

**RICE, REFUGEES,
AND ROOFTOPS**

**AIR AMERICA,
INC.**

BOOK SIX

1965

**BUDDHIST ERA
2508**

**YEAR OF THE
SNAKE**

Harry Richard Casterlin

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INTRODUCTION

This lengthy book involving events in 1965 Laos continues the sixth in a series of fifteen semi-autobiographical works planned to enlighten the public concerning Air America Inc's involvement in the Lao War from 1959 to 1974. The narrative continues with the Author's participation in the seemingly ever escalating conflict in the quest for ideological dominance between the East and West.

Prior to 1964, these books described the growing pains of the Air America mission amidst the political wrangling and military rivalries on both sides, with a comparative lack of action. However, beginning with expansion of the Second Indochina War in 1964, and the numerous events occurring throughout Southeast Asia, I have felt compelled to drastically lengthen the narrative--to tell it all, so to speak.

The outlines and notes are in place depicting events through close of business Udorn 1974. Time marches on, or, as my grade teacher used to say, "tempus fugit, will you?" Let us continue.

Methodology of writing will remain the same as in previous books. Other individuals' information will be introduced to substantiate and enhance the Author's, to flesh out an event, or to maintain a reasonably smooth linear flow, and provide information for periods when I was not present in the Theater. Since our ranks are rapidly thinning with time, I have attempted to draw on such knowledge from peers whose recall was considered good and valid and reliable.

Political dialogue and selected intelligence from pertinent books, the Internet, and other documents have been introduced to provide the reader with the flavor and thoughts of the period. In this regard, I have attempted to authenticate material not

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exclusively those of the Author. In some cases, as conclusions necessarily intertwine in the story, this data will necessarily overlap. Disagreements with official sources of information may be noted. Without my personal sources this project could never have come to fruition. These include letters to my parents, logbooks, circulars, notes, photos, and, of course recollection.

HRC

PROLOGUE

During 1965, United States Government (USG) leaders, instead of merely aiding South Vietnam to counter aggression from the North, made a difficult decision to introduce combat troops into the Southeast Asian conflict. Naturally, although overtly a neutral country, the fate of Laos depended on the ultimate military outcome in South Vietnam. This policy change, slowly evolving since middle 1964, greatly modified our operations.

Compared to 1964, nineteen hundred and sixty-five was liberally packed with excitement for the Author during the first half of the year. Any additional amount would have caused it to burst apart like a hyper-inflated balloon. In hindsight, a participant might have referred to the period as, **Living on the Edge**, or, in aviator parlance, **Pushing the Envelope**. One friend referred to Air America as "Scare America." Had I not continued to work in Southeast Asia for nine more years, 1965 alone would have provided all the ingredients for excitement, adventure, and color to last a young man a lifetime.

During April 1962, I had been extremely disappointed by the Joint Chiefs of Staffs' (JCS) decision to assign a different Southeast Asia-based Marine helicopter squadron as the first to serve and perform combat duty in South Vietnam. Completely biased, after two years with HMM-261, I believed that no other squadron than ours was as ready or capable of performing this mission. Therefore, still primed and ready to participate in a war, I joined Air America, Inc. for adventure, challenge, and financial gain. However, paraphrasing some wise individual's admonition to be careful what you wish for, in the ensuing years, I certainly received more than my fair share of combat action, particularly in 1965.

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For the first half of the year, successive upcountry remain-over-night flying periods (called RONS) appeared fraught with increasingly dangerous incidents and episodes calculated to keep me on edge. I cynically expected unpleasant incidents to occur, which they normally did. Although curious as to what would transpire next, I did not particularly welcome trouble. At times during low points in our operations, I harbored doubts of surviving the year. Therefore, to sooth my inner demons and relieve stress, a gradual increase in alcohol consumption provided temporary, but never lasting, relief.

Much of our increased combat activity related to a period of rapid Royal Lao Government (RLG) expansion throughout Laos. Threatened by actions in new areas close to the North Vietnam border, and an ever-expanding U.S. air campaign in the North, the enemy struck back with a vengeance. This thrust was especially prevalent in Sam Neua Province (Houa Phan), northern Military Region Two (MR-2) where we were obligated to relocate vast numbers of troops and refugees.

Supporting the huge expansion, additional H-34s, helicopter pilots, and Flight Mechanics were assigned to our program. Despite these supplementing entities, upcountry requirements demanded an even higher level of pilot hours. Therefore, consistent with Company attempts to reduce and stabilize annual flight time at 1,000 hours, hiring that began on a relatively small scale in 1964 continued and accelerated after mid-year. With an increased requirement for military pilots and turbine engine helicopters to address the need in the South Vietnamese Theater, it became increasingly difficult for Air America to hire former helicopter throttle twisters. Consequently, with the previous broad spectrum of qualified H-34 drivers no longer

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available, many of the individuals hired lacked much H-34 flight time, proficiency, and experience level. In retrospect, judging from the results, some pilots had lied and probably had no H-34 qualifications at all. Therefore, allowing for pilot deficiencies, checkout, and area familiarization, the influx of pilots did not appreciably influence or reduce our flight time until the late fall.

The drastic increase in pilots produced a love-hate response among us "old timers." On the one hand, as in 1964, we were tasked to assume the role of unpaid flight instructors. If the individual was competent and proficient, it added another cockpit member to help fly and relieve boredom, fatigue, and stress of long, hard days. On the other hand, when new pilots were upgraded to Captain, our previously fat paychecks were greatly reduced.

Whether calculated or not, the increased pilot complement achieved a dual purpose. In addition to minimizing individual yearly flight time that surely would have exceeded 1,400 hours, additional men were provided to share in hazardous combat search and rescue (SAR) requirements, and to double crew the cockpit. This proved a wise decision.

While U.S. military Barrel Roll and Rolling Thunder bombing missions escalated in Laos and North Vietnam, formidable enemy AAA defenses increased proportionally, as did the odds of USG aircraft losses. Since U.S. military SAR units were not yet wholly assembled, trained, or in place with adequate equipment and crewmembers, Air America's air assets continued to be employed to perform perilous rescue duties never foreseen by management or the pilot force. U.S. military losses normally

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occurred deep inside enemy territory, which made bona fide SAR rescue attempts increasingly hazardous.

Probing ever deeper into North Vietnam, one SAR operation culminated with the Author penetrating North Vietnam with other crewmembers to attempt a U.S. military pilot rescue. The three-day episode resulted in one successful extraction, but at the expense of two badly damaged H-34s, and an irreplaceable Lao commander. As a result of this historic SAR, and a belief that SAR duty would continue to evolve into far worse situations, I danced on a very thin string, seriously doubting my survival. However, I was too proud, too involved, and perhaps too unintelligent to terminate my employment and depart the source of my problems.

U.S Air Force air rescue squadrons with vastly more efficient helicopters, equipment, and trained crews eventually arrived in the fall to partially relieve us of difficult SAR missions and assume duties in the cross-border war. Except for Laos, we generally assumed a secondary role, as evidenced by the drastic reduction in our SAR requirements after July. If such a respite had not occurred, one could only speculate where military demands would have required us to venture next, or how many of us who elected to remain with Air America would have survived the ultimate sacrifice or the incipient ravages of stress and mental instability.

On a much happier note, during 1965, I met and married a lovely young Thai lady. At the appropriate period in my life, she provided the necessary catalyst to buoy my spirits and sufficiently divert my attention from all the negative aspects occurring upcountry. Without her loving care and support to cope with what I increasingly considered my diminishing odds of

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survival, I do not believe I would have remained very long with Air America.

HRC

On Friday, the first of January, "bright eyed and bushytailed" following a sober evening and decent night's sleep, I departed the Udorn air base in Hotel-12 for Ban Xieng Lom (Lima Site-69 Alternate) in northwestern Military Region One (MR-1). The eventual destination was Chiang Kong (Tango-516). My reliable and trusted Flight Mechanic, "C" Decosta accompanied me. Unfortunately, it was the last time we worked together upcountry. Sometime after a test flight with me on the fifteenth, "C" was terminated and repatriated to the Philippines. Not the type to endure abuse from anyone, the hot-tempered man became involved in an altercation with Udorn locals. Fearing for his life, he produced a knife and threatened his adversaries with a dreaded "Filipino Haircut." Word of the fracas and use of a weapon was reported to Air America management. Since it involved Thai citizens, and there was a standing Company policy forbidding weapons, there was no recourse but to terminate "C."

Since first regaining and then consolidating territory throughout Military Region Two in 1964, expansion to the west was the next logical choice for the RLG and U.S. interests. With a vast pool of tribal talent to draw from in MR-1, a guerrilla movement had already begun within the Houa Kong (Nam Tha) area. To the south, elevated tribal sites and the broad Xieng Lom Valley were next to gain attention. Years before, Bill Young and his PARU team had recruited and established a thin Meo ADC network across Sayaboury, but since the 1962 Accords signing, and pursuant to diminished support, they had generally lain quiescent. Now it was deemed time to reactivate and enhance

these valuable assets to provide listening posts, gather intelligence, and begin to eliminate Pathet Lao forces.

Xieng Lom, located in the far upper reaches of the dog leg-shaped Sayaboury Province, lay in a large open area surrounded by mountains and bracketed by the Thai border and Mekong River. At an elevation of 1,900 feet, it had a strategic value by lying on an ancient trade route through the mountains from Thailand, where elephant caravans had once been the only means of transportation. Now it was centered in often-contested areas. I had flown there once or twice before, but never to work.

In the context of the total Southeast Asia equation, other factors weighed heavily on attempts to secure these remote parts of the Kingdom. Still in its infancy, cross border insurgency was believed to be developing relatively unabated in northwest Thailand. January radio propaganda broadcasts in Thai from Peking seemed to corroborate this, and highly concerned Thai leaders. Even though border police patrol posts (BPP) had been introduced and expanded since 1962 (supported by AB-1 personnel, the Author serviced some of these as a First Officer), the northern border areas were massive and porous, a region so vast that it was virtually impossible to contain determined communist infiltrators. Although I lost touch with this important program, it was easy to assume the BPP project under Thai control had continued to attempt plugging the holes.

Courtesy of Japanese conquerors, Thailand had once owned Sayaboury Province, but after World War Two, under pressure from the French, had relinquished it when the area was ceded back to Laos. Thai leaders still coveted the perfect buffering strip of land between the river and high mountainous borders, for obvious security reasons. Now, with Pathet Lao units and bandits roaming unchecked throughout the province, and Chinese laborers pushing

roads ever closer toward the Mekong from the north, there was more than a little concern among top military leaders in Bangkok for help securing the country's fragile back door to stem insurgency. Against this scenario, in February, two Thai Special Forces teams were dispatched to begin recruiting and training Lao Theung and Meo ADC units along the Uttradit-Sayaboury border. In addition, Agency Case Officer Terry Burke, who had been floating between assignments at Nakhon Phanom and Long Tieng as required, was sent into the Sayaboury Province mountains to establish a small ADC training camp at Phia Chan (Lima Site-155), and to reclaim territory from Pathet Lao adherents. He later moved the program to Xieng Lom. He was assisted in these tasks by a competent Royal Thai Army (RTA) team, which set about forming a minor regional logistical base and headquarters. ¹

Located almost 200 miles from home, and consuming almost all onboard fuel, the flight was necessarily long and boring. However, since recapture of the Moung Met-Vang Vieng region, direct flight north northwest toward the Mekong south of Luang Prabang was possible with little danger of overflying or being impacted by enemy ground fire. I would have been naïve not to realize that bad guys, remnants of enemy units defeated during Operation Triangle, still lurked in the hills and jungles, but I assumed they had their own problems surviving. While weather conditions permitted, setting the radar altimeter to 1,500 feet above the highest terrain, I flew at sufficient altitude to

¹ Kenneth Conboy, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 1995) 134.

Terry Burke Email, 11/07/07.

Professor William Leary 1965 Notes, UTD. Bill and I communicated and shared notes on subjects for some time.

preclude the perennial duck hunters--and those individuals who somehow always felt the urge to shoot at a helicopter--from hitting my machine.

Tuning the ADF radio set to 425 kilocycles, I attempted to use the Company installed weak Luang Prabang non directional beacon (NDB) for a general direction, and my eyeballs to verify my position. Turning west at the Mekong, I soared over mountainous terrain until crossing close to the definitive Hong Sa (LS-62) area, one of two well-watered valleys large enough to support low land populations. In good weather it was virtually impossible to become disoriented (lost) for very long flying between Luang Prabang and Xieng Lom. A right turn north would place one over high cliffs above the easily recognizable Mekong, from which flight could be continued west and north to Chiang Kong (Tango-516). A 180-degree turn would provide a flight path back to Luang Prabang. Drifting south into Thailand could create a problem though, for I was not familiar with Nan Province or its landmarks.

Site-69A appeared quiet, with one or two Americans and some natives scurrying around. There was not much there except the grass runway, some POL, and rudiments of a below ground bunker being constructed from empty fuel drums that were filled with dirt to withstand small arms fire. After some light work, avoiding the high ground on both sides, I continued up river to my ultimate destination at Chiang Kong.

I completed the day with a few trips across the river to sites previously serviced.

Since Site-118A, sister to Nam Thouei (LS-118), which Bill Young and I had reconnoitered in October 1964, was not yet deemed suitable or adequately secure for American crews to overnight, we RON at the Mekong River Bungalow. Of course, Young

was gone, but many of his ethnic assistants still attended to the necessary tasks of running the project. After Young hurriedly departed Southeast Asia, full blooded Native American, Louis Austin O'Jibway, originally from Sault Saint Marie, Michigan, assumed the helm and took good care of helicopter crews. Like Tony Poe, Jib was an old war horse having served in the Office of Strategic Services Special Operations branch raiding the Burma coast in 1944. He then spent time in 1945 with the OSS 10th Chinese Commando unit. After a stint in Korea, in 1962 he was assigned to Ubon, Thailand, as an Agency Border Police advisor.

"Jib," a former Golden Gloves champion, who had sparred with beloved heavy weight champion Joe Louis in the U.S. Army Fort Riley Kansas athletic program, was as round as, or larger than, Tony Poe. However, his personality was diametrically opposed to Poe's overt brashness. Jib was an unpretentious, quiet man. He never talked about himself, and rarely uttered a word unless someone asked him a direct question. Furthermore, he reminded me somewhat of Military Region Two Commanding Officer General Kham Khong, for I never saw him drink, and Thai dessert wenching was only permitted if he was absent. Therefore, with the policy of Thai dessert following dinner largely abandoned at the Bungalow, I was advised by PARU members to walk down the dirt road into the small town for brief carnal entertainment. Because of the considerable distance involved and the seediness, I was motivated to do this only once, and found the small grubby wooden crib experience less than satisfying. ²

² Judy Porter, Email 06/26/09.
John Whiteclay Chambers, Emails 06/28/09.

Perhaps it was only my perception during a relatively quiescent period, but the operation did not appear to be as well organized under O'Jibway as under Young. Like Bill, he elected not to fly in a helicopter (the machine had a bad reputation with some Customers) and when he went to Nam Yu to assess construction, it was always in a U-10 Helio Courier. Similarly, unlike Vang Pao's policy, Jib or his assistants did not provide a guide to point the way to new sites. The unknown was never pleasant, especially with too much time to think about the "what ifs"... Flying and navigating over new territory, and landing at sites for the first time, was challenging and very stressful, but that was normally true for any area. Fortunately, there was no hostile action or search and rescue activity to contend with in the area I worked, so even though flight time was minimal, I had a chance to relax a little. In fact, over the ensuing years, I was never aware of being shot at any time that I worked the Houa Khong region.

Attesting to the lack of work planned, or supplies available for distribution, I was recalled to Udorn on Sunday.

Except for a twenty-minute test flight of CIC 5 on the 5th with Infiesto, a relatively new Filipino mechanic who preferred to remain in the Udorn area, I was left to leisure designs for a few days. I was alone again at Sopa Villa after Charlie Jones departed to billet with "Rad" Radalinski. ³

On Monday, I walked a short distance south to Soi Mahamit to visit Tom and Kathy Moher for conversation and the

³ That week, Infiesto also participated in test flights on Hotel-23, Hotel-27, Hotel-12, CIC-5, and 1332 with Wayne Knight and Lou McCasland. For added training and progress assessment, Wayne flew with the oldsters on several test flights.

outstanding food Kathy provided. Besides being an excellent host, Tom's good nature and keen intelligence helped plug a lonely void in my life since the departure of house mates and my dog's death. Tom, never overly enthusiastic about flying in Laos, was still planning on relocating to Bangkok to provide a warm body for the Jansky and Bailey contract. This was likely to commence sometime in the very near future. I reconfirmed my desire to rent his house. and as a commitment to purchase his furnishings, presented Tom with a postdated check for 110 dollars. We talked to the sarong clad landlady about charging me the same thirty-five dollars per month the Mohers paid, plus utilities. It was obvious that she dearly wanted to increase the rent, but after some Yankee haggling she eventually agreed to the same price and we parted friends.

Tom collected postage stamps. Aware that my Dad was also a philatelist, he gave me several Lao stamps to send home. Some of them were in mint condition because the Indian residents in Vientiane bought new issues for speculation, and they rarely reached circulation. The colorful stamps were quite beautiful, but without benefit of a Scott catalogue to assess valuation, Tom indicated they were among the costliest in the world. I had previously discussed this with my Father, and he had reported that Lao stamps were very inexpensive to purchase, but, not wanting to engage in controversy, I did not repeat this to Tom. Instead, I attempted to explain that it was difficult to assign a hard price to all stamps, for demand related mainly to collectors' perception. He had stamps from Taiwan, the Philippines, and Japan to trade for a list of 1940 commemorative issues.

Later that afternoon, I typed a lengthy letter to the folks, describing Caesar's demise and Tom's desire to trade stamps.

On the seventh, Johnny Sibal and I flew a day flight upcountry. I was assigned one of three most recent additions to our fleet, Hotel-28. (Bureau Number 144638.) The former Marine HUS-1, a 144 series aircraft, had been in HMM-261's inventory during our overseas tour and I was assigned to fly it several times between the fall of 1961 and spring of 1962. Granted, it was an old helicopter, probably just overhauled or scrounged from the bowels of an overseas squadron. No matter what condition we received a ship, the machines represented a conduit to prosecute USG policy, earn money, and to replace helicopters that were sent to Vientiane for the International Control Commission, the Royal Lao Air Force, and Air America H-34s damaged during normal operations, or those undergoing lengthy overhauls. The latter had accelerated since the previous year because of maximum flying requirements.

Before I had a chance to conduct tangible work out of Long Tieng, the Vientiane operations manager called and assigned me to Delta (Ban Na, LS-15) SAR standby. We had been performing SAR duty almost daily for some time, covering U.S. military air strikes in Military Region Two. Currently, the Barrel Roll operation in MR-2 and 3, despite earlier restrictions, apparently was assuming a more aggressive posture that required our continued support. In addition, Thai-piloted T-28 operations in the region were still conducted against mobile targets to thwart enemy dry season incursions, and strikes continued on increasing concentrations of enemy anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) in the Plain of Jars-Xieng Khouang, Nommarath-Maxhay, and Tchepone sectors. The importance of our SAR participation was

evidenced by the Customer willingness to pay the extensive round trip ferry time from Udorn. ⁴

In the interim, while Sikorsky was busy manufacturing larger, stronger machines specifically designed and equipped to perform and survive SAR missions, the U.S. Air Force was recruiting and creating trained professional SAR units. The stop-gap measure of providing Kaman HH-43s for SAR duty in Laos over the previous months was generally unsatisfactory. The machine's range was marginal. It was not able to encompass much of Laos without staging fuel near strike areas. In addition, the load factor was low. Therefore, except for casual experiments conducted in Military Region Two, the machine and pilots generally were assigned low areas east of the Nakhon Phanom Air Force Base, which they could easily cover. Recognizing that "Pedro" crews were not without honor and courage, and were flying helicopters even more ill-suited than ours for SAR work, we attempted to help them fulfill their mission when asked.

As an example of just one Air America pilot's SAR work load, Lou McCasland had been involved in a standby either at Site-15 or Hua Moung (LS-58) five times since 31 December, including one RON at Site-58. In addition to the mandatory SAR duty, work in the Hua Moung area was becoming more difficult because of an accelerated enemy dry season push toward the site.⁵

⁴ Customer was an all-encompassing generic term used to cover broad layers of individuals and organizations which assigned H-34s and paid for missions. On a local level, this was normally the specific individual we worked for at the job site, i.e., Pop Buell, Tom Ward, Blaine Jensen, Tongsar, or another representative at Sam Tong; Tony Poe, Vint Lawrence, or an indigenous air boss at Long Tieng.

⁵ LP McCasland, January 1965 Flight Time Record.
Joan McCasland January Diary.

Retired Marine Ed Mooreland moved into Sopa Villa. It seemed that my house was increasingly becoming a transient quarters for new hires. It really did not make much difference, for I had an empty bedroom, and with maximum flying and more time spent upcountry, neither one of us was home very often. Ed, like Charlie and Rad, was a former World War Two Marine. Tall, thin, and gray-haired, he reminded me of a younger version of my father. It appeared that under the Company's new policy Dawson's Washington office would continue hiring retired Marines, although it was too early to judge the program's end result. However, since I knew how the effects of continuous flying many hours for long periods fatigued my body, it was easy to speculate that an aging man would not be able to tolerate H-34 vibrations or the demanding program. This was a fact of life, and the philosophy that the H-34 program was a young man's profession was later evidenced by some of the oldsters' transfer to less invasive fixed wing operations.

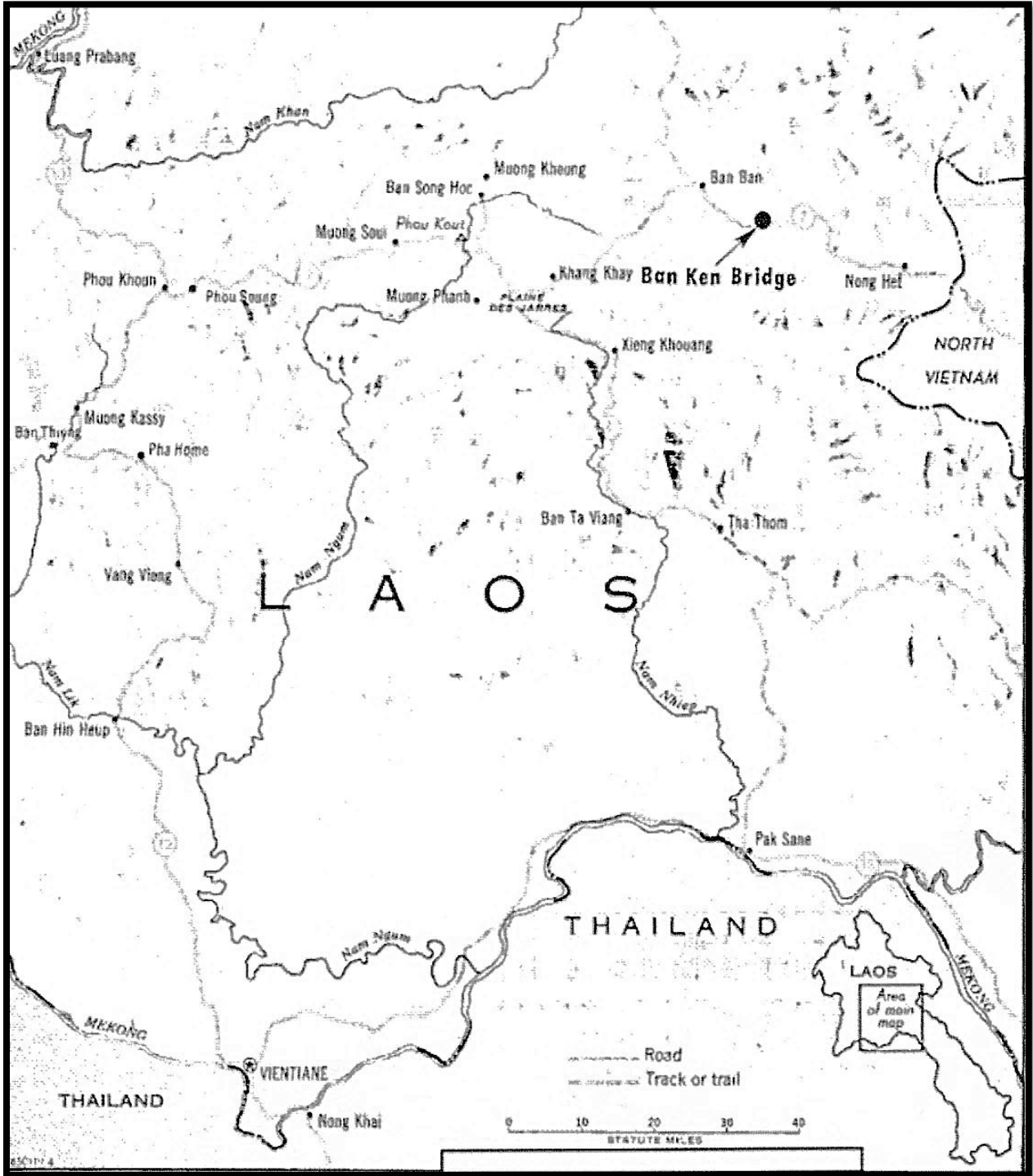
Word from the snake-bitten Asian American Kuala Lumpur operation was not particularly good. It contained both positive and negative news, but was over-weighted with bad. Apparently the highly touted Besser Vibropac machine, essential for cement block production, had been placed on the wrong ship and sent to Australia. This would delay production startup until February. Eight months of no profit was not encouraging, but Coble indicated that there was some land appreciation that created value on paper. Local lawyers were researching the possibility of litigation against the Besser Company for the error. Since I had been elected to the board of the subsidiary waste reclamation oil company during the past year, I was planning a trip to talk to the principals and view the project.

