

**RICE, REFUGEES, AND  
ROOFTOPS**

**AIR AMERICA, INC.**

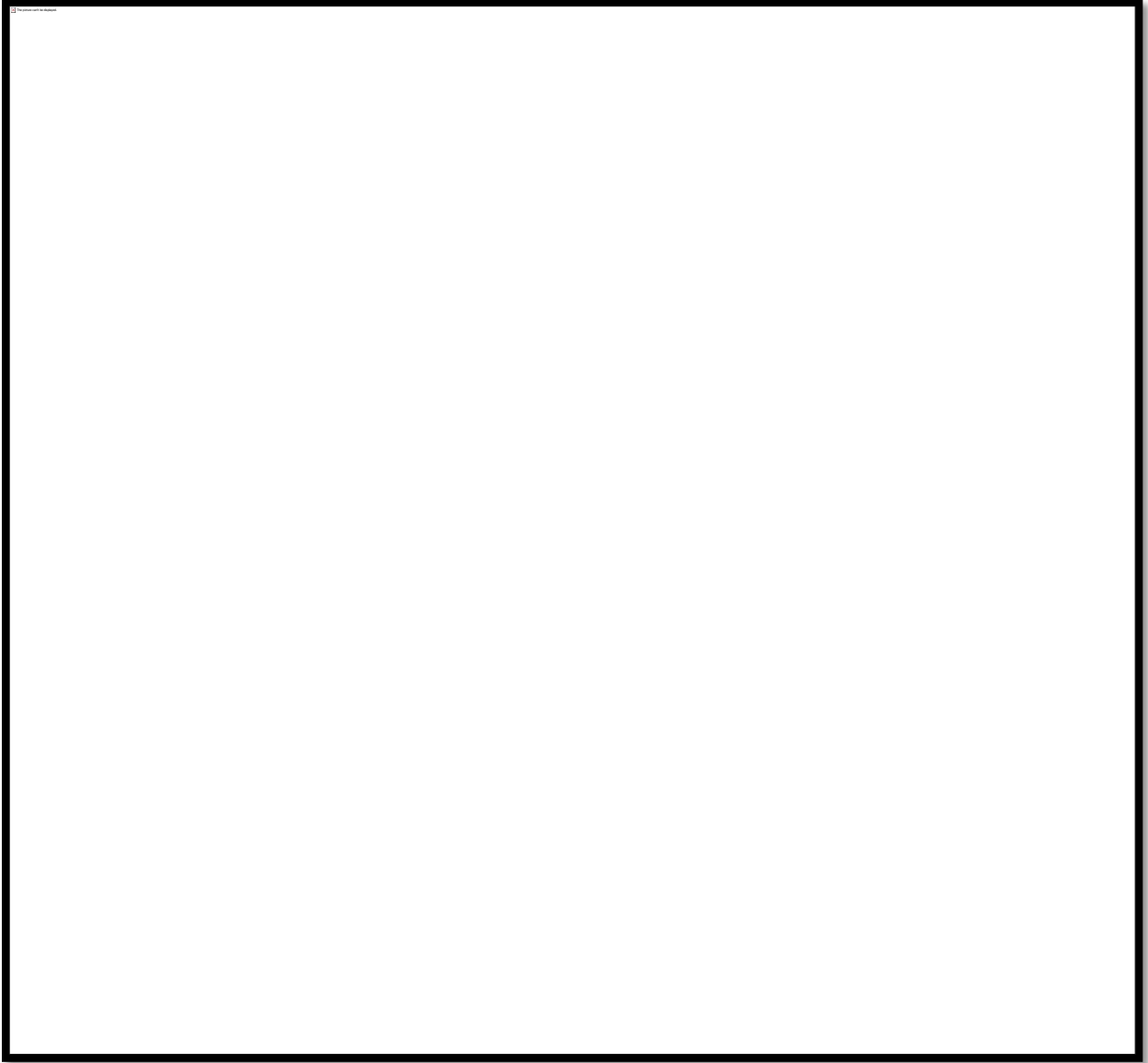
**BOOK FIFTEEN**

**1974**

**YEAR OF THE TIGER**

**BUDDHIST ERA 2517**

Harry Richard Casterlin



Air America Cap Insignia



Area encompassing countries involved in the Second Indochina War. Major towns and cities are shown.

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## INTRODUCTION

**A**fter persevering in a labor of love for thirty-seven years, which I considered part hobby, part catharsis of my soul, with this abbreviated fifteenth book, I approach the end of an attempt to describe my participation in the Second Indochina War as it applied to Laos.<sup>1</sup>

With so much time elapsed since the end of the war, hopefully the books will prove beneficial in preserving the memory of dedicated Air America employees and what they accomplished before it all fades into the dustbin of history.

My twelfth year with the Air America, Inc. Company commenced with the knowledge that shortly after a bilateral coalition government was formed in Laos, as specified in the bilateral ceasefire agreement of February 1972, Air America would be out of business.<sup>2</sup>

Like the Hundred Years War in Europe, there were times in earlier years I thought **our** "piss-poor-war" that morphed into a full-scale conflict would continue forever.<sup>3</sup> However, since nothing is forever, my half-serious speculation that after we had defeated the communists in Southeast Asia, we would be assigned to conduct reconstruction work throughout Vietnam, my sons would continue my work. Of course, like the Spanish idiom of "castles in the air," this proved nothing but a pipe-dream.

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<sup>1</sup> The participation also contributed to the "Cold War" policy of Western powers to contain communism in Asia.

<sup>2</sup> With the Company becoming too well known and unwieldy, the wind down and termination of the Air America Company had been planned for some time.

<sup>3</sup> PPW: Young Marines thrive on morale building phrases and slang buzz words. This off-color vernacular was first heard by the Author from a particularly imaginative drill sergeant during Marine Corps training at Quantico, Virginia. The entire phrase was "A *piss-poor-war* is better than no war at all."

## INTRODUCTION

On a positive note, we had been informed earlier by Agency types that Special Project intelligence work would continue for at least another year. Because of the Watergate scandal or other factors to which I was not privy, this projection failed to come to fruition. Consequently, after almost twelve years with the Company, I was left at odds looking for a suitable job. Fortunately, overseas helicopter work at reasonable wages was still available. Consequently, my family and I ended up working for Bell Helicopter International in the Middle Eastern country of Iran, but that is the basis for another interesting and colorful story set in a different, yet tumultuous period of history.

This short 1974 book portrays none of the former years of excitement and combat experiences. It represents the culmination of our participation as civilian crewmembers conducting paramilitary missions for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and implementing United States Government (USG) policy. Gone were the heady days of combat flying and challenging Special Project intelligence gathering missions. Emphasis was now centered on clean-up work in preparation to leaving Laotians (mostly the Meo people) to their own designs. No one in our organization considered the decision to leave Laos to be America's finest hour. <sup>4</sup>

As in previous books, the Author has strived to explain the Second Indochina War in Laos from a pilot's eyewitness perspective. Accounts were compiled from part history, part autobiographical memoir, part crewmember participation, part reflection, and other participants' recall. This concluding work

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<sup>4</sup> By 1974, most of the "Sneaky Pete" and large military operations were over, and we were delegated to perform more mundane tasks that closely paralleled the title of the book.



## INTRODUCTION

is an attempt to describe the final months working in Laos and life in Udorn, Thailand.

Unlike other books in the *Rice, Rooftops, and Refugees* series, there is no combat or hostile action to report, and this book is necessarily short. Therefore, it is recommended that the reader consult preceding works for background and a more comprehensive sphere of reference involving the long conflict.

The Author would like to acknowledge participation of both ground and air contributions of the multi-national civilian men and women of Air America, Inc., Bird and Son, and Continental Air Services, Inc. The accolade also extends to dedicated members of the Central Intelligence Agency, U.S. military services, and associated USG and civilian agencies, including United States Aid for International Development, U.S. Information Services, International Voluntary Service, religious orders, and other entities. The list includes third country nationals--Chinese, Filipino, Lao, and Thai--who participated in the Second Indochina conflict in Thailand and Laos, often as a "face-in-the crowd" during the lengthy and largely frustrating Soviet-American Cold War era.

For those who sacrificed everything for the cause and failed to make the cut: RIP...

**F**rom all outward appearances, in the United States Government's (USG) viewpoint, and that of the American people, U.S. participation in the Second Indochina War was finished. U.S. military appropriations had been cut to the bone, and strict Congressional bills prohibited U.S. forces from returning to the field. Therefore, in the absence of military leverage to counter their military movements, North Vietnamese leaders continued their 1959 policy and efforts to enlarge and position their force to a point where they could take possession of both South Vietnam and Laos.

Laos had always provided a pathetic supplement to the publicized war in the east. Western politicians envisioned it mostly as a buffer for the Thai government to develop their understrength military to ward off aggression. To a great extent, this had been accomplished over time, but a superclass of military and police was created, leaving an emerging and restless Thai middleclass--mostly university students--demanding increased access and say in government affairs. The boiling point was finally reached in the fall of 1973, when student protests precipitated wholesale slaughter and a change of government.

Laos, a tool of extraterritorial entities, was doomed from the beginning. The kingdom lacked a cohesive military to address enemy aggression, and the lowland people lacked a sense of national unity. But this was always the case, for from the early colonial days, French advisors, preferring to use their own people in civil and military positions, failed to train and structure leaders on the enlisted level to coordinate and

conduct operations. <sup>5</sup> Field grade officers were no better, preferring to reap the benefits, while leading from behind. Consequently, when the enemy attacked, lower grade officers fled, leaving the rank and file--and often U.S. Special Forces advisors--to their own devices. Indeed, there was a good reason for the Royal Lao Army's (RLA) infamous designation as the world's worst army. This did not change appreciably with the advent of U.S. efforts.

Special units, designated as irregulars, Special Guerrilla battalions (SGU), and Commando Raiders (CR), trained, structured, and supplied by CIA Case Officers performed, much better against the "dreaded" North Vietnamese Army in combat situations. Better pay and perks were contributive incentives.

Hill tribesmen (Meo, Yao) and lowland clans (generically called Lao Theung or Kha) were considered the most pugnacious and efficient warriors on the government side. They also formed good fighting units for the enemy (Meo and Black Tai). Fighting for the right to live in a particular area, although not generally accepted by Mekong River Lao people, these individuals possessed incentive to prevent incursions by the enemy. However, after many years of a war of attrition, their numbers had waned drastically, and had to be supplemented by massive Thai "volunteers" in the early seventies. <sup>6</sup>

### **REDUCTION IN PAY**

The January 1973 failure of the Far East Pilots' Association (FEPA) to successfully negotiate and enact a

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<sup>5</sup> In any army, sergeants provide the small unit backbone required to enable the system to work smoothly. This was not the case in the Royal Lao Army, where rampant greed and individual desires superseded the needs of all.

<sup>6</sup> Although a factor from the early sixties as trainers, pilots, and defensive stiffeners, Thai participation in the Lao war is not admitted even today.

contract with Air America management resulted in immediate and periodic pay cuts. <sup>7</sup> Despite the continuing high number of hostile incidents, including one fatality, the heralded pay cut announced the previous year took effect on 1 January.

Base and hourly compensation was scaled according to number of years with the Company and aircraft type. For example, my base pay for eleven years' service was 1,300 dollars, a reduction of almost fifty percent; block hour pay, originally developed in the FEPA contract with the company, was calculated by category, mine was thirteen dollars.

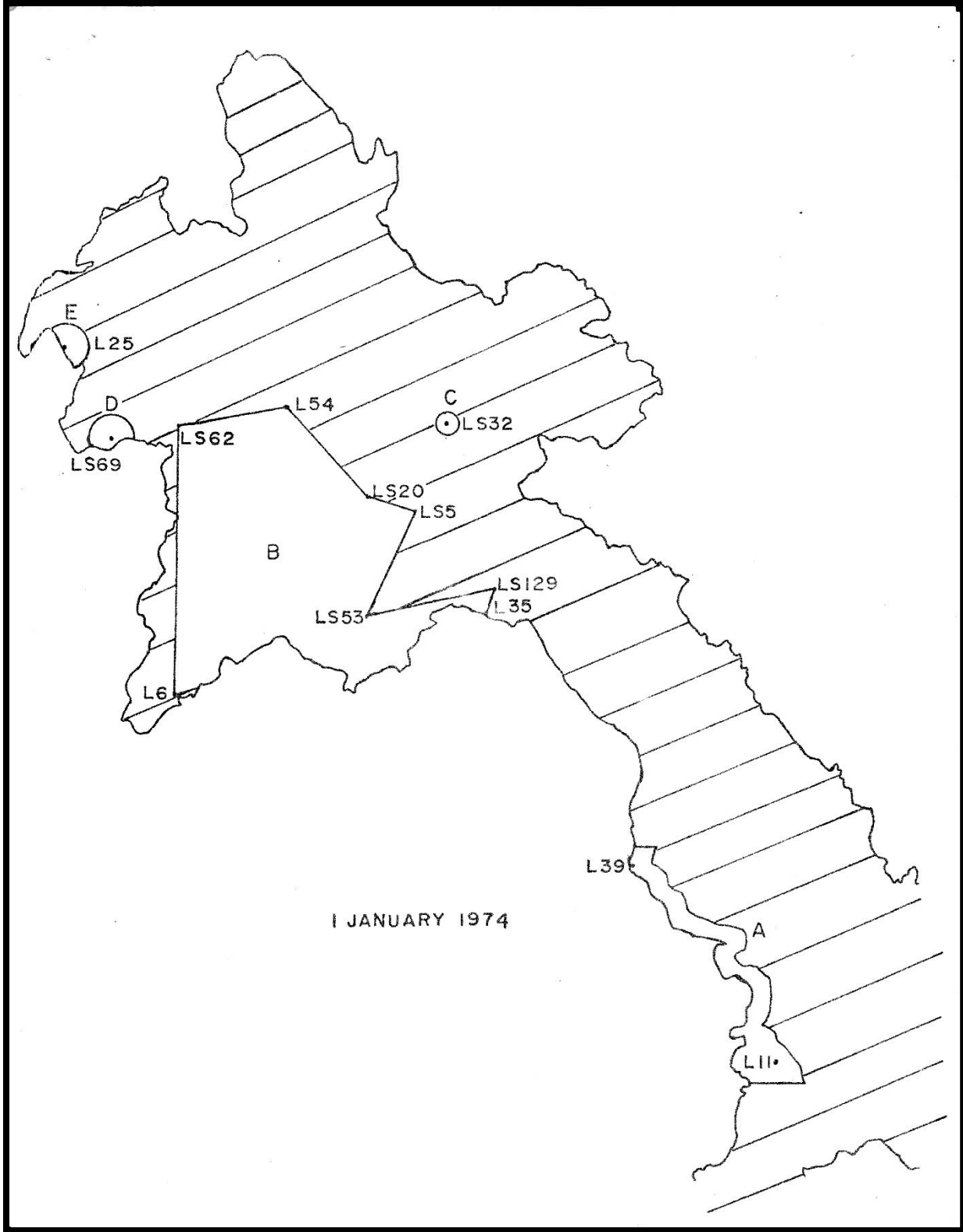
Area pay, a premium paid over and above flight pay for S-58T cockpit crewmembers for airborne operations where unusual natural hazards to aircraft operations existed, was two dollars. This amount would not be paid for a ferry flight, local FCF, or local training.

Formerly hostility pay, supplemental pay was premium compensation over and above flight pay for airborne operations conducted within geographical areas designated by the company where unnatural risks are reasonably suspected or known to exist. The supplemental pay was paid in the amount of fourteen dollars and fifty cents per block hour operated within designated geographical areas, or on designated segments of individual flights.

Both area and supplemental pay were subject to Company review of changes in natural hazards and making adjustments reflecting changes in conditions (i.e., pay reductions).

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<sup>7</sup> We did not know at the time that the bilateral negotiations were a farce. Determined to break the union's strength, the Company never intended to negotiate for a new contract in good faith. The facade was successful, and FEPA was forgotten. As a result, the Company had a free hand to do anything they wanted with employee compensation. Therefore, many disgruntled pilots, particularly old-timers chose to terminate employment and depart Southeast Asia.



Management-generated graphic of supplemental pay areas in Laos. Hash-marked areas, with limitations, qualified for supplemental pay. Others (A-E) will be explained in the following narrative.

Minor changes included: The Udorn station allowance for living expenses, 157.50 dollars; Night pay, three dollars; Deadhead pay, half of the flight pay appropriate to the deadheading pilot's aircraft category. <sup>8</sup>

To allay confusion, the supplemental pay areas were explained more clearly in a CJ Abadie memorandum distributed on 5 January.

The description in the graphic applied to aircraft assigned to work within designated supplemental pay areas, and was not intended to apply to relatively high-flying en route aircraft. Flights to or from T-08 (Udorn), L08 (Vientiane), or other major Thai or Lao airfields, located at L-25 (Ban Houei Sai), LS-69A (Xieng Lom), L-54 (Luang Prabang), LS-20A (Long Tieng), L-35 (Paksane), L-40 (Thakhet), L-39 (Savannakhet), or L-11 (Paksane) would not qualify for supplemental pay. Flights to and from LS-32 (Bouam Long) would qualify at all altitudes.

Alphabetical categories on the graphic were explained in detail:

Alpha area between Savannakhet (L-39) and Pakse (L-11) was defined by the Thai border on the west and a line ten miles east of the Mekong River extending ten miles north of L-39 and ten miles south of L-11.

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<sup>8</sup> Compiled from a Company issued compensation hand-out, effective January 1974. The FEPA years were financially rewarding for helicopter cockpit crews with the Author's monthly gross pay checks ranging from a one-time high of 7,000 dollars to a low of a little more than 3,000 dollars. After the new Company compensation was enacted, monthly gross pay dropped below 2,000 dollars, but then, with additional clean-up work in Laos, surged to the mid-3,000-dollar range. Following the initial starvation period when Captain upgrades were on hold between 09/62 and the spring of 1963, wages increased substantially and the Author's yearly pay averaged more than 33,000 dollars over the nearly twelve-year tenure. Consequently, aside from the fun of flying combat missions and getting shot at, the period could be judged as worthwhile.

Bravo area boundaries were established by direct lines connecting and encompassing Paksane (L-35), Borikhane (LS-129), Ritaville (LS-53), Padong (LS-05), Sam Tong (LS-20), Luang Prabang (L-54), Hong Sa (LS62), and Ken Thao (L-06). This also included the Mekong River area between Ken Thao and Paksane.

Charlie designated an area within a five-mile radius of Bouam Long (LS-32).

Delta described an area within a ten-mile radius of Xieng Lom (LS-69A).

Echo area included an area in a ten-mile radius of Ban Houie Sai (L-25).<sup>9</sup>

## **UDORN STRIKE**

Including late December, I did not fly or crank a helicopter blade for thirty-five days. Several factors influenced this down time: one was no near-term scheduled Special Project work. Gone was the mystery and challenge of night flying deep in enemy territory while performing intelligence gathering missions. Another was the monthly scheduled time off (STO) accorded flight crews. A third related to undercurrents of unrest that developed and surfaced during the second week of January among students and the Company Thai employees in Udorn, which might or might not have stemmed from the student revolutionary mood that prevailed in the country during the fall fracas in Bangkok which overthrew the Thanom

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<sup>9</sup> Memorandum, Northern Thailand Flight Crewmembers, Vice President-Northern Thailand Division (VP/NTD, CJ Abadie), Supplemental Pay, 01/05/74.

Author's Note: LS-05 was erroneously listed as Pha Khao (LS-14). Wayne Knight Email, 01/11/01. Supplemental vs hostile pay: "The hostile pay formula previously established had no area flown element, just a percentage of total hours based on the ratio of reported incidents to flying hours. The ratio had to be historical, either the previous month or quarter was used for computations."

military regime. Following the change of government there was more questioning of ties with the U.S. Nationalist sentiment, which was often expressed in terms of anti-Americanism, ran high among students who protested alleged American involvement in Thai domestic affairs, and called for the speedy withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country.

While this rebellious attitude was festering and developing in Udorn, we went south to Bangkok on STO for a change of venue and to attend to mundane items. Despite rumor, there was no evidence of last year's problems, and all appeared quiet in the Montien Hotel-Suriwongse-Patpong Road area.

Trouble surfaced on Friday the 11<sup>th</sup>, when students protested high prices in the area.

*"The Thais have the strike bug and are doing it all over Thailand. Today they struck Air America...How long this will last no one knows. The people are very restless especially the students. I understand there were a few American Go Home signs today. Suits me! If they want to screw up this country, well why not let them? There is a lack of violence in most of their protests."*

Continuation of the Letter:

*"Ricky went to school again on the bus today and returned as I guess there is still labor trouble. Tuie and I went to the Air Force outdoor movie last night and the students were marching down the street toward the base chanting anti-American slogans. They had signs alluding to the wrongdoings of the CIA. I guess we are in for it.*

*I [suppose] the Air Force personnel were restricted to base last night as I had to show my ID card to get off the base. All the girls of the night were milling about outside waiting for*



*their buddies. There must have been a couple hundred. Oh well, what's a nights pay?*

*On the way home about nine thirty there were motorcycle gangs cruising about [town] looking for trouble or Americans [to hassle].*

*I have checked all my hardware just in case. So far there is no trouble at individuals' houses yet. I really don't think it will come to this...hopefully.*

*Of course, all these protests and strikes have been going on in Bangkok for some time since the students ousted the former [Thanom] government. They are all feeling their oats and now it has spilled over to our area. There is speculation as to who is behind it all. I am sure the commies relish all this, if not perpetrating it."*

Later before posting the letter.

*"PS. A little more on the AAM strike. Tuie said the Base Manager's car [CJ Abadie] was destroyed and that he had been in a government building down town all night [it was erroneously rumored he was at the governor's house]. The Thai doctor at the clinic has been threatened and strikers want him out. The security at the AAM compound is running scared. Evidently these folks have angered some employees at some time. Thais don't like to be put down by other Thais.*

*I'll leave this in the typewriter as there will probably be more when Tuie gets home.*

*Tuie just returned home [from Kuhn Ta and Yai's house] and reports nothing more." <sup>10</sup>*

Letter Home, 01/13-14/74.

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<sup>10</sup> Rumors were rife emanating from both American and Thai communities. As with any incident, many initial reports were wrong. Recall by active principals will reveal this.

**ABADIE**

Sunday morning Vice President of Northeast Thailand CJ Abadie, Personnel Director Charlie Lane, and his assistant, Don Malech, went to supposedly neutral ground at the police station in town to negotiate with Air America strike leaders.

They spent a long, tiring day at the police station with Thai negotiators intimidating and attempting to induce Abadie to commit to their terms. Fending off demands, Ab reiterated many times that he possessed no actual authority to promise or sign any agreement, but would record their mandates, return to his office, and phone the Company office in Taipei to apprise management of the strikers' demands and seek approval to negotiate in good faith. As a counter, the Thai men acquiesced to allow Abadie to go back to his office to call Taipei, but they would hold Lane and Malech as insurance (hostages). Being the good Marine that he was, by leaving no man behind, Ab refused to leave alone. Taking a hard stand, he said they had all arrived together and would all leave together. Consequently, the three Air America representatives were not allowed to leave while the back-and-forth dialogue continued all night.

They were granted permission to leave at daybreak. Upon exiting the police station, Ab discovered that as a result of his stubborn persistence fending off Thai demands, the angry and frustrated Thai had smashed a window and created a few dents in his car. <sup>11</sup>

Since the strikers had some radio capability, Ab did not want to send sensitive information over the phone or by radio to

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<sup>11</sup> Wayne Knight Emails, 01/08/01, 01/09/01. Despite an early rumor, Wayne does not recall Abadie's car being destroyed, but the car seats were slashed along with a deposit of excrement on the front seat.

Author Note: Thai people are normally very peaceful, but if greatly angered, had a breaking point that knew no bounds.

Taipei. Therefore, he went across the parking ramp to AB-1 and informed Pat Landry and Buddy Rogers about the "negotiations." For security, he requested that they send a message to Taipei management using their equipment. They did, while also informing their superiors at Langley. Buddy and Polly Rogers were friends of Abadie and Mary Ann Cook. Knowing that Ab would be busy full time until the issue was resolved, Buddy arranged to have the children at his house and posted shotgun-bearing guards at Ab's house.

After Ab received a reply from Taipei outlining his options, he arranged another meeting with the chief Thai negotiators. However, this time discussion was planned at a genuinely neutral location. Ab had a good friend, a Thai Border Police colonel who, acting as an intermediary, offered the BPP camp on the Sakon Nakon road for future negotiations. <sup>12</sup> This was agreed to by both parties and negotiations progressed with lessened acrimony. <sup>13</sup>

I drove to the Air Force base to purchase some milk and other consumables in the event that access might be blocked in the future. There were a few strikers lining the road, but after I stated my business, no attempt was made to prevent me from proceeding. They did inform me that some of their people were on the access road to Air America with radios and not to go there.

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<sup>12</sup> Through the auspices of AB-1's Bill Lair and Pat Landry, Air America personnel had worked closely with the border police patrol program in the early days. We supplied their remote outposts along the northeastern border. Abadie had met the colonel at this time. The two men formed a rapport and Ab was always at ease when in the colonel's presence.

Author Note: There was also a BPP colonel in the Nisagonrungsee family, but probably not the same person who helped Abadie. Because of Air America's unique relationship with the BPP, we were encouraged to use the weapons range and some of the pilots flew their model airplanes at the camp.

<sup>13</sup> CJ Abadie Email, 02/08/99, 02/10/99.

Tuesday night Tuie and I went to the outdoor movie at the Air Force base. All seemed quiet. When we returned home, there was a notice taped to the gate along with the flight schedule. Grammar was skewed, but the overall message was quite clear.

*"January 15, 1974*

*To: All Air America Flight Crews.*

*Due to the fact that we, Thai employees are in the duration of the strike to demand for an improvement of the welfare and the financial assistance to adequately support the presently high cost of living. We wish your cooperation to stop your activity until the negotiation between Thai employees and the company comes to an agreement. It is anticipated that the reply from Washington D.C. will be received within January 18, 1974 [Friday]. Your fate is not better than us.*

*Your cooperation would be highly appreciated.*

*All Thai employees"*

The flight schedule specified that Dan Zube and I were to fly together on the 16th. We were fairly isolated on the north side of town, and had little actual knowledge about what was occurring at the Company facility. Rumors circulated that families would be harassed if flight crews went to work. Moreover, Plang and Cham Nisagonrungsee were hearing vicious rumors in the Thai community that sounded like a small war was about to break out, so Tuie wanted to keep the Cortina to take the children and go to Khun Yai's house when I went to work. Therefore, we drove to Dan and Candy's house to arrange for Dan to pick me up in the morning. Zube had also received the "read-between-the-lines" threatening Thai letter. Having been ruthlessly overwhelmed by the Company using divide and conquer tactics during FEPA contract negotiations the past January, we

were both sympathetic to the Thai cause, but could not turn down a scheduled flight. In the U.S. military this would have been tantamount to a missing movement and subject to judicial action under the Universal Code of Military Justice system. As civilians we were considerably less impacted, but could have been terminated with cause, that beside our jobs would have negated our repatriation perks. After some friendly chit-chat, Dan agreed to pick me up in the morning.

