and centered.

With all functions checked out properly, the LORAN was ready for navigation steering.

When nearing the destination, at a predetermined time, an amber light on the CDI instrument would illuminate. Then, about a minute or two before reaching the landing zone, the amber light extinguished and a countdown begun. Directly over the destination a green light on the CDI illuminated and a time readout began. Within a short time past the landing zone, both the green light and time count extinguished.

It was possible to record and store a real-time position on the ground (such as enemy small arms fire, prominent terrain features, future landing zones) using the equipment. This was accomplished by depressing the display hold button and freezing the digital readout. The operator then rotated the destination switch to any of four settings (D-1-D4) or reconnaissance position. Then the enter button was depressed to enter the coordinates in the computer memory. After accomplishing this, the display select switch was rotated to present position and the display hold depressed. Next, the destination coordinates were checked. After this, the switch was repositioned to present position to continue navigation. (I usually did not use this method during a mission, as it required all my concentration to relate present position to the LORAN chart.)

That night we engaged in two hours and forty-five minute-night training, stressing crew coordination, LORAN navigation, and techniques Scratch had developed. Flying six sorties, I was also cranked into right seat operations.

**NIGHT VISION GOGGLE DETAILS**

*"Flight flying proficiency will not improve appreciably using the NVGs if [a person] is unable to perform normal unaided night flight. Flight proficiency with the NVGs can only be maintained through a training program that requires regular usage.*

*Flight techniques and visual cues used for unaided night flight also apply for aided night flight."* <sup>21</sup>

The first time I saw and operated NVGs was at PS-44, when Buddy Rogers, surprisingly and without providing the benefit of a briefing or much explanation, handed me a protective case containing a set of goggles. Then he instructed me to go into a dark room and become acquainted with them. Actually, I was pleased, as every introduction to special equipment and perceived secret joined me symbiotically with the Agency. However, since the NVGs were a totally new piece of equipment, I required help, so I asked Scratch to show me how to operate them. <sup>22</sup> (It was like that in the Project. Hurry up, learn through osmosis, and always perform to perfection.) Although I managed to turn them on and view Scratch through the green field, I would have to wait until that night to appreciate all the NVG's capabilities, and to discover the disadvantages. One item I noticed was an infra-ray illuminator, a red trouble light for conditions of extreme darkness on the upper face of the

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<sup>21</sup> TC-1-28, *Rotary Wing Night Flight*, February 1976, Department of the Army/Field Manual 1-51, 16 April 1979: Night Vision Goggles.

<sup>22</sup> Kanach had some prior experience using NVGs. Early in the Special Project he and John Ford were asked to help evaluate the goggles at PS-44. There was no briefing and the experience was not noteworthy, so Scratch, deferring to before-dark mission landings, generally preferred to use the devices sparingly.

goggles. The enemy could see this dot if they had NVGs and we joked that the light perfectly bore-sighted our foreheads.

Unfortunately, not available to us at the time, a U.S. Army field manual provided the best description and information regarding NVGs. Much of this, and more, actually applied to our operation:

*"The additional advantage of NVGs is that ground reference is gained, however, field of view is drastically reduced. To compensate for the loss of peripheral vision, one must continually scan the area to the front and sides. Rotate the head slowly so as not to induce vertigo. Flying with the NVGs must be learned through training. The more you do it, the better you get [in our case everything was new and we had to learn by abbreviated OJT].*

*During the Vietnam experience, significant technological advances made possible the starlight scope which took advantage of ambient light to see at night. The development of a night vision device in the form of goggles was a major advancement in the search for an effective night vision device. The first-generation goggles [prototype]-SU-50-were used for limited [military] SAR [missions] with a 60-degree field of vision. The clarity of the system was considered inferior to that desired.*

*Dark adaption was about 15 minutes [to acclimate to darkness we wore red lens goggles prior to a night flight]. The unit was a self-containing night viewing device worn over the eyes. The system uses light amplification to provide night vision and is not detectable (outside the aircraft) when operated in this mode. An auxiliary infra-red source incorporated into the system provided viewing up to two meters [this feature allowed the wearer to perform close cockpit work].*

*A binocular unit consisted of two monocular assemblies. Each lens had the independent capability (a diopter adjustment ring)*

*for clarity and a focus knob for near or distant vision. Thus, one could use one eye for a quick check of the cockpit while still maintaining one for long vision. To prevent scratching or degrading of the lenses, [the unit was provided with] protective lens covers to be used when not wearing the glasses. Exposure to sunlight or a high-intensity light source damages the phosphorous tubes. A combination of head straps facilitated wearing the goggles. Proper fitting was essential to ensure comfort and to minimize fatigue. [For more efficient use we incorporated male dot snaps on our helmets and female snaps on the straps.] A neck cord allowed one to rest the goggles on the chest until ready to use them.*

*Aircrews using the NVGs were capable of performing all tasks normally performed during daylight, however, the resolution was not as good. Visual acuity was never better than 20/50 [for the AN/PVS-5. Our units might have been worse]. How well one was able to see depended on the level of ambient light. Under low to medium ambient light conditions--quarter moon--personnel could be detected at ranges up to 400 meters. Ranges increased with more moonlight. [For optimum conditions] the moon had to be 30 degrees or greater above the horizon with no cloud cover."*

*During certain conditions of reduced visibility--rain, fog, haze--one could fly using the glasses, although with degraded vision. It was not advisable, as instrument flight could be entered inadvertently.*

*"Light sources emitted by a vehicle..., lights, flashlight, cigarette can be seen at a great distance.*

*When viewing an area illuminated by an artificial light source--flare, landing light, built-up-area--[one could] not see anything outside the periphery of the area being illuminated. Direct viewing should be avoided..."*

There were several limitations included:

*"Cockpit lights must be turned to the lowest intensity and all press to test lights dimmed. Don't look at high intensity light sources, like a full moon. It would black the system out.<sup>23</sup>*

*{One} cannot see color. Everything is green. [You] have to identify [items] by shape and accuracy of navigation.*

*Standard maps [were] difficult to interpret when using NVG.<sup>24</sup> Vibrations caused the map to be out of focus, also the digital display. [For this reason, one] should be very familiar with the route to be flown...*

*To avoid spatial disorientation the aircraft bank angle [should] be limited to 30 degrees or less.*

*Goggles can become uncomfortable after 1-2 hours use, resulting in headaches or neck strain.<sup>25</sup>*

*[The] most common failure of the NVG is the loss of electrical current caused by a weak battery. The remaining battery capacity cannot be determined. A new battery should be*

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<sup>23</sup> Author Note: While wearing NVGs a cockpit member could be totally blinded by even minor white light. Just after landing on a ridgeline near PS-44, I was blacked out when a white light illuminated on a malfunctioning fire warning "T" handle located on the upper instrument console. As a fix, "T" handles were retrofitted with less invasive red lenses. It was fortunate that this occurred during a training mode with Scratch Kanach, and not on a mission. For this, and other reasons, only one pilot normally wore NVGs.

<sup>24</sup> We used overhead red lens trouble lights on alligator cords and pen lights with lenses covered by infra-red paper to aid illumination of the LORAN maps.

<sup>25</sup> Nothing was mentioned in the Army manual about the red-out condition that I experienced after one hour of operation.



*used for each operational mission."*<sup>26</sup>

Wires were invisible at night using the glasses, so if possible, it was important to completely familiarize oneself with the area. Clouds or fog would limit vision considerably. As depth perception and distance estimates were difficult to determine, experience developed this ability. Visual cues in the landing zone, and objects with vertical development along the route at nap-of-the-earth (NOE) flight, aided in determining height above the ground.

Peripheral vision was severely limited and night navigation was not appreciably improved until high proficiency was attained between an estimated twenty-five to forty hours of usage, which did not factor in mountain operations.

During the afternoon, we continued LORAN and crew coordination training. I focused on accuracy applying TDA/TDB readouts to the LORAN map.

After supper, at dark thirty, for several fatiguing hours we strove to acquaint ourselves with the NVGs, and endeavored to obtain an acceptable level of proficiency with the new form of work and equipment. We flew blacked out, without the rotating anti-collision light that would somewhat degrade our vision. Occasionally swapping seats, Kanach, having used the NVGs somewhat before, was noticeably more comfortable than I was. Daytime LORAN navigation had been easier, but at night, under subdued light, I had to lean over the unit at a forty-five-

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<sup>26</sup> *Rotary Wing Night Flight, Army/FM.*

Author Note: After each training session at PS-44 or actual mission, we logged battery usage. In order to extend life batteries were stored in a refrigerator when not in use. However, they still failed occasionally, causing a complete NVG blackout, a potentially dangerous condition should you be hovering over trees or in the process of taking off or landing. We carried extra batteries in a vest pocket of our Nomex flight suits, but it was a struggle, and took time to change one in the cockpit, as the cover had to be unscrewed, the battery removed, and a new one installed--all this performed in the dark.

degree angle to see the red LEDs and then lean back to the folded map in my lap, all while using a small light or the overhead grimes light to see and interpret our position on the map. It was difficult, and I could not even conceive of wearing the NVGs and performing the same work. We continued to use the hole as the termination spot of the round robin exercise, and with practice I eventually was able to navigate fairly well.

The ability to see at night using the NVGs was an honor and a novelty at first, had not our concentrated training been so accelerated. <sup>27</sup> The snow-like specks immersed in the green field took some getting used to. It was amazing looking down into the Khong Sedone Valley toward Pakse from above our site, knowing full well that wires leading to the town along Route-13 were invisible.

Because of severe eyestrain, the glasses were difficult to wear for long periods. In addition, the long arm of the longitudinal unit attached to my ballistic helmet tended to pull my head down, forcing me to elevate my head to see. This caused an abnormal strain on my neck muscles. I learned that lack of peripheral vision was a new, unpleasant experience, and that swiveling my neck to see also caused strain on disused muscles. Not being able to observe wires (except the vertical pole), and reduced or no visibility in clouds or fog was disconcerting, but indicated a good reason to operate with NVGs only in good weather. Starlight alone did not provide sufficient light to operate safely with the goggles. To providing adequate light, a partial, or even a sliver, of moonlight was necessary. I learned the hard way that looking directly into a full moon would result in a complete black out of the field of vision.

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<sup>27</sup> Without benefit of information in the Army field manual (that had not yet been published) we learned, experienced, and overcame much of the manual's material and cautionary measures through OJT.

Swapping units, we limited individual goggle familiarization to short periods. Nevertheless, you could still feel the effects and strain after wearing them for only a short time. However, challenged with mission-oriented pressure from the Customer, we were obliged to proceed with training as quickly as possible. As I became more familiar with, and acclimated to, the devices, I wore them for up to an hour. After removing them, everything appeared red for some time. This condition was disconcerting, causing me to pause and consider that perhaps the glasses might cause permanent damage to my optic nerves. As I became more involved in the Project, additional questions arose. Increasingly, we were concerned that if long-term effects of the light-intensifying phosphorescent tubes might be detrimental not only to our eyes, but also to our brains. We had heard confusing rumors, but were unable to determine if the goggles emitted radiation. The Customer insisted that the goggles were safe, but he maintained an agenda and really had little additional knowledge regarding them than we had. I was dubious and contrary by nature. As questions mounted, Scratch had no answer. Therefore, in the future we attempted to minimize NVG use and instead to modify the missions. There was always doubt in my mind about the efficacy and safety using the goggles, and about what the Agency folks were not telling us about them. However, we actually were able to see at night, and as I gained confidence using the equipment, some of my former aversion to wearing them dissipated. <sup>28</sup>

Somewhat confident in our ability to perform the mission-- Scratch would actually be the principal in the operation, while, aside from the navigation duties, I was only in a backup role--

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<sup>28</sup> Probably not related, but years later Julian "Scratch" Kanach passed from a rare inoperable brain tumor. The Author has also developed Parkinson's, a disease associated with cells in the brain.

we departed for Udorn, landing at 0150 hours on the 16<sup>th</sup>. (Eight plus twenty, five plus fifty-five night, seven sorties.)

## **PRELUDE**

After sleeping most of the morning, I checked into the Air America facility at 1345. During the day Scratch and I attended a briefing at the White House. At this time, we had to be accompanied by Buddy Rogers who had access to the key-punch code lock to gain entry to the building. We discussed Sunday's log mission with Buddy, "Moon Man" Wally Smith, the man in charge of scheduling missions around optimum light conditions, and whoever else was present. Projected weather, moon phase, and other details were covered. To prevent an unnecessary launch, a Twin Otter crew would act as a weather ship. Then we were taken to the AB-1 photo shop next door. It was another first of the inner sanctum for me. Employing stereoscopic lenses, we viewed the latest vertical and lateral photos of the landing zone portrayed in three dimensions that were recently obtained by 42Z's Volpar crew.

Description of stereoscopic photograph interpretation:

*"One of the limitations of the vertical aerial photograph is the lack of apparent relief. Stereoscopic vision...is the ability to see three-dimensionally or to see length, width, and depth at the same time. This requires two views of a single object from two slightly different positions. An object is seen twice-once with the left eye and once with the right eye. The combination of the two images in the brain permits the judgement of depth or distance.*

*An aircraft flies over an area to be photographed taking a series of pictures [a montage], each of which overlaps the photo preceding it so that an unbroken coverage of overlap is obtained.*

*A pocket stereoscope is used to view overlapping photos placed on a flat surface with the detail of one photo placed directly over the other photo to see two views of an object--the landing zone or target--from two slightly different places. The stereoscope is placed over the photos with the left lens over the left photo and right lens over the right one [the men in the shop did this for us]. A three-dimensional image can be seen. Hills appear to rise and valleys sink so there is an impression of being in an aircraft looking down at the ground. With the addition of relief, a more natural view of the photo is seen."* <sup>29</sup>

The men working in the shop seemed efficient and friendly. One individual wore a silver bracelet that had the name Shumaker embossed on it. <sup>30</sup> I inquired and discovered that it was worn as a reminder of the plight of our POWs in North Vietnam. The fad was completely new to me, and I considered that perhaps living in Udorn, I might be too insulated from world affairs.

In Buddy's office, Scratch indicated that he preferred to conduct a twilight mission with a dark insertion. He stressed the many advantages of using last light conditions: safety, ease of navigation, minimum use of the NVGs, crew alertness, the fact that flying completely blacked out throughout the entire flight would make formation flying difficult, etc. But since the landing zone was located in close proximity to a major LOC (in addition to Route-65, there were many sub-roads laced throughout the area) and the agent had already been briefed as to the late insertion time, Buddy insisted on the original plan. Therefore, despite the minimum training time, it was obvious that I would have to wear goggles the entire time and navigate with only the

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<sup>29</sup> Map Reading-Field Manual-21, Department of the Army.

<sup>30</sup> Navy pilot, LTC Robert Harper Shumaker, shot down in North Vietnam near Vinh 02/11/65 was the second known American airman incarcerated in Hanoi.

benefit of LED lights on the LORAN readout display and the trouble light on the goggles to read the map. The little that I had attempted using this method at PS-44 was not encouraging, but I was willing to try. Therefore, a final training session was scheduled for that night.

Scratch, Deak Kennedy, and I meticulously checked Papa Hotel Delta's systems, making sure it was mission ready-i.e., Gold Plated. Delta would be designated as second to our primary aircraft-Papa Hotel Echo. The fully configured helicopter would be crewed by Lloyd Higgins et. al. (One hour, fifteen minutes night, two landings.)

Because the white hover landing lights mounted on each cross tube of the main landing gear provided too much illumination while using NVG equipment, infrared glass lenses had recently been retrofitted into the units. As an initial fix, the IR film originally used had proved unacceptable, burning from excessive heat generated by the lights. This might have had disastrous consequences during actual mission operations if the film burned off at a hover and exposed the helicopter to enemy fire. <sup>31</sup>

Equipped with IR lenses, the hover lights provided sufficient illumination of the immediate area while using NVGs. However, I noted that an individual on the ground might detect a diminished rosy red glow from the helicopter's twelve o'clock position. Still, it was the best fix that Tom Deeble and the wizards at the AB-1 "Skunk Works," a photo intelligence and

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<sup>31</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/09/00, 12/11/00. Along with AB-1 people, Wayne ground evaluated the detectability of the IR lights. They checked them from many angles, sometimes directly under the hovering aircraft. The lights with IR lenses were extremely difficult to detect. This was even the case when they knew where to look. They assumed that for all intents and purposes, with many uncertainties and confusion, they would be almost invisible during a tactical situation.

experimental device laboratory located in a shed next to the White House, could muster. <sup>32</sup>

The night's training was performed in Papa Hotel Echo, primary mission ship. For the purpose of assessing my ability to perform the difficult work, a prominent mountain was selected south of Udorn, about halfway to Khon Kaen that was approximately the same distance to the mission landing zone. (Ironically, this spot was to be used by Khun Tha, his friend, and me to hunt killdeer.) Then a return track would terminate at a preselected landing zone in the Phou Phan mountains west of Udorn. (I was a little leery of this area since communist terrorists were reputedly roaming the area.)

As feared, I found it very difficult and fatiguing to read the rapidly cycling digital numbers and apply them quickly to the LORAN map. Mainly, the LORAN set was positioned high, and continually vibrated. One had to attempt to sit sideways or turn and lean over to see the read-outs. The unusual position, combined with the proximity of the LORAN box to the goggles, was uncomfortable and uncustomary.

During our first run, using the near vision feature of the lenses, which caused tunnel vision, I performed badly. As the mission was scheduled for the following night, this frustrated Scratch.

My efforts did not improve. After a couple more abbreviated runs, I was unable to even maintain a correct track, much less navigate to the landing zone. It was obvious to me that I would be unable to perform mission navigation using this method. By the way Scratch landed easily at the landing zone, it looked like he had been there before.

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<sup>32</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/11/00. Wayne spent a lot of time with the photo intelligence (PI) people. Tom Lum and Roy Lewis were involved to a certain extent, but not usually in an interpretive role.

As we sat on the landing spot sweating from our exertions, I confessed that I could not hack the work. It was not a good situation. Agency pressure to perform the mission, the favorable moon phase, and with no time for further training or a change of navigators, we were enmeshed in a quandary. At this point I was exhausted and suffering from severe eye-strain. Severely embarrassed and depressed, I wanted to quit the entire foolishness and go home. <sup>33</sup>

I knew Scratch was disgusted with my performance, and I hoped that he understood my problem. As an alternative to our common disappointment, I encouraged him to attempt the navigation to experience what I had discovered that I could not do. He was reluctant at first, but further coaxing persuaded him to attempt a modified run. During the process it was easy to see what problems I was having. It was just too difficult to perform the work without additional training and experience. Perhaps then we could have been able to find a solution to the problem. With the log mission scheduled for the next day, it was obvious that the original mission features needed to be drastically revised. The insertion time had to be earlier, at last light as Scratch originally desired. I would navigate without using the glasses, as I had ably demonstrated at PS-44. Then, just prior to landing at the landing zone, both of us would don NVGs for the final phase. Scratch would land, while I would scan my side

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<sup>33</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/09/00. Wayne had many discussions with Buddy Rogers regarding the log mission. Buddy indicated that a similar mission had been successfully conducted in a different theater. While I was conducting research for this segment, Wayne indicated that he could not imagine reading the rapidly moving LEDs with NVGs. He never tried. The old LORAN C was very difficult to interpret. One had to "stack" the columns. Later versions had greatly improved displays. In every mission he participated, the right seat pilot wore goggles, the left seater read the LORAN using naked eyeballs.



of the area and assist with any landing problem. (Two plus fifty night, one landing).

When we gathered in Buddy's office for a debriefing, evening problems were discussed. Based on this, a proposed change to the mission was agreed upon. The agent would be notified of our earlier landing time. I blocked out at 2235 and headed for home.

### **THE FIRST LOG MISSION**

After writing short letters home and to Dan Carson, complaining about the lack of rain, I reported into operations at 1335. A final briefing commenced in Buddy's office. It was attended by Wayne Knight, who would be monitoring every aspect of the mission with Rogers. The briefing was followed by last minute stereo views in subdued light of current black and white photos, showing a shallow, bowl-type landing site, located in a depression containing high grass. This was significant, and we had to be careful of possible hidden stumps or boulders that might puncture the aircraft belly and fuel tanks.

Our two crews conducted pre-flights of Papa Hotel Echo (Kanach, Casterlin, and Kennedy) and Papa Hotel Delta (Higgins, Gregoire). Someone retrieved six box lunches from the USAF flight kitchen, and then we taxied to the Q warehouse to load the realistic looking log. Following a final equipment and radio check, we launched for Bouam Long, arriving there late in the day. I had not worked at Site-32 for some time, but assumed the situation must be stable or else we would not have been sent there.

While the fuel tanks were being topped off, we consumed our box lunches of chicken, eggs, milk, and a sweet. Waiting for sunset (between 1823 and 1900), we chatted and reexamined our pre-planned flight. In order to avoid Routes-6, 68, and 61, our

flight plan could not be direct to the landing zone. Instead, we would fly east for thirty-four miles, between Site-29 and Site-231 to clear enemy LOCs, before turning north-northeast for twenty-eight miles. This would place us within three miles abeam the Phou Phans, a towering mountain range with a bench mark of 6,821 feet. Positive navigation, either in daylight, or dark would be aided by this prominent terrain feature. Remaining east of this natural behemoth, and collated with the LORAN readout, would provide an indication of an accurate final approach fix twenty miles from the target, and the beginning of a constant speed, straight line navigational countdown to the landing pad. Flown mostly in the dark, this was believed to provide a maximum navigation and LORAN reliability. (Total distance to the landing zone was calculated as eighty nautical miles.) We considered that, all things being equal and without complications, we could fly a shortcut back to Site-32, and the mission would be completed within an hour and a half.

Although we had flown in this area for years out of Houa Moung (LS-58) and Na Khang (LS-36), conducting mainly H-34 supply missions in the early years, and road watch missions in the Bell, the region was mostly considered denied area and old sites would be overgrown and invisible in the dark. <sup>34</sup>

Without being obvious to ground observers, a Twin Otter crew was tasked to report pre-launch weather in the mission area. Weather on this particular night was not considered a negative factor, and a partial moon would aid with NVG work.

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<sup>34</sup> Father Lucien Brouchard, the walking priest of Laos, had worked at Sam Neua town until chased out by the communists. When asked about the Sam Neua area, he claimed that there were 5,000 Christian converts living there who would surely help us if we were forced down. This was a bit reassuring, but since all the people looked alike, it sounded more like a hit or miss proposition. Besides, we had not controlled upper Military Region Two territory for some time, and I believed that natives would be loath the help us.

At the appointed time, Scratch cranked up and I loaded waypoint and landing zone coordinates into the LORAN set. With all factors indicating a go, and after receiving two clicks over the VHF radio from Lloyd we launched. Climbing to altitude we soared over enemy LOCs toward the first turning point. As it was still light, I spotted old sites and wondered if anyone still lived there, and if so, the state of their current allegiance. Then we turned north toward our objective.

Somewhere along our run, the Otter Captain broke radio silence reporting that fog and low clouds were beginning to form in the landing zone area. Scratch immediately aborted. I was surprised by Scratch's action, but not particularly disappointed. There were many unknowns. The mission could be disastrous for us should the agent be compromised, the landing zone mined, or hostiles waiting for us. I knew the setback was temporary, only delaying the inevitable. Intelligence was needed in this area, and it was an Agency priority. The word "conservative" popped into my mind. I thought that was considered my bailiwick, but now both Scratch and Lloyd had displayed this tendency. It seemed that was one of the elements different about the Special Project. If everything was not in place and nearly perfect, the mission would be scrubbed. Moreover, at this time in the Project, there was no overt pressure from the Customer and our mission pay would not be affected if we aborted.

Followed closely by Lloyd, we returned to Site-32, with Scratch conducting a NVG landing. The Twin Otter crew landed after us to assess our plans. After a couple of hours, there was no improvement seen in weather at the landing zone, so we RTB. Scratch flew the entire route home in silence. I am not sure whether he was being pensive, or just being Scratch. Moreover, it was not a time for small talk, and what was there really to

say? Normally a PIC accustomed to sharing flying duties, I really did not like this, but said nothing.

After contacting the Brigham Control tactical radar station at Udorn before leaving Laos, we were informed to squawk an assigned friend or foe (IFF) code for positive identification. We obtained vectors to the Udorn airfield and were handed off to approach control at the appropriate distance. Then, five miles from the field, given permission from the tower operator to land, we touched down and taxied to the parking area, where an AB-1 truck was waiting to remove the log. It was about 2300 hours. (Six hours, three plus forty-five night, one landing.) As we were all fatigued, the debriefing was perfunctory in Rogers' office. We would attempt the same drill the following day.

### **SPECIAL PROJECT FLIGHT FOLLOWING**

Circumventing normal flight-following voice reporting procedure, an electronic method was devised to both advise the AB-1 Customer of our progress, and to ensure security. Flight following of our missions was monitored by both Rogers and Knight.

When missions were in critical stages, the participants in the head shed relied on scrambled burst reports. A separate encoder-transmitter unit, about the size of a standard UHF or VHF transmit and receive black box, was installed in the Twinpac electronics compartment. This device converted the position report to an unintelligible burst of noise. This was interconnected with the LORAN unit because it was the LORAN coordinates that were received at AB-1.

I was shown the decoder unit in a White House back room. The equipment consisted of a large console. The first position report was heard in a raw form as an unintelligible burst at a pre-appointed time. Then a decrypted report could be obtained.

AB-1 was the only recipient capable of decoding the scrambled burst. This was the sole method of flight-following available other than "in the clear transmissions."

Reports were sent on a preset schedule, initiated by a cockpit member who directed the Flight Mechanic to activate the send. (We carried a page full of Falcon Codes probably devised by a bored wag, and calculated to instill a bit of levity to stressful situations. Numbers corresponding to mostly gross phrases could be sent over the system. For example; the number 275 was received as "*Time sure passes fast when you're having fun.*")

Flight-following was not automatic. The Flight Mechanic could send a scrambled or "in the clear message." Sometimes there was trouble with either the encoder or decoder, but it was difficult to discover which element was the culprit, and those monitoring the system suffered through long periods of uncertainty as to their resources. <sup>35</sup>

The same crews checked in at 1345 hours on the 18<sup>th</sup>, inspected the equipment, and walked to the White House for a pre-briefing. Wally expounded on the current moon phase and our shallow window of opportunity during this period of the month. When expired, we would have to wait until the following month for the same optimum conditions. Except for the Moon Man's interlude of light-hearted humor, all phases of the operation remained the same.

Unless other duties prevented him, Wayne always attended these sessions. Because I asked pertinent questions relating to missions, Rogers liked me, and this was reciprocal. Buddy even

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<sup>35</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/11/00, 12/15/00, 12/16/00, 12/17/00. One-night Deak came through loud and clear with his "Noooo problem" comment for which he was famous. He broke the radio silence rule, but those at AB-1 were pleased that he did.

divulged the push-button code to unlock the White House front door, so I could visit anytime without invitation to discuss or obtain information about a mission. I considered this a great honor reserved for a trusted member of the Special Project team.<sup>36</sup> Knight took another tack. For reasons he did not divulge, he recommended that I not visit AB-1 by myself. At one time, he astounded me by telling me to take it easy. The Company did not want us getting killed while performing Agency work. It must have come from higher up, and was the first time I ever heard a statement like this from management. (In fact, during the protracted and increasingly dangerous SAR work from 1964-1965, CJ Abadie told me that Company and military principals expected some of us to be killed conducting the dangerous work. This never occurred.)

As weather was again projected to be good, we launched about the same time. With no last-minute weather problems relayed from the Twotter, we arrived abeam the Phou Phan massif and began a descent for the long final approach to the landing zone. Suddenly the LORAN readout malfunctioned for no apparent reason. One minute we were tracking perfectly, the next we were receiving erroneous signals, a cycle slip, indication that our present position was ten miles east. I tried everything I knew to eradicate the problem, even turning the set off and back on with the resulting delay during re-initialization. Nothing worked. Therefore, Scratch broke radio silence, asking Lloyd if his LORAN was working. The answer was a terse negative. His set

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<sup>36</sup> Buddy had a small plaque on his desk referring to Rogers Rangers. When asked about it, he claimed that he was related to Robert Rogers, legendary frontier leader of Rogers Rangers for the British during the French/Indian war during early colonial days. Rogers' fortunes waxed and waned while he generally continued allegiance to the British during the Revolutionary War.

was also unreliable. Now we were in a quandary. The scenario confronting us was bleak. It was pitch black and we had no electronic navigation equipment. Our margin of error was small, as we would be dealing with an unknown quantity close to LOCs containing AAA capability. If we continued, it would require searching and milling around the area, certainly alerting the enemy, and possibly compromising the mission.

After obtaining a vector from the Otter crew, Scratch wisely elected to retrace our flight path and RTB Bouam Long, where we were greeted by an overly enthusiastic Meo firing a flare that instantly wiped out Kanach's NVG vision. Not affected by the illumination, I conducted the landing. Further confounding us, once on the ground the LORAN set reacquired a correct present position. However, after a short period, because of the problem encountered close to the landing zone and fog forming again in upper Military Region Two, we headed for the house. (Block in 2230, five plus fifty-five, three plus thirty night, one landing.)

The CIA folks at the White House were astounded by our description of the navigation error problems. They had never heard of the problem described, and no immediate solution was forthcoming. Supposedly, the Otter crew had not encountered the same problem. A little paranoid anyway, we were fast losing confidence in a well-tested system portrayed to us as relatively infallible. Further investigation would have to be conducted by Tom Deeble and his crew of technicians. An obvious check would start with the people who maintained the LORAN stations. They found that all stations were operational with nothing wrong with the sending equipment. For a time, it was considered that being in a fringe area at the end of propagation chain might have caused a signal too weak for the equipment to receive. It was further speculated that limestone karsts, high mountains, and

relatively low-level flight in the area contributed to the problem. All this was simply gross speculation. Until equipment checks were conducted, we would have to await an explanation.<sup>37</sup>

Buddy, who did not drink himself because of a health issue, always had a couple of beers available for us following the debriefing. I liked this personal touch, for I was very dehydrated after a mission. (In retrospect, water would have been a far better choice.) Except during the cold season or at latitude, the double thick Nomex uniforms we wore under the Army flight suits were warm, and I perspired heavily from stress and anxiety. (As we did not want to be branded as spies, the U.S Army flight suits could easily be discarded if forced down.) Also adding to our overall discomfort were the webbed survival vests that contained a radio, flares and other signaling devices. As a personal weapon, beside my bagged AK-47 in the cabin section, I wore my .22 caliber Ruger with a cylinder fitted with magnum hollow-point bullets. Lloyd took note of the long unwieldy barrel and offered me John Ford's smaller "James Bond" type 9mm Walther PPK and holster. Flat and compact, I wore the weapon on my hip.

Except for mission and LORAN updates, I was off for three days, as Tom Deeble and his crew worked overtime to discover the cause of our problem. In addition to through bench check

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<sup>37</sup> Years later, while conducting research for this segment through 04/30/98 Emails with Twin Otter Special Project Chief Pilot, Jim Pearson, it was revealed that Jim also had encountered cycle slip problems while flying in northeastern Military Region Two. The crew would be flying in Laos and find the LORAN digital display numbers jumping all over. Like us, they used a short burst high frequency transmitter to send present positions to Udorn. Upon return to base, the Customer asked what they were doing over the South China Sea. This was confusing as Pearson never observed any water on the radar. Attempting to resolve this anomaly, Jim sat in the right seat during the next mission and constantly plotted their position on a LORAN chart.



inspections of the black boxes and wire bundles inside Echo, the external coupler and antenna were changed. All components checked out perfectly. Friday the 22nd I was assigned standby at home.

The next morning Scratch and I boarded Beech VTB-18, N3728G for a Sam Neua Province recon. In order to let the area cool off, this was the first time since our aborted mission on the 18th that an attempt to contact the agent was initiated. We were flown to many places in the province, a few to mask the actual intent of the trip: to view the landing zone. After seven hours seventeen minutes we blocked in at 1635.

With troubleshooting and component changes complete, on the 25th, Tom Deeble and I flew Papa Hotel Echo and Papa Hotel Bravo one plus twenty hours each, in order to ensure that the LORAN sets were working properly. We flew a track west of the airfield to a predetermined point and back. There were no problems noted, and we finished the testing confident that our navigation equipment would take us to the assigned landing zone. Despite this, the mission did not materialize that night, but was scheduled for the following night.

For mission integrity and secrecy, the same crews assembled on Tuesday for another log delivery attempt. During the briefing "Moon Man" Wally informed us that a favorable moon phase would only be available late that night. Therefore, Buddy insisted that the mission had to be conducted in total darkness. Scratch was not happy with this development, but had no choice in the matter. At this point it seemed that we were beginning to lose whatever input and control of mission planning Lloyd had expounded on to persuade me to join the Special Project. It was essential the items in the log be delivered now.

Our flight of two, Papa Hotel Bravo and Papa Hotel Echo, departed in the late afternoon for Bouam Long, where the ships

were refueled and box lunches consumed. At the prescribed time, and based on the Otter crew's observation of the regional weather, we launched. Using the same course to the target, navigation was perfect. I was on course tracking perfectly when the LORAN set malfunctioned again east of the Phou Phan. I could not believe my eyes. According to the equipment, we were once again ten miles east of the correct course. Lloyd's LORAN set was also inoperative. Hurriedly attempting to reconfigure the LORAN set proved unproductive. It was apparent that all electronic navigation was finished this night.

At the time of the malfunction, we were only about twenty miles south of the landing zone, but since it was pitch black, it might as well have been 1000 miles. Except for an occasional glint of moonlight off a river, at our altitude I was unable to obtain a positive fix or reference to anything on the ground.

After I stopped struggling unsuccessfully to return the LORAN to the line, I thought Scratch would abort and RTB LS-32. However, instead of immediately retracing our flight path, he milled around, continuing north for a few minutes. Then he unexpectedly turned east. This surprised and confused me, for we were entering more concentrated Indian country. Perhaps Scratch was confused, hoping that I could solve an unsolvable LORAN problem. At the same time, as my PIC, I assumed that he had a special plan to which I was not privy. Out of ideas, now just along for the ride, I kept quiet, content with musing and considerable what ifs.

After twenty minutes, I was completely disoriented, and more than a little concerned about where we were going. Fuel was no problem for both ships were equipped with auxiliary fuel tanks. The overriding question remained were we close to, or had we actually penetrated North Vietnam? If so, what could we expect?

Then Lloyd, who likely had had enough fun that night, broke radio silence indicating that he had spotted another aircraft flying in our area. I did not see anything, but at this point was not about to question sighting something in the inky darkness. The unidentified plane (I hoped it was not a star displaying a phi-phenomenon effect that duplicated flashing aircraft position lights) was certainly not ours and could be aloft to either check on our presence or shoot us down. Fortunately, the Otter pilot heard our terse, concerned exchange and offered a westerly direction-finding steer that we were more than willing to accept. After spotting the Otter's lights, we followed the ship back to Bouam Long. Happy to be safely on terra firma, I noted that the LORAN set was again working properly. The revelation was confusing, again pointing to the fact that something in our target area was causing interference with the LORAN signals.

Because the Customer desperately wanted the log delivered, we were held on the ground at Site-32 while decision makers mulled over the situation and decided what to do. Finally, about 0130, without proper equipment and all the activity generated, the mission was scrubbed and we were recalled.

Again, Scratch silently drove the ship southward toward Udorn. As we were quite high and in and out of clouds, Brigham Control provided us with a steer while we were still north of Vang Vieng. Deeply immersed in my thoughts, I felt embarrassed and a little guilty that I had somehow let Scratch down, but I did not control electronic events. (Seven plus fifteen, four hours night, one landing.)

Buddy listened patiently during the sober debriefing and critique. Toward the end of the meeting, "Moon Man" asked why I had not used dead reckoning (DR) as a means to land at the landing zone. A shocker, and something that implied condemnation

of my participation, I had no ready answer. Moreover, no one had spoken to me in such terms, or questioned my ability to complete a mission, for years.

Because of our strict SOPs, and assurance the LORAN was an integral and infallible portion of mission success, I had never considered or planned for this option. Relating TDA-TDB digit readout to the LORAN map required total concentration in the cockpit; it was difficult enough conducting electronic navigation. Was the man attempting to assign the blame to me for the mission failure? <sup>38</sup>

Dead reckoning was a long-established aviator procedure of determining position by means of a heading indicator and calculations based on speed, time elapsed, wind effect, direction flown from a known position, and a lot of luck. Like flying IMC in Laos, except in an emergency situation, DR was a tool I rarely used and only for a short duration. Eyeball navigation had been the only process I trusted and was entirely reliable in an enemy infested environment, although I did use time-distance as a gross reference to back up an estimate to a distant landing zone. To me, counting on DR to reach a destination connoted a lack of maps, weather so bad one could not see the ground and should not be operating, gross inexperience, and perhaps an inherent death wish. Far too many helicopter pilots relying on this method and purported IMC experience, and lately a C-123 (Triple Nickel), had experienced trouble or an ultimate sacrifice using some aspects of this technique. Moreover, during the early days in Laos, the method

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<sup>38</sup> Wally, a heavy-set individual, was not my favorite Customer. He resembled the Shakespearian Falstaff comic character, as the jovial, obese knight of brazen assurance and few scruples in the Henry the Fourth play. Probably an ex-USAF type who had never flown close to the ground or in combat during his entire career, how could Wally possibly be aware of our problems in the cockpit and operational capabilities?

was not a successful, safe mechanism of navigation for single engine helicopters in mountainous, largely uncharted Laos.

Even with the benefit of a twin-engine helicopter, the possibility of employing DR in the situation we encountered that night had never been broached during my abbreviated training. DR navigation was not very sophisticated and not something we had considered using that close to AAA threats; it probably would have been rejected out of hand. This might have been a viable alternative conducting "normal" work, but not in this case. As far as I was concerned DR was not, nor had ever been, a cogent option. If the LORAN set failed to work properly, the mission was terminated. These were specified guidelines everyone agreed on. If the boys in the backroom wanted to change the rules in midstream, then they should inform concerned parties before, not after the fact. The hazards were such in the areas we worked that, even though we were flexible in some instances, we did not conduct missions by osmosis.

The concept of the mission stipulated that the proven LORAN system was the sole navigation instrument relied on to place us over the target. Directly after the unscheduled system failure, I was extremely busy attempting to bring the set back on the line and had no time to consider an alternative. Reconfiguring the equipment, and waiting for it to reacquire a correct present position, often necessitated several minutes. It never did reacquire a true present position; the displayed position was still skewed to the east. By the time I had lost confidence in restoring our electronic navigation asset, and was convinced that the equipment would never provide us with proper steering that night, there was no possibility of DR. At that point in the inky darkness, there were no visual checkpoints to fix our position and navigate. Moreover, we were confused and

disoriented as far as our location and mission progress was concerned. We should have aborted and returned to LS-32.

From aerial photographs and the previous recon, we knew what the landing zone looked like from overhead, but continuing blindly northward would have been like looking for a "needle in a haystack." Descending and searching in an area we were not familiar with or certain about would not only have compromised the agent, but been stupid and tantamount to disaster. Special Project was not a game of Russian Roulette, and such action would not have been conducive to longevity.

As a rear echelon-(REMF), it was obvious that from Wally's perspective, he had no actual concept of our problems. Perhaps well meaning, but certainly not taken that way, he was way out of line suggesting that I should have used a dead reckoning approach to resolve our LORAN problem. Since success normally breeds accolades, and failure the opposite, possibly he was looking for a scapegoat: me. At first, I was shocked, thinking the "Moon Man" might be mirroring Buddy's thoughts. From that night on, Wally went to the top of my short Sierra list.

Up to this point, Rogers had remained placid and silent. Then, likely aware that I was visibly offended at being challenged and maligned, he moved to silence Wally. Seemingly on our side, I wondered if his action might have constituted a form of a good cop-bad cop scenario. One never knew exactly what motives the CIA people pursued. On the exterior, the CIA guys seemed friendly, but, not fully aware of their modus operandi or thinking, one really never knew their actual intentions. Ultimately, they had to report to their superiors in Washington on why we had failed to complete the mission.