THE BAN KEN BRIDGE...AGAIN

During a six through seven January meeting of the Coordinating Committee for United States Missions Southeast Asia (SEACoord) in Saigon, Ambassadors and military leaders were briefed by Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) officials as to early interdiction effects Barrel Roll operations had on road, trail, and other logistical infrastructure in MR-2 and 3 since 14 December. They generally agreed that efforts to fulfill the primary mission of demonstrating USG power and dissuading Vietnamese leaders from illegally utilizing Lao territory as a conduit for troops and supplies to South Vietnam had not achieved their purpose. However, they believed that the activity had improved Lao-Thai morale, provided terrain familiarity for pilots, caused some enemy defections, forced enemy dispersal or abandonment of facilities, and thwarted enemy plans to counterattack the strategically positioned Neutralist base at Mung Soui and other government sites.

In the offices of the Pentagon, members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) vigorously argued for a more intense bombing campaign. They proposed more frequent and intensive armed reconnaissance, fewer restrictions in target selection, and less red tape in performing missions from Thai bases. However, Johnson Administration officials opposed most escalation for fear of disrupting a semblance of Lao neutrality stipulated under the 1962 Geneva Accords.

The fifty-foot, single girder Ban Ken Bridge spanning the Nam Mat ten-miles southeast of Ban Ban comprised an important link in the Route-7 supply route from the logistical marshalling center at Mung Sen, North Vietnam, and Nong Het, Laos. In fact, this line of communication (LOC) to the strategic Plain of Jars (PDJ) was deemed so important to reinforcing enemy troops



Approximate location of the Ban Ken bridge located on the eastern portion of Route-7, an important LOC leading to the Plain of Jars.
 Central Intelligence Bulletin Map, 01/21/65.

in Military Region Two that attempts to permanently drop the bridge were first attempted on 25 May 1964 by five American T-28 pilots led by Captain Ed Eckholdt, and again on 8 August by B Team Thai pilots. Because of concentrated AAA fire, it proved a formidable target, leading to losses. Because of poor bombing techniques or ordnance malfunctions, both strikes were unsuccessful, and one Thai pilot was downed and killed by the heaviest AAA in Laos.

Following two failures to demolish the bridge, Ambassador Unger lobbied for a more "professional" strike by U.S. military planes and pilots.

During October 1964, the Joint Chiefs of Staff forwarded guidelines for a future U.S. military strike to the USN and USAF for further planning. Both services submitted detailed plans, but specified the use of vastly different aircraft and weaponry. Plans were tabled until 10 December, when incoming Ambassador William Sullivan studied the Ban Ken destruction plans with his AIRA subordinate, Colonel Tyrrell. At that time, he opted for the Air Force plan, as it utilized fewer aircraft and employed no controversial napalm.

During the late months of 1964 and early 1965, with reconnaissance photographs revealing large daytime convoys moving into Military Region Two from North Vietnam, Barrel Roll activity moved into high gear. On 10 January, members of the National Security Council approved the mission against the Ban Ken Bridge. Consequently, the largest low-level day mission attempting to destroy the bridge was planned for 12 January.

When photo reconnaissance revealed the site to be the most heavily defended target in Laos, the strike unit was greatly expanded. In a massive single USAF strike, eight flack-suppressing F-100s would drop anti-personnel cluster bomb units

(CBU-2A), and strafe the thirty-four 37mm and 57mm guns surrounding the bridge, with 20mm guns. Sixteen F-105 planes would follow, each loaded with six 750-pound iron bombs and two AGM-12B Bullpup air-to-ground pilot-guided missiles. The launch would commence from Da Nang, South Vietnam. Time over target (TOT) was planned for 1130 hours. Complete success in destroying the bridge was calculated to relieve pressure against FAR and FAN ground forces in Military Region Two. Near term, it was also believed the strike would create a vehicle choke point with additional lucrative targets backed up along the eastern portion of Route-7 that would be targeted the following day. In addition to destroying the bridge, another benefit would result, for hazards to armed and photographic reconnaissance aircraft would likely be diminished.

For SAR coverage, Air America helicopter assets were prepositioned at Long Tieng, and C-123 PIC Don Campbell and crew were tasked to assume the coordinating role of Victor Control prepared for an early launch from Wattay Airport. However, adverse weather, which often formed or moved into the mountains and valleys (in the form of slowly dissipating fog) even during the cool, dry season, caused mission postponement until the following morning.

Lou McCasland, drawing his favorite spot at Ban Na, was assigned SAR standby at Delta on the 13th as SAR cover for the Ban Ken strike. Since the weather was still problematical, Lou was allowed to work locally within range of the radio station. A RF-101 "Voodoo" reconnaissance plane reported that a low cloud cover still impacted the target area, so Saigon operations elected to delay the mission until afternoon when clearing was expected. When the "word" between 7th Air Force, AIRA Vientiane,

and the Air America operations manager there was interpreted as "mission cancelled", the SAR assets were allowed to stand down.

Charlie Jones, Johnny Sibal, and I went upcountry in Hotel-23 with the assignment to work for Kong Le's FAN headquarters located at Vang Vieng (Lima-16), and then proceed to 20-Alternate for further work. Charlie had already flown day trips to various areas with other Captains, but this would mark his initial RON at Long Tieng. We stopped at Vientiane to load Neutralist officers and some supplies. This interval provided the opportunity for me to introduce Charlie to Jim Mullin in the Flight Information Center (FIC). It was obvious that Jim was not happy. During his briefing, he divulged that daily pilot briefings were difficult for him and Bill Solin because the office was still not receiving sufficient information regarding upcountry air strips and rice drops. In addition, Agency Customer, Lyle Brown, did not organize a meeting of interested parties necessary to coordinate the rice program. To improve this situation, he had forwarded a letter to Earl Jones requesting his help in persuading upcountry field Customers to provide the necessary information to FIC.

Despite the fact that Charlie was my former Executive Officer in HMM-261 and a World War Two veteran, although I showed him respect, we were now both civilians, and previous military rank or status no longer mattered. I was the PIC charged with responsibility for the ship and crew, regardless of training requirements. Therefore, because of the cockpit policy evolving during the previous year between upper Company management and the pilots, and the potential of being called into a hairy SAR at any time being great, I had Jones sit in the left seat and fly. As suspected, despite his previous helicopter



Surrounding mountains at Vang Vieng dwarf a C-46.

experience, Jones was indeed a bit "rusty," and I tactfully commented regarding inconsistent RPM control in cruise flight. I am not sure if he took offense at my intended constructive criticism, but I felt that if he was sloppy with throttle manipulation during a minimum task flight phase, what would happen during challenging mountain landings? I also wondered how the grossly overweight man would fare once released on his own. Would he be able to tolerate the long, difficult days and excessive vibrations that so taxed the human body? Then we briefly discussed the physical and mental impact SAR work had on all of us. I probably bored him with my negative views on the subject. Surprisingly, from his vast repertoire of "Jonesisms," sprang a country boy philosophy, which impressed me, and some I would always remember. Mainly, that you allocated one hand for the Customer and one hand for yourself, but when confronted with a serious situation, it was definitely two hands for you.

Later that afternoon, without benefit of organized Air America SAR coverage, guided by a RF-101 pilot familiar with the area, the USAF contingent attacked Ban Ken Bridge. Two flights of F-105 pilots dropped the bridge on the first pass. Since a portion of the concrete piers remained, additional passes were deemed required to reduce these with missiles.

F-105 pilot Captain Albert C. Vollmer, call sign Alva-36, while guiding a Bullpup missile onto a target, was hit by AAA fire aft of the cockpit from one of the camouflaged batteries not observed on the reconnaissance photos. Vollmer triggered the afterburner switch and turned south. Seconds later the controls froze and the jet pitched up at high speed. Vollmer momentarily blacked out. When he regained consciousness, all the console warning lights were illuminated. Then, hearing over the radio that his aircraft was on fire, he punched out.

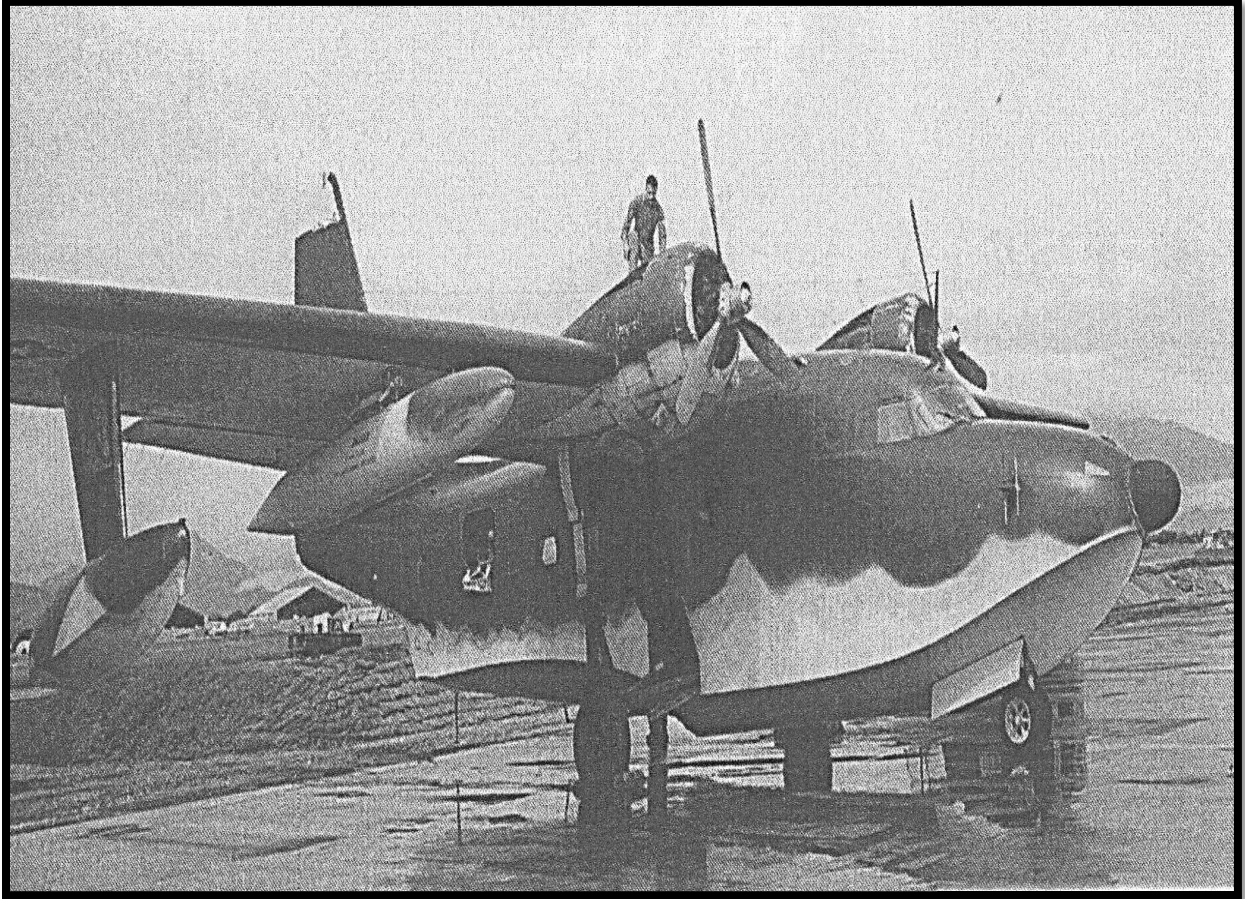
He landed in a high valley three miles from the bridge. After removing his parachute and digging his survival radio out of his vest, Vollmer attempted to contact planes circling overhead, but was not successful. Within a few minutes, experiencing bingo fuel,⁶ the planes departed. The silence was deafening, and Vollmer was alone in enemy territory. After collecting his thoughts and switching into a survival mode, he began climbing a hillside toward a ridge to increase his radio range. While the skies again darkened and became overcast, covering the mountaintops, he fought his way through difficult ten-foot-high saw grass, then collapsed from exertion halfway up the slope.

Since this was a USAF first, Ambassador William Sullivan closely monitored the attack with interest from Vientiane. Chatter over the radio net reported that two planes had been hit. First reports indicated one damaged jet, an F-100, was headed south toward Udorn and the other one was already down in enemy territory. With nothing but sketchy information to warrant his attention, he considered using Alpha T-28 pilots to help with a SAR effort should it become necessary.

Following the SNAFU regarding the requirement for Air America SAR, Don Campbell was alerted to launch immediately for Military Region Two and assume Victor Control status. Once airborne, he was directed to a general area by Crown, the USAF's high-flying coordinating Air Force HU-16B Albatross.⁷

⁶ Bingo: A military term considered the minimum fuel state to return to base-RTB.

⁷ HU-16B Albatross crews normally exclusively worked the Panhandle area, but because of a lack of Air America C-123 UHF equipment, they occasionally aided in Military Region Two SARs. By the same token, when needed, Air America C-123 and T-28 pilots also participated in central and southern Laos rescue missions.



HU-16B "Albatross" first used by the USAF as an airborne SAR control ship in the Southeast Asian Theater.
Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 57.

While the C-123 orbited above an undercast cloud layer, the reinvigorated Captain Vollmer established contact with the Air America plane. At the time, he was not a happy camper, for he not only had the terrain and enemy to cope with, but during the process of moving through high, sharp-edged grass, he was attacked by an irate snake. Using the sound of droning twin engines, he directed Campbell toward him until the plane passed directly overhead. Satisfied as to the man's identity and location, Don called Vientiane to alert the operations manager and the reestablished SAR force to launch H-34 crews toward the downed aviator. Then he orbited until making contact with the first H-34 inbound to the area.

On any normal day, three to four H-34 crews worked in Military Region Two and RON at either the Long Tieng or the Sam Tong forward bases. However, during the day, unless tasked to standby at Delta (LS-15) or Lima Site-58, helicopter crews might be scattered north around the Hua Moung area (Lima Site-58) of Houa Phan Province, west around Moung Soui, or in other distant eastern areas. With the air strike SAR duty cancelled at the established standby sites, and the great distance involved to reach the strike area, reaction time was appreciably slowed and there was sure to be confusion and delay in reassembling helicopter assets.

Lou McCasland had just been reassigned to Ban Na SAR standby when he received a call from Vientiane to launch east carrying three fuel drums. Arriving too late to participate in the first SAR, he orbited for a time and then shut down at Moung Moc (LS-46) to conserve fuel and establish an emergency fueling station.

Charlie and I had been working in the "Twin Peaks" area, a name that pilots years before had assigned to two prominent

karsts as a distinctive checkpoint to identify the Vang Vieng Valley. Even though my UHF radio selector switch was positioned to guard-transmit, I was flying too low to hear a Mayday call. ⁸

It was only when informed by someone in the Company radio room to immediately proceed to The Alternate, refuel, and standby that I knew the balloon had once again gone up. From the beginning of SAR work, it was an unwritten rule that during such an emergency all normal work ceased and aircraft crews either prepared to be called or converged on the area.

Difficult search and rescue missions during the previous six months had provided a fresh reality to Lao flying. As a newbie, better earlier than later, Charlie was about to receive a realistic taste of what our unwritten job description was all about. I did not say much regarding my feelings on the SAR subject, for Jones, being new to our program, might not completely understand the sinking feeling one felt in the pit of his stomach at the announcement of a SAR requirement and its subsequent hazards. But perhaps he did have an adequate appreciation of the situation, for he had been a young man while experiencing mortal combat and splashing six Japanese planes in the Pacific. His helicopter service in Korea certainly must have steeled him for our Theater.

It was not considered macho for a male to discuss one's inner fears, particularly with another aviator. Fear and anxiety was entirely personal, healthy to a degree, and each individual coped with it in his own way. Boring summer work at National

⁸ Mayday: Standard guard frequency-UHF 243.0-was reserved for bona fide emergencies. 121.5 for the VHF equivalent. Because the enemy monitored many of our radio frequencies, tactical mission strikes were often conducted on 259.0, 282.8, or other discrete UHF frequencies.

Lead's titanium division at Sayreville, New Jersey, plant, which was calculated to provide sufficient funds to pay tuition to return to Duke in the fall, had afforded me a short opportunity to daydream and consider the subject of fear of the unknown and its impact on human behavior. To me, still in my early twenties, the fear principle theory seemed to be plausible, inherent in all of us and pervading all facets of life from birth to death. This included interpersonal relationships and each step onward and upward in between.

One phase, including early advancement in the schooling process from kindergarten, to grade, to grammar, to high school, and on to higher education, involved some aspect of the unknown and a good measure of fear and anticipation of what would be encountered next. Individuals were forced to cope with this emotion because of federal laws and parental or peer pressure. Moving forward and settling into new surroundings, a healthy person realized that what he had initially feared was only a temporary condition, a process of maturation necessary for mental and physical development. Anything less might result in an individual's desire to drop out of society. While taking a break from the dirty work, hoping to obtain a reaction and expand on my thesis, I attempted to explain my silly theory to a young fellow employee, and found to my dismay that he had never thought about a fear principle.

After completing education, unless properly oriented, choosing a proper vocation could present the most traumatizing and difficult phase of life's fear aspect. The quandary: what to do with one's remaining life span. How could any decision be more challenging? Depending on how much time a person had on earth, a wrong turn at the fork in the road might set one back on an irreversible course to oblivion. I never developed my

theory past what is stated, but what I did might have influenced a few decisions while with the Air America organization.

A military man, especially a Marine recruit, is taught to kill his enemy with extreme prejudice when ordered.⁹ That is an inherent part of the profession and, in a Christian nation, constitutes an unnatural response for most Americans. Excessive fear can immobilize even the most courageous man, and create a situation that might endanger not only the individual, but others around him. Therefore, to counter any hesitation to act, fear for the military man is addressed early by vigorous training and repetition in the form of arduous drill to foster group cooperation and little thought, especially when fatigued. As applied to an aviator, maximum training assures a better product and proper response when the chips are down. When challenged by the possibility of death, fear should theoretically be suppressed in lieu of training. For a helicopter pilot, because of the realization that components could fail at any time, a certain amount of fear or apprehension was generally normal and healthy while flying at any time. Some call this paranoia. This feeling is particularly essential during times of extreme stress to alert the pilot and stimulate the flow of adrenaline, enabling him to successfully complete the task at hand. Having experienced both mud-Marine and Navy-Marine pilot training, I found that despite my initial fear encountered while flying toward or actually entering a hairy situation, in the final analysis, previous training **always** superseded fear.

⁹ PPK: In fact, we humorously referred to ourselves as PPKs—paid professional killers—a term derived from Gunny Stiegerwald's daily instruction during OCC training.

By the time we refueled and obtained whatever details we could relating to the downing and the rescue attempt, the first SAR was complete. Several H-34s and crews were either at the site or converging. During this down time, I introduced Jones to Tony Poe and other Customers in the area.

THE RESCUE

When Vollmer ejected south of the Ban Ban Valley, Howard Estes was the only helicopter pilot close enough to the action who had a fuel state low enough to attempt a high-altitude rescue. While engaged in a supply mission to a Meo site in the Moung Moc area, Estes heard the Mayday call over UHF guard frequency. He immediately dropped his passengers and load at a friendly site. Then, launching generally northwest toward the Ban Ban Valley, he overheard Don Campbell talking to Crown and the downed pilot, and quickly determined an improved plan of a direction to fly. After obtaining a visual sighting on the H-34 and ascertaining that Estes was only minutes away from the target area, Campbell punched through the high cloud layer and took up a position about a mile away from Vollmer. He advised Estes about a gap in the overcast where he could safely descend through the cloud cover. A few minutes later Estes soared over a ridge from the Site-40 area, evaded an enemy patrol's small arms fire, and popped into the valley. Estimating that the enemy was a half mile away from Vollmer, he judged that a rescue attempt would be difficult.

Even with a diminished fuel load, he was heavy for the 4,000-foot elevation, the terrain was not level, and enemy ground fire continued unabated from about a half mile away. With adrenaline pumping at high levels, and added urgency to extract the pilot, Estes commenced a flat approach toward the steep

slope and told his Flight Mechanic to lower the hoist cable and attached horse collar. While closing on the target, the main rotor blade tip path plane began contacting the sloped hillside's high grass. With marginal power available to hover out of ground effect (OGE), Estes elected to turn ninety degrees and dive into the valley to increase ground speed and go around.

After discussing with Campbell the considerable degree of difficulty involved in the recovery, and doubts about hovering safely, he asked Campbell to tell Vollmer to prepare to grab the horse collar during a slow pass (a dangerous procedure we called a running snatch). Enemy fire increased and, until actually hit, Estes believed that ordnance from the crashed aircraft was exploding. ¹⁰ During the next attempt, he approached slower and higher. Using maximum power, he positioned the yellow horse collar directly on top of Vollmer, who grabbed and entered the spinning donut shaped device. During the process, he was dragged under the tail wheel and likely struck in the head because it was noted later that his white helmet bore black tire streaks. After Al was safely in the cabin, Estes departed in a different direction and received additional ground fire.

Four H-34s were involved in the rescue, but the others, including Scratch Kanach, had far too heavy fuel loads to attempt a pick up. According to Tom Moher, who orbited at altitude to provide a relay watch and SAR capability, Estes was the only pilot to receive battle damage.

Following the successful rescue, Ambassador Sullivan forwarded a telegram to Washington with the latest available

¹⁰ Vollmer later informed Estes that the Pathet Lao were launching rocket propelled grenades (RPG) rounds at him. In retrospect, had he known this at the time, he would have aborted the mission.

details. Because A-1E Spad pilots were reported en route from carriers in the Tonkin Gulf, the relatively swift rescue had not necessitated launching an Air America Alpha Team force. However, since a second jet was reported down about six miles south of the target area, he launched a T-28 contingent to accompany Crown (USAF) and Victor Control (AAM) during the search, with express orders that because they lacked sufficient fuel to loiter, to RTB when the Navy Spads arrived in the area. ¹¹ Because of lingering marginal weather, mountains, and the great distance involved, communication was unreliable between the control ship and Vientiane principals, who received only limited details. One plus factor was received from recovering Air Force pilots at Udorn--confirmation that the target had indeed been destroyed.

A short time later, the ambassador's flash message continued that Air America T-28s were relieved on station by U.S. Navy "Sandys," and Alphas had returned safely to Wattay Airport. Searching Air America helicopters and light planes would remain in the area until twilight, and, barring a pilot sighting and a rescue attempt, the operation would resume at first light.

Doubtful of a second successful outcome, by virtue of the large denied area and confirmation that the pilot had escaped his plane, the ambassador was not optimistic that the pilot had survived. The message terminated with Sullivan stating he was going to Udorn with the air attaché to debrief jet pilots who recovered there.

¹¹ Captain Dick Crafts flew four missions on 13-14 January in support of the two-day SAR.



The U.S. Navy A-1H Douglas "Spad," an aircraft with the call sign "Sandy" utilized for SAR missions. Operating from the Yankee Station fleet in the Tonkin Gulf, the planes were utilized in both North Vietnam and Laos as escort for Air America H-34 and USAF rescue assets.

Rolling Thunder.

Sometime later, Ambassador Sullivan returned from Udorn, where he had debriefed Vollmer and other F-100 pilots involved in the strike. He discovered that enemy AAA batteries protecting the bridge were highly accurate and fire was intense, as four other aircraft conducting the mission were damaged. He had nothing but praise for all pilots engaged in the operation, especially the courageous Air America helicopter pilots.