Not certain that we could gain access to the base, and curious about what to do if this was the case, next we went to Abadie's house on Tahan Thanon (airport road) for advice and information about what was happening. The driveway to Ab's house was fairly long, and before driving too far we were stopped and met by Thai men in civilian clothes carrying shotguns. I identified myself and learned that Ab was not at home.

Next, we went to Jim Rhyne's house. He was there, but claimed to be on home leave and professed to not knowing much. Moreover, he did not appear too concerned about the situation.

Wednesday morning Zube picked me up at the appointed time. To maintain a low profile, as a poor façade, we elected to wear civilian clothes and carry our uniforms in a RON bag. From what we heard there was not much sense driving the Air America access road, so we attempted to get through the Air Force gate. However even at the early hour, the road was blocked by a few mean-looking strikers who looked like they meant business. <sup>14</sup> There was one more entrance Dan knew of on the west side of the airfield. Therefore, as a last-ditch effort, something I had never done before, Dan slowly negotiated little used back trails

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<sup>14</sup> There was no help from USAF gate guards, who were told not to intervene and remain apolitical. I suppose that if extreme violence had occurred and someone had been injured, they might have taken action.



The main gate to the U.S. Air Force Base at Udorn, Thailand.

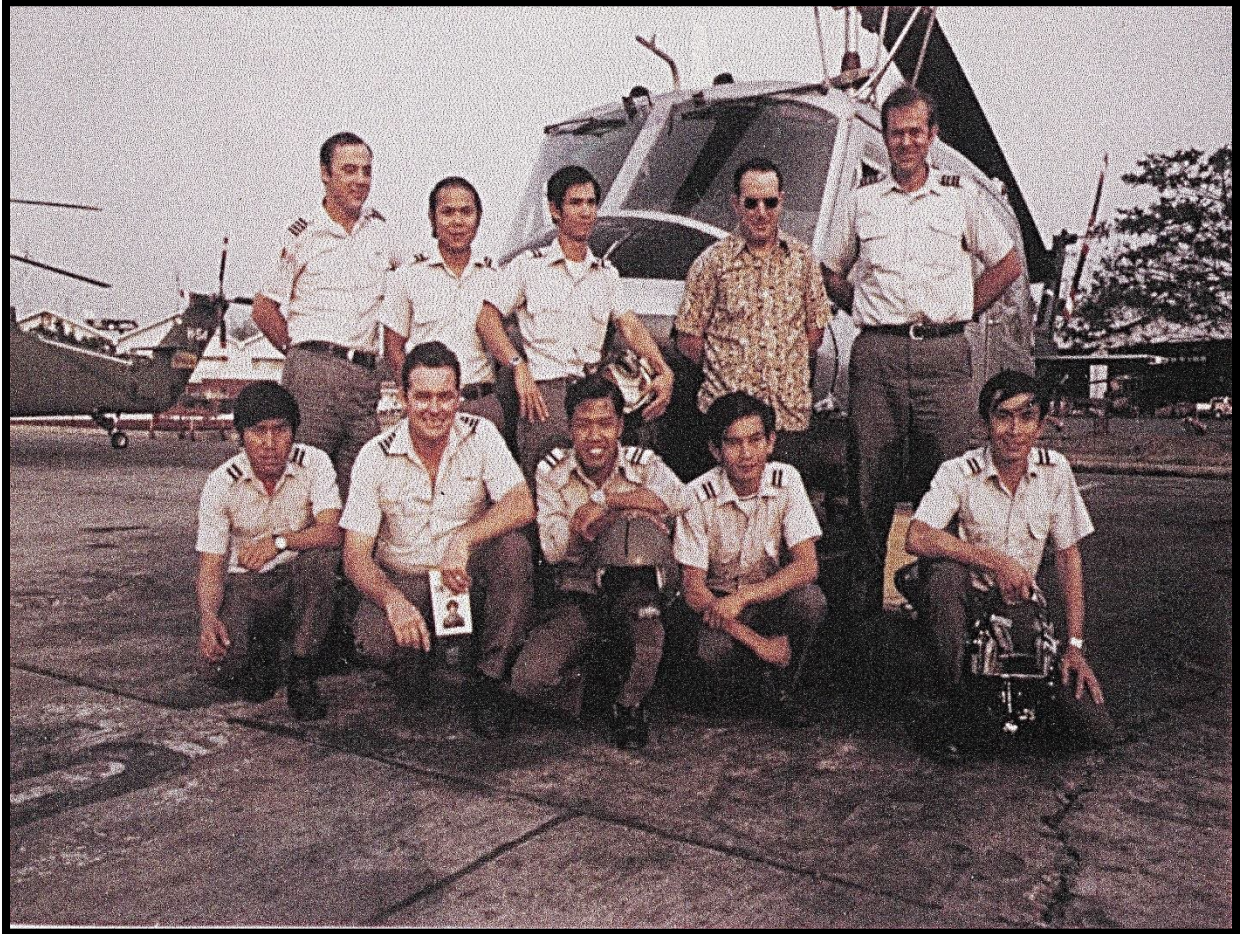
and grassy paths to the perimeter fence. There was no one on either side of the gate, but it was heavily chained and padlocked. We had no other alternative than to turn around and return home. Communications at the time were so bad that we could not even apprise flight operations of our plight. <sup>15</sup> Tuie was happy I was home. I must admit, as isolated as we were, subject to only rumor, I wanted to be close to the family in case of actual trouble.

Later in the day I attempted to go to the Air Force commissary to purchase milk and any information I could obtain. The road was blocked near the main highway with an increased number of pickets. Hoping to charm them, I stopped, rolled down the window and informed the boys of my intention, and that I had been allowed previous access. No deal. Everything had changed. This made me angry, so I penetrated the first cluster and headed toward the gate. Lining both sides of the road, some of the second lot was armed with sticks and two-by-fours. When they aggressively began beating on the car, I realized how serious they were and stopped. I exited the car to talk. They were not particularly nasty, but were adamant about not letting me on base no matter the excuse. What bothered me most was that I failed to recognize any in the group as I had previously. It was then I realized that they must have been ringers brought in from Bangkok or other areas of Thailand to stiffen the strike movement.

Just when I thought we were left hanging by Company management, and that the situation had morphed into everyman for himself, a two-way radio was delivered to my house and other centrally located areas in town. Contact was intermittent and not very good. The radio was rarely manned on the base side, but

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<sup>15</sup> I later heard that Jim Rhyne had barged through the Air America access road and gate with a large dog in his car.



The original test flight (FCF) crew at the Air America facility. American squatting Captain Tom Moher. Standing L-R Captains Bob Swartz, Joe Lopes (civilian clothes) and Ed Rudolphs. Thai boys are unidentified. Hangars and shops are seen to the rear.

*Air America Log*



citizen band radios some employees had did make us aware of the state of affairs to some extent. When anything pertinent came through, I walked the short distance to Joe Lopes house on Benjarn Road to swap information. Bob Davis, manager of the FCF test flight program, had informed his people to stay home until things calmed down and were resolved. Joe, who was active in the FCF program, had solicited and hired Korean karate instructors to patrol the road and his house. <sup>16</sup>

## **BURKE**

Chief Pilot Helicopters (CPH) Marius Burke spent the entire week on the base. There were specific helicopter lifts where operations could reach people from outside of town. The lifts were not scheduled and were catch-as-catch-can. However, during the entire strike period, communication was so bad that it was difficult to contact people. Mainly, those at the Air America facility were concerned about individuals intercepting information, particularly spies from the Transportation Department located on the airport access road with radios.

Since Chinook crews were programed to pick up scheduled workers, to be helpful, during the week Marius checked himself out in the CH-47C in which he previously had logged a few hours during test flights. <sup>17</sup>

In addition to the fence, barbed wire was strung around the base perimeter. Guards carried weapons. Burke maintained an arsenal of assorted weapons in his office to include grenade

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<sup>16</sup> After the strike was over, Joe and his family left Air America. I did not see Joe and his family again until we were working for Bell Helicopter International in Iran.

<sup>17</sup> Wayne Knight Email. Wayne does not recall Marius Burke staying on the base, checking himself out in the Chinook. "The claim is unreasonable but irresponsible as well." This was not the way things were done. The insurance debacle that could have ensued had he been involved in an accident later would have caused a problem.

launchers. He considered it an armed camp. There were expectations of big problems, and they were so isolated at the base that it was difficult to know exactly what was happening. People present fully expected that with all the threats the Thais were making, the base would be stormed with buildings and shops being torched.

Later reflecting on the episode, Marius believed the strike was well organized, and supported with a rally or two held downtown. <sup>18</sup>

### **GENTZ'S ADVENTURE**

When the strike first began, Thai mem started throwing furniture in the pool. Gary knew one of the men.

Intending to continue flight operations, originally the Flight Department was going to pick up flight crews needed for upcountry work in Chinook helicopters. There were no designated landing areas around town, but operations people were going to inform people where to go and pick them up at a certain time. For the majority of people this never worked. <sup>19</sup>

Flight Mechanics Gary Gentz and Hal Augustine were supposed to work one day. Knowing it was fruitless to attempt driving down the Air America access road, they elected to go through the Air Force side. Thai strikers lined both sides of the street to the gate, so not to antagonize them, they drove slowly. Ringers all, they did not recognize one of them. Some of the men held two by fours. They began approaching the car, so Gary drove faster. Then one of men swung his board and hit the windshield flat. As he began swinging, Hal placed his feet against the windshield and prevented it from breaking. Another guy struck the vehicle across the trunk creating a substantial crease. They

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<sup>18</sup> Marius Burke Interview.

<sup>19</sup> I knew nothing of this arrangement at the time.

went sliding through the gate and the Air Force guard ran up to the car asking, "Why the hell are you running through the gate?" Then he saw the damage and said, "Oh." The two shaken men continued along the perimeter road to the Company facility.

At this time, Chinook crews were ferrying food into Laos, so even though he was not accredited in the machine, like "needs of the service," Gentz was assigned part of the crew.

### **TEACHER ALLEN**

Air America school teacher, Jay Don Allen, drove his 1963 Bellaire Chevy, obtained from Agency Case Officer Chuck Campbell when he left Udorn, on base twice. Campbell's Joint Liaison Department (JLD) sticker on the windshield, and the fact that Allen was a teacher, helped both at the Air America and Air Force entrances. Trying to prevent people access to the facility, the Thai boys made menacing gestures and threw rocks. Some hit Jay's car, which greatly angered him.

Thais had thrown chairs and a television set into the pool. The situation got nasty. Later, the base was almost deserted, so Thai employees must have been restricted to only a few loyal ones. Thai strike breakers were getting a lot of flak. There was a lot of animosity after the strike. One of the school secretaries struck and the other one did not. They hated each other.

One time there were only a few people at Air America. One was Hal Augustine, who was mowing the yard around the school. Jay joined Principal Verne Clarkson in this activity.

A lot of people were packing weapons. In addition to a little league bat under the car seat, Jay carried an AK-47 with six full magazines obtained from Jim Sweeney when he left Air America. Dan Cooley had given him a Berretta, so, along with his testosterone, he was well armed. Against the possibility of

being breached, guards patrolled the compound and perimeter with Uzi machine guns.

Downtown, sound trucks normally used to tout local movies, were driving around trying to get people stirred up. Jay considered the situation pretty scary. There were rumors that people were going to be kidnapped. Consequently, individuals were getting trigger happy, conducting target practice in their back yards.

Allen considered the strike a sorry way to end the Air America experience. Although events in Laos and preordained mandates in Washington sealed the fate of Air America, Jay heard that the strike accelerated the closing of the base, instead of pulling out slowly in a more organized manner. <sup>20</sup>

## **KNIGHT**

Wayne had a Chevy station wagon and Lai drove him on to the Air America facility each day. Each entry was an adventure, but leaving was no problem. Throughout the ordeal he thought he was outsmarting the blockaders by attempting something different each day and using alternating gates. They were never stopped. A stout log was nearly thrown in front of the car on several occasions, but it was always drawn back. <sup>21</sup> One morning a person acted as if he was going to smash the windshield, but held back when he identified them.

After the affair was over, one of the strike leaders who Wayne knew well revealed that five members of Air America Udorn management had a "pass" to come and go through the barricades.

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<sup>20</sup> Jay Allen Interviews.

Wayne Knight Email. Wayne was surprised that Allen, or any other round-eye had gained access to the base.

<sup>21</sup> After the second day, on the road to the Air America gate, two people stood, along with others, with a sizable log, which they would toss in front of the wheels of a vehicle that appeared not to be stopping at their blockade.

Wayne was one, and Ab, Senior Operations Manager Dick Ford, Charlie Lane, and Don Malech were the others. However, passes were implied. No papers were issued and Air America personnel were never aware that they would be allowed access to the base. His informant indicated that someone had to be allowed access to the base in order to communicate their demands to Taipei and Washington. Learning this was a big disappointment, for Wayne believed he and Lai were being clever by slipping through the barricades each day. Revelation of the "pass" system was surprising as to recognition of management types, for Wayne could not identify any of the strikers and believed they had to be from other areas. Since most of the ringleaders were from the Maintenance Department, he did not know these participants either. <sup>22</sup>

Wayne remained at the base late one night with Abadie while a striker rally was held in City Park on the first day (called Hyde Park by the strikers). He telephoned his wife and suggested she might attend the rally and report what was discussed. For safety, he recommended she remain in the background. Lai went to the rally and was immediately recognized. The speaker even welcomed her. After the rally was over, she drove to the base to pick Wayne up, and was debriefed by two interested parties. (Wayne and his family lived in a second-floor apartment on Phosri Road and always went home at night.) Information was scanty. The strikers claimed ten demands, but three of them were undisclosed. The Thai were well organized tactically, but it took them three days to complete their list of demands. <sup>23</sup>

In order to deliver personnel to and from the base like during past flood periods, a helicopter lift was used. Flying a Chinook, Wayne participated with Herman Gehring picking up a

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<sup>22</sup> Wayne Knight Emails, 01/08/01, 01/09/01. Passes

<sup>23</sup> Wayne Knight Email, 01/09/01, 01/11/01.

large crowd of employees and pilots in rice paddies east of town. Information regarding a flight was passed by radio or phone to a certain point. After that information regarding the morning flights circulated by word of mouth.

Unaware of the pass-pass system, erroneously believing if they left the base at night reentry would not be granted, Ab and his assistant Dick Ford organized sleeping arrangements in their respective offices, and remained overnight at the Air America facility. During the negotiation period, when Ab was away during the day for long periods, Wayne stood in for him taking care of operational matters.

CJ Abadie and Dick Ford's secretary, Thongsook Ratanaphoka (considered by all a real tiger of a woman), continued to be loyal to Air America throughout the trouble. She often verbally abused the strikers. Her husband was a member of the border police, and she came to work each day in a BPP Jeep and was not bothered.

Long efficient and valued employee Limaiai Somsakdi, Chief of Crew Scheduling, remained loyal, but was unable to gain access to the base.<sup>24</sup> During the stressful and frustrating week, Wayne would not have encouraged any Thai to attempt to break the blockade, as they could have been injured.<sup>25</sup>

Much to Wayne's and Dick Ford's annoyance, Ab's paramour, Mary Ann Cook, spent the period in the outer office doing her nails, fretting, and asking too many questions. After Ab returned the first day, Wayne complained to him suggesting she should not be underfoot. He asked what they would do with her if

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<sup>24</sup> Limaiai, Somsakdi Email, 03/02/99. Somsak joined Air America in 1963 as the Operations Dispatcher Clerk; 1965 he was the Chief Pilot's clerk/secretary and worked for Captains Knight, Burke, and Rhyne; he advanced to the Chief of Crew Scheduling in 1969. He was one of the last personnel to work for Air America Udorn in 1974.

<sup>25</sup> Wayne Knight Email, 01/09/01.

there was an outbreak of violence. Ab said to call AB-1, and they would take care of her. This answer confirmed that Ab had little or no control over her actions.

Although Wayne spent a majority of time in the office, he did walk around the base. He did see some plastic furniture in the pool, but did not consider this particularly unusual. In the past, he generally arrived at the base before daylight and usually had a cup of coffee at the club. It was not uncommon to see a chair or lounge chair in the pool, apparently from boisterous activity the previous evening. Since there were never any militant strikers on base after the lockout on Sunday, hooliganism like this must have occurred early. <sup>26</sup>

By Friday night strikers' gross demands were met to their satisfaction and everybody went back to work on Saturday. Following almost a week of turmoil, inflamed tempers subsided and the strike was resolved, with some intervention from the U.S. Embassy and CIA contacts in the country. Air America yielded a slight amount on striker demands, but the Thai government did not want the strikers to receive too much, since they would have to face similar strikes elsewhere if all demands were met. <sup>27</sup>

Details of the settlement continued to be negotiated for several days after the strike was finished and the lock-out lifted. Wayne had no role in negotiations and assumed Ab's role as Vice President.

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<sup>26</sup> Wayne Knight Email, 01/09/01. As opposed to Marius Burke's recall and rumors, Wayne did not recall seeing barbed wire, fifty soldiers with machineguns, or documents being burned.

<sup>27</sup> CJ Abadie Email, 02/08/99. Wayne Knight Email. Wayne does not recall any embassy help. CIA help was even less obvious. At the time, they felt very much on their own, but he is sure both of these agencies had influences they were not aware of then.

Wayne heard none of the nasty and threatening rumors we did in town. However, he conceded that the rumors and threats were enough to spook just about everyone. Wayne's Thai friends told him after it was over that there was never any intent to harm anyone, and he never heard of any physical attacks. He believed there were few repercussions within the non-spooked expat community over the strike action. <sup>28</sup>

*"We have had a Thai Air America employee's strike that tied things up for a week. It never got too messy but had implications."*

Letter to Dan Carson in Scottsdale, Arizona, 12/29/74.

*"The Air America employees' strike is over and lasted about a week. There were many [people] running scared, as rumor had it that families would be harassed if flight crews went to work...There were reports or rumors of violence and incidents throughout the week and by Friday, the day of settlement or report from Washington, some people were nervous wrecks. I tried to go on the base several times and most times was not allowed..*

*To make a long story a bit shorter. The demands were met and/or settled Friday night and everyone went back to work Saturday. There was no violence and according to our management, who went to work every day by helicopter or stayed on the base, there was never any problem. It was all rumor to keep us off balance. If this was the case it was very effective [even the town folks were worried]. We were concerned, especially hearing that the strikers had weapons of automatic capability and fire bombs that they were going to use if they didn't get what they wanted Friday night. There were even rumors of gangs coming up*

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<sup>28</sup> Wayne Knight Emails, 01/08/01, 01/09/01, 01/11/01.



*from Bangkok and the Griffin compound [a few miles south of the airfield] was to be burned down as was Air America.*

*There are a few things that I cannot resolve if all was well. Why was Air America barricaded with barbed wire and 50 soldiers in the Compound with machineguns? Why were they burning documents Friday afternoon and encouraging people who were on base to go home at two o'clock?...Management was unprepared for this and are loath to admit it and the strikers were far more organized than had expected. Had the communists [some were suspected in the striker group] taken advantage of this situation there might have been some real problems. I have still not seen anything in the paper about this business.*

*Do you remember Bob Davis who stopped by the house a few summers ago [when I was on home leave]? He was in charge of the test flight program for the outfit. He told his people to stay home until all this was settled. Saturday he was asked why he stayed away from work and was harassed so badly that he quit. He was a man that was far better than any in management at present. This Company has always expected us to perform when the chips are down, but it looks like it is one way. Tom Moher [another FCF pilot] was bothered for two hours and foaming at the mouth when I saw him. The way they [management] treat people is why there was a union and now a Thai strike. There will be more.*

*This is not all that has been going on as the students have been marching condemning the CIA for some incident that didn't amount to anything. There have been reports in the papers that we are supplying guns to the commies and supporting them. The whole thing relates to the weak government in Bangkok. After the student strike there [last year] that ousted the military government a weak old man was put in power and the kids and anyone who pleases has run amok. This has spread to our area now and really has to stop or else there won't be any country soon.*

*Already the communists have stepped up activities in areas near us. If the Thais think we are the bad guys and are not here to help them, well maybe we should pull out and leave them to their fate. I think some of the older folks are getting disgusted with the students antics by now and the time is ripe for a new government to step in. I expect this."*

Letter Home, 12/29/74. <sup>29</sup>

## **BILL YOUNG**

Northern Thailand was also impacted by the revolutionary flavor pervading the country in late 1973-1974. During the period leading up to rebellious era, former Agency Case Officer Bill Young was living in Chiang Mai. He had gathered a great deal of hard evidence portending what was going to happen, but decided it would not be worthwhile to apprise the doubting press or turn the information over to anybody. Evidence of communists attempting to subvert Thailand was portrayed by suitcases of money entering the country from Hong Kong, Vientiane, and other places. It was a low period in his life. The U.S. had exited Southeast Asia in a cowardly manner, and Bill was ashamed to be an American and unhappy with the actions of U.S. Congress members.

Speaker of the House, and later Prime Minister (1975), Kukrit Pramoj, who also owned the *Siam Rath* newspaper, was inviting the U.S. to get out of Thailand. This led to militant students tearing down the American flag and embassy emblems, and urinating on them. Thinking that Pramoj was pro-west, Bill was somewhat surprised at the vitriol, but also knew that he had made a trip to Peking and shook hands with Mao. (Richard Nixon also did this.)

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<sup>29</sup> Discounting Laos, the Thai uprising was my first, but not my last revolution, as would later develop in 1979 Iran.

Bill was friends with a Thai policeman who helped him a lot, as did old friends of the Young family. He noted that the majority of Thais and Americans were friends. Only a small minority were causing trouble.

It was a period of witch hunts and student revolution. This was not restricted to Thailand, as Chief of Station Welch was killed in Athens, Greece. Obtaining help from outside communist operatives, communists had considerable influence in Thai labor unions and student organizations. Early in the movement, loud speaker trucks manned by radical students drove around Chiang Mai informing people what their new found freedoms would be rather than what their responsibilities should be. Anger was directed toward Americans. They began by calling the CIA's "blood-sucking" presence the problem to all Thailand. This developed into anti-U.S. government and anti-Americanism. During the peak of trouble, the U.S. consulate indicated that Americans could bring bedrolls and come into the consulate at night.

In Young's case, some people discovered that he had been working with the Thai government, USG, and Thai police (PARU) in Laos, so there was danger to his welfare. Students finally arrived at his house, but were not considered hostile. He informed them that he had lived in Thailand most of this life and it was his country.<sup>30</sup> Bill loved Thailand and was in the country long before the students were born. Moreover, he was proud of the fact that throughout his adult life he had attempted to keep Thailand free. Bill eventually won over some

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<sup>30</sup> Bill's father did not arrive in Thailand until just after World War Two. He was in India and Burma with the OSI-U.S. Office of War Information. He worked out of the same area as flyers traversing the legendary Hump, the marauders coming to Burma, and the Stilwell campaign.

of them to his way of thinking, causing them to scratch their heads over what this amazing man told them. <sup>31</sup>

## **VICHIT**

It was preordained that worldwide unrest would spill over to Laos. Close to the time of the student demonstrations in early 1974 to May 1974 the people living in Ban Houei Sai were confused. They lacked the former guidance they had relied on, as the high-ranking leaders departed for safer areas. The Chao Khouang, who was a member of the royal family, left for Luang Prabang. Colonel Khamphai, long commanding officer of the area, also departed, leaving the people to their fate. It was apparent that the hierarchy no longer cared about the people or what occurred in the town.

Finally, USAID did not have too many people left there to administer the program, and when Jack Huxable transferred to Luang Prabang, no Americans were left in Ban Houei Sai. Therefore, Vichit Mingrachata, who was living in Chiang Khong on the Thai side of the river for safety, was obliged to assume responsibility for the entire USAID Ban Houei Sai operation. Learning goods were shipped in by air, and not wanting to turn anything over to the communists, he had to cross the river and make decisions about distributing the shipment.

Lao students, infiltrated with communist agitators, were rising up from Savannakhet in the south to the north. They possessed good communications and informed the students in Ban Houei Sai that it was time to take over. By May they wanted to lock Vichit up. There was a Thai consulate in Ban Houei Sai, and not caring about diplomacy the students invaded the facility

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<sup>31</sup> Bill Young Interviews in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Ten years after the student encounter, one of the students became a business partner with Young--a bad one.

looking for Vichit. However, many Lao friends covering for him were watching the students closely, and he was able to cross the river. He never went back.

Vichit did not remain long in Chiang Kong. After the Thai consulate closed in Ban Houei Sai and moved everything to Thailand, Vichit rode with goods to Nong Khai. He thought that he would go to Vientiane and report to the USAID office, but the Thai consul advised not to go, as they could not take responsibility if the Lao arrested him. (This was about the same time Air America closed Udorn operations.) <sup>32</sup>

## **LAOS**

*"There are signs that negotiations on a new coalition government may soon gather momentum.*

*Prime Minister Souvanna [Phouma], in a private conversation with a U.S. official on January 20, said he expects the new government to be formed early next month. According to Souvanna, Soth Phetrasy, head of the Lao communist delegation to the Joint Commission to implement the Agreement, expects chief political negotiator Phoun Sipraseuth to return to Vientiane later this week with a list of Pathet Lao ministers for the new government. Phoun departed [Vientiane] on January 16 for consultations in Sam Neua [located fairly close to the border in the northern portion of Military Region 2]. <sup>33</sup> In the past several weeks the Prime Minister has pressed his half-brother, Lao communist*

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<sup>32</sup> Vichit Mingrachata Interviews in Udorn, Thailand, 11/30-31/96. Vichit was working at the U.S. consul's office when my wife and I visited family members in Udorn. Vichit, of Vietnamese origin, was very affable and provided me with invaluable information and publications. Not long afterward, he suffered a heart attack and passed.

<sup>33</sup> During most of the Second Indochina War in Laos, the country was divided into five military regions. This has been addressed in earlier books.

leader Prince Souphanouvong, to submit such a list, but these requests have been ignored up to now. Souvanna's new optimism is in marked contrast to the gloom he exhibited in earlier discussions with U.S. officials in Vientiane.

Soviet Ambassador Vdovine also seems more optimistic. He was scheduled to leave [VTE] on January 19 for Hanoi and Sam Neua, promising the U.S. ambassador that he would discuss North Vietnamese troop withdrawals with North Vietnamese and Lao communist leaders and help facilitate political negotiations on a new coalition government. Vdovine earlier blamed the Pathet Lao for delay in implementing the Lao accords and predicted that the [Pathet Lao] would change their negotiating tactics in 1974. His visit to Sam Neua will mark the first time since 1969 that a Soviet ambassador has travelled to the Lao communist headquarters. <sup>34</sup>

Government and Lao communist negotiators at the working level have been making limited progress on some of the problems associated with the neutralization of Vientiane and Luang Prabang. At the ninth plenary session of the Joint Commission on January 17, both sides agreed in principle on the size, duties, and prerogatives of the joint military forces, but no agreement was reached on the question of the joint police forces for the two cities—a point that has hamstrung deliberations in the commission for several weeks.” <sup>35</sup>

## **THE LINE**

After thirty-five days of no flying, the Flight Schedule issued late on the 22nd revealed that the next morning I was to

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<sup>34</sup> communist: After spending decades of the Cold War loathing and fighting the ideology, except as the first word in a sentence, the Author has no intention of capitalizing the offensive word in any of his works.