I was pleased with Buddy's support, and the rapport that I felt between us. However, I left the office confused. As the first seeds of doubt began to germinate, I wondered about the

Special Project, the unforeseen challenges inherent in the work, and my exact place in it. <sup>39</sup>

I was still considerably upset the next afternoon when I visited Wayne in the CPH office. Disgusted with Wally, current Special Project problems, ego-diminishing failures, and potential for failure, I confidentially told Wayne that I was thinking about leaving the Special Project when another person was available. Knight listened, and then indicated that Hank Edwards was interested. I never recorded my intentions and that was the last time the subject was broached. I continued in the Special Project until it was disbanded in 1974. <sup>40</sup>

The ultimate question lingered. Why had the LORAN malfunctioned on two separate helicopters that had previously been vetted and declared fully operational, when the Otter crew did not report the same?

The mysterious electronic problems and other requirements placed the log mission on hold. Then loss of contact with the agent negated the reason for the mission.

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<sup>39</sup> EW Knight Email, Wayne recalled no negatives concerning my ability in the Special Project. Buddy was very serious about his approval of my questions at briefings. He told Wayne a number of times that he harbored a great respect for my probing questions and go-slow approach to accepting everything a briefer said. Additionally, Knight concurred with Buddy's desire for a Devil's Advocate, or something similar, in the Special Project. It would not have suited anyone in the program for all to have been yes men. Over time, there were a few briefings that were considered a bit more complete because of a question from me. (This was true. After I felt comfortable in my position, I became more outspoken, for survival events over the past few years had dictated that we attempt to obtain total knowledge of a situation. And I was always one to doubt a little and ask pertinent questions.)

<sup>40</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/11/00. At the time, Wayne believed I wanted him to talk me out of quitting. He went along with me and I talked myself out of it. The discussion must have acted like a catharsis, purging all my demons at the time. Hank Edwards did join the project after a void in the senior pilot inventory created by the new Chinook program.

The search for a plausible explanation continued for some time. Finally, the reason for the electronic glitches surfaced. We were informed of the cause and exonerated from blame. As Buddy explained to us, the LORAN signals had been disrupted by an enemy radar van on one of the feeder routes leading from Sam Neua town to Ban Ban (Route-6, 61, 68). Power generator equipment had distorted signals to our receiver, causing the disconcerting cycle slips. After being identified as the culprit, the van was targeted and destroyed by USAF strikes and we experienced no further LORAN problems during missions in upper MR-2. <sup>41</sup>

My final duty day in September was on the 29th when I was directed to Vientiane in the morning for Link Trainer instrument training. Because of the degree of difficulty, the dreaded Link Trainers were called an "idiot box" for a good reason: they often caused a participant to feel foolish.

## **LOWER MR-2**

On the 16th Mike Jarina deadheaded to Wattay Airport on C-123 55-4576. He, Mike Barksdale, and Andy Anderson crewed XW-PFJ to Long Tieng. During a nine plus thirty-hour day, they supported Task Force Charlie at Khang Kho that was preparing to move toward the southern Plain of Jars. They also supported other aspects of Vang Pao's Plain of Jars venture.

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<sup>41</sup> Jim Pearson Email, The Otter had a device installed that detected enemy radar (LAWS). Concurrently with enemy radar scanning them during a mission, the LORAN began acting up. It was quite frustrating. Finally, the Customer deduced that "Knife Edge" radar propagation was causing the LORAN set to display spurious signals. (The Author is not familiar with this radar. We were only briefed on the Firecan-AAA, Fan Song-SAM guidance, and the Spoon Rest-early warning radar signals.) Jim indicated the problem cleared up after the Customer briefing.



With USAF air not abundant because of adverse weather and reduced assets during the PDJ operation, Vang Pao relied heavily on his T-28 force for support. Naturally a slow-moving T-28 was more vulnerable to AAA fire than an A-1E or fast mover, and losses occurred.

A T-28 had been shot down near the Jungle's Mouth and a Raven FAC was looking for evidence of a crashed aircraft, a parachute, or the pilot. In the meantime, the pilot discovered some field communication wires and followed them into an abandoned Pathet Lao training camp. Mike was in the area and was requested to retrieve the pilot. Time was important, so, without cover, but with the aid of the Raven pilot's smoke rockets, Jarina and crew conducted the recovery and delivered the aviator to Long Tieng.

Following a successful pick-up some pilots asked for the pilot's weapon. That is how a few obtained a personal handgun. The guy refused to hand over his pistol. After they landed, the man ran away, failing to even turn around and thank Mike for rescuing him. The crew RON at Vientiane

After an aircraft swap the previous evening, the crew returned to The Alternate in 12F. Shuttling between Padong and LS-204, they again supported the Plain of Jars operation and Task Force Charlie's efforts to mobilize and proceed toward the Nipple. After logging ten plus twenty-six hours, the crew RON Vientiane.

*"{North Vietnamese} troops this weekend [16-17 September] launched a series of ground attacks and shellings against government forces attempting to advance along the western edge of the [PDJ].*

*A four-battalion irregular force that had been pushing toward the hills north of the Plaine was forced to retreat to its starting point.*

*Other [Vietnamese] troops attacked four irregular battalions near the southwestern edge of the Plaine, but, assisted by effective air strikes, these government troops held their ground.*

*The communists are also maintaining pressure on Vang Pao's troops south of the Plaine. Elements of an irregular task force southwest of the Plaine briefly captured a hill near Tha Tam Bleung, but retreated after sustained shelling and ground fighting. The irregular task force in the Khang Kho area was stymied by enemy attacks.* <sup>42</sup>

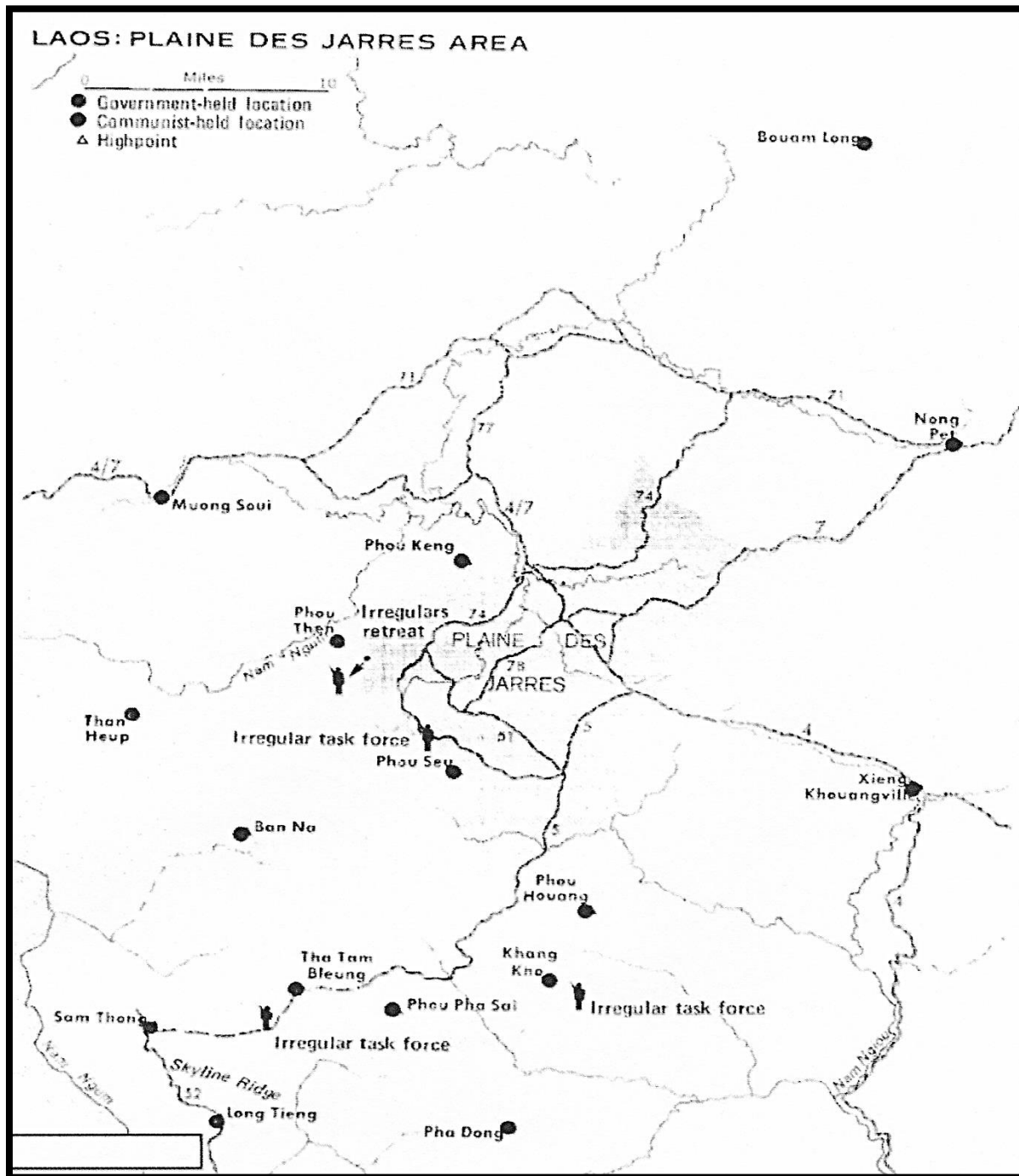
The next day, Monday the 18th, began with the same crew, aircraft, and mission to support troops on the Plain. (Nine plus fifty-five.) Toward the end of the day, Jarina switched to 35F with Bill Collier and Gary Gentz, and ferried the ship first to Wattay Airport and then to Udorn. (One plus thirty-five, twenty-five minutes night.)

### **LATE SEPTEMBER EVENTS ON THE PDJ**

*"Looks like Vang Pao has his units out of sync. They have not been able to mount [the planned] five-front attack [on the PDJ]. Thus, the enemy, with superior discipline, leadership, [weaponry] etc., has been able to use their assault forces and systematically take on each unit one at a time (Delta, then Echo, and now Bravo) and chew them up. We could see this coming over the last few days as enemy units were repositioned around Bravo. Task Force Bravo is Vang Pao's best. If they go down the*

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<sup>42</sup> CIA Bulletin, 09/18/72, Laos: The communists continue to offer strong resistance to government forces in northern Laos.



CIA 09/18/72 map showing Meo SGU-22 patrols retreating toward the Jungle's Mouth after encountering mines on the Plain of Jars.

tubes, there is little chance of Vang Pao making any significant gains this season." <sup>43</sup>

On the 20th FAG Fly Rod was transferred from the November Yankee position to battalion headquarters at November Echo, located west of Moung Phanh on Hill 4452 (Phou Then).

Taking a page out of the Meo irregular warfare book, the enemy reverted to small unit tactics to disrupt and harass Vang Pao's task forces. Therefore, a combat patrol from BC 619A was sent to recon eight areas around their position. Contact was made three miles southwest without incurring casualties. By day's end the patrol had advanced to a point about two miles north of Hill 4452.

Information regarding large caliber enemy field guns on the southern Plain of Jars, near Route-4, north of Lat Houang, and east of Moung Houang, was relayed through Kiwi to Bounder Control. Midafternoon, the crew of Papa Foxtrot Hotel received light machinegun fire from the Jungle's Mouth. During the early evening, FAG Green Back reported that an unknown number of enemy troops approached his perimeter fence and then departed. No fighting occurred and the movement was probably a small recon unit designed to test Thai defenses.

The next morning another combat patrol was dispatched to search and clear eight areas around Hill 4452. A fire team was sent to the north in order to destroy a suspected 12.7mm weapon. After lunch the area around the November Delta and November Echo helicopter landing zone was cleared 500 meters from the perimeter fence. Late that afternoon, the combat patrol returned after discovering a large bunker to the west of Phou Then, and receiving ten rounds of 60mm mortar fire.

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<sup>43</sup> Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 357, Message, 7th AF/13th Air Force to 7th Air Force, 161055Z Sep 72, subject Operation Phou Phiang.

A situation report (sitrep) was forwarded to Bounder Control reporting negative enemy activity or targets. At 1900 hours, Green Back observed two lights five miles northeast at the Phou Keng area and heard engine noise. He requested the duty Spooky gunship investigate. While complying, Spooky was shot at by 37mm fire near the Nam Ngum.

Early Friday morning, Fly Rod, Green Back, Mouse Trap (November Yankee), and Spike's (Rabin) situation was quiet. Ground visibility was reduced to one mile. No recon or combat patrols were dispatched at that time while all waited for the Raven FAC arrival to address the 37mm gun. During the mid-afternoon, two men on a combat patrol were wounded by a booby-trap west of November Bravo. Early evening there was quiet on the western Plain of Jars.

Early on the 23rd, the weather was zero-zero. <sup>44</sup> An enemy assembly area and a 37mm position were identified northeast of Moug Phanh. At 0930 eight recon and combat patrols were dispatched. In the early afternoon, Hard Nose was a passenger on the helicopter that was fired at from north of November Echo while over November X-Ray position. Counterfire was conducted with no accurate damage reported.

The recon patrols returned before dark with no evidence of enemy activity. Two hours later, a November Zulu outpost reported many lights moving from northwest to southwest east of the regiment's location. It was believed to be a resupply and weapon support movement. Before midnight, Fly Rod contacted Spooky-15 about the target. Strikes followed without BDA.

The next day a recon patrol returned from the area with evidence gathered in a bunker. At 1530 hours, H-34 Hotels-18 and 19 and Bell Papa Foxtrot Juliet were fired on from the area

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<sup>44</sup> Zero-zero: No visibility.

targeted the preceding night. Fifteen minutes later, Raven FAC 206 attempted to destroy the gun. Quiet prevailed from 1700 to 2400 hours.

On Monday the 25th, as usual, fog enveloped the Plain of Jars early, not dissipating at November Echo until 0830. The combat situation for Bravo FAGs Fly Rod, Mouse Trap, and Spike was reported as being quiet. At 0900 the perimeter fence was cleared around NE perimeter with 60mm mortar fire, then a combat patrol was dispatched. At 1300 a T-28 pilot was seen bailing out south of Ban Thang. He was intercepted and taken to GM-52's position by Hot Dog.

At 1605 one enemy ranging round splashed on November Echo. After two more ranging rounds impacted, within the next hour thirty rounds of mixed 130mm and 85mm fire landed at NE and NX sites. Bunker Control advised that enemy attacks would likely follow the incoming. The incoming ceased at 1830. Quiet prevailed and, to the surprise of all involved, by midnight no enemy activity was noted.

At 0100 hours Spooky-207 requested Fly Rod supply information about a target, a 12.7mm gun. Unable to obtain a positive fix on the target, Spooky departed the field for fuel at Wattay Airport. Returning at 0400, Spooky worked with Spike on a pesky 130mm field gun. By 0710 the enemy resumed 130mm, 122mm, and DX-82 fire from four locations on BC-619 positions (NX, NY).

Mouse Trap, at November Yankee, radioed Fly Rod at 0745 with information that his position was incurring TIC in the perimeter fence. Within a relatively short time FAG Mouse Trap relayed that he was wounded and requested a medivac from Hard Nose. The last word from the FAG indicated that his hand was broken and he was about to go unconscious. A soldier from November Yankee then observed Mouse Trap being dragged from his

bunker. At 0830, NY was in enemy hands. Estimates of casualties reached fifty percent.

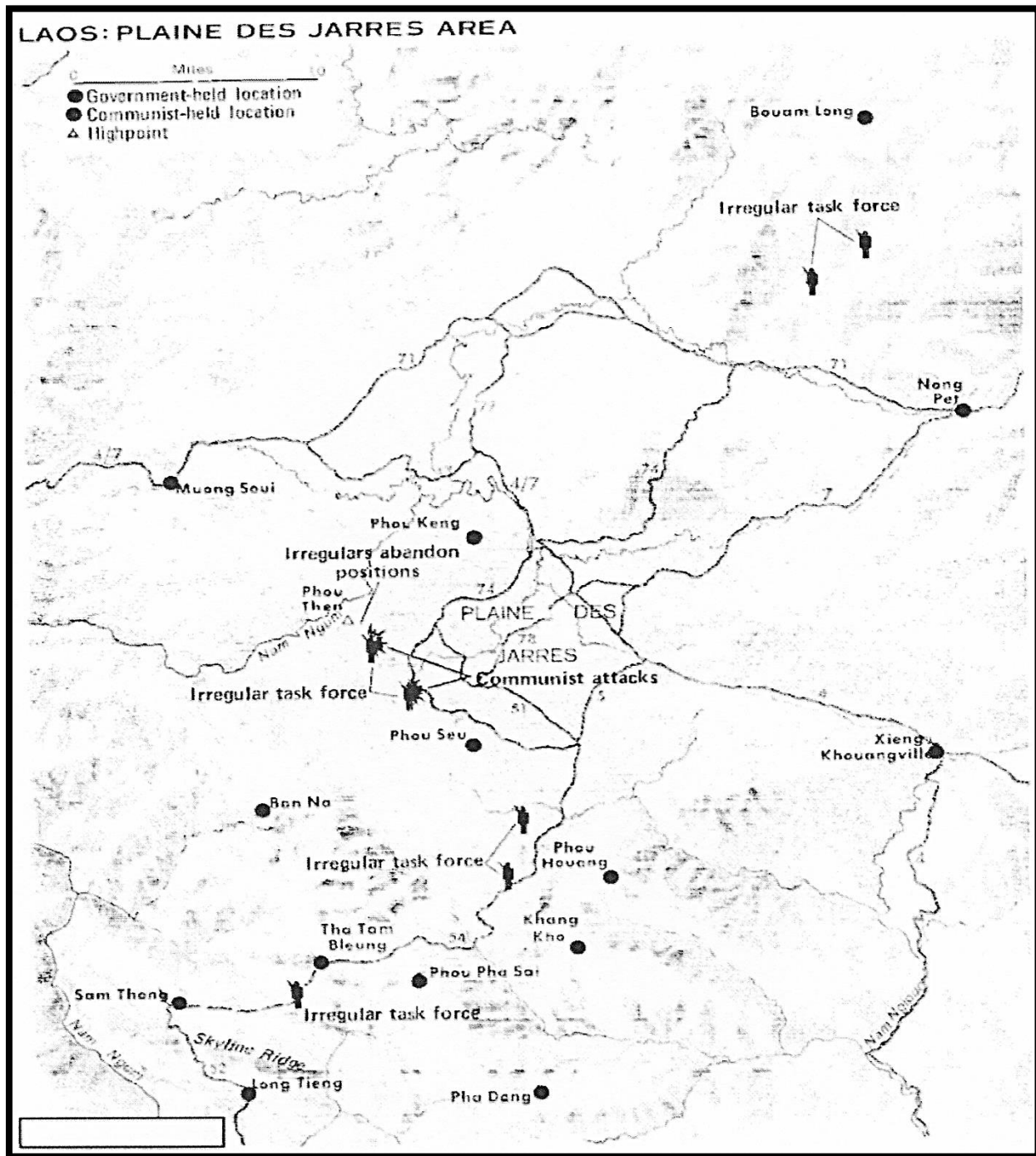
By 0900, November Xray, November Alpha, and November Zulu were lost, with the front-line troops moving back to the second interdiction line until 1030. Without benefit of Tacair, some Thai troops moved west toward the Nam Ngum. Others were scattered throughout the valley between NY and NE. Digger and Mule's GM SGU forces had withdrawn from their positions, allowing the enemy to locate 82mm and 60mm mortars on NY. Along with fire from enemy field guns, these weapons impacted NE. Sadly, adverse weather precluded air support.

The FAG at FSB Santi (BC-636A, located at the November November site) observed an 82mm mortar firing at the GM-22 SGU troops. The mortar tube was destroyed, but at the cost of large caliber incoming from the east. Counterfire on the gun was not possible because of the distance from Santi. A total of forty artillery rounds fell on NN and NB by 1200 hours.

At 1230, out of ammunition for their crew-served weapons, and with morale fading, the November Echo battalion commander elected to withdraw from NE, ND, NA, NZ, and NY positions. Within half an hour, the troops began moving southwest from ND. Fly Rod contacted the Raven FAC responsible for his area and requested that he destroy the mortars left at the position.

When the FSB Santi commander learned that BC-619 had retreated, and one of his 105mm howitzers had been rendered inoperable, he ordered his troops to prepare to follow, after destroying equipment too heavy to carry. The rally point would be located southwest of Ban Thang and west of the Jungle's Mouth.

At 1330 Santi at NN and 619/2 at NB began withdrawing west as thirty mixed 130mm and DK-82 rounds began impacting their



CIA 09/27/72 map showing enemy attacks on Task Force Bravo units in and around Phou Then and Ban Thang. Withdrawals initially commenced west toward the Nam Ngum, and southwest to the hills overlooking the southern Plain of Jars. Also depicted is Task Force Charlie's location, where GM-15 Case Officer Ray Seaborg was killed.



areas. At 1800 hours, the troops stopped in the hills overlooking the Jungle's Mouth for the night.

*"Under the personal direction of General Vang Pao, elements of one task force has moved into the southern tip [area known as The Nipple] of the [PDJ], severing the communist's main supply line to their forces in the Tha Tam Bleung area. The government force found several caches of enemy ammunition, the first significant supplies captured during this year's offensive.*

*North of the Plaine, elements of another task force have advanced from Bouam Long to within three miles of Route-71, an important enemy supply route. Although neither task force has yet encountered serious resistance, there are numerous signs that the communists are moving troops and supplies for counterattacks.*

*Vang Pao's other task forces are faring less well. Elements of the [Bravo] force on the western edge of the Plaine abandoned high ground at Phou Then on 26 September after being hit by a coordinated infantry and artillery attack. Other units of this task force [temporarily] held their ground.*

*[Consistent with the communist talk and fight policy and taking advantage of every gain], communist leader Souphanouvong on 22 September sent another tough message to Prime Minister Souvanna [Phouma] on peace talks. The communists proposed to send a representative to Vientiane to resume preliminary discussions, and again strongly condemned U.S, 'intervention and aggression in Laos.'*

*The communist special representative for peace talks left [VTE] on 3 September after protesting the government's offensive in the north. Since that offensive has failed to shake their*

*control over the Plaine, the communists evidently see some merit in resuming the hitherto sterile discussions."* <sup>45</sup>

By 0600 the next morning Santi, et. al. joined with major units of BC-619 at the rally point. During the early afternoon, Spike linked up with Headquarters 619. After receiving an ammunition resupply by air, they pushed further west before stopping for the night.

Lack of water and food, and fatigue began to become a distinct problem. Still, the large group kept moving west on the 28th toward the Nam Ngum. No enemy forces were encountered during the protracted journey. Some units reached the river by 1830--others at 2000--where they camped for the night. A drop zone was found about three and a half hours walk to the east, where food was received by famished troops.

After spending another night in the mountainous jungle, on the first day a helicopter was available for support, Tiny had Spike and Fly Rod retrieved by helicopter and delivered to Boulder Control at Long Tieng, where they were debriefed on the final eleven days.

BC-619 troops were ordered to remain in place, regroup, and prepare a defensive perimeter based on the decision to redeploy to the Phou Then area. Seventeen men were evacuated because of foot problems.

Fly Rod's analysis for the mass withdrawal indicated that the Thai positions ran out of crew-served ammunition. Moreover, enemy field guns were better positioned to deliver 300 rounds on Thai pads without Santi being able to execute counterfire. Because of adverse weather, no air was available to destroy the enemy guns. Finally, with no supporting weapons remaining, and

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<sup>45</sup> CIA Bulletin, 09/27/72. Laos: The government offensive in the north continues to make only slight progress.

with troops on the move, there was no remaining option but to depart the positions or face an ignominious death. <sup>46</sup>

With the enemy attacks on Task Force Bravo achieving positive results, Vang Pao's Phou Phiang Two operation continued to unravel when Ray Seaborg (code named Than), former U.S. Marine and Case Officer of Nam Yu Yao regiment GM-15, was killed on the 27th.

After arriving at Long Tieng, two GM-15 regimental battalions were lifted to Khang Kho to reinforce Task Force Charlie and immediately began moving toward the Plain of Jars. Two days later, a third battalion was lifted to a landing zone north of the Nipple that Seaborg and the regimental commander had selected. They walked north and linked up with GM-23, already in positions on the Plain. While discussing defensive plans with regimental and BG-103 officers, Seaborg missed a final helicopter flight to The Alternate.

A few artillery rounds impacted Charlie's troops early in the evening. Two hours after midnight, additional artillery shells splashed on friendly positions. This was followed by a squad-size infantry attack that included several RPG weapons. Since low clouds had formed in the area, requests for tactical air support could not be honored. Despite a lack of air, Charlie's troops stalled the small enemy probe.

Then at 0700 hours, under the cover of characteristic morning fog, natural obstacles, and smoke from grenade

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<sup>46</sup> Thai FAG Fly Rod daily reports to Task Force Vang Pao and SKY, 20-30 September 1972.

FAG Spike's (Rabin) debriefing reports to Task Force Vang Pao and SKY, 25-30 September 1972.

Synopsis of the Task Force Bravo action from Dhon to DHEP/Sophon, 09/30/72. Translation for SKY from DHEP, 10/10/72.

Ken Conboy, 349.

Tom Ahern, 466.

exchanges, enemy infantry attacked in force and Case Officer Seaborg was killed. The intensity of the attack was such that the Nam Yu troops departed the field of battle. <sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 349.  
Tom Ahern, *Undercover War*, 466-467.  
Bill Leary September 1972 Notes.

**V**ang Pao and his CIA cohorts were not happy with the apparent failure of the third Plain of Jars operation to achieve goals. Searching for a scapegoat, they blamed the lack of USAF tactical air for Phou Phiang's losses. Consequently, Vang Pao, not sure that he wanted to continue the offensive, met with the Seventh Air Force commander on the first:

*"I explained to General Vang Pao that all the Tacair in the world couldn't help them in the kind of weather we had encountered up there in the last two weeks. As a matter of fact, we had an F-4 and O-1 Raven FAC collide yesterday, trying to work under these difficult conditions. On top of all that Vang Pao's forces are simply no match for the NVA.*

*After extensive discussions, I am convinced [VP's] plans are far too ambitious for his capability. He insists he can take the PDJ if we give him air support, while I believe the best we can hope for is to secure some limited objective. We will attempt to give him whatever air can be profitably used since, if nothing else, he needs a morale boost. He does need to pare down his ambitious plans, however, since as the rout of his two Groupes Mobiles so vividly demonstrated, his troops are simply not capable of handling NVA regulars."*<sup>1</sup>

## **CHARLIE**

Despite Vang Pao's reservations, like the mythical Phoenix arising from the ashes, within a few days of the enemy offensive and Seaborg's death, Task Force Charlie's troops resumed their

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 357, 359. Message Embassy Ambassador Vientiane to SECSTATE 011505Z Oct. 72, subject Operation Phou Phiang.

offensive on the southern Plain of Jars. GM-23 pushed north toward Lat Sen (LS-276). After regrouping, GM-15 followed. On 1 October, the men of GM-26 were delivered by helicopters to Khang Kho; on the second, GM-30 was lifted to the Nipple.

Adverse weather continued to plague movement north of the Nipple. Taking advantage of this seasonal occurrence, an enemy regiment struck GM-23 on the ninth. The regiment withdrew south, with GM-30 close behind.

Concurrent with the action on the southern Plain, two Soviet-manufactured twin engine Il-28 Beagle aircraft bombed Bouam Long at last light. It was the first such incident since the enemy bombing of Phou Pha Thi (Site-85) in January 1968. Damage to Site-32 was insignificant, but not the repercussions. Based at Gia Lam, there was no U.S. radar sighting of the aircraft penetrating the border. An abject embarrassment, and meaningless to the overall aspect of the war, the action did tend to stimulate USAF hierarchy to increase combat air patrols, thus leaving fewer aircraft to support the Military Region Two ground troops.

A follow-up CIA report revealed:

*"The communists have mounted a small air attack against Bouam Long, an isolated government stronghold north of the [PDJ]. Two unidentified propeller-driven aircraft made two passes over the government base. Two MiGs may have supported the strike. There were no casualties, but a small fuel storage area was set afire. Later in the day, the [NVA] began shelling Bouam Long. No ground attack has been reported. Bouam Long, a staging area for operations against communist lines of communication [LOC] and supply depots north of the Plaine, has been a thorn in the side of the North Vietnamese for several years..."*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> CIA Bulletin, 10/10/72, Laos.

Meanwhile, un-deterred by their compatriots' advance in the opposite direction, GM-15 and other residual troops nearly reached Lat Sen the following day. Their success was short lived when Vietnamese tanks assaulted their positions two days later. Retreat was the watchword of the day, with all regiments leaving the field for their respective rear defensive sites.

After a few days' respite from combat, stiffened by two Thai battalions, Charlie's troops were back in action. By the 20<sup>th</sup>, the major portion of the task force again reached Lat Sen. At the same time, GM-30 attained the foothills of Phou Seu. <sup>3</sup>

### **ADDITIONAL EFFORTS**

With efforts to reach ceasefire agreements in South Vietnam still a paramount goal, and aware that Laos was next, Vang Pao was encouraged by the King and Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma to obtain as much territory as possible. This would be valuable in the horse trading that was sure to prevail at any future negotiations.

Ever the master of flanking and diversionary tactics, in order to complement plans to maintain the offensive on the western and other edges of the Plain of Jars, between the first and sixth October, Vang Pao conceived plans for a reenergized Task Force Echo to move on Route-71. Additionally, Task Force Foxtrot (GM-28) would interdict enemy LOCs east of the Plain. The operation would involve 1,200 troops, and require a substantial helicopter assist.

Efforts to deal the enemy setbacks and gain territory throughout October continued when FAR troops were lifted from

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<sup>3</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 387.  
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 359.



Map 10/06/72 depicting General Vang Pao's plans to interdict the enemy road system east of Bouam Long, Ban Ban, and Route-72 east of Xieng Khouang Ville.

Ahern, 468.



Vang Vieng to a landing zone eight miles southwest of Pathet Lao-held Moung Soui. Ostensibly intent on testing Pathet Lao-controlled Xieng Dat and parts of Route-7, the force divided, with a portion moving toward Xieng Dat and the remainder slowly clearing Route-7 toward Sala Phou Khoun.

Savannakhet's GM-32 (advised by Case Officer Sword), seemingly fit after excellent service in Military Region Four at Khong Sedone, was offered to Vang Pao. After arriving at Long Tieng, the 1,500 strong SGU regiment was lifted by USAF helicopter crews to an area near Lat Sen on the 25<sup>th</sup>, with the objective of seizing Finger Ridge and Phou Theung.

The enemy was ready to strike. Reacting with coordinated armor and infantry, they destroyed two companies at the foothills of Phou Theung. Throughout the night, large caliber artillery fire and armor further impacted the regiment. After less than twenty-four hours on the Plain of Jars, the commanding officer was killed and the regiment withdrew to the south. Casualties were high, with total estimates reaching almost 400.

Other units also suffered. The two Thai battalions attached to Charlie's regiments failed to hold, and withdrew to Khang Kho. GM-30 at Phou Seu fared no better, deserting and moving to Padong.

Phou Phiang Two was not over, but the outlook for success was certainly not encouraging. <sup>4</sup>

## JARINA

Mike Jarina spent more than half the month in the field, either transitioning to fly or in Military Region Two. On the 10th, he deadheaded to Wattay Airport on Aero Commander 714 to

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<sup>4</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 387-388.  
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 367, 369.

RON and be in position to fly the next day with Ray Purvis and Ueda in Papa Foxtrot Gulf. Flight Mechanic Ueda had just returned from a Jakarta junket to deliver a number of H-34s to the Indonesian military. Under FEPA regulations, Ray Purvis, a former S-58T First Officer, had been bumped into the Bell program by a more senior man. The crew worked The Alternate and RON Vientiane. (Eight hours.)

Thursday morning the crew departed Wattay Airport for a full day at Long Tieng, supporting the action on the southern Plain of Jars. They returned to Udorn that night. (Eleven hours, forty minutes night.)

On the 14th Mike deadheaded to Vientiane on 389 and RON at the Apollo Hotel to be in place to join Larry Taylor and Demindal in Papa Foxtrot Hotel the next day. (Ten plus fifty-five, thirty minutes night.) The same crew in the same aircraft continued to support Phou Phiang Two operations on Monday. RON Vientiane (nine plus forty-five).

*"Vang Pao's irregulars are attempting to consolidate their positions in the hills just south of the [PDJ]. These troops have sighted tanks nearby but thus far they have only been hit by several small-scale ground attacks."* <sup>5</sup>

Bill Philips replaced Taylor as Mike's copilot. After a day in the field on Tuesday, they RON at Luang Prabang (ten plus twenty-eight) to be in place for early morning work the next day at Bouam Long, where they supported Task Force Echo's efforts to harass and interdict enemy LOCs. After accomplishing this and logging nine hours, they RON at L08. The same crew worked upcountry on the 19th (ten plus twenty-eight), with Jarina deadheading to Udorn on S-58T XW-PHD.

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<sup>5</sup> CIA Bulletin, 10/17/72, Laos: Communist and government forces in north Laos are regrouping following last week's heavy fighting on the southern Plaine des Jarres.

Following two days off the schedule, Mike returned to Wattay Airport late on C-46 Papa Hotel November. After staying overnight in the administrative capital, he joined Braithwaite and Ortillo in 12F on Sunday. They managed to eke out eight plus thirty hours under less than desirable conditions, then RON at Long Tieng. This rare move was probably justified by en route weather and the need to have an experienced and well-liked pilot available for maximum troop support. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, they flew a little less than the previous day and again RON at 20A. Dodging monsoon storms to complete assignments on Tuesday, the crew of 12F finished the day RONing at Vientiane with seven plus thirty hours.

Pappy Wright replaced Braithwaite on the 25th. Weather and ferry time delayed and restricted flying, and not much was accomplished to support Task Force Charlie's efforts on the southern Plain. They RON Vientiane. (Four plus fifty-two, fifteen minutes night.) The next day, Mike deadheaded to Udorn on 617 for a few days off the schedule.

*"Military activity remains light in north Laos as Vang Pao continues to regroup the task force that was driven off the southern Plaine des Jarres on 26 October. Government forces suffered heavy casualties in this fighting: 100 were killed, 200 wounded and several hundred are still missing."* <sup>6</sup>

Early on the 30<sup>th</sup>, Mike deadheaded to Wattay Airport on C-123 617 to join Braithwaite and Terry Dunn in 204B 35F. They worked a full day at Long Tieng, recovering troops and supplying perimeter positions. They then recovered at Udorn. (Nine plus forty-five, fifteen minutes night.) <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> CIA Bulletin, 10/30/72, Laos.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

## **INDONESIA MILITARY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

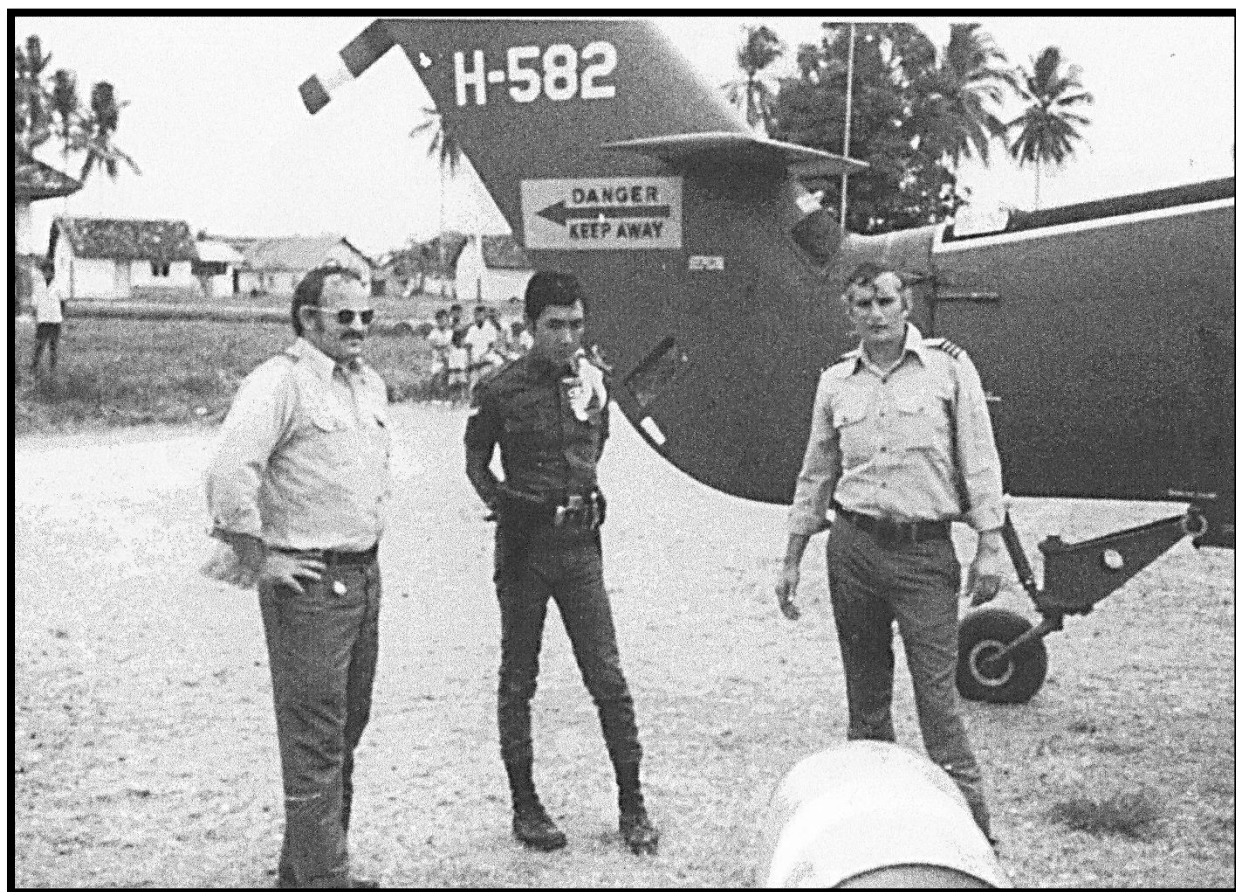
In order to maintain a semblance of stability in the geopolitical world, under the Military Assistance Program USG was very generous to designated South East Asian countries desired in the Western camp. Indonesia was one of these countries selected to receive aid in the form of overhauled and reconditioned H-34s.

Over time, three flights of five each H-34s were ferried to Jakarta. The first ships, most non-airworthy, were delivered from South Vietnam by cargo planes to the Udorn heavy maintenance overhaul and repair station, to undergo IRAN. A few consisted of old U.S. Navy or Coast Guard H-34s not equipped with automatic stabilization equipment (ASE). Because of the complexity of installing ASE, they were overhauled without the equipment.

The initial ferry flight was scheduled for 2 October. CPH Knight wanted to participate in the first delivery, but unable to justify a departure from his normal duties, deferred the project to his assistant, Captain Marius Burke.

Some of the men involved in the first flight were Captains Burke, Dick Lister, Al Cates, and Chuck Frady; Flight Mechanics Tom Cournoyer, Bill Long, Ron Ueda, and Doug Dexter. Each ship had a copilot, but Burke did not know who they were. His copilot was Mel Cooper (07/25/72), a recent hire. Cooper had been an A-4D jet pilot in the Corps, so Marius believed he must be fairly sharp and possess low level navigation skills. Since Burke would be leading the flight, he wanted someone who could adequately navigate over unfamiliar terrain.

Unable to transition into a reserve helicopter squadron after being released from active USMC duty, Burke had joined an A-4D reserve outfit before his Air America employment. By the time he departed for Southeast Asia, he had amassed close to



First Officer Mel Cooper, an Indonesian trooper, and Captain Al Cates standing by one of the H-34s being delivered to the Indonesian military.

1,000 hours low level flying experience. Low level work was highly demanding. Traveling at 400 knots at fifty feet AGL, one did not have much time to study the map, so he became adept at navigation.

Burke soon realized that he had been completely wrong about Cooper. Whether either lazy or incompetent, he appeared clueless about everything related to an aircraft, and particularly to low-level navigation.

They managed to fly the length of Thailand, but near the Thai-Malaysian border smoke largely obscured visibility. Consequently, Marius found his hands full flying a machine without ASE and in almost IMC conditions. A clearance was requested from STAR GCI to cross the border. They were told to report at a checkpoint that was unpronounceable and difficult to understand. As the map did not reveal such a place, Marius requested a phonetic spelling. Instead of writing the name of the checkpoint on his kneeboard, Cooper sat motionless doing nothing; Burke seethed while attempting to fly and navigate.