Sullivan was concerned about local interest and any possible publicity generated from the strike. Therefore, he wanted to limit the number of Americans directly involved in the operation. He was content that, from past SARs, Air America pilots had adequately demonstrated that they were able to remain quiet regarding the operations. However, many Thai personnel at the Udorn base had witnessed increased F-100 air activity and observed damaged planes return. Without too much thought on their part, two and two equaled Laos. The mission had been deemed so sensitive that no Lao official except RLA Commanding Officer, General Ma, was informed previous to commencement of the operation. Souvanna Phouma, in Luang Prabang attempting to settle top generals' political problems, would be briefed on the 14th.

When released, Charlie and I launched east to a designated sector to search and maintain a listening watch for the second pilot. We were one of many aircraft and crews that ground around the air for several hours without sighting a pilot or a plane wreck in the maze of twisted jungle undergrowth and mountainous terrain. At twilight, we began the long trek back to Long Tieng. In direct contrast to conditions encountered on Mekong basin flatlands, darkness always commenced early in the mountains, especially when the western sun sank below the mountain tops. Therefore, to retain last light as long as possible for landmark

identification, we maintained a high-altitude flight until passing Padong Ridge. Then, always eventually we were committed to descend into the inky void around Site-20A, and recovered about six o'clock.

It was the first time I had flown at night with Charlie since our night training hop at New River. The late arrival also reminded me of the exciting night I arrived late at Site-20A after shuttling refugees to Moung Cha all day, and, because of unfamiliarity with the area in the dark, had to land at Ban Na for the night. The difference now included clear weather conditions, acquired confidence, established familiarity with the area, and the presence of a few lights in the Long Tieng bowl. Still, I did not want to make a habit of flying in the dark in a single engine helicopter, especially with the current engine problems still plaguing us.

Lou McCasland and his Flight Mechanic, Ben Sabino remained overnight at Paksane. Weather permitting, they were advised to launch at first light with a load of emergency fuel for a standby site at Ban Nam Keng (LS-108), 4,800-foot site fifty-four miles north of the river town where two additional H-34 crews RON.

Challenge of the unknown, slated for the following morning SAR, fostered a somber and pensive mood that night during dinner in the administration hut. Those damn SARs always did that. Even a normally ebullient Tony Poe, just returned from investigating the disturbed Sam Neua situation, was subdued. He had his own problems. As conversation was not forthcoming, we departed early for the twenty-minute walk to the Blue House. However, like previous first light launches during SAR missions, obtaining sound sleep was not easy.

Sometime during the night, a survival radio signal was received from a location between San Tiau (LS-02) and the former Meo site at Phou Nong (LS-71) by an orbiting Air Force command ship. The spot was close to the area believed to be the second aircraft downing site. Lending hope to recovering the missing F-100 pilot, a Meo ground party from San Tiau traversed the area and reported seeing a parachute. Since two A1Es with the ability to loiter for hours were approaching a bingo fuel state, the ambassador authorized Alpha T-28 pilots to fly RESCAP until relieved by a fresh set of Sandy aircraft.

With current evidence of the pilot's location surfacing, we launched east at first light (about 0600 hours) into the cool, crisp air of the mid-January morning. Unlike other early morning flights, this one was highly charged with excitement and anticipation of retrieving another downed airman. After all the nervous ground standby assignments, it was not only a challenge, but actually a relief and perceived honor to participate in an attempt to save a fellow American. Most of all, I mused over the day it would be my turn in the weeds. I certainly would expect a similar rescue effort and, since the Lao war and SAR work was escalating, one would be foolish not to consider this a distinct possibility.

With Don Campbell again assuming the essential Victor Control billet and our Alpha pilots flying escort, within three hours one of our H-34 pilots plucked Charles L. Ferguson from his overnight jungle hiding spot south of LS-02. After Ferguson was recovered without incident, an impressed Air Force fighter pilot radioed Campbell, "*You Air America types are the best ever.*" Ferguson was flown directly to Padong (LS-05), transferred to a STOL plane, and delivered to Udorn to receive a physical and debriefing. With the SAR complete, we returned to

"normal" work and RTB Udorn that same night. Even though I did not actively rescue a downed aviator, I retained private satisfaction. I had participated in an important operation. At the same time, I harbored a distressing feeling that my moment of truth was imminent.

Because of the substantial distance from Tonkin Gulf carriers to Military Region Two and the Sandys' relative slow speed to target areas, Sullivan frequently authorized his American A-Team pilots to participate in SAR escort. However, employing civilians for this work greatly troubled him, for political repercussions from communist nations would be substantial if an American flown T-28 was shot down and the pilot captured. Therefore, the embassy requested Fleet aircraft units to stage a number of Skyraiders at Udorn on a rotating basis. This was attempted on a casual basis, but such assets could not always be spared and provided because of other pressing commitments.

Souvanna Phouma returned to Vientiane following a military conference with top FAR generals in which he continued to seek a political balance of Generals Kouprasith Abhay and Ouane Rathikone's policies at the expense of Phoumi Nosavan and Director General of the National Police (formerly the DNC), Siho Lamphoutacoul. Since Siho's unsuccessful coup attempt the previous year, and his withdrawal to the mountains north of the capital to a camp at Phou Khao Khouai, Phoumi had lost considerable support and power within the Vientiane hierarchy and the upper RLA echelon. Taking into account the tension in the room, Major General Vang Pao sensed yet another coup in the offing, and quietly decided to remain neutral during any future altercations.

Ambassador Sullivan presented the Prime Minister with an abbreviated version of the recent strike on the Ban Ken Bridge and the USAF losses. Since interdicting Route-7 was his favorite subject (to keep the bad guys from the gates of Vientiane), Souvanna was ecstatic that the mission was successful and the two downed Air Force pilots were rescued. Without revealing specifics, a press release made necessary by communist carping published only that American planes had been shot down in central Laos by enemy ground fire.

U.S. press reports were not so sketchy stating:

"Two USAF jet fighters have just been shot down in Laos while escorting USAF bombers in attacks on the communist supply trails passing from North Vietnam through Laos into South Vietnam. These planes are part of the secret air war in northern Laos, an extension of the Yankee Team that had begun in May 1964 with reconnaissance flights and then became Operation Barrel Roll-bombing raids that began in December 1964."

The mission was judged highly successful among military leaders. In addition, important lessons were derived from the operation. Pilots involved recommended that the "Time Over Target" (TOT) be increased to avoid the potential of midair collisions. Because "Bullpups" led to the loss of aircraft, missile use was not thought necessary during future missions, for individual launching involved additional passes that increased the chance of battle damage. Also, owing to the massive damage incurred to the bridge from salvoing the heavy iron bombs, some planners believed that an identical tactic could be used to interdict roads, particularly at hairpin turn chokepoints.

Regardless of the mission's apparent success and muted celebrating, the exercise had been costly in equipment.

Furthermore, the "Rules of Engagement" (ROE) established for Barrel Roll operations prevented a follow-up strike during a forty-eight-hour period (reduced from the original seventy-two hours). However, the operation did force enemy commanders to conduct logistical supply exclusively at night and to search for alternate lines of communication (LOC).

There were many recriminations over the loss of two planes. As one could imagine, General Moore, Commanding Officer of the 2nd Air Force in Saigon, was unhappy over the loss of two jets and extensive damage to others. He believed the flight leaders should have terminated aggressive attacks after the first wave of F-105s dropped the bridge.

Traffic on the LOC was not unduly impeded. Without rain to hamper construction, enemy engineers converted the top of an upriver dam into a viable bypass road and within three days traffic was again rolling on an alternate route using a submerged log bridge that crossed a natural ford.

Road watch teams reported traffic along the road east of Ban Ban during late January, and villagers along the road reported substantial truck movement during early February.

Gun shy, communist reinforcements moved into the hills northwest of Ban Ban to increase Route-7 security. Toward the end of January, a Vietnamese battalion dispersed an irregular Meo unit in the area. ¹²

For the first time, State's Public Affairs representative in effect had revealed to the press that U.S. planes were not solely flying reconnaissance missions in Laos. Furthermore, beside the two planes downed that day, four others had previously been lost in the country. Sullivan was beside himself

¹² CIA Daily Bulletin, 02/02/65.

regarding the release of information from Washington sources regarding a highly classified operation. He feared additional disclosures could entirely scrub Barrel Roll operations and cost SAR pilots' lives. To control "loose lips," he further recommended that appropriate agencies restrict messages from his office to only those who have the "need to know."

In the halls of Congress, Senator Wayne Morse was also unhappy, but for a completely different reason. Rejecting all Johnson Administration's justifications for Lao air attacks, the liberal dove stated the "*rule of law had been replaced by jungle law.*" He was pessimistic about the avoidance of a total Asian war unless USG changed its attitude.

In one of the first, and what became standard, correspondence for future Air America military SAR participation, Colonel Jack H. McCreery, General Moore's Udorn Deputy Commander of the 2nd Air Division, forwarded a letter of thanks to Vientiane Base Manager Dave Hickler on the 18th. Colonel Jack was a highly visible, valued member of our team, well known and respected by all of us. He had been stationed in Udorn for some time, patronized our Club, played poker with Dick Elder, eaten frequent dinners with the McCaslands, and appeared to nurture a close relationship with some of the pilots' wives.

Jack's letter, not yet disseminated to the pilot level, read in part:

"Again I express my appreciation for the outstanding accomplishments of your aircrews during the recent SAR in Laos. The USAF in SEA, at all levels of command, was greatly impressed with the courage and expertise which was displayed. Knowing that your organization, with this superb capability, stands ready to respond with such determination has also had a favorable psychological effect on our pilots."

Hickler, in turn, forwarded Colonel McCreery's letter to President Grundy with added comments regarding aircraft and assignments. He crowed that Air America's SAR effort was the most successful and well organized one to date.¹³

NEW EMPLOYEE

Following the Company's hiring of oldsters Jones, Radalinski, and Moreland, Charlie Davis's employment marked the first young former Marine helicopter pilot's arrival in Udorn since Marius Burke. Hired in January, Charlie arrived in Thailand and, in lieu of air transportation, was booked on the train to Udorn on the 13th. Operations Manager Tom Penniman met Davis at the train station early in a B-bus and accompanied him to the base.

¹³ Segment Sources:

Jacob Van Staaveren, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: Interdiction in Southern Laos 1960-1968* (Washington: Center for Air Force History, 1993.) 47-48.
 Professor William Leary 1965 Notes Provided the Author-Draft Account of the Ban Ken SAR.
 Bill Leary, *A Bit of History, SAR-January 13 and 14, 1965*, 1991 Air America Log Article, p 6-7.
 Telegram American Embassy (Taylor) to State, 01/07/65.
 FIC, Jim Mullin to ATOG, 01/07/65.
 William Sullivan and Embassy Accounts of the SAR to State, 01/13/65-LB Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, 11/30/95.
 Lou McCasland, January Flight Time Record.
 Howard Estes Phone Call, 09/04/93-Account of the SAR.
 Tom Moher Tape.
 Kenneth Conboy, *Shadow War: the CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 1995) 123, 137 fn 18.
 Victor Anthony and Richard Sexton *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The War in Northern Laos* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1993) 147-149, 164.
 John Bowman, *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: Random House, 1986) 102-103.

Charlie arrived at a time of increased activity and construction. As one turned right off the airport road (Tahan Thanon) and drove down the access road toward the Air America facility, an unpretentious thirty by fifty-foot windowless building set on the left in proximity to the Thai army compound and the 333 Headquarters location. This old structure housed AB-1, which, along with a sister office in Nong Khai, was the planning center of the Meo program in Laos. For those few individuals who ever ventured inside the restricted facility, there was a lounge with a secure door leading into a communications area. A door to the left led to Pat Landry's office and map room. Pat was Bill Lair's deputy and handled some aspects of the operation in southern Laos. Bill normally attended to the MR-2 and 1 regions and maintained a warm relationship with General Vang Pao and his Long Tieng case officers. When invited, Wayne Knight and Dale Means walked to the AB-1 headquarters after work to talk and drink beer with Pat. Even though Penniman still possessed a top-secret clearance rating from his time in the USAF, it was almost three months before he was escorted to AB-1 by Knight to meet Landry. Tom recalled Pat reclining on a couch in his map room recovering from a hangover. By way of introduction, Wayne said, "*This is Tom Penniman, who is replacing Dale Means.*" In response, Landry simply grunted.

Continuing down the road to the west, one drove through a monitored tilt pole gate into the compound, where the left fork passed a modern ranch home type building that served as the new school. Past this facility stood a long row building with parked ground transportation (GTD) vehicles. The dilapidated administration building housed a radio and operations room. The adjacent offices were occupied by Chief Pilot (CPH) Wayne

Knight, Chief of Operations Clarence Abadie, and Base Manager Ben Moore. The final office housed a medical clinic.

When Tom Penniman arrived in December to assume the Operations Manager billet from retired Chinese Nationalist General, Harry O, he perceived the Operations Department to be quite dysfunctional. Furthermore, in Tom's opinion Harry was a deficient manager. However, he was unsure if it related to the current system or if Harry was actually to blame, and Tom's initial review of the man reflected this. Later, Harry took two weeks leave. When the office ran much smoother during this period, Tom realized that the prior problems were perpetrated by Harry.

He considered part of the department's problem to be the old Chinese radio operators. At the end of the Civil Air Transport operation on the Chinese mainland, when the communists took over the country, CY Wong, Director of Communications Division Taipei, had an excess of elderly carrier wave experienced operators. Some were bona fide unsung heroes who deserved recognition for their work during the civil war. A few were assigned to Udorn, Vientiane, and other outlying sites as requirements warranted. They worked the voice radios as well as Morse Code over high frequency links to the Taipei headquarters. Their English communication skills were lacking because they never had sufficient practice and kept to themselves in small compounds where only Chinese was spoken. Tom wondered how the men could constantly tap out information they could not understand, and he did not consider them acceptable for the Udorn job.

Harry O had a beautiful seventeen-year-old daughter some individuals lusted after. Jim Rhyne was dating her. Tom thought



Overhead view of the Air America facility lodged between the aircraft parking ramp and the Royal Thai Army camp. The swimming pool was bracketed by the Club and operations/administration buildings. The gazebo fronted the supply building.

Abadie Collection.

this was unethical at the time, but since he was a new hire, he kept his counsel.

Later, Dale Means solved the Harry O problem, managing to have him transferred to Vientiane, where he worked in ATOG.

Between the administration and supply buildings sat a gazebo, which served as the employee country store, or faux post exchange, that was rarely fully stocked with consumable items. Usually empty, on a rare delivery day the facility was so well patronized by the ladies that little of substance remained for us single men.

A swimming pool divided the portion between Administration and the "L" shaped Club, where additions were nearing completion. It was fortunate that January still marked the cool season, as replacement air conditioning for the Club had not yet arrived. There was a string of small rooms set back on the wide porch. Ben Moore occupied the last room in the "L." Next to his room were two guest rooms and two bathrooms with showers. From the main porch, one entered the Club dining room or turned left into the bar anteroom and then the popular bar. Leaving by an interior bar door, one entered a back wing of the Club. This large room comprised the movie room auditorium and meeting room. Double doors to the rear spilled out to the right fork road, where a parking area barely accommodated the recent increase in employee automobiles.

The road led to a supply and busy maintenance complex with offices and hangars. In a never-ending building program attempting to keep pace with requirements, additions to the supply building were also almost complete. A new hangar being erected beside the others resembled a red primed steel skeleton. Past the maintenance area Detachment-6 Air Commando enlisted personnel tents were pitched. A large drainage ditch, dubbed the

Madriver, flowed along the compound's perimeter between the road and the parking area-taxiway. Across the laterite taxiway sat the Bird and Son hangar and Q-rice warehouse. Inside, AB-1 logistics and offices housing both Bird and Son and the AB-1 Customer were co-located.

Charlie Davis met C.J. Abadie. CPH Wayne Knight was not visible on the base, as he was still out working most of the time. Since Charlie Weitz was still on leave, Tom took Davis to the Playboy House in the Chet compound where Penniman was house sitting.¹⁴ Davis slept on the couch for a week and then went to a hotel when Weitz returned

As Lek Abadie had relocated to the Bangkok house Ab commissioned carpenters to build, Penniman, anticipating his family's arrival in March, rented and moved to Abadie's house near the airport. The property contained a large inner court where Ab kept a pet ape that was chained to the top of a wall over the gate. The ape lurked there and leaped on stray dogs and samlor drivers. The house had good potential, but lacked screens, a kitchen, and a western style toilet. When Tom's wife and children arrived, Jeanne, a large authoritative person, remained there only three nights before issuing a firm ultimatum to find better accommodations or else.

A house was soon found in a compound the Victor Galts had just vacated to upgrade into Gary Erb's house. Both were young Customers. The Erbs were particularly close to the Goddards. Gary, who worked at Savannakhet, had just relocated his family to Chiang Mai and been assigned to work at Nam Yu. One house was occupied by the landlady, and another by Air Commandos. The Air

¹⁴ Ever the libertine, and not reluctant to publicize the fact, Charlie Weitz had a Playboy logo painted on the stucco façade.

Force types, who possessed many weapons, would get drunk and frisky, firing them into the night sky.

The Goddard family and another Air America employee lived in a compound near the Pennimans. One-night Tom and Jeanne were enjoying dinner at the Goddard's house, while their children were at home with the maid. Suddenly there were gunshots from their compound. Alarmed, Tom ran out the back door, and while attempting to slip under a barbed wire fence, a weapon discharged six feet from his head. Blinded by the muzzle flash, he abruptly raised his head and contacted the business end of the barbed wire, slicing his scalp eight inches. With blood filling his eyes, Tom dashed back into the Goddard's kitchen where Kathleen, a registered nurse, thought he had been struck in the head.

In the meantime, Phil and Jeanne had gone to the compound in Phil's Waggoner vehicle. The children were fine, but the maid was cowering in terror. Before long, they discovered that the crazy old landlady, who, adamant about no whores entering her compound, suspected as much and had disturbed the night's silence.

Tom's head wound was expertly stitched closed by Doctor Phil Choate, after which he displayed a reverse Mohawk haircut for a time.

Charlie Davis considered everyone he met helpful and friendly, and he was never shunned or avoided like a few pilots hired earlier. During his first two weeks in Udorn, Davis recalled meeting Joan and Lou McCasland, Operations Manager Tom Penniman, Dale Means (OM Udorn 1964), Chief Operations Officer CJ Abadie (COO), Julian "Scratch" Kanach, Art Wilson (who he recalled from New River), Ed Moreland, Charlie Jones, Zim Radalinski, and Club Manager Billy Pearson, as well as Ben

Moore, when he returned from home leave on the 31st to resume his Base Manager duties, and to replace the detested and much maligned Jack McMahon. We had all looked forward to Ben's return and certain relaxation of McMahon's unpopular Club uniform policy. ¹⁵

Since I was assigned to test fly Hotel-14 and Hotel-23, Charlie had his initial flights and introduction to the Udorn airport with me. Taking advantage of the situation, I explained the Long Tieng food fund and collected ten dollars from him.

Davis was not the only new aviator hired in January. While still assigned to the Waterpump program, T-28 instructor pilots Bill McShane and Joe Potter (DOH 02/01/65), in addition to meeting most Udorn-based Air America pilots, had gotten to know Ben Moore quite well and expressed interest in a Company job. With increased requirements for fixed wing pilots, they were contacted by the Washington office after returning to the U.S. Despite both men recently being promoted to major, because of the lure of money and adventure, they elected to terminate their Air Force careers for Air America employment.

Arriving in Bangkok on 1 February, they journeyed to Vientiane, where they flew four months in the right seat as C-46 copilots. Unhappy with this billet, they volunteered for the Helio Courier and T-28 programs. McShane flew many hours with Lee Mullins, who was in charge of Helio instruction. His period of checkout occurred during the rainy season. Mountain strips were small and slippery, and visibility from the curved

¹⁵ Charlie Davis Phone Call, 03/10/96.
Charlie Davis Email, 03/20/96.
Tom Penniman Emails, 02/26/00, 03/11/00 (2), 03/31/00, 04/02/00.
EW Knight Emails, 07/06/00, 05/14/01, 10/21/07.
Ben Moore January 1965 Monthly Report to Headquarters Taipei, Taiwan.

windscreen was quite poor. Because of the horrible conditions and state of the strips, he wondered why more accidents did not occur. McShane was upgraded by a tough and critical Joe Hazen. Within a short time, Lee Mullins was advanced to Helio Courier Chief Pilot, and McShane assumed Lee's previous training slot. ¹⁶

ERRANT BOMBING

The intermittent Barrel Roll campaign was still encountering problems in Military Region Three. The same day I flew with Davis, A-1H Skyraider pilots flew their initial night mission in Laos (Barrel Roll number ten) using carrier TACAN radials and distance-measuring equipment (DME). They hit a five-vehicle convoy and then, observing campfires, "strayed" off course twenty-five miles and struck a friendly Kha village at Ban Tang Vai.

On Saturday the 16th, I was assigned Hotel-12 to gather a USAID investigation team at Vientiane (Lima-08) and General Ma's people at Savannakhet (L-39), and ferry them to Tang Vai. The village was located forty-five miles east of Savannakhet on Route-111, an offshoot of Route-13, a road thrusting east toward Moung Phine and Tchepone. The village had indeed been bombed, but not as severely as first reported. There was one sizable bomb crater in a rice paddy about 1,500 yards from the ville. Five houses and seven granaries had been destroyed, but initial casualties were downgraded from the originally reported ten people, half civilians and half Lao soldiers, to only four villagers slightly injured by flying shrapnel. Sullivan ordered an immediate payment of kip as compensation for the incident.

¹⁶ Bill Leary February 1965 Notes.

The restitution was probably more money than the villagers had seen in their entire lives.

At day's end, Johnny Sibal and I headed for Udorn. The long day had been both interesting and enlightening, but hardly rewarding from a hazardous pay aspect.

Despite an attempt to make amends for the errant strike, damage to public relations in the Tang Vai region probably suffered, and certainly did not enhance USG's image as a primary liberator of Laos. Recognizing negative implications and the gross error, RLAF Commanding General Thao Ma was highly irate, and Ambassador Sullivan halted night missions for a short period. New procedures and guidelines for Barrel Roll were proposed and studied in Washington. Future actions were to be coordinated with General Ma. AIRA Vientiane would prepare a list of secondary targets for both daylight and night missions. Targets of opportunity were defined as military vehicular and troop movements, and active AAA sites on or near roads being reconnoitered. In the future, remote nighttime campfires were to be avoided, and to minimize aircraft losses, known heavy concentrations of AAA bypassed.

For a time, General Ma restricted U.S. operations in some areas, as he believed his pilots knew the military situation and area significantly better. During Fleet briefings, pilots were cautioned to adhere to previously established regulations for Yankee Team operations. This reprimand helped short term, but I later heard a bus full of friendly people was hit by Navy planes along the western portion of Route-9. Obviously, improvement of air operations was required to enhance both navigation skills

and pilot mentality.¹⁷

With the increased upcountry activity, I had been very busy with little time to socialize, write home, or attend to mundane matters. The flying routine continued and I deadheaded (D/H) to Long Tieng on Hotel-28 and C-7 401. It was afternoon by the time I arrived to assume control of Hotel-29, another bailed H-34 received during the late December transfer. I had not flown with Ben Naval in a long time. Like other Flight Mechanics who opted to work in ground maintenance after "Pappy" Pascual's death in August, or other personal reasons, Ben had been pressed into flight duty service because of the requirement for qualified people. Ben was a good man and I was happy to crew with him.

After working the local Long Tieng area, we went to the river town of Paksane (Lima-35) for the night. Accommodations were the same at General Kham Kong's one story wooden green residence, but a certain amount of tension and heightened sense of excitement seemed to pervade the officer ranks present. Naturally, I suspected underlying coup problems again, although no one admitted anything despite my inquiries and probes.

The next day we worked three fuel loads out of Paksane, hauling bullets, beans, and bandages north to Tha Thom and various sites in the valley to beef up area defenses against the traditional enemy dry season offensive already underway in some parts of the country. Late in the day we returned to Long Tieng. The high number of aircraft crews present necessitated ascending the hill to sleep in the Blue House.

¹⁷ Jacob Van Staaveren, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: Interdiction in Southern Laos 1960-1968* (Washington: Center for Air Force History, 1993) 48.

Telegram State to the U.S. Embassy Laos #1908, 01/19/65.

INTEL

In Washington, intelligence experts collectively assembled a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) regarding early 1965 enemy capabilities and pending intentions for Indochina. Citing historical analysis, the report acknowledged that communist China, North Vietnam, Pathet Lao, and Viet Cong forces had gradually increased over several years in and close to South Vietnam and Laos. At present, the offensive and defensive capabilities of these forces were not utilized or tested.