<sup>35</sup> Central Intelligence Bulletin, Laos, 01/22/74.

fly XW-PHA to Lima Site-20A with a crew of Ben Densley and Chuck Low and RON.<sup>36</sup>

That morning, with employees again able to gain access to the Air America facility and the system functioning normally again, the Transportation Department driver deposited me at the side door of the operations building at 0615 hours. After checking in, gathering my gear from the pilot locker room (helmet, AK-47, and assorted items), and a survival vest from the Supply Department worker, Captain Ben Densley and I were bussed to the flight line, where S-58T XW-PHA sat stoically awaiting the next driver. Our Flight Mechanic, soft spoken and gentlemanly Chuck Low, was already in the process of inspecting the ship. We loaded our gear and, as always, performed a redundant visual inspection, for there were so many small items on a helicopter that could go unnoticed by one or more persons.<sup>37</sup> Satisfied that at least all looked fine externally, we assumed our positions in the cockpit or the cabin section. Engine starts were normal and rotor engagement flawless. Following system checks in the chocks, I released the brakes and began ground taxiing toward the warmup section of Runway-30. No longer did F-4C jet pilots choke this area testing their afterburners against stout, metal, louvered exhaust deflectors. After performing before-takeoff cockpit checks, I called the tower on UHF 236.6 frequency for a northerly departure. (Our helicopters were equipped with radios capable of contacting both military and commercial aircraft.) Since it was early in the morning, and tactical or training flights were rare to nonexistent now, I was

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<sup>36</sup> RON: Acronym for remain overnight.

<sup>37</sup> Since your life was at stake any time one launched in a helicopter, it was never wise to take anything for granted. The aircraft were often inspected in the hangars overnight to be ready for morning launches. Several times in the past, with the benefit of sunlight I discovered overlooked cracks in critical components and battle damage to blades.

provided immediate takeoff clearance and handed off to departure control on 270.6. We were assigned a four-digit identification friend or foe (IFF) code to initialize and squawk. Since this unit was rarely engaged with traffic, we were easily identified even at our low altitude. With their radar screen clear, and wanting to get back to their coffee, the Air Force people soon released us. This allowed me to call our Company radio people on VHF 119.1 with an estimated time of arrival at Long Tieng (LS-20A) in a little over an hour. <sup>38</sup>

Cruising at a moderate altitude of 700 feet, <sup>39</sup> as had been the norm over the years, I passed west of Nong Khai, crossed the relatively tranquil Mekong River, and surged west of Wattay Airport north on the flood plain toward the mountains. Except for Route-13 from Vientiane to Luang Prabang, and the Nam Ngum (river) flowing from the north toward the Mekong, there was little to see on the terrain below except for dry, patchwork rice fields. Foothills in the distance pointed the way to the harsher terrain of Laos where I had worked for years.

Ban Keun (LS-44), a site that had developed into a sprawling refugee containment area over the years, lay adjacent to the east side of the Nam Ngum.

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<sup>38</sup> Lima Sites: Instead of using often unpronounceable names, Lima or Lima Sites defined locations throughout the country. Providing map coordinates and pertinent information regarding a site status, they were listed in an Air America-produced Air Facilities Data Pamphlet that crewmembers could carry in the cockpit. They were periodically upgraded by the Flight Information Center (FIC) offices to reflect changing conditions at the site.

<sup>39</sup> Seven hundred feet above ground level (AGL) was considered sufficient altitude while flying in friendly areas to provide adequate reaction time to autorotate in case of an engine failure. Fifteen hundred feet AGL was the standard altitude flying over known or suspected hostile small arm weapons areas. Larger guns warranted proportionally higher altitudes, or circumnavigation if possible. I was never aware of being shot at or hit while flying at altitude, but the nature of the job warranted landings in questionable areas that were sometimes exciting.





The town of Nong Khai strung out along the bank of the Mekong River across from Vientiane, Laos. Located thirty miles north of Udorn, it provided a definitive navigation point for aircraft on the way to or from upcountry.

Author Collection.



Refugee center of Ban Keun (LS-44) lying on the east side of the Nam Ngum (river). The foothills of Ritaville and mountains beyond portrayed the rough topography of upper Laos.

Author Collection.



The Nam Ngum Dam in the Ritaville area. The artificial reservoir and islands created by backed up water leads to seemingly never-ending mountains.

Author Collection.

Next on our familiar track north was the Nam Ngum dam located at the Ritaville gateway entrance to the mountainous region of Military Region Two. Ritaville, a lengthy ridgeline and adjoining mountains had been named by French explorers before USG considered operations in the country. The hydroelectric dam had been funded and constructed by engineers from several countries while the war still raged. It was relatively untouched by the Pathet Lao during construction for the value and income it would provide Laos when they eventually took over. Indeed, Thailand committed to purchasing most of the power provided for the developing northeast.

Following pressure by superior Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army forces, Meo military and civil leader Colonel Vang Pao's fledgling army, to fight another day, withdrew from the heights of Ban Padong (LS-05) to Phou Khao (LS-14) during early June 1961. Training continued at the site under the auspices of U.S. Special Forces Field Training Teams (FTT-code named White Star). The program was funded and overseen by CIA and assigned Case Officer advisors, who had overall responsibility for the indigenous forces in Military Region Two.<sup>40</sup>

A nasty crash of a cargo plane resulting in fatalities and pilot complaints regarding difficulty negotiating the narrow bowl and short airstrip at Phou Khao, produced the search for a safer and more viable training center. After collating air and ground reconnaissance and word of mouth information from local natives, a promising site was found a few miles west of Phou

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<sup>40</sup> Laos declared a neutral country under the Geneva Accords of 1954, a small number of U.S. military were introduced, but restricted to training billets. Combat was forbidden. Under the protocols, Air America was allowed to provide humanitarian assistance to the country. For more on this early period refer to Book-1, *Genesis: The Air America Helicopter Program-Laos 1959-May 1962*.

Khao at a Lao Theung area called Long Tieng. Situated in a long, wide valley deemed suitable for STOL aircraft and helicopters to land, and surrounded by high protective mountains, Long Tieng appeared to satisfy most safety and logistic requirements. Overall, Long Tieng was considered a far superior training base than Phou Khao to implement and continue the Meo training program without further interruptions.

Transition to Long Tieng commenced, and was generally completed by the fall of 1962. With few amenities, including thatched housing, the operation began on a modest scale. It was successful, and with increased funding from CIA and USAID coffers, the complex continued to develop and burgeoned into Laos' second largest city. With several site numbers over the years, Long Tieng was also assigned LS-30, LS-98, LS-20A designations, but we preferred to call it The Alternate.

Over many years, I spent untold days and nights there. Some were quite unsettling with enemy rockets and artillery impacting the valley during the day and sappers invading at night. Enemy activity intensified in later years, when our "piss-poor war" developed into one of major proportions, perhaps rivaling the action in Viet Nam. In fact, with the Vietnamese beating on the gates to clear government forces out of the area, had it not been for USAF and Allied tactical and strategic bombing, and the auspices of Agency-funded Thai battalions in the late sixties, we certainly would have lost Long Tieng, its environs, and an important foothold in the region. This would have left the southern route clear to Mekong River towns at the enemy's choosing.

There was considerable work available for Sikorsky UH-34D, Bell Huey, and Twinpac crews moving refugees and delivering food supplies to landing zones and sites in the local area. Since the



Part of the 1974 well-developed Long Tieng complex seen from the north-northwest over Skyline Ridge. A dirt road leads to the King's villa on the southern hillside. Mountains containing Phou Khao (LS-14) are seen to the upper right.

Author Collection.



The upper portion of the hard surface Long Tieng airstrip. Limestone karsts guard the northwest valley. Parking ramp, air operations and assorted buildings to the upper right. Lao H-34s and O-1 Birddogs parked to the left. SKY hill housing, Agency headquarters, and accommodations to middle left. Skyline Ridge in the background leading to the abandoned refugee base at Sam Tong (LS-20).

Author Collection.

1973 agreement only related to a bilateral ceasefire (a past ceasefire attempt in 1961 had been broken before), there was also some emphasis placed on maintaining defensive positions prepared to react to any enemy violations.

Before securing on the parking ramp for the night, I logged nine plus thirty hours and thirty landings, an amount rarely flown while working in the Special Project program over the previous year and a half. <sup>41</sup> The next day we continued supply work and recovered at Udorn (T08) at 1825 hours (nine plus twenty-five hours, thirty-five landings). The two days upcountry netted me almost nineteen hours, and I was finished flying in January.

### **JARINA'S FINAL FLIGHTS**

On Thursday the 24th, Bell helicopter driver, Captain Mike Jarina, deadheaded to The Alternate on C-7 STOL cargo aircraft Caribou 405. (Forty-nine minutes.) Mike, a former U.S. Navy pilot and older retired type, had joined Air America in the summer of 1965, and became a mainstay in our H-34 and Bell 204B

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<sup>41</sup> Except for round-the-clock training at PS-44 in southern Laos, actual Special Project missions were always conducted at night, with assigned specific goals and agendas.



and 205 programs. <sup>42</sup>

As an instructor pilot Mike had a dual task performing relocation and supply work, while conducting transition training with Steve Stevens in Papa Foxtrot Gulf that was left at Long Tieng by the previous crew. Steve had arrived from the Marine Corps in 1964, flown UH-34Ds, and later rotated to Volpar fixed wing aircraft to perform specialized Agency work. Now, with system wide cutbacks impacting all programs, he was back in the helicopter fold.

With Tom Neis crewing and performing heavy work from the cargo compartment, the trio conducted short trips from Long Tieng to sites on three cardinal headings: Ban Na (LS-15), north of Sam Tong; Padong (LS-05), to the east; Moung Phun (LS-37), to the south; and Ban Nam Song (LS-363), and Ban Son (LS-273) both sites south of LS-20A. During the shortened day, Mike logged six plus fifteen hours with twenty-one landings. Along with other crews, they RON at Site-20A for the next five nights.

The crew of Bell 205 Papa Foxtrot Gulf was assigned to work north of the Plain of Jars at Bouam Long (LS-32) the following day and also Ban Na (LS-15). (Six plus fifteen.) Bouam Long, like other Meo sites was transitioning to peacetime pursuits,

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<sup>42</sup> Long after the war was over, while embroiled in research for these books, over time, I conducted more than a total of six days of extensive interviews with Mike Jarina at his small ranch in Milton, Florida, and at my home in Metairie, Louisiana. In addition to Mike's excellent memory, his flight records were intact and quite good. He also lent me a number of photos that added to the overall understanding of certain aspects of the period. When a version of the title I originally selected for my series was adopted by another author, I was undecided about what to use for a time. Then, during one of our last interviews, Mike related a story about being briefed by a spook type while processing in Taipei. The subject was maintaining secrecy about what jobs Air America performed. When Mike asked what he should say when friends asked what he did in Southeast Asia, the briefer was quick to answer, "*Tell them you haul Rice, Refugees and Rooftops.*" A light immediately flashed in my brain, for this phrase seemed a perfect replacement title for my books. Unfortunately, Mike is no longer with us to share in the accolades-RIP brother.



Ban Na (LS-15) with a few battle scars still visible from past conflicts. The site was located north of Sam Tong, and only a few miles south of the expansive and strategic Plain of Jars.

Author Collection.



Looking east over the Padong (LS-05) bowl (elevation 4,500 feet), where, aided by U.S. Special Forces and Agency Case Officers, concentrated Meo ambush and guerrilla training began in January 1961 to thwart Pathet Lao and Vietnamese advances south of the Plain of Jars.

Author Collection.

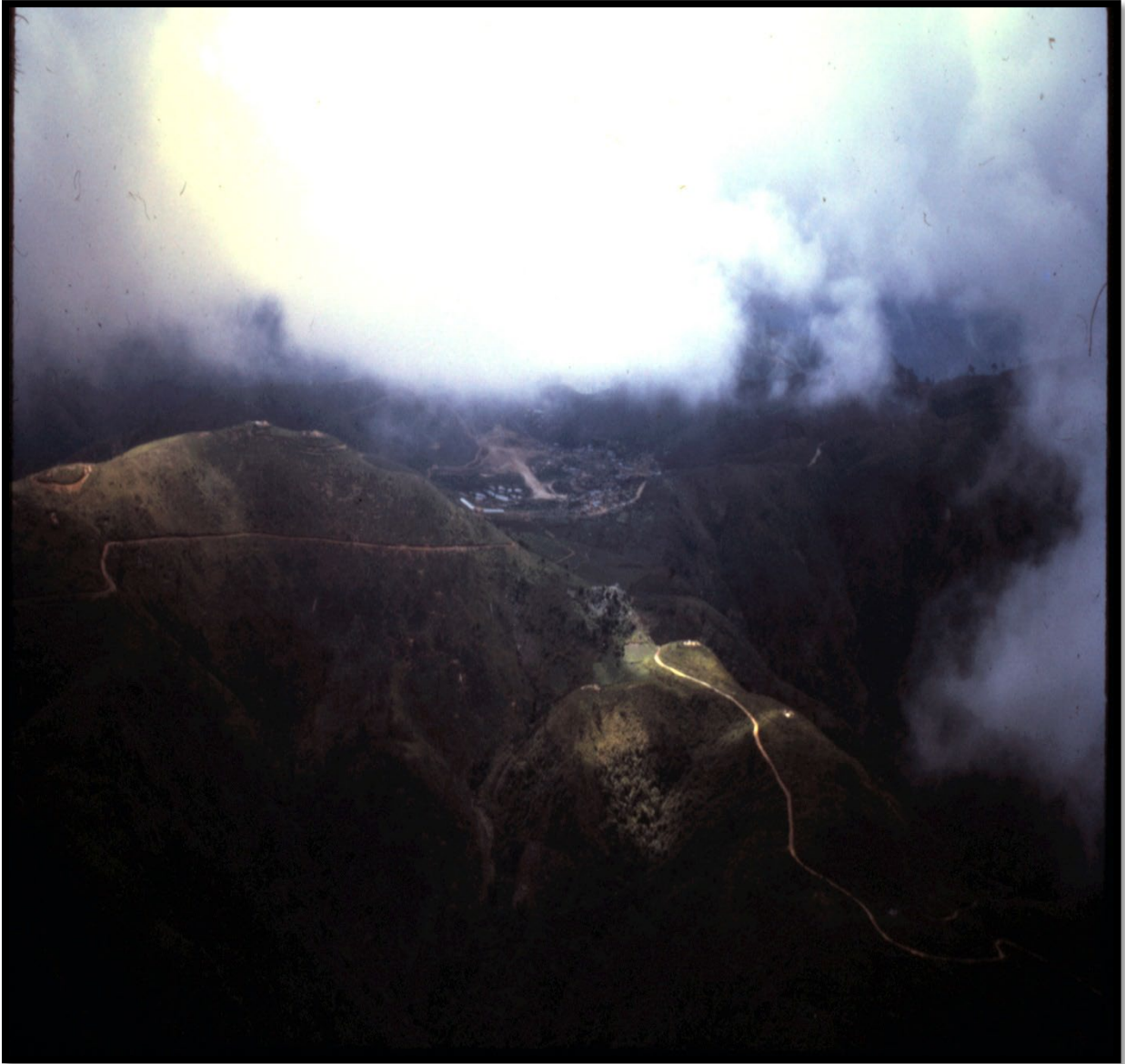


Moungh Phun (LS-37), one of the early Meo sites located in the hills south of Long Tieng, west of and overlooking the Nam Ngum.  
Author Collection.



Ban Son (Ban Xon-LS-272) a large refugee center developed as a USAID fallback site prior to the enemy capture of Sam Tong (LS-20) during March 1970.

Author Collection.



North of the Plain of Jars, the Bouam Long (LS-32) bowl was located at 4,800 foot above sea level. The surrounding hills and numerous landing zones were considerably higher. Used as a base of operations, we conducted many Special Project night missions into Sam Neua from this site.

Author Collection.



Sam Tong (LS-20) and the contour dirt road to Long Tieng as seen from a portion of Skyline Drive.

Author Collection.



Sam Tong, looking southwest, displays a virtual wasteland caused by enemy incursion and allied bombing. At one time the site was the largest refugee center and administrative capitol in Xieng Khouang Province.

Author Collection.





The mountainous route to Ban Na lay north of Sam Tong.  
Author Collection.

but as an isolated bastion deep in enemy territory, maintained diligence against attack. Moreover, it boasted being one of the few sites that had never been captured. It had also been an important fueling spot and springboard for our S-58T nighttime Special Project phone tap missions into Sam Neua Province.<sup>43</sup> Gary Gentz replaced Tom Neis as Flight Mechanic, and local work continued around Long Tieng on the 26<sup>th</sup>. (Eight plus thirty-two, sixty-seven landings.)

On Sunday, after an aircraft swap, the Jarina crew assumed control of Papa Foxtrot Juliet. (Eight plus twenty-six, seventy-two landings.)

Although fog prevented an early launch the following day, working mostly locally, seventy-two landings were conducted. This included a trip to Moung Cha (LS-113), an early refugee site that had been used to process and house displaced individuals from northeastern areas; some were flown in, others walked long distances at the expense of torn and bloody feet. Moung Cha was well chosen, for the rolling, grassy hills, and rich soil was conducive to agriculture and the cattle industry. The war made refugee resettlement an enormous task for USAID and Air America assets. In time, as Site-113 became saturated, Meo and disparate ethnic groups found suitable locations to live on low and high ground to the south and southwest.

The crew terminated on the parking ramp at The Alternate for a final RON in January. (Six plus ten, seventy-two landings.) During an abbreviated day, before being relieved, Jarina flew two plus thirty-five hours between Long Tieng, Ban

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<sup>43</sup> Reference Book 13 for this very difficult Special Project work.

Na, and Sam Tong. He then deadheaded to Wattay Airport on C-130 218, and caught a ride south to Udorn. <sup>44</sup>

### **JIM PEARSON**

DC-6 Twin Otter pilot Captain Jim Pearson, who had supported our protracted efforts to install a relay device (ADR) in Sam Neua, was also impacted by the absence of Special Project work. Nevertheless, he kept active training and maintaining proficiency with Berl King and Don Romes. The first three days of the month were involved in testing the sensitive terrain following radar and other electronic equipment installed on 868. This was combined with instrument flying and ground- controlled approaches (GCA) to the Udorn strip. On the fourth, Jim and Bob Watson went to Long Tieng to work eight plus forty-three hours and conduct nineteen landings.

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<sup>44</sup> This was the last recorded flight the Author has for Mike Jarina. Mike departed Air America during mid-April for a well-earned retirement and life of leisure on his ranch in Milton, Florida.

*"We are working very little and I went 35 days without cranking a blade.*

*Most of the cutbacks in personnel have been accomplished and we are projected through June. After that no one knows if we will continue to operate. We have all taken horrible pay cuts, but at least we have a job.*

*The Thais are demonstrating and striking about every little thing and the government looks quite shaky at this point. It was bound to happen after the students ousted the last military government. Now they are trying to dictate to everyone..."*

Letter to Don Valentine in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. <sup>1</sup>

**A** helicopter crew personnel list for Udorn was distributed to all hands. This was first implemented during the Far East Pilot Association era, and continued after the union was rendered ineffective after a failed strike attempt in early 1973. The list was liberal with Twinpac Special Project and Bell pilots. The bailed UH-34Ds were not working much or had been returned to the U.S. military or to the Royal Lao Airforce. <sup>2</sup>

There were thirty-two helicopter pilots remaining to fly out of the Air America facility in Udorn. A few pilots were currently dual qualified. All had flown in other helicopter programs during the course of their Air America career.

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<sup>1</sup> Don Valentine was the president and majority owner of Sunray Land Corporation in Steamboat Springs Colorado. Along with Don's mother, I was a minority owner in the company.

<sup>2</sup> Bailed: Aircraft on loan to Air America from the United States military. H-34s were transferred mainly from the Marine Corps. They were returned to the Department of Defense on paper and then distributed to the Royal Lao Air Force, Vietnamese Air Force, and Royal Thai Air Force.

Listed by categories and primary job:

Management: Wayne Knight, Jerry McEntee, Marius Burke, Bill Hutchison, Hal Miller (CJ Abadie no longer flew).

FCF (test flight): Tom Moher, Ed Rudolfs, Bob Swartz, Joe Lopes, Bert Rolston.

S-58T-Twinpac: Dick Casterlin, Lloyd Higgins, Hank Edwards, Al Cates, Tom Grady, Dan Zube, Ben Densley.

CH-47-Chinook: "Scratch" Kanach, Billy Pearson, Ed Reid, Tony Byrne, Herman Gehring, Terry Olson.

Bell 205 Huey: Steve Stevens, Bob Hitchman, Herb Baker, John Fonburg, Mike Jarina, Windy Wingrove, Dave Kendall, Ivar Gram, Val Broz.

Remaining American Helicopter Flight Mechanics included: Gaza Eiler, Tod Yourgliche, Dave Crowell, Willy Parker, Bill Long, Steve Sickler, Chuck Low, Deak Kennedy, Tom Neis, Gary Gentz.

DHC-6-Twin Otter: Jim Pearson, Pete Parker, Jim Rhyne, Don Romes.<sup>3</sup>

### **BELL HELICOPTER JOB POTENTIAL**

On the sixth, I was released after lunch, following a half day standby at the Air America facility and was en route home in a Company Volkswagen bus with several other individuals. One was Frank Gumienik, General Supervisor of Maintenance for Bell Helicopter International (BHI). After obtaining Air America's management's permission, Gumienik had carte blanche to solicit Company mechanics for the fledgling BHI helicopter operation in the Middle Eastern country of Isfahan, Iran. The contract with

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<sup>3</sup> Jim Rhyne and Berl King had management billets. Others flying with Pearson in 1974 were Bob Watson, Olson, Larry Wilderom (who was originally an H-34 Captain), Connelly, Barry Heidt, Jake Wehrell, Clyde Morehouse, Ted Mauldin.

the Government of Iran (GOI) involved maintaining Bell 205 and 206 helicopters that were used to train Iranian Army pilots. Frank had no authority to hire pilots, but indicated that many experienced helicopter pilots were also required. At that time, I believed that Special Project activities would continue for another year, so I was not particularly interested in another job. Still, I recorded the address of the company and tucked the information away for another day. <sup>4</sup>

### **THE FIELD AND LOGGING OPERATIONS**

The following day, Tom Grady, Bill Long, and I crewed Papa Hotel Echo (PHE) to The Alternate for a three-day RON that included four days in the field. Work was plentiful. In the relaxed atmosphere of diminished hostility and no need for special missions that required waiting for air cover, logged flight time was very good, averaging ten hours or more per day with forty landings. Except when working a predetermined distance outside the perimeter of Long Tieng and further north, allowed supplemental pay amounted to about half total flight time. The high number of hours flown stretched into late afternoon and necessitated some night time.

After supporting local defensive positions scattered throughout the area, and with sufficient aircraft working the Long Tieng area, we were assigned to Bouam Long (LS-32) on Friday, where local Meo people were engaged in erecting a portable sawmill on the long, narrow ridgeline east of and

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<sup>4</sup> Wayne Knight Email, 01/11/01. *"This era might have been one of Air America's shining moments in that efforts to place people with other companies was monumental. Ab spent days writing, calling, and looking for aviation firms that might be looking for qualified people."* [Wayne was also caught up in the activity.] *"Management extended the invitation to Bell to visit Udorn and conduct interviews for the Iran operation."* [He could only guess at the interest generated.]

overlooking the bowl. <sup>5</sup> The goal was to manufacture varied planks, beams, and other wood product configurations for erecting a schoolhouse, other buildings, and housing for permanent residents. There was substantial material available. Large trees abounded on hillsides to the west, north, and beyond. These were cut down, trimmed, and left in place for us to sling to the mill.

I thought that I had seen and done everything possible over the years, but the logging operation marked an entirely new experience. At Agency Case Officer Vint Lawrence's direction, during the early days I hauled green, freshly cut boards from a portable sawmill at Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72) to Sam Tong, and learned how heavy and impossible it was to judge the weight of wet lumber. Moreover, I had never envisaged being involved in a true logging business. <sup>6</sup>

During the OJT period, coordination and initial attempts to lift the stout logs proved difficult. Unless they had been lying on the ground for a time, the long, freshly cut logs were very heavy, and it was virtually impossible to estimate even a ball park weight. Since the cargo hook load was book limited to a maximum of 5,000 pounds at sea level, we had to be careful. First attempts became a trial-and-error process. In addition to the weight concern, long lines attached to the logs warranted lifting a load vertically far out of ground effect (OGE) which, factoring in the high elevation (density altitude-DA) we were working, further limited our total lifting capability. The

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<sup>5</sup> Despite the ceasefire, I avoided flying over the Plain of Jars, preferring to track "around the horn." A time-honored flight path, this entailed flying northwest over Mounng Soui (LS-108), abeam Phou So (LS-57), north toward Phou Vieng (LS-06) and Phou Cum (LS-50), and easterly to Bouam Long. Since I had no idea of the sites' status, I flew at an altitude at which I had never experienced battle damage.

<sup>6</sup> After a few days of logging, I thought the experience might prove valuable for future employment.



Terrain north of Bouam Long showing an abundance of stout trees available for the sawmill operation.

Author Collection.



matter was eventually resolved by convincing Meo lumbermen to cut the logs in two sections and shorten the cables as much as possible to obtain the benefit of increased lift from ground effect.<sup>7</sup> Since we were mostly working on steep slopes, steel cable length, along with the need to be aware of the proximity of the rotors to the side of the mountain, became a distinct consideration. With cables securely attached to the log's center of gravity (CG) for stability, the method worked well. In minutes we hauled a log across the bowl and deposited it near the saw mill. Periodically, cables were returned to workers on the sides of hillsides in order to prepare their loads. However, during the process we experienced all the normal problems associated with sling operations, improperly hooked loads, failing swedges, and faulty cables.

The next day followed the identical pattern of the previous one: hover over a log, being careful that no loose branches or other debris became flying objects that might tangle in the main or tail rotor blades, hook the cable securely, increase power to lift the helicopter until the cable was taut, then further increase power until ascertaining that the load would hold and clear the ground enough to launch. If the lift could not be achieved, then release the cable and move on to a lighter load.

There were some anxious moments during the operation. One time during the Bouam Long logging operation, when felled and sectioned trees were becoming scarce locally, I latched onto a

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<sup>7</sup> Ground Effect: Increased lifting capability aided by a ground cushion created by rotor downwash. This was normally half the rotor blade diameter (fifteen feet) in a no wind condition. The steep slopes we worked on probably diminished any beneficial ground cushion.

Density Altitude: Pressure altitude corrected for nonstandard temperature. As temperature and altitude increase, air density (molecules) decreases and performance suffers. Therefore, maximum helicopter performance in the mountains was better during a cool morning rather than in the heat of the day.

deceptively extra heavy load that no one else was able to lift. Using maximum allowed engine power, and patiently awaiting a favorable breeze to enhance lift, still did not permit the log to be lifted vertically enough for a safe takeoff. I judged the log to weigh thousands of pounds. Determined to retrieve it, I jerked it laterally off the slope to where I could translate altitude to airspeed. The stress was enormous on Echo, as the entire rotorhead system shook and the machine vibrated. Aware that I was vastly over grossed, I should have had the sense to pickle the load at this point, but instead chose to continue. After obtaining translational lift (ten to fifteen knots), I was required to fly slowly up an adjacent ravine at maximum power to gain climb speed (about sixty knots). Then, at the correct altitude to clear the hilltops, I reversed course and headed east for the mill. I realized the effort was unwise and probably deleterious to the machine. It was purely a matter of pride. Still, it was a learning process.