When the flight finally arrived at Djambi, North Borneo from Singapore, Marius was still quite angry with Cooper. On the ground, pointing out the fact that he seemed reluctant or even incapable of performing basic duties, the two nearly engaged in fisticuffs.

The following day, the armada planned to fly to Palembang, a little over 200 miles from Djambi. There were no distinct terrain features between the two places, just mangrove swamps. To make matters worse, the smoke was very bad. There was an NDB at Palembang which worked intermittently. If navigation was inaccurate by even a quarter mile, conceivably they could miss the airport.

The flight launched and remained low level in order to maintain a visual reference to the ground. Five minutes later

Chuck Frady called indicating that he was experiencing vertigo problems and was not able to continue. For this reason, and the drastically reduced visibility, Marius reversed course and landed at the Djambi airfield. They remained at Djambi waiting for the smoke and haze to clear.

The adverse conditions never improved. Since Djambi was not a choice spot where one wanted to remain long, they collectively elected to leave. Visibility was still only an eighth of a mile, so, remaining at a hundred feet AGL, they proceeded at a much-reduced airspeed toward their destination. Fortune was with them and they eventually sighted Palembang. However, on short final Frady's lead-acid battery overheated and the toxic electrolyte boiled over.

A general, accompanied by his staff, arrived at the aircraft to greet the crews. Marius advised the general that they would have to leave the H-34 at the airfield, and that it was imperative that the helicopter be cleaned immediately with water before the corrosive battery acid permanently damaged the metal.

Either not fully comprehending Burke's tactful recommendation, or expecting a bribe, the dense general wanted to know who was going to pay for the clean-up service. Because the Department of Defense was providing the helicopters gratis to the Indonesian military, Burke became furious saying, "*I don't give a damn who is going to pay for it. It's your problem. You're going to pay for it. I don't care what you do, because we are leaving.*" After making his heated statement, the airworthy aircraft and crews departed on their journey. The helicopters and crews arrived in Jakarta and officially transferred the ships to the military there on the ninth. Then all hands boarded a commercial flight for Don Muang airport.

A second trip to deliver H-34s to Indonesia commenced on 18 December 1972. Flight Mechanics replaced First Officers, and Doug Dexter was Marius Burke's copilot. Flight Mechanics Bill Long, Geza Eiler, and Gary Gentz also crewed the helicopters. Not encountering the horrible environmental conditions of October, they arrived in Jakarta on the 23rd. To extend range, the cargo sections were fitted with a 150-gallon C-47 centerline drop tank that was plumbed into the forward fuel tank. When fuel was required, the Flight Mechanic climbed down from the left cockpit seat and opened a petcock.

Despite the improvement in October weather, the trip was not without incident. Not far outside Udorn, Hal Miller and Gary Gentz noticed hydraulic fluid spraying from the aircraft. Hal landed in a rice paddy and Gary climbed the side of the ship to investigate the source of the leak. He was standing on top of the rescue hoist when the rotor blades clipped the top of his helmet. Undeterred, he discovered the problem, fixed the leak, and they continued the trip south. After a fueling stop at Don Muang airport in Bangkok, they RON at Hua Hin.

The second night was spent at Penang. While refueling, a leak was observed from the belly of Bill Long's H-34. A critical interconnection had broken on a fuel cell. For three days, five Flight Mechanics attempted to remove the damaged cell and install a new fuel cell. It was a difficult job for even a skilled mechanic, but in spite of not knowing exactly what they were doing, the men completed the work. However, fuel still leaked from the filler orifice.

Following a night in Singapore, they proceeded a good distance to Jakarta. Arriving late, they were obliged to spend the weekend.





First Officer Mel Cooper and Flight Mechanic Bill Long relaxing and enjoying the Jakarta MAP H-34 delivery trip.

A third UH-34D delivery was made the following year.<sup>8</sup>

Prior to six days STO in Udorn, on the first of October, Scratch and I spent the morning flying XW-PHC, and providing each other with a Company-mandated proficiency check. It was beneficial in that it enhanced our crew coordination, ability to perform, and discuss various aspects of old or new emergency procedures. Moreover, there was always something to learn from this process. (Two plus twenty, one-hour IP.)

### **CEASEFIRE POSSIBILITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

By eight October, North Vietnamese leaders were relatively certain the Nixon Republican Administration would retain four additional years of power in Washington and his administration's policies regarding the war would not appreciably change. But they were equally convinced Nixon wanted any kind of agreement to display good faith to the American electorate prior to the polling. Moreover, the U.S. no longer possessed the manpower to fight in South Vietnam and conscription of young men had ended. Therefore, during a four-day meeting in Paris between Le Duc Tho, Henry Kissinger, and Alexander Haig, proposals seemed likely that a ceasefire would finally be arranged earlier than later between the U.S. and North Vietnam governing military matters, troop withdrawal, and the always contentious issue of American POWs. Political agendas would be dealt with separately by North and South Vietnam. Kissinger agreed to a North Vietnamese presence in the South, but quietly informed Premier Thieu to acquire as much territory as possible quickly.

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<sup>8</sup> Former Air America Flight Mechanic Gary Gentz Interview.  
Marius Burke Interview, 05/30/98.  
EW Knight Email, 12/11/00.

## **ERNEST MOVES TOWARD A LAO PEACE**

Wars are easy to foment and are generally all fought along the same guidelines. Introduce troops. Seize the high ground and obtain as much territory as possible before your opponent. Then, the last man standing is declared the winner. Wars eventually end, but then what? End games are rarely addressed. How does a nation cope with more than a decade of death and destruction? That remained to be ascertained. Instead enter the politicians.

As the long, exhausting war in Laos inexorably ground toward a conclusion, and USG's total withdrawal from Indochina became a certainty, high level consensus focused on a timely peaceful solution. No longer was there a burning desire to mount large offenses except to obtain and maintain certain strategic areas like the Plain of Jars, Saravane, and other sites considered important. Then when a ceasefire was eventually declared and peace negotiations underway, certain positions could be employed as bargaining chips or remain under control of the occupying entity. The attitude was much the same in the enemy camp-take and hold terrain, only their discipline and motivation was far stronger than the Lao. This policy for both sides would become known as a land grab. Of course, because no one wanted the dubious honor of being the final person to die in Laos, for those in the RLA, this policy was not particularly popular among the rank and file.

Fall negotiations and the likelihood of an agreement in Paris between American and Vietnamese representatives had encouraged Lao and Pathet Lao counterparts to attempt reaching a similar ceasefire agreement in Laos. Along with his cohorts, senior Pathet Lao official, Phoumi Vongvichit, arrived in Vientiane as a special counselor for peace negotiations with the Royal Lao Government. Amid much media fanfare and relative optimism among the people, formal negotiations commenced in

Vientiane on 17 October, with ten experienced delegates representing both sides. The same month, the Democratic Vietnam Republic's (DVR) leading negotiator, Le Duc Tho, pledged to U.S. envoy Kissinger that Hanoi would bring about a ceasefire in Laos within thirty days of a ceasefire in South Vietnam.

Following years of talk and fight, fight and talk policy, ceasefire and peace talks in "neutral" Laos were deemed a hum-nothing new item. A ceasefire had been agreed upon in 1961 and the Geneva Accords protocols on Laos signed in 1962. Of course, confined on a piece of paper, it did not last, for when one pits two rabid dogs opposite the other, fighting will always occur. With hegemony over all Laos North Vietnamese leaders' ultimate goal, except for a few token soldiers, the North's leaders never completely withdrew their forces from the country, or admitted to having troops in Laos. USG cheated on an infinitely lower scale, retaining the cargo delivery capability of Air Americas fixed wing and maintaining a helicopter fleet on standby. Hostilities continued generally unabated during periods attempting to achieve a ceasefire, but with very little chance of ever succeeding.

When negotiators arrived at the bargaining table in Vientiane much had already been discussed over the years, therefore, sufficient talking points existed for an agreement.

Asian rationalization prevailed. Foreign interlopers were readily blamed for the conflict; a total ceasefire should be implemented throughout the country. Then delving into redundancy inherent in old settlements, they agreed *"that Laos should embrace a neutral foreign policy, subscribe to peaceful co-existence, abstain from military alliances, and refuse [to establish] foreign bases."*

With no mention of Vietnamese participation in the chaos, Pathet Lao delegates wanted the United States to provide compensation for all the destruction caused during the war.

A main point of disagreement arose when the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) wanted an entirely new Provisional Government of National Union that had been established in 1962.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to former talks, this time the (NLHS) was to be treated as a co-equal with the Neutralist government of Laos.<sup>10</sup> The NLHS refused to recognize the Souvanna Phouma government. It was only a political group claiming to govern in Vientiane in opposition to the NLHS. They further diminished the government's negotiating power by refusing to recognize the numerous political parties that were represented in the government. They made the point that there were actually only two parties and these two parties would negotiate on equal terms. Souvanna believed his half-brother and he would negotiate in good faith and he considered that any agreement was better than none. Therefore, in order to move negotiations along in a timely manner, the Prime Minister approved these allegations. Any future problems could be corrected after a new coalition government was established. Besides, he was being pushed by USG to render concessions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ratnam.

*CHECO, Military Assistance Program.*

Library of Congress, Laos.

Author Note: Because of the recent developments in Paris and Vientiane regarding a ceasefire agreement, it was considered essential that USG and our negotiators obtain and judge current North Vietnamese leaders' political and military intensions, hence, the pressure and urgency to complete the Agency inspired and Special Project implemented Vinh wiretap.

<sup>10</sup> The Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) was the political faction of the communist movement in Laos; the Pathet Lao (PL) formed the military arm.

<sup>11</sup> *CHECO, Sananikone, 146-47.*

Over time, the NLHS negotiated for a share in the Vientiane government, but failed to relinquish any of their assets or permit any government intrusion into Pathet Lao territory.

On 19 October William Sullivan, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs and former Ambassador to Laos along with McMurtrie Godley and John Negroponte, NSC Staff convened a meeting at the Godley residence in Vientiane, Laos to brief Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma that North Vietnamese representatives in Paris had generally agreed to a settlement which followed the general outline of the President Nixon's May 8 proposal. The agreement dealt primarily with Vietnam, but there was also a chapter regarding Cambodia and Laos, as well as written understanding on the completion of ceasefire negotiations in Laos no later than thirty days after the agreement on Vietnam came into effect. However, there were still two important articles in the proposal that required agreement before finalization.

Souvanna's reaction to the proposals was generally positive and enthusiastic, but he harbored some reservations as to how the agreement pertained to Laos. Mainly, should there be a ceasefire in Vietnam, the Vietnamese must also withdraw from Laos, as he believed they would enter Laos, join the Pathet Lao and attack the Lao armed forces. Sullivan attempted to assuage Souvanna's fears indicating there would be a maximum U.S. air effort sanctioned during the thirty-day period between ceasefires. In addition, the U.S. would maintain the 7th Fleet's Naval capability and air assets in the South China Sea and throughout Thailand, until positive that North Vietnamese leaders honored all provisions of the agreement.

Envisioning problems for a month following the ceasefire, and still highly suspicious of North Vietnam's overall motives, Souvanna insisted the U.S. provide the Lao maximum support and

all the necessary means to fight the Pathet Lao. This would include additional T-28s, more helicopters, and all the U.S. air assets that could be spared. Ambassador Godley was confident U.S. air could effectively resist any Vietnamese encroachment on Saravane or Pakse. <sup>12</sup>

By the 21st, the North Vietnamese premier announced that his nation would accept a ceasefire as the initial step in a peace agreement in South Vietnam. This would be followed by the withdrawal of all U.S. forces. All American POWs would be released upon signing of the settlement. After a coalition of the South Vietnamese government and the Vietcong, a general election would be held within six months.

The next day, Henry Kissinger's attempts to have an angry President Thieu, who was heartily opposed to many of the conditions, agree to the proposal failed. Although still optimistic as to a positive outcome, USG did not immediately sign a ceasefire agreement with North Vietnam. <sup>13</sup>

Lao Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma journeyed to the United States to meet with President Nixon in the Oval Office on 27 October. Also present were Doctor Kissinger, Ambassador William Sullivan, and Ambassador Prince Khammao.

Queried by the President of his evaluation regarding the ceasefire draft agreement, Souvanna indicated it was excellent. However, as he had to Sullivan in Laos, he reiterated that there should not be an appreciable interval between the implementation of the Vietnam ceasefire and the ones in Laos and Cambodia. Any extended time would afford Vietnamese forces to mount offensives

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<sup>12</sup> Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume 9, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973, Item 28, Memorandum of Conversation, 10/19-20/72.

<sup>13</sup> John Bowman, *Vietnamese Almanac*, 325-327.

against the RLA. In fact, an offense had already begun. Lao forces had been counterattacking since 15 October.

Souvanna had just met with USG officials and envisioning the worst scenario after the ceasefire, requested helicopter gunships, T-28s, Spooky C-47 equipped with miniguns, and anti-aircraft weapons to protect two cities close to North Vietnam.

Then Nixon inquired about Laos' future if agreements were reached. Souvanna referred to the Accords agreements of 1962 and the necessity to implement them. He also added that the Pathet Lao's political arm was attempting to distort past agreements in order to change the governmental political balance. Realistically there eventually had to be a national reconciliation and integration of military forces.

The President harbored no illusions about North Vietnamese leaders' overall ambitions to acquire territory in Indochina, but thought a pause in further Vietnamese moves would be necessary after Linebacker One destruction of considerable infrastructure. Of course, this respite was expressly linked to their interests. If suitable, the agreements would be implemented; if not...

Souvanna concurred that a lull in activity was quite likely. Reconciliation was warranted, but no one should ever trust the North Vietnamese leaders.

Asked how many Lao had been killed since 1962, Souvanna estimated 50,000 (there was no mention of Thai or tribal losses). About 600,000 refugees remained in the kingdom.

The President indicated the agreement did not constitute a total disengagement from Indochina. USG would continue economic aid and other assistance to countries in the area. Souvanna was happy to hear this statement, but was concerned about too much aid to North Vietnam and eventual retaliation against neighboring countries.



The President replied that the Prime Minister's skeptical observations were perceptive and he assured Souvanna USG would conduct operations in Indochina without any illusions and act with good will. <sup>14</sup>

## **THE PROJECT**

On the same day as the Paris "peace" talks resumed, Lloyd Higgins and I deadheaded on C-123B 4374 to Pakse where we joined Flight Mechanic Deak Kennedy to fly XW-PHC. With the Vinh phone tap mission imminent, we would spend the following four days and nights at the PS-44 facility preparing for aspects of the mission.

There had been a short delay while frustrated Agency planners determined the next move since the August H-500P accident, and subsequent Chinese repatriation to Taiwan. Since the mission's goal remained unchanged and a large expenditure in funds had been incurred over the previous two years, the plausible deniability aspect would be scrubbed and the project would continue with the two original IPs, former Army warrant officer pilots, Dan Smith and Lloyd Lamothe as primary delivery tools. Toward the end of September, the two men returned to PS-44 to resume concentrated H-500P training and preparing for the Vinh tap mission. Dan, a pleasant individual, who looked like he ate well, would act as PIC and fly as mission commander. Baldheaded Lloyd, who still turned people off because of his annoying girlish giggling, would navigate and act as Dan's

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<sup>14</sup> FRUS, Number 74, 10/27/72, Memorandum for the President's File by the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger).

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and the titular head of the Pathet Lao, Prince Souphanouvong, and their representatives continued to meet throughout 1972. However, no real settlement could be achieved until tangible guidelines relating to South Vietnam emanated from Paris.

navigator copilot. As originally planned, two S-58T crews would provide SAR capability should the situation warrant a rescue. (Although I was always candid about my reluctance to enter North Vietnam, this did not seem to concern anyone.) A Twin Otter crew would be available to ferry personnel to forward locations, access and report weather along the border region, act as a radio relay, and sometimes carry parachute trained Commando Raiders in case they were needed to help rescue the crew of a downed helicopter. <sup>15</sup>

Along with H-500P technicians, air operations types, and Commando Raider trainers, overall mission manager Jim Glerum was occasionally present at PS-44. <sup>16</sup> In September there was ongoing fighting between the FAR and Vietnamese forces in the Khong Sedone area only fifteen miles north. Therefore, in order to complement already iffy base security at PS-44, Jim opted for the presence at all times of at least one Twinpac and crew to conduct an emergency evacuation of American personnel should it become necessary.

Challenged by the hurry-up mode stimulated by the Paris negotiations and requirement for pertinent intelligence, since their arrival, both Dan and Lloyd hit the deck running. Originally obtaining two months of valuable H-500P experience flying low level with FLIR equipment and NVGs in the Nevada desert's highly classified Area-51, they commenced similar mission profiles for the proposed Vinh tap mission in the PS-44

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Pearson Email. Up to twenty Commando Raiders were carried by the command Otter on our Special Project missions. Carrying rapid firing guns and wearing two parachutes, their purpose was to jump to the assistance of any helicopter that went down. With a full fuel load and passengers, the landing gear spread out. Ever confident at his ability, Jim's motto was, *"Whatever the Customer wants, if I think I can do it, I will."*

<sup>16</sup> One pilot/technician at the base at this time for advice was later killed in the States during H-500P night training.

area, including day and night landings in The Hole. At the same time, under the direction of Shep Johnson, two of the best Commando Raiders out of a handful of reliable and elite men continued honing their wiretap skills, scaling makeshift telephone poles in The Hole streambed and installing the tap device, and supplementary items.

### **THE WIRETAP AND ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**

The actual wiretap device consisted of a standard French type glass insulator normally installed on telephone poles and used to secure wires. Attributable to the ingenuity and sheer magic of the Agency's technical services department personnel, without expert examination, the device overtly appeared like any other insulator, but it contained a miniature short-range receiver/transmitter. In order for the system to work properly, the installation team had to ascend the wooden communications pole in the dark, staple the unit to the structure's top, patch wires into the insulator, fix a short antenna, and attach small solar panels to power the system.

Like former Trail taps and other trail watch devices in Laos, relaying information to an orbiting aircraft would have been feasible, but a very difficult process to conceal over North Vietnamese territory, and counterproductive to secrecy. Consequently, a singular relay apparatus was developed in American laboratories incorporating a stronger receiver/transmitter, redundant batteries, voltage regulators, and other miniaturized electronic components. From an elevated platform it was capable of forwarding line-of-sight signals for many miles. We called this foldable device an air deployable

relay (ADR).<sup>17</sup> Painted green to blend in with a verdant jungle habitat, the ADR was powered by an array of solar panels mounted on several deployable arms.<sup>18</sup> Compact and easily transportable in a folded condition, after opened flat on demand, it was designed to be lowered onto the top of a tree relatively close to a wiretap. A nylon mesh fitted to the lower portion was installed to tangle firmly in the branches and help stabilize the apparatus. Elements of the ADR device were expected to remain active for months, or long enough to obtain sufficient and detailed information that our Paris negotiators required.

Because of the long distance (almost a hundred miles) involved in transmitting signals to the high technology computer banks of receiving equipment at the USAF Nakhon Phanom base, another ADR located halfway from the tap would have to be installed on another elevated hill. This would soon be accomplished by an S-58T crew.

Since it would be too dangerous for all blacked-out aircraft to fly pre-planned mission profiles at night in the relatively constricted area around PS-44 at the same time, sharing aircraft with Scratch Kanach, we restricted day flying to one hour in both Papa Hotel Charlie and Papa Hotel Delta. While not actually flying, our activities revolved around planning local training, reading, eating, watching movies, and drinking beer. Occasional briefings were not extensive.

Retaining Papa Hotel Delta on the ninth, switching cockpit seats, we practiced area LORAN profiles. Some of the flying

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<sup>17</sup> ADR: Some Customers and Authors referred to the device as a spider relay device. Unaware of this term, recorded in his logbook as such, the Author will use the ADR acronym.

<sup>18</sup> Buddy Rogers informed me that a single solar panel comprising less than one square foot cost 5,000 dollars to manufacture. This amount seemed exorbitantly expensive, but at that time electricity generated by solar power was a relatively new and very costly technology.

included logistic duties ferrying people and goods to and from Pakse (ten landings). It was encouraging and rewarding to fly in an area where LORAN navigation was accurate with no interference like what we had encountered in Sam Neua Province. Night adaption with red goggles preceded night NVG training and consumed one hour fifteen minutes of the six plus fifty-five day. (Ten landings.)

The next day Lloyd and I flew six-plus fifteen hours during the day. Since the monthly time frame for an optimum moon phase was rapidly approaching to attempt the first tap sortie, Tuesday was selected for Scratch Kanach and his crew to install an ADR booster antenna on a high mountain near Ban Nong Leung and Route-8 (WF 0902) in Military Region Three Province. Located about halfway to the Nakhon Phanom base, it was forty-six miles southwest of the designated Vinh ADR site. With the ADR hooked onto PHC's rescue hoist and firmly secured, Scratch departed north. Delegated the SAR ship, we followed him toward the drop site and then stood off a good distance. While Kanach hovered over a suitable tree, his Flight Mechanic lowered, opened, and deployed the device. Apparently, the ADR was planted and oriented successfully. If not, it could always be lifted and repositioned later. That night our logged two hours included NVG and LORAN training.

On the eleventh, we continued training with additional emphasis on night proficiency flying. (Three plus forty, two fifteen night, nine landings.) The same day Wayne Knight joined Scratch in Papa Hotel Charlie for abbreviated flight time. They RON at Pakse. (Two plus fifty-eight.)<sup>19</sup>

As the target date for the mission approached additional personnel flooded PS-44. Therefore, the following day, because

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<sup>19</sup> EW Knight Email.

of the overcrowding and a requirement to shuttle supplies to the base, we ate and RON at Pakse. <sup>20</sup> Gaza Eiler replaced Kennedy as our Flight Mechanic. (Five plus thirty-five ten landings.) Since supplying water was a continuing problem on the plateau, part of our duty was to sling a three-quarter filled 500-gallon black rubber bladder to the base. The first time I attempted to lift the large, round object, I found it far too heavy to budge. Therefore, I did not refuel one evening and attempted to pick the monster up in the morning before temperature increased the density altitude. The Blivet came off the ground a few inches at full power, but not at a sufficient height to allow a safe takeoff. Therefore, I hovered into the wind, waiting until a slight breeze or beneficial gust provided sufficient lift to obtain translational lift. The load was still extremely heavy and I did not enjoy the slow, plodding flight at low airspeed to the base.

Wayne and Scratch remained at PS-44 for nighttime security. (Two plus fifty-one.)

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<sup>20</sup> Because of efforts to control and restore government territory in Military Region Four the Air America hostel was always full. One evening, while I was eating at the large family style table, H-34 Captain Bob Caron, a health enthusiast, returned from his evening run. Surprising me and everyone sitting in my general vicinity, he approached and said in a non-threatening manner, "*Hey Dick I understand that you are unhappy with me.*" I rarely crossed paths with Caron and had to temporarily search my memory for an answer. Then I recalled the February 1971 SAR north of Luang Prabang when Caron, Fram, and Champanil were shot down in a H-34. Their rescue was delayed because none of the crew had taken the trouble to wear a Company issued survival vest containing a radio and various signal devices. Because I was an integral part of the SAR mission and exposed to danger, I was truly angry and disgusted when I discovered the crew's casual neglect wearing survival gear. However, now that so much time had elapsed since this and other incidents, I had largely put the Caron incident out of mind. Not wanting to conduct any more discussion regarding the matter and anxious to be relieved of Caron's presence, I merely said the incident was forgotten. Bob accepted the hint and left.

Preparations for the tap mission required a lengthy and difficult training period. In addition to adverse weather and enemy activity, the mission was beset with a few setbacks and temporary delays, especially when the specially manufactured ADR slid off the brittle and thinly branched tree canopy in The Hole during a dress rehearsal session just prior to the scheduled mission. <sup>21</sup> The-one of a kind-ADR unit was damaged, but major pieces were recovered by two Customers who believed it could be repaired given proper parts replacement. Parts were fast forwarded from the States. Working around the clock, an enterprising and talented technician managed to repair the unit in record time.

On the morning of the thirteenth, we were directed to RTB Udorn with Delta for a maintenance inspection. First, we crossed the river and landed a Customer at Ubon AFB to obtain a detailed weather outlook for the next several days from the meteorology section (this would be the first of many such forays to the base to obtain future weather information). It looked like weather in eastern Military Region Three was projected to be favorable by the third week and the proper moon light available for the tap mission. After lunch at the base, we proceeded to Udorn. (Two plus fifty.)

Kanach and Knight remained overnight at PS-44. (Two hours, one plus twenty night.)

They remained at the site on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

Before returning to PS-44 with Higgins in Papa Hotel Delta on Sunday afternoon, I drafted a lengthy letter home:

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<sup>21</sup> Most tree crowns were normally fragile leading to problems firmly setting the ADR. This should have been a wakeup call to principals and would lead to later problems, and frustration for our continuing tap operations.

*"The IRS is finally reevaluating their harassment of us over here. A lot of pressure has been put on them by our lawyers and congressmen who we have written to. I don't know how this will all come out, but at least it is a step in the right direction. I think it will result in a change in the of the residency law. This will hurt because without it you can only leave your point of physical presence for a month every 18 months.*

*We are still having rain. This is a good thing as there was little earlier and should relieve a future water shortage."*

Letter Home, 10/15/72.

That afternoon Lloyd Higgins and I checked into the Air America facility at 1230 and returned Papa Hotel Delta to PS-44. (Three plus five, two landings.) With a working ADR available, and a waxing moon available, the Vinh mission was tentatively scheduled for the 16th. As always, Scratch was realistic. Despite our curious navigation problems in Sam Neua Province, he wanted me as his cockpit mate. Since the mission had the highest priority and expense was no object, Lloyd and his crew would form a second SAR ship. Therefore, after Knight and Kanach completed a two plus fifty-five day-night flying Papa Hotel Charlie, I joined Scratch for two hours concentrated night training, during which we conducted ten NVG rough area landings, including The Hole, to hone our skills. We arrived at the sand strewn parking area near the bunkhouse late, but had the entire morning to sleep. <sup>22</sup>

Although we were not the primary wiretap ship, as part of the whole, strain and anticipation of the impending mission, and

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<sup>22</sup> Rooms were configured to be dark and removed from the main dining-recreation area so occupants could obtain relatively undisturbed sleep.



what lay ahead weighed heavily on us. Actually, it visibly showed on the entire complement associated with the cross border mission.

Monday morning, I flew Charlie less than an hour. After daytime logistic runs to Pakse in Papa Hotel Delta (two plus fifteen), we again flew at night. Although encouraged by the Customer, training was largely generated and scheduled by Kanach, who was his own taskmaster. There was no cheating by departing at sunset when twilight still provided subdued light for about twenty or thirty minutes. Like we had been doing since the advent of serious night flying, in order to obtain the maximum realistic benefit of the training, we waited until actual dark before launching. The evening was consumed by polishing LORAN navigation procedures to a point we both felt highly confident of our ability to go anywhere. (Two plus twenty-five night.)

The snake-bitten operation continued to plague our group. Just when it looked like everything was in place, the mission was once more placed on hold, when the lead team man for the tap insertion was stung by a scorpion and temporarily incapacitated.

We were unaware how long the key individual would be disabled, so the next day after some perfunctory work, we ferried Papa Hotel Delta to Udorn for maintenance, a couple days rest, and to wait for the word to return to PS-44. (Three plus five, four sorties.)

Except to obtain the mail and check in the CPH office I did not mix much with other pilots, particularly in the bar. I was more relaxed now that a lot of pressure of the war in Military Region Two no longer impinged on me, so I preferred to spend time at home with the family.

*"I passed my tenth year over here in September. It seems to have gone quite fast until I look at my children.*

*There are rumors about the end of the war [in Laos]. There have always been rumors concerning this but there are more tangible events now. I hope that we don't blow it because it means the loss of South East Asia. If there is a ceasefire, I assume that we will be involved for at time."*

10/18/72 Letter to Don Valentine in Steamboat Springs, Colorado.

### **SARAVANE**

*"In south Laos, where military activity has been at a low level since government troops recaptured Khong Sedone in early summer, the [Vietnamese] appear to be preparing for increased combat. U.S. pilots report signs of an enemy build-up east and southeast of Khong Sedone.*

*Communist units in the past week have strongly resisted Lao Army efforts to recapture villages east of Khong Sedone. Late yesterday [Monday the 16th] three government companies operating in the area came under heavy enemy attack, and were forced to withdraw to Khong Sedone. The [NVA] may be preparing to attack Khong Sedone in an effort to forestall any government attempt to push east into the Se Done Valley or onto the Bolovens Plateau."<sup>23</sup>*

Consistent with a government mandated land grab policy prior to tangible ceasefire agreements and to cast enemy plans off balance, FAR Military Region Four leader Brigadier General Soutchay Vongsavanh and his staff resurrected a plan, successful the previous year, to seize Lima-44. Two regiments, GM-41, advised by Case Officer Leon "Khamsing" Williamson and GM-42, John Peterson (call sign Thanh Mak) would be employed in the

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<sup>23</sup> CIA Bulletin, 10/17/72, Laos.

offensive action. Reminiscent of a boxer's one-two punch, GM-42 SGU troops would be lifted by several USAF and Air America helicopters to a landing zone near the airfield. GM-41 would be inserted the following day or at an appropriate time.

After local training with Jim Rhyne (one plus thirty) in Twin Otter 74M on the 18th, Jim Pearson and First Officer Paul Broussard launched south for PS-44. During the late evening or early morning, in order to secure the landing zone and reinforce Commando Raiders already circulating throughout the area, Captain Jim Pearson and Paul Broussard dropped a pathfinder team in the designated area (one plus twenty-five).

That same day H-34 crews and aircraft converged on Pakse to complement and act as a backup delivery mechanism to Air Force crews. Even though the Air Force crews always enjoyed A-1 escort and cover, Customers knew they were notorious for not fully completing a mission.

Air America crews consisted of Captain Frank Stergar, Hotel-52; Captain Boonrat Com Intra, copilot S. Swangpunt, Hotel-62; Captain Joe Lopes, copilot Robert Huntsberger, Hotel-59; Captain Harold Thompson, copilot Angelo Spelios and their Flight Mechanics.

Early Thursday morning, eight USAF helicopters and crews departed the Ubon air base, crossed the Mekong, and converged on the Phou Lat Seu (LS-418, PS-18) air strip. Having ferried a Customer to the site, Jim Pearson and Brossard were waiting to lead the Air Force crews to the Lima-44 area. A portion of the first two regimental battalions were loaded, and with A-1, and Raven FAC escort and the Otter pointing the way, the initial lift was conducted without a hitch. At GM-42 Customer's request Captain Pearson remained overhead the area in case of a counterattack and an evacuation requirement.

After returning to PS-44 and loading another regimental battalion, the Air Force armada returned to the air. This shuttle did not proceed smoothly. During final planning and reconnaissance stages of the operation, principals failed to note the proximity of the 39th Vietnamese Infantry Regiment training area to the landing zone. Therefore, during a second sortie, alerted, the enemy had moved into position, and was waiting to inflict damage on the invading force. The lead helicopter was hit. Almost all aircraft managed to land and offload troops, but only two escaped without incurring battle damage. As a result of damage to their helicopters and psyche, some Air Force crews claimed maintenance problems, or refused outright to attempt further shuttles.

As rear echelon elements reported:

*"Advanced elements of an eight-battalion irregular force were airlifted on 19 October to positions just southwest of Saravane, which has been under communist control since late last year. The communists directed antiaircraft fire against the arriving aircraft, but at last report the airlift was continuing [albeit with Air America helicopter crews]."*

*If the government troops can retake Saravane, they will probably then try to push south to regain a foothold on the Bolovens Plateau. The communists will strongly oppose any move on the Bolovens that would threaten their logistic system to South Vietnam. Three regiments of the communists' newly organized 968th Division would probably be committed to the effort. In the past few weeks, the 968th has received replacement troops and has had ample time to preposition supply caches."* <sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> CIA Bulletin, 10/20/72, Laos: The government has launched a major new offensive in the south.

In order to continue the lift and achieve troop superiority before the enemy regiment could fully react, Pakse air operations tapped Air America and RLAF helicopter crews to continue the operation and then evacuate American Case Officers, a high-ranking Lao officer, and numerous WIAs.

Meanwhile, still in an orbit, Pearson's Otter was nearing a bingo fuel state. Jim called the Customer to apprise him of this and learned that the Case Officer could not leave his troops.

Senior pilot of the group, Captain Frank Stergar, led the Air America contingent toward Saravane. Hoping to minimize enemy action, he approached the runway from the east, landed and loaded six friendly WIA, Customer Leon Williamson, and his Lao assistant. Small arms fire was directed at Hotel-59 as Frank conducted a running takeoff, became airborne, and proceeded south toward PS-44.

Joe Lopes flying Hotel-59 was second to land and on-load wounded. Joe departed with a cabin full of troops and incurred no hostile fire.

Boonrat piloted the third UH-34D to land. The Flight Mechanic loaded Case Officer John Peterson, his assistant, and the SGU chief of staff, Colonel Vanthong, and four WIAs, when numerous mortar rounds began splashing on the airfield. Boonrat, a long-time respected H-34 Captain, who was no stranger to hairy enemy situations, instantly grabbed a handful of throttle, pulled pitch, and rotated for takeoff. Twenty feet off the ground, heavy machine gun fire began splattering Hotel-62.

Angelo Spelios, a recent Bell transfer pilot from Saigon, observed the unfolding action from the left seat of Hotel-89, the designated SAR ship piloted by Captain Harold Thompson. While Boonrat turned over a wooded area, flames shot out from the engine compartment. Next, a well-aimed rifle propelled grenade (RPG) struck, and severed part of the tail section.

Without a functioning anti-torque device, spinning to the right and on fire, Boonrat autorotated and crashed into to the ground.

Immediately reacting, Thompson headed toward the downed aircraft, while radioing Lopes that he might require his help. Joe in turn called Stergar requesting he reverse course to assist in the SAR. Since he was well on the way south to Pakse and had the Customer onboard, Frank replied that Thompson was empty and could better conduct a rescue attempt. Despite the fact he was fully loaded, Lopes made a 180 degree turn and headed toward Lima-44 intending to land, discharge his passengers, and participate in the rescue.

In the meantime, Thompson landed as close as he could to the burning wreck of Hotel-52. Boonrat, suffering considerable shock, First Officer Swangpunt, who lost a toe, the Thai Flight Mechanic, Colonel Vanthong, and several others instantly boarded Hotel-89. The recovery had been timely. However, during the process of departing the crash site, Thompson's engine carburetor received battle damage. Despite this, Harold managed to fly south to Pakse, where Jim Pearson, Paul Broussard, and Kicker Stone waited to ferry the wounded to the Udorn facility.<sup>25</sup>

As Captain Lopes approached the airfield, heavy groundfire impacted his ship. Perhaps saving a second aircraft from crashing, in order to draw enemy fire away from the helicopter,

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<sup>25</sup> Jim Pearson Email, 10/17/16, 10/19/72. One wounded man lost so much blood that Customer, Walter Smith immediately began a blood transfusion, which contributed to saving his life. Jim's Captain's report requested that Smith be issued a letter of commendation for his action.

Jim Pearson first met Peterson, a former Special Forces at Bouam Long. The young man inquired if Air America would hire him as a pilot if he went back to the States to obtain airman certificates.

Joe Leeker DH-6 Otter, Emails from Pearson, When Pearson returned to Pakse, the Customer indicated that Jim would have to shuttle troops into Saravane as only three H-34 crews were still working. This was possible, for earlier Jim had requested the Customer have the runway checked for mines so he could land.

a Raven forward air control (FAC) pilot flew directly between Hotel-59 and the enemy allowing Lopes to escape. In the process, Huntsberger received a grievous wound to his groin which incapacitated him for six months and eventually resulted in the loss of a bladder. After Bob eventually returned to Udorn, people noted that his hair had prematurely turned pure white.

It had not been a good day for Saravane participants. Many helicopters had received various degrees of battle damage, one Customer had perished, and the operation's success was still in doubt.

The crash site was secured overnight. The next day, while fresh or reinvigorated USAF helicopter crews inserted another battalion south of the strip, the deceased Case Officer's remains and those of his Lao assistant were recovered. <sup>26</sup>

On the 21st a portion of GM-41 was introduced into the new landing zone. This was followed by helicopter and Twin Otter troop insertion to the airstrip. When all GMs were in position, government troop superiority proved too much for the understrength 9th Vietnamese regiment. After severe fighting, Saravane returned to Royal Lao Government hands...for a time. <sup>27</sup>

While the Saravane offensive was underway, the western portion of the Bolovens was active:

*"Elements of the 9th Regiment of the 968th Division on 18 and 19 October, supported by as many as four tanks and heavy weapons,*

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<sup>26</sup> John Peterson's wife, who had accompanied him to Pakse, continued a thirty-two-year career in the CIA that included an interesting stint in Moscow.

<sup>27</sup> Saravane Segment:  
 Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 352-353.  
 Bill Leary 1972 Notes. Professor Leary includes information from Air America XOXOs, and interviews from Frank Stergar, and Angelo Spelios.  
 Soutchay Vongsavanh, 83.  
 Marius Burke Interview.  
 Ken Conboy Letter to Stergar, 07/01/91.  
 Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 475.

*attacked irregular units that for the past months have been defending positions near the junction of Routes 23 and 231 [between kilometer 23 and Ban Gnik] at the western edge of the Bolovens. Some of the irregular troops have retreated to the west and the rest have reported that they are under attack. These assaults probably are designed to forestall and government push up Route-23 toward Paksong town and perhaps force the government to divert some of its troops from the new offensive against Saravane."* <sup>28</sup>

Anticipating an early ceasefire agreement and attempting to salvage the western Bolovens, the land grab continued. On the night of 23 and morning of 24 October, Twin Otter crews (one was Jim Pearson and Barney Heidt in 74M) positioned to PS-18 and boarded troops. The aircraft crews jumped four dozen Commando Raiders about four miles northwest of Lao Ngam to secure and prepare a landing zone for Savannakhet's GM-33 SGU troops. USAF helicopters delivered the regiment the following morning, and the town was occupied by the 27th. During clearing operations, several enemy tanks were either destroyed or disabled, a first such gutsy operation conducted by SGU troops. <sup>29</sup>

A CIA report divulged:

*"Irregular troops this weekend [28-29] drove the last [North Vietnamese] troops out of Saravane while other irregulars occupied Ban Lao Ngam...Lao Army units have been unable to retake Khong Sedone to the west."* <sup>30</sup>

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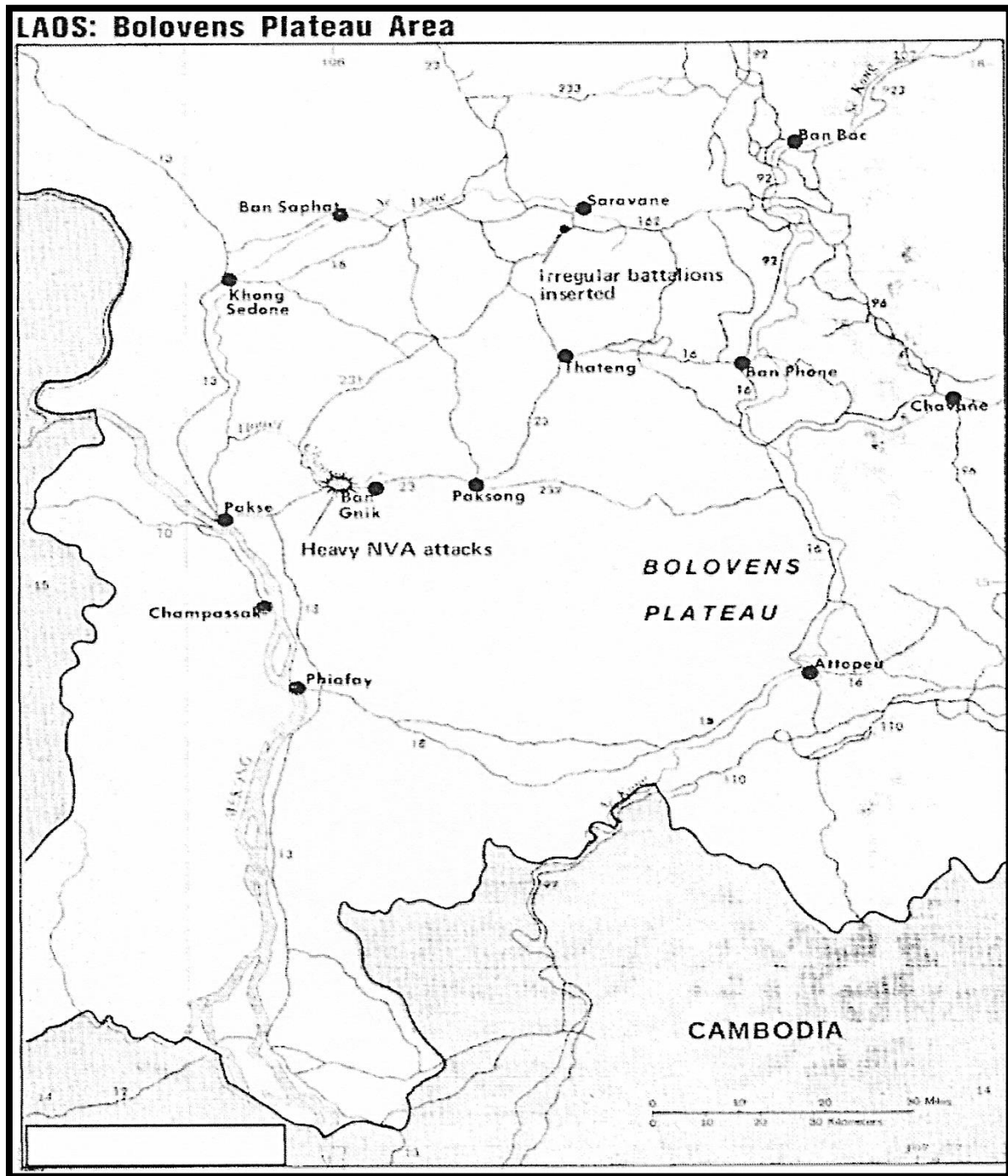
<sup>28</sup> CIA Bulletin, 10/20/72, Laos.