Since August 1964, enemy deployments in the Lao Panhandle had been augmenting existing capabilities there. Recent troop reinforcements from North Vietnam increased offensive potential in the country. However, the new deployments did not appear to be a prelude to a general dry season offensive. Still, in Military Region Three an attempt might be mounted to push FAR from positions obtained along Route-9 during Victorious Arrow. In Military Region Two, there was conjecture of an enemy push to recover the Sala Phu Khoun 7/13 road junction that FAR had captured during Operation Triangle. Moung Soui could also receive enemy attention. Additionally, using only current assets, the enemy had the capability to move on Vientiane and Luang Prabang, capture Thakhet and Attopeu, and harass Seno and Savannakhet.

Although a possible scenario, it was generally believed that the northern communists would continue existing policy to support their surrogates, but would exploit any opportunities in the Theater.

Intelligence continued to be collated for Laos. USAF aerial photography during the previous few weeks had revealed improved roads, new bridge construction, and dust clouds along LOCs. All this pointed to increased use of trail systems

throughout the country. By January, an intelligence paper prepared for President Johnson, and based on available information regarding the current enemy build-up in Laos, concluded that a significant reinforcement of Vietnamese army units on the Plain of Jars and in the Panhandle had occurred. Reinforcement was not unusual, for it occurred each year following termination of the rainy season, but this time it extended further south and exceeded that of previous years. Before the end of the monsoon season there were an estimated eight Vietnamese battalions, a total of 6,000 troops present in country. The present estimate increased battalion strength to sixteen, totaling 11,000 troops. Pathet Lao strength remained in the 20,000 range. The increased personnel provided a means to improve defenses and capabilities. It also enabled the enemy to maneuver quickly in South Vietnam or Laos, should they decide to retaliate for increased USG air attacks.

Since October, RLAF T-28 pilots had conducted reconnaissance and interdiction missions against known and suspected enemy infiltration targets. Accurate battle damage assessment (BDA) was not obtainable, although photographs revealed that former military areas were deserted and movements along LOCs were mostly conducted at night.

By November 1964, Military Region Three FAR units, using artillery and close air support, completed the second phase of the operation calculated to retake Route-9 and Moung Phine by advancing ten miles along Route-9 and capturing former Pathet Lao strong points. Furthermore, intelligence teams probed deep into enemy-held territory and clashed with communist forces.

In the Panhandle, communist troop and supply build-up in the trails area since December raised the possibility that North



Lao towns in boldface illustrate the areas under enemy pressure.
 CIA Map, 02/02/65.

Vietnamese military leaders intended to commence a new offensive in Laos, or introduce hard core army units into South Vietnam. From events preceding the Lao build-up, analysts believed there was a determined effort underway to support and maintain the infiltration routes into South Vietnam. Road watch teams reported artillery, AAA, heavy convoys, and 2,000 troops moving west and south in the Panhandle. Aerial photography confirmed the arrival of two new AAA battalions. The enemy units were accompanied by security forces and support elements. Speculation centered on the introduction of experienced units to counter FAR-Meo road watch ground action, and to conduct a counterattack against the FAR final phase of the Victorious Arrow offensive to capture Moung Phine.

As illuminated by a CIA Daily Brief, the SNIE report was correct in several aspects:

"In the Thakhet area of central Laos, the [c]ommunists have resumed operations similar to the forays they conducted early last December...¹⁸ On 30-31 January, enemy forces-reportedly in battalion strength-launched attacks against government regular and guerilla forces near Route-13 about 20-25 miles southeast of Thakhet.

In the north, recent reports suggest that the [c]ommunists may be preparing another clearing operation against regular and guerrilla forces operating in territory the Pathet Lao claim to be within their 'liberated area.' Several guerrilla units in the hills surrounding Moung Sai, north of Luang Prabang, were forced from their positions in mid-January as a result of sharply stepped-up enemy pressure.

¹⁸ communist: Except for the first word of a sentence the Author will never capitalize communist, communism, and the sort.

Communist pressure on government pockets southwest of Sam Neua continues."

Enemy forces have moved into the hills northwest of Ban Ban. ¹⁹

EMPHASIS ON SAM NEUA PROVINCE

Following RLG overwhelming successes in Military Region Two during the last half of 1964, by 1965, USG's Lao policy evolved into a strategy of war largely conducted by CIA operatives to regain communist-controlled portions of the remote northern provinces of Luang Prabang, the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang, and Houa Phan (Sam Neua). Sam Neua Province was considered central to this strategy, as it was an important conduit for Vietnamese infiltration of troops and supplies into the region.

Lacking real RLA command unity in Sam Neua Province, it proved difficult for the mixed bag of government troops to coordinate and operate when the first major offensive was conceived. Vang Pao's men received orders from Long Tieng, while the majority of ethnic Lao troops took orders from Luang Prabang. Even Agency personnel at Site-20A and Luang Prabang failed to coordinate their efforts, with the exception of intelligence reports collated at AB-1 Udorn.

¹⁹ Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE): Communist Military Capabilities and Near-Term Intentions in Laos and South Vietnam 02/04/65.

CIA Report, Daily Briefing, 02/02/65, Laos: The communists are increasing pressure at widely separated locations in northern and southern Laos.

White House White Paper-Memorandum for the President, 01/21/65.

State Intelligence Note, 01/21/65.

Memorandum Director of Intelligence and Research (George C. Denny) to Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, 01/27/65.

Greenhalgh, William *RF-101 Voodoo*.

At one time, Blaine Jensen had been forced to remain at a northern site because Sam Tong lacked sufficient aircraft to retrieve him. While there, a Lao H-34 delivered soldiers and supplies. Blaine asked the PIC if he could hitch a ride to Luang Prabang, but when the pilot learned that he worked at Sam Tong, Blaine was refused a ride, even though the ship was returning empty.

By the middle of January, a fresh Vietnamese regimental unit from the dreaded 316 Division provided the manpower for an offensive underway in Military Region Two's Sam Neua region (Houa Phan Province). Whether the movement was triggered in response to substantial FAR inroads into remote portions of the province the previous year, or an attempt to clear government forces away from and reconstitute Route-6 as an alternate supply line to Route-7 in the Ban Ban Valley and Plain of Jars, was open to conjecture. Most likely it was both. Despite the reasons, enemy units began a piecemeal progression of rolling up Lieutenant Colonel Tong Vonggrassamay's positions close to the road and other areas of contention. The Tong-inspired Nong Khang (LS-52) garrison twelve miles north of Sam Neua Town (L-04) remained firmly in place for a time, successfully fighting off enemy attacks. Then, when vastly outnumbered, while fighting a delaying retreat, the troops slowly withdrew toward friendly sites around Phu Pha Thi (Lima Site-85). However, sixteen miles east of Hua Mung at Phou Kouk (LS-59), Tong's forward tactical battalion BV-26 headquarters, the desire to hold in place was not duplicated.

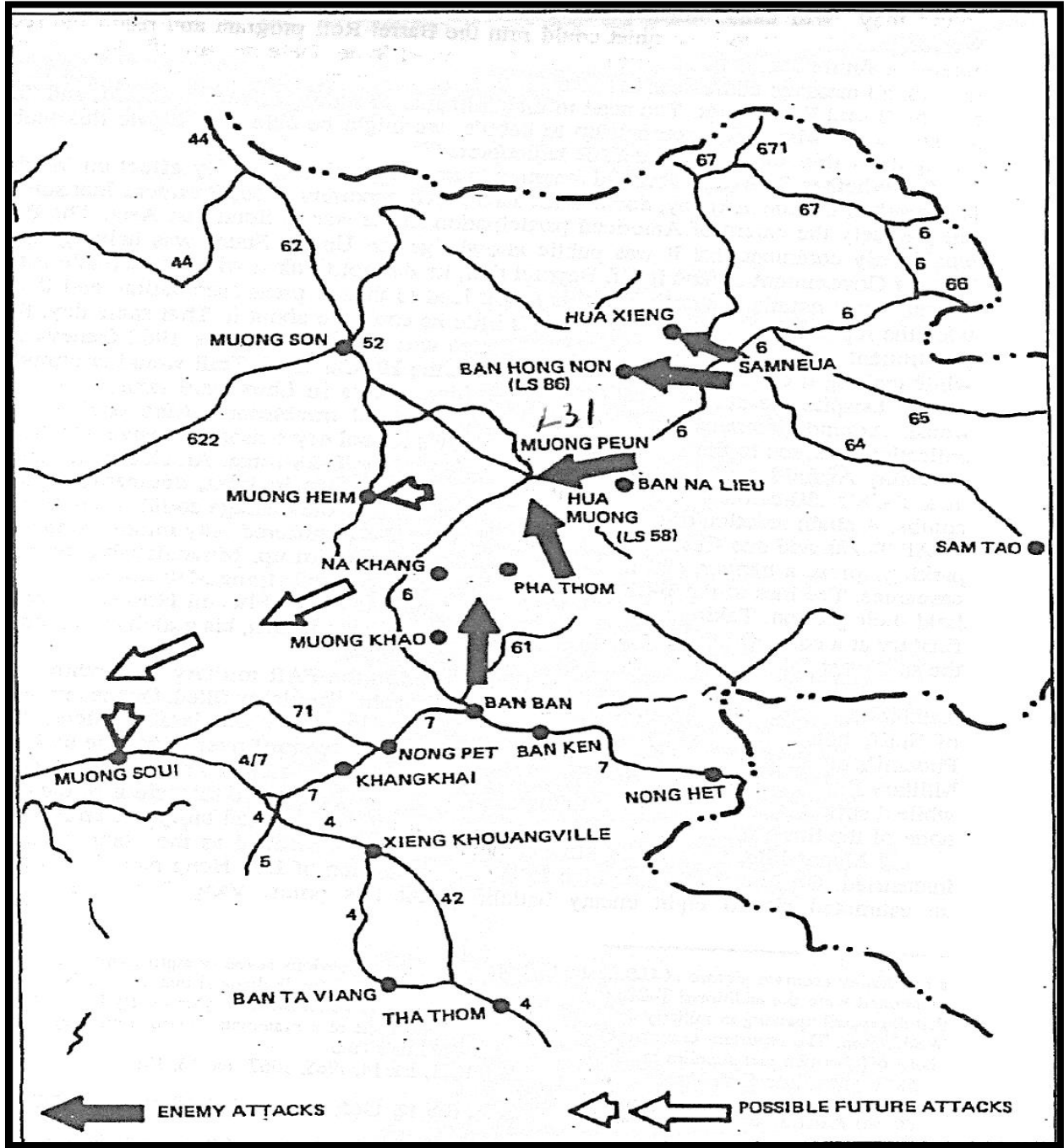
Pressed by superior enemy numbers, while dependents escaped, the defenders commenced a fighting withdrawal west to reinforce Colonel Kham Sao's eastern defensive perimeter.

TONY

After clearing this area, the enemy wheeled north toward the commanding heights of Hong Non (LS-86), a mere twelve miles west of Sam Neua. Located at a 4,600-foot elevation with a challenging 700-foot STOL strip, for years defenders on the heights of the old site always survived half-hearted enemy onslaughts. Now, with rested, more determined, well equipped, and superior Vietnamese forces facing the Meo warriors, there was not the same confidence of retaining the site.

Before departing Long Tieng to work in Sayaboury Province, Case Officer Terry Burke overnighted at Hong Non with Colonel Tong and Thai PARU team leader, Majorat. Vietnamese patrols were probing the area at the time and a discussion ensued regarding a likely avenue of attack the enemy might use to engage the site.

Previously, Pop Buell and "Jiggs" Weldon, concerned about impending enemy action creating thousands of new refugees for AID to contend with, appealed to Ambassador Sullivan for Agency assistance to significantly increase FAR efforts in the area. Acquiescing to their requests, Sullivan reluctantly allowed Tony Poe carte blanche to "legally" journey into the province, evaluate what was required, and assist in its defense. (Tony had been barred from overtly entering the area for some time.) Since Hong Non had been an AB-1 and Vang Pao listening post for years, in response to on site PARU team requests, Tony flew to Hong Non on a Helio Courier to consult with the PARU team and Auto-Defense de Choc (ADC paid local troop unit) home guard leaders. He wanted a current assessment of exactly what was required to fend off a concerted enemy attack, to also assist in organizing and tighten defense measures, and to boost the ADC 700-man morale. Noting a sense of urgency, he radioed Long Tieng for



Enemy attack locations in the upper Military Region Two of Laos. The loss of Hong Non (LS-86) in January was followed by the abandoning of Hua Mung (LS-58) under pressure during early February and a fallback south to a new base of operations at Na Khang (LS-36).

Anthony, The War in Northern Laos, page 151.

immediate shipments of mortar rounds and small arms ammunition. Supplies promptly arrived by Helio Courier in time for the battle. As last-minute preparations were completed, Poe, the consummate warrior, once again reveled in his element.

While I conducted missions from Long Tieng on the 19th, and briefly performed a SAR stand-by assignment at Ban Na, T-28 pilots, working at maximum range, pounded suspected enemy troop concentrations and camp sites in the Sam Neua region. Concerned about the developing situation, Sullivan, lacking adequate access to valid and reliable battle damage assessment, recommended employing USAF strikes against enemy concentrations in the area. The request was denied by higher ups.

Opening shots against outlying southeast and northeast outposts around Site-86 commenced at first light. As the battle unfolded, some outposts withdrew under covering fire from "Four Deuce," 81mm, 60mm mortar, 75mm recoilless rifle, and other crew served weapons positioned near the air strip. Friendly fire was answered by enemy pre-positioned long-range howitzers and mortars.

The attack on Hong Non was pursued from the exact direction predicted the night Terry Burke visited Tong. Participants reported the entire hillside appeared like hordes of black ants crawling toward the site from the estimated six to eight enemy battalions taking part in the battle. Advancing enemy units methodically ascended the cliffs and attacked the mortar pits. Before enemy teams were silenced by ADC and PARU forces, the defenders suffered ten casualties. Poe was severely wounded and Majorat killed during the action. After suffering an AK-47 round to his pelvic area, with the assistance of medics, Tony managed to evade west on a trail where Bobby Nunez landed and Poe was loaded into the cabin. Tony, no stranger to severe

battle wounds, used to display a scar on his lower abdomen incurred from a bullet strike at Iwo Jima while serving in the Marine Corps during World War Two. In addition, during mine removal operations along Route-6 east of Bouam Long in the fall of 1963, he and Captain Dick Crafts had also been struck by shrapnel along. This time, Tony, the caring person we all loved and admired, characteristically would not permit Nunez to immediately fly him to safety at Hua Mounq until retrieving additional Meo and PARU wounded at Hong Non. In the process, because of the extreme elevation, load, and requirements to hover for prolonged periods, Nunez was obligated to both overboost and overspeed the engine and transmission while performing the task. ²⁰

A Caribou crew and Doctor Weldon waited at Site-58 to ferry Tony to the U.S. Army 31st Field Hospital in Korat, Thailand. Sorely missed at a particularly critical time, the warrior was once again out of action and did not return to Long Tieng for several months.

After Poe was evacuated, the battlefield situation measurably worsened. Hong Non's main perimeter was breached about noon and, with enemy forces roaming unchecked, ADC units abandoned the entire area by mid-afternoon. Consequently, guerrilla fighters, PARU, and civilian refugees moved west toward safer locations.

With the loss of the forward position near Sam Neua Town, Ambassador Sullivan advised his superiors the RLG might request U.S. assistance to strike enemy targets above Ban Ban. For

²⁰ Maximum military power at 2800 rpm was limited to five minutes. The abuse necessitated an engine change when the aircraft reached Udorn.

enhanced implementation, he also believed his Vientiane headquarters should originate, plan, and coordinate Barrel Roll missions. General Moore agreed, but stated that coordination of USAF and embassy planning should be concentrated at the Udorn Air Support Operations Center (ASOC). The RTAF base possessed the personnel, facilities, navigation aids, and the radar ground-controlled intercept equipment (GCI) to control Barrel Roll operations should Thai-based planes be authorized for strike missions. Furthermore, the Udorn communications net connected directly to 2nd Air Division, Air Attaché (AIRA) Vientiane, and the entire radar system was within Thailand. The Udorn complex provided the perfect location to coordinate Air America, Thai, and USAF planning, and evaluate after action results. ²¹

On the morning of the attack and Tony's wounding, I conducted one fuel load around The Alternate and then was directed to Luang Prabang (L-54) to work a fuel load. Toward late afternoon, I returned to Site-20A and caught a ride on a Bird Dornier, PBJ, to Udorn.

MIKE LADUE

Following a three-year service obligation, during which he graduated from the U.S Army Fort Campbell, Kentucky, parachute school and served time with the Special Forces in Germany, Mike LaDue attended college. Bored after more than two years, he

²¹ Ken Conboy, 126.
Blaine Jensen Letter.
Doctor Charles Weldon, Email, 02/25/97.
Terry Burke Emails, 10/29/07, 11/19/07.
Ambassador William Sullivan message to State, 01/21/65.
Victor Anthony, 152-153.

joined Air America as an Air Freight Specialist (AFS, also known as a kicker). There were three other men there when he arrived in March 1962: head of the program Earl Young, Hugh Olsen, and Bobby Herald. Most were young men seconded from the elite Montana "Mafia" smoke jumpers. After a few months, Young was fired and LaDue promoted to program Co-Chief.

At that time, there was no problem with carrying weapons on upcountry flights. Mike checked out a Thompson sub-machine gun, or M-2 carbine from the gun room arsenal to the rear of the U-2 hangar at the "Ranch" (Takhli AFB). However, there were concerns about keeping it safe from theft, so he returned the piece. Shortly afterward, Ed Subowsty shot holes in King Bhumibol Adulyadej's picture in Udorn. Subowsty was sent home and the noose tightened with apologies from red-faced Taipei and Thailand-based officials. To preclude further incidents, Grundy and Rousselot issued memorandums to crews forbidding obtaining or carrying weapons in Udorn or Vientiane. This was overlooked for occasional night "Black Flights" when everyone was heavily armed.

Because of Agency compartmentalization and a "need to know," the cabin crew was exempted from mission briefings. Flights were long, and seemed to proceed toward Luang Prabang and then take a right turn toward North Vietnam and perhaps between Dien Bien Phu and Son La. There was only one pass over the drop zone, and if something was amiss in the rear, either human or hard cargo was returned to Takhli. Security was very tight and flights were not mentioned except how to improve techniques. The kickers just took the money in the proffered envelope, repaired to the bar, and then to bed.

Following more than three years with Air America as the Co-Chief of Aerial Delivery and Search and Rescue, Mike LaDue made

a career decision. Mike had accidentally fallen out of two planes during air drops and somehow survived, but not without injury. It was time for a change. He elected to return to college and obtain a degree to learn something more useful and less dangerous. In August 1964 he left Southeast Asia and returned to Takoma Park, Maryland, to enter the University of Maryland. However, after Pop Buell and others requested that he return to Laos, the restless nature displayed during his first stint as a scholar returned. Of course, working in the mountains took precedence over scholastics. Laos won the battle, and Mike was back in country by December as a USAID Area Operations Officer in North Laos.

Sam Tong had not changed appreciably when Mike returned. Pop was all business during the day, but enjoyed a drink or two in the evening. The thatched warehouse beside the runway was still the core of the program at Site-20. The front portion was the work and sleeping area. A desk and single sideband radio were located on the left side of the room and a raised split bamboo bed was positioned in the center to sleep several people in blankets or sleeping bags. ²²

Every ten days or so, he and Pop flew down to Vientiane for business meetings with AID Director Charlie Mann. They billeted in second floor rooms in the Bird Compound near Wattay Airport. If there was nothing to do in the evening and they did not want to bar hop, Pop and Mike would organize poker games in Mike's room. In addition to the principals, regular players were Jack Leister, Tom Krohn, Al Rich, Bill Solin, and a few Helio Courier pilots who lived nearby.

²² The "bed" must have been expanded considerably, for it only accommodated four of us in the winter of 1962.

Enemy attacks in upper Military Region Two preemptively stimulated refugee withdrawal from affected areas and movement toward Hua Mung. Refugee relocation was not a new phenomenon in Houa Phan and, as in the past, placed an enormous burden on AID personnel. Because of the availability of an airstrip, fixed wing aircraft were initially used in lieu of helicopters.

With a low-key evacuation underway to move refugees out of harm's way to areas like Ban San Pa Ka, Phu Cum, and Bouam Long, LaDue had the occasion to RON several times at Site-58. Staying at the operations hut at the end of the strip, he was provided good food and a warm sleeping bag. Before retiring on moonlit nights, he would walk the dark, empty runway smoking a cigar. It was a good feeling to be at the very end of the world in a good cause.

Another time, closer to the final days of Site-58, he was working with two helicopter crews around Mung Heim. The work took longer than envisioned, so, rather than return to Sam Tong in the dark, the pilots obtained permission to RON at Hua Mung. The two H-34s were a ghostly sight under the moon that night parked at the end of the strip.

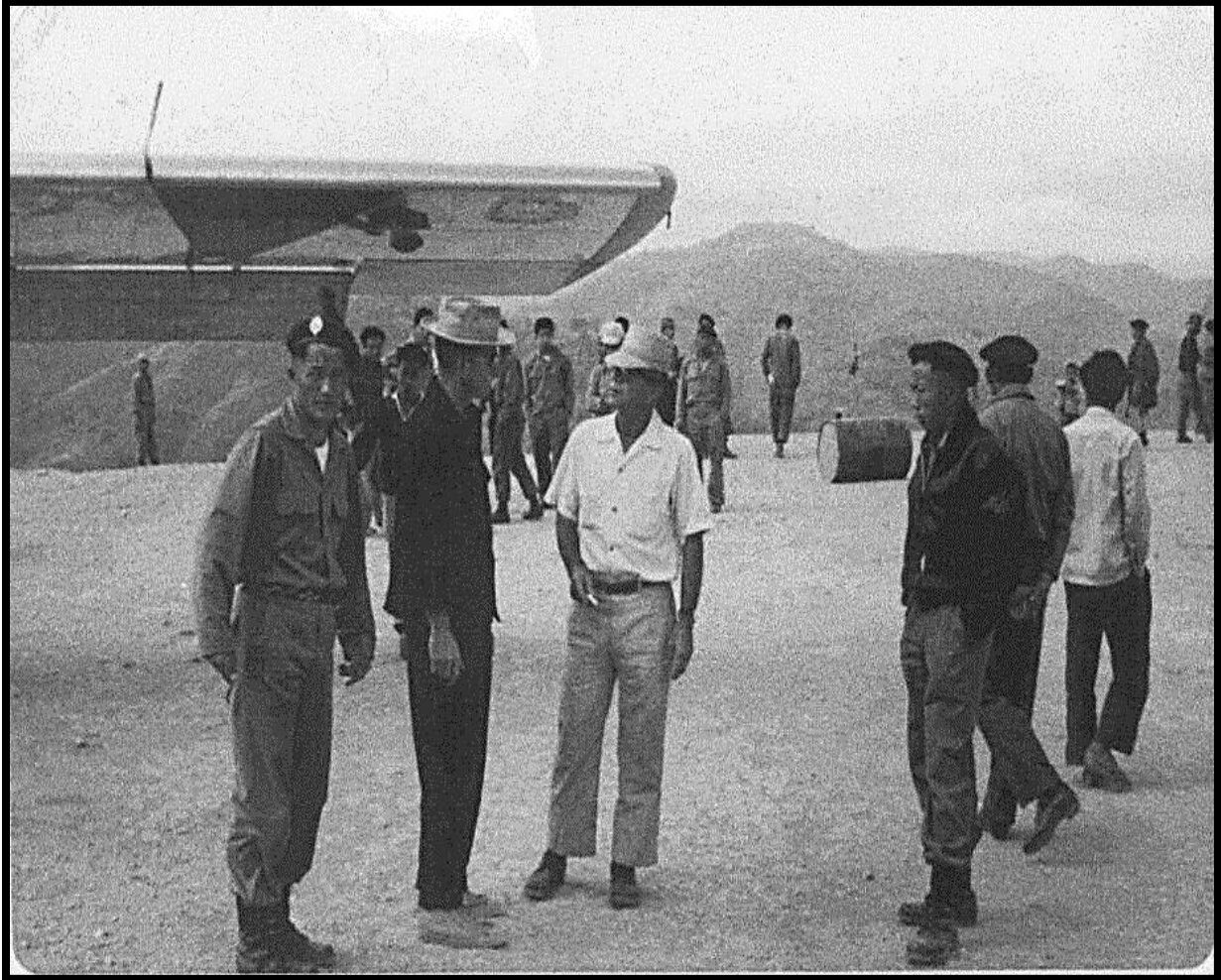
Prior to the expected enemy attack on Hua Mung, before the refugee evacuation moved into an emergency mode, at the behest of Long Tieng, Pop asked Mike to go to Na Khang and assess the viability of Site-36 as a fallback staging area. He remained there for three days walking the area during the day and freezing at night because he had neglected to bring his sleeping bag. Consequently, he attempted to sleep on a hard-wooden table in a wind-filled tent pitched near the proposed new runway.