On Sunday the 10th, Echo belched once while demanding power. PT-6 engine compressor stalls had been appreciably reduced, but never totally eliminated. <sup>8</sup> After apprising Udorn operations of the stall, we were advised to return to base (RTB) for investigation. We blocked in at 1925 hours.

Although no intelligence operations were scheduled near term that we were aware of, the death knell for the Special Project program had not yet been sounded. Therefore, with some attempt to maintain night proficiency, following lunch on

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<sup>8</sup> The stall problem was never completely resolved and United Aircraft was still evaluating our engines. United had one or two of our Twinpac engines, but workers were on a prolonged strike and engine examination was curtailed. Technicians eventually discovered that the annular holes in the combustion burner cans were elongated from erosion. This disrupted air flow. By the time this fact was discovered and the engines were operating better, our jobs in Udorn, Thailand, and Laos had been eliminated.

Tuesday, Marius Burke, Bill Long, and I launched in Papa Hotel Alpha for Pakse. Conducting en route LORAN navigation and crew coordination, we ran a canned round robin navigation exercise in the PS-44 area, and then stopped at Lima-11 to obtain fuel and take dinner. We continued some local night work in the hills to the west and returned to Udorn by 2110 hours. (Six plus twenty, two fifty night, one landing.)

After a day off the schedule, I attended a one-day ground school. Following that I was allocated seven consecutive days off to comply with the Company-mandated scheduled time off (STO).<sup>9</sup>

*"I really don't think that I will have to worry about taxes this year as we will be lucky to make our minimum, if that, and even retain a job.*

*There has been a guy here recently trying to recruit people for Iran. I suppose that is good for a last resort.*

*I am recommencing the [Canadian] 5BX plan after several years layoff. I already feel better and with a reduced intake of beer I think that I can lose a bit of weight. We are not working much so it is either exercise or grow into a blob.*

*I am afraid we have had the last of the cool weather as it has been very hot the last two days.*

*Tuie is busy editing a spoken Thai book [that she wrote] for her teaching. Pretty soon I will be able to retire and have*

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<sup>9</sup> STO: Scheduled time off was instituted early in the Air America operation by Vice President of Flight Operations Robert Rousselot to allow pilots consecutive days off (six to seven days depending on the number of days in a month) to recover from the rigors and stresses of flying high hours and performing combat roles. Scheduled by operations in advance, a pilot could normally plan to journey to Bangkok, Hong Kong, or other exotic places. It was an excellent system and, coupled with home leave, back-to-back STOs could provide extra time for travel.

her bring home the groceries. It is almost that way now with the roles reversed.

Rick fell out of a small tree on his beezzer this afternoon. I cautioned him two days ago about the dead branches but he had to test them anyway. He didn't feel too well after supper and I will watch him closely.

Amanda says quite a few words now and must have the doll you sent for Christmas with her in bed. She calls it her baby...she is about 23 pounds now and has four more teeth, molars that were just discovered. She is still a pretty good baby and eats almost anything you give her. She seems to have a pretty good time doing all things.

Peter has finally decided that he wants to be a scholar. He was after me today to help teach him the alphabet and numbers. He is making numbers, as he knows how to count. He does well and I am disappointed he can't go to an organized school..."<sup>10</sup>

Next day:

"Rick is off to school with no ill effects. This hot weather really bothers him because I think he doesn't drink enough water. He often doesn't feel well when he returns from school in the afternoon on the bus.

Our leave is scheduled for the 15th of June, but we will see what happens before that. We should be very low on machines and manpower by that time and it may not be worth going anywhere unless for good. As usual we are playing everything by ear."

Letter Home, 02/18-19/74.

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<sup>10</sup> Peter was attending a pre-school conducted by Mrs. Allen, wife of Jay Allen, Ricky's teacher.

**LAOS**

As with former ceasefire agreements with the communists, there was always a possibility they would not be honored. Therefore, during the transition period until a coalition government was formed, Henry Kissinger directed Ambassador Charles Whitehouse to maintain a strong non-communist position. Despite less U.S. aid to distribute, the ambassador was instructed to provide Souvanna Phouma with military assistance and maintain advisory units at sufficient levels to function if required.

During the period, the Defense Attaché Office (DAO), 404, and DepChief in Udorn labored to create a smaller, but self-reliant, armed force. <sup>11</sup>

In the meantime, events began progressing to form a new government:

*"Prime Minister Souvanna has had some success in resolving differing viewpoints over the investiture of a new coalition government, which he still hopes to name by tomorrow.*

*Last weekend [16th] Souvanna met with the King, who unexpectedly changed his mind and agreed to invest the new government, even if it does not have National Assembly approval. The elated prime minister planned to meet yesterday with chief Lao communist negotiator Phoun Sipraseuth to inform him of the King's position--which accords with the communist view that the planned coalition is a 'special' government requiring only royal approval.* <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ken Conboy with James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 1995), 409.

<sup>12</sup> communist: The Author devoted much of his early adult life--during much of the Cold War--attempting to counter communist intrusions into parts of the world. Therefore, as in previous books, as a sign of disrespect, except for the beginning of a sentence, communist will never be capitalized.

*According to Souvanna, the King also indicated that he is willing to dissolve the Assembly pending new legislative elections. The threat of such a move may in part explain the Assembly's willingness to soften its earlier insistence that it must approve the entire membership of the new government. Souvanna's recent offer to appoint one incumbent Assembly deputy from each province to the Joint National Political Council, the principal advisory body to the new coalition cabinet, probably has also aided the prospects for compromise.*

*In a bid to keep things moving, Souvanna yesterday [19th] planned to convene the government's Council of Ministers, a high-level policy making group of senior cabinet officers that has long been inactive. Souvanna reportedly wanted to have the council give final approval to the government's ministerial candidates for the new coalition.*

*Whether the progress Souvanna has made will satisfy other important Pathet Lao preconditions for forming the new government by February 21 remains to be seen. The communists, for example, still hold that effective neutralization of Vientiane and Luang Prabang must precede formation of the coalition. It will be some weeks before the neutralization process is completed, and Lao communist leaders in Sam Neua may be reluctant to send their ministers to the two cities until their safety is assured." <sup>13</sup>*

Harking back to early 1963, when helicopter pilots did not fly much because of the 1962 Geneva Accord protocols USG was attempting to honor, it appeared that Udorn management again searched for way to keep us busy. Therefore, I was scheduled to attend ground school on the 22nd.

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<sup>13</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 02/20/74.

Following the weekend, on the 25th and 26th, I was scheduled for Link instrument training or, as we referred to the blue device, "the idiot box."<sup>14</sup>

Rounding out the month of February, Ben Densley, Chuck Low, and I deadheaded to The Alternate on 019. (One plus ten hours.) After taking command of XW-PHA (the first Twinpac maintenance personnel assembled in 1971), we worked mostly around the Long Tieng area supplying defensive positions. (Seven plus thirty-five, forty landings.)

Following a night in the mountains, we continued refugee and supply missions in the area. Toward late afternoon we returned to Udorn. (Ten hours, forty landings.)

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<sup>14</sup> When the small box was sealed and there was not much reference available such as in a cockpit, it was difficult to produce decent results. If the top was slid back, performance was much improved. Actually, with more exposure to the Link trainer, the better one generally performed.

*"We have been getting a bit more flying lately, but usually a day or two at a time. I am afraid that the big money will never materialize again."*

Letter Home, 03/15/74.

A *Bangkok Post* article reported that Long Tieng was relatively quiet.

**M**y March flying month commenced on the second when Tom Grady, Tom Neis, and I ferried Papa Hotel Echo to Long Tieng for both humanitarian and defense assignments. At the end of the work day we parked on the ramp and remained overnight, as we did during the following night. (Nine plus fifty, forty landings.)

Early the next morning we continued supplying positions in and around The Alternate. The work was not exciting or particularly challenging, but enough to keep beans and bacon on the table. (Ten hours, forty landings.)

Because of the number of pilots in the S-58T program, RONs were necessarily short and I was relieved on the fourth after flying one plus forty-five hours. I deadheaded to T08 on 37879, arriving at 1244. (Two plus eleven hours.)

Three days later, consistent with remaining somewhat proficient for any projected Special Project missions, I was scheduled for night training. Captain Ben Densley, Chuck Low, Steve Sickler, and I checked in to operations at 1710 hours. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As a Flight Mechanic, Steve Sickler had survived crippling battle damage to a four-way fail-safe UH-34D hydraulic valve flown by Captains Frank Stergar and Tony Byrne in Military Region Four. Thought to be a death knell in a H-34, no one in recorded history could recall anyone ever surviving such an emergency. Steve also crewed CH-47 Chinook helicopters.





A photo looking south from Skyline Ridge across the upper airstrip and karst-protected parking ramp at Long Tieng. The Air America hostel was originally situated at the upper end of the parking ramp. During adverse weather, the west gap seen to the right was often used by helicopter and small fixed wing pilots to enter and depart the valley.

Author Collection.



A portion of the aircraft parking and fueling area at Long Tieng, Laos. Limestone karsts on both sides of the ramp tended to provide some protection from incoming artillery rounds.

Author Collection.



Looking up the aircraft parking ramp as a helicopter Flight Mechanic walks toward a Twinpac in the morning to conduct a preflight inspection.

Author Collection.

After thoroughly inspecting Papa Hotel Bravo, one of three remaining Twinpacs in the inventory, we launched at dark. Training included crew coordination, navigation exercises, and seven landings using night vision (NVG) devices. Accomplishing what we wanted, the flight was satisfying and we logged two plus fifty-five hours night before securing at 2135.

I was assigned standby at home on the eighth, but was not summoned to the airfield for an assignment. Within two days I was back on the schedule with CPH Marius Burke and Chuck Low. We launched for Long Tieng in Papa Hotel Alpha. Since the initial object of the flight was a periodic Company-mandated route check to ascertain my proficiency, I conducted fifty landings around The Alternate.

The following morning, since Burke had business in his office, we were relieved by a new crew after flying two plus twenty hours and ten landings. We caught a ride on Caribou 12389, the same aircraft that brought our relief crew. We blocked in at Udorn at 1113 in time for lunch at Club Rendezvous. I was then off for two days prior to an abbreviated STO.

*"I understand that the [Arab] oil embargo has been lifted. I don't suppose that you will feel the impact of this for several months, but it is a step in the right direction.."*

*There may be separate checks appearing in the checking account from time to time. This is some new system that has been devised that I would rather not go into just now. I would like to know of any extras.*

*Many [of the junior men] are going to Iran to work. Bell International is training the Iranians to fly the Bell [helicopter] equipment. It pays fairly well [about 2,000 dollars plus perks], but there are drawbacks. There are a lot of oil jobs out of the Singapore area, but the wages are not too great*

[one sizeable company was National Utility Helicopters]. *When it comes right down to it, Air America's fringes have been outstanding compared to other companies. I believe that I will stay here until they throw me out.* [This became my modus operandi for the future. I always remained in a job too long, thereby, losing the opportunity to obtain other jobs before they were taken.]

*We could struggle through another year if all goes well. This is not firm and we are awaiting word on this* [a lot of rumors were circulating]. *I have heard that there might not be a formal school next year* [many teachers leaving]. *This is not firm and we are awaiting word on this.* [With a growing family, this was an important consideration for me.]

*I expect more cuts in personnel by the middle of the year. I think that I will survive* [I was number eight in helicopter pilot seniority], *but who knows? I refuse to brown nose as my record speaks for itself. There have been some power plays recently but I try not to get involved* [People were scrambling to create positions or associate with those who were. Selling AAM to Thai Am, a Bangkok based company, was one agenda. Tom Moher was working to establish a FCF program for any new company].

[Paul Velte], *the Managing Director is here now from Washington, so perhaps we will learn something about the future.*

*I hope it isn't another pay cut! <sup>2</sup>*

*Pete's playschool is closing up after this month as one of the women [Jay Allen's wife] has left her husband. Pete's luck has to change. If there is no kindergarten in the fall I don't know what to do. He will be too young for first grade. He was just born at the wrong time.*

*Rick seems to be doing ok in school except he is slow.*

*Baby Amanda is putting more words together and seems to be very bright..."*

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Velte, who professed that the Company was working on establishing alternate work for our employees when operations terminated from Udorn, held out some hope for the future of Air America. He talked about the Company obtaining exploration and petroleum company contracts to support projected oil and gas operations offshore of South Vietnam in the Tonkin Gulf. During the war Exxon and others had blocked out vast areas for future exploration and drilling operations. Nothing like this materialized.

Those of us working in the Special Project program still believed we would have work for another year, and there was still talk of positioning an ADR relay unit on top of Phou Bia.

CJ Abadie Email, 02/12/99. Ab knew about the plan to close Air America down before it was announced to the public. "I had talked with Paul Velte and [Hugh] Grundy about the plan and Velte suggested we try to save the capability by getting a contract with some agencies on our own. I knew that without CIA direct support, any contract a group like ours might obtain would not last in Thailand since the Thai government wanted us out. We had no contracts in other countries and it was never clear just how we would get aircraft assigned to us so it was difficult to understand just how it would work...Velte pulled a few strings but nothing came of it; our government wanted the program to end. The CIA had gotten lots of bad press over the Forgotten War and other stories and were in no mood to get any more heat. I had children to raise and did not want to take too many chances with my own finances, so I prepared to leave. However, a few people did make arrangements to stay involved. Jim Rhyne and John Ford were among those who hooked up with the right people and stayed active. I departed Udorn before Wayne and Dick Ford so I could attend college in Louisiana [LSU in Baton Rouge] for the fall semester and I needed to be in place by August 1974. I departed and left Wayne in charge with Dick helping. We had already done a lot of paperwork clean-up before I left [in early August] so they had a plan for the close of the Project and I am sure carried it out well. I have not discussed with them their last days in Udorn. About six months later, I met with Velte and Grundy in D.C. while they were still closing out things there. That was the last I saw of them but have kept contact."

Letter Home, 03/15/74.

On the afternoon of the 21<sup>st</sup>, I was back on the ramp FCFing Papa Hotel Alpha with Gary Gentz. (Two plus twenty, five landings.) The unforgiving February sun was brutal, which, after releasing Alpha for upcountry work, required frosty brews to quench an enormous thirst. Early the next morning, Gentz and I FCF Papa Hotel Echo. I was finished by lunchtime. (One plus twenty, five landings.)

Saturday Dan Zube, Gary Gentz, and I deadheaded to Long Tieng on 37789. (One plus fifteen.) Arriving by late morning, we disembarked the plane through the rear ramp with our gear and walked a short distance to Papa Hotel Alpha that sat next to the karst across from air operations. Not wasting any time, we began working local missions that continued past sunset. (Six plus fifty-five, twenty minutes night, thirty landings.)

On the 24th we began delivering large one hundred-kilogram bags (220 pounds) of seed rice to refugee villages mostly located south of The Alternate. Since people relocating from other areas were limited in what they were allowed to carry, providing tools, pots and pans, and seed rice was part of the USAID program to help make the refugees self-sufficient. Since there were so many refugees it seemed like a never-ending project.

C-123 crews shuttled 220-pound bags of seed rice to The Alternate. Palletized and secured on long, centerline rollers, the loads were quickly and easily discharged by unchaining a load and pushing it to the lip of the rear ramp. Then the PIC would move the plane forward and the load would be neatly deposited in a line on the tarmac. It was a time-honored process similar to that used to discharge cargo by parachute during air drops. Helicopter crews would then taxi beside a load, where a



The Long Tieng Air Operations building seen from the helicopter parking area. Aircraft loads were deposited on the ramp and parceled out by workers for distribution.

Author Collection.



local air operations man would hand up a set of coordinates to the pilot. After applying the coordinates to his map, supervised by the Flight Mechanic, indigenous workers would begin placing cargo in the cabin section to conform with the center of gravity (CG) laws. Then the pilot's knowledge of the site, or an "educated guess," would determine the total weight carried.

During the day a new crew arrived in a cargo plane. Ben Densley and Deak Kennedy replaced Zube and Gentz. Kennedy's Thai wife had just presented him with a baby, which tended to somewhat calm the normally hyper individual. However, Deak still talked about "shooting out people's lights." The rotation did not slow me down, and I logged ten hours and forty landings that day before securing for the night.

### **BLACK MONDAY**

I was relieved and called home after flying half a fuel load. (Two plus five, five landings.)

Deadheading home on 37879, I arrived at noon. Waiting for me was an invitation to attend an important meeting in a conference room of the administration building. Although we were a much smaller group now, past all-pilot-meetings (APM) in the club movie room had always left me cold, for they often revealed bad news.

CJ Abadie presided over our small group of Special Project pilots. Never one to mince words or prolong bad news, Ab quietly informed us that we were out of a job in Udorn as of close of business (COB) 30 June. Moreover, the Special Project that was supposed to continue for at least another year was cancelled. No answers for this sudden unexpected decision were offered, but it was not difficult to deduce that the well-publicized Watergate scandal, and Dick Nixon's mounting problems, were most certainly

part of the cause. All of us were shocked and numbed by the news; some like Scratch Kanach were quite bitter. <sup>3</sup>

Twin Otter Captain Jim Pearson had been informed a few months earlier that Air America was on the way out, but the AB-1 briefer did not know what color uniform employees would be wearing. The Special Project was to continue another five years, and he should plan on living in Udorn and flying the Twin Otter. Now the Special Project was scrubbed and the participants were informed the activity was over.

Jim felt like the world had come to an end, as Asia was more a home to him than the States. It was a very strange and bewildering feeling. Before, when he went on home leave he could not wait to return to Southeast Asia. He even began to look on Vientiane as home, and felt secure there. Moreover, the people he worked with, even though he considered some of them real jerks and basket cases of humanity, were still some of the most unique people any organization could have at their service. <sup>4</sup>

After discussing the day's proceedings with Tuie, and following a night of slumber to digest Abadie's unwelcome announcement, I wrote a brief letter to the parents informing them of the latest development:

***"Well it has finally happened. The Company is closing the doors here in Udorn the 30th of June. It could come earlier as***

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<sup>3</sup> Scratch was so disturbed by the news that he wanted nothing further to do with the Agency.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Pearson Email, 05/02/98.  
Jim Pearson FEPA pocket logbook. Jim no longer performed intelligence work for AB-1. He had been flying with various pilots mostly in the Long Tieng area delivering loads of supplies to outlying sites. As it was the smoky season, he logged considerable instrument time and a few instrument approaches.  
Bill Leary Notes. Interview with former DC-6 Captain Don Romes. "Romes went to Udorn when Vientiane closed. He was told the Special Projects would be kept active with a half dozen helicopter and a half dozen fixed wing pilots. The decision to retain this core group, however, was reversed. Everyone was out of a job."

*we are obligated to leave Laos sixty days after the [new] government is formed.*

*The operation will still continue in Saigon for a short time and then Air America will be out of business. For those who don't want to go to Saigon or who aren't asked there is the immediate problem of what to do. This is what I am faced with at present. I will probably look around over here first and if anything attractive shows up maybe take it. The Company claims they are trying to place us in other jobs but one has to take this with a grain of salt. I have a good record with Air America and others who shall remain unnamed [the Agency], so something could come out of this. <sup>5</sup> Politics being what they are now due to Watergate and all the other little messes present a poor climate for "sneaky Pete" work. <sup>6</sup>*

*Tuie says she would like to live in Singapore but not Saigon. <sup>7</sup> We will see. Naturally, this fouls up our leave plans. We had hoped to be home for your 50th anniversary, but things are in such a state of flux now I am not sure. We will try and keep you posted."*

Letter Home, 03/26/74.

There had been two serious fires at Mount Werner in Steamboat Springs impacting Sunray Land Corporation. Curious if

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<sup>5</sup> As it neared time to break up, Buddy Rogers called me to his office in the White House to provide me with the name and address of a contact in Washington. If interested in continued contract work with the Agency, I was supposed to inform the contact of my plans and where I would be working.

<sup>6</sup> It was fairly easy for an individual to read between the lines, and this was the closest I came to divulging the previous nature of my work.

<sup>7</sup> Saigon was not particularly appealing to me either. Although the war had ostensibly ceased, I knew next to nothing about the culture, political, or military situation there, and enemy ground forces were still firing the hand-held Grail missiles at aircraft.

the company would survive, I wrote to Don Valentine. After asking pertinent questions, I informed him of our plight:

*"Air America is ceasing to operate here in Udorn as of 30 June and perhaps earlier. Politics and whole smear has most to do with it.*

*I really haven't started to look for another job in earnest yet, but will shortly. I will probably look around over here as there are jobs relating to oil exploration in the Singapore area. I suppose that I will have to make a decision soon. The business outlook in the States doesn't look too good at present but I could probably get something. There is always unemployment insurance.*

*June is still a way off and things could break open again very easily.*

*Most of us are still in a state of shock as we didn't think that all flying would cease. Saigon [operations] will continue for a short time and then it will fold as old Air America is going completely out of business. I guess the name is too well known to do something elsewhere..."*

Letter to Don Valentine, 03/26/74.

## **UPCOUNTRY**

On Thursday the 28th, I checked into operations about 0700 hours for what became a six-day assignment in the field with various crewmembers. After deadheading to The Alternate on Twin Otter N389EX, I joined Al Cates and Deak Kennedy in Papa Hotel Alpha. Disregarding seasonal smoke and haze, we conducted normal supply missions of the day. (Six hours, twenty landings.)

Since it was approaching the end of the month, our platoon system of rotating crews continued the next day to equalize flight time when Dan Zube and Tom Neis replaced my previous



We supplied many Meo villages throughout the area. As opposed to backwoods Lao, the Meo people built their thatch houses on the ground. Meo people generally wore black pajama type clothes seen in the photo; Lao Theung women wore a blouse and skirt.

Author Collection.

crew. The change was effected relatively quickly during the fueling process, and did not unduly influence air operations work assignments or time flown. (Nine plus twenty, thirty landings.)

Lloyd Higgins and Gary Gentz joined the fun on Saturday, replacing Zube and Neis. (Ten hours, thirty-five night, thirty-five landings.)

On the final day of the month, Ben Densley replaced Higgins in the cockpit. During the ten-hour day we ranged further into eastern zones that warranted supplemental pay. (Six plus thirty supplemental pay, thirty-five landings). I then remained in the field for two additional days. <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Despite the announcement that we were losing our positions in June, March flight time was high and I grossed over 3,200 dollars. It was almost like we were being awarded a final perk, but realistically it related to the Agency and USAID's desire to occupy land, equip refugees with provisions and the wherewithal to support themselves near term before we could no longer help them.

**M**y time upcountry working out of Long Tieng with Ben Densley and Gary Gentz continued. (Nine plus fifty-five, thirty landings.) After flying two plus thirty-five hours on the second, I was relieved and returned to Udorn in the afternoon on a Beech VTB-18 N9671C. (One plus fifty-three.)

On the third I wrote a letter to Dan Carson in Scottsdale, Arizona:

*"We are all at the end of the rope over here as 30 June or before the flying will cease and we will be terminated. Some are going to Saigon for a short time, but that will finish soon. So the curtain descends on Air America after so many years. I am sad but expect that is for the best and there are only good things ahead. There is some scramble to look for other jobs, but I have not yet taken part in it. I suppose they will all be gone by the time that I convince myself to start looking.*

*Cocchi has finally left if you can believe this, I believe that he has gone back to Mass., where his family lives.*

*I will try and keep you posted on our future plans, but I must confess that I am still in a slight state of shock over the whole thing. I will probably need some rehabilitation before I will be much good to anyone. We'll see"*

### **MAURICE COCCHI**

From its inception Air America was always loaded with interesting and colorful characters. Maurice Cocchi was one.

Hired in the early 1970s, Cocchi worked for Bart Brigida, who in turn worked for Chief Pilot Marius Burke as an operations scheduler. With all the flight time restrictions imposed by the

Company, one of his jobs was attempting to maintain equal flight time between pilots.

Cocchi was a very polite individual, always saying "Yes sir, no sir." However, he would not tolerate intimidation as was thoroughly evidenced one day.

Senior Bell Captain Ted Cash, a character in his own right, had amassed considerable time earlier in the month and was far ahead all other pilots, so he was purposely left off the schedule. Despite this, he frequently entered the office, curious to know if he was on the schedule the next day. After two days of inquiries, he repaired to the Club bar and proceeded to get snockered.

One day, after drinking, Ted again asked Cocchi if he was on the schedule the following day. Receiving a negative, Ted grumbled, "Well, then put me on the schedule. I'm tired of sitting around."

*"Sorry sir, but I can't do that."*

Finally, the frustrated macho Cash, who had been passed over for major in the Marine Corps for clobbering a senior officer in the bar, said, "If you don't put me on the schedule, I'm going to beat your ass." Cocchi, a well-built individual with broad shoulders, had served in the U.S. Army Special Forces said, "Well, sir, I guess you're going to have to beat my ass."

The two men proceeded outside the operations building, intent on doing violence. The fight was on, and Cash quickly realized that Cocchi was no weakling. The fracas was soon over. Cash lay on the ground and Maurice was unmarked. On a positive note, the fight created a good bar story for patrons starved for something new and fascinating to talk about.

Cocchi was an interesting, but strange person, who had gone completely native, and lived among the locals outside of Udorn city limits. He raised flowers at his house. The day after the



fight, a picture of a mailed fist with flowers attached appeared attached to his office door, with the inscription, "*All schedule procedures are final.*" Cocchi had a good size Iguana as a pet. One day, the Iguana snapped at him, so he ate it.

Marius Burke became good friends with Cocchi, who often arrived at the Burke house around dinner time. Finally, he was struggling with his demons, declaring, "*I just can't be scheduling people's lives.*" He was extremely uptight and quit Air America.

Planning to journey to Malaysia on his motorcycle before leaving Southeast Asia, he left a lot of his goods with Marius. After returning, he showed the Burke family numerous pictures that he had taken during the trip, then he departed again. When he returned later to retrieve his goods, he found that his camera was missing. Burke indicated that no one had touched anything that was stored. Still, Cocchi insisted that the maid had stolen it. After deliberating on the disappearance, Marius realized that no one could have taken the camera, for Cocchi had it with him when he shared the pictures. It was bizarre. Cocchi was outraged. <sup>1</sup>

Like so many others, I thought Cocchi had gone to the States, but he came by our house on the evening 30 May to cage a meal. (I had previously been in touch with him through his interest in some of Dan Carson's Arizona projects.) Upset, and very disaffected with Thai neighbors, he told us that someone had stolen his pots and pans, and killed the fish in his pond.

The next day I sent a letter to Dan Carson outlining some of our discussion:

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<sup>1</sup> Marius Burke Interview. After Cocchi left, Marius did not hear from him again until 1983. Cocchi had been working for the U.S. Forest Service and was retiring.

*"I don't think he will be stopping in to see you; doesn't have the ticketing. He says he will be leaving Thailand Monday [3 June]."*

## **FRUITION**

While I was on home standby, the folks in Vientiane agreed to the salient points of the Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU). This was approved the following day by the King.