<sup>29</sup> Vongsavanh, 83.

Ken Conboy, 396.

<sup>30</sup> CIA Bulletin, 10/30/72, Laos.





CIA 10/20/72 graphic displaying battle areas around Ban Gnik on the Bolovens and Saravane northeast of Khong Sedone.

## **THE VINH TAP MISSION UNFOLDS**

So began more than six weeks of an extremely frustrating start and stop cycle to accomplish the Vinh wiretap. On 20 October, with weather predicted to be favorable and full moonlight available between 1635 and 0428 hours, mission assets consisting of helicopters, crews, and Customers began converging on PS-44 to be in place for the Vinh mission.

Friday morning, I boarded the cargo compartment of Bell 205 Papa Foxtrot Juliet as a passenger for the two plus twenty-hour trip to PS-44. The commercial version of the U.S. Army Huey was crewed by CPH Wayne Knight, Larry Price, and an experienced Flight Mechanic. Equipped with LORAN gear, Foxtrot Juliet would be used as a logistic tool and a backup to the primary SAR unit for the Vinh mission.

Given optimum conditions, and no more Murphy-like occurrences, everyone overtly appeared mentally prepared and confident the tap installation and ADR insertion would result in a successful mission.

Dan and Lloyd were primed and ready with their H-500P. Scratch, Deak Kennedy, and I were prepared in Papa Hotel Delta. Higgins, his copilot, and Chuck Low were all set in Papa Hotel Charlie. After delivering key personnel from Udorn to PS-44 in the afternoon, Twin Otter Captain Jim Pearson and his copilot Paul Broussard were ready in N774M. Depending on the phase, Pearson would perform several important roles: a logistic conduit, a radio relay platform, and a means to report on area weather.

After launching north at twilight, the first tap attempt did not result in success. (Two plus thirty-five, two plus ten night, one landing.) Moreover, after receiving information late in the day regarding unsettling events at Khong Sedone, to forestall the possibility of an enemy sapper attack on the

training base that might damage scarce assets and disrupt operations, and to be in position for another tap attempt on the 21st, it was decided that our two Twinpac crews and ships would RON at Savannakhet. The move would place us closer to the forward launch base at L-40 East (Thakhet), and establish a working presence so as not to cause undue suspicion over any increased activity level.

Wayne Knight, Larry Price, their Flight Mechanic, Jim Pearson and Paul Broussard RON at the Company hostel at Pakse (Two plus twenty-three, fourteen minutes night.) <sup>31</sup>

Saturday, in order to establish a cover for our presence until the appointed time to launch, we worked a few local missions for the L-39 Customer, after which we rested for what was anticipated as being a long night.

Jim Pearson and Broussard returned a skeleton crew to PS-44 at noon. Toward late afternoon, they departed for Lima-39 where at dark they boarded Udorn AB-1 observers and technicians for Thakhet East. Then they launched to establish a northeast orbit.

Dan Smith and Lloyd Lamothe departed PS-44 under the cover of darkness for the advanced base at Thakhet East to top off kerosene and nitrogen liquids, receive last minute instructions, and await the appropriate time to launch.

Well into evening, after thoroughly checking LORAN functions and other S-58T systems, we received word from air operations to depart north; the number two SAR ship piloted by Lloyd Higgins and Paul Gregoire took up a loose trail position. Lightning was visible from isolated thunderstorms in the distance, but nothing on the horizon appeared serious or

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<sup>31</sup> Learning they were going to be attacked by Vietnamese forces, skittish FAR/FAN troops defending Khong Sedone beat a hasty retreat. Hence, the concerned Customer at PS-44 had the Twin Otter relocate all Americans to Pakse for the night.



General track of the H-500P from PS-44 to the forward base at LS-40A and to the Vinh tap. Approximate mileage to the tap: 210 miles from PS-44 to Thakhet East; fifty-seven miles to the border crossing without deviation; twenty-five miles to the Vinh tap. Twinpac crews initially orbited along the Mekong River far enough from enemy radar detection, but close enough to be in position to assist the H-500P crew if necessary.

Jim Chiles.

particularly threatening to cancel the mission. Our orders were to assume a high orbit along the Mekong River about halfway between PS-44 and Thakhet wait and listen. Although a fair distance from our orbit, I assumed the Ubon based Lion Control unit had been informed we were flying that night, for we were not called or challenged like I had been by T-28 pilots in December 1965.

Only cognizant of a gross heading to the target, I had no definitive Vinh tap LORAN landing zone coordinates recorded, and assumed that they would be provided should any rescue attempt become necessary. Perhaps Scratch had been briefed on the exact tap location, but I doubt it, for he never conveyed this to me.<sup>32</sup>

The night was calm and beautiful. Although initially quite dark, moonlight began shimmering off the wide Mekong. We waited in rapt anticipation for events to unfold. Like many previous missions, there was abundant time to consult my demons. I still harbored considerable reservations about penetrating the dreaded environs of North Vietnam, but part of an elite team and not PIC of Papa Hotel Delta, I really had little choice except to follow orders. Contemplating the many what ifs involved in the Special Project program, I previously asked Rogers what I was allowed to

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<sup>32</sup> Compartmentalization and need to know was just that. Except for being the primary SAR ship, I was never made fully aware of the tap plan or the Twin Otter's overall role in the mission. Perhaps thinking the subject would curse the operation's end game, survival issues and methodology were rarely discussed during my entire tenure with Air America. Negatives were not pursued. Too much of our operation relied on luck and individual ingenuity; hence, briefings were never overly detailed. This is what contrasted us with the military. Forget lengthy briefings, just go and do the job the best you can.

I assume Jim Pearson would have been positioned to jump his complement of Commando Raiders and guide us to the tap landing zone should it have become necessary. Fortunately, his services were not required. Years later Jim informed me in Emails that he was equally in the dark in regard to the overall mission. He did not attend our briefings and was notified by the Customer to just launch and perform a specified mission. I never recall seeing an Air America fixed wing type at our White House briefings.

tell the enemy if downed and captured. I do not know what I expected him to say. Poison pill a la Gary Powers U-2 pilot withstanding, Buddy stated simply, "Tell them anything you want." His advice was deflating, but deemed honest. Moreover, frank answers like this endeared me to the man.

After more than an hour of considerable bottled-up stress and eventual boredom, we were informed the H-500P crew was returning to the forward Thakhet base because of electronic equipment problems. While the ship was undergoing repairs, Pearson departed his orbit and landed at 40 East to discharge his Commando Raiders. Then he crossed the Mekong River and arrived at the Nakhon Phanom base to refuel. After this, he returned to the pre-set orbit location.

We took advantage of the delay to fuel at Savannakhet. In the interim, we took up temporary residence in Ken Hassel's (call sign Church Bell) air operations office, where we impatiently awaited the word to launch. Finally, we were alerted and departed upriver to resume our previous racetrack orbit.

As the third contingency SAR team, Knight flew locally to help if needed.

When all hands were on station the H-500P crew departed north with the compact ADR slung under the belly for another attempt. Time passed annoyingly slowly, while we circled and anticipated and mentally willed success without incident. As always, strict radio silence was the policy. Adding to drama, the airways were deathly silent, and we did not hear anything for a long time. Then after what seemed like an eternity, "Quebec Quebec" boomed clearly over our assigned radio frequency. This was the code phrase that alerted all participants of an abort, a failure to proceed to the landing zone. A disappointing development, we were fairly certain the crew had not made it over the spiny border, for we were not high

enough to receive a radio call if they were flying low level in North Vietnamese territory. With no immediate explanation as to their problem, we knew the Vinh exercise was over that night.<sup>33</sup> The mission marked the first of several aborted tap attempts.

As it was too late for another insertion attempt, participants were recalled.

Smith landed the H-500P at 40-East for a final inspection by technicians prior to RTB PS-44.

Despite mission failure, the exercise was not over; logistics and cleanup required further attention. Therefore, Pearson dropped out of orbit, landed at Thakhet to retrieve principals and some equipment for Savannakhet and PS-44. After landing at PS-44, he continued to Pakse to secure and repair to the hostel for a well-deserved rest. (Seven plus fifty-six, six-plus twenty-two night, ten landings.)

Knight landed and boarded people for Udorn.

We remained in position until the H-500P crew was safely on the deck for a quick debriefing and en route for PS-44, then we headed for PS-44). After securing our ships we proceeded to the bunk house. (Ten hours, seven hours night, ten sorties.) Already early morning, we ate a hasty breakfast and retired to our respective rooms.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> We later learned the H-500P crew had encountered fog and equipment problems at the point they intended to cross the mountain range south of Nape Pass. Unknown at the time, but what future missions in Laos revealed, the dew point spread was conducive to seasonal fog formation on the Annamite mountain range during the same period selected for border crossings. In addition, the monsoon season in North Vietnam was opposite that in Thailand and Laos.

<sup>34</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 384.  
Ken Conboy & Dale Andrade, *Spies and Commandos*, 256.  
Jim Pearson Emails, 04/30/98, 05/23/98.  
Jim Pearson FEPA log entry for 21 October 1972.  
Wayne Knight Emails, 08/29/00, 08/30/00, 08/31/00.

## **THE CHINOOK**

The U.S. Army tandem rotor CH-47 had been deployed in Southeast Asia for some time. Faced with the fact the war for control of South Vietnam was rapidly winding down and military assets would eventually dry up, the Udorn Agency people long desired a heavy lift helicopter capability included in the Air America inventory. Introduction of the more powerful Twinpac in 1971 had met and temporarily satisfied some lower-level criteria to sling heavier loads to high elevations than the Bell. However, the machine was unable to move large caliber howitzers intact from mountain top to mountain top and larger numbers of troops the new phase of the war demanded. This requirement was even more evident with the advent of regimental operations in and around the Plain of Jars, and like timely air assets, military assistance was not always available. <sup>35</sup>

Exploratory measures had us senior pilots briefly evaluate the CH-53 locally in 1971 and again in 1972, but for various reasons nothing ever resulted from that. Next considered in the heavy lift department was the Boeing Vertol CH-47C model equipped with the latest engine upgrade. <sup>36</sup> Interested in a machine that would lift a 155mm howitzer to 5,000 feet, the decision was made to obtain this model. Attesting to the influence the Agency exerted in Washington and the Air America Company's priority, with hostilities winding down in South Vietnam and ceasefire talks ongoing, we were the only outfit that could legally perform the war work in Laos. Therefore,

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<sup>35</sup> The numbers of the often-ineffective CH-3 and CH-53 (Pony Express and Knife) helicopters and crews, mostly used in the Pakse areas, was dwindling because of attrition and battle damage. In addition to heavy lift operation requirements, the Agency planned to employ the Chinook for black operations on the eastern Trail system in Military Region Three and Military Region Four.

<sup>36</sup> These Lycoming T5511A engines were rated at 3750 horsepower, a large power increase over the CH-47B models working in South Vietnam.



beginning in October, eight low time operational CH-47Cs formerly assigned to an Army unit in Korea, were bailed (loaned) to Air America (under Project Black Hook), and began arriving at the Air America facility in Udorn on 2 October.<sup>37</sup>

Toward late September, Wayne was busy culling and accepting pilot bids under FEPA regulations and cobbling together a class of senior individuals interested in flying the machine. Despite Bob Davis revelation that flight time would be low, something we had already experienced in the Special Project and five hours of instrument (IMC) training required, most senior S-58T pilots opted for the Chinook program. A few were Wayne Knight, Bill Pearson, Scratch Kanach, Bill Hutchison, Lloyd Higgins, and various First Officer volunteers. I was aware of the machine's impressive high-altitude performance from a time in 1968 when an Army crew hovered out of ground effect alongside a 7,000-foot ridgeline in the Mounng Ngan valley and then easily extracted Papa Foxtrot Juliet, Captain Ted Moore's crashed Bell. However, I was happy in the Twinpac program and this was reinforced by the knowledge that with Scratch transferring to the CH-47, I would become the de facto Senior Instructor (SIP) S-58T pilot. Although only a title, including a small increase in pay, the elevation made me feel good. It meant more work, for the job would entail more responsibility training and checking out pilots to replace those transferring to Chinooks. I would also be theoretically responsible to Bob Davis and soon the newly elevated Bill Hutchison. Although my decision to accept the SIP billet tended to separate me from my peers, I never regretted

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<sup>37</sup> Joe Leeker, CH-47.



The tandem rotor Boeing Vertol CH-47C.  
*Air America Log*, Volume 6, #5, 1972.

the choice. <sup>38</sup>

Ground school had already been conducted for "Hook" aspirants by two U.S. Army Warrant Officers, Joe Probst and one other man. In addition to normal work, the CH-47 would be slated for Special Project work inserting road watch teams to the Trails in order to complement intelligence gleaned from the Vinh tap. The ground school was nearing an end when a still active George Doole intervened. <sup>39</sup> Perhaps comparing it to the coordinated, highly detailed Sikorsky and Pratt and Whitney S-58T school, George claimed the school was totally inadequate. <sup>40</sup> Forgetting the above average experience level and demonstrated transition ability of participants, the rear echelon honcho also did not believe that senior pilots who advanced through the UH-34D system were qualified to fly the Chinook. Similar to our transition to the Bells in 1967, Doole wanted to hire former Army pilots to assist with the transition and act as "safety" pilots. <sup>41</sup> Knowing Doole and his "idiotsyncrasies," Knight was cagey. Therefore, in order to placate Doole, Hal Miller and Bill Hutchison were installed in newly created CH-47 management positions because they had previous U.S. Army Chinook experience.

The first batch of three CH-47s (857,864, 103) began arriving, sans blades, by C-5A aircraft on 2 October. Knight

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<sup>38</sup> Those already in the S-58T Special Project, like Scratch Kanach, would remain and fly missions in both programs. However, since they were unable to always be available, additional pilots would enter the Special Project.

<sup>39</sup> Like top military generals, important CIA operatives never actually retire and are subject to recall to duty at any time. George Arntzen Doole retired in 1971, but was probably in an advisory or consultant position at this time. Doole passed in 1985.

<sup>40</sup> EW Knight Email, 07/11/01. Wayne never learned the reason for Doole's objection.

<sup>41</sup> All this accomplished at the time of the Bell introduction was to introduce young pilots with limited mountain flying experience, which resulted in the first accidents.

conducted his first training flight with Army Warrant Officer, Joe Probst, on the 26th. Anxious to introduce the machines into the field, concentrated Chinook training continued for the next four days.

Curious about the new machine's characteristics and potential, toward the end of the month I sat in the jump seat to get a feel of the aircraft, while Captain Billy Pearson and an Army instructor pilot flew patterns around the airfield. Although the cockpit was spacious, I did not like the tandem rotor beast for several reasons: It was very large and its shape appeared conducive to battle damage. Moreover, with dual everything, it looked like a maintenance nightmare and we already had problems with our existing machines. Even though equipped with an electronic stabilization system (SAS) similar to the UH-34D and S-58T ASE, it undulated through the air like a porpoise in water; instrument flying was in the mill, and the original concept was to employ two Captains. This would place more senior pilots in the right seat and me in the left (this changed when First Officers entered the program). I had enough of that nonsense in the old days. Still there were people who opted to transition. Wayne Knight, Bill Hutchison, Scratch Kanach, and Lloyd Higgins were those who chose to fly in both Special Project programs. With additional Chinooks expected to arrive at the Air America facility in threes, additional pilots and First Officers were required, so the program eventually became as large or larger than the S-58T.

One day after the Chinooks began operating locally, George Doole and a group of Washington VIP's were visiting Udorn. Wayne and Bob Davis escorted them during a Chinook inspection. Through early dealings, Wayne observed, and was well aware, of Doole's cruel, mean tendency, a proclivity to glory in abusing, shaming, and embarrassing a subordinate to make himself look good. Doole

could be a sneaky devil. Whenever he asked a person a question, he already knew the answer. George asked loudly what the maximum load the Chinook could lift with the cargo hook. Before Wayne could warn Bob about Doole, Davis offered 20,000 pounds, the correct structural limit. George, actually after giving a practical maximum lift capability in Southeast Asia, answered no. Then he proceeded to tongue lash Davis unmercifully, embarrassing him in front of the bevy of VIPs. <sup>42</sup>

### **CHANGES IN THE TWINPAC PROJECT**

Without informing participants, the Special Project was slowly being modified. Because of the new Chinook program that entailed personnel shifts, there were pilot and methodology changes. Fresh faces appeared on the scene, some people we did not or only casually knew. As a result, prior control over the tight selection process was lost. Gone was the ability of our small group to choose preferred peers who we knew well, had flown with for years, and were comfortable with; those who could form instant good decisions, and those who were considered reliable under fire.

Consequently, anyone who now entered the Special Project and was not sanctioned by the tight-knit group was necessarily looked upon with ultimate suspicion and distrust. Under a previous unwritten agreement, all hands had to agree on accepting those individuals deemed to be compatible with everyone and able to conduct and execute the work. Fitting into the group was highly important and most of us had known each other for a long time. Each had a track record and we generally knew how the other person would react under stress. Moreover,

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<sup>42</sup> EW Knight Emails, 11/02/00, 11/05/00, 12/08/00, 12/09/00, 12/16/00, 07/08/01, 07/11/01.

there was certainly the old military special trust and confidence factor involved. When I was accepted, selection seemed to me much like a Greek fraternity system that used black-ball voting procedures. Not quite obvious, but imminent, this method, as did crew participation in mission planning and mission acceptance, fell through the cracks.

Rip Green was one person in question who suddenly appeared at PS-44. Green had attended the S-58T ground school and then disappeared (perhaps to fly Papa Hotel Yankee in Taiwan). Green was hired on 10/16/70 at the same time as Paul Gregoire and Buzz Baiz and flew on the same plane to Taipei for hire and processing. Green had extensive Skycrane experience in the Army and on Alaska's North Slope. Company personnel appeared very interested in his credentials and he remained in Taipei while Paul and Buzz went on to Udorn, Thailand. <sup>43</sup>

The period between missions while waiting for high level clearance, weather, and a propitious moon phase was used for maintaining proficiency and training new people. On the 22nd, Chuck Low replaced Kennedy as Flight Mechanic on Papa Hotel Bravo. Scratch rotated to Udorn along with Wayne Knight for Chinook training. Feeling somewhat refreshed from the previous night's activities, I was scheduled to fly with Captain Bill Hutchison. Hutch, was a former Air America pilot for some time. Reminding me of a Duke University Kappa Sigma fraternity brother and football player, Charlie Klinger, Hutch was also a very large intimidating looking individual, who effected a mild-mannered disposition. Striving to maintain night flying proficiency, I put Bill through the paces, training him in LORAN

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<sup>43</sup> Paul Gregoire Email.

EW Knight Email, 12/15/00, 12/16/00.

Author Note: When Buddy Rogers was working in Taipei, he met Bob Hitchman and most likely Rip Green. Both were involved in clandestine work. On the basis of this he formed a preference for both men.

and night vision devices. Hutch adapted well and added some innovation to the program. Much to our amusement, he later festooned himself with numerous infra-ray (IR) configured pen or flashlights slung around his neck. (Three plus fifteen, one plus fifteen night, five sorties.)

Jim Pearson conducted routine flights in N774M between Pakse, Udorn, and Vientiane. (One plus fifty-four.)

Monday, we conducted day and night LORAN training. Knowing our limitations and needs, we generally planned our own night training schedules, rotating flights among crews. Primed to participate in the Vinh mission at a moment's notice, but with many extraneous variables intervening, stress began to show. In order to allay this, the Customer did all he could to maintain our spirits by serving good food, letting us fire weapons on a rocky range a short distance northwest, and showing movies on a large screen outside the building. (Three plus fifty-five, one plus forty-five night, six sorties.)

The Customer kept the Otter crew busy. Jim Pearson flew N774M between Vientiane, Udorn and Pakse. He conducted a recon in Military Region Four and then made a weather recon from PS-44 of the LS-40 region before recovering at Lima-11. (Five plus fifty-five, one plus seven night.)

We continued LORAN and confined area training to high and low landing zones. I was becoming increasingly comfortable flying with Hutch and we frequently switched seats, so I could maintain a semblance of LORAN navigation skills. During the five-hour day using the Ubon ground control intercept (GCI), Hutch flew a TACAN approach to Ubon. I was not particularly interested in the maneuver, but humored him by conducting one approach (ten sorties).

The Otter crew conducted routine day missions out of Pakse. Then performed a short night drop, followed by landings at PS-18

to load supplies for air drops at Kong Mi (PS-7). (Six plus twenty-four, one plus fifty-eight night.) Note: probably the Lao Ngam insertion this night.

Eyeing a tentative mission on Tuesday the 26th, we continued our navigation and proficiency training on the 25<sup>th</sup>. (Three plus twenty-five, ten sorties.)

Jim Pearson and Barney Heidt flew routine flights. Jim delivered the Customer to Ubon (T-19) to obtain a weather synopsis for Thursday. Then, after returning to Pakse, he flew to PS-44, picked up a Customer to coordinate mission details with the chief of station (COS) Savannakhet. After dropping his charges at Udorn, Jim repaired to L-08. (Three plus thirty.)

On mission day 26 October, I conducted a training flight with the largely unknown Rip Green. It was a first for both of us.

Later in the day, Jim Pearson landed with Scratch, Lloyd and other personnel from Udorn. Earlier they had been involved in initial Chinook training flight at Udorn and the Customer wanted to maintain the same crews for secrecy and coordination.

### **ANOTHER TAP ATTEMPT**

Thursday, evening after boarding a key technician and Commando Raiders from PS-44, Jimmy Pearson and Barney Heidt flew 74M to Lima-39 to top off the fuel tanks and pick up Pat Landry and other individuals who had arrived from Udorn to monitor the mission. Then he continued to the remote Thakhet East strip where he secured his engines to await further instructions. Aware of a potential enemy presence and concerned about area security, he was informed that the perimeter was defined by barbed wire and sentries were posted around at strategic points around the field.



Within a reasonable time, the H-500P crew arrived to stage for another run into North Vietnam.

After Wayne Knight completed a Chinook training flight with Joe Probst earlier in the day, he and Larry Price were scheduled to participate in the tap mission. They arrived at 40A that night from Udorn with AB-1 technicians et. al. to join a host of observers. After landing, Wayne noticed the Hughes perched to one side of the field on a level, spot-lighted pre-fabricated platform. With the aircraft perfectly level, a bottle installed under the belly was being charged with cooling liquid nitrogen for the FLIR system. Except for the muffled chugging of a generator, the entire setting was surreal. A shadowy, wraith like technician scurried around in semi-darkness while clouds of nitrogen gas billowed upward, enveloping the elevated Hughes highlighted against the jungle backdrop. <sup>44</sup>

We spent the day and much of the evening eating and resting at the PS-44 retreat. The word finally arrived to crank up and prepare to launch. Upon completion of thorough inspections of our aircraft and ensuring that the LORAN equipment was operating satisfactorily, we took off in order to be on our assigned station by the time the H-500P crew departed for North Vietnam.

Toward evening, Jim Pearson and Barney Heidt flew north to Savannakhet and then to Thakhet East carrying the two wiretap men and several Commando Raiders. There, they waited patiently for the H-500P to arrive and the mission attempt to commence. Later, Pearson left the Thakhet site and commenced an easterly orbit. In addition to Commando Raiders, electronics expert Tom Deeble, who not only monitored critical H-500P equipment while on the ground, was onboard the Otter to assess correct alignment

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<sup>44</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/15/00.

of the ADR antenna on the oscilloscope after the tap was installed.

Adding another aircraft to the mix, the crew of Papa Foxtrot Juliet launched to become a third SAR ship if needed.

With moon rise not scheduled until after 2100 hours, long after dark the H-500P crew launched north for the forward base. After topping off with fuel and nitrogen, and boarding the wiretap team, they would proceed toward the target landing zone. Smith and Lamothe departed before midnight for the more than eighty nautical mile flight to the Vinh landing zone when most people were inclined to be either sleeping or at minimum alertness. This time period was considered most advantageous, when human activity functioned at its lowest ebb, with daily biorhythms judged at a minimum.

Within minutes, the Hughes crew returned to the forward base, as the FLIR unit curiously malfunctioned again after so much attention and tender loving care. Without a forward-looking system to cross the mountains at treetop level the mission might be compromised or worse. Therefore, as one of the principle go-no-go items required for the mission, the FLIR required trouble shooting and repair before the operation could proceed.

A general recall was initiated without details: Knight recovered to Thakhet East; then Pearson landed to drop Deeble, the Commando Raider team, and await further instructions.

We were airborne and still in orbit when we received the word to recover at 40A. Amid a haze of spotlights, people were running around in a supreme state of agitation, while frantic maintenance on the FLIR was underway. I was told that apparently sometime after departing Thakhet, the Hughes' sensitive electronic equipment had again malfunctioned. I was surprised to

see several high-ranking Customers among the crowd, including AB-1 Chief Pat Landry.<sup>45</sup>

It was initially unknown when and if the FLIR unit might be repaired in time for another attempt. After a short period, we were informed there would be an estimated five-hour delay while repairs were underway. So not to unduly congest the site with aircraft, and as minimum fuel was available at the forward base, we were advised to relocate south to Savannakhet, top off our machines, eat, obtain some rest at the hostel, and await further developments. We would be alerted when it was time to become airborne again. It looked like it was going to be another long night.

I was assigned a single bunk room in the annex next to the hostel. However, after lying down I was too keyed up with anticipation and nervous excitement to sleep. Moreover, for me, disrupting normal biorhythms was not conducive to slumber. After a short time of aimless tossing and turning, abandoning all hopes of sleep, I arose and went next door to the main hostel where I ate something and drank coffee to raise my blood sugar level and remain alert. Scratch came in later indicating that he managed to nap for a couple hours.

Thursday night had long slipped into the early morning hours of Friday the 27th. After the FLIR was declared operational, although moonlight was no longer judged perfect for NVG use, considerable pressure to complete the mission dictated conducting a second mission attempt.

We were orbiting closer to the border during the early morning hours when someone in the cockpit of the H-500P relayed

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<sup>45</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/16/00. Landry's relationship with the Special Project was from the AB-1 prospective, much as CJ Abadie's was from the Air America angle. Wayne is sure that Pat was kept briefed, but played no direct role.

"Quebec Quebec." Another equipment failure, or weather glitch had occurred, and the mission was scrubbed. This second mission abort during the night and morning of 26/27 October was indeed disconcerting. Doubt began to creep into our mind set regarding the ability of the Hughes-500P crew to complete the mission. They were not actually Air America pilots and never having flown with them, we had no idea how motivated they were to perform. As inane as it sounded, could they just be in the program for the money?

Disgusted and finally released to RTB Udorn, long after sunrise, we headed for home. I was sitting in the right seat and was so tired that I could not keep my eyes open. Therefore, I asked Scratch if he was OK, and if so, was it was acceptable for me to nod for a bit. For the first time since I had been flying helicopters, I slept in the cockpit.

We blocked in to the Air America facility at 0650. (Six plus fifty, four fifty night, ten sorties.)

Jim Pearson landed at Thakhet to load people for Udorn. (Six hours, three plus seventeen night, seven landings.)

After a long night of mostly standing by, Knight and Price ferried excess individuals to Udorn. (Two plus forty-five night.)<sup>46</sup>

The following two days I remained on standby at home attempting to catch up on sleep and waiting for further instructions pertaining to the tap mission. During one of these days, I flew a short local flight as an observer in the Chinook.

Even though a mission was not actually scheduled, we were spring-loaded to instantly react, and preparations for the next was always underway. On the 28th, Pearson and Heidt, now flying

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<sup>46</sup> Jim Pearson Email, 05/23/98.  
Jim Pearson Log entry for 10/26/72.  
EW Knight Emails, 08/29/00, 12/15/00.

Twin Otter N6868, made a run into L-40A to check current area status and the weather. He also dropped personnel off at PS-44 before returning to Udorn and Vientiane. (Four plus forty-seven, five landings.)

### **ADDITIONAL LAND GRAB EFFORTS**

The land grab concept prior to any ceasefire agreement was not solely restricted to the Lao government. During this period Vietnamese battalions began crossing the border to attack both Borikhane and Khammouane Provinces (Military Region Five and Military Region Three). In Military Region Three, Thakhet would traditionally be impacted. It was not considered an immediate security concern for Vinh mission participants and the Thakhet East forward base of operations, but caution was warranted, and enemy movements would eventually lead to delays and displacement of our operations. <sup>47</sup>

By the first of November, the western arm of the Vietnamese thrust overran the Namthorn Buk Kwang garrison ninety miles east of Vientiane. Casualties were considered heavy and many soldiers and civilians fled in terror into Thailand. <sup>48</sup>

At the same time the cross border land grab was occurring, part of an enemy regiment moving west on Route-9 toward Dong Hene, on the 27th, wheeled south to Keng Kok, sending the FAR unit packing. During the occupation the enemy committed some acts of atrocity.

*"Combined [North Vietnamese] and [Pathet Lao] forces drove the Lao Army garrison from the town on 28 October and then pushed west toward Route-13, a major north-south road. Four missionaries, three U.S. and one Canadian, were captured during*

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<sup>47</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 395.

<sup>48</sup> John Bowman, *Almanac*, 327.

*the attack. Villagers report that as many as two enemy battalions are now building a bunker system within Keng Kok.*

*The increase in activity in the central panhandle seems designed to forestall any government push west to capture important towns along Route-9."* <sup>49</sup>

The following day GM-31 and a SGU battalion moved toward Keng Kok. After three attempts the town was recovered on 2 November.

*"Government forces have recouped most of their recent losses in the south. A five-battalion irregular task force on 2 November recaptured Keng Kok, a village about 30 miles southeast of Savannakhet, after three days of close combat. The two battalions of the [Vietnamese] 29th Independent Regiment that overran Keng Kok last weekend have apparently withdrawn to the east to regroup and resupply."* <sup>50</sup>

Another regiment (GM-30), recently returned from Vang Pao's meat grinder in Military Region Two after getting beat up at Phou Seu, was introduced to the eastern operation. Together the regiments began to move north toward Dong Hene.

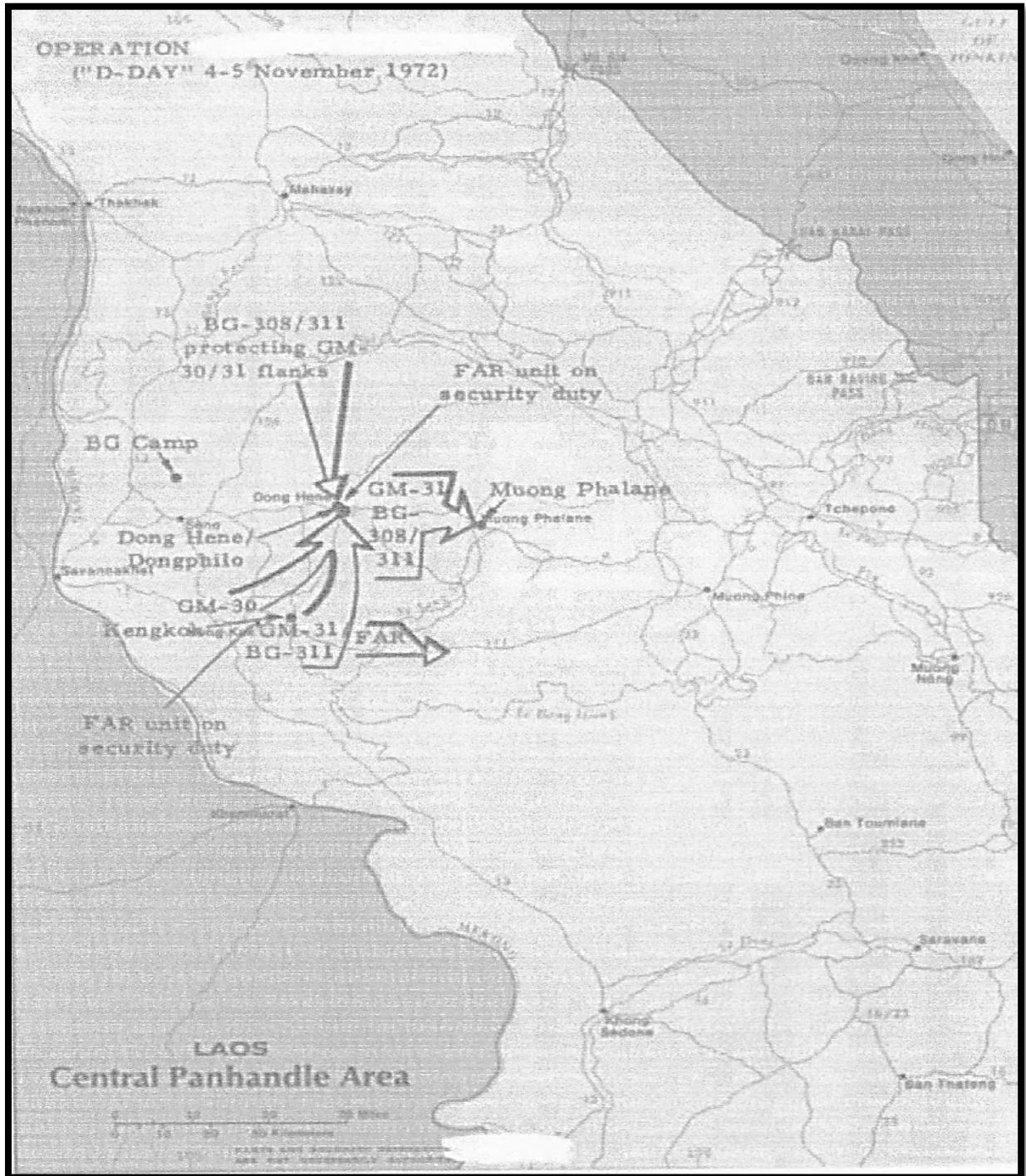
*"In the central panhandle, government forces that drove communist troops from the village of Keng Kok last week are now attempting to recapture Dong Hene, a village [on Route-9] that has been under communist control since early this year. Advance elements of the nine-battalion irregular force met stiff resistance when they attempted to enter the town on 9 November.*

*The [Vietnamese] 29th Independent Regiment, the only major communist unit in this area has one battalion defending Dong*

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<sup>49</sup> CIA Bulletin, 10/30/72, Laos: The communists for the first time have occupied Keng Kok, an important town some thirty miles southeast of Savannakhet.

<sup>50</sup> CIA Bulletin, 11/04/71.



Early November action in Military Region Three to the east of Savannakhet at Keng Kok and Dong Hene. Ahern, 476.

*Hene and the rest of its elements are located along the roads to the east."* <sup>51</sup>

*"Government irregular forces succeeded in reoccupying Dong Hene on 11 November after several days of bitter fighting in and around the town. The capture of this town in the central panhandle, while of little military significance, caps a successful government counteroffensive that began on 2 November with the recapture of the nearby village of Keng Kok.*

*The military situation in the central panhandle is far from settled. At the same time that government forces were pushing their way into Dong Hene, a [NVA] battalion was overrunning a lightly defended government outpost some 15 miles southeast of Keng Kok."* <sup>52</sup>

Another depleted regiment (GM-32) back from losses at Lat Sen and Phou Theung on the Plain of Jars moved along Route-9 through Dong Hene and approached Moung Phalane by the 25th. Overwhelmed by superior forces, the enemy had withdrawn leaving behind a plethora of military supplies. <sup>53</sup>

*"In the central panhandle, elements of a 12-battalion government force have pushed east from Dong Hene, a village captured from the communists earlier this month, and are clearing small enemy units from villages along Route-9. Four battalions from this force were airlifted on 22 November to an area northwest of Moung Phalane, a town not far from the Ho Chi Minh logistic network. Lead units of this force have met only light opposition in moving to within three miles of Moung Phalane."* <sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> CIA Bulletin, 11/11/72, Laos.

<sup>52</sup> CIA Bulletin, 11/13/72, Laos.

<sup>53</sup> Ken Conboy, 387-388, 393-394.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 477.

<sup>54</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 11/24/72.



"...a 12 battalion irregular force is encountering strong resistance from elements of the [North Vietnamese] 28th Independent Regiment entrenched in the village of Moung Phalane on Route-9. The communists can be expected to stage a determined defense there to forestall any government moves against the Ho Chi Minh trail complex not far to the east." <sup>55</sup>

"Heavy fighting in the south continued over the weekend, but neither side was able to make significant advances...government irregulars edged closer to the enemy held town of Moung Phalane with the capture of two lightly defended villages some four miles to the southeast. Another government unit, situated along the western edge of the town, has been unable to move against a well-entrenched enemy force occupying the center of Moung Phalane." <sup>56</sup>

"Government troops...are on the verge of retaking Moung Phalane, which has been under communist control since May 1971. Most of the [Vietnamese] 29th Independent Regiment remains near the town, however, strongly contesting government efforts to secure hamlets in the surrounding area." <sup>57</sup>

"Irregular forces are pursuing the [North Vietnamese] 29th Independent Regiment, which is withdrawing to the south and east after staging an unsuccessful defense of the village of Moung Phalane. This regiment has suffered significant casualties and lost about 40 tons of supplies plus some heavy equipment since the fighting began in the central panhandle in late October." <sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 11/29/72.

<sup>56</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/04/72.

<sup>57</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/08/72.

<sup>58</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 11/21/72.

**TAP DIFFICULTY**

Twinpac project crews reported to the Air America facility at 2100 hours on the 30th. After a short briefing and ensuring that all helicopters and electronic systems were operating properly, retaining the same crewmembers for continuity, Scratch, Chuck Low, and I departed east in Papa Hotel Delta for the 116 nautical mile flight to Thakhet. Lloyd Higgins and his crew accompanied us in the backup SAR ship. We planned to arrive on station just prior to the time the H-500P crew departed.

Wayne Knight had already flown a Chinook two plus fifty-five hours that day. Normally he did not fly at night after a day session. This led him to believe the mission had not been pre-planned. (Anticipating future Vietnamese activity at Thakhet may have accounted for an accelerated mission.)

Wayne, Larry Price, and their Flight Mechanic, departed a little earlier than us in Papa Foxtrot Juliet for Nakhon Phanom, where the Customer he was hauling briefed and coordinated with his Air Force counterpart regarding the Vinh mission. From there the crew proceeded to LS-40A to offload the Customer(s) and participate as assigned.