Except for a radio team, there were few people in the area.



During a spate of inclement weather at Sam Tong, Laos, "Pop" Buell and Mike LaDue, and Meo youngsters watch as a large turtle is being prepared for the stew pot.

LaDue Collection.



"Pop" Buell and Father "Luke" Bouchard discussing a refugee disposition during the evacuation of Hua Mung.
LaDue Collection.

With the required information, he returned to Sam Tong and briefed Pop on his findings. ²³

OPERATIONS IN OTHER REGIONS

The overwhelming success of Triangle and other Military Region Two territorial gains in 1964 stimulated efforts in other military regions. Similar to Agency efforts in Sam Neua the previous year, government efforts to create viable tribal guerrilla assets were beginning to develop in a portion of Military Region One. This occurred sixty-five miles north of Luang Prabang close to the Chinese border and the valley of Dien Bien Phu. In 1961, small enclaves of Lao and Meo had independently established contact with Vang Pao. Assuring their loyalty to the general's campaign of communist containment, they were supported and supplied by air drops. By 1964, promising site leaders were encouraged to recruit additional ADC troops. Consequently, by early 1965 soldiers located at several ADC sites in the mountains north of the enemy controlled Nam Bac Valley (LS-203) were armed and potentially capable of causing grief to Pathet Lao interests. Some of these sites north of Nam Bac in proximity to Route-19 and Phong Saly Province at Lao Ta (LS-121) and Ban Pha Thong (LS-169), would later be supplied by our H-34s and serve as a talking point for area incidents. Other friendly positions further northwest were located at Doi Saeng (LS-160, nine-miles east of Moung Hai) and Moung Hai (L-41, five miles north of Ban Nam Mo). The most remote Meo site was at Nam

²³ Mike LaDue Emails, 02/21/10, 02/22/10, 02/27/10, 03/04/10, 03/06/10; 03/13/10, 06/24/11.

Houn (LS-243), located in Phong Saly Province hard against the North Vietnamese border.

Toward the end of March and through the first week of April, reacting to enhanced ADC capability and aggressive presence, communist pressure increased in the area. ADC sites in Phong Saly and northwest Luang Prabang provinces were attacked by enemy units of between 200 to 800 men. A majority of these troops were Pathet Lao reinforced by People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) stiffeners. Four friendly units were lost or dispersed during two weeks of vicious fighting, and the two areas were under heavy pressure.

In northwestern Military Region One, intelligence from locals indicated that 250 enemy troops had moved down the road from Moung Sing to Nam Tha on 18 March. Ten days later, 109 enemy police and troops controlled Moung Sing. Attacks soon commenced that encompassed areas sixty-five kilometers northeast and forty-one kilos east of Nam Tha. Reports were filed that 300 Pathet Lao attacked and captured an ADC company thirty-nine kilometers east of Nam Tha in the vicinity of Moung Hai on the 31st. Attacks continued into April, when another ADC commanding officer claimed 200 troops were Chinese regulars. A local farmer also reported ChiCom movements to forty-nine kilos east of Nam Tha. Pending verification, none of this was confirmed.

Attacks continued at Doi Saeng and further east with the intention of surrounding Dory Sang. By 12 April, enemy forces controlled a line eight kilometers east of Nam Tha to Meng La

and Mounq Sai, sixty-seven kilos southeast of Nam Tha. ²⁴ ²⁵

BLOODY NOODLES ANYONE?

While I was still upcountry, an incident occurred in Udorn town involving Air America personnel. It was one that could have resulted in devastating repercussions from the Thai military and town fathers. After carousing in town watering holes, Tom and Kathy Moher, Steve and Michico Stevens, and Tom Penniman journeyed by samlor to the preferred late-night open-air noodle shop located close to the second traffic circle. Lacking ambiance, the dreary establishment was made somewhat more colorful by a short, overweight Chinese cook, who prepared the delicious broth, and one who looked like he relished his own cooking. Shirtless, the smooth-skinned young man stood behind the huge copper caldron adding plucked ducks, pig livers, and other goodies while stirring the contents. Six metal and Formica-topped tables with folding metal chairs were provided for patrons' comfort. Various Thai sauces, condiments, and peanuts were available to add taste to the steaming bowl of Bam Mi Nam.

²⁴ Ken Conboy, 133.
CIA Intelligence Cable, 04/12/65.

²⁵ Many sites were originally unnumbered, referred to only by coordinates or village names, until FIC intelligence operatives Jim Mullen and Bill Solin created the first standardized site information in a booklet that could be easily carried in the cockpit. The first attempt contained many errors, which were later corrected. Constantly revised and updated, the first crude attempts, really tailored for small STOL and drop aircraft, became highly sophisticated and contained critical information for pilot knowledge regarding sites.

The noodle shop was an ideal place for a hormonally challenged bachelor to procure a female after local bars closed for business. Those not already engaged for the night were generally not the cream of the crop, but easily obtainable without a Mama-San payment. Against this backdrop, the friends were laughing and enjoying their noodles when five drunken Thai men began heckling them from the sidewalk. Apparently there to obtain a late tryst, they did not recognize that the women were Japanese wives of the Americans. Believing the two ladies were Thai, and greatly emboldened by drink, they took exception to the fact that the ugly foreign devils had again usurped their local women.

Likely fueled by "Ugly American" rhetoric, one word led to another and the Thai gang menacingly advanced into the shop. Without thinking clearly, Penniman stood up uttering something foolish like, "*Just a minute,*" when one of the men grabbed a steel chair and swung it at him. Tom deflected the blow with his arm, but it sheared off his watch, a treasured item from his father's estate. His initial response was to bend down, locate, and retrieve the keepsake. However, before he could move, another Thai hit Tom Moher over the head with a chair. Seeing her husband's skull spurting blood, Kathy, who held a coveted Karate black belt rating and often whacked Tom about the head and shoulders if he arrived home drunk, instantly leaped up and smashed a full quart bottle of Singa beer over the culprit's head before he had the opportunity to strike again. The perpetrator collapsed to the floor like a sack of dropped rocks. Then, approaching the zenith of her violent temper, Kathy attacked his jugular vein with the jagged bottle. Steve, who was vigorously engaged in defending himself, used all his strength to pull Kathy off the incapacitated Thai, likely saving his

life. In the meantime, someone grazed Michico's head with a pickled garlic jar, and she began to bleed profusely. Fortunately, the fight was soon over, and the Thai men still standing dragged their wounded off through the blood and mess. However, serious damage had been done to both body and American-Thai relations.

The uninjured members among the Americans took Moher to the Thai hospital for emergency treatment and observation. He was transferred to the Air America clinic the following day, and because the injury involved his head, Tom was evacuated to the Bangkok Christian Hospital for X-rays and further evaluation. Except for headaches, Tom did not suffer any lasting damage from the incident. However, as per Company regulations in regard to head injuries, he was temporarily grounded pending a doctor's release. ²⁶ In the interim, Tom and Kathy left for Bangkok to find housing accommodations.

Michico, only superficially injured, was taken to General Moore's Deputy Colonel Jack McCreery's trailer just inside the STARCOMM-Air Force gate. Jack, who harbored an ill-disguised crush for the voluptuous girl, immediately took her to the base medic for professional stitching.

The Thai involved in the fracas were discovered to be RTAF airmen. In a meeting with the base commander, the commanding officer apologized for his drunken men's behavior. It was then that the Americans learned of the petty jealousy involved, and the belief that the Americans had invaded their pool of available women. The whole incident was totally out of character

²⁶ In the case of a serious head injury pilot grounding could last up to six months.

for the normally polite Thai men, and there must have been a tremendous loss of face for the base commander. One could only speculate on the fate of the airmen involved in the noodle shop caper.²⁷

January continued to be a time of crew hiring for the helicopter program. Slowly fulfilling bilateral contractual agreements with the Thai government to blend Thai personnel into the organization, two former Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) mechanics, Saribongse and Veera Champanil, arrived in Udorn to serve as H-34 Flight Mechanics. Saribongse, the older man, was very enthusiastic about his Flight Mechanic duties in the field. In time, I found that both men spoke tolerable English over the aircraft ICS system, without the often-incomprehensible Tagalog inflection older Filipino Flight Mechanics jabbered at us, particularly when excited. Although the first Thai crewmembers, they were not the first Thais hired. Almost from the beginning of the helicopter Maddriver Project, Thai nationals worked as drivers, operations clerks, security guards, and in various and sundry menial facility jobs. I suppose that there was a certain quota required by the Thai government, stipulating that higher-level positions were tendered as people became qualified, but I was not privy to such contract details. Despite RTG pressure to accelerate Thai hiring practices, the Company did not fill maintenance technical or pilot positions until later. Consequently, third country Taiwanese nationals and Filipinos performed the more skilled operations.

²⁷ Tom Penniman Emails, 02/21/00, 02/26/00, 04/17/00.
Steve Stevens Email, 04/17/00.

RETURN OF AN ERRANT SON

After quitting Air America in 1963 because he failed to receive a coveted management slot, like a bad penny exposed on the street, Bob Hitchman gravitated back into our H-34 program. Although Bob was considered an excellent pilot, no one was particularly thrilled with his return, for he had a proclivity to be very bossy and pushy at others' expense. With increasing conflict, SARs, and proliferating engine problems, it seemed an inopportune time for him to return to the fold. Except for suspecting it might have been the lure of a fatter paycheck, I never learned his actual reason for leaving Bird and Son. With a new hire date of 10 January 1965, Bob lost considerable seniority, which really was not all that important at the time.

Wayne Knight had no input on Hitchman's rehiring. Although there was no overt animosity between the CPH and the line pilot, Bob had previously attempted to make life difficult for Wayne. Whenever there was tension between the two, he ran to Ab to gain a sympathetic ear. Therefore, to avoid a potential conflict, Abadie had sanctioned his rehiring while Wayne was absent on STO. Also, as Wayne was very busy with test flights, Helio Courier training, and flying with the oldsters upcountry, someone else was responsible for Bob's upgrading. In the future, except for a slight initial paternalistic attitude from Bob, the two never had direct conflicts. On the surface they got along well, even to the point of the Knights being occasional guests at his home, and Wayne generally trusted Bob about as much as any other line pilot. However, this attitude changed to a

negative one after later hearing stories regarding Bob's activities from well-meaning pilots. ²⁸

On Thursday, I was scheduled to fly in Hotel-14 with Hitchman during his area re-familiarization, and to introduce him to new sites that had sprung up during the period he was absent from Air America. Although I had reservations about the man and his methodology when dealing with others, I was beholden to him, for he had done a lot to ease my upcountry transition in 1962 and taught me a valuable work ethic.

Following a stop at Long Tieng, we flew north to Hua Moung to conduct a couple of short trips. There we supplied new or established outlying perimeter outposts surrounding the eastern and northern sections against an expected enemy onslaught. I was surprised at Hitch's demeanor, as he seemed to be low-key, not at all the overbearing person I recalled. Perhaps he was saving his energy or was cowed by the area changes.

The PIC of Hotel-29 was also working at Site-58. His helicopter was within a few hours of a one-hundred-hour maintenance inspection, so I was advised to ferry it to Udorn that afternoon. After swapping aircraft, we returned to The Alternate with several FAR BV-26 and twenty-seven officers onboard, among them Colonel Kham Sao, administrative official for the Sam Neua district and the commanding officer of BV-27, and Colonel Douang Ta Norasing. I had previously met both men and liked them. While Kham Sao and Douang conferred with Vang Pao regarding conditions in Sam Neua, we conducted missions east of Padong Ridge. With increased action and the recent losses in upper Military Region Two, there was a concerted effort by Vang

²⁸ EW Knight Email, 04/12/01.

Pao and Major General Kham Khong's top officers to meet and develop viable defensive postures in the two threatened areas. Toward the end of the day, we were loaded with important people for Paksane.

After arriving and depositing our passengers at Lima-39, we took on sufficient fuel for the one-hour trip to Udorn. During shutdown Ben Sabino discovered minor tail rotor tip damage. This was not apparent when we accepted the ship at Hua Moun, so I judged it must have occurred on our watch. Again, as in past tail rotor blade dings, there was no indication of a problem or vibrations felt in flight through the tail rotor pedals or fuselage. In addition, I did not recall any definitive encounter in which the damage might have occurred, except while venturing to a new pad, which entailed flying low along a streambed lined with feathery overhanging bamboo culms. Hitchman was flying from the left seat and perhaps rotor wash caused the light bamboo tips to oscillate and bend sufficiently to contact the tail rotor blades. The situation reminded me of the time I recovered on the USS *Valley Forge* in division formation. To expedite squadron recovery, division landings were to be accomplished with one-second breaks. Therefore, rapid sideward flight was necessary across the flight deck to allow other H-34s to land. In that particular case, I speculated the F/M radio whip antenna mounted on top of the tail pylon must have flexed and contacted one tail rotor blade when I cleared the deck. I did not believe the antenna caused the damage this time. Because an explanation was required for the CPH, I hated to damage an aircraft and was angry about **someone** else dinging Hotel-29.

Because of his prior experience and proficiency, and the need for pilots, Hitchman was quickly upgraded and began flying the line. On 31 May, he incurred an accident in the Tha Thom

Valley. While flying on top of a solid cloud layer, Bob autorotated through the clouds and broke out at fifty feet AGL over a landing site. He landed safely, but damaged the fuselage's underside on a stump. He later claimed experiencing total engine failure, but no maintenance problem was ever discovered.^{29 30}

Following nine days on the schedule, I welcomed a two-day respite from flying. I was not loath to fly, especially when in overtime. However, I was becoming chronically tired and increasingly achy from the pounding of pronounced vibrations, resulting from the amplified time on airframes and components. In contrast to less strenuous periods, one day rest did not appear to provide the necessary rest and healing to restore my body to a state where I felt normal. During the down time, in order to take a little exercise and clear my mind, I managed to squeeze in a few early morning tennis games with Lou McCasland at the Thai Army asphalt court adjacent to Air America. Lou's wife Joan, who still taught at the Company School and liked to entertain, provided a tasty salmon croquette dinner for us one evening.

MISSION TO MUGIA

On the 22nd, a multi-H-34 special night mission was conducted by four crews. It marked the first helicopter-borne road watch team infiltration-exfiltration mission to Mugia Pass, and was deemed unique in that single engine helicopter night

²⁹ One can draw his own conclusions as to the real reason for the incident, for it was still a period of unusual and unexplained engine and mechanical malfunctions.

³⁰ EW Knight Email, 07/06/00.

missions were normally deemed too dangerous, and rarely performed in Laos. In addition, no prior training was conducted, and our pilots were not night proficient. It appeared that the Customer expected our people to perform the arduous task purely by osmosis. The mission was planned to rotate an eleven-man road watch team with sufficient provisions into an elevated mountain landing zone in the vicinity of Mugia Pass. The same number of personnel would be extracted. This was the location Boonrat had crashed in a Bell-47 while attempting to extract an ill troop the previous fall.

Billy Zeitler had trouble sleeping upcountry at Long Tieng following recovery from the August shoot down near Site-95. Because of sleep deprivation, he vomited in the morning, but upon entering the cockpit and launching, he was fine. When he queried Doctor Weldon about this difficulty, Jiggs speculated that the disorder might be caused by hepatitis, but this was not the case. When Bill consulted Abadie regarding his problem, Ab thought it might be manifesting a psychological issue related to his hairy incident. Bill took exception to this line of reasoning, and to challenge Ab's theory, he volunteered for the night mission. The flight would represent his last helicopter mission.

On Friday, Wayne Knight tested Hotels-20, 23, and 26, three of the four ships slated for use on the mission. In late afternoon, the crews departed Udorn for the Nakhon Phanom Air Force Base. Ed Reid and Bill Zeitler crewed the lead ship, followed by Scratch Kanach-Steve Stevens, and Jack Connor-Charlie Davis-Ben Naval. Newbie Davis was quickly obtaining a rare, but realistic taste of clandestine helicopter work. A fourth crew would provide a SAR function if necessary. At Nakhon

Phanom the Flight Mechanics attended to refueling while the pilots went to the mess hall for an early supper.

At twilight, the armada flew across the river and landed at the Thakhet airstrip, where they shut down at a remote spot and were briefed by the Customer. Then, under the cover of darkness, three of the helicopters were loaded with supplies and team members.

Earlier in the day, Jim Rhyne and Bill Zeitler had flown to the area in a Helio Courier to recon the site and air drop fire cans with illustrated instructions on how to place and illuminate them so all the helicopters could land at approximately the same time. While transiting the area they discovered a AAA gun located on their original line of flight. This necessitated planning a bypass "dog-leg" flight to the landing zone.

Maintaining pre-briefed radio silence, crews launched in loose formation and flew a three-legged circuitous route to the destination. An hour later they spotted lights on the flat mesa. However, the fire pots were not placed in open circles tangent to each other as planned, but more like a three ringed Ballantine Beer sign with one circle inside the other. They intersected each other, leaving room for only one aircraft to land at a time instead of all four. While the first helicopter unloaded troops and the loading process continued, the other ships orbited west. This delay consumed precious time and lost the opportunity for a quick in and out of the landing zone. Furthermore, the engine and rotor noise were probably noted in North Vietnam.

During the return phase, a few miles north of Thakhet, duplicating current problems our unit was experiencing with R-1820 engines, Kanach's power plant momentarily quit, and then

surged back on line with a loud report, duplicating current problems our unit was experiencing with R-1820 engines. Without much recourse, he continued for a time. Then breaking radio silence, he informed the other crews that the engine was still losing power and began autorotating into a farmer's field. The PIC of the SAR ship followed him down. Opening the clam shell doors, the Flight Mechanic discovered that the carburetor heat door had vibrated to the full closed (maximum heat) position. While team members transferred to the SAR ship, he wired the unit to the full open position. Scratch then hover-checked the engine and, finding it to be performing to an acceptable level, they continued to Thakhet and then Udorn without further incident. ³¹

After discharging the road watch team, and before returning to Udorn, the pilots continued to NKP to refuel and grab a late-night snack. There was no Customer debriefing at Thakhet, but much to discuss among the crews, mainly the lighting system foul-up at the landing zone, and a sliding cockpit window that partially dislodged before the mission, which had to be removed and stowed in the cabin. Because of the high altitude flown

³¹ To preclude similar occurrences, Udorn maintenance subsequently wired all carburetor heat levers to the open position on the cockpit mixture quadrants. Made of soft copper, the wire could easily be broken if the pilot required the heat function. Although the H-34 had been in service for many years, it seemed that unusual problems such as this had not been previously experienced or recorded in the Marine Corps, nor were service bulletins explaining the condition disseminated from Sikorsky factory to operating units. But this was a rare occurrence and, since we were the only organization in the world pushing the machines to extreme limits, we experienced the brunt of all new malfunctions. Therefore, all temporary or permanent fixes to our problems were generally made after the fact.

during the two-and-a-half-hour mission, the cockpit crew of the affected aircraft suffered greatly from the cold.

In late January, Billy Zeitler indicated to management that he could not continue to fly H-34s and RON upcountry. However, he did not want to leave the Company and requested a transfer to the fixed wing Caribou program. Bill was supported by Knight, Abadie, and Company officials, who were inclined to allow him almost any request. Ab advised Bill to talk with Fred Walker in Vientiane. Fred inquired as to the amount of total airplane time he had logged in the military. He only had forty hours total fixed wing, no multi-engine experience, or instrument certification. Therefore, not wanting to prevaricate, he answered, "Not a lot. Under 1,000 hours." Fred seemed satisfied with this answer, but advised Zeitler that he would have to spend a year as a right seat First Officer. During that year Bill obtained a multi-engine license and sufficient C-7 experience for an upgrade to Captain. He flew as a Captain for over a year until Don Teeters sent a message to Vientiane stating that both Bill Zeitler and Milt Olsen were not instrument rated. They were subsequently placed on leave without pay and sent to Taipei to obtain the certificate. ³²

TROUBLE AT WATTAY

Shortly after 0900 hours on the 23rd, during a T-28 refueling operation on the designated Wattay Airport PSP parking ramp, an electrical malfunction reputedly caused a .50 caliber

³² Charles O. Davis, *Across the Mekong: The True Story of an Air America Helicopter Pilot* (Charlottesville: Hildesigns Press, 1996) 31-35.

Charlie Davis Phone Call, 04/08/96.

Bill Zeitler Interview at the Author's House, 09/01/01.

EW Knight Email, 09/10/01; 10/20/07.

machine gun to discharge rounds. An eyewitness observed bullets impacting a parked T-28, triggering a chain reaction of fire and explosions, which ultimately wiped out the RLAF strike force parked at Wattay Airport. As usual, initial reports were sketchy regarding fatalities, injuries, or infrastructure damage. USAID rushed its fire-fighting apparatus to the area, and a request was forwarded to Udorn for additional equipment. When it was considered "safe," a concerted effort commenced to contain the fire before it spread to the main ammunition storage area or the main parking area.

Later inquiries revealed that at 0910 hours, an Air America employee heard a sharp report like a machine gun beyond the hangar from the vicinity of the military parking ramp. A puff of smoke followed, and then a series of explosions rocked the area. Windows were shattered in the operations building, and because of a danger that fires would spread, Operations was evacuated by 0930 hours. About the same time, ATOG's John Dyste was informed that T-28 ordnance was on fire and a possibility that 500-pound bombs would explode. He therefore ordered the rice warehouse evacuated. Between bomb blasts, Captain Joe Hazen cranked up Caribou 851 without a copilot, taxied to the runway with the landing gear pins installed, and took off. He remained airborne for thirty minutes, and then landed and parked some distance from the danger area. His courageous act was enhanced by the fact that the plane was loaded with fuel drums for transport upcountry. Fred Walker later contacted him, advising that it might be a good idea not to log the flight, as Taipei would not

understand his flying without a copilot. Joe thought about this and finally heeded Fred's suggestion not to log the flight.³³

Since it was Saturday morning, Base Manager Dave Hickler was still at home and thought the noise was the commencement of a rumored coup. After an hour he went to the airfield. Fires were still raging and the ramp was littered with debris. He was not surprised by the incident, as for a long time T-28 personnel had been observed not adhering to accepted safety regulations.

On Sunday, I was at the field test flying Hotel-29. After lunch, while we were still tinkering with the machine, Operations had me fly a military man, either from an Air Force contingent at Udorn or JUSMAAG Bangkok, to Wattay Airport to obtain information about the T-28 disaster the previous day. It was the first time I had heard of the problem.

When we arrived, fires were largely under control, but area was still smoldering. Live ammunition had been removed from the immediate area. Because we were not aware of the current situation, to preclude damage to my ship or unforeseen possibility, I parked some distance from the affected area and kept the aircraft running at idle.

After more than a boring hour and a half, the man returned and I learned the extent of the damage. From a tactical air standpoint, it was not good for our side. Eight T-28s, one RT-28 and a U-17 were destroyed. Two Lao C-47s incurred minor damage from machine gun fire. The T-28 hangar and three other buildings were heavily damaged or destroyed, and the PSP parking area was churned up from explosions. On the upside, no one had been killed and only minor wounds incurred from light shrapnel. At

³³ Joe Hazen Email, 05/24/16.

the Air America ramp, six planes sustained damage from flying missiles.

RLAF had targeted forty sorties a day in Laos for 1965. However, combat and operational losses over the previous weeks, and the T-28 destruction sustained from the parking ramp accident, substantially decreased this programmed goal. This was particularly the case in the Sam Neua area where Tong's men were under considerable pressure and needed the airborne artillery. Furthermore, there was considerable difficulty envisioned in replacing all the aircraft losses.

The U.S. State Department wanted the RTAF to loan the Lao Air Force fourteen T-28s. These would eventually be replaced from Lao Military Assistance Program (MAP) stocks. To implement this request, the ambassador consulted with Air Marshall Dawee on the 26th. He explained the dire circumstances of the recent T-28 destruction at Wattay, and other losses that hampered strike operations in Laos. The Thai leader wanted time to consider the matter, probably because Chief Air Marshall Boon Choo would object to the transfer of so many aircraft that would deplete Thai stocks to only twenty-one. However, after consulting with Prime Minister Thanom, they agreed to transfer ten T-28s. U.S. JUSMAAG Thailand would accomplish the transfer.³⁴

³⁴ U.S. Embassy Vientiane to State, 01/24, 25/65.