A few months had elapsed to firm details and divide cabinet assignments between the royalists and Lao Patriotic Front (LPF). With everything in order, Prince Souphanouvong, the nominal leader of the Pathet Lao and his subordinates, departed Sam Neua for Hanoi. After obtaining last minute briefings by their communist masters, they flew to Wattay Airport. It marked the first time in ten years that the prince had set foot in Vientiane. Whether manufactured or not, the populace was in a mood to celebrate. In one of the largest turnouts ever, thousands of people lined the streets to cheer Souphanouvong's journey to his official residence.

A new twelve-member coalition cabinet was sworn in. Each party was accorded five cabinet posts. Two posts went to the neutral faction-justice, and posts and telegraphs. Souvanna Phouma continued as Prime Minister. Defense, interior, finance, public health, and education went to his colleagues. The LPF obtained foreign affairs, information, economic and planning, public works, and religion. Souphanouvong assumed the chairmanship of the (Joint) National Coalition Political Council

(NPCC) that met in the neutral city of Luang Prabang. <sup>2</sup>

With the formation of the PGNU, all foreign military had sixty days to get their affairs in order and depart the kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

On the fifth I checked in at 1015 with my crew of Dan Zube and Tom Neis. The primary task was to ferry Deputy Chief JUSMAGTHAI General Trefry to Vientiane to attend ceremonies officially heralding formation of the new government. After dropping the general and his staff at Wattay Airport, we proceed to Long Tieng in Papa Hotel Bravo. Arriving about noon, we began working local assignments before securing after sunset. This turned into five days in the field. (Six plus ten, fifteen minutes night, twenty landings.)

We continued our local work with the refugees and hauling seed rice to villages. During the course of the day, Tom Grady replaced Zube, and we experienced some problems with a slipping clutch during main rotor blade engagement. (Six plus thirty, twenty landings.) <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> CHECO, *Indochina Monographs*, Major General Oudone Sananikone, *The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1979), 156.

The NPCC forty-two-member body was controlled by the communists. The Pathet Lao regarded the Council as the instrument of social, political, and economic change for Laos.

Lieutenant Colonel HR Chakrabarty, *Vietnam, Kampuchea, Laos: Bound in Comradeship, Chapter 5 War on Laotian Soil: A Period of Devastation. Chapter 6 In communist Laos* (New Delhi: Patriot Publications, 1988), 670-671. This book was found by the Author at the Chulalakorn University library in Bangkok, Thailand.

<sup>3</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 410.  
Oudone Sananikone, 159.

<sup>4</sup> Wayne Knight, Email. A slipping clutch was not all that uncommon, especially in the old diverter valve clutch. To prevent excessive rolling, one had to ensure proper oil temperature prior to engaging the clutch pump. Air America received very few of the old diverter valve ships, but modified them to the Go-90 systems. Wayne never operated a H-34 in a very cold environment, although the temperature was occasionally around freezing in the mountains.



Phone Sai (LS-211) one of many refugee sites located south or southwest of Long Tieng.

Author Collection.



Waterfall located along the Nam Ngum generally west of LS-211. At one time, I wondered if there might be gold deposits in the pool at the bottom of the fall.

Author Collection.

Sunday proved maintenance trouble free. We continued to relocate people and their goods to areas next to Pathet Lao sites to establish territorial possession. Tons of seed rice were hauled to help the refugees with self-sufficiency. USG agencies took care of them so long that a generation of tribal people believed that rice fell from the sky. We also ferried various sized pigs to supply protein. I usually smelled like a porker at day's end as despite attempts to bag both ends (large hogs could not be bagged), they would manage to defecate and urinate on the plywood decking with residue filtering onto the actual cabin deck through tie-down holes. If not sluiced out daily (virtually impossible in the mountains where water was scarce), the toxic mixture would cause serious corrosion of the aluminum decking.

Flying was measurably relaxed compared to the incessant combat that had been the norm for so many years. Sometimes two helicopter crews would stop at a village and shutdown while the Customer or his representative parlayed with the Naiban. This also allowed us to interact with the people, something that was normally difficult from the cockpit. Even before the rotors were stopped, adorable, smiling children gravitated to the helicopters to gaze at the large machines. As we had done for years, we opened the clam shell doors to show them the large Buddhas in the engine compartment that made the helicopter function. After OHs and Ah's were exhausted, the "fun" continued with Flight Mechanics Long, Kennedy, and Low lining the laughing kids up to teach them foul language and get them to repeat the words in unison. It was a panic and the unknowing kids loved it, but it was a spiteful way to treat them. The precocious children would also assist us taking off. Standing in front and around the perimeter of the whirling rotors, they would gleefully jump up and down with their arms stretched and palms upward,

providing us lift. Like kids anywhere, they were great. We finished a very long day with ten hours and forty landings.

On the eighth we were assigned to work at Bouam Long, where we resumed logging. Pre-cut logs had been lying in the sun for some time and, lacking moisture, were easier to lift. By the end of the day, I logged ten hours and forty landings.

The next day, after a short stint of flying that included five landings, we encountered maintenance problems that could not be resolved in the field. We were advised by Udorn to RTB and arrived about noon. (Two plus twenty-five.)

***"As I wrote you recently, I will shortly be in the ranks of the unemployed.***

***As we are about to be fired the flying has picked up. There is a last-minute panic to clean up loose ends [for the Meo people] as when we leave the mountain people will be on their own. They have roads now, but most still live in remote areas that can only be serviced by air or walking long distances [roads were only dirt, and subject to erosion during the rainy season]. There are Lao helicopters, but I don't believe that they can take up a tenth of the slack [they wouldn't help the Meo anyway].***

***My plans are still up in the air as to staying over here or returning. Right now I am leaning toward the States."***<sup>5</sup>

Letter to Don Valentine, Steamboat Springs, Colorado, 04/10/74.

Manager of Flight Jim Rhyne had been assigned the task of marshalling willing pilots with Huey experience for work in

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps I was half expecting Don to offer me a job with Sunray, although things were not going all that well there at the time, with fires and a money crunch. Whatever my expectations, a job offer from Don Valentine never materialized.

South Vietnam. Even if we had no intention of transferring, most of us who held seniority status and qualified officially signaled our desire for the change of station at the time Air America closed the doors (COB) in Udorn. It would extend the deadline for a hard decision, and keep us around for a time. It was not a fair system, and because junior people were excluded from the process and could be terminated in deference to those of us who signed up, Rhyne was quite suspicious as to our actual intentions. Therefore, he later issued a memo that if a person who previously indicated his intention for the Saigon billet refused to sign a firm bid to transfer, he would be terminated with prejudice. The threat succeeded and the Saigon list of senior pilots immediately shrank.

I was assigned a half day field standby on the eleventh. By this time, the Rhyne memorandum and a need to search for employment after Air America prompted me to examine the possibilities of work with Bell Helicopter International (BHI) in Isfahan, Iran. This would require a trip to the Middle Eastern country to obtain impressions of the job from some former Air America pilots and ground personnel already working there. I would also talk to management and take a screening check ride in the Huey, the primary aircraft flown in the tactics syllabus, required in the hiring process.

With this in mind, I sought FCF pilot Captain Ed Rudolfs, who was scheduled for a test flight on Bell 205 Papa Foxtrot Hotel. I asked Ed if I could accompany him in the left seat and obtain some stick time. Strictly a by-the-book man, Ed waffled, saying that even though I had thousands of hours in Bell equipment, I was not currently checked out in the machine. Moreover, it would violate Company policy to allow me to fly. I could not understand his attitude, for this same Company he referenced was about to let all of us go without a bonus,



anything tangible, or even a pat on the fanny. Surely, he could have bent the rules in my case. Instead, Rudolfs proposed that I fly with him and observe from the rear. I was disappointed, but thought this could be helpful in re-acquainting me with aircraft procedures and maneuvers.

In the one plus fifty hours flown, Ed conducted three landing patterns, and five total landings, to include hovering. During the period, I recalled a lot and felt more comfortable in the machine. For further familiarization, I sat in the cockpit and scanned the instrument panel, while reading the check list for starting procedures and all the rest.

I was back at the airfield the next morning on standby. Taking advantage of the time and available Bells on the flight line, I continued my cockpit self-instruction and read the pilot handbook. Returning home in the afternoon, I began a letter home to the parents:

***"We will be going to Bangkok Sunday night [14<sup>th</sup>] on the train if all goes well. I want to have Peter see the fellow who took Rick's tonsils out. His are very large and [frequently] become infected, but nothing like Ricky.***

***Dad, the next time you are at the bank could you get all the letters of commendation out of the [safety deposit] box and send them to me? I will make a folder to show potential employers."***

Partial Letter Home 04/12/74.

Early on the thirteenth, Ben Densley, Bill Long, and I crewed Papa Hotel Echo to Long Tieng. A Thai mining survey team had been working out of the base, exploring the local government-controlled area to possibly discover minerals that might be worth mining to help supplement the natives' meager living conditions. Helicopter crews had been taking the team

into the field (south and east) in the morning and returning them at night. They found many minerals, but not much that could be commercially exploited.

On the advice of knowledgeable locals, team members described or directed us to sites of potential mineral deposits, or to rivers named with various colors in the MOUNG CHA-PHOU BIA area. As pointed out to me by the young Thai engineer, the green river connoted possible copper deposits at the source and infiltration into the water; the red river-iron ore; a brown river, and the sort. Most gold discovered over the years had been mined from the Khang Khay area on the northeast Plain of Jars. (I had heard in previous years that gold was also mined in the southern Attapeu region.) Since gold was located in enemy-controlled territory, it did not impact our equation.

In addition to assisting with mineral surveys, we also delivered seed rice and other essential commodities to villages sponsoring refugees near enemy-controlled territory and chosen as a buffer zone. Before RON at The Alternate, I logged eight plus fifteen, thirty minutes night, and twenty landings. The following morning, I took the mining engineer to areas of his choosing. We had formed a considerable bonding in a very short time, possibly because of my interest in what he was doing.

Minerals scattered around the area were considered a geologist's dream. <sup>6</sup> Before being recalled after flying two plus fifty-five hours, my new friend presented me with a sizeable chunk of iron ore that had been seventy percent crystallized and been fused from pressure and heat over a least a million years before. He claimed that the specimen had been found lying on the

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<sup>6</sup> Although discounted by peers, old Porter Hough an early advocate of a plethora of minerals and oil in lower Military Region Two, had been essentially right. French geologists had explored parts of Laos years before, but findings were classified and never saw the light of day.

ground. This substantiated what Pop Buell, USAID chief at Sam Tong, had told us years before about the existence of an iron mountain although he refused to tell us where.<sup>7</sup> During the previous week, the team had discovered coral and sea shell fossils that were reputedly over five hundred million years old.

Since it was Sunday, flights south were rare. Therefore, I was allowed to ride to Wattay Airport on Tango Foxtrot Delta (TFD), General Vang Pao's personal C-47. (Forty minutes.) From there air operations arranged a ride to Udorn on CASI C-46, XW-PHN. (Thirty minutes.) I blocked in at 1415.

My early arrival allowed me to complete the letter home started two days before. I briefly covered some of the interesting upcountry events:

***"I went upcountry for a day and just returned. We planned to go to Bangkok tonight on the train and I was lucky to get home today as not much [air traffic] returns early on Sundays...***

***There has been some infighting here with various parties trying to get contracts for future work in this area. I am probably on the wrong team and won't get to stay. They [management] long ago forgot that we are people and should be***

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<sup>7</sup> Wayne Knight Email. "The iron ore deposit was on Phou Bia. The Agency actually had some samples analyzed. Buddy [Rogers] said it was high grade, but would remain top secret because the USG supported factions would never be able to mine it."

Author Note: Blaine Jensen's recall of iron mountain is covered in Book 14, 1973.

*treated accordingly.* <sup>8</sup>

*I haven't really looked for work yet but should get started. We were originally told that we would be helped to get jobs but it looks like this was another of the numerous lies we have had to put up with over a number of years. I hoped this would all end without bitterness, but this may not be. Now we are required to fill out bids for Saigon. If we don't, of course, we will be finished when Udorn closes.* [This was implemented to minimize junior pilot dislocation when senior pilots who originally signed up for Saigon rejected their original decision.] *I still can see no reason to go there.*

*I think it is impossible to predict what will happen to us in the next few months. There are all kinds of things to consider. As I said before I will try and keep you informed."*

George Casterlin, my Father's brother, sent a letter to him. Part of it concerned me:

*"...I am glad Dick will be through in Thailand and hope, for your sake, he will come home.* <sup>9</sup> *He has been over there a long time, but suppose Tuie wants to be with her own people...*

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<sup>8</sup> Wayne Knight Email, Wayne did not recall very many quests for work in Udorn. Some maintenance and supply types were signing up with Thai Am. Jim Agnew remained in Bangkok as a Bell representative.

*"When we were preparing to break up in 1974, Ab and he were looking into a charter operation in Bangkok using the Air America Bell 205s. This was Ab's baby. Wayne just acquiesced initially and let himself be dragged along. The Agency was prepared to be very helpful in setting up the operation. They went so far as to form a Delaware Corporation. However, they ran into major problems with the Thai government over Thai registration formalities."*

From the beginning, Wayne was very pessimistic about the project and was actually relieved when it didn't come to fruition. He didn't believe a helicopter charter operation could survive in Bangkok at the time.

<sup>9</sup> Uncle George Casterlin did not know that Dad had counseled me to remain overseas and continue to make money when I was on home leave and considering terminating with Air America.

***Hope all turns out well for Dick."***

Letter George Casterlin to Harry Casterlin, 04/14/74.

We went to Bangkok for a few days STO. Peter had his tonsils examined by Doctor Asawin Teapakom, who had removed Ricky's badly diseased tonsils at his clinic. He did not advise removing Peter's at this time, for they were considered a beneficial factor in a child's early years of development and Peter did not have the problems Ricky did. Doctor Vichai examined both children. Amanda exhibited a concave breast bone, which he believed she would outgrow. Other than that, she was declared fine.

There was some concern about the children's slow growth. Peter had his wrists ex-rayed--specifically the epiphysis at the end of his bones--to check his growth potential, and both children were prescribed extra amino acids to help stimulate their growth. I really considered this unnecessary. I believed they would never achieve average American height because of a hereditary factor. At over six feet Dad was the only tall person in our immediate family. I was average in height, at just under five feet nine inches, but Mom and most of her family were small people.

**LOSS OF AN AIR AMERICA CREWMEMBER**

On the 18th one of two original Thai pilots hired to fly UH-34D helicopters, Captain Boonrat Com-Intra, departed Long Tieng with a Thai First Officer and Flight Mechanic Manoon Latloi. The crew was assigned to deliver five passengers and 500 pounds of supplies to a refugee village located twenty miles west of The Alternate in the Long Pot area in foothills west of the Nam Ngum (TG-6233). Approaching to the west with a light tail wind, the First Officer miscalculated his ground speed and

overshot the Tango pad. With RPM and lift rapidly decaying, the aircraft swerved to the right, allowing the right main landing gear to touch the ground. The helicopter settled, severing the right gear, and rolled over. During the gyrations Latloi was ejected from the cabin section and was killed. The pilots and passengers were injured, but managed to depart Hotel-45 through the emergency exits.

Nine days later, Hotel-45 was recovered and air lifted to Udorn. Considered a strike, and not worth repairing so late in the Second Indochina War timeline, the aircraft never flew again for Air America.<sup>10</sup>

Don Ronk was one of the few civilian reporters allowed into the Long Tieng valley. He wandered around the area for four days noting *"decaying sandbags around the king's house, a fort that overlooks the valley."* New growth was taking hold and covering bomb and artillery scars on the landscape. Young men on crutches aimlessly negotiated the town. A long road climbed and plunged into the valley. *"A carpet of huge yellow flowers, taller than a man's head spreads luxuriantly and buries the roadway."*

Approximately 6,500 people lived in the valley. General Vang Pao ordered a new market built, and continued to improve the schools. A new hospital had been built. Interested in improving the people's welfare, it was rumored that Vang Pao would order old shacks destroyed and begin new construction now that the pressure and stresses of a war mentality had subsided.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America, Hotel-45.*

<sup>11</sup> Don Ronk, *Article in the Asia Magazine, The Legend of Long Cheng (Tieng).*



Refugee village located well to the east of Long Tieng.  
Author Collection.

On Monday morning the 22nd, I deadheaded to The Alternate on Bell Papa Hotel Foxtrot. (One plus forty-five.) There I joined Dan Zube and Tom Neis flying Papa Hotel Bravo. During the day we worked refugee areas well to the east that warranted logging over five hours supplemental pay. (Seven plus twenty-five, twenty-five landings.) That night I discovered fleas in the Air America hostel, confirming that the quality of help and supervision was not the same as we had enjoyed during previous months and years.

The next morning, I was relieved after flying only two plus fifteen and ten landings. Since Caribou 05430 was still unloading, I hurriedly turned Bravo over to the new PIC and boarded the C-7 plane for Udorn. We arrived at 1130 hours. After I submitted a trip report regarding the fleas, a Transportation Department B-bus driver took me home. I was assigned a morning standby at the airfield on Wednesday morning, and was relieved during early afternoon.

## **THE FIELD**

Scheduled to work at Long Tieng, at 0825 on the 26<sup>th</sup>, I checked into operations with my RON bag and enough clothes for at least three days. The reason for scheduling a late arrival was because Papa Hotel Bravo had spent the night in hangar one, undergoing maintenance inspections. An air worthiness FCF conducted by Tom Moher that morning was required before upcountry release.

For some reason I had been assigned to fly solo pilot. Except for FCF flights, this was something that had not occurred during field flying for a number of years, when it was standard



procedure in the UH-34D. <sup>12</sup> Thinking that perhaps someone was sick, lame, or lazy, I did not question the move, and was quite happy to fly by myself for a change.

Deak Kennedy was my Flight Mechanic. Deak had changed somewhat. He had married a Thai girl, who had a baby, and they were planning to return to Boston shortly. Somewhat subdued, he still showed his Irish spunk, was excitable and a little difficult to handle at times. This was evidenced during the day when I began observing some borderline torque splits on the instrument gage and called Udorn for a dead weight tester to be delivered to The Alternate on the first available aircraft. <sup>13</sup> After attempting to rectify the splits without success (plus or minus five percent was deemed acceptable because of vibrations and instrument error), Deak wanted to ground Bravo. In my mind the problem was not acute enough to warrant grounding the machine, so I elected to continue working.

We continued working until Kennedy announced on the loading ramp that he was not going to fly anymore. Perhaps the recent death of Flight Mechanic Latloi in Hotel-45, and his status as a new father, weighed heavily on him. I did not think that the CPH would allow me to fly without a Flight Mechanic, so there were a few unkind words spoken between us. Although the "Boston Bean" would never kowtow to anyone, Deak's demeanor was uncharacteristic. For almost two years, we had flown numerous night Special Project missions together in Indian country, and endured many unsettling situations without any similar animosity. Still, April 1974 was a different time and place.

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<sup>12</sup> Except for occasional supervisory upcountry check rides and training new pilots, dual cockpit crews began in 1965, when military search and rescue missions began in earnest. As trail watch missions increased and the war heated up appreciably, two pilots in the cockpit became a standard procedure.

<sup>13</sup> At this time very few maintenance items were kept at Long Tieng.

I was fed up. A C-123 crew had just landed and turned into the ramp, so I told Deak that if he was not going to perform his duty, then he better board that plane and go home. My bluff failed to work. He agreed. While gathering his gear and preparing to leave, one of the kickers carried a dead weight tester to us. This tended to calm my testy mechanic. He attached the device's hoses to the individual torque meters, pumped up the pneumatic gage, and took readings. As I had believed, the splits were an instrument error, and there was nothing wrong with the system. Buddies again, we resumed local work and made up the down time by flying forty-five minutes night. (Eight plus forty, sixty landings.)

After swapping Bravo for Papa Hotel Alpha, refugee work continued on Saturday to all points of the compass that were still under government control. (Nine hours, five plus ten supplemental, fifty landings.)

### **FINAL SAR**

While we continued local refugee and supply missions during the day, we were told to investigate the crash of Twin Otter N389EX at Sala Phou Khoun (LS-260). There we confirmed that the aircraft had run off the end of the crushed gravel 875-foot strip. Captains Bob Watson, Larry Wilderom,<sup>14</sup> and AFS JJ Brennan were shaken, without sustaining major injuries, although two other passengers had incurred injury. 89EX suffered considerably more damage than its occupants. The excursion down the side of the mountain cracked the fuselage circumferentially just aft of the cargo compartment.

Happy that the SAR had been easy and resulted in considerably more success than others I had participated in, we

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<sup>14</sup> Larry Wilderom had been a UH-34D Captain, but transferred to the fixed wing program.



Captain Billy Pearson and his crew lifting DHC-6 N389EX with Chinook 016 from a hillside below the LS-260 airstrip.

boarded the crew and ferried them to Long Tieng, where they were able to arrange transportation to Udorn. We continued to march, ending the day with eight plus forty and fifty landings.

Flying Chinook 016, Billy Pearson was tasked to recover the damaged Otter. In addition to the normal Chinook crew, Special project program chief Jim Pearson went along to advise the best points to attach cables for the lift. Because of darkness during the trip to Udorn PIC Pearson was forced to deposit the shaky load at Vang Vieng (L-16). Upon touchdown, the fuselage broke in two pieces. That evening vandals entered the fuselage and smashed the instrument panel. Hearing this, Jim Pearson believed this was "*justification for leveling the entire population of the town.*"<sup>15</sup> The remains of the Otter were later loaded into a C-130E and delivered to Udorn, where managers determined it was not feasible to rebuild the machine.

After flying Papa Hotel Alpha three hours plus ten minutes and ten landings the next day, I was relieved. I deadheaded to Wattay Airport on remaining Otter N6868. (Forty-four minutes.) From there I caught a ride further south on 998, arriving at the Air America facility at 1450. It had not been the most interesting RON but was not bad for the period. CPH Marius Burke and I conducted a local proficiency check and later ferried General Trefry to Vientiane. (Three plus seventeen, ten landings.)

Ironically, as our timetable in Laos wound down toward the endgame in Southeast Asia, monthly flight time remained high with over a hundred hours flown.

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Pearson Email. During the course of two years, the airline types introduced into the Otter program managed to prang two of the three Company DCH-6 aircraft. Professor Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America, Twin Otter, N389EX.*

**A**s I planned a quick trip to Iran mid-month during STO to talk to pilots and the management of Bell Helicopter International and evaluate the BHI job potential, I coordinated with the Operations Department to fly most of my monthly flight time during the first two weeks.

On the third of May, I deadheaded to Long Tieng on Chinook 016. (One plus one four.) There I joined Captain Bill Hutchison and Flight Mechanic Chuck Low on XW-PHE. Attrition had taken its toll on personnel, and since there were few if any First Officers remaining in the S-58T program we were scheduled to fly with senior Captains.

We proceeded over familiar hills, ravines, and valleys for an hour or more to Bouam Long to participate in the continuing logging operation, hooking and lifting well-seasoned logs to the portable sawmill perched on the eastern ridgeline. By now the undertaking seemed much better organized, providing boards to fabricate buildings and creating a sense of permanence to the site and those individuals living there. Toward the end of the day, we retraced our flight path to RON at The Alternate. (Six plus thirty, three plus thirty supplemental, twenty landings.) Fortunately, the fleas had been eliminated in the hostel and I had nothing to complain about.

The next day we returned to Site-32 to complete the log lifting operation and to shuttle stacked, rough sawn boards off the ridge into the bowl. When we secured on the Long Tieng ramp, I had recorded ten hours, seven plus fifteen supplemental, and thirty landings in the logbook.

Sunday missions kept us mostly in the local area. Later in



The torn remains of a T-28 that had crashed during a previous year lay scattered on a grassy slope below the Padong airstrip.

Author Collection.



Ban Tha Vieng (LS-13) adjacent to Route-4. The site, listed as unfriendly, frequently changed hands over the years.  
Author Collection.



Fair weather cumulus clouds hang over the unfriendly Tha Thom valley (LS-22) and Nam Xan. Formerly a Neutralist stronghold, traces of Route-4 are visible before turning south toward Borikhane, Paksane, and linking with Route-13.

Author Collection.





Fifteen miles southeast of Tha Thom, and twelve miles from the muddy Nam Houi lay the unfriendly site of Ban Tha Si (LS-61).  
Author Collection.



Against a wooded and mountainous backdrop, Nam Houi (LS-360) natives gather around a post rice delivery  
Author Collection.

the day, Tom Neis replaced Chuck Low, and we were assigned a trip seventy-two nautical miles southeast to a Lao Theung refugee village at Nam Houi (LS-360). The flight took us past the historical Padong (LS-05) complex where the Agency-inspired and supported Meo program commenced in 1961, both Ban Tha Vieng (LS-13) and Tha Thom (LS-11) situated along Route-4, and Ban Tha Si (LS-61) at the lower end of the Tha Thom valley. Since much of the area was outside the de facto demarcation line, and was now controlled by the enemy, I flew at a reasonable altitude employing heavily wooded mountains as cover.

Nam Houi was located in the well-watered Nam Hong valley parallel to the lower Tha Thom valley. Like many villages it was well chosen, separated and protected by mountain ridges. In addition to delivering supplies, the main purpose of the trip was to drop off an officer to muster able bodied men and check on the progress of men already enlisted for an ambitious logging operation close to the border. (Nine plus forty-five, twenty-two landings.)

After flying one plus thirty and conducting six landings, I was relieved. Deadheading on 40515, I arrived in Udorn at 1100 hours.

Off the schedule for four days, I scrambled around gathering and compiling pertinent items for the Iran trip. The letters of commendation I asked Dad to send arrived to be added to the file depicting my life as an aviator.

***"I hope that by the time you receive this, you will have in hand the letters of commendation.."***

***Well Dick, what can I say, as I know you are at the crossroads and in a quandary to revamp your way of life. I feel pretty confident you will come out on top of the heap in good shape."***

Letter from Home, Sunday May 5, 1974.

*"I received the letters Dad. Just in time as I am going to Iran on the 16th to talk to the Bell [Helicopter] International people. I am still hoping that we can come home this summer for a short visit. Bell only gives two weeks a year, which limits ones travel considerably.*

*A very unusual thing happened the other day. I was upcountry and talking with a Customer by the name of John Scott from West Virginia. When I told him that I was from Plainfield he asked if I knew John Lacamera. Naturally, he was amazed when I told him that John was our next-door neighbor. As it turns out Scott's brother married John's niece, I guess the dental technician's daughter in West Virginia. It might be fun to mention this to him and see his reaction. Such a small world.*

*We haven't sold anything yet but are now preparing to do this. I sent a package to you containing two [bronze] temple drums [obtained from a pile of booty collected at Xieng Khouang Ville and staged at Lat Houang (LS-09) during the 1969 PDJ operation]. It will be a long while before they reach you as I sent them regular mail."*

Letter Home, 05/07/74.

*"I told John and Elsie [Lacamera] of your meeting with the customer Scott. They were really surprised as they had no knowledge of his being in that part of the world. The comment was (Small World)."*

Letter from Home, 06/09/74.