Jim Pearson and Barney Heidt flying N868, a substitute for 74M as the primary mission Otter, left Vientiane earlier in the day to retrieve key personnel at Udorn. From there, Jim proceeded to Pakse and then to PS-44, where people were alerted to, and prepared for the impending mission. Later Jim arrived at Savannakhet to fuel and pickup additional principals for the forward base. Then, he departed to assume his normal orbit and act as the radio platform relay.

It was quite late when we arrived on station. While we orbited, the H-500P crew left for the Nape Pass border crossing point. For about an hour we failed to hear anything, then a familiar, but dreaded weak "Quebec Quebec" shattered the

silence. The latest abort was disappointing to all participants and grating on our nerves. After the H-500P crew arrived safely at the forward base we were released to RON at Lima-39. More than an hour later we arrived at the airfield, secured our aircraft, and were transported to the hostel to await further word. (Four plus thirty night, one landing.)

Captain Wayne Knight collected his AB-1 charges and returned to Udorn. (Three plus forty-three night, one landing.)

Because of the late mission, Jim Pearson landed at Lima-40A anticipating another tap attempt. Instead, he RON there. (Three plus twenty-eight, one plus thirty-eight night, seven landings.)

With another mission attempt pending, on the final day of the month, expecting a go, we remained at the hostel until late afternoon, when adverse weather, enemy activity, or some other factor influenced the decision to cancel another mission. After this was passed through channels to us, no longer needed, Scratch returned to Udorn for continuing Chinook training. He was replaced by Higgins. Released, we headed 121 miles south for our PS-44 base, arriving just after dark. (One plus fifty-five, thirty-five night.)

Glum crews ate supper in silence that night. Gone was the previously friendly, chatty atmosphere that had prevailed during the early heady days of wiretap training. It was particularly difficult interfacing with Smith and Lamothe, two men we had severe doubts about at this point. In addition, Lamothe's incessant giggling was particularly annoying to all those present and provided nothing positive to alleviate the strained

environment. <sup>59</sup>

Pearson and Heidt were busy that day shuttling people and radio equipment from 40 East to PS-44 and Pakse where they RON. (Five plus fifty, two plus twenty-two night.) <sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> EW Knight Emails, 08/30/00, 07/06/01.

We increasingly believed and voiced our opinion that we could perform the Vinh job using the Twinpac. Except for minute details, we had conducted all necessary LORAN and Hole training for the mission. Over time Scratch had formed a bond with the wiretap team, and as he had already installed one ADR, further training was not considered that essential. Only a photographic briefing on the actual tap location was required.

With this in mind, Buddy summoned Wayne to his office to conduct a long discussion regarding the viability of S-58T crews assuming the primary mission. It did not take much convincing. Pros cited during the discussion were the ability of the Twinpac crew to better maneuver the Spider antenna (ADR), not releasing it until perfectly oriented. In contrast, the ADR, slung under the H-500P belly, had to be blown off by explosive squibs. There were some problems discovered with this procedure during practice sessions. Further touting the pros, S-58T crews were considered better qualified, better acquainted with the overall region, and they operated an aircraft with considerably more power reserve for the critical hovering stage of the operation.

There was only one con involved, that being considerable the tail rotor noise at a hover, particularly while turning. In order to evaluate this, they conducted sound measurements on the Udorn ramp and also in flight. They found there was little sound difference detected between the two aircraft in cruise configuration. However, the S-58T was deemed considerably noisier at a hover. Both Buddy and Wayne agreed the plusses greatly outweighed the minus, but opposition arose from those in the Agency who had initially conceived and established the H-500P operation (do not break my rice bowl). Other factors were the great expense, the excessive time involved establishing the operation and training various ethnic groups, and the loss of face if the H-500P operation was terminated.

Knight was not privy to all the ongoing conflicts, but in the end the Hughes helicopter continued as the primary asset for the Vinh mission.

<sup>60</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/16/00.

Jim Pearson Email, 05/23/98.

Jim Pearson's FEPA Flight Crew Log entries.

**F**lying locally at PS-44 during the day, performing administrative and logistic tasks, Lloyd Higgins, Chuck Low, and I relocated to Pakse for the night.

(Five plus twenty, thirty-nine minutes night, ten sorties.)

On the second, it was more of the same. We shuttled supplies to the plateau early, ate breakfast, and were briefed on the latest developments pertaining to the Vinh mission. We RON at Lima-11 again. (Five hours, ten sorties.)

On one November, Jim Pearson and Heidt, in sister ship N6868, worked out of Vang Vieng. (Three plus thirty-nine, six landings.) The next day they returned to PS-44 to conduct local work. (Two plus thirty-six, five landings.)

Wednesday, the third, loomed as another potential tap mission day. Following some local work for the Gray Fox, Lloyd and I relocated to PS-44 in Papa Hotel Delta and conducted training. Later in the day, Scratch replaced Lloyd, and Len Bevan replaced Low. Then after additional training and checking the LORAN equipment for accuracy, we departed in daylight for the Thakhet East launch site with passengers and equipment. Rightly or wrongly, we were informed that enemy forces were still some distance away, and there should be sufficient early warning measures available to take appropriate action.

Still flying N6868, Otter Captain Jim Pearson had obtained a favorable weather forecast from the Ubon meteorological department, and an early waning moon phase was predicted that would be beneficial for night vision usage. Then yet another H-500P mechanical abort occurred.

As we departed for PS-44 I wondered if the wiretap program was merely a cruel joke, cursed by Asian demons, or perhaps growing pains involved in new horizons. (Ten hours, two plus

thirty night, ten sorties.) Pearson returned to Pakse for the night. (Three plus forty-five, fifty-eight night.)

Because of the lack of favorable moon light (only a sliver), enemy movement around Thakhet, and a need for a thorough FLIR overhaul by specialists, the tap mission was placed on hold for the next two weeks. Consequently, after lunch on the fourth Hutch, Bevan, and I drove Papa Hotel Delta to Udorn. (Two plus thirty-five, one landing.) Still flying 868, Jim Pearson relocated to PS-44, retrieved several personnel and flew to Udorn before terminating at Vientiane. (Two plus five.) <sup>1</sup>

### **CHINOOK TRAINING**

All of Wayne Knight's November flights were in the Chinook. He had twelve flights until the 12<sup>th</sup>, totaling forty hours plus twenty-four minutes, some as an observer in the jump seat. Most training by the Army warrant officers was performed outside Laos. They honed all Southeast Asia-related skills with Co-Captains, and Wayne worked primarily with Scratch Kanach. On the fourth he and others conducted training at Lima-39 and Lima-11.

Five days later, Wayne and Scratch went upcountry for two days of field experience at Long Tieng. They usually trained in teams, half in the right seat and the other half observing from the jump seat. The method saved time and enhanced training.

Wayne enjoyed piloting the Chinook. The enormous lifting capability and cruise speed were strong points. Eventually, they would sling 16,000-pound ammunition packages routinely. He pushed an aircraft to 175 knots one day. That was the red line (VNE) and the ride was so rough that he could barely read the

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Pearson Email and FEPA Log. Jim flew many flights in November, but they were routine air drops, and hauling various items out of The Alternate area. This was combined with considerable training.

instruments. They normally cruised at 150 knots empty and 110 knots with a heavy load. During his entire flying career, he was the most satisfied when he could accomplish the maximum load in the shortest time. He considered the Chinook the best helicopter ever flown, given the constraints.

Flying 815857 on the fifteenth, Wayne and Scratch went to The Alternate and were assigned to work at Vang Vieng hauling loads to outlying positions. All support was at Lima-16. There was a giant fuel farm located there. and their 16,000-pound sling loads were prepared at the site. They RTB Udorn. (Five plus fifteen.)

Day flights continued. Flying another CH-47, 815864, the same crew returned to Vang Vieng the next day to support Vang Pao's operations. (Six plus thirty.) Wayne then conducted FCFs from the 17th through the 19th.

The following day, the crew was back in the field in 815857, flying to Savannakhet to support the ongoing Route-9 operation, lifting supplies and GM troops to the Dong Hene Moung Phalane area, and retrieving captured enemy equipment. (Three plus fifteen, four landings.)

On the 25th Wayne and First Officer Olson worked at LS-32 using 815864. On the way south, they repositioned a TACAN Conex box from LS-353 (Ban Pha Ke, 3,700 feet), located thirteen miles east-northeast of Ban Son (LS-272), to a higher mountain, Phou Kho (6,114 feet), three miles west of Site-272. It was very heavy and a CH-64 had crashed there earlier carrying a similar load. <sup>2</sup> Landing at Udorn, the crew recorded six hours and thirty minutes.

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<sup>2</sup> I was en route to the Alternate one day when I saw a Hook landing at this site. The dust cloud the downwash produced was quite impressive.

Two days later, flying 815864, Wayne and Scratch worked landing zones at Bouam Long. (Six plus forty-five.)

Sunday, the two Captains FCF 815864, and flew two hours and fifteen minutes local instrument training, including two ground-controlled approaches (GCA).

Showing just how versatile the Chinook (815857) was, on the last day of the month, Wayne and Bob Davis recovered a T-28 from the Mekong River, just off the Savannakhet runway. (Three plus eighteen.) <sup>3</sup>

### **MR-2 ACTION**

By the end of October, Vang Pao's Phou Phiang Two Plain of Jars operation had suffered many losses and was running mostly on fumes. In the western sector, efforts by regular government forces to retake Xieng Dat failed, and they were withdrawn to garrison at Sala Phou Khoun.

The general was not finished with his offensive. At the beginning of November, fresh troops of Task Force Charlie moved out toward the southern Plain. The enemy struck back with a vengeance. By the fourth, Charlie force was in disarray, with the troops reverting to Khang Kho.

*"The communists have again struck hard against irregular forces in north Laos. After several days of preparation, elements of two [NVA] regiments on 2 and 3 November carried out ground assaults and heavy shellings against the irregular task force that had been trying to regroup along a ridge about four miles south of the [PDJ]. The attacks forced the irregulars to abandon their positions in that area, and most of them have now fallen back to Padong-some ten miles south of the Plaine's southern edge. It seems unlikely that this task force, which is*

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<sup>3</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/11/00, 12/17/00, 07/03/01.



*the largest of Vang Pao's forces operating against the Plaine, will be able to mount any new offensive operations in the near future. Consequently, the communists are now in a position to confront Vang Pao's smaller task forces west and north of the Plaine."* <sup>4</sup>

*"Several understrength irregular battalions, with a total strength of about 1,300, are being airlifted into Khang Kho to join the 500-800 irregulars holding the government's only remaining high-ground position in the hills about four miles from the Plaine's southern tip. Only last week these troops were driven from nearby positions; they will attempt to secure this area in preparation for renewed offensive operations toward the southern Plaine.*

*The [North Vietnamese] still have major elements of three infantry regiments, plus armor and artillery units near the southern tip of the Plaine. Unless these units have been badly hurt by the heavy daily air strikes, they should be able to deal with [Vang Pao's] troops. Nevertheless, the irregulars latest push will help divert the communists from concentrating their forces against the government's outer defense lines in the hills southwest of the Plaine.*

*Reports from U.S. pilots that the communists are repairing Route-54, their supply road into this area, indicate that the [Vietnamese] may be planning to increase their pressure on this area."* <sup>5</sup>

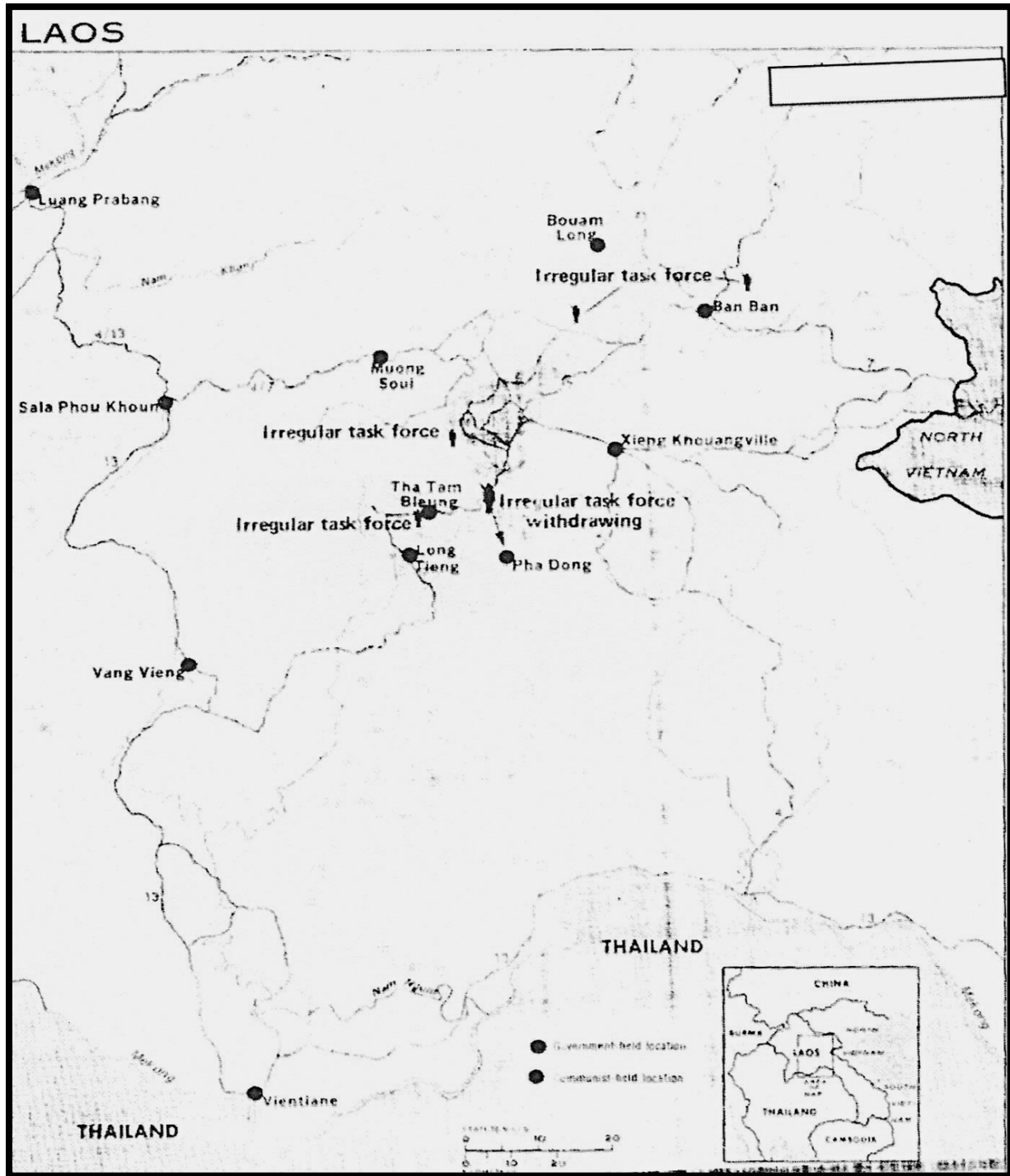
*"Poor weather over the weekend [10-11th] hampered General Vang Pao's forces, and they made no significant headway on the [PDJ]."* <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> CIA Bulletin, 11/06/72, Laos.

<sup>5</sup> CIA Bulletin, 11/11/72, Laos: General Vang Pao appears determined to try again to advance toward the Plaine des Jarres.

<sup>6</sup> CIA Bulletin, 11/13/72, Laos.



CIA map, 11/06/72, showing areas of action on the Plain of Jars and north of the Plain.

*"Heavy artillery attacks, followed by ground assaults by elements of two [Vietnamese] regiments on 14 November, forced Vang Pao's task force to give up positions around Khang Kho, seven miles south of the Plaine. Communist troops ambushed the irregulars as they withdrew toward the government base at Padong, and the preliminary reports indicate that government casualties are high."*

Holding Site-204 until the 14th, the irregulars abandoned the Khang Kho area and were eventually repatriated to Nam Yu. In the center portion of the operation, one regiment of Task Force Bravo moved toward Ban Na, while another slowly maneuvered northwest of Phou Seu.

North of the Plain elements of Task Force Echo was being held up by enemy resistance.

*"...continued communist shellings on 13 and 14 November caused irregular battalions to abandon positions along Route-71 and at a nearby artillery site. Government commanders are attempting to regroup these forces south of Bouam Long.*

*With [two] irregular forces in retreat, the [NVA] appear to be preparing for action against another irregular task force in the hills southwest of the Plaine. U.S. pilots report that Route-54, the main communist supply route into this area, has been repaired and could now support a communist thrust in the sector. If the communists could breach the government defenses southeast of the Plaine, they could then quickly move into the immediate Sam Tong area."* <sup>7</sup>

By the end of October, Task Force Foxtrot successfully attained the northern Ban Ban valley, but the enemy checked further progress. During the third week in November, Foxtrot

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<sup>7</sup> CIA Bulletin, 11/16/72. Laos: The communists have inflicted fresh setbacks on irregular forces near the Plaine des Jarres.

withdrew to Bouam Long and Vang Pao's operation was virtually at an end.<sup>8</sup>

### **AGENCY SYNOPSIS OF THE MONSOON SEASON CONFLICT**

*"As the new dry season begins in Laos, the communists must view the results of their military activities during the recently ended rainy season with some satisfaction. In the north, they managed to turn back all of Vang Pao's efforts to match last year's recapture of the [PDJ]-despite the fact that a full [NVA] division withdrew for service in South Vietnam. In the south, they succeeded in keeping government forces well away from the Ho Chi Minh supply corridor to [SVN] and Cambodia.*

#### **The North**

*As the rainy season began in April in north Laos, the communists were still maintaining pressure against Long Tieng. Their siege of Vang Pao's headquarters quickly ended, however, because of the early arrival of rainy weather, which washed out their supply route [54], and the redeployment of the [NVA] 312th Division to South Vietnam. When the communists abandoned positions overlooking Long Tieng, they shifted the bulk of their forces to a line of hills southwest of the Plaine to check possible government offensives. With the departure of the 312th, the [NVA] were left with four regiments-the same number they had during the 1971 rainy season when they did not make any real attempt to defend the Plaine.*

*The [Vietnamese] pullback allowed government forces to recapture Sam Tong, a former refugee center just north of Long Tieng, and several nearby hills. The irregulars tried unsuccessfully to breach the communist defense line southwest of*

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<sup>8</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 388.

the Plaine in June and July, but relatively few irregular units were involved because most of [Vang Pao's] tribal forces were returned to rear areas for badly needed rest and refitting. The respite delayed any major government rainy season campaign in the north. By mid-August, [VP] was able to commit nearly all of his 6,000 retrained tribal troops, plus some 4,000 troops from other areas, to a major offensive against the Plaine. The military objective was to push the communists far enough back to limit the effectiveness of any enemy drive on Long Tieng the following dry season. Its political aim was to regain as much territory as possible to strengthen Prime Minister Souvanna [Phouma's] hand in any possible peace negotiations with the communists.

For the next two and a half months, irregular task forces tried to move onto the Plaine from the north, west, and south. The [Vietnamese] used one of their crack regiments to hold the defensive line southwest of the Plaine, while their other three regiments--despite heavy air strikes--maneuvered from one sector of the Plaine to another to inflict a series of defeats on the irregulars. [Vang Pao] had intended a simultaneous advance to prevent the communists from concentrating their limited manpower, but the irregular columns made no real effort unless the Meo general was personally on the scene.

As the rains began to taper off in mid-October, [VP] concentrated over 5,000 men--including some of the government's best troops--in a single task force on the southern tip of the Plaine. After making some limited progress, these troops lost just enough momentum to allow the communists to concentrate the bulk of three regiments against them. On 26 October communist ground forces, tanks, and artillery routed the government troops, killing over 100, wounding 200, and capturing many more. [VP] is currently attempting to regroup the remaining elements

*of his badly battered force in the hills a few miles south of the Plaine, but they are still under heavy enemy pressure.*

### **The South**

*In south Laos, the North Vietnamese objective was a little different from previous years-to keep the government at arms-length from the Ho Chi Minh trail complex. But they were a bit more aggressive. Communist preemptive moves began in mid-May, when a [Vietnamese] regiment for the first time occupied Khong Sedone, a provincial capital north of Pakse. Although government troops managed to recapture Khong Sedone in early June, it took them another two months to drive the [NVA] away from the surrounding area. The fighting at Khong Sedone resulted in some heavy casualties on both sides, and the irregulars had to have several weeks of rest and retraining before they could be committed to regain lost ground.*

*At the same time that the [Vietnamese] moved into Khong Sedone, other communists were launching strong attacks farther south against government defensive positions just 15 miles from Pakse [at Ban Gnik]. Elements of one [North Vietnamese] regiment kept up these attacks throughout the summer, successfully tying down government troops east of that important [crossroads] town. The combined pressure in the Khong Sedone and Pakse sectors prevented the government from organizing any sizable offensive operations in the south until mid-October."*

*'Lao Army units met no opposition in reoccupying Khong Sedone, a provincial capital 30 miles north of Pakse [on Route-13].'*<sup>9</sup>

*"In early November eight irregular battalions managed to occupy Saravane-a provincial capital north of the Bolovens*

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<sup>9</sup> CIA Bulletin, 11/04/72.

Plateau-while other government units moved into the village of Ban Lao Ngam, which is on an important communist supply route.

'Irregular forces at Ban Lao Ngam and Saravane...that were recaptured last week have reported only minor skirmishing.'<sup>10</sup>

"The communists attempted to forestall this government offensive by once again attacking Khong Sedone and the frontline east of Pakse, but they failed. The [Vietnamese] are now focusing their attention on eliminating the government presence north of the Bolovens and have already reoccupied Saravane.

### **Prognosis**

The government's failure to redress the losses sustained in the previous dry season leaves the communists in a good military position. The prospect of an imminent settlement in Vietnam and a ceasefire in Laos, however, adds political dimensions to the military situation. An end to the fighting is now obviously uppermost in the thoughts and actions of both sides, and the dry season seems likely to bring a series of attacks and maneuvers in anticipation of some form of in-place ceasefire.

In some areas this seems well underway. The communists staged their strongest attacks in over a year to drive dispirited irregular battalions back to within ten miles of the royal capital of Luang Prabang and have recently attacked the airfield there with rockets [early morning of the 13th].

Enemy units made an unprecedented attack on Keng Kok, southeast of Savannakhet, and broke a long-standing informal

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<sup>10</sup> CIA Bulletin, 11/04/72.

local arrangement by attacking Thakhet, <sup>11</sup> a provincial capital on the Mekong and several other positions to the north near Route-13. The timing of these unusual attacks suggests that they were probably aimed in part at making some limited territorial gains in light of the peace talks now under way in Vientiane. At a minimum, they serve to remind the government that military pressure can be increased if the negotiations remained stalled.

In the north, the course of future fighting seems less clear. It is not at all certain that the [Vietnamese] will mount a major attack on Long Tieng once they have mopped up [Vang Pao's] remnants near the Plaine. Any full-scale attack on [Vang Pao's] defenses around Long Tieng would require a respectable buildup of new troops and supplies from [North Vietnam]. Some troops to fill out the units already in place have been detected moving toward the Plaine, but no significant amounts of supplies have been shipped.

If a ceasefire is arranged in the next several weeks, the communists will clearly control more than half of Laos, more territory than they held at the time of the 1962 ceasefire. An exact comparison between 1962 and 1972, however, is not possible because no effort was made the years ago to draw an [exact] agreed upon ceasefire line or to pin-point troops locations.

Government and communist negotiations in [Vientiane] have not yet come to grips with the questions of a ceasefire and withdrawal of foreign troops. If, however, [Vietnamese] forces

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<sup>11</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 395, During the second week of November, Vietnamese units were closing on the Mekong River. One element struck the vicinity between Paksane and the Nam Kadin River; the other began probing Thakhet. Initial attempts to fend off the enemy advance were not successful. As was so often the case, Savannakhet SGUs were called to address the enemy attacks. By 17 November, two battalions of GM-34 were introduced to Thakhet. They held until 4 December, causing the enemy to withdraw. With the area somewhat cleared, we were able to resume the Vinh tap operation.



*are eventually withdrawn and the government accedes to communist demands that irregular units be disbanded, the opposing military forces would consist of the Royal Lao Army and the Pathet Lao. [Vientiane's] regular army stands at some 48,000 men-including some nominally 'neutralist' units-while the Lao communists have approximately 35,000 to 45,000 combat and support troops spread throughout the country. Over the years these indigenous Lao forces of both sides have not been particularly aggressive or effective. Without foreign prodding they would probably be generally willing, if not eager, to comply with the terms of any ceasefire."* <sup>12</sup>

### **BACK ON THE LINE**

Monday, 6 November I checked into Air America operations at 1650 to deadhead to Wattay Airport on 5-4648, in order to be in place to fly XW-PHB the following morning.

Mike Jarina, George Taylor, and Tod Yourglic, who had worked six plus five hours at Long Tieng in 35F, also RON at Vientiane.

On the seventh, the same day President Richard Nixon defeated anti-war Democratic Senator George McGovern, and was reelected to the highest office in the land, Stan Thompsen, Tom Neis, and I flew north to Long Tieng in Hotel Bravo. I had not worked there for at least a month and a half, but according to what I learned from visiting the FIC office and from other pilots, not much had changed. However, I had learned to reserve judgement until I could observe the situation for myself. We began by supporting local artillery sites hauling 1,800-pound sling loads to local fire bases. Then we worked on operations intended to retake Phou Pha Sai.

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<sup>12</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 11/17/72.

**A CAN OF WORMS**

Toward late afternoon, as I was already considering returning to Udorn, without benefit of a briefing, we were informed to head out to the southern Plain of Jars toward Phou Seu to participate in an ongoing SAR. I was not particularly happy over the assignment. Late afternoon, hurry-up assignments, without adequate briefing or support, had twice caused me grief, and contributed to battle damage--once at Site-72, and another time north of Phou Pha Sai.

In addition, I was not fully convinced that my First Officer was fully up to the task of taking command should I become incapacitated. During dislocation of senior fixed wing pilots from Vientiane, as per FEPA seniority regulations, I had transitioned and trained Stan Thompsen in the Twinpac the previous year. Essentially an airplane driver, he was very deficient in helicopter proficiency and procedures, and required concentrated, often initial, training on some maneuvers. However, Stan was a very dedicated person. He had studied hard, learned fast, and, to my surprise, managed to pass a final check ride with Hank Edwards, whom I had elevated to a Twinpac instructor pilot specifically for Stan's check ride. I had flown with Stan a few times earlier in the year, but had no real feel for his ability to perform under fire. I also felt very uncomfortable conducting a mission in a seemingly cursed area, where I had already been shot once in a Bell during a SAR attempt on a finger ridgeline south of Phou Seu, and had been downed in December 1971 in Papa Hotel Bravo, a couple of miles east of Phou Seu while trolling for Thai FAG stragglers. How

many times could a person be lucky? <sup>13</sup>

Sometime after 1400, Mike Jarina, George Taylor, and Tod Younglich were working Bell 204B N8535F around Padong supporting Task Force Charlie. Someone radioed that there was an emergency, and King, the SAR controller, requested any Alpha Alpha in the area to respond. John Carroll, Raven-20, a newly arrived FAC to Military Region Two, had reported a rough running engine on the southern Plain of Jars, and wanted someone to escort him to Long Tieng. <sup>14</sup>

Mike dropped his sling load at Site-5, then returned to the air. Cruising at 5,000 feet, he headed in the direction of the Nipple, the southern Plain, and announced his position.

There were many helicopters available that day and, true to form, normal work ceased and all crews responded to the emergency. It was the Air America code.

Captain French Smith, in Papa Foxtrot Juliet with AW Wilbur, Willie Parker, and training Flight Mechanic B Boonreung, indicated that they were also in the area. Frenchy, then at 10,000 feet, cautioned Mike to remain high, as there was a .50 caliber or 12.7mm weapon on Phou Seu or in the adjacent valley. Mike climbed to 8,000 feet.

Ted Cash, PIC of N8512F, and his crew of RA Heibel and Gary Neufeld, also responded to the distress call and began flying toward the Raven's last reported position. Ted told Carroll to head north, remain clear of roads, and land the Birddog on the

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<sup>13</sup> If the reader infers the Author's aircraft often received battle damage, he is correct; however, given the amount of flight time and sorties flown, the incidence and percentage of battle damage was statistically quite low. Moreover, most battle damage rarely occurred during "normal" work. The damage generally took place during periods of extracurricular work, like SAR missions in denied areas and other situations over which the Author exercised little control.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Leary November 1972 Notes. Information from Darrel Whitcomb. Carroll had recently arrived in Laos as Chief Raven pilot. He had formerly been a test pilot at Edwards Air Force Base.

Plain while power was still available. However, as was so often the case, the Air Force pilot failed to heed Ted's advice and continued southwest toward foothills leading to the Site 72 valley.

Captain Pat Colgan in N1196W, and his crew of Richard Wright and JE Israel, converged on the scene along with Captain Vladimir Broz, Bill Collier, and JG Demandal in Papa Foxtrot Hotel.

Everyone participating listened attentively for further developments. Then the Raven reported that his engine was running rougher, oil pressure was low, and cylinder head temperature reading at maximum; he could not make it off the Plain of Jars and was going to land.

A sixth helicopter, S-58T Papa Hotel Delta crewed by Bill Hutchinson, Paul Gregoire, and MA Leveriza was returning to The Alternate for fuel prior to flying south to Udorn. They had spent much of the day at LS-32 supporting the two Echo and Foxtrot operations on the northern rim of the Plain. Paul, who was hoping to resolve some marital problems in the States, held a ticket on the night train to Bangkok, with the intention of flying home commercially the next morning.

About an hour into the flight, they heard Raven-20 declare an emergency over the eastern Plain of Jars. Hutch remained at altitude so he could closely monitor the tense situation. While nearing Long Tieng, the crew heard that the O1E's engine had quit, and the FAC was going down on the southwest corner of the Plain, arguably one of the worst places in that area.

Hutch landed on the parking ramp after which the Flight Mechanic attended to the refueling. Gregoire privately hoped Cash or someone on the scene would rescue the Raven before they cranked up again. As the fueling process reached the final stages, air operations officer Greek hurried across the ramp to

Delta and told them to head for the Plain of Jars to assist with the SAR. Because of the current enemy situation and reported large guns, instead of flying direct to the Plain via the Nipple, they headed the long way around toward Padong. Then, at about 1630 hours they turned north toward Phou Seu.

Mike Jarina was nearing the immediate area when the Raven FAC indicated that he was landing. Unable to spot him at that moment, Mike began a 2,000 foot per minute descent while talking to King or another Raven pilot who had Carroll in sight. There was no air cover available. While Mike was descending out of altitude, ground fire commenced. No tracers or battle damage were noted, so Mike continued toward the ground. Then he saw the plane. With adrenaline pumping, he approached the ship from the southeast on a side where the O-1's left wing sloped downward. Flying fairly low, he looked for activity around the aircraft. Then four men jumped from the plane and began scurrying west up a hill. With no sign of the pilot, Mike considered that he might be dead. Then he conducted a high approach close to the plane, closely watching the men who had stopped on a ridgeline. It looked like they were firing AK-47s at him, so he peeled off to the right and made a circle, trying to deceive them into believing that he was departing the area.

Then he returned to the scene low, sliding sideways toward the plane. While hovering at two feet, he positioned the left side of 35F toward the plane so Tod could jump out and examine the Birddog's cockpit, but not so close as to blow the aircraft over. (Flight Mechanic Parker later told him that his rotor downwash was shaking the light plane.)

The enemy was still firing. Although unable to observe anyone Tod returned fire with his M-16. The enemy appeared so close that Mike could not understand why Tod's M-16 fire was not knocking men down. At the same time, Taylor was attempting to

lower his window in order to deploy his bulky AK-47. In vain, Mike kept hoping the pilot would run to the helicopter.

Then it sounded like someone was banging on a tin can. Next, the low-level fuel warning light illuminated, and the fuel gage needle wavered. It was past time to leave. Moreover, the Air Force pilot had not appeared during either the first or second approach, indicating that he was likely dead or totally incapacitated.

Unable to determine how much battle damage was incurred, Mike took off and climbed southeast at sixty knots. Someone asked if he was alright, as every time Mike keyed his microphone, bursts of groundfire were heard. Next, other caution lights illuminated on the center pedestal as he constantly reminded himself, *"Mike, do not lose your cool."*

He was not too worried, for he still noted some fuel pressure and was maintaining airspeed and altitude. He told Taylor to monitor the fuel gage. If it blinked, not wanting to autorotate into the jungle, they would land if there was a suitable place available. Then George asked, *"Don't you think it would be better if we went a little faster?"* Thinking this advice sound, Mike nosed over to effect a somewhat more rapid climb.

Now French radioed with urgency saying, *"Mike, you are spraying fuel like a crop duster."* This convinced Mike that he had no other option but to land ASAP. The first place he considered was Site-204 on the long Khang Kho ridgeline. After he landed, Smith radioed that the place was not safe. The enemy was only half a klick away, and the crew should be ready to leave immediately. Rolling the throttle to the full closed position failed to shut the engine down, so he turned the fuel switch off and let the engine spool down. With French approaching, Mike gathered up his hard hat, map, and RON bag.

Then he walked to the left side of the ship, where he observed fuel pouring out of the fuselage like a refueling orifice. (Only the lower portion of the tanks were self-sealing.)

Smith ferried the crew fifteen minutes to Long Tieng, where they boarded Papa Hotel Alpha for the trip to Udorn. (Mike logged eight plus thirty that day.)

He later asked Tod how many enemy soldiers he had dropped from almost point-blank range. He was incredulous when Tod replied that he did not know. When the men began charging down the ridgeline toward the Birddog, Tod was busy changing magazines. Then, while lying flat on the deck he began firing wildly with the rifle held above his head. <sup>15</sup>

As they approached the southern edge of the Plain, Hutchinson and Gregoire observed a purple cloud ahead in the distance at the same altitude. Approaching closer, Gregoire saw that a Bell, going as fast as possible, was spewing fuel from holes in the left side, a sure sign of trouble.

They were cruising at 7,000 feet MSL, just below a broken overcast, continuing to look for Cash or the downed Raven pilot. They were having problems finding either when Gregoire spotted the Raven on the ground and informed Hutch. As they circled over the downed aircraft, huge tracer rounds began flying past the window. Having experienced 12.7mm gun fire in South Vietnam, the rapidity of fire, large tracers, and high altitude convinced Gregoire that the guns must be ZPU 23mm.

During times like this, cockpit briefings were rare and the copilot normally relied on the PIC's judgement. Still, during

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<sup>15</sup> Mike Jarina claimed that he always did what he was trained to do. Wayne Knight told him one time that a First Officer Mike had flown with several times came in the CPH office seriously complaining that Mike had a death wish. Mike countered it was not so.

Bell 35F was later recovered at an appropriate time, and repaired.

the heat of battle, confusion sometimes reigned. In this case, Gregoire grabbed the cyclic control and pushed it to the right in order to escape the fire, but the stick would not budge--big Hutch was an enormously strong person. He looked at Hutch and saw additional tracers coursing past the right side of the cockpit. Bracketed, Hutch was attempting to turn left to avoid the fire on his side. While both men fought for aircraft control, the net effect of the two pilots' struggle was straight and level flight.

Hutch eventually pulled up into the overcast and they effected their escape. IMC, they became disoriented in the clouds and were unsure of their exact position after breaking out. Having difficulty returning to the Birddog site, they remained two miles to the west.

It was quite late when we headed north toward the Ban Na area. Hearing several pilots talking excitedly over each other, I asked for a briefing. People, likely thinking that, as senior pilot, I was specifically dispatched by the Customer to attempt a rescue, became somewhat animated because of my reputation and previous SAR work. (I was surprised at this, for as my family grew, I had become increasingly conservative.) Moreover, this would relieve them of the responsibility. I was only thinking that, although the Twinpac was equipped with two engines and sliding armor-plated windows, the aircraft still presented a large, lumbering airframe that descended slowly and was an excellent target.

There was very little information available. A Raven had conducted an emergency landing southeast of Phou Seu, one of the worst spots imaginable. He was reportedly spread-eagled under the wing of his plane. Not moving, everyone believed him to be dead and no one desired to risk life and limb for a hopeless case this late in the war. However, USAF personnel wanted



confirmation on the sighting, and they insisted that someone check the FAC's status. The requirement seemed like a total disregard for our safety. Some of us were aware of a 12.7mm or larger caliber threat on or around Phou Seu. I was considering going to the area, but, after learning that there were multiple aircraft stacked overhead waiting for someone to do something, I elected to temporarily remain in the Ban Na area, clear of that congestion and await further developments. <sup>16</sup>

There was a lot of discussion and confusion about who was going to do what and when. Ted Cash was doing most of the talking. <sup>17</sup> It was Gregoire's impression that Cash was going to make the SAR attempt and was waiting for Thai-piloted White Horse gunships (with American instructors) to appear and provide cover. A Raven pilot or King reported that the gunships had departed Long Tieng and were en route to the PDJ. Numerous radio calls provided no further information on the White Horse arrival.

Sometime prior to this, A-7 pilots had arrived east of the stacked gaggle of Bells, while Hutch was orbiting to the west. <sup>18</sup> As per strict USAF SOP, there was a Raven FAC on scene to control the strike on the 23mm located north of Phou Seu that had so panicked the Delta crew. The first A-7 pilot rolled in on a northwest heading and began his attack. As soon as he

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<sup>16</sup> During the course of the cursory briefing, nothing was mentioned to me about Mike Jarina making the first SAR attempt and getting severely hosed. There was also no mention of, or sign of, a Raven or support aircraft to strafe the immediate area.

<sup>17</sup> Although Ted Cash was a good guy, one had to be careful around him during flying and non-flying encounters. He was another mercurial, aggressive, and unpredictable type, who often acted largely on raw emotion. Moreover, he would rarely seek or heed good advice. Because of the close call I had with his Bell during the Caron SAR, I did not want to get too close to him during this or any other SAR.

<sup>18</sup> A-7D jets were replacing A-1 aircraft in the primary SAR escort role.

commenced his dive, Gregoire observed airbursts close behind the plane. The black bursts looked like 37mm fire that followed him through his strike. The wingman followed lead down the same trajectory, and the AAA fire followed him. Gregoire could not believe the jets were not blown out of the sky. It was the first time this type of weapon was used that day. This sighting really got Gregoire's attention, and he did not relish descending into the area, particularly since he was convinced from all the talk that the Raven pilot was dead.

Pressure from somewhere above us mounted to do the job. From the little information I had already been briefed on, the entire operation seemed like a stupid, senseless mission calculated to incur serious consequences. Like everyone else in the air that day, I had no desire to go into that hornet's nest to check on a dead pilot and likely trigger yet another SAR. In addition, we needed the S-58Ts for Special Project work and could ill afford to lose one. Moreover, Wayne, by his own admission said the Company did not want us getting killed while performing Customer work. A Taipei first, although not realistic given the nature of our work, it sounded like excellent advice.

I had cleared the immediate Ban Na area and was slowly proceeding east toward Phou Seu, when I saw four dark White Horse Huey gunships headed in my direction. I did not know what they were doing, but decided that if they agreed to escort me to suppress enemy fire in the Phou Seu or Birddog areas, I might be able to perform the job. However, several radio calls on Guard frequency failed to elicit an answer. When I finally established radio contact and asked for help, an American, Benj Peterson, answered, informing me that they would be unable to assist the operation because of the politics involved (Bob Moberg, Ted Untalan, and Moore were the other instructor pilots involved in the Thai gunship program). It was incredible. We could not use

the available resources. I was really angry and uttered several choice expletives under my breath. The lack of cooperation was discouraging, and did not seem right to me. Therefore, without cover aircraft, or something to strike the guns in and around Phou Seu and suppress enemy fire in the Birddog area, I decided that it would be better to remain quiet, while waiting to see how the situation developed.

After loitering for a short period, I continued north to the edge of the Plain. Then I moved out onto the Plain of Jars at altitude and orbited, hoping to divert enemy attention away from the SAR area. Evidentially, I had chosen a good area to circle, for there was no noticeable groundfire or AAA directed at me.

The Air Farce kept up pressure for us to check the pilot's status. Hutch and Gregoire discussed about what to do next, and agreed to the consensus that they had to give it a try. They were still engaged in this dialogue when, much to everyone's relief, Ted Cash announced in the blind that he was going down to take a look at the pilot.