Dick Fisher, 01/23/65.

Dyste, 01/23/65.

Dave Hickler, 01/23/65.

Dave Hickler Letter to Air America President Grundy, 01/28/65.

John Pratt *CHECO The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970*
(Christiansburg, Virginia: Dalley Book Service) 23.

Telegram U.S. Embassy Thailand to State, 01/26/65.

ISAN

The nine provinces located in northeast Thailand (called Isan by the Thai population) constantly caused problems for the central government in Bangkok. Economic stagnation, remoteness, cultural and ethnic similarity to the Lao, and Bangkok leaders' lack of authority and general neglect in the region, provided more than adequate conditions among the population for communist subversion and mischief.

Communist activity in the region had been ongoing since the termination of World War Two. There had been fifteen communist front organizations reported in Thailand since 1960, some no more than wishful thinking. Previously restricted to recruitment, training, and propaganda, movements were fairly low key until increasing in 1961, when the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese made progress in Laos. However, the Royal Thai Government (RTG) temporarily thwarted budding overt problems by commencing broad arrests and summary executions of leaders that were calculated to discourage further subversive activity.

Since early 1962, the Voice of the Thai People, a propaganda mechanism, had broadcast five programs a day from secret transmitters located along the Lao-North Vietnamese border. The content focused on blaming USG and first the Sarit, then the Thanom government, for poverty in the northeast and the policy of local corruption. The propaganda and recruitment was targeted at prime audiences, ethnic minorities, mostly the 40,000 Vietnamese community and smaller tribal groups with ties to Laos. The party line sought to exploit the peoples' traditional animosity toward Bangkok and corrupt local officials, particularly the police. A northeast separatist movement had been stressed for several years with the hope of eventual reunification with Laos.

Despite half-measures taken to discourage anti-government activity over the past year, an increase in activity had been noted. In early December 1964, the clandestine radio station announced the establishment of the Thai Independence Movement (TIM). The purported agenda expressed the peoples' desire for withdrawal of U.S. forces from Thailand, the overthrow of the Thanom government, and the establishment of a neutralist regime. Like clockwork, the New China News Agency and Hanoi Radio touted the communist front organization. Thai leaders were not overly impressed, for no evidence had surfaced that such an organization was present in Thailand. However, somewhat disconcerting, the formation of this organization coincided with a reported increase in subversive activity in the northeast and three assassinations in late 1964.

By 1 January 1965, the Voice of the Thai People announced formation of the Thai Patriotic Front. The two insurgent and subversive movements were widely covered by China and North Vietnamese news media sources. They all appeared to hinge on increased United States Government (USG) involvement in South Vietnam.

During January, the Bangkok U.S. Embassy intelligence division apprised Ambassador Martin of several developments in recent communist strategy. They included increased terrorism and assassination of a Thai official in the northeast, establishment of a National Front Organization, Chinese leader Chen Yi's statement to the French Ambassador in Peking that insurgency might break out in Thailand during 1965, and increased communist propaganda.

At the time, communist planners perceived an impending victory in South Vietnam. On this basis, they were proceeding to

create safe havens in South Vietnam and Laos, and to stimulate a war of national liberation in Thailand.

Although evident to some degree in other areas, most communist activity appeared to be limited to the Nakhon Phanom Province. We were cautioned to avoid overflying the rugged Phu Phan Mountains where there were 200 guerrillas reportedly roaming. The irregulars were reputed to be independent tribal Soh members, a Lao ethnic group passively disputing Thai governance. Government sweeps had not produced results, and a Mobile Development Unit (MDU), the parent of teams I had worked with in 1963 with Gordon Murchie, had made few inroads with the region's population.

Then, on the 19th, the Prime Minister revealed to the public that communist agents were already in Thailand, financed by baht obtained from Hong Kong banks.

From 1963 to mid-1965, Peace Corps representative Ernest Kuhn performed duties in Thailand. Ernie was assigned to a Meo village in upper Loei Province, where the provinces of Loei, Phitsanulok, and Phetchabun merged. During walking surveys of up to five days at a time, with the help of guides he determined that there were 9,000 hill tribe units in the combined areas.

Some low-key communist activity was noted in his area by late 1964-early 1965 when village leaders discovered bloody hex symbols on their front doors. In addition, Chinese broadcasts were beamed toward border areas where small transistor radios issued by the government delivered propaganda to many Meo who spoke Chinese. ³⁵

³⁵ The Meo people originally emigrated from Yunnan Province in China.

Despite RTG representation by border police (BPP), dispensaries, hospitals, and schools, the tribal people were becoming fearful of the future.

Because of his good efforts with the Meo, and a requirement for more AID workers in Laos, Kuhn, along with others, was recruited to work for Pop Buell at Sam Tong. Consequently, he missed the brunt of insurgency in Thailand, for the challenges and excitement of actual combat conditions in Laos. ³⁶

VIPs

On the 26th and 27th, Ben Naval and I squired a load of civilian VIPs around the northeast in Hotel-28. To keep a ship out of Laos for two days at such a critical time, the trip must have been considered quite important, and was probably scheduled at a very high level. Moreover, it likely had something to do with a fact-finding team assessing the region's insurgency situation.

The first stop was Nong Khai Airport, about thirty miles north of Udorn (Tango-22), at road's end. ³⁷ Next, after contacting the Nakhon Phanom Air Base Ground Control Intercept (GCI) unit for clearance into the province, we flew southeast to

³⁶ Internet: Situation in Northeast Thailand
(foia.ucia.gov/scripts/cgiserv).
Thai-Chinese Communist Relations, 04/09/68
(foia.ucia.gov/scripts/cgise), 4.
Larry Pickering, Report of the Thai Working Group Interdepartmental
Regional Group Counterinsurgency: Evolution of Communist Strategy in
Thailand, 344, 04/26/67.
Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era* (New York, NY: The Free
Press, 1977) 176.
Arthur Dommen Interview with USAID worker Ernest Kuhn, 03/25/95, 1, 29
(<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:pfi198VSi>).

³⁷ As with Lao sites, FIC personnel had issued Thailand site pamphlets for cockpit reference.

villages northwest and northeast of Sakon Nakhon (T-39), a provincial town readily identified adjacent to a large lake. After dropping the people at the second village, I slipped over to the Nakhon Phanom base (T-55) to refuel. In contrast to the problem that I had obtaining fuel at Korat when working for JUSMAAG in 1963, there was no trouble now. Our last stop for the day was Sakon Nakhon, before terminating at the Mekong River town of Nakhon Phanom (T-50).

We checked into a typical concrete style hotel owned and operated by a Chinese family. Rooms, similar to any other location, were Spartan with a wooden bed, a thin mattress seemingly filled with rocks, and a green fan suspended on a long pole from the high ceiling. The nightly fee was still reasonable. That was a plus, for Air America did not reimburse employees for nights away from Udorn, and there would be no project pay during this trip. At least I was into overtime.

After mustering everyone, we solicited information as to the best restaurant in town. My passengers had little experience with ordering Thai food, so I was able to display a little of my culinary and language skills. They settled on standard fare like fried rice, somewhat similar to what they had eaten before. I was hungry, but did not want the same food, so I looked around and observed a Thai man eating something that looked delicious and vaguely familiar--something like the meat and vegetables I had come to enjoy. Taking a chance, with flourish, I ordered the same dish. After consuming a glass or two of Singha beer, and feeling mellow from the strong drink, we struck up a conversation with Thai doctors eating at an adjoining table. The dialogue consisted of friendly banter until one curious man inquired as to what so many of us were doing there. Apparently, the number of civilian farangs in town was unusual and noted.

Naturally, the mission's actual reason could not be divulged, so the conversation waned.

My food took considerable time to prepare, and I was ravenous when it finally arrived. I recognized onions and peppers smothered in oyster sauce, but the baby duck feet were foreign to me. Having reservations, I took a bite of the chewy cartilaginous mess and began thinking about where those feet had waded. Not normally squeamish about eating any food, I almost regurgitated. Consequently, I settled for some white rice and that was the last time I ordered duck feet.

The following day we continued the trip, landing first south southwest of the river town of That Phanom, and then the edge of the Phu Phan Mountains. After taking lunch at Mukdahan, across the Mekong from Savannakhet, we continued to the Phu Mu Mountain range and another location. A final stop was made at the Ubon Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) Base, where I was obligated to contact Lion Control, another GCI unit controlling aircraft entering that region. After another fueling session, we RTB.

THE GODNOMA COMPOUND

Tom and Kathy Moher had just relocated to Bangkok, temporarily renting an apartment next to Bill and Molly Zeitler. Except for a bad headache and some down time off the flight schedule, Tom had survived the noodle shop incident without permanent physical injury. During the following two days, I transitioned to the former Moher bungalow in the Godnoma compound. By design, I always remained "light on the skids," ready to go where required. With only clothes, my ancient green World War Two trunk, radio, typewriter, a few pots and pans, the English water filter and cooler, and other minor items, it did not take long to move. Ed Moreland was upcountry and I did not

have an opportunity to coordinate with him. In order to take advantage of the narrow window of opportunity, I had to move quickly before Longmoun, the tall, vivacious Mama San, rented the house to someone else. Therefore, I hustled over to Soi Mahamit and presented her seven hundred baht. Addressing me as Captain, she exhibited a sweet mouthed façade. I wondered how long that would last and what she actually felt by not obtaining a requested increase in rent. Even so, there was still some room for chicanery in sharing water and electricity bills with other compound mates. Knowing a little of the Thai mentality by then, I seriously doubted that the Godnomas paid their fair share.

Before I departed Sopa Villa for the final time, Marvin Thisopa, the owner's cousin, arrived to collect the monthly rental check. Seeing me in the process of moving, he expressed his unhappiness that I was departing without prior notification. I had few misgivings, for during my time at Sopa the superintendent of schools had attempted to play the familiar landlord game and jack up the rent a couple of times. Even though I had purchased Tom's bamboo-rattan furniture, fixtures, and other improvements he had made to the house, I was not completely certain regarding the actual move until the last minute. Overall, I had been comfortable and quite satisfied living in Thisopa's house. However, there were several enduring bad memories there: the loss of my motorbike, Sang's abrupt departure when I was on annual leave, and my beloved Shepherd's death at the end of December. All these negatives created an infinite sadness and fostered an enormous void in my life. Merging the negatives with a desire for more human association to aid in healing my emotional wounds, and a desire for a safer place to live, it was exactly the right time to relocate. Furthermore, it was not as if I was leaving Mister Thisopa cold,

for Ed Moreland was still a tenant, and Ed could do whatever he wished with the place. ³⁸

Beside the Godnoma family, others residing next door in a similar type bungalow were Marius Burke and Bobby Nunez, both men I considered friends. As Burke was also involved in the Kuala Lumpur project and interested in other offshore projects that might prove lucrative and improve his life, we were fairly tight. Indeed, Marius and I were planning a trip to Hong Kong early in February so he could further assess his interest in forming an export company with a couple of Chinese men with which he had previously been acquainted. In addition to badly requiring a change from the Udorn lifestyle, I elected to go so that I could purchase wood carvings to fill empty shelf space in my new house. I also needed two ceramic candles (filters) not available in Thailand for the inner liner of my English-manufactured water filter.

Next in the line of residences were the Stevens, in a new more modern two-story white house. Later, an older couple, the Marshes, rounded out my neighbors. Don Marsh, a graying former stock broker who touted mutual funds, was a Bird Dornier pilot. Marsh had recently attained some acclaim. He, Pop Buell, and AID "honcho," Phil Gullion, had recently crashed in "Hitler's Revenge" while landing at Sam Tong during the early afternoon.³⁹ The unofficial version of the accident had him decelerating below the accepted speed while turning onto final approach. Then, while flying into a strong wind on short final, he

³⁸ Ed did not say anything to me regarding my sudden departure to new digs, but found a new place and roommate shortly afterward.

³⁹ Hitler's Revenge: A name coined by some Customers for the twin engine Dornier. They had little respect for the machine.

realized that he was slightly below the strip's elevation. While attempting to climb, he had further decreased his ground speed and stalled. The unforgiving plane struck the ground below the lip of the approach end of the runway at such a slow forward speed that the landing gear was not damaged. However, both propellers were bent when the plane pitched forward.⁴⁰

Blaine Jensen was loading a Helio Courier in the parking area when the accident occurred. Fearing a fire, he and others dashed down the strip to the plane and extracted the three men. Except for Gullion, who broke a leg, no one was badly injured. Pop, not wearing his shoulder straps and lap belt at impact, pitched forward hitting the dual yoke, bruising his nose, and shattering his glasses.

Jensen, like Joe Flipse and many other Customers, was never comfortable flying in the machine. They believed the Dornier was never intended to operate in the harsh conditions Laos offered, and land on marginal strips.⁴¹ The Dornier had a faulty engine cowling design. Sometimes, when flying through heavy rain, an engine (s) would quit. Then it became a challenge to restart the affected power plant (s) before smashing into a mountain.⁴²

My furnished bungalow, although small, seemed a perfectly self-contained unit for a bachelor. Considerably different from older Thai houses like Sopa Villa, the kitchen and bathroom were inside. With floor to ceiling screening and shade from banana trees lining the western side, the living room was airy. A road

⁴⁰ A more sanitized version stated that the engine had failed and the aircraft yawed uncontrollably to one side.

⁴¹ One could make a similar case for almost any aircraft that worked in the mountains of Laos.

⁴² Blaine Jensen Letter.
Joe Flipse Email, 05/08/97.

drove straight through the far side of the compound, far enough away from the houses to prevent major dust intrusion during the dry season. In contrast to the stark, dead-looking wood of Sopa Villa, Tom had installed wallpaper, and workers had painted the house a bright color. I did miss the refrigerator the landlord had provided at the old house. However, I found that I could purchase a sizeable American-built refrigerator from my Filipino friend at the Army Post Exchange. I decided to do this at a later time, when Udorn upgraded its electric power to twentieth century standards. City power was still so degraded at night that it was almost impossible to run any large 60-cycle appliance without burning up the motor. Electricity was also sporadic at night, and I occasionally had to resort to using a small kerosene lantern for illumination. The step-up transformer I bought at Song Serm's shop in town, dialed to the maximum ten setting, allowed usage of neon lights provided they were switched on well before dark. Otherwise, there was not enough power to allow the igniters to activate the neon gas. For some time, there were rumors of a large dam nearing completion that would enhance power in the region and allow us to utilize more creature comforts, especially on the outskirts of town. Tall poles and electric lines were already being erected and strung to effect this development.

Perhaps life would soon be better. The only items I actually considered essential to feel partially civilized were a one-inch foam topper to lessen the effects of a hard mattress, and a larger floor fan to circulate air. ⁴³ I could purchase the

⁴³ During the worst part of the year, it was so hot and humid that a fan would only move air around with no cooling effect.

topper from the Sears catalogue and have it shipped through U.S. Army post office (APO) mail. A fan could be purchased in town.

It seemed, especially among newer employees, that purchases of expensive items were increasing. One person bought something of value, and then others coveting an item would do likewise. Recalling my early history in the helicopter program, the current enemy push in Military Region Two, and accelerating maintenance problems, unconvinced that the job would last long, I elected to err on the conservative side and continue concentrating on saving money. Therefore, when the latest craze surfaced and people began purchasing new or used cars, I deferred, preferring to utilize local transportation in the form of samlors, local busses, Air America busses, my trusty thumb, or good old-fashioned foot power.

Tom Penniman purchased Coble's 1951 Jaguar 18 that Jim had left in Udorn with Jack Parks, the elderly Australian Facility Maintenance Chief. This was the same cheerful Parks who always remarked in passing, "Wot's up, mate?" Coble had originally acquired the machine in Bangkok from the estate of a deceased pilot. When Jim came to visit Asian American investors in 1965, Tom gave him seventy-five dollars for the decrepit car. He joking informed Tom that should he not get the vehicle running, to parachute it into the Long Tieng Valley so that when Tony Poe's bones were discovered by archeologists, they would also find the remnants of a very sophisticated culture which included Jaguars. ⁴⁴

Since Caesar's death, I had considered seeking an acceptable canine replacement, but had not yet found one to my

⁴⁴ Tom Penniman Email, 02/29/00.
Jim Coble Email.

liking. Knowing that I had recently lost my dog, a friend offered me a one-year-old shepherd that had not been well disciplined. I reserved judgment until seeing the animal. In the end, as I was away so much and could not properly care for an animal, I did not acquire a new pet.

Probably because of Billy Zeitler's downing the previous year, the increased hazards associated with SAR duty, and perhaps the current engine problems (even though this would never be acknowledged by management), the Company required an updated beneficiary form for our pilot file. I named my Father beneficiary, and sent him a copy of the form.

It was not divulged, nor was I aware at the time, but at the inception of the SAR program, both Company and military personnel associated with SAR coordination seriously believed that some of us would be lost while performing rescue missions. So as not to place a curse on us, ⁴⁵ the subject was not broached by local management types, and thoughts regarding the ultimate sacrifice remained unspoken until several months later when Abadie mentioned it to me one day. Certainly, line pilots did not converse about this distinct possibility, but it was a subject never far from my mind. Using foxhole mentality, most took the attitude that being young and invincible, it would always be the other guy who would die.

On the upside, many perversely believed that as long as Howard Estes continued to remain in our program and absorb most of the bad luck, no harm could possibly befall any of us. It was cruel, insensitive thinking, but Howard was subject to frequent incidents, fostered partly by his sometimes-rash actions and partly by chance. Howard always managed to be involved in the

⁴⁵ Called the bad phi after the Thai word for spirit or ghost.

worst possible situation at the wrong time. He could fly within the middle of a half dozen other helicopters and incur the only battle damage (BD). With a reputation gained over the past two or more years as the group's primary "magnet ass," he was considered the most shot at and hit individual in our group. Realistic as to his fate, he did not attempt to deny this, often joking that it did not matter if he flew high, low, sideways, or backwards, enemy projectiles always managed to find him.

Since the Estes family lived on the other side of town and I lacked adequate transportation, I rarely visited them anymore. Granted, we were away more often and working in different areas, but he, Deanie, and the kids now entertained or remained at home, occasionally attending nightly movies in the Club auditorium. Because of untimely incidents, temperament, and the reputation he acquired as the unit's dark cloud, it appeared that he was withdrawing from our tiny society. It was too bad, but we all had to address and resolve demons in our own way.

IMPENDING COUP?

Lazaro and I took Hotel-20 to Long Tieng very late, landing almost at dark. On Sunday we worked one fuel load around the local area then departed for Hua Mung in upper Military Region Two with FAR officers. Because of recent eastern losses, the site was becoming even more important as the primary forward supply and operations base in the region. Making a rare appearance, Colonel Tong was present monitoring the refugee situation and attempting to cobble together hasty defenses against the enemy offense that everyone, including Vang Pao, expected soon. From the left seat, he directed me to new outposts on hills between Site-58 and Pha Thi.

After supplying several sites, I shut down for fuel. The "Coffee Man" still fulfilled a function for his mentors and guests in the radio-operations hut at the top of the strip. Even though I did not believe it possible, perhaps as a forecast of impending enemy action, the friendly guy wore even more hand grenades on his web belt. Looking like a veritable tiger, I wondered how the young man would perform in a pinch. Perhaps, like Rudyard Kipling's loveable, but ultra-tragic character Gunga Din, he would surprise everyone.

In the late afternoon, after topping off, I loaded Colonel Kham Sao and other officers for an urgent business trip to Phoumist right-wing headquarters at Savannakhet and Paksane. There seemed to be substantial excitement and electricity in the air. En route to Lima-39, I dropped off and picked up people at Long Tieng and Paksane. Because of the unusual flight, so far afield from northern Military Region Two, with high-ranking officers, I suspected something out of the ordinary was afoot. The implications smacked of another coup so prevalent in the country. Following the lengthy flight, I flew a long leg north to Paksane to RON. Arriving after dark, I recorded over 11 hours on the last day of the 116-hour month. Lou McCasland and Abuy had been working Hotel-15 at Paksane since Saturday, trying to shore up defenses around Tha Thom. Except what I had observed, he professed to know little about the current political situation. In addition, since most of the top leaders had already left for a pow-wow at Savannakhet, the house was fairly empty and Kham Kong's remaining subordinates were somber, unwilling to discuss anything beyond mundane items.

On the first, another coup unfolded in Military Region Five. So as not to appear aiding either side, the powers that be grounded Lou and me at Paksane until the political confusion was clearer or resolved. During the afternoon, I was instructed to relocate to Long Tieng with BV-27 people, including Colonel Kham Sao. I parked the aircraft in the fuel pit and caught a ride to Udorn on Air America Dornier X-ray Whiskey Papa Charlie Alpha (XW-PCA).

Lou remained at Paksane two additional days conducting war work and shuttling people between Site-39 and Savannakhet.

GENERAL PHOUMI'S LAST STAND

Right wing elements of the FAR attempted yet another coup to eliminate the Neutralist government of Souvanna Phouma. Ambassador William Sullivan's actions and support for the Prime Minister and his government aided in suppressing the confusing attempt to seize political power. If any good occurred at the end of the day, it was the elimination of ultra-conservative political figures, Generals Phoumi Nosavan and Siho Lamphouhakoul. Their departures from Laos enabled Souvanna's government to resume the process of nation building and the Royal Lao Army to focus on increasing military problems.

The coup d'état that commenced on 31 January, and continued for a week, had roots in the long-standing struggle for political power between top ranks of military and paramilitary police. It involved not one coup, but two or even three independent events, each coalescing into a nasty mess that nearly spun out of control. With a string of coups occurring almost every year within so-called friendly military factions,

and the enemy knocking on the gates, it was surprising that Laos survived as a free nation until 1975.

Colonel Bounleut Saycocie, chief of FAR logistics and the leader of the younger and the supposedly more enlightened FAR officers, had received advanced military training and served in the USA performing diplomat duties. For some time, he had been unhappy with the business as usual political caldron and corruption characterizing the army-police relationship in Vientiane. Also, the unfair pay structure became a hot issue with him and his young officers. Over time, and after taking the pulse of his message among peers and constituents, Bounleut presupposed that he had almost blanket support for change. The dissatisfaction came to a head in January, when the unpopular Kouprasith was promoted to Major General, which was certain to enhance his grasp over the General Staff.

Late Sunday night, the ambassador was informed that considerable military activity was underway in the city. Several roadblocks were erected and troops were moving around. After 2000 hours, automatic weapons fire was heard in town. Rumors abounded regarding the long-anticipated move by disgruntled young colonels. ARMA personnel were dispatched to FAR headquarters located at the Chinaimo army base to monitor Kouprasith's response. Others went to Police Commander Siho's headquarters. Souvanna Phouma and General Ouane sought refuge in the King's compound. Many General Staff and cabinet officers took refuge in the safety of Bill Sullivan's house. Most individuals seemed to believe the effort would fail. Shortly after midnight, Bounleut's men seized the radio station and began broadcasting that a coup had taken place and demanded reorganization of the army high command. Wearing blue scarves for easy recognition, they seized the adjoining sports stadium.

Base Manager Dave Hickler was informed late in the evening that a coup was expected on the following day. Because of past coup rumors that never materialized, like the boy who cried wolf too many times, he was not convinced that a coup was actually underway, and assumed a patient wait and see attitude.

Generals Phoumi Nosavan and Abhay Kouprasith had long vied for political power in Vientiane. After losing considerable influence and several profitable enterprises in the city, Phoumi made several attempts to get rid of his nemesis, but all had failed. During the weeks leading up to the coup, Phoumi secretly planned another change to eliminate rival Kouprasith. He recognized the Bounleut faction's dissatisfaction as the perfect catalyst to act. Therefore, while separately concerned over the Prime Minister's support of Kouprasith and Ouane during a recent LP conference, and taking advantage of Bounleut's pending move, on the 27th he ordered Commanding General of Military Region Two, Kham Kong Buddavong, to commence moving troops toward Vientiane to suppress any theoretical Military Region Five troop movements toward his area. At the time, a majority of Kham Kong's troops were heavily engaged with enemy forces around Tha Thom and Sam Neua Province. Therefore, the general had little interest in a nonsense power struggle among power crazy generals. However, as a loyal Phoumist, and owing his position to Nosavan, he could not refuse to comply with the order. Therefore, he organized a small force of headquarters troops and directed them to proceed up Route-13 toward the capital. On the 31st, troop movements from Military Region Two toward Military Region Five were detected by an aerial observer. When queried by Kouprasith, Phoumi denied any knowledge or responsibility for the movement, and indicated that he could do nothing to stop it.

Kham Sao, Commanding Officer of BV-27, and many of his officers posted to Sam Neua Province, were also ardent Phoumists. Informed of impending problems in Vientiane, he was summoned to Paksane for a conference and support. As the coup unfolded, he returned to Site-20A with intentions of returning to Hua Moun and assembling loyal troops to complement the rightists and Kham Kong's movement on Vientiane.