Continuing my efforts to prepare information for the Iran trip, I entered Wayne Knight's office to solicit a recommendation for the years I had worked under him. Wayne composed the following letter dated 10 May 1974:

*"To whom it may concern:*

*The bearer of this letter, Mr. H. R. Casterlin, has been employed by Air America, Inc. from mid-1962 to the present. Due solely to Air America phase-down plans, Mr. Casterlin's employment may soon be ended.*

*Mr. Casterlin has been assigned to Rotary Wing Pilot duties for his entire Air America tenure and he has consistently performed these duties in a very satisfactory manner.*

*I have personal high regard for Mr. Casterlin's professional talents and have no reluctance whatever in recommending him for follow-on employment within his chosen field.*

*Earl W. Knight  
Director of Operations  
Northern Thailand Division*

On the morning of the eleventh, I deadheaded to The Alternate on 868. (One hour and six minutes.) Replacing Dan Zube, I joined Scratch Kanach and Chuck Low in Papa Hotel Echo. As the only person left senior to me in the Twinpac program, Scratch was the designated pilot in command (PIC). Scratch had heard that I was planning a trip to Iran, and asked if he could accompany me. Naturally, I was delighted to have someone familiar to talk to, ask questions, and probe the job potential.

Later, during a standard walk around the aircraft, Chuck discovered a substantial crack in the aft right tail cone at station-316. Since the inception of the S-58T program, we had experienced problems with fuselage cracks. For the first time in the history of the Sikorsky H-34, with the installation of the twin PT-6 engines, maximum allowed shaft horsepower (SHP of 1525



The cockpit crew of Captain Scratch Kanach and Dan Zube landing on the upper portion centerline of the Long Tieng macadam runway.

Author Collection.

SHP) had been introduced to the main transmission. <sup>1</sup> The high torque input and the resulting vibrations impacting the ships proved detrimental to the old fuselages and pylons of the H-34. Before long, elongated vertical cracks, some reaching eighteen inches, began to develop on the fuselage skin under transmission mounts, on tail pylons, or on tail cones where they were joined with the fuselage. All the trouble areas were modified, patched, repaired, or beefed up with aluminum doublers in order to help sustain the extra torque and high vibration levels created by the extra power.

Removal of the armored sliding cockpit windows helped considerably in diminishing severe vibrations while transitioning through the loss of lift during landing. We thought the crack problems had been resolved, but it was obvious it had not, and perhaps the logging operation at Bouam Long, and the excessive power required to lift heavy logs from hillsides, had taken a toll on the machine. <sup>2</sup> The damage was extensive enough to warrant returning the machine to Udorn for repairs. We arrived at 1815 hours. (Six plus thirty, twenty landings.)

We were reassigned Papa Hotel Alpha for upcountry work on Sunday with Gary Gentz as our third crewmember. After arriving at The Alternate, Meo Air Operations boss Snoopy, who had been assigning us tasks for many years and we had watched grow up,

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<sup>1</sup> The H-34 was originally built for the U.S. Navy, and Navy specifications always demanded a twenty percent or more safety factor built into helicopter components. To prevent abuse, these specifications were not published for the normal individual to see.

<sup>2</sup> We experienced maintenance problems with the Twinpac until the end, and I doubted if it would ever be right. It had cost us a lot of flight time, but it was still reassuring to have the security of two engines while flying over the mountains and jungles of Laos.

assigned us to Bouam Long for the day. <sup>3</sup>

We were all sorry about running out on the Meo, for we had worked so closely with them over the years, and at times had endured much of what they had. It did not seem right, but what could we do? It was USG policy, and our hands were tied. To compensate, I recalled Scratch's admonition long ago not to get politically involved in Lao affairs when being sent to Paksane to help search for a subordinate of General Kham Korn, whom I liked very much, but who had backed the wrong side of a coup attempt. I wondered how Scratch felt now.

Snoopy, a pilot favorite, was upbeat and philosophical about the plight of the Meo people after we were no longer available to help them relocate and ferry supplies over harsh terrain. I asked Snoopy one day what he required to survive. Laos contained many different kinds of hardwood trees suitable for reducing into lumber to build sturdy houses and manufacture fine furniture. Hoping to take advantage of this potential, the intelligent youngster had conceived a plan, only wanting a Sears chain saw to participate in the lucrative timber business. I also learned that one of the Meo lads had attended college in the States and attained a master's degree. After returning to his people, he divulged and insisted that the people's real name was actually Hmong, not the pejorative Meo term accorded the clans while they still lived in Yunnan province in China. He advocated the people should be called Hmong. This was the first time I heard that

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<sup>3</sup> Before Snoopy spoke English well, he would climb up the side of the helicopter to give me a slip of paper, usually with four, but sometimes six-digit coordinates. I checked the map, and if the destination was a site I was familiar with, I asked him if it was such and such village. We both liked this method and it encouraged a sense of rapport.



term in the almost twelve years I had worked in Laos. <sup>4</sup>

We carried sections of trees and hauled sawed boards for the majority of the day. (Nine plus twenty, five plus five supplemental hours, and twenty-five landings.) Remaining local the next day, we conducted trips to local positions and sites. (Ten hours, thirty landings.) I worked three hours and conducted four landings on the 14<sup>th</sup>, and then was relieved by another pilot. Since nothing was returning to Udorn early, I waited and deadheaded home on Papa Hotel Alpha. (One plus ten.) We arrived at 1820.

## **IRAN**

*"I went to Iran and it will be satisfactory for a year or so. Isfahan is very high and dry [a 5,000-foot plateau located approximately in the center of the country]. My lips dried up and cracked. I would say the climate is comparable to Steamboat Springs [Colorado]. The work is training Iranian pilots to fly Bell helicopters and will continue for five years. <sup>5</sup> I think it will actually be more than five years as the whole country is pushing to be number one and is developing very fast. Everything is available there but is very expensive. A house rents empty for 300 dollars [a month] or more. It gets cold in the winter*

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<sup>4</sup> Today the Meo (a corruption of Miao or barbarian) people are referred to as Hmong (Mong). Most writers of Lao history are probably unaware of the original name that until 1974 was strictly Meo, and if they are, they use the more politically correct version of Hmong. I call attention to this as today's blatant revisionism of true facts.

<sup>5</sup> Bell's (DOD supervised) comprehensive billion-dollar contract with the Government of Iran (GOI) included a few weeks of technical English instruction, basic primary and then advanced helicopter flight instruction for Iranian students, many with little formal education and virtually no experience with anything remotely mechanical. Iran had reputedly purchased all the necessary equipment for the operation, although I never believed this. Bell would provide the manpower to implement the program.

*with some snow. It will be quite a change for us. I haven't signed any papers yet and will probably have to go to Texas to do so as I told them that I would be going home for vacation."*

Letter Home, 05/29/74.

After obtaining travelers checks from the Chase Manhattan branch on the Air Force base, Scratch and I went to Bangkok and then to Teheran, Iran, the country's capital, for job interviews. It was late when we arrived. We checked in to the Sina Hotel on Takhete Jamshid, and stayed two nights in what could be called a cavernous, ugly squad bay type room that incorporated several beds.

Initial interviews took place the next day at the Bell International, Inc. (BHI), office on the same street as the unusual hotel. After filling out standard forms that indicated I had logged almost 11,000 hours, I was ushered in to my interviewer Senior Personnel Representative Phil Belgio's office. From Phil I learned a little more about the company, its goals, and liberal benefits. Starting pay was 1,150 dollars with add-ons from a twenty-five percent bonus, cost of living adjustment of twelve percent, and a transportation and housing allowance. The total monthly salary for a new hire amounted to almost 2,000 dollars.

All went well until we began discussing delivery of household goods. I thought that the rattan furniture and some other items we had in our house in Udorn would be nice to send there. It was cheaper if sent by surface transportation. By air the weight allotment would have been severely reduced. It would not have cost BHI anything as Air America would be paying the freight charge. Belgio did not agree with me, and his negative attitude left a bad taste in my mouth. According to him, he did not want to go to the port and endure the delay and hassle of

customs officials. Since he was adamant about this, and I was still seeking employment, I did not push the issue, but I elevated Belgio to the top of my sierra list.

Following the initial interview, we booked a flight on Iranian Air to Esfahan for further interviews. After submitting our credentials, both Scratch and I talked to Flight Department head, George Young, who had been a U.S. Army colonel and served with distinction in Vietnam during the height of that war. <sup>6</sup> In contrast to the all-business Belgio, who was not an aviator, rapport with George was easy to attain. Bell company regulations required us to conduct a formal check ride in the Huey with Standards Instructor, Bill Taylor. Satisfactorily passing this, we would likely be hired to teach tactics courses to classes of Iranian Army students who had graduated from the primary stage involving the Bell-206.

Bill Taylor was a laid-back, likable, good-old-boy type, typical of many Texans. Scratch flew first, as I observed from the cabin section. After Kanach completed his session, we switched seats and Bill led me through various Bell-205 maneuvers. The flight that I had with Ed Rudolfs as an observer during a FCF flight, and the static time I had spent in the cockpit reviewing procedures, paid off handsomely, and I actually performed a little better than Scratch, particularly when I aced a full autorotation. Aware that all our recent flying experience had been in the S58T or CH-47, Bill was satisfied that our performance was good enough for him to recommend our hiring.

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<sup>6</sup> Before Air America personnel began filtering into BHI, the majority of pilots and management were Texans, had served in the Army or Army Reserve, and worked at the Southern Air training complex at Mineral Wells, Texas. Forming the group's core, it was obvious that the BHI flight department was mainly an "old boy" organization. Later, perceived as a source of favoritism, this would be the cause of future dissent and a nasty union confrontation.

We returned to Young's office, where the colonel indicated that, pending the company's final decision, as far as he was concerned, we were hired to staff the advanced tactics program. Because we would be transitioning from overseas, the normal Chief Flight Instructor (CFI) requirement would be waived.<sup>7</sup>

Although I had been designated a Company instructor pilot for the S-58T program, unlike Scratch, I had never attended any formal military Method of Instruction (MOI) training courses. The IP work I conducted in the early days of the Air America helicopter program was mostly transition training of new hires, who reputedly already had sufficient time and experience in the machine, although this was not always the case. Sometimes flying with non-proficient pilots became an exercise in survival, for some had lied about their time in an aircraft type to obtain the job. In addition, few pilots, if any, possessed much experience landing at elevated mountain sites. Consequently, I had to develop my own brand of teaching. For those with talent and motivation, my instruction generally worked, and I hoped that it contributed to their overall flying ability.

Notwithstanding my past IP experience, I knew that memorizing and implementing the flight school's standard procedures to teach naive students from an established syllabus would not be an easy task.

Following the interviews and check ride, we booked rooms in the three-hundred-year-old Shah Abbas, a beautiful hotel that looked more like a modern-day structure. Originally built by a previous Shah as a caravansary to provide safety at night for

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<sup>7</sup> Bell must have really been anxious to hire pilots, for to my knowledge we were the first and only pilots hired without a CFI license. Scratch later obtained a CFI and throughout four and a half years I remained the only BHI pilot without one. I did later obtain the ticket when working as Chief Pilot of Helicopter Charter at Moisant Airport in Kenner, Louisiana.

weary travelers and their livestock, it was now obviously modernized to present day standards. The bright, white structure was enclosed on three sides with rooms facing a broad courtyard. This area proliferated with appealing gardens and pools. Apparently, the region's desert soil was conducive to the growth of huge Persian roses, the beauty of which I had never seen rivaled anywhere.

Returning to town, we talked to some former pilots we knew, such as Dave Cox, who had flown with me as a First Officer in the Twinpac program. Generally, we liked what we saw and heard, especially after talking to a former Air America administrative type, Roger Stock, who was able to brief us on living conditions, the school, and so forth from a family perspective.

As a waypoint in transitioning and building a home and living in Steamboat Springs, which was about the same altitude and climate as Isfahan, and enthused about the possibility of working there for a short time, I visited the BHI Industrial Relations unit in offices behind the Kourosh Hotel on Chaharbagh Bala, the main road through town, for the purpose of calling Phil Belgio to hasten the hiring process. <sup>8</sup> After I explained that I had been accepted by the flight department, he said that he was not prepared to hire me yet. I had to await a firm offer. We departed Esfahan still unsure of the future.

Back in Teheran, we checked into the Commodore Hotel, definitely a decidedly better hotel than the Sina. It was a little more expensive, but well worth the extra rials.

Before leaving for Thailand on the 21<sup>st</sup>, we did a little sightseeing. To help with this venture, we stopped at the

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<sup>8</sup> The Kourosh Hotel was located adjacent to the east-west Zayandeh Rud (river) and crossed by a sizeable bridge that joined two parts of the city. Genghis Khan's Mongolian hordes had reputedly slaughtered 100,000 Isfahanies on the banks of the river when they failed to pay respect to the conquerors.

equivalent of a chamber of commerce or tourist information center. In addition to providing glossy information pamphlets, the lady who worked in the office explained many interesting details regarding the people and country. The only thing I could recall about Iran was a little history about the ancient Persian Empire from my early primary school years. Although overtly a nice person and helpful, I received negative vibrations from the woman, for she seemed a bit strange and defensive. After hesitating for some time, she haltingly admitted that she did not particularly like Americans. Taken by surprise, Scratch and I exchanged quizzical glances. Totally out of character from her previous demeanor, this admission made me wonder about the sincerity of these people. Were all Iranians like this, arrogant and resting on the laurels of a long dead Persian empire? I was curious about, that given her attitude, why was she ever placed in a position to deal with impressionable tourists? I also wondered about my decision to work in Iran.<sup>9</sup> Despite the few days spent in Iran seeking employment, I was still unsure about the future.

### **UNITY TERMINATED**

After performing admirably for several years, to comply with the ceasefire agreement, Agency-supported Thai infantry "military" participation in the Second Indochina War in Laos ended on the 22nd. Late in the day, three battalions defending hardened positions on Skyline Ridge, and forward of Long Tieng on Zebra (Romeo) Ridge, responded to a withdrawal order and filtered back to The Alternate. They were then shuttled home to

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<sup>9</sup> At this time, I knew very little about Middle Eastern geopolitics and general dissension building in Iran.

Thailand on cargo planes and disbanded.<sup>10</sup>

### **THE SANDALWOOD HAULING FIASCO**

I was back on the flight schedule on the 24<sup>th</sup>, flying XW-PHB with Captain Bill Hutchison and Tom Neis. The previous day, in the CPH office, we were advised that the Long Tieng hostel dining facility no longer functioned for crewmembers, so we had to carry canned food and bread with us for the first time in years.

USG was pulling out of Laos and leaving the Meo people to their own devices. There was no mustering out pay for the troops to cushion their switch from wartime to peaceful civilian pursuits. The general opinion was that something had to be done. Faced with this human dilemma, Agency Case Officers remaining at The Alternate found sufficient funds and implemented a plan to show good faith and possibly help Vang Pao's officers.

What had begun earlier in the month at Site-360 came to fruition. It was well known that huge sandalwood trees grew undisturbed on the Lao-North Vietnamese border northeast of Moung Ngai (LS-01), an uninhabited, grassy bowl that was now officially listed as unfriendly in the Air Facilities Data book for Laos. While flying over the pristine area, one could see very tall waving grass and no cattle or other forms of domestic life could be seen. It appeared peaceful, and attested to the fact that certain remote parts of Laos had been untouched by the destructive war and remained beautiful. However, this was not always so. It was difficult to believe that the area had once

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<sup>10</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 411. Reduction of Thai forces had been an ongoing process since mid-1973. Consistent with the agreements, additional Thai POWs were released in September and repatriated. However, hundreds of troops were still missing and presumed KIA.



Looking west toward the grassy Mung Ngai (LS-01) bowl.  
Author Collection.



been the scene of fierce battles during the early days when several PARU "advisors" and Meo were lost, and two Case Officers (Jack Shirley and Tom Ahern) evacuated. Over the years I had seldom worked in the area, and was amazed and a bit concerned that we were flying there.

Sandalwood, the second most valuable wood in the world, when cut exuded a distinctive and pleasing aroma that often lasted for decades. Because of these aromatic properties, Chinese families of means chose to use the wood to manufacture caskets that tended to retard insect and worm penetration. Case Officers believed that the boards could be circulated, sold to Chinese merchants, and the money distributed to help officers transition to a new line of work. (We all suspected that since weapons would be retained by former soldiers, banditry would flourish in the mountains.)

The grand old trees, long growing from a former era were as round at the base as a small room. This was confirmed by the massive yellow trunks hand-sawed almost to ground level. It seemed a shame to cut them down, but this was consistent with the rape of the country. After being identified and marked, trees were laboriously cut by men wielding enormous two-man saws. Felled on the spot, the trunks were then rough sawed by woodman teams into lengthy, thick rough-hewn boards and stacked. I marveled at the little guys' ability to perform such difficult work purely by hand, but I already knew they were tough people.

When ready, we were summoned to transport the lumber to Nam Houi for further transport to Long Tieng. Remote, but not under government control and close to the border, I was a little apprehensive landing at the marginal landing zone. Because of this, while the little guys loaded boards, I maintained RPM and some power to implement a speedy takeoff if necessary. We had already dealt with the unknown weight factor of freshly cut



Close to the North Vietnamese border, stacked freshly cut sandalwood boards in a cleared area of forest and jungle await Twinpac helicopter transport to Lima Site-360. A Meo worker holds a wooden template to determine the size of the boards.

Author Collection.



Offloading sandalwood boards from the cabin section of Papa Hotel Bravo at Nam Houi for Caribou crews to deliver to Long Tieng.  
Author Collection.



Between unloading and fueling intervals I had time to snap a few photos of the village and its occupants. Such was the nature of the Asian diet and heredity that it was virtually impossible to determine the age of people, many who looked like children. Note the sandalwood boards at the lower and upper right.

Author Collection.



In order to facilitate Twinpac sandalwood shuttles, A-1 jet fuel was staged at Nan Houi, and villagers helped transfer fuel to one or more of the three tanks.

Author Collection.



At the end of the day, there was always a demand for transportation to Long Tieng to visit relatives or trade in the marketplace. Sometimes this was arranged by the village pecking order or the exchange of money. At any rate, the helicopter crew had no control over the process.

Author Collection.

lumber at Boum Long, so employing that experience, loaded a few boards and then attempted a hover to determine the necessary power required for departure. Adding or subtracting boards would determine the actual weight that could be carried safely out of the landing zone. Using this method to establish a standard load, and factoring in fuel burn, wind and temperature, additional boards could be carried on subsequent shuttles twenty-five miles south-southwest to Nam Houi. Working late, we ended the day at Long Tieng logging ten hours, twenty-five minutes night, seven plus forty supplemental pay, and forty landings.

Transfer of sandalwood and other work continued Saturday. (Nine plus fifty-five, twenty-five minutes night, seven plus thirty-three supplemental, forty landings.) Except for switching to Papa Hotel Echo with Bill Long our Flight Mechanic, the following day was much the same, hauling sandalwood boards from the forward site to Site-360. (Nine plus forty-five, five hours supplemental, thirty landings.) <sup>11</sup>

The aroma of the boards was so pleasant and so unusual that I decided to ask a Customer if I could appropriate two for personal future use (I considered this my mustering out pay). <sup>12</sup> The answer was affirmative, so I intended to take them home when we were relieved.

27 May 1974, my final day in Laos, and the end of flying for Air America, was spent working locally around The Alternate.

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<sup>11</sup> Flight Mechanics Bill Long, Chuck Low, Tom Neis, and others also opted to work for Bell Helicopter International (BHI) in Iran. Bill and Chuck have both now gone to their maker.

<sup>12</sup> I had visions of crafting furniture from the soft sandalwood or shaving thin pieces to line a closet. The boards were sent home with my personal household shipment and were stored while I worked for BHI. They accompanied me to the New Orleans area and have resided in the attic for decades. The pleasant aroma is all but gone now unless the wood is cut.

Aware we were going to ferry Echo to Udorn, I selected two sandalwood boards that had just arrived by fixed wing and arranged to have them loaded into the cabin section. In addition, during the RON I had appropriated a sandalwood waste basket made from segmented pieces and held together by twisted bamboo twine. The artifact was probably destined for General Vang Pao, whose name was marked on the inside. It was not the first time I had purloined an item assigned to the general. The temple gongs from Xieng Khong Ville in 1969 were addressed to him. I also had a rectangular piece of wood that I thought might be carved into a figure.

The final flight home that evening was nostalgic. I could not even begin to count the number of times that I had covered the identical track south over miles of verdant ridgelines, deep ravines, and rushing rivers. A lot had changed from my initial incursion into Military Region Two during the fall of 1962. From mostly pristine terrain seen at altitude, the area now revealed ribbons of USIS-inspired dirt roads, numerous refugee villages, and vestiges of wasteful hilltribe slash and burn agriculture on the hillsides. As we exited the mountains in the gathering darkness, broad outlines of the Vientiane flood plain spread out like an amoeba for thirty miles toward the administrative capital. This area too had changed, with more villages housing people displaced by the destructive war. Cultivation of rice fields dotted the landscape to feed these individuals. Crossing the Mekong River west of Wattay Airport evoked fond memories of flying and boating over the wide brown waterway.

We arrived at 1845. (Ten hours, thirty-five landings.) Since Air America was prohibited from flying in Laos after 3 June, my nearly twelve years of supporting USG's effort there was over.



After securing the aircraft and completing the logbook, I arranged to have the wood taken to the house in a Company truck. I asked Tuie to have Jarun, the town veterinarian, ask around town if there might be a market for the boards among the Chinese population. After a time lag, he reported there was none. Either the market was already swamped with sandalwood, or, more likely, from the beginning the scheme had just been an exercise in smoke and mirrors, calculated to obfuscate and placate the poor tribal people into believing that USG was doing something beneficial for their suffering and long service as our warrior surrogates to the cause of freedom from communism.

### **A DISMAL PROGNOSTICATION**

Ever since the ceasefire signing, the CIA and intelligence departments of State, Defense (DIA), Treasury, and the National Security Agency (NSA) were skeptical that the peace would last in South Vietnam. Consequently, a National Intelligence Estimate was issued in May:

*"A major communist offensive in South Vietnam is unlikely during 1974. The picture for the first half of 1975, however, is less clear, and there obviously is a substantial risk the Hanoi will opt for a major offensive during this period. But our best judgement now is that Hanoi will not do so."*<sup>13</sup>

*If unforeseen and dramatic new developments occurred the communists could easily shift course to take advantage of them.*

*They have the capability to launch an offensive with little warning.*

*We expect the North Vietnamese to reassess their situation this summer of fall.*

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<sup>13</sup> This opinion was not held by all participants. DIA director believed the "best judgement" was too optimistic.

*Changes both in South Vietnam and in the international situation, particularly in the U.S., will weigh heavily in their calculations.*

*The North Vietnamese would also consider the views of the Soviet Union and China, but the influence of Moscow and Peking on any reassessment in Hanoi would not be decisive.*

*Should a major offensive occur, the communists could retake Quang Tri City, and perhaps capture Hue in MR1, Kontum and Pleiku in MR2 and Tay Ninh City in MR3. If the communists persisted in their offensive, this initial situation would probably be followed by a period of inconclusive fighting and over time, further GVN losses. ARVN might be unable to regain the initiative, and it would be questionable whether the GVN would be able to survive without combat participation by U.S. Air Force and Navy units. At a minimum, large-scale U.S. logistic support would be required to stop the communist drive.*

*Even if there is not a major offensive during the next year, current communist strategy does call for some increase in the tempo of the conflict.*

*Furthermore, it is clear that at some point Hanoi will shift back to major warfare." <sup>14</sup>*

Concern over North Vietnamese Army presence in Laos continued, when eleven days later, the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, de Poix forwarded a message to the Secretary of Defense Schlesinger:

*"The 1973 ceasefire agreements in Laos specified that foreign powers would remove their troops from Laos within 60 days after formation of a coalition government. As you know,*

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<sup>14</sup> Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume 10, Vietnam, January 1973-July 1975. #128 National Intelligence Estimate, NIE 53/14-1-74, The likelihood of a major North Vietnamese offensive against South Vietnam before June 30, 1975, Washington, May 23, 1974.

that government was formed on 5 April. Since then, Hanoi has withdrawn only one regiment. The allotted 60-day period is about to expire and North Vietnam still has 40,000-50,000 troops in Laos.

Hanoi has shown no intention of complying with the troop withdrawal provision. They have disguised certain of their troop units as communist Pathet Lao; others have been rotated from front line positions to rear areas to reduce their visibility. Hanoi continues to make full use of Laos as a logistic corridor to South Vietnam and had embarked on agricultural and resettlement programs. All of which reflect an intention to remain in Laos.

I believe we should undertake some action that would convey to Hanoi U.S. knowledge of their failure to comply with the ceasefire agreements and indicate our unwillingness to proceed with a unilateral withdrawal.

Possible actions might include:

Delay reducing the manning level of the U.S. Defense Attaché Office in Vientiane to the agreed upon 30-man military ceiling.

Delay further reductions, or even institute temporary increases in U.S. airborne reconnaissance activity over Laos.<sup>15</sup>

North Vietnam appears determined to maintain a military presence in Laos for some time to come. I doubt that the above actions could, by themselves, force Hanoi's full compliance with the Laos ceasefire agreements. They would, however, without risk to U.S. long term plans for force reductions in Southeast Asia, signal our insistence that the ceasefire agreements be executed in good faith. Moreover, these actions would strengthen our

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<sup>15</sup> Except for Trail ground sensors and reports from remote villagers, this was likely the sole means of intelligence gathering. Highly trained road watch teams had been disbanded, and Air America intelligence gathering assets were no longer used.

*intelligence effort at a time when-as a result of the continued presence of North Vietnamese troops coupled with continued decrements to friendly forces-the military balance of power is swinging progressively more toward the communists in Laos. Under such circumstances, a strong, alert intelligence effort is particularly important."* <sup>16</sup>

### **CEO VELTE'S COMMENTS AND AIR AMERICA'S FUTURE PLANS**

On 24 May, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer Paul Velte issued a notice to all Air America personnel at Udorn:

*"I regret that I could not, before now, address you on the subject that I know is uppermost in your minds-Air America's status after June 30.*

*The U.S. Government, we understand, will award the aircraft and facility maintenance contract to another contractor, not yet officially identified, for the period commencing July 1st. <sup>17</sup> This means that Air America will turn over to its successor the U.S. Government facilities known for its professional capability and performance.*

*The turnover, when it commences, must be orderly and reflect the discipline of performance for which Air America is known. It is foreseen that Air America will retain a small nucleus of employees for some period of time after July 1st to audit ourselves out of the operation. Those employees required for this phase will be identified later.*

*Every effort will be made by Air America to assure continued employment of its personnel by the organization*

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<sup>16</sup> FRUS, Memorandum #130, North Vietnamese Troop Presence in Laos, Washington, June 3, 1974.

<sup>17</sup> It was common knowledge that Thai Am was going to take over Air America assets.

*succeeding us and for those who may be adversely affected by the changeover, Air America will make every effort to find other employment opportunities. To this end, Air America has instituted a broad campaign to solicit the interests of other employers in personnel who may be surplussed, both flight and ground."* <sup>18</sup>

Six days later Paul Velte followed up his 24 May notice:

*"As a supplement to my notice to you of May 24th, I have been informed that the U.S. Government has selected Thai Airways Aircraft Maintenance Co. Ltd. (Thai Am) as the successor contractor to Air America, Inc. after June 30, 1974.*

*Discussions are taking place between Air America and Thai Am to develop means and methods to achieve an orderly turnover of the Udorn facility.*

*Officials of Thai Am, under the sponsorship of Air America will tour the Udorn facility shortly as the initial step in a planned familiarization program between the two companies."* <sup>19</sup>

The first meeting between Air America and Thai Am was held on the thirtieth of May in the conference room of the Thai Am administrative building at Don Muang Airport. Intent of the meeting was to solidify details of the Thai Am takeover of Air America's facilities and contracts on 1 July 1974. It was attended by six Air America representatives including: Paul Velte, CJ Abadie, and Dave Hickler. Six Thai Am representatives included high level types from each department. U.S Air Force

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<sup>18</sup> Reference Bell Helicopter International's interest in hiring pilots and mechanics.