From my orbit on the Plain, I heard Cash say, "*Aw shit, I'll go in.*" Taking the initiative, he began talking his way through the entire process. He indicated that he would go a short distance north, then dive straight down from 8,000 feet to grass level, and make a fast approach toward the O-1E. Halfway to the ground, he tensely reported that his cockpit window was fogging over from the drastic temperature change from the ultra-rapid descent. Along with his constant chatter, the situation became more dramatic.

At ground level, coming over a rise at top speed, the crew saw the Birddog. Ted performed a quick stop and within seconds observed the pilot hanging out of the cockpit. He was obviously dead from a head wound, as reported by Roy Heible--something we

were already aware of. As they stopped forward progress at a low hover, an estimated hundred Vietnamese sprang from the high grass and began shooting at them. Cash immediately nosed over to avoid the intense fire, began jinking east at low-level, and then conducted an abrupt, high-speed climb toward the safety of the foothills. At one point he was pulling so many "Gs" that Heible was unable to install a new magazine in his Uzi.

Pilots normally get very talkative during periods of high stress, and this case was no different. Cash continued his monologue, announcing that he was getting shot at along his flight path. Almost like comic relief, it was all very amusing during a tense, stressful time of high drama. Every pilot was spiritually in that cockpit with the crew, yet at the same time, enormously relieved that the monkey had been temporarily taken off their backs. But not entirely, for now we had a situation where another aircraft might be committed to a forced landing in hostile territory.

Miraculously, a tribute to Ted Cash's airmanship, or pure, blind luck, the crew of 12F survived without incurring a scratch. Cash had earned bragging rights again. With the show over, and the Air Force pogues finally satisfied, all the participants headed either to Wattay Airport or to the house.

Hutchison and Gregoire, who had been on the Plain of Jars for more than an hour, flew back to Tango-08 in the dark. Gregoire was a happy camper when they headed south. They arrived in time for him to board the night train for Bangkok.

It had been a long eventful day. After we taxied to the parking ramp at dark, I had logged ten plus fifty-four hours and thirty sorties. I later heard from the Customer that most analysts speculated that Carroll first attempted to fight and then lost a shootout with the enemy.

A letter of appreciation from Vientiane U.S. Embassy-based USAF Air Attaché Colonel Curry for the SAR effort was later forwarded to Jim Cunningham, Air America Vice President to Laos.

*"Air America has established a tradition of heroism and bravery in helicopter operations, especially in the recovery of downed [air] crew members. For some time, I have intended to convey my admiration for a job well done...*

*...typical of the devotion and selfless dedication of your pilots. The SAR on 7 November, although not resulting in the recovery of one of our FACs was so courageously supported by your company that it has warranted the respect of all my personnel.*

*Seven of your crews participated in this endeavor (curiously, we were never mentioned)...35F and 12F performed heroically and with complete disregard for their personal safety in an attempt to save a downed airman. The other crews, although not as intimately involved, were there willing and able to assist if needed. It is reassuring to all of us to know that in the case of an emergency that a concerted rescue effort will be made... <sup>19</sup>*

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<sup>19</sup> Can of Worms Segment Sources:  
Mike Jarina Interviews.  
Tod Yourglich Email.  
Paul Gregoire Emails, 02/11/97, 02/16/97, 02/18/97.  
William Leary November 1972 Notes.  
*Air America Log*, Volume 7, #2, 1973.  
Wayne Knight Email, 12/16/00, 12/17/00. Captain Don Henthorn came into his office to register a bitter complaint in regard to the SAR. He was not in the immediate area, but monitored events over the air and did not arrive in the area until everything was climaxing. Quite possibly ill advised, "The crazy Indian" accused participants of being yellow and taking far too long to respond. He indicated that a pilot's life was lost because of our inaction. An emotional Henthorn was very upset, and Knight suspects that he directly contacted some of the participants.

## **JUGGLING AIR ASSETS**

It was disheartening to many of us, but no surprise when A-7s replaced the A-1 Skyraider in the SAR role. Long ago, Wayne Knight had provided us with a heads up regarding the dwindling number of A-1s (one hundred) in the Theater. Looking ahead, there were attempts to utilize other aircraft in the USAF inventory to escort us during SAR and trail watch missions. We had already used T-28s at various times, but these ships carried few stores and had limited loitering capability. A-26 Nimrod pilots out of the Nakhon Phanom base displayed courage, but the aircraft was too large and presented a juicy target that might trigger an unintended SAR event. Cessna A-37 jets were introduced, but proved too fast and with too large a radius of action to keep a helicopter flight in sight and provide a viable escort.

By 1971, battle damage, maintenance requirements for an old aircraft, and transfers to the Royal Vietnamese Air Force had depleted the U.S. A-1 inventory to the point where similar substitutes would have to be introduced for SAR work. (At one point in early 1971 there were only twenty-four A-1Es remaining at Nakhon Phanom.) This affected our SAR missions. When A-1 assets were not immediately available, in order to preclude capture of an airman, normal SOPs were disregarded and SARs proceeded without adequate cover. This resulted in some battle damage, but no loss of machines or crewmembers.

Piloted by competent individuals, the A-1 plane had proved versatile in many roles in Laos over the years. Also called Hobo for close air support missions, the Sandy was assigned to the 1st Special Operations Squadron of the 56th Special Operations Wing at NKP for SAR missions. Escort duty was provided for Air America and USAF helicopter pilots during road watch insertion and exfiltration missions. Working closely with Agency Case

Officers, A-1 pilots provided close air support for Meo guerrillas in Military Region Two and other military regions. Able to loiter and carry enormous amounts of mixed ordnance, the Skyraiders and pilots proved highly effective, and were universally loved by helicopter pilots and crews.

Because of current geopolitical developments, such as the impending ceasefire talks, acceleration of weapons transfer to the South Vietnamese government was underway in 1972, and the A-1 Skyraider was replaced by the Chance Vought A-7D jet and OV-10 (an aircraft already in use) for SAR missions.

On 2 November, Seventh Air Force designated twelve A-7s based at Korat, Thailand, the new Sandy instrument for daily search and rescue training missions. (A-7 assets had appeared in Military region Two for the Carroll SAR.) The next day, four A-1 Skyraiders were handed over to the VNAF, and in less than two weeks final delivery was effected. The final American A-1 SAR escort mission in South Vietnam was conducted on the 7th.<sup>20</sup>

After encountering problems and unexplained losses in 1968, and recalled to the States for evaluation and further testing under other than combat conditions, in September 1972, two F-111A squadrons from the 474th Tactical Fighter Wing were redeployed to the Takhli Air Base to resume combat duties.<sup>21</sup>

On 7 November, an F-111 (67-0063) jet and crew of two was lost. Two days later, Hutchison, Low, and I ferried Papa Hotel Alpha 123 nautical miles southeast to Savannakhet, and then to

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<sup>20</sup> Earl Tilford, *USAF in Southeast Asia: Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia 1961-1975* (Washington D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1992) 124-125.

In contrast to A-1s, the A-7 had the capability to carry more ordnance, but time on station was limited because of a high rate of fuel consumption. In addition, the jet's high speed necessitated a large turning radius, preventing adequate coverage while escorting slow helicopters.

<sup>21</sup> John Bowman, *Almanac, Air Forces*, 410.

Thakhet to be in place and search for the downed F-111 pilots. The exercise was fruitless. After only cursory flying, we were released during the late afternoon and RTB Udorn by 1750 hours.

**"I have been having some good paychecks, but working much more.**

**I have been doing some very classified work lately which I can't talk about. It is quite different than normal [activity].**

**We are not looking for things here [reference to the war in Laos] to stop any time soon. The fighting, if anything has intensified."**

Letter Home, 11/10/72.

On Saturday, the 11<sup>th</sup>, Dave Cox, Greg Burch, and I drove Papa Hotel Alpha north to Long Tieng. With troop movement to Khang Kho an ongoing process, there was ample work. We continued to move men and supplies until experiencing a compressor stall on one of the power sections. The stall was a first in some time for me. None had occurred while performing project work, but in contrast to the high power used at The Alternate, power demand was much lower during that operation. In addition, Alpha was our oldest Twinpac and quite possibly--but unlikely--had original engines.

As per Bob Davis' SOP, we headed for Wattay Airport to RON. and where a maintenance crew was sent to examine the engine sections. (Six hours, thirty sorties.)

### **PRATT AND WHITNEY PT-6 COMPRESSOR STALLS AND THE FANPAC**

PT-6T-3 compressor stalls became a significant maintenance, and largely unsolved, problem in 1972. Earlier in May, while John Ford still occupied the Helicopter Chief Pilot position, a Company engineer from Washington, D.C. arrived at the facility



to investigate our engine compressor stall problems. After a short period, he departed for Tainan to observe the PT-6 overhaul facilities and current procedures used there. After Wayne was reinstalled as CPH, the man returned to Udorn. Over a two-month period, Knight worked closely with him to resolve the issue. Wayne considered him something of a whiz, and he taught Knight and Bob Davis much regarding building a statistical data base for substantiating his theory. His findings and research were ultimately "flame proof"--so much so that not even Director of Maintenance Jack Forney, a contrary individual who normally opposed any previous mind set different from his own, could refute them. <sup>22</sup> The engineer's compressor stall data completely overwhelmed Jack, as well as former non-believers at Tainan. This eventually led to a new PT-6 overhaul practice at the Tainan maintenance facility of complete re-blading of both stator and compressor blades. The method helped, but it was very late in the time line of the Air America operation, and the problem was not fully resolved until after Company operations were dissolved in Udorn. <sup>23</sup>

In addition to positive identification of the compressor stall problem as related to blade erosion, it was recognized that the original Sikorsky dual electrical ramps and engine bleed air system failed to eliminate sufficient sand, dust, and

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<sup>22</sup> Jack Forney Email, Jack insisted to the Author that he had nothing to do with the project beyond installing new units.

<sup>23</sup> EW Knight Email, 11/05/00, 12/03/00, 07/06/01. In addition to calling them boomers, sarcastic jokes were generated about the compressor stalls. A mechanic was overheard quipping that the way to fix the problem was to obtain a flying tug. For a time, all the S-58Ts were grounded for stalls. After maintenance worked on the power sections, the tow tug would pull a machine out of the hangar for a run-up. They would stall during the run-up acceleration check, then follow the tug back into the hangar. The reasoning and semi-gallows humor evolved that if they could only get the tug to fly, the S-58T would follow.

other ingested particles from the inlet air chambers.<sup>24</sup> This led to rapid and serious erosion to engine compressors, and contamination of various air passages and spaces between moving surfaces. This was greatly affecting field performance and escalating maintenance costs.

Recognizing what was required, Company engineers in Washington returned to the drawing board to design and develop an entirely new, more efficient, particle separator for the air intake system, and to reduce compressor erosion to more acceptable limits. Then workers at Tainan developed and manufactured the system. Analytical data and test cell results revealed the new scavenge system to be efficient and highly effective. Consequently, Company management authorized replacing the old system. To ensure correct procedures, a prototype model was installed on XW-PHY.

The improved inlet ducts worked on the same principle of separating dust particles by inertia. However, instead of the former Sikorsky passive system, the new "fix" incorporated a powerful hydraulic motor (using fluid from the rescue hoist) for more efficient sand and dust scavenging. This device was called the Fanpac.

Along with parts, technical data for the new system arrived in Bob Davis' office by early November, and the fleet was

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<sup>24</sup> It was obvious that by endeavoring to hurry the S-58T product to the world commercial market, insufficient research had been accomplished by Sikorsky engineers and test pilots regarding the effect of detrimental inlet air dust and sand particles, foreign object damage (FOD), on the Pratt and Whitney PT-6 compressor sections. As a result, a substandard particle separator system was devised for the machine. Moreover, system testing was conducted on a hard, clean ramp at the factory that failed to duplicate our harsh Southeast Asian conditions. This method not only resulted in inflated performance charts at altitude, but failed to reveal an inferior air intake system. In addition, the electrically activated system not only was ineffective in our theater, but caused a hundred-degree rise in TOT temperature that limited power.

predicted to be retrofitted and operational by the end of the month.

Bob issued another memorandum dated 16 November:

*"We are presently installing the new ducting and particle separator system on all S-58T aircraft...This system should provide excellent engine protection with very little power loss when operating.*

*We will still be faced with compressor stalls until all power sections have been overhauled or had the compressors re-bladed.*

*When compressor stalls occur the aircraft should be flown to a secure area and troubleshooting steps taken (listed). In no case will an S-58T continue to work after a compressor stall incident, until the trouble shooting has been accomplished."* <sup>25</sup>

The process of investigating and trouble-shooting power sections after stalls was time consuming, as the stainless-steel fire wall had to be removed and offset mirrors used to examine the compressor blades. This, and nightly engine washing, was normally only a stopgap to a problem that unfortunately continued. While conducting acceleration checks and testing for further stalls an oil leak was discovered that had to be addressed before we went upcountry. All the maintenance work required considerable time. Therefore, Cox, Burch, and I did not reach Long Tieng until after lunch. I conducted nine local landings and then we were advised to relocate to Luang Prabang

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<sup>25</sup> Memorandum, HS Lui, Manager, Engineering Design Department (MEDD Tainan), *58T New Engine Inlet Air Induction System: Multi-Turning-Vane Engine Inlet Air Sand and Dust Separating Ducts and Fanpac Scavenge System on S-58T Helicopter*, 10/31/72.

Memorandum, All S-58T Pilots Udorn, Robert Davis, *New S-58T Engine Air Inlet Duct System*, 11/10/72.

Memorandum, Bob Davis, *S58T Compressor Stalls*, 11/16/72.

Author Note: The new system helped reduce erosion, but did not completely solve the problem.

in order to be in position to work the next day at Bouam Long. (Three plus fifteen.)

I had not RON at the well-appointed Luang Prabang Air America hostel for some time. Managed by Abdul, the place was normally quiet, and provided a space with rattan furniture set on a cool terrazzo-checked floor. Now rumors circulating about the place and the nocturnal activities of the "Midnight Rambler" abounded. Apparently, an enterprising Thai woman had a thriving business selling beer and soft drinks in a tent across the street from the hostel. The "Rambler" also provided late night sexual favors in the hostel, reputedly with mostly Filipino Flight Mechanics. Curious to see this person, I ventured to the open-air establishment for a beer. "Rambler" was quite affable and provided me with a complementary neck and shoulder massage. I guess she offered more than that, for she and H-34 Captain Dave Kendell disappeared in the back for a few minutes, after which Dave returned to our group sporting a silly grin.

I failed to obtain a full night's sleep, for at 0315 and 0430 hours large enemy rockets impacted the airfield with resounding booms that woke the house. After being assured that there was no danger to the town, I returned to a restless sleep. There was some damage at the field, but none of our helicopters were damaged.

Undeterred by the rare enemy harassing tactic, Monday morning after breakfast, we obtained a sack full of sandwiches, and launched northeast for Bouam Long. Operations at LS-32 were very active. I conducted forty-nine sorties supporting Task Force Foxtrot and Phou Phiang Two. A late compressor stall convinced me that the ship required a thorough inspection at Udorn. We blocked in at 1015. (Eight plus forty-five.)

Following a two-day respite from the flight schedule, using Papa Hotel Alpha, I was assigned local proficiency checks for

Captain Pogo Hunter and First Officer Dick Graham. (IP three twenty.) Alpha was likely kept close to home in order to evaluate the power section problem that had caused me to return from upcountry.

With the advent of the Chinook program, and transfer of several S-58T pilots, bidding was opened up for vacated Twinpac positions. Based on seniority, a person bidding for a slot was required to indicate if they would accept Special Project work. Those who opted for the Special Project were generally favored over those who did not including even more senior pilots. <sup>26</sup>

On the 17th, I conducted all-day transition training for three such types: Captains Al Cates, Harold Thompson, and First Officer Ed Eneboe. Before flying, as was my custom, I conducted a thorough ground session regarding emergency procedures. (Six plus seventeen.)

### **LAO PEACE TALKS; SIGNS OF PROGRESS**

*"The [Royal Lao] government is clearly attempting to create a favorable atmosphere for the ongoing sessions in Vientiane. The official Lao newspaper on 14 November carried an optimistic account of the fifth session on the peace talks on Tuesday [the 13th], emphasizing the similarity of the positions of both sides.*

*For the first time since the [peace] talks opened five weeks ago, government spokesman Pheng Phongsavan addressed the Lao communists' five-point peace proposals and offered specific changes for each point of disagreement. Ample ground for agreement appears to exist on the points dealing with foreign*

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<sup>26</sup> Al Cates Email.

Author Note: This became a bone of contention in the upcoming FEPA-Company negotiations.

*intervention, Lao neutrality and foreign policy, and the resettlement of refugees.*

*The major stumbling block between the two sides concerns the mechanics of an internal political settlement. Pheng rejected the communists' contention that the Souvanna [Phouma] government has outlived its legitimacy, but he did advance ideas on how a new government might be created within the existing constitutional framework.*

*The government's presentation is an invitation to drop the polemics and get down to the business of working out the specifics of a Lao government. Any communist reaction will have to await the return of Phoumi Vongvichit-the high-ranking 'special adviser' to the Lao communists' negotiating team-who left for consultations with Souphanouvong in Sam Neua prior to the meeting on 14 November.*

*[On the 17<sup>th</sup>, a CIA bulletin divulged] Souvanna has invited the communist leader Souphanouvong to come to Luang Prabang, the royal capital, for discussions. Souvanna presumably believes that direct private dealings with his half-brother are the best way to move forward on such difficult issues as Lao cease-fire and the shape of any future government. Many of the arrangements for the Lao settlement were worked out face-to-face meetings between the two leaders."* <sup>27</sup>

*Local transition training continued on Saturday with*

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<sup>27</sup> CIA Bulletin, 11/15/72, Laos: The government got down to discussion at the session on 14 November of the peace talks in Vientiane.

CIA Bulletin, 11/17/72, Laos: Prime Minister Souvanna is attempting to step up the pace of negotiations.

Captain Dave Kendell.<sup>28</sup> Gary Gentz continued as my Flight Mechanic. Alpha still was not right and we experienced a compressor stall, terminating our session (actually I could induce a compressor stall any time I wanted with a heavily eroded compressor section).

The following morning Captain Link Lockett (DOH 9/01/66) was the next pilot scheduled to transition to the Twinpac. Gary

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<sup>28</sup> It was inconceivable how much some of the H-34 pilots drank at outstations after daily operations terminated, and Kendall, considered a good guy with a beautiful wife and children, was a prime offender. EW Knight Email, 12/17/00, 12/18/00. For the CPH to have any knowledge of such activities, he would have to observe the infractions first hand. No one would have relayed this to him. Management's view of FEPA's position to errant members was akin to the Cosa Nostra Omerta. FEPA support for certain individuals was often considered misplaced, and Wayne did not recall any association member doing anything wrong in their estimation. However, perhaps he was wrong, and violators were sanctioned from within, as rules were established to deal with such situations.

Dave Kendell's abnormal activities did eventually come to light in an incident with a bar girl in Vientiane. He beat a prostitute rather badly, and was arrested by the Lao police. He was later released to a U.S Embassy representative.

Wanting to conserve his energy for flying activities, and not for off-duty misdemeanors, Knight did not want to become embroiled in such situations. Still, he applied a ruling in Kendell's unsavory case which turned out to be an original in Air America. Therefore, believing that Kendall required a severe awakening for his wayward activities, Wayne initially fired him. To his credit, Kendell accepted full blame in the incident and swore there would be no repeat episodes. On the basis of this declaration, Wayne suspended his firing decision, and Kendell was allowed to continue with the Company on the condition that he change his wild ways. However, thinking that he might be making the wrong decision, Knight harbored some compunction over allowing Kendell to remain with Air America.

VPFO Taipei, Earl Richmond, was very complimentary in his praise for the way Knight handled the incident. He called it "suspended termination." It became a matter of record in Kendell's pilot file, and with another infraction he would have been terminated. Knight did not recall any reoccurrences.

Years later, I met Kendell's brother at the Helicopter Charter hangar at the Moisant International Airport, Kenner, Louisiana-later renamed Louis Armstrong Airport. By this time, Kendell had been killed in a car accident while returning home after a two-week hitch in the Gulf of Mexico with Petroleum Helicopters.

Gentz remained my Flight Mechanic on Papa Hotel Alpha. Lockett, a bald-headed individual, had considerable helicopter experience, confidence, and natural talent. In addition, he was noted for several record-breaking rescues of people from the 17,230-foot heights of Mount McKinley in Alaska with a Hiller 12-E reciprocating engine helicopter in 1960. This feat earned him the Carnegie Silver Hero Award. (Two plus thirty IP.)

On the 20th, after checking into operations, Al Cates and I boarded Volpar N3728G for a one-hour and twenty-minute trip to Pakse. Al was the newest member to our small Special Project group that rarely changed individuals. It became Al's initial visit to PS-44, and I was designated to train, familiarize, and bring him up to speed on our equipment and operations. All this would be conducted on a crash basis. Our aircraft, Papa Hotel Echo was already at the base with Flight Mechanic Chuck Low. We would spend the major part of the next five days flying and living together. (IP six plus forty, two hours night, ten landings.) One day Jim Glerum was present during a rare appearance. Since I had never received a formal briefing regarding the Special Project, Jim briefed both of us on the subject. Not a lot was new to me, for I had gained a good appreciation for what we were doing by then. <sup>29</sup>

Cates' selection for the Special Project marked a distinct change from former methods. Normally, the process was seniority-driven, sometimes requiring special qualifications (like Larry Price's electronic background), and overall group consensus, to which Knight never was privy. Participants were nearly always selected from the program in which they were currently flying,

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<sup>29</sup> Al Cates, 04/09/00 phone call.  
EW Knight Email, 12/16/00. Wayne was not aware of much overlap between Buddy Rogers and Jim Glerum. Buddy was considerably more hands-on than Jim. It was more difficult to squeeze things out of Jim.



if that aircraft was used in the Special Project. Very rarely did a candidate surface and request an assignment to the Project, but Cates proved the exception. CPH Knight approached a few potential choices, while some pilots were recommended to him by members of the Special Project group. In all cases, except for some of the Chinook assignments, the candidates' names were circulated around the Special Project crew and Project Manager Buddy Rodgers. The final assignment was generally a consensus agreement.

Some controversy arose with Cates' selection. This policy had also applied to Bob Hitchman, who was unsuccessful in his attempt to join the Twinpac Project. With these pilots, Rogers proffered the candidate, likely through social contacts he had with the men either in Taiwan or in Udorn. When an S-58T Special Project position opened, Buddy wanted Al. Had Wayne known about the consensus policy formulated during John Ford's tenure, Cates' inclusion may have been accomplished differently. However, Al definitely was Buddy's man, and since Knight had no reason to object--as he did in Hitchman's case--Cates was sanctioned.

When Chinooks were included in the Special Project, new recruits were required, and Knight forwarded proposed names to Rogers. Knight and Scratch Kanach evaluated each addition. In Cate's case, Lloyd Higgins was the sole dissenter, possibly derived from bad blood between the two while flying in the H-34 program, or a deviation from the former selection process, or pure dislike. Lloyd once actually complained to Wayne about Al's inclusion.

Knight did not recall much unrest within FEPA management regarding Special Project assignments. Phil Payton did entertain the subject for a time as had been evidenced during the final Company/FEPA negotiations. Scratch, who was an avid champion of

the Special Project program, agreed with recruiting for talent and attitude rather than strictly seniority. This hard stance led to his unpopularity with FEPA management. <sup>30</sup>

Over the next three days, Al and I flew more than eighteen hours together--mostly IP training--combining LORAN training, with hole and other rough area landings in rocky and bush-laden areas.

### **LIMA-44**

In late 1972 the ability to supply government troops using helicopters and fixed wing aircraft deteriorated substantially. By 15 November, the enemy had moved back into Military Region Four and retrenched around Saravane, bringing AAA guns with them. Aircraft could no longer land at the strip. The added danger forced Air America crews to air drop supplies to government troops. <sup>31</sup>

*"The communists have thwarted government efforts to re-establish a presence north of the Bolovens Plateau before a possible cease-fire. Communist artillery attacks and ground assaults by two [Vietnamese] battalions forced irregular units on 15 November to withdraw from Saravane...Irregular units*

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<sup>30</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/16/00, 12/18/00, 12/19/00, 12/20/00.  
"Many pilots in other programs knew very little about the Special Project...[Some H-34 pilots were inbound to Udorn] toward the end of the day. Our flight of two S-58Ts [encountered] them northbound over Snake Lake (what some individuals used to call the [massive] lake created by the [hydro-electric] dam north of Vientiane [between Ritaville Ridge and the mountains, and also known as the dam site checkpoint]. One person, perhaps Ed Reid, speculated that every little island created by the rising water was covered by snakes...) One of the pilots later asked Wayne what was going on. He wasn't even sure the S-58Ts were piloted by Air America pilots."

<sup>31</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 397.



The hydro-electric dam site at Ritaville Ridge. Islands still exposed in the reservoir, fed by the Nam Ngum, gave rise to the term "Snake Lake." Mountains in the distance lead north to Long Tieng and the Plain of Jars in Military Region Two.

Author Collection.

*attempting to retake the town are meeting stiff resistance."* <sup>32</sup>

On Thursday, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Thanksgiving Day, while dropping cargo pallets of food and ammunition approximately three miles southwest (XC485330) of Saravane, Caribou C-7A 61-2401 was shot down. The entire crew, Captain John Bannerman, First Officer Charles McCarthy, AFD "kickers" Suthis Chimpaibul and B Somchai, were killed.

H-34 pilots working in the area observed the incident. They radioed Bannerman that another Caribou had been hit recently while dropping in the same area, and cautioned him to modify his flight path or climb to a higher altitude. Not heeding the advice, the Caribou crew continued to drop. During the last low pass, the pilot screamed that the hydraulics were compromised and he was losing aircraft control. <sup>33</sup>

Former USAF Air Commando Bill McShane checked out in the Caribou in 1971. He had performed a lot of cargo drops out of Pakse to a drop zone near Saravane. Hoping to score a hit during the downward trajectory, the enemy lobbed mortar shells at the plane, and at first Bill speculated that perhaps this is what had happened to Bannerman. The pilot relationship with the Lima-11 Customer--Jim Butler, the Gray Fox--was not good. Butler would ask pilots to perform dangerous missions, but would impart incomplete and misleading information. There were pros and cons related to these allegations, but to quell the storm and distrust, an Air America FIC representative was later assigned to Pakse to conduct briefings.

Conducting some final morning training, Al and I may have been standing by to help with any SAR. We were not needed, so Al

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<sup>32</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 11/17/72.

<sup>33</sup> Christopher Robbins, *Air America* (New York, 1979) 191-192, Information derived from recently hired Air America First Officer Mel Cooper.

departed for Udorn. <sup>34</sup> The following day, after some minor logistic work around the area and a nice lunch, Chuck and I crewed Papa Hotel Echo to Udorn. (Four hours, ten landings.)

### **THE COMPANY VS THE FAR EAST PILOT ASSOCIATION**

Negotiations were not only underway in Paris, in secret, and in Vientiane. They were also being conducted between the Company and FEPA pilot group in Bangkok, but with infinitely different agendas.

On 1 November, the Company and FEPA exchanged proposed amendments to the present agreement in Hong Kong. Over the course of the negotiations, the pilots requested an improvement in rates of pay, rules, and working conditions. The Company's proposal as it was later amended, attempted to erode many of the provisions of the present agreement and to deprive the pilots of several important benefits, which included:

1. Reduction of the minimum monthly flight time guarantee.
2. Complete elimination of hostility pay on the date that a cease fire is signed.
3. Sixty days after a cease fire is signed, a periodic review of area pay for the purpose of adjustments in it.
4. Removal of flight time and duty time limitations from both the agreement and the operations manual (thus giving the Company sole control over the important aspect of working conditions).

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<sup>34</sup> Bill Leary November 1972 Notes, Professor Leary cites interviews with former Air America Captains Bill McShane and Ted Mauldin.

Author Notes: Located relatively close to the enemy's logistical trail system, the Pakse area became a dreaded place for pilots to work. Although the problems stuck out like a sore thumb, and continued to become worse, it was not until December that it was recognized in print and addressed by pilots. This will be pursued in the next chapter.

5. A change in the pilots' system seniority list..
6. Restriction of present displacement rights, by dividing each proposed divisional seniority list into three separate seniority displacement groups.
7. Limiting the coverage of the agreement to the Company's Southeast Asia and Far East operation..
8. Removal from the agreement of any operation that may be designated as Special Projects or Special Assignments by the Company. <sup>35</sup>

***"The Association is bargaining with the Company now for the next three-year contract. I am sure that the Company will be very tough this time as they have the hammer this round. It is costing us roughly 1,000 dollars a day for these negotiations. They started the 20th in Bangkok. We have a professional negotiator from the beginning this time."***

Letter Home, 11/30/72.

Information in the form of memorandums slowly filtered down to system wide rank and file members.

Between 15 and 18 November, the negotiating committee reviewed proposals as they were submitted to the Company and discussed them with Lucien Kock, who was retained to help in the negotiations.

Over the next two days, the FEPA pilot committee reviewed and discussed its proposals with the Company.

During the following three days (22-25th), the Company committee reviewed and discussed its proposals with the pilot committee.

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<sup>35</sup> Distribution synopsis of the FEPA/Company negotiations to the FEPA Board of Directors, Jesse B. Walton, Chairman, FEPA Negotiating Committee, 01/10/73.

November 26-29, at the Company's suggestion, the parties began on page one to discuss issues in depth. A few items were mutually agreed upon. The Company assured the pilot committee that progress was being made. Company negotiator, Jim Meals, departed Bangkok for consultations with Paul Velte. (Jim Meals had originally been FEPA's mediator during the first negotiations. He performed with such exceptional expertise that the Company retained him and now he worked on the opposite side of the table.)

***"I thought that our proposal was high, but the Company did not offer anything [tangible]. In fact, most of it was pay cuts. If they don't come across, I am sure there will be a strike. I can see no other way, as we have lost 17 men this year and the work becomes more dangerous all the time."***

Letter Home, 11/30/72

We were completely unaware that, from a management and Langley Agency headquarters perspective, depending on negotiating results, this contractual activity would either mark the end of Air America, or of the FEPA union.

Air America President Paul Velte was conducting regular visits to Southeast Asia during the negotiations. During conversations, Velte convinced CPH Knight that Air America would certainly close shop if FEPA was not defeated. There had to be major overall cost cutting, and most of management believed that expenses could not be reduced without eliminating FEPA.

The wind-down and relocation of pilots and aircraft had been underway for some time, and Wayne believed that many pilots could ascertain the end result: the end was in sight regardless of the negotiation outcome. Like any incumbent entity, the perceived Company advantage was just the nature of the beast.

Still, the type of information that Wayne possessed could not be shared with others at the time. There were just too many variables and uncertainties involved in the convoluted process.<sup>36</sup>

During Jim Meals' absence, on the first two days of December, the remaining negotiators continued reviewing issues in depth through Section 10 of the bilateral agreement.

When Meals returned to Bangkok on the fourth, he submitted a comprehensive package proposal covering every issue. However, the package provided take-it-or-leave-it offers (as delineated above). To add gasoline to the flames, during this period, Meals amended the Company proposal by stipulating an end to hostility pay upon signing of a ceasefire in Laos, the re-negotiation of area pay, and the exclusion of flight time and duty time limitations. The Company held on to most of its proposals, which eroded or confused provisions of the present agreement. A few minor pilot proposals were accepted in part or in their entirety. One of the more important was life insurance. A number of miscellaneous issues and sections were tabled for further negotiation. Naturally, the pilot committee had to take some time to review and discuss in depth the new, and more than disconcerting, proposal.

On the 5th and 6<sup>th</sup>, issues the Company left open for negotiations were discussed. These included in part: general training, leaves of absence, sick leave, seniority, bidding upgrading, displacement, and furlough; grievances, educational allowances, and household effects. Some progress was made on these open issues. On others, the Company agreed to make a later offer.

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<sup>36</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/18/00, 12/19/00 regarding the Company/FEPA negotiations.



On the seventh, the pilot committee responded to the Company package with a counter proposal, submitted as a talking point on which negotiations could proceed on a problem-solving basis. At this point in the discussions, after recording the proposal, Meals requested a recess until 11 December to consult with Velte. This raised some question as to Meals' and Company representatives' authority to negotiate.

When Meals returned, he indicated that the Company's position was the same as proposed on 4 December. He also stipulated that Taipei Vice President of Industrial Relations, Tom Ingles, had been accorded the authority to negotiate. Ingles voiced the hope that an agreement could be reached by the eighteenth, so that they could recess over the Christmas holidays. Discussions on sick leave continued; then seniority, bidding, and upgrading.

As discussions continued from the 12th through the 18<sup>th</sup>, Several provisions were approved. The Company would accept the pilots' position on displacements if they would accept the compensation proposal. The Company was willing to re-instate the seventy-hour flight time guarantee. The committee looked on this resentfully, for it would mean cancellation of hostility pay pending a ceasefire, and re-negotiation of area pay. The only pay increase the Company offered was twenty-five cents in Captain's night pay. Despite its negative posture, the Company urged the pilot committee to submit a revised proposal on pilot pay.

***"The ceasefire is at hand and we are negotiating a new contract with the Company. We are at a distinct disadvantage. They are trying to cut us to the bone where we are trying to better the last contract. Same problems as last time. They are not willing to negotiate in good faith. Our professional***

*negotiator from the States says that he has never seen anything like it. They must be real SOB's. Frankly, I have always taken anything the Company has said at face value."*

Letter Home, 12/13/72.

On the 19th, the pilot committee complied with the Company request by submitting a pay proposal based on the assumption that an agreement would be reached on all remaining open issues, including improvements in several of them. The pilot committee proposed an increase in longevity pay for First Officers, staged increases in hourly pay for both First Officers and Captains, a division of project pay into area and hostility pay, with the bulk of project pay going into area pay and extension of longevity pay to fourteen years.

The entire proposal was geared to a two-and-a-half-year agreement, beginning on 1 January 1973, the amendable date of the present agreement. (In light of what had happened to the stateside cost of living, the devaluation of the dollar, and the threatened change in the status of the federal income tax code, the pilot proposal was deemed moderate. The committee sought to restore the net purchasing power enjoyed on 12 March 1970, when the present agreement was signed. Spreading the increased cost over a two-and one-half-year period, as proposed by the committee, had the effect of reducing the overall cost.)

After a short recess, in order to discuss the new pay proposal with their superiors, Company representatives suggested a lengthy recess until 4 January. The pilot committee reluctantly agreed to the recess, and Jim Meals returned to

Washington to consult with Paul Velte. <sup>37</sup>

## **MR-2**

With the Vang Pao Plain of Jars operation virtually over, four fresh Thai battalions arrived at Long Tieng. These new battalions allowed the four battalions present in the Phou Pha Sai area to be rotated to Nam Phong for rest and retraining.

On the 21<sup>st</sup>, Mike Jarina caught an early flight to Wattay Airport on C-123 617. There he joined First Officer Ray Purvis and Flight Mechanic Demandal in 96W. The crew worked a full day in the Long Tieng area and RON Vientiane. (Ten plus fifteen.) They returned to The Alternate the following morning and worked the local landing zones. In a rare move, they RON at 20A. (Nine plus five.)

Starting early on Thanksgiving Day, the crew of 96W moved troops to and from Long Tieng, Padong, and the Ban Na areas. (Seven plus thirty-five.) Switching helicopters to Papa Hotel Foxtrot, with Larry Taylor and Terry Dunn, they flew to Luang Prabang and then to Vientiane for the night. Vaughn then replaced Taylor. The crew arrived at Long Tieng in the late morning on Friday. At day's end they RON there. (Five plus five.) The Alternate Customer directed PFH to Bouam Long on the 25<sup>th</sup>, where a Special Mission was conducted to support returning

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<sup>37</sup> Jesse Walton, Status of Negotiations, 01/10/73.

Author Note: If FEPA was preordained to be terminated, then it was no wonder that the game became totally bitter toward the end. What the FEPA member rank and file was unaware of at the time was the Agency/Company's plan to dissolve Air America's presence in Thailand and Laos at the end of the Southeast Asian War Games. One could only speculate that, because Company leaders and their negotiators were aware of this, they always held the advantage.

Many of us had worked with Air America for over a decade, and it was inconceivable that our job and way of life were rapidly approaching an end. Although staring us directly in the face, the tragic reality of it was something no one wanted to acknowledge.

task forces. After recovering at Long Tieng, the crew was directed to RON at the site. (Eight hours.)

Cates had been upgraded to PIC in the Twinpac and required a mandatory route check. On Sunday, he, Velasquez, and I departed north before lunch in Papa Hotel Echo for Long Tieng. We worked the entire afternoon moving troops to forward defensive positions. Having arrived late, we continued working until almost twilight before heading south for Udorn. (IP six plus thirty, fifty night.) Mike Jarina and crew also worked at Long Tieng. At the end of the day Mike deadheaded to Tango-08. (Nine plus five.)

On the 28<sup>th</sup>, Jarina again boarded 671 for Wattay Airport, where he joined Phillips and Ueda in 35F. Proceeding to the Alternate they worked for nine plus thirty-three hours. They then RON in the Portacamp trailers on SKY hill, in what was becoming standard procedure. Except for Estrella replacing Ueda, the crew, and the flight time, remained the same for the next two days.

#### **MR-4**

Akin to the childhood game of musical chairs, deadly fighting between adversaries continued in south Laos for important sites.

*"Irregular troops on 21 November moved back into Saravane...and are now clearing small pockets of enemy resistance from the town. Units from the [NVA] 968th Division drove government troops from Saravane last week, but the irregulars remained nearby and heavy [allied] air strikes on enemy positions enabled them to retake the town.*

*Irregular units around Ban Lao Ngam, the other government-held town in the area, continue to report only sporadic contact with small enemy units. The [Vietnamese], however, may be*

preparing for a new drive on the town, once an important communist supply hub.

North of the Bolovens Plateau, Lao Army units have advanced about ten miles east of Khong Sedone without meeting any significant resistance and an irregular force has reoccupied positions at the junction of Routes 223 and 231 some 11 miles east of Pakse." <sup>38</sup>

Toward month's end, another Agency report revealed:

"Irregular forces have launched an operation to retake Paksong, the principal town on the Bolovens Plateau [located on Route-23] held by the communists for nearly a year. Seven battalions dispersed a small communist blocking force and on 27 November were within eight miles of Paksong. Only one untested battalion of the [NVA] 968th Division is now at Paksong.

North of the Bolovens, the irregulars are clashing sporadically with communist units near Saravane, a provincial capital recaptured by the government last week. Four [North Vietnamese] battalions remain nearby, but heavy casualties have forced these units to rest and refit before attempting the retake the town."<sup>39</sup>

Two days off the flight schedule allowed me to catch up on mail to the States:

**"It has been a busy month with me working at least 22 days** [and also twenty-two days the preceding month. It included actual schedule time training new people in the S-58T and other commitments].

**I am now senior instructor pilot [SIP] of the S-58T program by default as most of the old crew went to the CH-47 equipment**

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<sup>38</sup> CIA Bulletin, 11/24/72, Laos: Government forces have regained some positions in the seesaw contest for territory north of the Bolovens Plateau.

<sup>39</sup> CIA Bulletin, 11/29/72, Laos: The government is stepping up its campaign to recapture territory in the south.

*that we recently acquired* [from the U.S. Army]. <sup>40</sup> *I expect to be quite busy for some time. I opted to stay where I was for various reasons. It means a small raise, more work and less time off.*

*No word on any ceasefire yet* [and there are those who doubt that this will ever come to fruition]. *I am wondering how such a thing could be administered in Laos.*

*We are in the middle of negotiating with the Company now, and who knows how that will turn out?"*

Combined Letters Home and to Dan Carson in Scottsdale, Arizona, 11/30/72.

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<sup>40</sup> Some of the Captains eventually transferring to the Chinook program included: Julian Kanach, Charlie Weitz, Bill Pearson, Ed Reid, Bob Hitchman, Lloyd Higgins, Bill Hutchison, Wayne Knight; First Officers: Tony Byrne, Herman Gehring, and Terry Olson. Three of the Captains flew in both Special Project programs.