Blaine Jensen was out of commission for six weeks before and during the coup period. Suffering a severe case of malaria, gall bladder, and a series of kidney ailments that almost caused them to cease functioning, he had spent time at Doc Weldon's house obtaining treatment. Still largely unwell, he returned to Sam Tong two days after the coup unfolded.

Believing that supporting a coup would only come to grief, Long Tieng Case Officers Pop and Vang Pao actively attempted to talk Kham Sao out of journeying to Paksane to participate in a coup. The only aircraft available to him flew from Long Tieng and Sam Tong. Adamant about going to the aid of his respected boss, General Kham Kong, Kham Sao demanded a ride to Savannakhet, but was collectively rejected by the Americans who did not want him to be implicated in an illogical mess during a critical time when all commanders and fighting men were sorely needed to suppress enemy advances in Sam Neua. The colonel finally requested a Lao plane ride to Moun Soui, where he could obtain a flight to Vientiane. He was refused. The Long Tieng people, fearing he might hop on a RLAF C-47 that brought goods from Vientiane to the 20A market, sent Kham Sao to Sam Tong. Blaine had to listen to his pleading and was the chief recipient of Kham Sao's ire at a time when he was still bothered by malaria's effects.

Ambassador William Sullivan did not sleep that night, preferring to churn out current situation messages to State. He talked on the telephone to Phoumi, who denied any complicity in the coup. Then the ambassador summoned the Australian technician who operated the radio station for assistance. Within a short time, the Aussie severed the electric lines, effectively decommissioning the station and propaganda broadcasts. Then Sullivan continued attempts to convince Bounleut's troops that the coup had failed to achieve anything, and to flee the area. Even though Bounleut was not in evidence, the ambassador believed the worst would be over by the next day.

By morning, roads were blocked by soldiers, but, as it was easy to pass through the roadblocks, most Air America personnel were at work. Rumors abounded; it was obvious that a coup was either underway or about to commence.

Souvanna arranged a meeting between Bounleut and the General Staff that morning. In the interest of peace, and grossly outnumbered by Kouprasith's forces, the colonel attended. He had one battalion in the vicinity of Wattay Airport, one at the ordinance depot, one near the signal engineer depot, and one at the palace grounds protecting the General Staff. Pressured by his superiors, Bounleut agreed to cease occupation of the city. He withdrew troops from several strategic locations, but redeployed them to the old passenger terminal at Wattay Airport without coordination with FAR leaders. As the day progressed, not all the agreements were fulfilled as stipulated. Bounleut failed to withdraw his men from the Lao National Radio Station and ignored attempts to obtain an explanation.

Air America Base Manager Dave Hickler noted that approximately 1,100 troops moved onto the airfield and prepared

fighting positions. The base commander advised him to move the Air America aircraft, as he soon expected hostilities. Air America aircraft were dispersed to remote portions of the field to minimize damage. All was quiet, except for minor troop movements, but as Company personnel were unable to load rice, fly, or work, many ground personnel were released and departed for home. The base manager maintained some flight crews at the field in the event it was necessary to evacuate planes. Toward late afternoon, with nothing resolved, several planes were sent to Udorn, while others remained in place to deal with emergencies. Air America operations secured at 1800 hours.

While the Prime Minister made recorded radio statements that all was settled, other broadcasts advised the town folks to leave. This stimulated a large evacuation to Thailand.

On the day of the blowup in Vientiane, enemy aggression began east of Thakhet in Military Region Three. FAR units were ejected from several hilltop positions. The activity was believed a maneuver to cover the initial stages of a counter offensive to the FAR operation east of Savannakhet and Keng Kok (LS-139). With a serious threat apparently developing in the southern area, State indicated that unity and cooperation among non-communist leaders in support of Souvanna was particularly vital to Lao national interests at this time. Since evidence surfaced that Phoumi was not attempting to dampen the coup situation, the ambassador was asked to reason with him and Siho.

Sullivan visited Phoumi at his home, hoping to convince him of the dangers involved in supporting the current instability. It could only be counterproductive to maintaining a viable government and free country, while the enemy pressured FAR forces in Sam Neua and the Panhandle. He wanted Phoumi to accompany him to confer with Souvanna, but the general refused.

For his part, the Prime Minister wanted no fighting, but ordered his generals to block any hostile movement from the port at Tha Deua to Vientiane. The AIRA representative returning from Savannakhet was asked to stop at Paksane and attempt to dissuade Kham Kong from participating in the coup, withdraw his troops, and sever relations with Phoumi. Embassy messages were also directed to Vang Pao, and the Thai-staffed 333 headquarters group in Udorn, requesting support in defusing the problem.

With Bounleut refusing to remove all his men from the city, based on Kouprasith's failure to fulfill all the agreements, the situation was highly confused. At Wattay Airport, the major in charge professed expecting troop reinforcements from the second zone. Dashing hopes of dispersal, he requested permission from the General Staff for his troops to overnight at the airfield.

As Kouprasith began to slowly seize control of the situation, he positioned a platoon of armored cars at the airport and the palace. Additionally, a curfew was established from 2300 to 0600 hours.

Although Siho normally supported Phoumi's coup attempts, this time he shrewdly opted to remain temporarily neutral until Phoumi and Kouprasith's forces resolved their differences. That night he directed border patrol companies to the police camp at Phong Keng outside Vientiane, in order to reinforce the camp and prepare to take advantage of the situation. At the time, no clear police intentions surfaced.

Negotiating and maneuvering continued on Sunday. Phoumi, like Bounleut, still attempting to gather wavering support, sent a representative to Siho requesting that he arrest everyone opposed to him. Still cautious, taking a wait and see attitude, Siho refused to promise anything tangible. Then Phoumi ordered RLAF General Ma to bomb the Chinaimo camp in support of Kham

Kong's troops, who were reputedly about to attack from the east. It never happened. Later, Ma was ordered by Kouprasith to bomb Siho's troops north of Vientiane, which he equally ignored.

On the third, with Souvanna Phouma's blessing, Kouprasith adopted the philosophy that the best defense was a good offense. He elected to take positive action and quell the uprising before the situation accelerated. Since Phoumi, with marginal support from his followers, posed only a marginal threat, he elected to first neutralize Phoumi's meager forces with artillery fire, and then eliminate the more formidable police element.

Dave Hickler noted relative quiet in the city during the early morning. Air America Operations attempted to conduct missions with planes shuttling out of Udorn, but without unimpeded access to the supply hangar, little was accomplished. At 1100 hours, the ambassador cautioned the Base Manager that the airport should be emptied of civilians, as fighting was anticipated. Therefore, all American personnel assigned to the airport and to opposing factions were withdrawn. Remaining aircraft were flown out and those not considered airworthy were dispersed. Apparently, town folk who had not already departed received the same message, for streets were deserted. At 1215 hours, 105mm rounds fired from Chinaimo at Phone Keng impacted loudly near the Base Manager's home. At that time, Operations manager Tom Krohn called Dave requesting permission to launch Bob Abrams in a Helio Courier to conduct a recon and relay the situation to interested parties. Bob circled the city until low on fuel. During Abrams' many hours aloft, he radioed a blow-by-blow description of the action to the operations manager who, in turn, relayed it to the U.S. Embassy Requirements Office.

While an unseasonable rain fell intermittently on the action, heavy firing occurred throughout the city. Kouprasith's

troops fanned out to secure main roads leading into town. Phoumi's house was destroyed and the general mysteriously disappeared. Throughout the afternoon, Kouprasith's armored vehicles and troops engaged PARU-trained police commando units inside and outside Phong Keng. Artillery barrages continued until afternoon, eventually igniting a POL dump and leaving the police camp in flames. By day's end the police units were defeated. Artillery fire diminished, and then increased again along with groundfire during the evening.

At 2300 hours, an ammunition dump exploded. Estimates ranged to at least thirty killed and wounded.

During ensuing fighting, the Phou Khao Khouai Frontier Police Headquarters lodged in the hilly Ritaville Ridge area was seized without conflict. Police elements from the headquarters moving south toward Vientiane were engaged and defeated.

Almost from the commencement of Kouprasith's offensive, within the airport perimeter and in the city, Bounleut's men surrendered without a fight and quickly declared their loyalty to the FAR.

With the damaged city largely in pro-government hands, firing ceased, but concern lingered regarding nervous trigger fingers. Despite this danger, Sullivan's aides were able to initially assess damage and casualties. Seeking to escape the carnage, droves of refugees continued to boat across the Mekong to Thailand. Except for a few minor shrapnel wounds, all Americans were reported safe, and no one displayed an immediate concern over a need to evacuate the city. Damage was light to houses struck by rifle and 81mm mortar fire. A corner of the Air America Great House Hostel was hit by a mortar shell. Estimates of civilian population and troop casualties were slow being recorded. Sixty civilian deaths were eventually tabulated.

Injuries warranting medical treatment were dealt with at the USAID hospital; others at a local hospital.

The ambassador, aware that regional Generals Vang Pao and Phasouk were staunchly anti-Kouprasith, but realistic individuals, forwarded messages to them indicating that despite the trouble, USG would continue to supply their forces. However, because of their Phoumist loyalties, there was some concern that the men would not embrace a new military command structure with Kouprasith at the top. Because of an active participation in the coup, General Kham Khong was written off as a viable military figure. With Phoumi no longer in evidence, enthusiasm to participate in the lost cause waned. One of the Paksane units withdrew. Another BV led by Major Karbkeo Sourisak continued to Tha Deua and fired the fuel depot, after which the unit pulled back to a bridge crossing the Nam Ngum. Subjected to artillery and L-20 machine gun fire, the troops withdrew to the jungles north of Paksane.

Three helicopter crews and UH-34Ds were placed on alert at Udorn, available for use if the situation warranted. Once Wattay Airport was deemed in friendly hands, the ambassador requested the helicopters move north to standby there for potential missions.

Ed Reid, Charlie Davis, and Rick Decosta were in one of two H-34s landing at the field. One ship was tasked to fly the Assistant ARMA to Chinaimo to obtain a current report from Kouprasith. Charlie noted soldiers wearing blue armbands standing around airport fringes and near the terminal and taxiways. Others wearing orange bands or scarves milled around the field perimeter. It was a confusing situation, but the day appeared quiet, with people going about their business. Helicopter crews RON at the Air America compound, and after

several hours of standby at the airport, RTB the following day. Except for hearsay regarding the situation in town, they never learned why they were sent to Vientiane, or were not used in any capacity.

Howard Estes and Art White had just returned from upcountry when they learned of the coup. Several fixed wing pilots were harassing the CPH about their families' safety in Vientiane. They were explicitly ordered not to cross the river under the penalty of termination. Howard wanted to help, but was told the same thing. He and Art were assigned night flying and were again informed, "tongue in cheek," not to cross the river. Disturbed at the dependents' plight, Estes and White discussed the possibility of evacuating people and decided to go. They landed at Wattay Airport near the Bird house. Despite a tank gun pointed at them, people poured from the house. He launched with ten people, flew across the river and deposited them. Howard made three shuttles that night totaling thirty people.

Later, Bird pilot Bill Tedder's wife arrived at Howard's house in a panicked frenzy. After calming somewhat, she related that during the fighting, in order to avoid death or injury, she took refuge in a meat cooler among several bodies.

In another report, "Diamond" Jim Voiles' plump, middle aged girlfriend witnessed a Lao hit point blank by a rifle grenade outside her compound. Jim managed to fly her to Udorn in a C-123 without benefit of a copilot. Both were highly agitated.

During the night, heavy rain tended to discourage additional fighting. When Hickler left for the airport at 0650 hours, weather conditions had improved, but it was still dark and gray with low hanging clouds. The streets were deserted. He noted no damage at the airport and little evidence of wholesale looting. Employees filtered in to work, and planes began

shuttling to Udorn. There was some panic among Air America pilots with families, and a few of the faint of heart left for the safety of Udorn.

Bill Sullivan met with the Prime Minister. He learned that apparently both Phoumi and Siho were still alive, but except for rumors of their being in Paksane or Savannakhet, their actual location was unknown for two days. Phoumi had sent envoys to Long Tieng to maintain Vang Pao's continued loyalty. However, Vang Pao professed that although he did not personally like Kouprasith or the General Staff, his primary loyalty was for the Vientiane group.

During continuing talks with U.S. Embassy attaches, both Generals Kong Le and Vang Pao expressed considerable concern regarding the coup and its implications on them and their people. Kong Le was assured that the situation had returned to normal in Vientiane. Delegations of General Sing, Thao, and Touby Ly Fong visited Long Tieng. Vang Pao placed himself at the disposal of the Prime Minister and King. However, the general still felt strong personal loyalty toward Kham Kong and Phoumi, as both had supported him with pay and military supplies during the unsettling days in 1960. The representatives assured Vang Pao of continued support and that the Vientiane problems were neutralized.

Souvanna authorized the embassy team to attempt to persuade General Kham Kong to commit to no further actions against the establishment. However, it was understood that he would be required to personally answer to Souvanna and the Minister of Defense for his actions during the coup. Souvanna correctly judged that Phoumi was finished as a military and political force in Laos, and that he lacked sufficient forces to mount a counteroffensive.

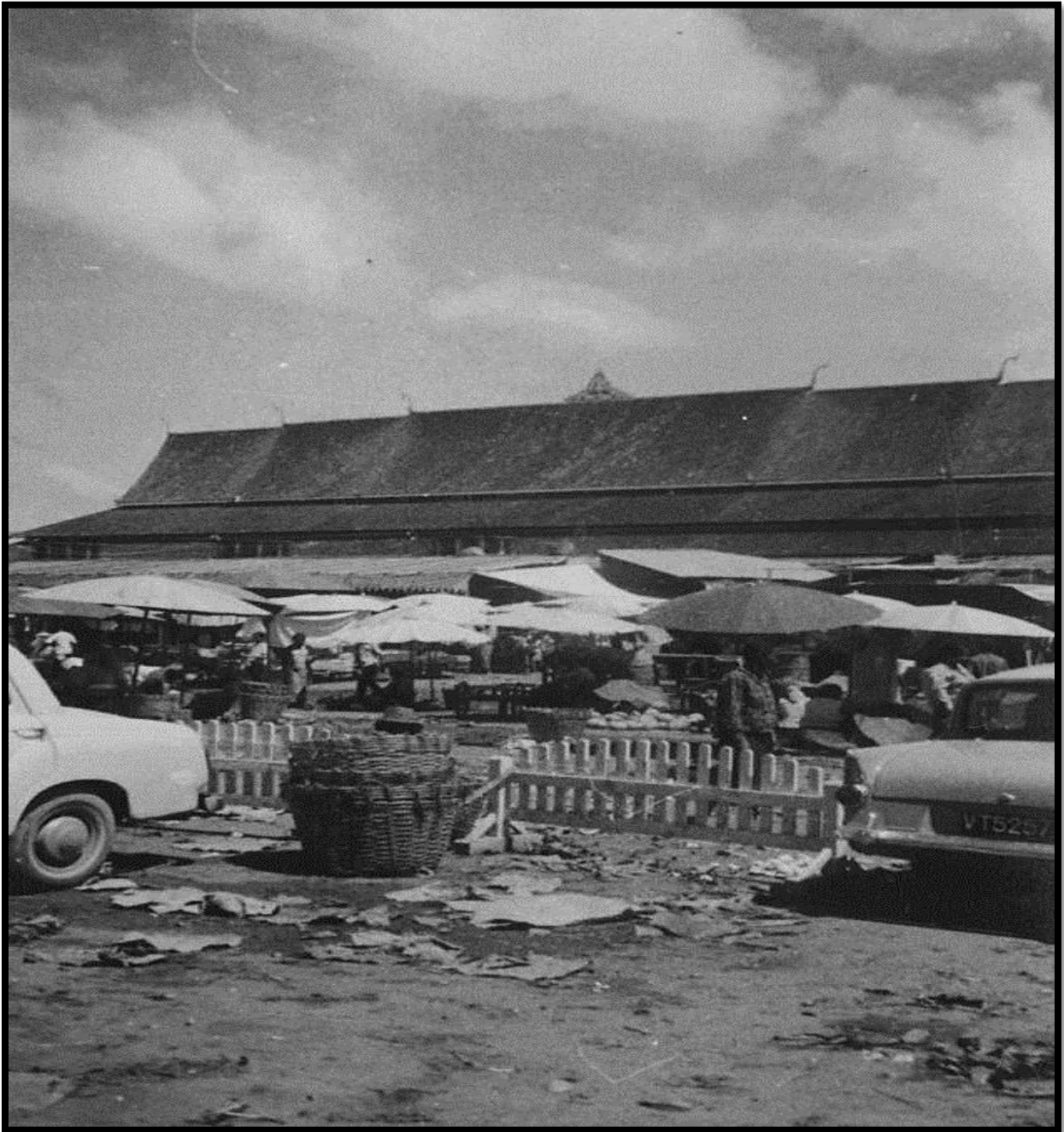
General Phoumi had flown to Hua Moung several times in the past to ensure that his people and Kham Kong's troops were paid and properly fed. Because of this long-term concern for his men, many of Commanding Officer Kham Sao's BV-27 officers continued to be loyal, and supported Kham Kong. As enemy offensives and pressure impacted the province, this could not have occurred at a worse time.

General Ma's T-28 pilots resumed action against Pathet Lao positions. There were rumors that the Pathet Lao would take advantage of the fighting on the 3rd to step up countrywide attacks. Except for enemy action south of Thakhet along Route-13, there was no immediate evidence to support this speculation.

Dave Hickler recorded minor small arms fire at 0400 hours on the 5th. When he left for Wattay Airport, barricades were manned by alert forces. During the day, rumors still abounded that unsettled and caused panic among employees. Some rice was loaded on planes and sent upcountry, as there was a critical need for this commodity because of the increased number of refugees in Sam Neua Province. That night was calm, and Dave believed that Vientiane was returning to normal.

In messages to State, Sullivan reiterated Hickler's assessment of the situation. The streets were mostly deserted except for military patrols, but the morning market was open for business. As to the enemy taking advantage of the unstable situation, there was no evidence of increased Pathet Lao movement in any sector. The situation south of Thakhet was being investigated.

By the 5th, General Kham Kong had withdrawn all his forces from Military Region Five, and there was no tangible evidence that he intended to launch a counteroffensive against Vientiane, although the General Staff continued to be concerned about the



Vientiane morning market.
Joe Flipse Collection.

commanding officer's loyalty and intentions. They planned to send a plane to Paksane to deliver the general to Vientiane for an explanation of his recent actions. Since his safe return to his Military Region Two headquarters could not be guaranteed, the proposed meeting was deferred.

Prognostications and assumptions emanating from Washington surmised that not all coup events were finished, although it was likely that Phoumi and Siho had been eliminated from future roles in the country. On the horizon, a leading family, the Sananikones, and General Kouprasith might undermine Souvanna, his ministers, and the Geneva settlement to establish control of Vientiane's legitimate and illegitimate businesses previously owned by Phoumi and his cohorts. There was also the possibility that military and civilian leaders from southern military regions might not cooperate with Vientiane, or might withdraw into separate entities without strongman Phoumi's presence. In the end, it would be up to the Lao hierarchy to resolve the problems, but it was believed that American input would be influential.

By Monday, the coup was considered over, and all Air America employees were back at work. Hickler indicated that employee behavior during the coup, in which he never felt in mortal danger, was revealing in regard to their loyalty. During any crisis he could always count on some key workers, but others ran at the first sign of trouble. Air America's policy was to never leave anyone behind during times of trouble, and to care for all employees. As real credit to the Company, most dependents had handled themselves well during the previous week, although turmoil and doubt persisted. As late as the 12th some people still talked about moving from Vientiane to safer regions in Udorn or Bangkok.

With the handwriting on the wall, Phoumi Nosavan and Siho Lamphouthakoul covertly slipped across the river with their immediate security forces and many loyal officers. They were accompanied by Lao officers: Police Colonel Khamfanh Phisaoukahn, former commanding officer of the Vientiane Provincial Police; Police Colonel Wanchai Khansopha, former Assistant Director for the Immigration Police; Police Lieutenant Colonel Khamphoui Sayarth-psychological warfare expert; Police Lieutenant Colonel, Pany Phonethipsavath, former Secretary of Police; Police Lieutenant Khounon-Siho's aide; Army Major Nonsay-Phoumi's aide; Army Captain Phouratsamay Rattanaavong-Phoumi's nephew; and Army Captain Phoumal Nosavan-Phoumi's nephew. As political refugees they were all placed in Thai protective custody. To prevent further mischief, the Vientiane Embassy advised that the RTG men should be kept incommunicado from other Lao, and placed under strict house arrest in Thailand until the situation in Laos could be rectified.

For additional safety in surroundings befitting their status, and as surveillance-type housing became available, eight of the men left for Bangkok on the 11th.

With the protagonists of the insurrection no longer a factor, immediate military structure problems loomed on the horizon. Ambassador Sullivan's Country Team mused over the ability of Souvanna Phouma's military hierarchy under Ouane and Kouprasith to assert sufficient authority over leading FAR officers, most of whom had obtained their initial strength and support from Phoumi. Generals Vang Pao and Phasouk were still considered unknown quantities in the equation, since they owed long time allegiance to Phoumi, and thoroughly disliked Kouprasith. Kham Kong was also perceived as a direct threat to Vientiane.

Kouprasith did not wait long to assimilate the good benefits Phoumi had enjoyed. Shortly after Phoumi et. al. fled to Udorn, Kouprasith invited RLA Command General Thao Ma to Vientiane. Ma, considered a moral man and a patriot, had remained neutral when the various factions vied for power. When Kouprasith offered Ma money to allocate two C-47 for his and Ouane's opium smuggling operations, Ma refused. Since 1964, Ma had been using the planes for night air support in the role of early gunships, and did not have any planes available for such foolishness. He took exception to the offer and told the two generals not to attempt bribing any of his pilots. Then he returned to his Savannakhet command.

While the situation continued to unwind, problems over military loyalty and hard feelings persisted for several months. Phoumists suffered. In Military Region Three, Generals Lam Ngeum and Sang were forced to resign. Other officers were replaced in a Group Mobile unit.

Lao mentality was partial to switching positions in varying situations. This led to generally jumping on the survival band wagon, depending on who won the day: The Oriental bend-with-the-wind philosophy. Major General Kham Kong was not contrite over his reluctant participation in the coup, and, as Phoumi Nosavan's highest ranking officer involved, became the primary fall guy after the unpleasantness subsided. He was eventually tricked into a Vientiane trip by a trusted U.S. Embassy attaché, and subsequently arrested by Kouprasith. Court-martialed, he was imprisoned for a few months at the Ritaville Phou Khao Khouai facility. Then he was transferred and placed under house arrest at Luang Prabang for three years. After Kham Kong's release, Doctor Weldon twisted Larry Joseph's arm and obtained a job for

him with Continental Air Services, CASI, the airline that purchased Bill Bird's Bird and Son Company in 1965.

Colonel Kham Sao eventually managed a return to Paksane, but learning of the treachery perpetrated on Kham Kong, fled into the forests and jungles northeast of Paksane to join Major Karbkeo and his unit. In April, after surrendering, he was court-marshaled, convicted of treason, and jailed. Karbkeo's ultimate fate was more serious, as he was executed while "surrendering."

After Kham Sao had served almost a year in prison, "Jiggs" Weldon bribed a member of the royal court at Luang Prabang with two million kip to have him receive amnesty from the King. Weldon then arranged for him to supervise the work force at the Vientiane medical warehouse. After several years of political sterility, Vang Pao placed him on his staff at Long Tieng. He performed a commendable job, but always in civilian clothes without military rank.

Shortly after General Kham Kong's arrest, the General Staff passed the Military Region Two command to General Vang Pao. In addition, Borikhane Province was deleted from Military Region Two and folded onto Military Region Five. Military Region Two headquarters was relocated from Paksane to Sam Tong. Over time, Paksane and Thakhet rightist uprisings proved unsuccessful. To escape retribution, many Phoumist officers fled to Thailand and were interned near Udorn. So many key men disappeared from the RLA that Souvanna later appealed to them to return to the fold. Several hundred did eventually return to Savannakhet.

The National Police Force did not escape the purge. Since General Siho had used his paramilitary forces against the Vientiane FAR during the coup, the Phoumist government elected to drastically dismantle and reform the unit. Organized military

type battalions were transferred to the army. USAID assistance was sought to rebuild the remaining police units into a purely conventional and civilian force.