<sup>19</sup> Notice, To: All Air America personnel at Udorn; From: Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer: Subject: Air America Status in Thailand after June 30, 1974, 05/30/74.

contract representatives attending were from contracts and DepChief. <sup>20</sup>

*"The meeting opened by Mr. Velte stating that Air America will cooperate in every way possible to see that the transition at Udorn takes place as smoothly as possible, but made it clear that Air America will not accept any responsibility for the operations of the Udorn facility after 30 June 1974. As a result, he requested that Thai-Am identify as early as possible what they will need in the way of manpower to operate the facility commencing 1 July as we are losing people daily due to our inability to give assurances on what future manpower requirements will be.*

*Capt. Bryant then stated that the purpose of this meeting was to begin to work out the details of an orderly transition and that the government appreciates the cooperation that has been shown by both parties up to this time..Capt. Weisert then stated that Thai-Am should base its facilities maintenance estimates on the fact that the facility will be operated at its present level with the exception that the club, school, and country store will be closed.*

*To a question from Mr. Heckler [Executive Manager of Thai-Am] regarding breakdown of the current Air America head count at Udorn, Mr. Velte stated that he did not have this specific information with him and suggested that questions of this nature be answered during Thai-Am's scheduled visit to the Udorn facility beginning 2 June 1974. He also stated that any other*

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<sup>20</sup> To anyone still doubting Air America was a USG organization, please take note of Paul Velte's second notice, the U.S. military, the government representative associated in the takeover, and the lack of any overt Agency participation.

*specific information that Thai-Am requires will be provided by the company during this visit.”*<sup>21</sup>

## **FINALIZATION**

Consistent with the separation process, I was required to submit a formal letter of resignation to Chief Pilot Marius Burke. I complied with this on the 28th:

*"This letter shall constitute my official resignation from the employment of Air America, Inc. Udorn, Thailand. I request separation from the services of Air America, Inc. on or about 30 June 1974.*

*I request that my son, John Richard be allowed to finish the present school year and that adequate time is afforded myself and my family to clear Thailand.*

*I wish to leave the funds of my pension plan with the controlling agency until the maximum time allotted or until further notice from me.*

*I request that any owed remuneration for past or present services be promptly issued to me.*

*Correspondence should be directed to my domestic address as follows:*

*1123 Dorsey Place  
Plainfield, New Jersey  
07062*

*During my years with the company, I have derived much job satisfaction from the challenges and problems that have arisen in the course of my work. I trust that I am leaving a company management and Customer who have always been satisfied with my*

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<sup>21</sup> Dave Hickler memoires. While Udorn was winding down, Bangkok was told to prepare to end its role in the phase out proceedings. [CEO] Paul Velte was now in full command in place of George Doole who had "retired." [President] Hugh Grundy had shut down the Taipei head office and was now based in Washington with Velte. Tainan, Air Asia was still going but in the process of being sold to E-Systems.

efforts, both in the field and here in Udorn. I would like to thank all who have aided me in the past and have treated me fairly.

If at any future time, an operation of this nature presents itself, I hope that I might be considered for a position.

Thank you."

"I turned in my resignation yesterday to Air America effective the 30th of June. I don't know definitely when they will get rid of us but will let you know.

Not many from here are going to Saigon as there is nothing but doom there. These last three months have been good flying ones with high time.

We will be sending a household shipment home but it won't be very much. It probably won't arrive for some time.

As for our immediate plans, we will be coming home in June or July and if I decide to accept the job in Iran be leaving for there in August. Can you stand us for a month or so? I will have to go to Arizona and Colorado to check up on the business. This will probably be immediately after I get home as all tickets expire thirty days after we leave the Company...

I am having all mail sent to your address, so you might be getting some strange things."

Letter Home, 05/29/74.

In less than two weeks I received a letter on Air America, Inc. letterhead from APO San Francisco, California, 96242 from R. (Reese) T. Bradburn, Jr., Director, Industrial Relations-



Administration (signed by Personnel Representative John W. Melton in the Air America Udorn facility).<sup>22</sup>

*"This letter will confirm acceptance of your resignation effective 30 June 1974 at the close of business [COB].*

*You will receive a final settlement check in payment for any unpaid salary and unused accrued leave less any debits you may have on the Company books. This payment will be sent to your bank of record unless another bank or mailing address is given at this time as well as a separate check representing your retirement fund benefits which should be sent by the Trustee within 90 days from your resignation date. The Personnel Office will originate a base clearance form which would be completed prior to your departure to avoid delay in payment of your final settlement. Additionally, as previously agreed by you, until those checks guaranteed by the Company are honored by your bank, we shall withhold an equivalent sum.*

*The Company will provide you and your dependents, if residing in the Far East, with first class repatriation air travel to the airport nearest your point-of-hire and shipment of personal/household effects to your point-of-hire. Both airline travel and personal/household shipments authorizations will be issued by the Manager Personnel Administration and Industrial Relations, each authorization having a 30-day validity period from your resignation date.*

*If you have any questions regarding your separation processing in Udorn, please discuss them with your supervisor or*

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<sup>22</sup> I first met "Brad" at the Kowloon Peninsula Hotel Civil Air Transport (CAT) office in September 1961 while still in the USMC HMM-261 HUS-1 squadron. Friend Connie Barsky and I were trolling for accurate information relating to a helicopter flying job with Air America. "Brad" was very affable, introducing us to Vice President of Flight Operations (VPFO) Mister Bob Rousselot at Kai Tak Airport. For more information of this meeting and ensuing details see Book Two, 1960-1962, *The Crotch*.

*the Manager personnel Administration and Industrial Relations. Please correspond directly with this office should any questions arise with respect to the Company or should the following address change.*

*Mr. H.R. Casterlin  
1123 Dorsey Place  
Plainfield, N.J. 09062*

*We thank you for your past service and wish you every success in your future endeavors..."* <sup>23</sup>

## **IRAN**

I received a telegram from Tehran:

*"Position available as discussed offer letter in mail today  
Expect you in BHI Texas office NLT [not later than] 13 Aug.*

*Confirm acceptance Belgio"*

Dated 29 May 1974, a comprehensive letter from Belgio on a Bell Helicopter International, Inc. letterhead arrived in a few days:

*This is to confirm my offer of employment with Bell Helicopter Intl. Inc., as an Instructor Pilot. Your starting base salary as an Instructor Pilot will be \$1,150 per month and you will be assigned to our operations in Isfahan.*

*Your pay and allowances will be as discussed during your visit to my office in mid-May. In regards to the relocation assistance, you are entitled to receive the lump sum of 4,000.00 (if accompanied by your family) which will be paid to you on submission of the required BHI form informing the Company that you have secured housing.*

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<sup>23</sup> Wayne Knight Email. Wayne also received a letter from Bradburn. The Company gave him a very good deal. He held everything in Bangkok until deciding on Australia or not. They shipped five containers of effects to Australia at no cost.

The cost-of-living allowance is 19.5% of your base salary. In addition, upon your arrival in Iran, you will be allowed a maximum of forty-five days in a hotel during which BHI will reimburse you for actual lodging and laundry expenses. During the period in the hotel you will also be reimbursed for meals based on actual expenses up to \$15.00 per day. BHI will reimburse you for the cost of shipping 400 lbs. of personal effects Air Freight from Bangkok to Tehran, or from the U.S. to Tehran.

The Government of Iran levies a heavy customs taxation against electronic equipment and appliances. The importation of fire arms or weapons of any kind is not recommended in view of the length of time required to clear customs. Any cost incurred resulting from the importation of the above items will be a personal expense and not a company expense..

During our discussions you indicated that you will be returning to the U.S. prior to accepting the above position with Bell Helicopter Intl. Inc. Upon your arrival in the U.S. kindly contact Mr. Hardy Reed, Personnel Supervisor, at Bell Helicopter Intl. Inc., 1324 Park Place Blvd, Hurst Texas. (Tel: 617-284-4121) Your first work day in Iran is presently scheduled for 1 Sept. 1974, so you should contact Mr. Reed as soon as possible (probably no later than 13 Aug. 1974) so that he may complete the hire process and arrange for your transportation to Iran prior to that date.

Prior to your departure from Thailand you should obtain a multiple re-entry visa to Iran for yourself and your family. Additionally, upon your arrival you should have with you 36 passport photos and 36 ID size photos of yourself and each member of your family.

This offer of employment is contingent upon a statement of health from a licensed physician stating that you are physically

able to perform your duties on this assignment. In addition, a satisfactory reference check from previous employer is required prior to a final acceptance by the Company.

We are confident that you will complete your assignment, however, should you resign voluntarily or be discharge for cause prior to the completion of your assignment or 24 months service, whichever is first, you will forfeit eligibility for payment of your return transportation, which includes your Air Freight shipment to your home of record.

We trust that you will find this offer satisfactory and will be in a position to accept employment with BHI. Should you decide to accept please contact Mr. H. Reed or myself via mail or telegram no later than 10 July 1974. Please be sure to keep me advised of any changes in your present status or location."

After receiving the BHI offer of employment, on 5 June I composed a letter of acceptance to Phillip Belgio:

"...I will be sending a small personal effects shipment from Thailand to the address included in your letter. This shipment will be part of my Air America repatriation allowance and will be paid for by that organization. I will try to minimize, as you requested, any items that might be objectionable to Iranian customs.

We will be leaving Thailand at the end of this month and will contact Mr. Hardy Reed upon arrival in the United States.

Pertaining to the statement of health, I now hold a FAA first class medical certificate. Is this acceptable? Would you, in addition to this prefer to have a statement of health from our company doctor who is FAA certified?

Included please find an updated resume for your records.

Any information you wish to convey to me at this time please do so through Mr. William Long who will be the bearer of this letter.

*Thank you for this offer of employment. I trust that it will be a rewarding experience for all parties concerned.."*

In June I followed up Belgio's request for medical information:

*"Enclosed please find a completed Bell International Inc. physical examination record and medical history questionnaire. The information on the physical examination record relates to data recorded from my last FAA medical exam.*

*I currently hold a valid first-class FAA medical certificate that expires at the end of August and reverts to second class status..*

*I trust that this satisfies your requirements."*

Letter to Philip Belgio, BHI Tehran, Iran, 06/14/74.

I received a surprising revelation involving Dan Carson:

***"I recently heard a rumor that you were going to work for Bell Helicopter International in Iran. When? This came as quite a shock to me, as I had no idea you considered going overseas again. How about a little word on this. I thought naturally occurred to me, who would watch the shop if you did this?***

***I resigned as of 30 June and may be around until that time. I had hoped to see you in July, but will have to wait for word on what I mentioned in the first paragraph."*** <sup>24</sup>

Letter to Dan Carson in Scottsdale, Arizona, 05/31/74.

The Club Rendezvous held a free special "end of era dinner" gala to consume of a lot of stored food. It was well attended with all the prime rib one could eat. <sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Dan Carson indicated he would still be in Scottsdale, Arizona when I arrived home.

<sup>25</sup> Jay Allen Interview. I do not recall attending this dinner.

AB-1 also sponsored a going away party at the Club. Air America Special Project members and wives were invited. Tuie and I attended. It was fairly subdued until one of the more innovative Agency guys presented a hilarious movie he had filmed and edited with the sound track of *I'm a Girl Watcher*.

Before Buddy Rogers left for the States, he called me to his office and handed me the address of Paul W. Garrow, PO Box 2140, Main Post Office, Washington, D.C. 20013. <sup>26</sup> This was an Agency contact should I be interested in conducting future work for the Agency. I felt honored that the Agency would take such a step when Air America, my parent organization, was leaving me high a dry. I did write a letter to Garrow when I got home, and received a reply:

***"I was very pleased to receive your recent letter indicating your continued interest. While we have nothing right now your name and address is on file for future reference and if something does come up either I or one of my colleagues will contact you.***

***Your upcoming employment in Iran would appear to be a most interesting experience. I have visited Tehran and found it a most interesting city. Could you let me know when you plan to depart? I would like to keep in touch."***

*Paul Garrow*

*13 August 1974<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>26</sup> Buddy Rogers did not live long after leaving Udorn. He died of heart complications. Years later, Tuie and I met and spent some time with his wife Polly at an Air America reunion in New Orleans.

<sup>27</sup> The Paul Garrow mailing address was a standard Agency drop used to conceal the source. As I changed jobs, I communicated several times with Mister Garrow, providing an address, plans, and desired particulars. Years later, while still researching and gathering information for my books, I telephoned a then-retired Jim Glerum in Washington, D.C. regarding divulging details of the Special Project. During the course of the conversation, I discovered that Paul Garrow

I returned a letter to Garrow indicating our departure date for Iran and mailing address.

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was actually Jim Glerum, who had used the name as a pseudonym. What eventually happened while I was still in Iran was quite unusual.

**E**arly June was a very busy period for the family. Writing letters, preparing to dispose of household items, and deciding what to ship home assumed a priority. To comply with local management guidelines, I was required to turn in flight gear, identification cards, Nomex uniforms (I saved one uniform), and so forth. This process was mandatory to clear Udorn, and to obtain final pay, and perks. I was surprised to hear later that everything was burned. <sup>1</sup>

Since weapons could not be sent through the mail or in a household shipment, I turned in one AK-47 and gave another to Khun Tha (Plang). <sup>2</sup> The M-2 carbine obtained from Flynn Perry in Pakse and parts of a Soviet SKS were presented to Ricky's teacher, Jay Allen. <sup>3</sup> I also gave Jay a uniform, ammunition, and other booty that I had acquired from the 1969 Plain of Jars operation. The 9mm Walther handgun that John Ford had lent me to carry during the Special Project night mission was returned to Wayne Knight.

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<sup>1</sup> During later trips to Thailand to visit the Nisagonrungsee family, I learned that CJ Abadie had not burned everything, but given many books to his old friend Khun Ajan Panor for her school. I read several of these books while on vacation.

Wayne Knight Email. Wayne does not recall the burning of clothes, etc., but a lot of administration file shredding was accomplished. Wayne managed to rescue a few items. Ab divvied up the Air America and Civil Air Transport kitchen and dining ware from the Club. Wayne obtained a few of these.

<sup>2</sup> Reputedly, fully automatic weapons such as mine commanded a high price on the black market. Therefore, I was a little concerned about giving it to Plang, thinking he might sell the AK and it might end up in the wrong hands. Therefore, a little special trust and confidence was necessary in my decision to dispose of weapons.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Allen Interview. Jay also received a Berretta handgun from Dan Cooley and an AK-47 from Jim Sweeny. Before leaving Thailand, Jay gave the AK to an Air Force individual and the rest to his house girl's village leader.



The only people left who might be potential customers for my gear were Thai Air America employees. However, I waited too long. Most of them had already purchased choice items from departing souls, and, soon to be unemployed, watched their money closely. This was especially the case for large ticket items like the Ford Cortina, which I had advertised early and had generated no interest. However, a pistol, considered a real bargain, was coveted. Therefore, my beloved .22 caliber Blackhawk Ruger, which I had carried while flying upcountry for many years, including having been fired in anger in North Vietnam during the 20 June 1965 SAR, was sold to Sopone ("Soupy"), a Transportation Department supervisor. Despite its estimated worth, I let it go for seventy-five dollars, the same amount I had purchased it from Air America Udorn Security Chief, Jim Baron, in 1963.

The Flight Equipment Department was disposing of survival gear and giving away useful items. Learning this, I stocked up on articles I considered might prove useful in the future. These included standard items: pen flares, strobe lights, signal mirrors, and the like.

I was in the process of cleaning up my logbook in anticipation of someone in Bell challenging my total instructor time. Despite often performing like IPs, we were not designated Company instructors, nor logged as such in the early days, so I had Marius Burke write a letter, dated 1 June 1974, attesting to substantiated instructor flight training conducted either at Udorn or upcountry during 1964-1966. Consequently, 327+40 UH-34D instructor pilot hours were added as a late entry to my May 1974 logbook.

***"Just to keep you posted, I received a letter of an offer of employment from Bell Helicopter International. They want me***

*to report to Texas on 13 August or contact them about that time for work in Iran starting Sept. 1. I will probably take the offer. It won't be the greatest job but it is a job and with conditions the way they are in the world I think that I should have something steady until things become better, if that is possible.*

*There is a possible contract over here but it is taking so long to formulate that everyone will be gone. Tom Moher is handling this one. It would be work training Lao pilots and probably living in Vientiane. The pay would be fairly good and we would be able to save more money, but as I said, nothing is firm and it is getting very late... <sup>4</sup>*

*We may be able to sneak out of here early but I can't say sure on what date. As I think I mentioned before I resigned June 30th and am not sure they will let me stay here until then, but I think it is a good bet. I am through flying, so there is nothing to do but tie up loose ends and leave. I am sending home a desk that the kids can use later, a filing cabinet, a couple pieces of rattan furniture, and some odds and ends. I think we can jam them in the attic without any problem and perhaps you might like to use some of it. Bell will store a certain amount if you find you can't fit it in. <sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Wayne Knight Email. Wayne did not recall Tom Moher's project, for it was kept quiet.

Nothing came out of either the Moher or Abadie attempts to formulate companies to keep our jobs. Tom gave up in disgust and went home. We heard that Bob Nunez had returned to Southeast Asia and had a chief pilot job for a Jet Ranger contract out of Vientiane. I sent him a resume, but heard nothing in reply. Then to my surprise Hank Edwards went to work for him.

<sup>5</sup> Our household shipment kept growing. Tuie purchased rattan furniture. We also had teak frames manufactured and large pictures mounted at a reasonable cost. Most, if not all of the shipment, was relegated to storage.

*If we go to Iran we will need winter clothes for all of us, especially the kids...I am not even sure we can buy winter clothes at the time we will be home.*

*The hole in the small temple gong [I sent home] is some kind of war damage. The small one came from Xieng Khong Ville at the east end of the Plain of Jars on Route-4. The large one came from the PDJ, but I am not sure where. If you assemble the striker that Tuie's father made, you will find that the smaller one has a better ring than the larger. <sup>6</sup> They are quite a conversation piece. All I need are elephant tusks to flank them. I had a chance one time, but did not take advantage of it [authentic tusks were very expensive]."*

Letter Home, 06/04/74.

## **OUT OF LAOS**

Because of adverse publicity relating to CIA complicity, since October Air America had rotated its planes and crewmembers from Wattay Airport to the Udorn facility. RLAJ cargo planes took up the slack, dropping supplies. As Military Region Two provided many rudimentary roads, some supplies were ferried across the Mekong and delivered by truck or CASI-46s.

The third was Air America's last flying day in Laos and Company officials wanted a fixed wing aircraft to be the last

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<sup>6</sup> Years later, we discovered that Plang Nisagonrungsee was not actually Tuie's father. Nor was Cham her mother. Her real father was Cha Tha Musagablert, formerly believed to be her uncle. It was something Mom had suspected after observing a photograph of Tuie and "Uncle" Cha Tha together. She said to me, "That's her father." The fact was confirmed to Tuie by retired Supreme Court friend, Judge Prasat, in Bangkok on his deathbed. The origin was a deeply concealed, mind-boggling secret that involved the Minister of Interior's half English daughter (whose blond mother's maiden name was Spencer) everyone in the Musagablert family and Plang Nisagonrungsee had sworn an oath never to divulge. They took the secret of Tuie's birth to their grave. It was quite a lengthy and interesting story, one that, if asked about, no one in the immediate family would ever discuss.

ship out of the country. This was performed by supervisors Captains Fred Walker and Bill Shaver, flying Caribou C-7A 2389.

Scratch Kanach and Gary Gentz had been working upcountry for a few days and were officially the last helicopter out of Laos. When the crew of 2389 heard Scratch announce crossing the Mekong, they announced their departure.

Gary, who wanted to be the last aircraft out, radioed Scratch over the ICS, "*Let's turn around and land.*" To justify this maneuver, he recommended they ask the radio operator at operations if there were any passengers at Wattay Airport waiting to go to Tango Zero Eight. Scratch refused to do this. He wanted to play the game. <sup>7</sup>

Limited fixed wing flights were still underway in Thailand, and on 16 June Captain Jim Pearson flew Twin Otter (868) missions north to the Chiang Khong Military airstrip (T-526) across the Mekong River from Ban Houie Sai. From there he went to Ban Chiang Kham (T-514), Muang Nan (T-509), and back to Udorn. (Two plus forty-five, one ten instrument, three landings.) The next day Jim went back to Tango-526 and Loei (T-17). (Four plus forty-eight, forty-five minutes instrument, four landings.)

Captain Pearson's last flight with Air America was conducted on the 18<sup>th</sup>, with trips to Nakhon Phanom (T-55), Ubon (T-19), and Nakhon Phanom East (T-50). (Six plus twenty-three, one ten instrument, six landings.)

A management meeting between CJ Abadie, Paul Velte, and Dave Hickler took place at the Udorn facility on 12 June. Notes taken from the 12th and 13th were as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 412.  
Telex VP-NTD-CEO.  
Gary Gentz Interview.

*"Velte asked Hickler to brief Abadie on what has been going on in Bangkok regarding the Sanya group. Hickler gave an oral briefing and then gave Abadie a set of notes of his meeting with Sanya.*

*Abadie felt that [General Heine] Aderholt had a hand in the machinations going on. He wanted no part of the Udorn management as an employee of Thai Am.*

*Abadie brought Velte up to date on what had been going on between Thai-Am and the Air America third-country-nationals (TCNs) re employment offers. Abadie felt that Thai-Am was having problems with their recruitment because they could not give detailed answers to questions on employment details.*

*[Reese] Bradburn was brought into the meeting and answered Velte's questions on TCN termination procedures. A discussion took place on exactly what benefits should be given to the TCNs.*

*Velte asked Bradburn to write up specific authorization and procedures. Bradburn made completed paper for Velte approval on [the morning of] 13 June.*

*Velte called [Executive Manager of Thai-Am] Dick Heckler at 4:15 p.m. and arranged a meeting with him at his hotel in town at 5:00 p.m. Velte, Bradburn, and Hickler attended.*

*Velte introduced Bradburn to Heckler and [General Manager] Plob [also spelled Prob]. Velte started out with a friendly inquiry as to how things were going, problems encountered, etc. Heckler said things were going as about expected. There appeared to be no insurmountable obstacles, etc. A general discussion took place with Velte making a point of offering his help if needed.*

*Heckler never asked for any help from Velte or said there were any problems where he needed Velte's assistance. Heckler said they were making progress, had talked to the TCNs, Americans, and the Thais.*

Conversation continued for [one and a half] hours with Velte giving Heckler and Plob every opportunity to raise any questions or problems that they may have with the turnover of Air America at Udorn. Nothing of substance was brought up or mentioned.

Bradburn asked a few leading questions regarding personnel, but this surfaced nothing from Heckler or Plob..."<sup>8</sup>

On the last day of the Air America school, I wrote a letter to Dan Carson:

"I don't blame you for wanting to get away for a time. The place that you are thinking about going is not exactly the garden spot of the world but has potential. The setup is similar to old Air America in the early days.

I have accepted employment myself and am preparing a shipment to that area. Scratch will be going and several of the good Flight Mechanics. The way I see it, there will be two factions. The Air America group and the others. I will brief you on what I know when I see you.

I'll give you a call when I get home and we can make some plans for the trip West. I don't think that we will stop off on our way home as we are usually very tired. I have to swing by old Steamboat too...

We are finally selling our goodies of the past few years. It is a hassle, but a step in the right direction. There are very few [of us] left and those are leaving daily."

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<sup>8</sup> Wayne Knight Email. After Abadie departed Udorn sometime after COB, Wayne remained as acting Vice President. "Dick Ford, Ken Himes, and he were involved mostly with the transition to Thai-Am. Dick Ford, his wife Ruth and he moved into the Company's three-bedroom leased apartment and he took over the leased automobile. Wayne went to a few local meetings in Udorn. They were mostly boring logistical matters. They remained until 30 August 1974 and mostly oversaw logistic turnover matters."

Letter to Dan Carson, 06/14/74.

Preparing two shipments, one for the States and one for Iran, was not fun, but somewhat diminished by the efficient movers who came to the house, packed our goods, and were gone within a relatively short time. Our household items were offered for sale to friends of Tuie. Wanting things for little or nothing, they haggled so much that, disgusted, I finally said to let everything go just to get rid of them. Most of the large items like the ping pong table, swings, slides, and the dog Samson were given to the family. We felt that Bung Orn's children would benefit from them.

In order to provide Tuie's aunt, Klua Won, the opportunity to seek another tenant, we had previously informed her that we would be vacating her house as of the 15th. She was not particularly happy to be losing a steady source of income to accommodate her Thai disease.<sup>9</sup>

Our passport visas were sponsored by Air America until the 30th, when we were expected to clear Thailand or be penalized by the Thai government. Therefore, I planned to have the family rent a room at the Charoen Hotel for a few days before departing for Bangkok. Learning this, Cham and Plang insisted we stay at their house. I had reservations, but to prevent any perceived slights, in the end we did move into bedrooms on the second floor of their house.

During this period, I ventured to the Air America facility to retrieve our airline tickets, obtain traveler's checks, pay my respects to anyone who was still around, and inquire if there

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<sup>9</sup> The Thai disease: card gambling addiction displayed by many Thai women.

was any last-minute interest in the Ford Cortina. <sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, except for the Administration-Operations building area, there were few people in evidence. In the hall of the operations area workmen were busy ripping out wallboard and generally gutting the place. Abadie was there supervising the work. We shook hands for what I considered the last time. <sup>11</sup> After encountering him, I could not remain, for tears welled up in my eyes and I did not want him to see this a second time. I was really moved by the wind-up of base activity; almost twelve years of good and bad times that culminated in the efforts of a wrecking crew. <sup>12</sup>

Our final days with the Nisagonrungsee family were pleasant. Of course, there was a modicum of gloom over our leaving, but this was unavoidable. I was concerned about parasites we might have acquired, so Khun Tha had a friend venture into the western jungle around the Phu Phan mountains and retrieve a special nut, a back-woods laxative to purge our systems. When boiled the nut produced a jet-black fluid. After the bitter mixture cooled, I was the first to consume it. Efficient, the nasty tasting solution worked fast and I felt cleansed. It was an unscientific northeast remedy. Roughly calculating how much each child should ingest, one by one we took our turn drinking the liquid and then running to the bathroom.

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<sup>10</sup> There was no money left to purchase large items like a car, hence no takers. The Nisagonrungsee family finally insisted on buying the car for nostalgic reasons.

<sup>11</sup> In later years when I was in Louisiana working, Ab and I renewed our relationship. Ab resided in Tickfaw, Louisiana until the death of his wife and then moved to a houseboat in Alabama.

<sup>12</sup> Workmen were removing valuable items that could be salvaged so the same situation as occurred at the Korat base was not repeated when Thais stripped all the air conditioners and other items immediately after the U.S. military departed.