**O**n the first we began mustering for another snake-bitten Vinh tap mission. After checking in to the Air America facility at 0700, I received a FIC briefing and waited for transportation to Pakse. <sup>1</sup> I started out on Hotel-45, but, after only twenty minutes, we aborted for a maintenance problem and returned to Udorn. Since no other aircraft to the south was available until later, I ate lunch and then boarded Hotel-80 for a three plus thirty-hour flight. It was late when we arrived at Lima-11, and I had to wait for Lloyd Higgins and Chuck Low to arrive in Papa Hotel Echo. As PIC I took control and flew to PS-44 for the night. (Twenty minutes, one landing.) Scratch and his Copilot were also present crewing Papa Hotel Delta.

Khong Sedone was fairly secure, but, further to the north fighting continued around Saravane. However, this failed to negatively impact the local PS-44 area.

*"[Vietnamese] troops moved into Saravane on 30 November following a heavy shelling attack and are now battling irregular units for control of the town, which has changed hands three times in the past month. The communist attack followed a week of sharp skirmishing as reinforcements from the [Vietnamese] 968th Division moved into the area to bolster communist units which had suffered heavy casualties during earlier fighting."* <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Bowman, *Almanac*, 331. By the end of November, Washington movers and shakers approved the proposed bilateral peace settlement hammered out in Paris with North Vietnam. National Security Advisor to President Nixon, Henry Kissinger, was optimistic that the opposing party would agree to a truce settlement. Therefore, pressure was mounting for valid and reliable information regarding North Vietnamese actual thinking on the matter. This was what the Vinh wiretap operation was all about: cogent ongoing intelligence information.

<sup>2</sup> CIA Bulletin, 12/02/72, Laos.

On Saturday, Lloyd (who was also in the Chinook program) and I spent the day training and honing our skills in the Twinpac for the imminent mission. Since Higgins was due a mandatory proficiency check, I administered one at the airstrip. (Three plus five, forty-five minutes IP, five landings.) Since Smith and Lamothe were preparing for the mission and required use of the night vision glasses, to reduce area saturation, we did not fly at night.

An incident at the Nakhon Phanom Air Force Base, an area across the river from Thakhet, and perhaps enemy movement toward Thakhet, set our mission back slightly.

*"The small-scale communist action against the Nakhon Phanom air base during the early morning hours of 3 December, the first against this installation, was limited to some small arms fire near the base perimeter, according to preliminary reports. There was no damage to U.S. facilities or aircraft.*

*The action came on the heels of the first Thai insurgent attack against a government district headquarters at Na Kae, some 30 miles to the south. There is reason to believe that the incident at [NKP]-the fifth against a U.S.-tenanted air base in Thailand this year-was mounted by Thai insurgents rather than by [NVA] sappers.*

*The recent increase in enemy activity apparently reflects a communist desire to disrupt the [Thai] government's three-battalion counterinsurgency program in this insecure province on 1 December."* <sup>3</sup>

Flight Mechanic Len Bevan replaced Chuck Low, and the daytime-only policy to remain proficient in the machine and electronic equipment continued on the third. (Four plus ten, five landings.)

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<sup>3</sup> CIA Bulletin, 12/04/72, Thailand.





CIA 12/04/72 map showing the location of the Nakhon Phanom airbase. Udon, site of the Air America maintenance and helicopter facility lies more than a hundred miles to the west.

The next day I flew with both Higgins and Hutchison. (Three plus forty, five landings.)

On the same day that we were training at PS-44, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho resumed secret negotiations in Paris to continue talks on previously agreed-upon points regarding peace in South Vietnam. Chagrined, the President's chief negotiator learned that the North Vietnamese leader's stance on important matters had drastically changed. After a short break to discuss the new developments with respective leaders, talks resumed on 6-9 December. <sup>4</sup>

### **FINALLY... SUCCESS**

Tuesday, the fifth, was selected for the next and, what would turn out to be the final cross border tap attempt. On the upside, weather was predicted to cooperate, but on the downside, the new moon would provide only a sliver, about one percent illumination for NVG devices. However, because of the current state of the Paris negotiations, pressure from Washington agencies was intense to gather reliable intelligence, so the decision to go superseded previous guidelines.

Because enemy activity in the Thakhet area was still considered a potential threat to our operations, and the Customer wanted to minimize noise and discernable air activity at Site-40 East, we positioned from PS-44 to an isolated section of the Nakhon Phanom Air Force base after lunch. Scratch and Lloyd crewed Papa Hotel Delta; Hutch and I Papa Hotel Echo. We would launch well after dark, assume our standard orbit, and remain on call in the role of a SAR tool. Since essential fuel and nitrogen was staged at Thakhet, the forward base would still

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<sup>4</sup> John Bowman, *Almanac*, 331.

be used by the H-500P crew. For some unknown reason, the Otter crew switched from Jim Pearson to another Captain.

Like previous missions, this one commenced at the witching hour. Using LORAN and FLIR navigation aids, the Hughes faux Air America crew headed north toward the Nape Pass crossing point, at a relatively low level that included nap-of-the-earth (NOE) flying, while traversing enemy-controlled Route-8 at a right angle and avoiding known AAA sites. Just prior to approaching the soaring mountain chain dividing the two countries, the crew began a slow ascent. Reaching the heavily wooded apex, Smith pushed the nose of the ship over and dove down the reverse slope toward the deck on the North Vietnamese side. The crew had studied and restudied maps, memorized aerial photographs, and noted verifiable checkpoints. Therefore, in concert with the navigation gear and NVG, Lamothe was able to direct Smith to the correct landing zone, where the heavily loaded insertion team was dropped from a low hover. After Smith departed for a predetermined hill mass to the west, the men scrambled toward the designated phone line to perform their job.

So far, the mission had proceeded without incident. Now intangibles entered the equation that confused and could damage the mission or initiate failure. Reaching the target, the Raiders noted that the telephone poles were constructed of concrete, and not wood on which they had practiced. Consequently, the staplers were worthless to attach the insulators.

These individuals had survived previous challenges working in the field. They were not only selected for their ability to perform under stress without panic, but to also think clearly and form contingency plans. Therefore, trained and honed to precision by Shep, they quickly ascended the pole and secured the two insulators taps with sturdy tape normally available to

install only ancillary equipment. When all the receiving/transmitting and solar panels were fixed securely in place, the two men returned to the original landing zone to await extraction. Despite the problem encountered with the poles, the total installation time did not deviate substantially from that determined by Shep Johnson and his training partner during training.

Meanwhile, Smith and Lamothe were engaged with the mission's second phase: inserting the ADR in a predetermined direction toward the secondary ADR Scratch Kanach had previously positioned approximately halfway to Nakhon Phanom. Unlike Twinpac ADR delivery procedure, conducted largely by the Flight Mechanic from the cargo compartment, the Hughes technique was more complicated. The relay was slung by cables close to the Hughes belly. At the pilot's choosing, he determined the exact insertion process. As he had during practice training sessions, while oriented in a low westerly hover over a selected tree, Dan activated a series of three switches connected electronically to small explosive charges that, in sequence, lowered, opened, and then dropped the device into the tree canopy. Within minutes, with the task completed to his satisfaction, Smith departed the hill and headed for an unprepared spot in a nearby streambed. Here he was to wait a pre-estimated time allotted for the tap team to complete their task. However, the relocation resulted in unexpected damage to the H-500P. In the diminished new moon illumination of early morning, the NVGs failed to provide essential vision to either Smith or Lamothe. While descending to land, sharp rocks punctured a nitrogen bottle and slightly damaged the H-500P's low-slung belly. Moreover, the landing error rendered the FLIR navigation equipment inoperative. Undeterred by this turn of events, they retraced the flight

track to the landing zone near the tap, retrieved the two Commando Raiders, and recovered at NKP without further incident.

After several aborted attempts for various reasons, human sweat, much cursing, and at considerable expense, the Vinh wiretap mission, a first in the annals of Agency intelligence-gathering history, was ranked a success, but was not perfect.<sup>5</sup>

Since nothing is considered particularly easy during clandestine intelligence gathering operations involving air assets, so many personnel, and the fact that Mister Murphy is constantly lurking around the corner, S-58T crews did not enjoy a trouble-free mission. At some point an unusual vibration in Hotel Echo's main rotor system persuaded me to land at the Thakhet base. A damper problem was discovered on the rotorhead that prevented the ship's further participation in the mission. (Three plus fifty-five, Two plus fifty-five night.) After a brief discussion, and since the tap mission was already well underway, Scratch insisted that I join him in Papa Hotel Delta to continue our role with only half of the original SAR capability.

After Smith and Lamothe were safely on the ground at Nakhon Phanom, we proceeded to Savannakhet for fuel and a hearty breakfast to remain awake. After Echo was repaired, we proceeded to PS-44 to obtain some blessed sleep, await tap results, and

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<sup>5</sup> Central Intelligence Agency policy dictates that successful missions are kept secret. Even though participating, the Author did not learn the reason for the mission until years later while providing information to Ken Conboy for his outstanding book on *Laos-Shadow War*.

further orders. (Two plus fifty-five, one plus thirty night.) <sup>6</sup>

Installation of the insulators on the same line caused some degradation and garbled signals transmitted to the primary and secondary ADRs. Initially unaware of this, and confused as to the reason, on the 23rd and 24th, the AB-1 Special Project Customer assigned Otter pilots Jim Pearson and Brossard to monitor intermittent signals flowing through the system. Packed with high technology electronic miracles, N774M was configured with an oscilloscope to measure the spike signal a reasonable distance from the tap. Based on the findings, Agency electronic wizards were able to clean up the transmissions and obtain sensible messages. <sup>7</sup>

Signals eventually flowed into the Nakhon Phanom computer system, and in turn into Agency coffers. Not divulged to us low echelon pogues, information from the wiretap communication began providing invaluable intelligence to chief negotiator Henry Kissinger and his subordinates at the often-secret Paris peace talks. Providing heads-up information regarding enemy representatives' false assertions, the tap afforded Kissinger detailed knowledge of enemy troop movements in South Vietnam, and later of effects of the 18 December Linebacker Two bombing strikes in North Vietnam. Moreover, the devastating air campaign

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<sup>6</sup> The H-500P was loaded onto a C-130 for transit from Southeast Asia to the States where it became a training vehicle for future missions. Their mission complete, Smith and Lamothe were conveyed to Udorn. According to former H-34 Captain Frank Stergar, that same day, while blowing off steam in the Wolverine Bar in Udorn town, Dan Smith engaged in violent fisticuffs and in the process lost a portion of his ear. Both men eventually disappeared from the Air America ranks. I did not meet Dan Smith again until working for Bell Helicopter International (BHI) in Isfahan, Iran during the 1970s. I never saw Lloyd Lamothe again. In fact Ken Conboy, who was very good at finding and interviewing people, could not contact him.

<sup>7</sup> Jim Pearson Email and FEPA logbook entries.

led to the eventual signing of peace agreements in January 1973.<sup>8</sup>

### **EXCITEMENT ON THE BOLOVENS**

On 18 November, a Thai battalion moved past Lao Ngam toward the Bolovens. Over the next week this battalion and other units converged on, and occupied Houei Sai. On the 27<sup>th</sup>, GM-401 was lifted by USAF helicopters to a point near the village. Combined Thai and Savannakhet troops then moved on Paksong. Against minimum opposition, they entered and occupied the abandoned town on 6 December.

With opposing forces in close proximity to each other, the tactical situation was very fluid, producing increased risks to both fixed wing and helicopter crews during resupply and medical evacuation missions. Moreover, *"the quantity and sophistication of enemy anti-aircraft armament was relatively high compared to most other areas of Laos."* As a result, and

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<sup>8</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 384-385.

Conboy and Dale Andrade, *Spies & Commandos: The Quiet One*, 357-359. Much information was provided by former Customer Jim Glerum.

Later communication intercepts produced static that garbled phone conversations. Experts were initially stumped, until they deduced that the team had mistakenly installed both tap devices on the same wire. To enhance the signal, the secondary ADR was repositioned in January 1973.

EW Knight Emails, 12/19/00, 12/29/00. Wayne was privy to knowledge that Henry Kissinger was involved and that the Vinh tap provided urgent information cogent to the Paris negotiations. From time-to-time Buddy Rogers informed him that good information was being recorded. He also learned that the telephone poles were concrete and not wood. Over time environmental conditions caused the tape to deteriorate and some tap parts fell off the pole. Buddy indicated that from overhead photos his photo intelligence people could see the devices slipping. The signal loss was slow and steady, and eventually resulted in nothing being recorded.

Paul Gregoire Email, 02/09/97, Paul indicated to the Author that at an Air America reunion in the mid-1980s in California a Customer type divulged that the tap was still working. Since this is unsubstantiated by cross checking at this point, the reader can take this recall at face value.

largely because of contracting drop zones, fixed wing cargo delivery technique altered from using impact parachutes from high altitude to 300-foot drops. To minimize further losses, like in the case of Caribou 401 the previous month, drop patterns were varied "*from rapid descents and pull-ups and the use of 'pop-up' delivery from tree top level.*" Of course, none of these precautions proved one hundred percent perfect in preventing battle damage in a high threat area.

This became abundantly clear when PIC "Weird" Neal Hansen and First Officer Bill Crothers (who had an entomology degree) were assigned to fly C-123 54-648 supply drops of mixed ammunition and fresh food to three government positions in the Old Paksong area along Route-23. Even though Air America pilots reported at least one 12.7mm gun in the drop area, the Case Officer insisted that his troops had recently patrolled and verified there were no AAA guns present.

Hansen was approaching the drop zone, south of Toong Set (LS-449) and northeast of old Paksong (LS-180), when 648 was hit by large caliber antiaircraft fire. Several large holes were noted in both wings, and hydraulic lines were damaged. At full throttle the engines struggled to supply sufficient climb power, while the two kickers jettisoned most of the palletized loads. Before long, with no hydraulic fluid left in the system, tail rudder control was severely compromised when the rudder was severed, so Hansen directed everyone to abandon the ship. The two AFDs bailed out, but Crothers, initially reluctant to leave his mate, finally acceded to the order.

Still attempting to regain rudder control of the plane, Hansen circled and secured the left engine. When this attempt failed, he departed the crippled aircraft. From his parachute, he observed the crash. The 123 disappeared in a cloud of dust and smoke; then fire erupted, eventually consuming the plane.



Frank Stergar, Mackie, and Decosta in Hotel-81, along with two other H-34 crews, were working north of Paksong in the vicinity of a new landing zone northeast of the town. Frank was looking directly at the C-123, and thought the plane was too low, when the Mayday was broadcast.

Like previous SAR work, all normal activity ceased in favor of conducting rescue attempts. With experienced, professional helicopter pilots at the controls, the entire C-123 crew of four was retrieved. However, the delay in bailing from the stricken aircraft resulted in crew landings in different areas, and substantial fuel depletion occurred during searches and actual retrievals.

Stergar picked up kicker Sompop, and eventually returned him to Pakse. Flying Hotel-52, Dick Theriault, Howell, and Charon landed and retrieved Crothers and the second kicker, Boonma. Hansen was located several kilometers northwest of Paksong. Because of high grass and shrubs, he had to be hoisted into the cabin. During this process, with the tail hanging low in a hover, the high speed and vulnerable tail rotor was damaged by tough elephant grass. Moreover, the aircraft was approaching a low fuel state, and Theriault soon had to land in the middle of a minefield.

The crew and rescued men then had to wait thirty minutes for Harold Thompson, Jim Sweeney, and "Blacky" Mondello to arrive. All boarded Hotel-53 for the flight to Lima-11. However, Harold's ship also had experienced a perilously low fuel state, so he diverted to Lao Ngam, where he knew friendly troops had recently liberated.

After a long night participating in the "final" Vinh tap mission, fatigued, we repaired to our individual rooms in the PS-44 building to sleep. During the afternoon Hutch, Bevan, and I were flying locally when we heard excited chatter on the

Company frequency regarding the ongoing action on the Plateau. Obtaining some information from one of the H-34 pilots, we decided to provide assistance if the Customer agreed.

Papa Foxtrot Echo was fueled, and a Gatling type 7.62mm six-barrel rotating minigun was wrestled onto the varnished plywood floorboard near the cabin door. The formidable military gun, rated at expending two to six thousand rounds per minute, had been obtained by the Agency to supplement our meager defensive combat equipment, and possibly to assist us in fending off potential ground fire during dangerous missions into enemy hinterlands. Except for the Israeli Uzi submachine gun, provided for crew use upcountry after Captain French Smith was shot down on the Plain of Jars, as "unarmed civilians" we had been prohibited by the U.S. State Department and the Air America Company from legally carrying weapons. However, because of the nature of our work, and increasing battle damage, most crewmembers, even at the threat of termination, chose to disregard this mandate and carried a hodgepodge of weapons gathered from various sources. As long as we exercised discretion, a realistic local management turned a blind eye to this, even providing lockers to store our personal weapons in the operations building.

Since no hard points existed on the Twinpac for weapon attachment, the minigun was securely mounted on a thick wooden plate. The total package required a battery for power, and an electric motor. An M-60 machine gun and ammunition backed up the minigun.

Feeling pretty cocky carrying our six-barrel mechanism of death, we departed east in the direction of Lao Ngam. I was occupying the left seat, when, not long after takeoff, out of the corner of my right eye, I suddenly spied an Air America twin engine Volpar converging on us. It was obvious that the pilot

did not see us, and the plane was moving at a high rate of speed from the right, at an acute angle that would certainly cross our path. Failing to initiate evasive action, it was also obvious that Hutch did not see the aircraft. In all the annals of aviation, nanoseconds often counted in life or death. With the plane so close I could actually see the pilot's head. Alarmed, and with no time to alert Hutch to an imminent collision, I aggressively seized the controls and maneuvered to avoid a crash. Once the danger was over there was nothing to say, so I turned the aircraft back over to Hutch as if the incident had never happened. <sup>9</sup>

As H-34 crews were in the process of landing, we arrived at an overgrown grassy strip surrounded by trees. I had not worked in the area for a long time and was unaware of the current state of activity. Therefore, not wanting to alert other pilots not in the Special Project to the fact that we carried a minigun, but at the same time wanting to provide them maximum protection, I assumed a steady hover over the western tree line about three-quarters of the way down strip. From this vantage point in the rectangle, Bevan was able to cover the south and eastern perimeters and the H-34s. We were not there long. While fuel was ferried in from Lima-11, crew and passengers transferred to another ship and launched for Pakse. The remaining H-34 crews went back to work.

The successful SAR over, we returned to PS-44, satisfied that we had contributed to the operation, relieved boredom normally associated with repetitive training, and hopefully

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<sup>9</sup> An event such as this occurred on a HUS-1 flight from MCAB at New River, North Carolina, to NAS Jacksonville, Florida, for heavy maintenance when the PIC was descending into powerline wires. I forcefully took control of the aircraft at the last moment and we barely avoided what could have been a substantial mess.

preserved the secrecy that we had the use of a high-tech military weapon. (Three plus ten, five landings.) <sup>10</sup>

Thursday morning and afternoon, we continued leisurely proficiency training. Leaving Echo for another crew to fly, we deadheaded home on Volpar N9157Z, likely the same airplane we had nearly tangled horns with the day before. <sup>11</sup>

**"...the enemy has brought all their AAA guns to bear in certain areas [Pakse]. Some of the pilots refuse to fly into these areas with good reason. It is all coming to a head now. I suspect it will be resolved, but I am not exactly sure how. We have had two large fixed wing aircraft shot down in this particular [Pakse] area in the last month. Helicopters have been hit but their luck holds and no one has been lost yet. The pressure is very bad both on the Customer and the pilots at this particular phase of the war."**

Letter Home, 12/13/72.

Like Saravane, the Plateau conflict was reaching increasingly dangerous proportions, so much so that some pilots refused to conduct missions. It became a no-win situation,

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<sup>10</sup> Neal Hansen, on the way to Udorn in a Caribou flown by Jim Ackley and Dick Stewart Hansen penciled the aircraft and crews involved in the extended crew transfer on the back of a yellow Air America chit book. Captain Hansen's recall of the event was slightly skewed, and not identical to the Author's, particularly the comment regarding our participation in returning the crew to Pakse.

CIA telegram regarding the C-123 incident, 12/23/72.

CIA Corporate Files, Box 61, Aircraft Accident/Incident Report, C-123K, 54-648.

Frank Stergar Email, 06/08/96.

Joe Leeker, H-34s, Hotel-52, The aircraft was repaired on 22 December and flown to safety.

<sup>11</sup> The Author talked to Bill Crothers sometime after the event. He candidly briefed me about his reluctance to leave Hansen and the delay in jumping from 648.

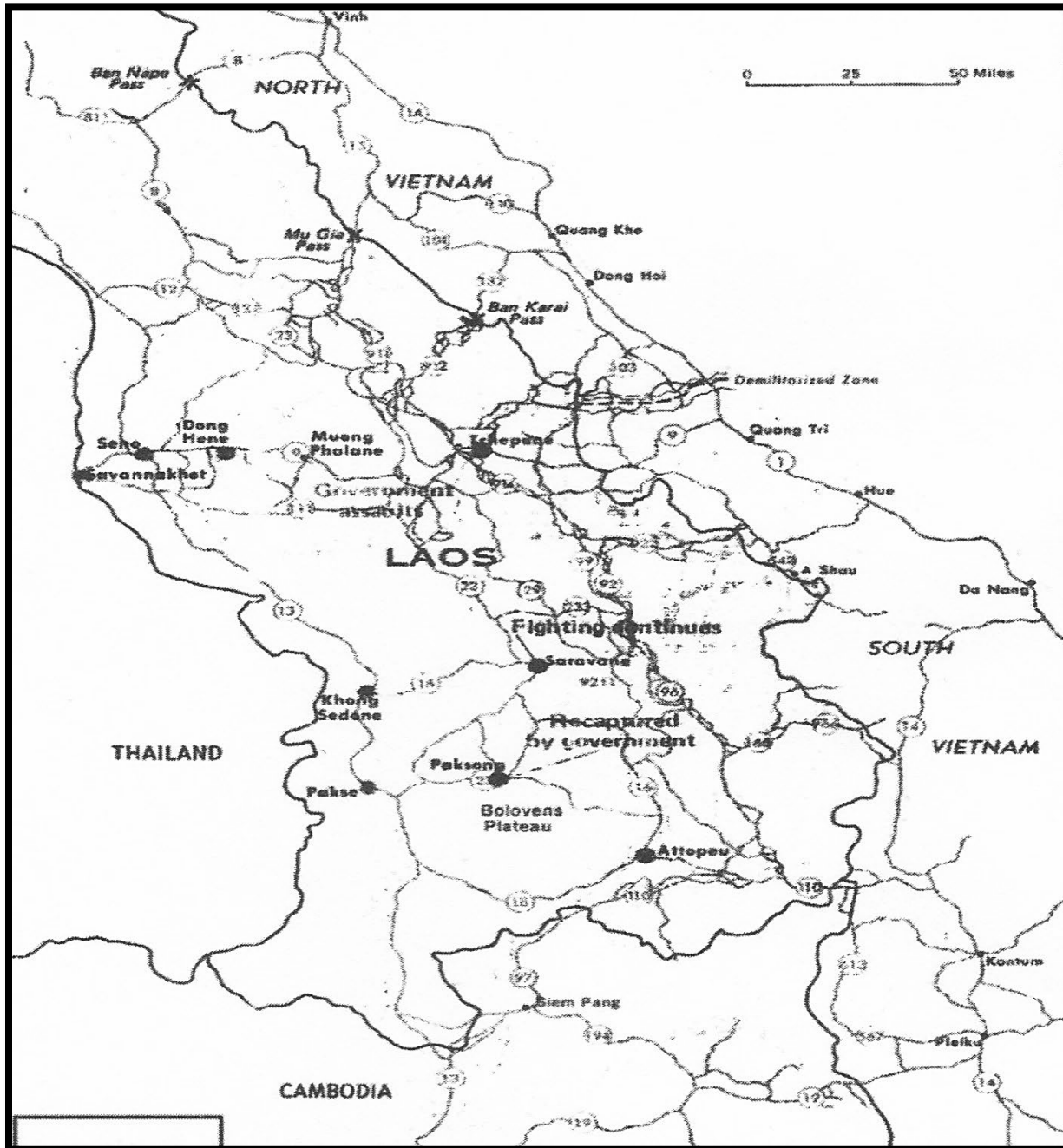
since, in the Customer's mind, the Thai and Lao SGU troops still had to be supplied and reinforced, and their seriously wounded evacuated.

On the seventh, Captain Harold Miller and other crewmembers arrived at Pakse for flight duty, and were briefed on known 37mm guns located east, southeast, and west of Paksong. Following the briefing, Hal consulted departing crews to corroborate the Customer's information. After the incident of the previous day, none of the pilots was optimistic. To a man they considered the situation serious enough to warrant individual and voluntary acceptance of missions. This seemed reasonable and became the norm.

Numerous 37mm and one suspected 23mm gun forced H-34 pilots to approach and land at the Paksong positions from the north. Pilots commenced a power dive five miles from target in order to arrive at treetop level for a two-mile final. Departures utilized the same flight path, but since maximum loads were carried in order to minimize required trips into the area, full power requirements restricted a rapid, high-speed ascent. The slow climb potentially exposed departing ships to attack and battle damage.

Since the same route had been employed for more than a week, the Customer was apprised that the enemy would certainly position guns to deny further use of this supply approach path. Furthermore, it was reiterated that it was essential for ground forces to move out of their camp and maintain a clear path to their encampment. The Customer was blasé about this declaration, asserting that, if and when, the flight path was indeed compromised, then another supply route would have to be found.

During the afternoon of the 9th, while using the established approach-departure corridor, Miller was climbing out of the landing zone in Hotel-70, when accosted by 12.7mm or



CIA map of Military Region Three and Military Region Four, 12/08/72. Upper left portion of Military Region Three shows the Nape Pass where the H-500P crew and tap team penetrated North Vietnam for the Vinh phone tap mission.

larger fire. He attempted to alert and direct the duty Raven FAC and T-28 pilots toward the gun, but low overcast conditions prevented air strikes.

The following day the route was moved further east to avoid the AAA. Close to noon, a flight was mounted using the same approach. While carrying a load of soldiers, Captain Boonrat Com-intra and his crew of Hotel-59 encountered heavy fire and battle damage to the tail rotor drive shaft and aft fuselage at 2,000 feet, three miles northeast of Paksong. Fire ignited inside the cabin section, but was quickly extinguished by the Flight Mechanic. Boonrat aborted and returned to Pakse with two wounded. <sup>12</sup> Because of the unexpected action, unwilling to patrol the immediate area, the other H-34 crews elected to terminate using this corridor to supply troops.

The Customer suggested that the pilots select a new route from the south, which a H-500 pilot had recently accomplished. Talking to the pilot, however, they discovered that he had used an altitude in excess of 7,000 feet. Next, Hal and the other pilots went to the AOC building to converse with Raven pilots. They insisted that there was no safe way in or out of the landing zones. Moreover, one of the two enemy battalions in the area contained an anti-aircraft unit and a suspected 23mmgun was located somewhere to the south. <sup>13</sup>

Danger continued for Air America H-34 pilots on 22 December, when Captain Russ Carpenter, First Officer D. Walker, and Flight Mechanic T. Sisawat were hit by gunfire in Hotel-52 while conducting a medevac two miles south of New Paksong. With the ship badly crippled in the transmission and the fuselage,

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<sup>12</sup> Joe Leeker, The Aircraft of Air America, H-34s, Hotel-59. Bill Leary 10 December 1972 Notes.

<sup>13</sup> Harold Miller Statement regarding the situation in the Pakse area, and the refusal of one pilot to volunteer for Paksong missions, 12/13/72.

Carpenter conducted a forced landing at Site-180. Hotel-22 was recovered by a Chinook crew the same day. <sup>14</sup>

### **HOT SOUP**

With the situation volatile and Allied air not always available when needed, unorthodox methods called "hot soup" were sometimes employed to supplement USAF and RLAFF resources, and to aid government forces in disrupting and dislodging enemy advances.

In lieu of close air support during the very early days of the Lao war in 1961, the "hot soup" concept was conceived and implemented by U.S. Army White Star Special Forces personnel, with the aid of willing H-34 crews. <sup>15</sup> The operation was not guaranteed safe for vulnerable helicopters. Delivery required slow flight, or a hover high out of ground effect to enhance an accurate delivery, and not all crews were willing to participate in such dangerous work. Then, with the advent of USAF participation in the Lao war in 1964, "hot soup" was only sporadically used by fixed wing crews, and other "dirty tricks" were generally abandoned when "discovered" and considered politically unacceptable as pressure mounted from the ambassador.

Later in the war, with friendly air either drying up or in short supply, in order to slow the Vietnamese 9th Regiment advance on the Bolovens, Jim Butler and Joe Glasgow collaborated with several aggressive fixed wing pilots willing to attempt other methods.

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<sup>14</sup> Joe Leeker, H-34s, Hotel-52.  
Bill Leary December 1972 Notes.

<sup>15</sup> A handful of RLAFF T-6 planes were the only strike aircraft available. Not allowed to bomb at first, equipped with only rocket and machineguns, they were considered relatively ineffective from a pilot and ordnance viewpoint.



When normal napalm delivery failed to dislodge Vietnamese troops from a hilltop, where the enemy was entrenched in deep spider holes and the napalm did not penetrate the holes, and burned too fast, another method was conceived. C-123, Caribou, and Otter crews, experienced in dropping cargo, were recruited to deliver drummed contaminated petroleum products on enemy positions, which would then be hit with napalm. Because no fire resulted from this method, the "hot soup" method was tried. Three drums secured to a wooded pallet were rolled out the back or open door of the aircraft. If timed correctly, after hitting the ground the volatile mixture would seep into the spider holes before exploding. The tactic worked, but was abandoned as being too risky. <sup>16</sup>

The basics of "hot soup" were not complicated. Tide detergent, soap flakes, dry napalm, or any other thickening agent available was added to fifty-five-gallon steel drums of gasoline to simulate a napalm mixture. Then, thermite grenades or other high explosive devices were taped to opposite sides of the barrel to ensure ignition of the mixture. Lanyards and static lines were attached to the safety pins in order to activate the grenade after delivery by either fixed wing or helicopter crews. Depending on the timing and accuracy of the drums dropped on enemy positions, resulting explosions and damage from the jellied gasoline could be quite spectacular. <sup>17</sup>

One morning the Pakse Customer assigned Captain Jim Pearson to drop "hot soup" in the Paksong area. Jim, who would attempt

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<sup>16</sup> Bill Leary December 1972 Notes, Information derived from Joseph H. Glasgow.

<sup>17</sup> Another simpler bombing method using Air America aircraft was employed by White Star advisors in the early days. A grenade with the pin removed was carefully inserted in an empty glass Skippy peanut jar. Dropped from an aircraft the jar shattered upon ground contact. No longer confined to the jar, the spoon released, the igniter activated, followed by an explosion.

anything reasonable for the Customer, agreed. Totaling over 2,000 pounds, six barrels of the deadly blend were loaded in the Otter. Jim departed, ascending the Plateau along Route-23 to link up with a Raven FAC, who would direct him to a target.

The on-scene Raven pilot indicated that he had identified a lucrative target, and would mark the position with two white phosphorous rockets (Willy Pete). Jim was advised to bomb the forward edge of the smoke.

Jim had never worked with "hot soup," before, so he had to quickly devise a reasonable delivery plan. He calculated that accuracy could only be achieved by flying straight toward the objective. With the target identified, he climbed to 1,200 feet AGL, slowed to eighty knots, and activated ten-degree flaps. Then he commenced a steep dive toward the white smoke plume. When the smoke loomed large in his windscreen, he rang the drop bell, alerting the kicker and Customer to push two barrels out the door. Grenade pins were extracted as planned and the lethal drums plummeted toward the target. At the same time, Jim rapidly ascended and rolled to the left to observe the results of his effort. The barrels hit where directed, gasoline splattered over a wide area, and a large fireball ensued. Using the same procedure, he hit two additional targets before returning to Pakse. After four more loads of "hot soup" were delivered during the day, the enemy advance was considered temporarily halted.<sup>18</sup>

*"On 7 and 8 December, [Vietnamese] artillery and heavy weapons fired some 2,000 rounds into Saravane...The barrage caused few casualties [however, GM-41 headquarters was hit, killing most gathered there] among well-entrenched defenders, and the government troops easily turned back a ground assault by three [NVA] battalions. [One third of the original artillery rounds*

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<sup>18</sup> Joe Leeker, DHC-6 Otter, Jim Pearson's Email of 09/05/05.

struck Saravane on the 15th. Ground attacks followed for weeks, with the defenders pulling back in January. <sup>19]</sup>

*On the Bolovens, other irregulars are taking advantage of the absence of enemy resistance to consolidate their hold on Paksong."* <sup>20</sup>

In order to slow enemy resupply of Paksong and Saravane, a government regiment was moved northeast from PS-18 and retook Thateng.

With battle damage incidents, aircraft and crew losses, and pilot and AFD resignations mounting amid general crew dissatisfaction over the high risks flying missions out of Pakse, higher ups sanctioned changes, proposed, and sought cogent answers. A lengthy 23 December telegram delineated fixed wing and helicopter crew problems, some recommendations, and caveats regarding medevac and supply operations.

*"Several steps have been taken during the past few days toward improving the [Pakse] situation. They have helped somewhat, but certainly not cured the intelligence deficiencies. [They] have substantially reduced the risk to airplanes. The problems continue little abated for rotorcraft [crews].*

*Regarding intelligence and reflecting the need for increased accuracy of tactical intelligence regarding disposition and armament of enemy forces, the contractor has positioned an operations specialist (along with a Portacamp and FIC [type]) at L-11 to screen and correlate such information for its impact on air operations, and to conduct briefings for all aircrews.*

*Regarding aircraft, the situation in the area around L-11 differs materially for airplanes and rotorcraft. Airplane effort*

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<sup>19</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 397.

<sup>20</sup> CIA Bulletin, 12/11/72.

in the high-risk areas has been restricted for some time to resupply by airdrop [some delivery techniques have been previously described].

Recognizing the urgency of the tactical ground situation, the requirement for continued air support, and the necessity to arrest losses, fixed wing tactics have been changed again.<sup>21</sup> Trial runs at night were conducted starting 7 December using [Twin Otter] DHC-6 aircraft equipped with LORAN-C. These proved satisfactory, and daylight delivery to high threat DZ's in the L-11 area has been stopped.<sup>22</sup> [It was found] the [cargo] capacity of the DHC-6 was insufficient to meet demands and C-7A [Caribous] were inserted into the program. All DHCs and C-7As in the fleet are equipped with LORAN-C provisions. Seven LORAN-C [sets] are presently available. Switching black boxes from one to another aircraft is readily accomplished by an ordinary technician who has been trained on this task. Installation of LORAN provisions in most aircraft take six hours. The DHC-6 aircrews were well trained and experienced in the use of LORAN-C in night work. [Caribou] aircrews required training which involved, for minimum qualifications, some three to four hours of air work. Since the inauguration of night dropping hundreds of night drop missions (with an average of three DZ's per flight), DHC-6 and C-7A airplanes have been completed successfully and without incident or gunfire damage. The

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<sup>21</sup> Bill Leary December 1972 Notes. On 4 December PIC Terry Frazer's C-123K plane was hit by small arms fire approaching the DZ near Saravane.

<sup>22</sup> According to his FEPA log, flying 868, Captain Jim Pearson and First Officer Barney Heidt conducted ten night missions from Pakse on the 14<sup>th</sup>. (Nine plus thirty-two, seven plus forty-five night.) Ten more night missions were flown on the 26<sup>th</sup> with Broussard. (Nine plus thirty-eight, nine plus thirty-two night.) Then he flew thirteen special missions on 27 December. (Ten plus fifty, eight plus fifty-eight night.)

*efficiency of this system of night resupply of DZ's seems proven for the time being.*

*Should still greater capacity be required, C-123s can be installed with LORAN-C provisions and aircrews trained in its use on these missions. With the use of larger aircraft than the DHC-6 and aircrews not so well experienced, some degradation of drop accuracy over that of daylight drops, or night drops by DHC-6 [crews], may be experienced (to date [23 December], accuracy is reported to be excellent). Also, ground forces, generally, are not trained, equipped or experienced for night recovery. But, the benefits of this system would seem to far outweigh the disadvantages...*

*...the routine use of fixed wing night delivery in the L-11 situation seemed practical at this time, however, enemy introduction of radar aimed anti-aircraft guns, missiles, or other countermeasures would nullify this tactic. It should also be understood that generally the terrain in the area of activity presents relatively few natural hazards compared to elsewhere in Laos.*

*Rotorcraft missions have been subjected to the same build-up in [AAA] activity, but [crews] have limited opportunity for changing tactics. Tree-top level penetrations and departure from 'hot' HLZ's virtually eliminates the 37mm risk, but the resultant exposure to small arms and 12.7 has proven costly. Both during approach and departure helicopters are extremely vulnerable to ground fire because they [move] at such slow speed, and are below safe autorotation altitude if system damage is incurred. Even if entry/exit to the HLZ is made at high altitude, the helicopter must spend considerable time in the slow speed/low altitude high vulnerability phase. The necessity for ensuring that an approach/departure zone is relatively free from opposing troops is paramount. Unfortunately, units which*

need helicopter medevac of wounded or insertion of fresh troops often are in contact with the enemy very near their perimeter defenses.

The paradox of this circumstance has been recognized from an early date in the L-11 area and the Customer has conscientiously attempted to supply tactical close air support for such missions. This has been in the form of armed UH-1C [Thai piloted White Horse Huey] helicopters or fixed wing tactical air, or both. Recently, however, the loss of USAF A-1E support and the diversions of virtually all 'fast mover' USAF aircraft to Vietnam have significantly reduced the effectiveness of the close air support to critical helicopter missions. Both the gunship element and the T-28 aircraft present continuing communications/coordination difficulties arising from language barriers. Additionally, the [Thai gunship] group has suffered from a parts shortage with as many as four out of six machines being grounded in recent time for parts. Lastly, and possibly most critically, the UH-1C aircraft are badly 'outgunned' by the enemy 12.7 weapon, with the T-28s representing a stand-off at best when [pitted] against a skilled and determined 12.7 crew.

The exceptional impact on troop morale achieved by rapid medevac of wounded, or insertion of critically needed troops, is very clear and a change to night operation [for] critical helicopter missions is now under active consideration. The operational risks of night helicopter operations are considerably greater than those for fixed wing aircraft [crews]...In addition to the problem of navigating to a small HLZ at night, (which we propose to solve by installing LORAN-C), the helicopter [crew] must make a black-out approach since normal use of landing flood lights would likely attract nearly the same volume of groundfire at a small perimeter HLZ as in the daytime. Landing light use must be confined to the shortest possible

time. With any moonlight, the effectiveness of nighttime cover is also lessened. Also, the noise level of certain helicopter types [like the H-34] is so distinctive that it will alert enemy troops at night and provide definitive location information.

The high exposure factor attendant with landing/take off at HLZ's subject to enemy rifle necessitates that a back-up or SAR helicopter [crew] accompany each mission. This requires night formation flight, in which our crews are inexperienced, and involves questionable safety in weather at night...Use of single engine helicopters at night may be of questionable soundness since successful accomplishment of an autorotation in the event of mechanical failure [or battle damage] is unlikely considering the terrain over which operation would be conducted, and the high descent rates generated in autorotations.

...for helicopters, night operations offers some reduction of potential exposure to enemy fire, but not to the extent it does for fixed wing air drop operations, meanwhile imposing added operating risks. Troops in the field also may be very reluctant to wait for nightfall to evacuate the critically wounded. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the [AAM] contractor plans to conduct evaluation night flights, using specially trained crews and LORAN-C.