Toward the end of the month, amid much crying (I had never seen Khun Yai cry before) and protestations of love and devotion, and what I thought would be our last time in Udorn, we boarded the night train for Bangkok. <sup>13</sup>

By June 30 we were on our way to the States and what would begin a new life in a new culture. I was not leaving Southeast Asia a pauper. During the almost twelve years with the Company, I had earned over 400,000 dollars. Granted, like many "get rich schemes" entertained by our people, I had lost a considerable amount of money in questionable projects like a cement block factory in Malaysia, failed touted stocks, phony camera lenses, real estate projects, and the sort, but I still had a considerable sum saved and deposited in bank passbooks, certificates of deposit, and stock market securities.

Had I been able to predict the future, opportunities of great wealth had enormous potential. When John Fonburg arrived in 1965, he was an avid advocate of "gold bug," and the esteemed investment letter writer James Dines' philosophy regarding the impending price rise in the metal. Dines was eventually vindicated, but was several years early with his prediction, long after our ardor had cooled.

At the time twenty-four karat gold was selling for forty-four dollars an ounce in Vientiane. (Still the basis for gold standard, the official U.S. price was thirty-five dollars per ounce.) Many of our pilots had opted to purchase heavy gold identification bracelets. The underlying philosophy proffered was that if one was forced down in Laos, he could bargain his way out of any situation with the gold. This sounded much like a

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<sup>13</sup> In the future, we would make many trips to Thailand to visit friends and relatives. During these periods, I spent considerable time conducting research for the book project. Unfortunately, age and physical infirmities now restrict such long journeys to the old country.

rationalization and did not make sense to me, for the enemy could take just the bracelet and keep the person. Considering such a purchase gaudy and ostentatious, I was not interested. Moreover, if not on one's body, nothing of value was secure in Thailand, and one was indeed fortunate not to be robbed. <sup>14</sup>

Dines' prediction came to fruition in 1969 when "Tricky" Dick Nixon and Henry Kissinger removed the decades long gold standard and the price of gold skyrocketed.

At this time, I was still a relatively young man, healthy, possessed a marketable trade, and best of all, was still alive after all the years of horse feathers and gun smoke. I judged that we would be fine in the future.

After several coups, wars, unrest, and one revolution, we were soon to be off on a new adventure that would launch us into unknown lands, cultures, and further turmoil where the unexpected became the expected.

## **FINAL FLIGHT**

*"At 1008L today VTB [Volpar] N3728G piloted by Captain Rhyne blocked out of the chocks on the Air America ramp to become the last departure of an Air America NTD [Northern Thai Division] aircraft from Udorn. The crew and aircraft with 5 pax were given a New York harbor send off.*

*At 2400 this evening the AAM-NTD staff will be on hand to witness the changing of the guard at the main entrance to the base at 0001 tomorrow morning and Air America is released of contract responsibility.*

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<sup>14</sup> During separate occasions, we had lost two Omega watches, radios, a camera, and various other items over the years to normally sticky-fingered servants or their relatives. Sam Jordon lost a gold Rolex that he purchased in Hong Kong for 440 dollars. He bought another, but fearing another theft, locked it up and never wore it.

*Air America personnel who remain at Udorn will be concerned primarily with turning over accountability to Thai-Am for the supply accounts, cleaning up personnel and financial affairs, shipping files, and in general, administering the last rites to Air America. At the same time these stay-behind Air America employees will provide Thai-Am with advice when called upon and will satisfy requirements for 'continuity of services' in a phase-out fashion for a period not to exceed 90 days.*

*Those who were here in March of 1961 when 20 UH-34 helicopters, 40 eager pilots and 20 stunned Flight Mechanics descended on this dusty air strip will recall that the job had a temporary look about it even then. <sup>15</sup> Some of the personalities involved in stirring up the Thais and later in wading through mud and water in those first months of the [Madrivier] operation were Doc Lewis, Joe Madison, Ray Wall, Jack Forney and others still with the Company who might recall tents and other temporary fixtures. Others such as Ben Moore [former Base Manager] and 'Sandy' Santos [Chief of Supply], who have passed away, were also part of that temporary group Udorn was home for hundreds of good people, for some as long as 14 years, who pursued the task of getting aircraft into the blue in order that*

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<sup>15</sup> The number of helicopters and crewmembers quoted as arriving at Udorn on 29 March 1961 as intimated in the message is not quite accurate. However, the number of UH-34Ds did eventually reach twenty. From late December 1960 four Marine HUS-1 (UH-34) helicopters were already in the inventory and based at Wattay Airport, Vientiane, Laos; fourteen out of the sixteen bailed HUS-1s were ferried from the *USS Bennington* to Don Muang Airport north of Bangkok. Because of a maintenance problem on 29 March 1961, only thirteen helicopters and crews conducted the initial trip from Bangkok to Udorn. Crewmembers eventually reached proper manning levels for the allocated helicopters. Although the parking ramp was laterite and indeed rutted and dusty, the airstrip was concrete. For the interested reader seeking a more accurate description of the facts and time period, see the Author's Book One, *Genesis: The Air America Inc. Helicopter Program-Laos 1959-May 1962*.

*U.S. government missions in Laos could be carried out successfully. And, although their names were not hailed during their stay here, did contribute to the reputation of the base and the good name of Air America in this part of the world and for that we are grateful to them. We turn over the Udorn base this evening being reminded again that everything is temporary.*"<sup>16</sup>

Dick Ford included a dedication in the final Flight Operations Schedule:

*"So ends the final paragraph of a saga that may have an epilogue, but never a sequel. It has been to each participating individual an experience that varied according to his role and perspective. However, there is the common bond of knowledge and satisfaction of having taken part in something worthwhile and with just a slight sense of pity for those lesser souls who could nor, or would not, share in it.*

*This last flight schedule is dedicated to those for whom a previous similar schedule represented an appointment with their destiny."*

"END"

In addition to Dick Ford's final flight schedule dedication, CJ Abadie's secretary Khun Thongsook Ratanaphoka and other Thai administrative personnel submitted a stirring and emotional end document:

*"So farewell our heroic Air America, an episode we have long entrusted our beloved lives. The dramatic place where we were given guidance, faith, and courage to make living*

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<sup>16</sup> Telex message from VP-NTD Udorn to CEO Washington, Last Flight From NTD and Turnover of the Base.

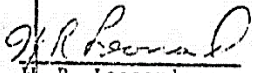
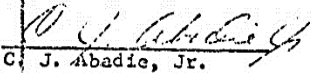
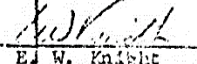

# AIR AMERICA - UDORN

## FLIGHT OPERATIONS SCHEDULE

Sunday  
30 June 1974

Surprise: 0534L  
Sunset: 1833L

Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Page 1 of \_\_\_\_\_

ACFT	CREW	ETD	ROUTE	PBL ACL	REMARKS
79542Z	King	0800L	T08/T09/V01 (Ferry Flt.)		
83728G	Rhyme	0600L 1000L	T08/T09/T03 (ASB 044/VIP Flt.) T08/T09/V01 (Ferry Flt.)		
<p>So ends the last sentence of the final paragraph of a saga that may have an epilogue, but never a sequel. It has been to each participating individual an experience which varied according to his role and perspective. However, there is the common bond of knowledge and satisfaction of having taken part in something worthwhile and with just a slight sense of pity for those lesser souls who could not, or would not, share in it.</p> <p>This last flight schedule is dedicated to those for whom a previous similar schedule represented an appointment with their destiny.</p> <p style="font-size: 1.2em;">* E N D *</p>					
 W. R. Leonard C/ASB/USAID		 E. J. Abadie, Jr. VP-NTD		 E. W. Knight DC-NTD	
 W. F. Palmer, MGR-NTD					
<input type="checkbox"/> SCHEDULE CONTINUED ON PAGE(S) _____			<input type="checkbox"/> AIRCRAFT/CREW NOTES ON REVERSE SIDE		
PREPARED BY: _____ APPROVED BY: _____ <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <span>NFC</span> <span>USAID/ASB</span> <span>DOTY CIV</span> </div>					

30 June final Air America-Udorn Flight Operations Schedule. Pilots of both aircraft flew to Bangkok (T-09) and then out of the country. Dick Ford created the dedication.

Author Collection.

worthwhile. From nobody's child we became someone's and how profoundly proud we were, are, and will be. We may part forever, but the Air America sign will never die. It will smile in Thailand sky from now to eternity, at least...for me."

#### <sup>17</sup>WASHINGTON

High level intelligence emanating from the CIA portended further negotiations problems with the North Vietnamese, pending the outcome of Richard Nixon's uncertain political career:

"[Information was received] from a source who is an official of the Provisional Revolutionary Government [PRG was the communist political arm in South Vietnam] stationed abroad. Although this source has reported what is believed to be accurate information in the past, his reporting reliability has not been definitely established.

According to the report, the DVR [Democratic Vietnamese Republic] believed that President Nixon will not be in office much longer [because of the Watergate scandal] and that any agreement reached with you, even though entered into in good faith, would be 'sabotaged' by other elements of the U.S. Government. The DVR therefore has decided that no meaningful negotiations can be held until the American 'domestic political problems are resolved,' a position shared, according to the report, by the PRG. The report also indicates that the DVR and PRG are 'keenly interested' in securing American economic aid, and that the DVR is prepared to go 'to great lengths' to rationalize the acceptance of U.S. aid, but that talks regarding such aid must be postponed.

We are making no dissemination of this information other

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<sup>17</sup> According to contract agent Jim Glerum.

than in this memorandum to you." <sup>18</sup>

Looking to the future the U.S. intelligence community continued gathering and disseminating information regarding recent events and politics in Indochina:

### **Vietnam**

*"Communist military strategy over the past three months has been to conduct intense but limited attacks within a relatively small geographic area, with the apparent intention of keeping ARVN off-balance and expanding areas of control. ARVN reaction to communist attacks has generally been good, but limitations on artillery expenditures due to budgetary constraints and greatly enhanced NVA anti-aircraft capability have reduced ARVN effectiveness somewhat.*

*An all-out offensive is not anticipated during the remainder of 1974; however, we estimate the communists now have sufficient supplies in the South to conduct 1972-level hostilities for over 18 months. Since the cease-fire, the North Vietnamese have infiltrated over 160,000 men, 400 tanks and 130 long-range artillery pieces, 16 SAM-2 launchers (with 6 missiles each), plus large quantities of supplies ammunition into the South.*

*The cease-fire machinery remains generally frustrated and ineffective. The communists are boycotting the Four Party Joint Military Team and the Two-Party Joint Military Commission in Saigon and as a result there is no-ongoing discussion of the resolution of the MIA problem. The International Commission of Control and Supervision is largely ineffective due mainly to the*

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<sup>18</sup> FRUS #129, 06/19/74, Memorandum from the Director of Central Intelligence (William Colby) to Secretary of State Kissinger (signed by William E. Nelson), North Vietnamese and PRG belief that substantive negotiations with the United States must be postponed until after resolution of American Internal political problems.

*intransigence of the Polish and Hungarian members. The ICCS also has budgetary problems as the communist side refused to contribute its share. We are now largely financing the ICCS.*

*President Thieu's political position remains strong and is likely to remain so for the time being..*

### **Cambodia**

*The FANK (government forces) has won several significant victories recently and currently has the initiative in the fighting. Intelligence sources indicate that the communists are suffering from morale problems and supply shortages which may allow further FANK successes.*

*On July 9, Khmer Republic President Lon Nol publicly made an unconditional offer with the other side at any time and any place. One day later, Prince Sihanouk, speaking from Peking, rejected this offer and stated that he would never talk with any of 'Lon Nol's clique.' Intelligence sources, however, indicate that the Prince is interested in talks with the United States to achieve some type of settlement, although there is a serious question about how much authority the Prince has..*

### **Laos**

*Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's heart attack on July 12 brought a respite to political maneuvering between the Pathet Lao and the non-communists in the coalition government in Laos. Prior to that, the communists had largely dominated the government and had initiated several proposals which were obviously to their advantage. The non-communists have now organized themselves and appear better able to stand up to any new communist parliamentary advances.*

*Militarily, the cease-fire is working well and no significant military engagements have been reported. However,*



*the North Vietnamese, in blatant violation of the Lao accords, still have approximately 47,000 troops in Laos, some of which are used to protect that part of their trail system through Laos..."*<sup>19</sup>

Within a year the endgame in Southeast Asia reached a logical conclusion. Communist tanks and infantry rolled into Saigon, and Laos fell under communist rule. With such an impoverished country to deal with, except for being able to crow about the victory, the communists did not obtain any bargain. Cut off from U.S. funds, and later from Soviet support, Laos sank into a financial crisis. Beset with a diverse population not programmed to accept communist ideology, and with Meo warriors fomenting trouble upcountry, parts of Laos were in turmoil for years.

When former H-34 Captain Dan Carson was asked why he had left Laos, he replied in jest, "*We won the battle and went home.*" A portion of Dan's quip may have been correct, but as in all wars, no one actually won the Lao war. Many people were killed or maimed, and generations were eliminated. Hundreds of thousands of others were displaced to unfamiliar places, where they were generally unable to function and thrive. The enemy also undoubtedly suffered casualties, but of largely unknown proportions.

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<sup>19</sup> FRUS, #132, 08/01/74, Memorandum from Jeanne Davis of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft), Washington.

### *The Air America Detail*

A phrase Temporary H-34 Flight Mechanics employed for their 1961 deployment to Udorn.

**I** had arrived in the Southeast Asian Theater as a young former Marine intent on participating in a low intensity "piss-poor war" which, during 1961, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and U.S Marine Corps, deferring to a west coast helicopter squadron, had denied me in South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the job with Air America afforded high wages, high adventure, and a challenge that envisioned no limits.

After nearly twelve years with Air America, Inc., I departed Southeast Asia as a man of some means, and more important, physically and mentally intact. I was still relatively young, except by commercial aviation hiring standards, which sought younger pilots who had rotated out of the Vietnam War. One of the greatest features emanating from my tour, I was leaving with a beautiful, intelligent Thai wife and three small children, an accomplishment in its own right for a person who grew up with no siblings.

During my tenure with Air America, I loved the freedom and flying aspect of the paramilitary job that entailed working and living in one of the world's last beautiful and rustic frontiers. Despite the excitement and extreme high inherent in combat flying, decent pay, and assisting USG to counter communist advances in Southeast Asia during the protracted Cold War era, I never lost sight of the fact that my employment with Air America afforded me the supreme challenge of my life, one

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<sup>1</sup> Marine slang: "A piss poor war is better than no war at all."

never to be repeated. <sup>2</sup> This, coupled with the fact that, as a senior Captain, I was my own boss while pilot in command (PIC), and was able to craft my own decisions and take action, which afforded me great satisfaction. Although occasionally wavering in this attitude somewhat during times of extreme stress, the sentiment never changed. <sup>3</sup>

Few helicopter pilots arrived in Southeast Asia with an abundance of mountain flying experience, and all the negative environmental variables with which to contend. However, while growing with the job in the early days, I managed to learn a considerable amount from senior pilots. Then after making some mistakes, but never twice, I developed my own techniques. These procedures were sufficient to satisfactorily perform the job and see me safely through many years of flying in Laos.

I was periodically asked by sitting Chief Pilots to share their duties of responsibility, but I was never interested in an office job. Although a management billet would have removed me from stressful line flying duties during periods of intense conflict in and around Long Tieng, it would have been counter to my overall goal to accumulate funds for later life. We did not discuss management salary, so I was never aware of the management wage comparison with that of a line pilot.

Another reason I was not keen in transitioning to office work was the gap in rapport and understanding between management

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<sup>2</sup> I am not the only person to make this statement.

<sup>3</sup> Lending an "Oh Shit" explicative that aviators utter during severe emergencies or during extreme battle conditions, my aircraft was hit on at least eleven separate occasions. However, I was only downed once in nearly twelve years while flying in the "friendly" skies of Laos.

Helping to quell anxiety and fatigue, the Company had a liberal time off and a leave policy, which tended to ameliorate the ability of the human brain to adjust and disregard the bad incidents inherent in the job. Consequently, after a few months at home with family, relatives, and friends, I was always energized and ready to tackle another year of combat.

and line pilots. Chief Pilot Wayne Knight attempted to maintain a semblance of knowledge about current action upcountry and his pilots' unique place in the equation. Given his responsibilities, Wayne managed the best he could, but was continually thwarted by upper management attempts in Taipei, Taiwan to keep him out of the field and in the office.

Finally, I enjoyed flying the line and would not have been happy with mundane office desk work. That had been one of several reasons for my leaving the Marine Corps when my tour was finished, as described in Book Two. I was a pilot and wanted to fly helicopters.

Moreover, there was always jealousy and disgruntled rumblings over any advancement from the ranks. For example, when a less senior individual in our group was elevated to the CPH office just after damaging a machine, a cynical wife in passing remarked to me near the swimming pool, "*You fuck up and move up.*" I was shocked by the woman's sarcastic statement, but clearly understood her logic.

The nearest I ever got to management was as an instructor pilot (IP). I had always said that I did not want to be in a position to judge others' performance because I had enough to cope with just taking care of myself, but with the passage of time, I morphed into the job, and I actually enjoyed it. From the beginning, since there were no designated IPs among line pilots, we were obliged to fly with new hires. Part of this task was to acquaint them in upcountry methodology. This entailed area familiarization, established techniques for jungle and mountain flying, takeoffs, landings, fuel and payload management, dealing with the various Customers, map reading, avoiding known enemy locations, cockpit and crew coordination, and many other facets involved in the operation. Although not recognized as such, these items entailed considerable

instruction. It was easy dealing with some individuals; for others, who had lied about their helicopter flight time, or lacked talent or experience, transition training could be very difficult. There was no remuneration or kudos initially for the arduous work. This changed with the advent of the Far East Pilot Association. Stressing professionalism and safety, with the realization that designated IPs were necessary to the success of the operation, selected individuals were paid accordingly.

Perhaps the most satisfying work I performed during my last two years with the Company was conducting missions for the Agency-sponsored Special Project program. Unlike "normal" work, it entailed flying difficult and hazardous intelligence-gathering missions at night--some historical, and, to my knowledge, never previously attempted by a helicopter unit. The enterprise taxed both AB-1, and particularly Air America individuals to the maximum of their ability to perform. So difficult were the goals established by CIA Langley Headquarters in Virginia and Udorn AB-1, that one hundred percent results were not always accomplished as originally envisioned. Although we operated exclusively in remote denied areas without the benefit of armed fixed wing escort, it is noteworthy that no machines or crewmembers were lost performing the work, and some success was achieved. <sup>4</sup>

## **RESULTS OF THE SECOND INDOCHINA WAR**

A few words are necessary from an interested aviator's perspective regarding the long conflict in Laos. Observing the war evolve, it was clearly apparent to this Author that the U.S. Government (USG), by attempting to micromanage a war from

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<sup>4</sup> Although we often knew the mission's intended goals, we were not always privy to results. This was often due to the "need to know" and strict compartmentalization of our operations.

thousands of miles away in Washington, was pursuing a no win, but rather a negotiation policy in Laos: Fend the enemy off just enough to preserve the country, and hold the line at the Lao border. Do not let the communists cross from Laos into Thailand. This would allow the Thai military time to train, augment forces, and reinforce with modern weapons. Even though the communists could have implemented large unit movements south to the Mekong River at any time of their choosing, their strategy and the threat of the introduction of powerful U.S. forces, restrained this option, and time revealed the American buffer plan's success, but it unduly prolonged the war. Displaying resolve to counter communism in Southeast Asia also resulted in Indonesia, Burma, and Malaysia remaining relatively free to seek their sovereign destinies. Unfortunately, this was not the case for other Indochinese countries.

Deferring to cost effectiveness and pragmatism, it did not appear that U.S. politicians, statesmen, and those rotating through our government during the contested war years had any firm intention of ever defeating the North Vietnamese. Deep within Washington-based elements, and also among military hierarchy, bureaucracy tends to beget bureaucracy, which cultivates perpetuating the Chinese adage of "don't break my rice bowl". It is a sad state of affairs that politicians' poorly crafted agendas always negatively impact the U.S. taxpayer, and the lives of so many citizens.

In the beginning, pursuing a limited war was somewhat "penny wise and pound foolish," and may have fostered positive views of our resolve to some of our allies, but, as the world's superpower, it sent a negative message of our staying power to a determined and highly motivated enemy willing to pursue a unification goal to seize possession of the South, no matter the cost in men and materiel or the time element.

Unless properly conducted by competent leaders, wars of attrition are necessarily protracted and rarely successful. Ask the impatient and restless American people with short attention spans about that.

Military leaders are quick to point out that the U.S never lost a battle in Vietnam. This may be true, but we lost the war. In retrospect, I believe that military tours were too short. Just when a person had learned and adjusted to a job his time was up and a new man arrived to continue the cycle. This was the case from the top down. But it was particularly evident in aviation. Pilots learned the country and where to effectively deliver their ordinance. Then they rotated home and a new batch would require orientation and a similar learning process that would require many missions and exposure to danger. Given extended tours, there were Skyraider crews that could have contributed a great deal more to the conduct of the Lao War. This was evident in the Raven program at Long Tieng where the pilots often stayed beyond their normal tour and performed outstanding work.

### **RULES OF ENGAGEMENT**<sup>5</sup>

There is no substitute for victory. As raw recruits, we were taught this phrase during initial Marine Corps training at Quantico, Virginia. However, while attempting to conduct the Vietnam War far from the field in Washington, this was never the primary goal of our civilian run government, an entity which lives and dies on geopolitical and political issues. Instead, the process of gradualism, employing a carrot and stick policy,

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<sup>5</sup> Rules of Engagement: From Wikipedia. *"The internal rules or directives among military forces (including individuals) that define the circumstances, conditions, degree, and manner in which the use of force, or actions which might be constrained as provocative, may be applied."*

led to an unnecessary and prolonged war that sacrificed or ruined many lives, cost abundant national treasure, and ultimately failed to achieve the West's intended goal to maintain free South Vietnamese and Lao societies.

To implement the war without unnecessary collateral damage, rules of engagement (ROE) controlled the pace of actions, and the constraints often sacrificed good airmen and expensive machines. Also, the lack of adequate and timely military search and rescue efforts contributed to many unnecessary losses. This could be attributed to leaders' initial lack of foresight as to requirements. Later SAR demands were often delayed or stymied by extensive crew briefings including strict rules and regulations before launch. <sup>6</sup> It was almost as if no one cared that minutes were usually critically important in the rescue of a downed airman.

In 1964, when aerial reconnaissance missions resumed over Laos, ROEs restricted escort planes from conducting strikes on AAA gun batteries, unless first receiving groundfire. Then, during April 1965, when surface to air (SAM) missile sites were observed under construction in North Vietnam, no attempt was sanctioned to preemptively destroy them until a missile downed our first jet. I was in the air that day, and was privy to this downing. It made me feel sick, disgusted, and fostered considerable distrust for our exalted leaders.

Rumors of striking "smoking holes," or destroying trees in the jungle, or creating buffalo wallows on the Plain of Jars became somewhat of a sick joke among Customers and Air Force and Air America types. There was even scuttlebutt, later to be confirmed, about our leaders forwarding target names of next-day air strikes to the enemy in North Vietnam so no civilians would

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<sup>6</sup> I attended one of these briefings at Nakhon Phanom and was appalled over the amount of time consumed prior to the actual launch.



be injured.<sup>7</sup>

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

There is little publicly disclosed about the U.S Government having won the war in 1972, but either it was not recognized by USG, or disregarded, and we failed to act accordingly. Following the second Linebacker mission, Sir Robert Thompson, the former head of the British Advisory Mission to Vietnam, noted at the time:

*"In my view, on [December] 1972, after 11 days of B-52 attacks on [the] Hanoi area, you had won the war. It was over: They had fired 1,242 SAM's; they had none left save for a mere trickle which would come in from China. They and their whole rear base at that point were at your mercy. They would have taken any terms. And that is why, of course, you actually got a peace agreement in January, which you had not been able to get in October."*<sup>8</sup>

Esteemed General Giap, his cohorts, and most thoughtful people realized that the Vietnam War was not lost on the

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<sup>7</sup> This issue was addressed in General Piotrowski's 2014 book, *Basic Airman to General: The Secret War and Other Conflicts: Lessons in Leadership and Life*, (Xilbris, 2014), 246-247. During an interview of one segment of *The Ten Thousand Day War* on Canadian Broadcast Company TV, former U.S Secretary of State Dean Rusk under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, was asked about the target compromising allegation by correspondent Peter Arnett. Rusk's disconcerting answer was, "Yes. We didn't want to harm the North Vietnamese people, so we passed the targets to the Swiss Embassy in Washington with instructions to pass them to the North Vietnamese government in Hanoi."

With this information the enemy was able to shuttle AAA weapons into position to defend the intended targets. As a result, many of our unsuspecting airmen were killed or remanded to years of harsh imprisonment.

Purportedly, this policy ceased and was not pursued during the Richard Nixon administration.

<sup>8</sup> Colonel Warren L. Harris, *The Linebacker Campaigns: An Analysis*. Air War College Research Report, Air University United States Air Force, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, May 1987, 23.

battlefield, but in America by negative reporting from a biased media, which tended to influence the public.

Indeed, General Giap's memoirs specified:

*"What we still don't understand is why you Americans stopped the bombing of Hanoi. You had us on the ropes. If you had pressed us a little harder, just for another day or two, we were ready to surrender! It was the same at the battles of TET [during 1968]. You defeated us. We knew it and we thought you knew it. We were elated to notice your media was definitely helping us. They were causing more disruption in America than we could in the battlefields. We were ready to surrender. **You had won.**"*<sup>9</sup>

General Giap's recall of the war says it all. Granted, militarily we were largely out of South Vietnam, and there was political pressure from the left in the United States to end the conflict, but where was our vaunted intelligence capability to inform our leaders that the North Vietnamese were finished? Something does not equate...©

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<sup>9</sup> General Vo Nguyen Giap on the Vietnam War.

## EPILOGUE

At the sake of treasure and American lives, our government is still meddling in the affairs of other countries deemed in the "national interest." This is not all. Like in Vietnam and Laos, we are still withdrawing when it is expeditious, leaving people in harms' way. Afghanistan is the latest failure at present. This situation is messy at best and morally reprehensible.

Forty-seven years later the remaining members of my family (Ricky is gone) enjoy a fairly good lifestyle. Amanda, a self-starter, is a respected doctor of veterinary medicine. She has two daughters of high school age. Peter, an extraordinary person, lives at home. He spends his time on computer work and mechanical tasks. In this modern age of gadgets, he can fix almost anything. Unmarried, Pete contracted a rare bone disease while in his twenties, but an outstanding rheumatologist and recently manufactured medicine to prevent inflammation have contributed to his living a somewhat normal life. Tuie (Prapapon) ages gracefully. She is still a beautiful and talented woman and is more American than many Americans. I have been retired from thirty-five years of aviation since the end of 1995. I never looked back and do not miss flying.

During quiet periods of refectation, I sometime wonder why I was allowed to survive unscathed almost twelve years of combat flying in the Lao Theater, when others were not so fortunate. Since this is not readily evident, I must assume that the Supreme Being was closely monitoring me, and coupled with a little talent and good luck I was allowed to "continued to march."

Perhaps the grand plan all along was for me to offer these books to the public, so that the younger generation and other

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interested parties might better understand the Second Indochina War from the Lao viewpoint. Time will tell...

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## GLOSSARY