...the success of the attempt to continue provisions of vital helicopter air support is contingent upon no further deterioration of the tactical environment. For helicopter [crews] this means that enemy troop concentrations in close proximity to HLZ's will severely restrict the chances for success, even at night. Operations which may be conducted safely at night in relatively level terrain, (such as the [Lima-44] valley), probably are unworkable in the mountainous areas near LS-20A. Those latter locations also have generally been

*characterized by the very small diameter perimeter defenses further mitigating the value of darkness.*

*...in the event the tactical situation changes in the LS-20A region, necessitating air support under conditions of heavy enemy AA fire, conversion to night operations may not be a viable concept, except for fixed wing resupply of very large sites such as has been done at LS-32. It very likely will not be sound for helicopter medevac or troop movement.*

*...some daylight operations into high threat areas may be necessary. We, therefore request that serious consideration be given to upgrading the effectiveness of tactical air support provided for our flights into such areas. Carefully time pre-mission strikes with hard ordinance, together with cover by both 'fast movers' too offset heavy caliber weapons and armed helicopters or OV-10 aircraft to cope with small arms fire, we feel would be effective in reducing the risk. It is essential that effective English language communications be maintained with these cover elements... <sup>23</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> CIA telegram likely involving the Chief of Station in Vientiane, 12/23/72.

Author Comment: The telegram displays considerable insight and knowledge of both fixed wing and helicopter operations in high threat areas. However, some of the suggestions, like insisting that close air support with Thai and Lao pilots who could communicate in English were totally unrealistic. Solving an unsurmountable language barrier had never been possible in the past and there was no reason to believe it would be achieved in the future.

Strictly used for intelligence missions, unless specified, Twinpac crews did not participate in any resupply or medevacs in the Plateau area. Because many Chinook crewmembers were also in the Special Project, some missions may have been considered or tailored to reflect resupply requirements on the Bolovens. However, this was unlikely in December, for crews were still getting acquainted with the machine and its potential. Moreover, the Chinook was too large to land in smaller landing zones.



## HOOK OPERATIONS

Captain Wayne Knight and Bob Davis conducted CH-47 FCFs part of the day on the first. Then Knight had a Bell proficiency check with ACP Marius Burke. Two days later, he and Tony Byrne flew 17103 to Long Tieng. Among several tasks, they moved a D-4 Caterpillar bulldozer and 155mm howitzer to the hills northwest of Sam Tong. Wayne achieved a great deal of personal satisfaction and accomplishment moving such heavy items to elevated friendly positions. (Six hours five minutes.)

On the 5<sup>th</sup>, Chief Pilot Knight and First Officer Olsen performed Chinook FCFs. The next morning, they were scheduled to work LS-20A with 815898. In what became normal procedure, they moved two 105mm, two 155mm guns, and ammunition around The Alternate area in support of Thai troops being lifted into the Site-72 Valley by other Chinooks and crews. In conjunction with GM 21 and 26, they advanced to Phou Pha Sai without achieving appreciable results. <sup>24</sup>

During the busy day they recovered an Air Attaché (AIRA) UH1H Huey after it experienced an engine failure near Vang Vieng. Another requirement that became standard was called the Elephant Flight. Initiated by the Lima-08 Oscar Mike (OM), because the CH-47 could carry excessive loads, it entailed ferrying passengers to Udorn at the end of the day. (Nine plus thirty hours.)

FCFs continued with Beng Bengston on the 8th and Ed Reid on 10-11 December. Getting ready for "Sneaky Pete" operations, using Chinook 815828, Wayne conducted Special Project training with Olsen at Udorn on the 13<sup>th</sup>. (Two plus twenty-five.) The following day Wayne and Scratch conducted FCFs involving drop procedures.

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<sup>24</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 389.

Flying 815864 on the 15th, Scratch and Wayne transitioned to Pakse for extra curricula work. They delivered a load of SGU troops to LS-441 on the Bolovens just east of LS-166 (Phou Kham Phouk) to supplement troops on the ground and establish security for an anticipated operation the following day. <sup>25</sup> Along with four other crews, they RON at PS-44 in order to maintain security and secrecy, and to obtain a detailed briefing regarding a sizeable Bolovens mission.

The next morning, demonstrating the flexibility and mobility of the Chinook, four C-47 crews performed a classic vertical envelopment to grassy, rolling hill, open country in the Site-441 area. After a final briefing, each crew boarded sixty FAR troops and a 105mm sling load at a specified location outside Pakse. Rounding out the package, fifty rounds were piggy-backed on a long line with the artillery sling load.

After firing a number of rounds, before the enemy could react and deliver counterfire, the Chinook crews retrieved the men and equipment, moving them to another pre-determined location and resupplying them. This was done three times before retiring. With a stunned enemy unable to cope with tactics never seen before, the rapid maneuver proved a complete success. The crews and aircraft RTB Udorn. (Six plus seven.)

From the 17th through the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Wayne conducted local FCFs with Beng Bengston, Bob Hitchman, and Billy Pearson. During the latter day, flying 816019, Knight and Pearson participated in a RLAF H-34 recovery from Sakon Nakhon (T-38). (Three plus fourteen.) Flying the same aircraft on Sunday, the crew worked The Alternate and defensive positions in the Ban Na area. At

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<sup>25</sup> To ensure success, Otter pilots Captain Jim Pearson and Barney Heidt dropped pathfinder troops to this location in the early morning hours of 15/16 December.

day's end, in order to be home on Christmas Eve, they RTB Udorn.  
(Six plus thirty.) <sup>26</sup>

**"I have been busy training new people in the S-58T. Some have never flown heavy helicopters before and take more time to train than others. I have also been doing some other work which I am not at liberty to talk about but that is worthwhile. It is entirely different than I have been used to previously."**

Letter Home, 12/13/72.

Following the successful Vinh mission and a recent stint at PS-44, with S-58T Special Project operation placed on hold, I was accorded one day off the flight schedule. I cherished this, as I knew that I would be busy training new individuals for the Twinpac program and performing FCFs because of Chinook personnel requirements.

The training began after lunch on the ninth with First Officer Ed Eneboe and Gary Gentz as our Flight Mechanic. I had flown with Ed in November, but since he had not been upgraded to a second pilot, I reviewed all emergency procedures before working Papa Hotel Echo locally for two plus five hours. I demonstrated maneuvers and Ed did them until I was satisfied with his performance. The next two days were spent at home on standby, which enabled me to accomplish neglected items around the house.

Tuesday Eneboe and I continued local training in Papa Hotel Alpha with Greg Burch as our third crewmember. After one plus forty-five, we had to return to the ramp because of mechanical

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<sup>26</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/20/00, 12/19/00, 07/08/01 and Flight Log Records for December 1972.

problems. The 13th and 14th were stand-by at the field until mid-afternoon for non-existent FCFs.

## **NEGOTIATIONS**

**"The year is fast drawing to a close and with it are more doubts of the future. The ceasefire is at hand.."**

Letter Home, 12/13/72.

### **Laos**

*"The document, presented by the Lao communist chief negotiator who returned last Sunday [10th] from consultations in Sam Neua and Hanoi, was primarily noteworthy for the specific timetable for implementation it contained. The draft provides for the creation of a broadly based political consultative council and a new tripartite provisional government within 30 days of signature. Until a permanent coalition government can be formed, the two sides would continue to administer their respective zones of control. The proposal stipulates that Vientiane would be a neutral zone. This proviso apparently is aimed at protecting Lao communist representatives from a recurrence of the harassment that followed the 1962 agreements.*

*On military matters, the draft states that an in-place ceasefire would occur once the agreement itself is signed and promulgated. The ceasefire would be supervised by a joint Lao commission, supported by the International Control Commission [ICC] using the 1962 Geneva Accords as terms of reference. The Lao communists also propose a withdrawal of all foreign military personnel and advisors within 90 days after the agreement is signed. This goes beyond their initial presentation in October, which focused only on ending U.S. and Thai military involvement in Laos, and probably is a response to Souvanna [Phouma's] long-standing demand that all [Vietnamese military] be withdrawn. In*

*addition, all future military assistance to each side would require approval by the new provisional government.*

*Government negotiators, while not specifically addressing the draft agreement, reiterated Vientiane's opposition to much of the communist formula for a political settlement."* <sup>27</sup>

Concerned that some of the communist draft relating to the formation of a coalition government was unconstitutional, the Lao government responded with a counter proposal on the 19th, which was summarily rejected by the communists. <sup>28</sup> With negotiations at an impasse, the issue was deferred to the new year.

On the 20<sup>th</sup>, the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Alexander Haig, after a trip to Vietnam, conducted a meeting with Souvanna Phouma in Vientiane in order to bring him up to date on the current negotiation situation, particularly as it applied to Laos.

As he had stated to the President in Washington, Souvanna was adamant about ensuring that the ceasefire in Laos occurred ASAP after the Vietnam ceasefire to deny Vietnamese forces the opportunity to stir the pot. (The time frame between ceasefires was later reduced from thirty to fifteen days.)

During further discussion, the Prime Minister emphasized that he would never accept a settlement with the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese which permitted the use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Laos would ensure that local provisions would permit U.S. reconnaissance, would insist on retaining the provisions of the 1962 Geneva Accords, would not go beyond the external provisions of the Accords...would abide by the concept of constitutionality,

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<sup>27</sup> CIA Bulletin, 12/13/72, Laos: The communist draft for a settlement tabled at yesterday's session of the peace talks was essentially a fleshing out of previous proposals.

<sup>28</sup> John Bowman, *Almanac*, 332.

and would insist on arrangements for a ceasefire before completion of the political solution.

The discussion was constructive and realistic. Souvanna was aware of the pitfalls of the settlement with North Vietnam. He recognized that the war had been largely won, and was enthusiastic about the current U.S. air action in the North.<sup>29</sup>

Dialogue continued from Ambassador Godley in Vientiane to Washington:

*"...Lao are concerned that under the present scenario where the Laos ceasefire would follow the Vietnam ceasefire, a settlement in Laos is being postponed because of the impasse in the U.S.-North Vietnamese negotiations...Souvanna was approached about exploring the possibility of concluding a ceasefire in Laos without awaiting a settlement in Vietnam."*

The idea was proposed by Souvanna's cohorts that a representative in Paris informally and unofficially explore if the North Vietnamese might be receptive to settling the Lao problem first.

*"...the Lao fear that a prolonged stalemate...in the negotiations and no settlement in Laos would strain Laos defense posture."*

*As long as the fighting continues in Cambodia and Vietnam the North Vietnamese need the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The American bombing of the trail makes it more difficult for the [NVA] to get their supplies and manpower to their destination in the South. If the American bombing of the trail could be replaced by a strong international supervision of the trail area, it would*

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<sup>29</sup> FRUS, Item 210, 12/20/72, Backchannel message from A. Haig to H. Kissinger.  
Backchannel: A secondary or covert route for the passage of information.

be just as much, if not more, of a hindrance to the [NVA] bringing down their supplies through Laos.

...now that the [Vietnamese] are relying to a large extent on using the DMZ area for infiltrating supplies and manpower through South Vietnam proper, the [HCMT] is not quite as important as it was before the [NVA] invasion of [South Vietnam] last spring...the Lao believe an international supervision of the [HCMT] area would serve a similar purpose as the American bombing of that area. This is really the primary problem standing in the way of a settlement in Laos.

...perhaps the idea of putting Laos first and Vietnam second in search for a ceasefire might be a good tactical move since it would save Hanoi face if the DVR wants to move ahead with a political solution in Indochina but not wishing to give the impression that they are bending to American military pressure...if the U.S.-Vietnamese negotiations remain deadlocked, then perhaps the [USG] might look with a favorable eye on efforts to resolve at least one of the three Indochina problems..."<sup>30</sup>

A message from Washington countered:

"We continue to believe that a Lao settlement should follow an end to fighting in Vietnam...you will no doubt have heard by now that U.S.-DVR technical talks will resume on January 2 in Paris...Under these circumstances it would be extremely inadvisable for the Lao to sound out the [NVN] in Paris regarding a settlement independent from that in Vietnam.

I am sure that you can convince the Lao that they should therefore not attempt to make contact or follow through with the DVR in Paris in this matter...you might also wish to correct the

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<sup>30</sup> FRUS, #219, 12/23/72. Backchannel message from the Ambassador to Laos (Godley) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger).

*assumptions...about the Trail's declining importance (it is still critical to Cambodia and to the southern half of South Vietnam) and about the 'secondary importance' of the LPF's political demands."* <sup>31</sup>

### **Vietnam**

As in Laos, preparations for a final signing of a peace agreement proceeded with optimism. However, President Thieu's intransigence on the issue of future political power in South Vietnam, and his objection to North Vietnamese troops remaining in his country, caused Kissinger to seek guidance in Washington on the 13th. Hoping to push the pending agreements to completion, President Nixon demanded that North Vietnamese leaders "begin talking seriously or suffer the consequences." Concurrent with this harsh threat, he directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to prepare for a barn burner of a bombing campaign against the North that included previously untouched portions of Hanoi and the Haiphong Harbor area. It was designed not only to destroy the remaining infrastructure, but also the will to wage war.

On the 16<sup>th</sup>, Kissinger divulged to the world that secret peace talks in Paris had failed to achieve a "just and fair agreement to end the war."

Recriminations continued from both sides. In order to move the peace process along, within two days Linebacker Two commenced with massive B-52 and other fighter jet bombing of the North.

Announced to the public on the 18th, the resumption of concentrated bombing was intended to continue until an

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<sup>31</sup> FRUS, #240, 12/30/72, Backchannel message from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the Ambassador to Laos (Godley).



acceptable settlement was reached. Sometimes duplicating Linebacker-1 targets, it was designed to destroy all military installations in the Hanoi-Haiphong area as well as other facilities: railroad yards, storage areas, bridges, roads, communication centers, electric power plants, and steel works.

To protest carpet bombing of the North, the communist delegation departed the Paris talks on the 21<sup>st</sup>, with possible intentions of returning on the 28th.

Except for a bombing break over Christmas, and temporary cessation of U.S. Naval gunfire above the 20th Parallel attacks on the two major population centers continued until the end of December. After eleven days of air strikes and the expenditure of 42,000 bombs, *"most targets were destroyed damaged or rendered inoperative."* Moreover, the North Vietnamese military potential, the industrial base, and the economy were in a shambles. U.S. bombing had destroyed the North Vietnamese ability to defend itself. All surface-to-air missiles (SAM) had been expended, and major airfields were destroyed.

The offensive operation was dubbed both a military and political success. It was later acknowledged by some foreign observers that the war was over. North Vietnam's war potential was nil, LOCs from China neutralized, and nothing was moving.

Whatever the pros and cons relating to the massive bombing portrayed, the North Vietnamese representatives quickly returned to the negotiating table in Paris on 2 January to hash out a serious agreement the following year, and the U.S. was able to

withdraw from South Vietnam. <sup>32</sup>

Being home provided enormous advantages, for I had ample opportunity to spend time with the children and Tuie. It was also a welcome diversion from the stark realities of war.

***"The kids are getting ready for Christmas. Last night they had a small show at Air America. Ricky's class sang Deck the Halls...Today they had their Christmas party..***

***I have been fighting off a cold for about three weeks. No sooner than I think I am rid of it, I get another.***

***A group down town had Tuie get a girl for the annual beauty contest at this year's fair.***

[The girl was an older child of the Vietnamese couple who lived in a small house in the rear of Khun Yai's property. Tuie, who was always impeccable regarding her appearance, and having some modeling experience, taught her how to dress properly, make-up her face to best advantage, and stroll down a runway like a

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<sup>32</sup> John Bowman, *Almanac*, 332-336.

Although considered a success, Linebacker Two was costly to America in both men and machines. Fifteen B-52s and eleven other aircraft were downed by more than 1,200 SAM missiles, AAA weapons, or maintenance issues. Ninety-three crewmembers were listed as killed, captured, or missing.

Davidson, Phillip, *Vietnam at War*.

Colonel Warren Harris, *The Linebacker Campaigns: An Analysis*, (Air War College, Air University Maxwell AFB, Alabama, 1987) 20-25.

In his research report, Colonel Harris raises an interesting scenario. Instead of the gradual bombing approach of the Johnson Administration, which failed to produce tangible negotiations, he questions the eight-year delay to employ B-52s in the North to implement the correct aggressive tactics to end the war. All this ineffectual bombing did was to firm North Vietnamese resolve to persevere and divide our country. Secondly, he wonders why, with the North Vietnamese military incapable of continuing the war at the end of 1972, did we ultimately settle for less than we should have demanded, and likely could have achieved? As history records, the favorable peace agreement led to the North's seizure of South Vietnam in 1975. Of course, even our leaders were human, susceptible to the will of Congress, and a war-weary people, anxious to leave South Vietnam.

model.] *I didn't think she had a chance, but they fixed her up pretty good and damned if she didn't win. Tuie pulls off these surprises occasionally...* [Because of the notoriety and broad publicity, the girl married well.]

*A funny thing happened last night. I turned off the Christmas lights on our outside tree and went to bed. About 0300 Tuie woke me and said the tree lights were on outside. Her father [Khun Tha] was here, so we both crept downstairs guns in hand expecting the worst. I went outside and no one was around. I finally turned out the lights and after scratching my head went back to bed. Perhaps we had a visitation?"*

Letter Home, 12/13/72.

## **BACK ON THE LINE**

Following a boring ride to the airfield, which I had done hundreds of times over the years, I hopped out of the blue Air America B-bus at the transportation end of the administration building and checked into operations at 0545 hours on the 16th. After signing out a survival vest from supply, and obtaining my sturdy plastic weapon bag containing an AK-47 assault rifle and five full magazines from my assigned locker, along with Link Lockett, I loaded my equipment and boarded another B-bus for the short drive across the parking ramp to the Q-warehouse where C-123 671 was being loaded. Within thirty minutes of taxiing and departure, we arrived at Wattay Airport and assumed control of XW-PHA with Flight Mechanic Leveriza. Although he was an experienced pilot on other aircraft, I was still transitioning Link to the Twinpac.

After working defensive pads around Long Tieng, we were sent to work the heights of Phu Cum (LS-50), where troops were busy reestablishing a presence, clearing the area, and constructing new landing zones. This was likely a diversionary

attempt to create an alternate or fallback site for Bouam Long, which was again in the early stages of being probed and attacked by Vietnamese forces.

Wanting Link to gain as much experience in the machine as possible prior to his release as PIC, after directing him to various pads, I allowed him to perform most of the landings and takeoffs that day. One relatively new landing zone was located in trees on the east side and down slope of the mountain. I had landed there before, and considered it a difficult pad to negotiate. Using my time-honored technique, I approached the confined area slow, flat, with high power. This generally assured a wave off should down drafts or adverse winds be encountered. Although he never talked much, Link seemed an impatient person, and when I asked him if he wanted to attempt a landing there, he took the controls, made a tight left turn and expertly dove into the pad. I would not have flown such an abrupt or unnecessary approach, but he performed a good job.

Late in the day, while in The Alternate fuel pit, as I secured the engine and waited for the blades to coast down, we received a radio message relieving Lockett. At the time of the message, there was a large fixed wing on the runway ready to launch south. Link was so anxious to RTB that while exiting the cockpit, he pushed the cyclic forward abruptly, causing the slowing blades to dangerously contact and bounce off the rotor head stops. He mumbled something unintelligible that I took as recognition of his error. I was not happy with his carelessness, but, considering his good work that day, chose to disregard it. After we were fueled, I returned to Wattay Airport for the night. (Eight plus forty-five, four landings.)

Dave Cox became my First Officer. When we arrived at The Alternate, the Customer instructed us to deliver sling loads to surrounding pads. Later in the day, while carrying a load for

the Site-72 area, and just past the east gap, I began smelling kerosene. Both Cox and Leveriza confirmed my analysis. Alarmed, at the thought that we were potentially a flying bomb, I reversed course, reentered the Long Tieng bowl and dove for the lower loading ramp. The Customer, probably Hardnose was standing in the middle of the area as I pickled the load and commenced a hairy nose high flare to touchdown. I landed near enough to the amazed Customer that he probably needed to change his skivvies. While I shut the engine down and slowed the rotor blades with the rotor brake, Leveriza removed the angle gearbox compartment cover on the cargo compartment bulkhead and discovered the deck awash with JP-4 fuel. Further investigation revealed that the number one fuel control had produced the leak. Costing us considerable flight time, we were grounded until a maintenance team and parts arrived from Udorn. After the work was completed, and a FCF ascertained the leak was repaired, we RTB Wattay Airport. (Four plus forty-four, twenty landings.) Chuck Low then replaced Leveriza as our Flight Mechanic.

Many aircraft and crews supported Long Tieng operations in anticipation to the annual communist offensive. Mike Jarina deadheaded to Vientiane on Papa Foxtrot Gulf to take command of Papa Foxtrot Juliet with Stan Thompsen and Ortillo. After working almost a full day, the crew recovered at Wattay Airport. (Eight plus thirty-five.)

Monday morning, we returned to The Alternate. We worked a full day supplying local pads. Toward nightfall, we were instructed to RON at Luang Prabang to be in position to support Bouam Long the next day. (Ten plus ten, fifteen night, eighty landings.)

Although there was no enemy rocket fire on the airfield this particular night to keep me awake, the "Midnight Rambler" was stomping through the hostel, busy servicing those who

desired her company. I could not believe that the hostel manager, Abdul, failed to be aware of and prevent this nocturnal activity, but perhaps she shared her earnings with him.

The same day, Mike Jarina and his crew supported The Alternate and RTB Udorn for a scheduled maintenance inspection. (Six plus forty-five.)

After breakfast we launched for Bouam Long. After failure to move on Long Tieng and enduring heavy casualties from allied air, the Vietnamese concentrated on offensives at Site-32. We had a taste of what was about to occur in the area while working Phu Cum on the 16<sup>th</sup>, when advanced units from two Vietnamese regiments began encroaching the river valleys and low ground around the west and north portions of Site-32, and large artillery pieces were slowly moved back into former positions to impact the historic site. In addition, a newly developed road from Moung Kheung was observed by aerial recon. The location was only a few miles west from which Bouam Long could be hit by 130mm and 122mm field siege guns. Since the constant harassing fire caused problems to local defenders, with the help of Raven FACs and photo recce, the USAF addressed the situation and claimed seven large guns silenced during the latter part of December. Christmas night the enemy assault commenced. Air strikes were fruitful, and the major communist thrust was quelled.<sup>33</sup>

For these reasons, and a sense of pride that the site had never been lost to hostile forces, there was a frenzy of activity to strengthen positions surrounding the bowl, and to ready all hands for an expected enemy onslaught. While cargo planes delivered fresh supplies, we shuttled existing stockpiles

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<sup>33</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 390.  
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 360.

of ammunition and other items to surrounding high ground defense positions. Consisting mostly of pre-prepared sling loads, except to retrieve nets and cables at the landing zones, five minutes or so was generally required for each round trip. After I swooped down from the hilltops to latch onto another sling load, the indigenous air operations man displayed a cardboard sign with the landing zone letters depicted. Then I did my part. The process was very efficient, and the only pit break afforded us was during refueling. I had worked hard in the past with other types of aircraft, but even with a First Officer to aid with the work, I considered this equally exhausting. <sup>34</sup>

As per rumors of enemy activity, I expected incoming artillery rounds to stall our work, but this never materialized. However, the day was not without high drama and excitement when A-7 jets unexpectedly buzzed the site at low level--perhaps to show the flag after delivering ordnance on the approaching enemy. Since Site-32 had already been bombed earlier in the year by two Soviet Il-28 aircraft, and 130mm artillery fire was predicted, this potential had quite a stressful effect on all of us. We returned to Luang Prabang for the night, and to be in position to work another day at LS-32. (Nine plus thirty, eighty landings.)

Mike Jarina was scheduled to work at The Alternate with Cliff Hendrix and Ortillo in Papa Foxtrot Juliet. After an FCF, the crew departed north. The helicopter was only a machine, and subject to failure as, a few minutes out of Udorn, the engine chip detector light illuminated on the center pedestal. A go-no-go item, Jarina reversed course and landed Juliet at the air

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<sup>34</sup> A graphic of a few landing zones and their letter designations surrounding Site-32 can be found on page 168.

base for a maintenance inspection that ultimately resulted in the engine being changed.

The morning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, we returned to Bouam Long and continued supporting the myriad pads. A few ranging rounds had been directed at the site under the cover of darkness, but although the Customer and troops were apprehensive, all seemed quiet when we arrived. Old and new fortifications in the form of trenches, moats, bunkers, and perimeter defenses were constantly being reinforced and upgraded with logs, PSP, sand bags, and dirt-filled fuel drums. 75mm guns were firmly emplaced in revetments and we supplied boxes of shells and ammunition for these and other crew-served weapons.

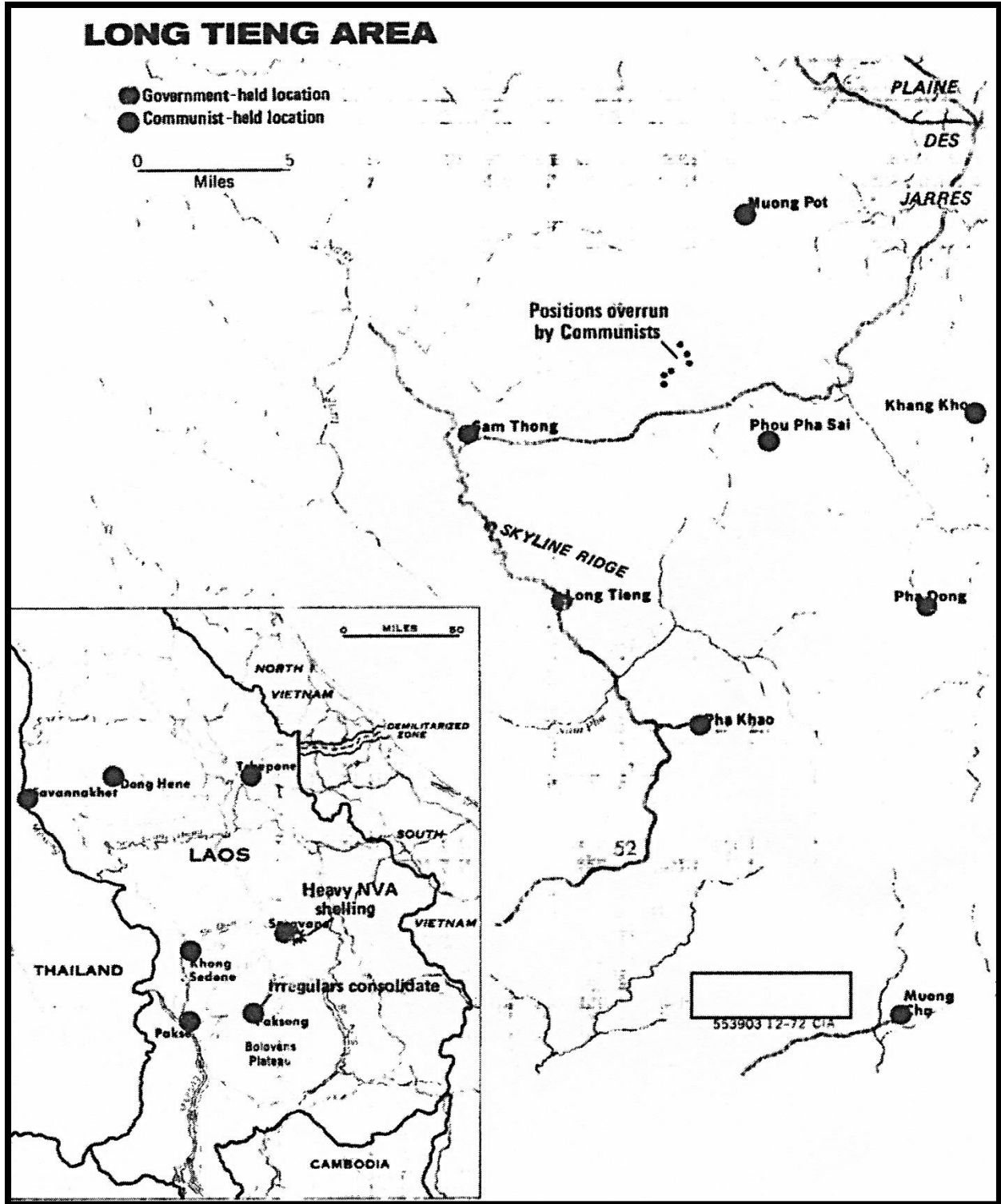
After approximating the same number of landings as the previous day, we stopped at Wattay Airport to leave Alpha, and deadheaded south to Udorn on 490. After a one-hour plus FCF, Mike Jarina, Larry Taylor, and Israel ferried Papa Foxtrot Juliet to Site-20A. They recovered at Wattay Airport and Vientiane for the night. (Five plus twenty.)

Upcountry work continued. Cox, Low, and I crewed Papa Hotel Echo to Long Tieng. As Bouam Long was now under serious attack by heavy weapons,<sup>35</sup> we remained at Long Tieng conducting forty sorties to outlying areas. (Seven plus forty-five.) Toward the end of the day, we were advised to leave Echo at The Alternate and ferry Papa Hotel Alpha to Wattay. (Forty minutes.) After securing the ship, I caught a thirty-minute ride on PEO to Udorn.

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<sup>35</sup> During the height of enemy attacks, when landings were no longer feasible at Site-32, various means of cargo delivery were explored. One included low level dropping of 250 pounds of palletized supplies from Chinooks. Like fixed wing, rollers were installed in the Chinook cargo compartment and loads were pushed out the rear ramps. EW Knight.





CIA 12/10/72 combined map of Military Region Two, Three, and Four. In Military Region Two there was little organized fighting and mostly defensive action conducted by the enemy. To the south in Military Region Four, Saravane defenders endured shelling.

Chinook crews infiltrated Thai troops into the Site-72 valley on the 6<sup>th</sup> of the month. Other GMs moved toward Phou Pha Sai, but their efforts were rejected by entrenched Vietnamese. After this last offensive gasp of the year, heavy fighting diminished to a low ebb. <sup>36</sup> Jarina, Phillips, and Israel were also active at Long Tieng, recovering at L08 after flying nine plus twenty-eight hours.

### **MILITARY LOSSES**

The USAF was still incurring aircraft losses. The night we returned to Udorn, an AC 130 gunship was shot down over the western Ho Chi Minh Trail. Another AC-130 crew was diverted from a patrol to assist a HH-53 helicopter crew search for the Specter crew. Using night vision electronic devices, they discovered two survivors. The following morning, several Air America and Lao H-34 crews assisted the USAF in investigating the crash. Coordination was nil, and small arms fire in the landing zone caused battle damage to the ship Joe Lopes and Mel Cooper were flying. <sup>37</sup>

While I was off the schedule on the 22nd, Jarina and crew returned to Long Tieng. Their flying was restricted to less than an hour and they RTB Udorn on C-123K 4524.

The next morning, Ed Eneboe, Len Bevan, and I participated in Ed's local proficiency check. (Two plus forty, seven landings.)

### **AN UNPLEASANT CHRISTMAS EVE**

After an eventful year, I considered my cup full, but my final flight upcountry in 1972 provided considerably more

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<sup>36</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 389.

<sup>37</sup> Earl Tilford, *SAR*, 135-136.

Christopher Robbins, *Air America*, 197-198.

excitement than I expected or needed. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, one of many aircraft working upcountry, Ed Eneboe, Len Bevan, and I departed late in XW-PHA for Long Tieng. That morning, Mike Jarina deadheaded to Wattay Airport in Bell-204 96W to join First Officer Heible and Flight Mechanic Ortillo in Bell-205 Papa Foxtrot Gulf.

While I was supplying defense positions around The Alternate, Chuck Hines, call sign Raven-20, was flying an O-1 Birdog, supporting efforts to preserve fortress Bouam Long. The enemy infantry, along with artillery units had concentrated forces along the newly improved road system four miles west to the northwest. However, preferring to use the cover of night to mask their activity, they remained relatively quiet during the day. Chuck worked the area over, directing T-28 flights Chaophakao Star, Yellow, Brown, and Noy on perceived targets. Initial BDA was deemed inconclusive.

Later that afternoon, Site-32 reported 130mm incoming rounds, so Hines was alerted to fly north and investigate. Eventually discovering the gun close to a cave, he radioed the UMT coordinates to Cricket ABCCC and requested strike assets. Since Linebacker Two was still underway in the North, there was a delay until a weaponized F-111 from Takhli was diverted to the area. Time over target (TOT) was estimated within fifteen minutes. Radioed in the clear over a common radio frequency, his request had been monitored by an enemy English speaker. While orbiting and anticipating the jet's arrival, Chuck watched as a man hurriedly exited the cave and talked to the gun crew. They immediately began dismantling the field piece and hauled it toward the cave. Hoping to slow or forestall this activity, Chuck fired two white phosphorous rockets at the area without palpable results. Then, close to bingo fuel state, he departed for The Alternate before the jet arrived.

While traversing the southern Plain of Jars toward the Nipple, he spotted Raven-21, Skip Jackson, the only other 0-1 FAC still working out of Long Tieng. <sup>38</sup> Orbiting near Lat Sen (LS-276), he was awaiting the arrival of an A-7 aircraft division, call signs SLAM 1-4. Skip intended to direct last minute strikes on a cache of supplies concealed under trees.

Believing he was finished flying for the day, Hines walked to operations to debrief regarding events at Bouam Long and what he observed on the Plain, while his aircraft was being rearmed and fueled for missions the following day. As he entered the multi-purpose room, the radio operator announced that a fighter jet was down on the Plain. With information sketchy, and initially thinking that it must be an aircraft returning from the North, Chuck dashed to his plane and departed to the east. Establishing radio contact with Air Operations, he learned that contact with Raven-21 had been lost. Whatever could be done that day had to be accomplished swiftly, for it was late afternoon, a time when the cloak of night descended quickly in the mountains.

Looking forward to Christmas Eve with my family, I prepared to depart for Vientiane when Air Operations informed me to launch for a potential SAR on the southern Plain of Jars, in an area of known 12.7mm and 14.5mm guns and larger weapons. No other information pertinent to the mission was forthcoming, and other helicopter crews still at Long Tieng preparing to fly south, were alerted to participate. Since I had incurred battle damage twice in the area in the past and had recently participated in a miserable SAR in November, I was not overjoyed at the prospect of another dangerous and badly managed SAR so

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<sup>38</sup> Foreign Relations, Consistent with USG policy, USAF personnel in the field had been drastically reduced. Raven FAC pilots numbered twenty-six in 1971, but, following attrition and rotation only eleven remained at the end of 1972. By the end of 1972, in order to take up the slack, sixteen Lao pilots were trained to conduct FAC operations.

late in the day. Still, with an American projected to be on the ground, I was obligated to accomplish what I could.

What we could not and did not know at the time was that two fixed wing aircraft were down near Lat Sen (LS-276). After briefing the A-7 pilots, Skip Jackson cleared each plane in turn to conduct strikes on the Vietnamese supplies. While SLAM-04, piloted by Chuck Reiss was in the process of ascending after the flight's final ordnance delivery, he encountered Jackson in the O-1 in an almost vertical climb directly toward him.<sup>39</sup> Maneuvering abruptly in order to avoid a certain collision, Reiss's wingtip contacted and severed Jackson's left-wing strut. The O-1's wing folded and then separated and the crippled plane miraculously floated to the ground, somehow landing upright on flat terrain. Reiss fared no better. With his plane damaged and uncontrollable, he punched out at a low altitude.

As we arrived at the scene, Raven-20 spotted a small fire and the wreckage of the A-7. Radio calls to raise anyone on the ground proved negative. After I checked in, Hines or someone on the controlling aircraft advised us to standby in a "safe" area while two Sandy fighter planes worked the area around Reiss. To avoid congestion, I chose to assume an orbit over foothills east of the Plain of Jars, where I could observe the contested area and was still close enough to swoop in for a rescue attempt if deemed necessary. While we circled, déjà vu took over and I became lost in deep thought regarding the many SARs in which I had participated. None were easy, but I had survived all challenges, often at considerable cost to my ship and psyche. Now, with time caught in a vacuum, high drama and heart-pounding

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<sup>39</sup> There was some conjecture about Jackson being hit by enemy fire, incapacitated, and by reflex pulling the control yoke back in his lap.

anxiety increased exponentially by the minute, while I wondered if I would embrace my family that night or ever again.

Sometime after contacting the ground, the A-7 pilot was heard talking in the clear on the survival radio emergency frequency. Down in a semi-forested area with a leg injured during landing, he was unable to move. Moreover, he reported human noises around him. Eventually, shots were heard and his last message indicated that they were coming.

The adage of "when you mess with the bull, you get the horns" rang true. A combination of Murphy's interference and extremely bad luck impacted Reiss, for in all the wide expanse of the Plain of Jars, unfortunately he had landed only a stone's throw from an enemy artillery regimental command bunker. Consequently, he was captured within a relatively short time.

Hines continued his search for Skip Jackson. Surprised, he discovered the plane sitting upright and in relatively good condition except for a missing left wing. Descending to have a closer look, he observed Skip securely strapped in his seat. Blowtorch-like flames from a broken fuel line were licking at his neck and left shoulder. From all indications, Jackson was clearly dead. With both principals deemed deceased, the SAR was terminated. <sup>40</sup>

While Mike Jarina landed at 20A to RON (eight plus twenty-seven), we headed south for Wattay Airport. (Six plus twenty-three, fifty minutes night.) Leaving the helicopter on the parking ramp, we rode to Udorn on Caribou 1-2389 and blocked in at 1945. By the time I arrived home, the children were already in bed, so I had to wait until morning to share Santa's bounty with them.

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<sup>40</sup> Internet: Bio, Jackson, Paul Vernon "Skip."  
Internet: Raven 21, Downed 24 December 1972, Chuck Hines account of the day and incident.

*"The boys had a good Christmas. I think Peter likes the puzzles best. It doesn't take him any time at all to figure them out...Amanda likes her things as she is teething and chews anything...We couldn't find the boy's stockings, but I am sure they are around and we will find them...The boys, especially Ricky missed the stockings. Tuie was happy with the jewelry.*

*We all liked everything and thank you very much...We had a lot of fun and it was a good day."*

Letter Home, 01/05/1973.

After Christmas, we drove down to Bangkok with several goals to accomplish. Amanda required a medical check-up. The aging Cortina needed new tires, and the engine was long overdue for professional maintenance; and we wanted a break from the Udorn environment.

The four-star Montien Hotel, where we normally stayed while on STO, was completely full of German and Japanese tourists, so Somsak, the affable hotel manager, mentioned the newly opened four-star Sheraton Hotel a short distance down Suriwongse Road. He even made reservations for us. Offering many amenities, the hotel had a swimming pool that the children enjoyed.

The pediatrician declared Amanda fit. We asked him about a bluish tint in the corner of her eyes and were informed that it was likely a throwback to occidental ancestors.

The same car dealership where I purchased the Cortina in 1966 installed a set of new tires and performed engine work to replace a front-end seal that was leaking oil. After a comprehensive tune-up, and other repairs, the bill amounted to 200 dollars. Amazingly, only fifteen dollars was for labor.

**JARINA CARRIES ON**

Consistent with the Chief Pilot Knight's long-standing policy of granting married pilots with families Christmas Day off the schedule, unaccompanied pilots and bachelors worked upcountry. Since Mike and his crew were already at The Alternate, they completed the day and RON at Vientiane. (Eight plus fifty.) Mike only worked thirty minutes on the 26th and RON at the administrative capital.

The following day, with Thompson replacing Heible, the crew worked at Long Tieng. Experiencing hydraulic problems, Jarina recovered at Udorn for maintenance repairs. (Five plus fifty.)

On the 30th, with 35F and new crew of Larry Price and Israel, Jarina flew north of The Alternate. From there they were reassigned to Bouam Long to help support efforts to retain the site. RON was at Vientiane. (Eight plus fifty-two.)

On the final day of the year, Cliff Hendrix replaced Price. After arriving at Long Tieng, Jarina worked southwest at Ban Pong Hai (LS-361) in hills of the Long Pot area. They returned to Wattay with seven plus fifty-five hours logged. <sup>41</sup>

Thus concluded another year flying for Air America.

Although Air America was still considered a viable paramilitary organization, many questions prevailed for the coming year. When would a ceasefire be signed by combatants in Laos? What would happen then? Secondly, there was also the unsettled and acrimonious issue of the Company-FEPA pilot contract that attempted to cut us to the bone remaining to resolve. On the upside, the few of us in the Twinpac and Chinook Special Project programs were reasonably sure we would be retained, for there was still intelligence to be gathered from remote regions adjoining both Laos and North Vietnam pertaining

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<sup>41</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.



to Vietnamese movement, and we were the only vetted civilian team trained to conduct this sensitive work...©

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## GLOSSARY

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