Citing the coup as justification, Souvanna Phouma reorganized and strengthened his government. He persuaded the National Assembly to pass a constitutional amendment changing electoral procedures during stressful periods. Because many areas of the country were under Pathet Lao control, this change virtually established continuance of the Phouma government. Souvannavong complained that the new procedure was illegal, but the PL maintained very little representation in the government. In rebuttal, as Souvanna had reiterated many times before, leftist politicians were still a part of the coalition government and could return to Vientiane any time to resume their ministries and assembly seats.

Finance Minister Sisouk spoke for younger men in the government who would eliminate corruption and inefficiency in running the country. It was a waste of time and effort, for as usual, regional, family, and personal loyalties took precedence over the overall good of the country and a sense of nation building.

In the end, the divisive coup left the Lao military no better equipped for success against the well-disciplined enemy. As before, military regional commanders continued to operate their zones like personal kingdoms. In addition, they rarely allowed their troops to travel outside their regions to assist

operations in other beleaguered zones. ¹

HONG KONG INTERLUDE

Marius and I had journeyed to Hong Kong on scheduled time off (STO) and missed the shooting portion of the coup. Consistent with his future plans, Burke harbored visions of forming an import/export business with two Chinese men he had met on a previous trip. I was always interested in a good business proposition, but was along mainly for a change in venue. Area weather was miserable--cold and rainy--and we also realized that it was a Chinese New Year holiday period, when many businesses and other establishments were closed. Streets were nearly devoid of people except for a few begging children who sometimes chased us for blocks to cage a few coins.

The communist department store was open and I was able to purchase several Indonesian wood carvings for the house. In

¹Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, 123-125.

Dave Hickler's After Action Accounts of the Coup to Taipei Covering the Time Period 01/31/65-02/12/65.

Ambassador William Sullivan Messages to State (6), 02/01/65, 0030, 0200, 1756 Hours.

CIA SITREPs, 02/01/65.

White House Situation Room, 02/02/65.

William Sullivan to State, Several Messages, 02/03/65.

Memorandum NSC (Smith) to President Johnson, 02/03/65.

Charles Davis, *Across the Mekong*, 42-43.

Howard Estes Telephone Call, 09/04/93.

William Sullivan to State, 02/04/65.

William Sullivan to State, 02/05/65.

State to Vientiane Embassy, 02/05/65, 2005.

William Sullivan to State, 02/06/65 (2) 1700 Hours.

CIA Intelligence Information Cable, Departure of Phoumi-Siho Party for Bangkok, 02/11/65.

Doctor Charles Weldon Emails, 02/09/97, 02/25/97, 11/21/99.

Blaine Jensen Letters, 06/08/96, 07/01/96.

Tom Penniman Email, 03/02/00.

CHECO: The Royal Lao Air Force, 28.

addition, the store stocked difficult-to-obtain ceramic candles that perfectly fit my British-manufactured leadless glaze Cheavin Saludor water filter. The candles were touted to filter dirt and impurities, including very fine micron particles. This included the amoeba parasite. The procedure involved boiling a pot of water for a minimum of three minutes, letting it cool, and pouring the liquid into the filter's inner liner. Designed for the tropics, the resulting water was guaranteed potable and safe to drink.

Marius' buddies were rather strange-looking individuals and reminded me of the comic characters Mutt and Jeff. Johnny Fay was the taller of the two and "fey" was a good description of the man. The little guy was unspectacular, but his later actions surprised me. After meeting them, any aspirations I might have entertained of joining Marius in his business venture faded.

One evening toward the end of our vacation, our group which included a couple of "Teddy Girls", was walking down the covered walkway leading to the Star Ferry Kowloon dock landing across Victoria Harbor from the main Island. Three or four young Chinese and one Englishman engaged us in the corridor. I went on ahead and boarded the almost empty boat, while Marius seemingly conducted a polite conversation with the tall British chap. As the boat moved away from the dock, the two suddenly began to swing at each other. The change in the atmosphere so surprised me that, frozen in my tracks, I watched in astonishment, wondering what could have possibly perpetrated the fight. The small Chinese man did not hesitate to act. He immediately leaped on the Brit's back and applied a choke hold. Had this incident occurred in a grade Z movie, it would have been comical, but in this instance no one laughed. The fight was over in an instant, but not before the tall Brit grabbed Marius by the shoulders

and, using his head to advantage, bashed Marius on the forehead. I had never seen that form of combat, but it proved highly effective. Burke received a deep, bloody cut, and a sizeable indentation to his brow. The aggression over, and fearing police repercussions, the boys quickly moved off toward the boat's bow. Fay's small Chinese buddy stripped the paper wrapping off a cigarette and plugged the open wound with tobacco to stem the copious bleeding. I shuddered at the unsanitary method, but it effectively caused the blood to immediately coagulate. I was impressed with the emergency first aid. Twice, in a matter of a few minutes, the little guy had saved the day. Despite Marius' protests that he felt fine, the wound on his temple looked ugly. Therefore, when we arrived at the Hong Kong dock, we hired a Mercedes diesel taxi to drive us to a government hospital (part of the colony's structured socialized medicine) in the hills. X-rays revealed no fracture and the wound was cleaned and stitched. By then it was very late, so, with little incentive to continue prowling, we retraced our steps to Kowloon. When queried, Marius explained that the boys had levied nasty remarks toward the girls who accompanied us. Taking exception to taunts calculated to cause problems, Marius had told them to "cool it." This had resulted in the confrontation.

The incident was deemed too bazaar to mention again. Marius continued his business relationship with the Chinese, and they eventually cheated him out of his entire investment. ²

² Today, Marius Burke maintains that he still has an indentation above an eye socket, a reminder of the Brit's bashing technique.

PENNIMAN

While we were "enjoying" our Hong Kong fun and games interlude, an amusing incident occurred at the Air America base. Tom Penniman's Operation Manager duties extended to ground transportation (GTD) in which he administered driving tests to prospective Thai drivers by the side of the Administration Building. In the afternoon, a van pulled up and, amid a flurry of activity, a fat man wearing a rumpled suit was ushered into Ben Moore's office. Pending further disposition, his luggage was placed on the roadside. During the course of a driving test, an errant driver carelessly backed into the luggage with a loud crash, crushing the bags against the side of the building. Hearing the noise, Ben and the "suit" rushed off the porch and the normally unflappable Moore began frantically scooping up the scattered clothes. Penniman discovered that the "suit" was none other than Air America's Chief Operating Officer George Doole. Tom later was informed by a friend in Taipei that Doole had made an outrageous insurance claim for silk pajamas and other high-priced items "destroyed" during the incident, when in actuality he wore government issued undergarments, which it was rumored that he did not change often.

Tom had never met George Doole, but knew him by proxy. The knowledge was mainly derived from accounts of his brother-in-law John Church of the early Pan American Airline period. At one time, PAA was divided into three divisions: LAD-Latin American with headquarters in Miami, Florida; PAD-Pacific, headquarters in San Francisco, California; and Atlantic headquarters in New York City. The Atlantic and Pacific divisions merged into one unit during 1963. LAD refused to enter the merger and President Juan Trippe allowed this. Trippe enjoyed a close association with the CIA, particularly in Latin America. He was deemed

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valuable because of the legitimacy of the airline and its ability to position Agency staff at any landing location.

Several former PAA employees eventually became Air America employees or Customers, including George Doole, a future VPFO, and Tom Penniman, who had worked for PAA in Liberia after leaving the USAF.

Church and Doole were roommates in Beirut, Lebanon, during the late 1940s. Doole was the station Chief of Operations and Church the Director of Traffic. John recalled Doole as being too frugal to have his socks laundered, preferring to wash them in the common sink, which angered Church, who wanted to shave. ³

³ Tom Penniman Emails, 03/09/00, 03/10/00, 04/13/00.
EW Knight Email, 07/06/00.

Following Hong Non's capture, there was a temporary lull in the enemy offensive while Vietnamese units consolidated their victories and prepared for an assault on Hua Moung's under strength, but formidable defenses. It was almost like they allowed villagers and ADC units to flee westward so as not to impede their progress. By the end of January, enemy forces began moving toward Hua Moung. Then, with the advent of the Vientiane coup, during the confusion and dissension precipitated among various elements of the FAR in the days afterward, Pathet Lao forces redoubled aggressive efforts in upper Military Region Two in an attempt to force government troops south and away from the Route-6 logistical corridor leading to Ban Ban, the Plain of Jars, and the gateway to the river towns.

To stem enemy movement and create diversions away from the Site-58 regional headquarters, Colonel Tong's men counterattacked in the Hong Non area and reclaimed a few sites. Despite T-28 sorties that inflicted a considerable toll on enemy forces, government troops failed to consolidate and hold these positions. Between 8 and 10 February, the positions were lost, as were others at Moung Khao, Pha Thom, and Ban Na Lieu. The important site at Houei Sa An (LS-127), ten miles northeast of Bouam Long (LS-88) on the east side of Route-6, also was attacked and abandoned on the ninth. As Pop and "Jiggs" predicted, fighting continued to accelerate displacement and requirements for civilian evacuation throughout the eastern area.

While Vang Pao, Kham Sao, and Tong anxiously worried about their northern and eastern flanks, and jointly planned regional

defensive strategies, the U.S. Embassy Country Team believed the political attitudes of Vang Pao and Kham Kong (who was still at the Paksane headquarters) were essential to FAR and Meo ADC unit morale in resisting further enemy inroads into the Sam Neua area. Their personal views were difficult to assess, for both generals unrealistically expected General Phoumi, like the Phoenix, to rise from the ashes, reassume his previous status, and take control of the confused rightist elements. Therefore, expecting to eventually be asked to join the loyal Phoumist cause, to hedge their bets, they queried Udorn for advice. In addition, many stragglers from the aborted coup were making their way toward Paksane.

In Military Region Three, enemy guerrilla units in the Thakhet area were creating havoc and consternation among still-disorganized FAR troops. Helping to prevent total chaos, General Ma's T-28 pilots performed good field work. ¹

"During the period 1-11 February, approximately 115 trucks were observed entering central Laos from North Vietnam along Route-12. an estimated 450 to 500 North Vietnamese troops were reported accompanying the convoys on foot.

On the night of 10-11 February, U.S. aircraft attacked a 16-truck convoy on Route-23, a few miles south of the junction with Route-12. Several of the trucks were damaged or destroyed.

In northern Laos, communist truck traffic continues to move along Route-7 into the Planes des Jarres area..." ²

¹William Sullivan to State, 02/10/65.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 127.
Victor Anthony, 153.

² CIA Daily Bulletin. 02/13/65. Laos: Communist supply convoys are continuing to move into Laos.

The enemy was on the move. By the eighteenth a CIA brief reported:

In south-central Laos, the communists are continuing to bring in troops and supplies. Since early this month, according to road watch reports, at least 170 trucks and possibly as many as 1,200 North Vietnamese troops have moved into Laos along Route-12.

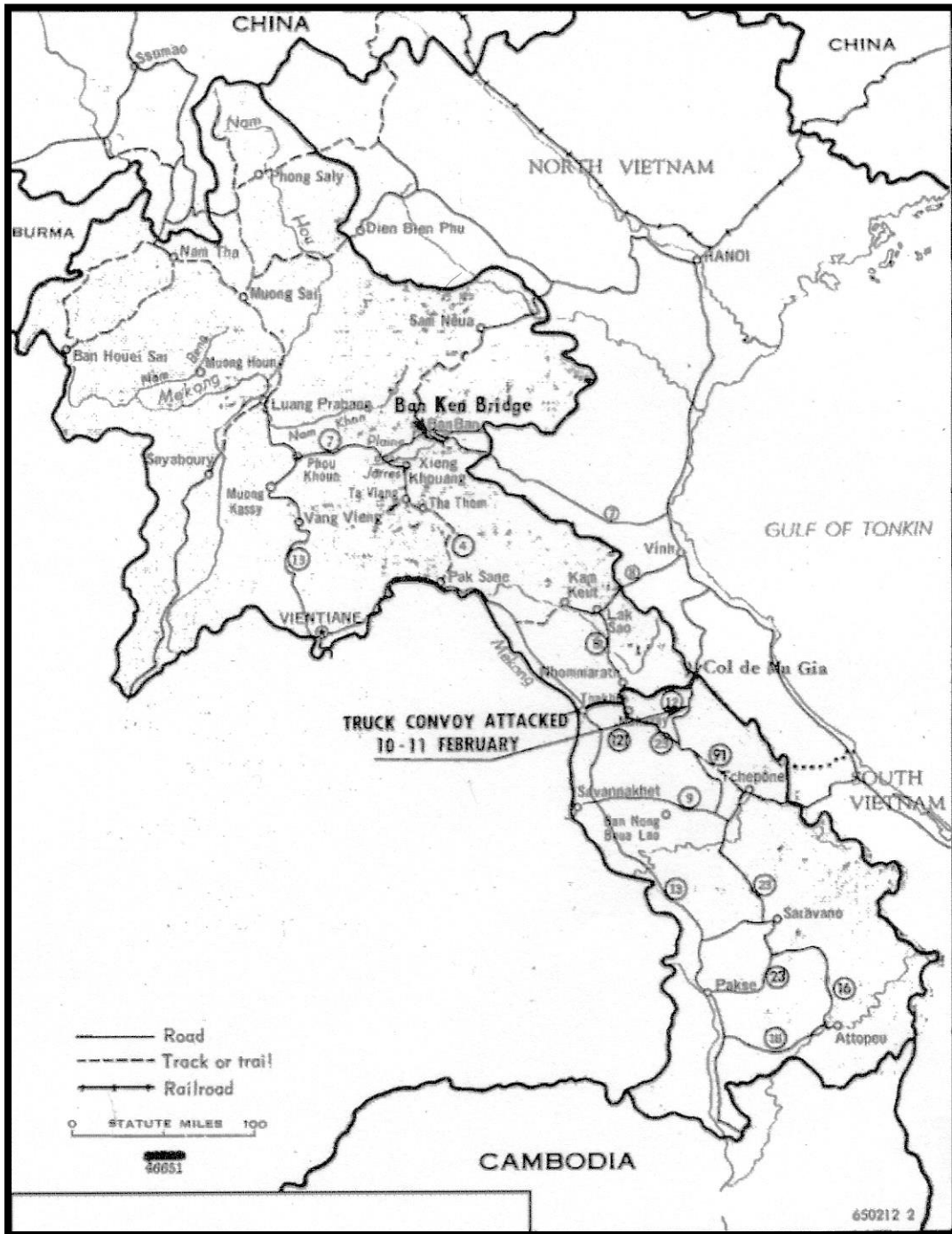
These troops may be moving south to counter rightist advances in the area between [Moung Phalane] and Moung Phine on Route-9. On 14 February, a captured Pathet Lao soldier reported a large concentration of North Vietnamese troops a few miles to the northwest of Moung Phine..." ³

I was happy to return to my new house, but since activity was popping upcountry, I had little time to enjoy it. The maid Kathy Moher had trained took good care of the place during the day and the youthful guard, my property at night. Their presence was deemed important to our safety. This was particularly the case on the Soi Mahamit side, since no fence existed between the public dirt road and the bungalow. The stagnant pond behind the house provided some security against non-swimming thieves and the houses in the rest of the compound introduced a buffer zone and some means of interlocking fire.

HUA MOUNG

It required the Maintenance Department some time to repair and haul Hotel-28 out of the barn, and for Wayne Knight to test and produce an airworthy machine. Therefore, I had to stand-by at

³ CIA Daily Bulletin, 02/18/65. Laos: The communists are continuing to strengthen their military posture throughout Laos.



Map depicting the air strike area in Military Region Three near Mugia Pass. In Military Region Two, despite the bombing of the Route-7 Ban Ken Bridge, traffic still rolled along an alternate route.

CIA Map, 02/13/65.

the field until the ship was released. I had all morning to drink coffee in the Club and converse with other pilots, who filled me in on the week's events upcountry. Apparently, it was not a pleasant time for our friends in Sam Neua Province. Following a dismal intelligence briefing from Dale Means, I penned a very short note to the Parents stating:

"Things are getting rough over here. I have to rely on double doses of courage now."

Little did I imagine how perceptive these few simple words would be, or the nervous state that would envelop me while working the front lines over the next few days. The work was increasingly evolving into a love-hate relationship: on the one hand very menacing with dire implications for mortality, on the other hand extremely challenging with combat flying approaching an opiate.

Consistent with the management double crew policy when sufficient people were available, Jack Connor and I teamed up in the cockpit until he conducted an upcountry crew change. ⁴ Ben Naval filled out our crew. At Long Tieng, we were assigned to shuttle refugees and troops from the Houei Sa An area to Bouam Long, and move troops to Na Khang (LS-36) to help secure and reinforce the area as a potential fallback site for those at Site-58. Shuttles across Route-6 necessitated flying at a high enough altitude to avoid enemy fire. The "safe" flight path into the area was deemed directly east and then north, with a reversal of track on the return trip.

Earlier, as the government military situation rapidly deteriorated in Sam Neua, army personnel, AID representatives, and Long Tieng Case Officers, heeding Tong's warnings about his

⁴ This was the first time I recall flying with Jack Connor.

inability to hold Site-58 against the anticipated overwhelming odds, acknowledged a requirement to discover a suitable refugee assembly point should it become necessary to abandon Hua Moung. Located just west of Route-6, sixteen miles southwest of Site-58, Na Khang, with a small existing airstrip and topography capable of expansion, appeared to be the only logical interdiction site available in the area. We had used the site before on an ad hoc basis, and it offered no problem for helicopter and short takeoff and landing aircraft operations.

The following day after working most of a fuel load out of The Alternate, I was assigned to Na Khang with a load of people to assess the progress being made there and take an inventory of available assets. Located in an upland rice paddy valley at an elevation of 4,400 feet, the short dirt and grass runway at Site-36 was marginally acceptable for small STOL planes and perhaps a Caribou in a pinch. A small village had contained a few people in the past, but had been abandoned in recent years with Pathet Lao intrusion. At present, contingency work was obviously underway to prepare for all eventualities, and a few fuel drums were stored there on an emergency basis as an alternate to refueling at Hua Moung. Plans were already underway to widen and lengthen the strip to accommodate larger planes.

Doctor Weldon communicated with USAID Director Charles Mann in Vientiane about the escalating FAR problems at Hua Moung and the possibility of improving the strip at Na Khang. Sensing urgency, Mann called Tom Cole, USAID Public Works supervisor, who was currently completing improvements to the Sam Tong complex. One was the construction of a hostel large enough to accommodate several flight crews. Then "Jiggs" contacted the AIRA chief, Colonel Pettigrew. Both men agreed to help. Cole would provide a bulldozer, and AIRA the means to deliver it

should the embassy concur with the project. At a Country Team meeting, representatives of the various organizations agreed to provide sufficient funding for the work. ⁵

I returned the inspection team and other officers to Long Tieng, where they conferred with Vang Pao about the situation at Hua Moung. After Naval and helpers had refueled Hotel-28, we were turned around, this time to RON at LS-58. With a fully-fledged evacuation underway to shuttle dependents south, several Americans, including Pop Buell, "Jiggs" Weldon, and Vint Lawrence, were present monitoring the situation. Although it would be my initial RON at the site, there was a first time for everything. In recent months a few pilots, such as Marius Burke and Lou McCasland, had RON there because foul weather prevented a return to The Alternate, or to satisfy SAR work requirements, or to provide an escape mechanism for overnighing Americans. However, accommodations were quite poor for crews, and RONs were not relished or encouraged. That night, because of enemy proximity, I was to be the safety valve and primary means of evacuation in case of trouble.

Lately, it was not unusual for "Jiggs" and Pop to spend the night at Hua Moung. Ferried to Site-58 by old timers in the early days, the two had attended parties, quaffed the fiery Lao Lao, and partaken of the hot springs benefits near the village at the base of the ridgeline. Now, with the area under considerable pressure, particularly since refugees had been constantly pouring into the site from the east and straining USAID resources, the elite duo were focused on organizing,

⁵ Charles Weldon, *Tragedy in Paradise: A Country Doctor at War in Laos* (Bangkok: Asia Books, 1999) 181.

caring for health issues, and marshaling the refugees to safety. However, I never knew Vint Lawrence to RON anywhere but Long Tieng. With Tony still in the hospital and Mike Lynch relatively new to the Case Officer business, I assumed that Vint had been pressed into field duty by AB-1 Udorn.

I noted a hint of gravity in the air and observed a dearth of children frolicking in the area. I did not know how serious the situation was, or that three GM-14 companies General Ouane Rathikone had ordered airlifted to the site to stiffen regulars had never arrived because they remained loyal to the recently disgraced General Kham Khong Vongnarath. Recently forced out of other forward sites, Colonel Tong was present and sometimes acted as a "General Direction" for me while supplying several eastern and northern outposts. Ever unflappable in demeanor and speech, I could not tell how much the current enemy situation concerned the legendary commander. Nevertheless, I felt as comfortable flying with Tong as I ever did with Tony (without the intimidating stick bumping). I believed there was no greater tribute on earth than to have sufficient confidence in a person to place one's life in his hands. "Protect and trust your buddy" was the Marine Corps way.

The cheerful "Coffee Man," with his drooping web belt overloaded with grenades, still performed his appointed duty in the operations hooch. I was happy to see him, for he always added comic relief to any situation. Colonel Kham Sao was noticeably absent.

Except for the recognizable rice staple, supper appeared

derived from a dubious origin. ⁶ I appreciated the Japanese warm beer provided to wash the meal down, for it tended to cut through the day's dust and temporarily take the edge off my fatigue. However, despite a full stomach and slight buzz, I was weary from flying over eleven hours, including fifty-five minutes night, and the strain of the unknown and pseudo combat flying. I calculated that the following day would be equally eventful and would require all the energy and mental alertness I could muster to meet the challenge. Disregarding the subdued yellow illumination of a kerosene lantern hanging from a front rafter of the large open-sided thatched hut, and the muted chatter of Tong and his officers hovering over the situation map, I prepared to retire early on the common bed, a customary raised split-bamboo platform. Except for removing my boots, which I secured high on a post to minimize unwanted intruders, I slid into the filthy sleeping bag fully clothed should my services be instantly required.

At 0400 hours I was rudely awakened by excited people yelling and scurrying about in the dark outside the hut. The resounding crump of mortars could be heard about a mile to the east where minor enemy probes were underway. Vint, looking very stern and exhaling condensed water vapor in the cold mountain air, appeared at the front of the platform to alert me to the situation. In my drowsy state, I asked him to leave me alone unless evacuation was deemed absolutely necessary. I do not know if anyone slept that night except me, or, if the enemy probes

⁶ I rarely asked the origin of a meat course in the field, for the answer was normally venison. It was a pat answer, but the actual meat might consist of rat, opossum, or any other weird animal caught in the local area.

had been successful would I have been able to crank up the helicopter and bug out. More than likely, the machine would have afforded a prime target and become immeasurably more dangerous to employ than humping over mountain trails to safety. At any rate, the small enemy force was flushed out and eliminated later in the day.

After daybreak, there was a delay in launching while the overworked radio operator collated reports from outposts, and the early valley fog that formed during this part of the year dissipated. I worked all day with other helicopters and planes supplying still viable positions around the eastern semi-circular defensive line, and hauling women, children, and old people south to Na Khang. Since the January withdrawal of Phou Kouk, terrified refugees from villages to the east had continuously streamed into Hua Moung. Their immediate needs were attended to by Pop, "Jiggs," Thongsar, and other AID personnel. Many walked to new or established western locations. Others were flown south by Caribou to Sam Tong or Long Tieng. Now, in a frenzy of activity perpetrated by rumors of enemy proximity, dependent movement was accelerated, and it was obvious to all involved that a serious evacuation effort was warranted. Shuttling people around the area was commonplace even during normal times, but this large movement did not bode well for continued government presence at Hua Moung; it appeared that the balloon was about to go up.

I expected to RON at Site-58 again that night. Late in the day, without explanation, Vint directed me to Phu Pha Thi (LS-85). That was one long-standing gripe I harbored about our interfacing: unlike Tony, Vint rarely offered any explanation about a situation or took me into his confidence about anything of an operational nature. It was probably his Agency training

and rigid policy regarding need to know. Of course, based on latest intelligence from eastern outposts and the previous night's probes, perhaps he believed the site would sustain an attack that night, or might even fall. Perhaps he thought I had already deduced this. *But had not the same circumstances prevailed the past several nights?* Thinking that I would be denied hot rice, weeds, a bit of meat, beer, a warm bed, company, and a medium to provide a means of escape for the Americans, I protested a little.

Also, there was no chance of being rescued at that late hour should a maintenance problem occur to the helicopter, which might necessitate a forced landing in rough terrain while en route to Site-85. Even if I managed a successful landing without damage or injury, it would be a long, cold night before help arrived.

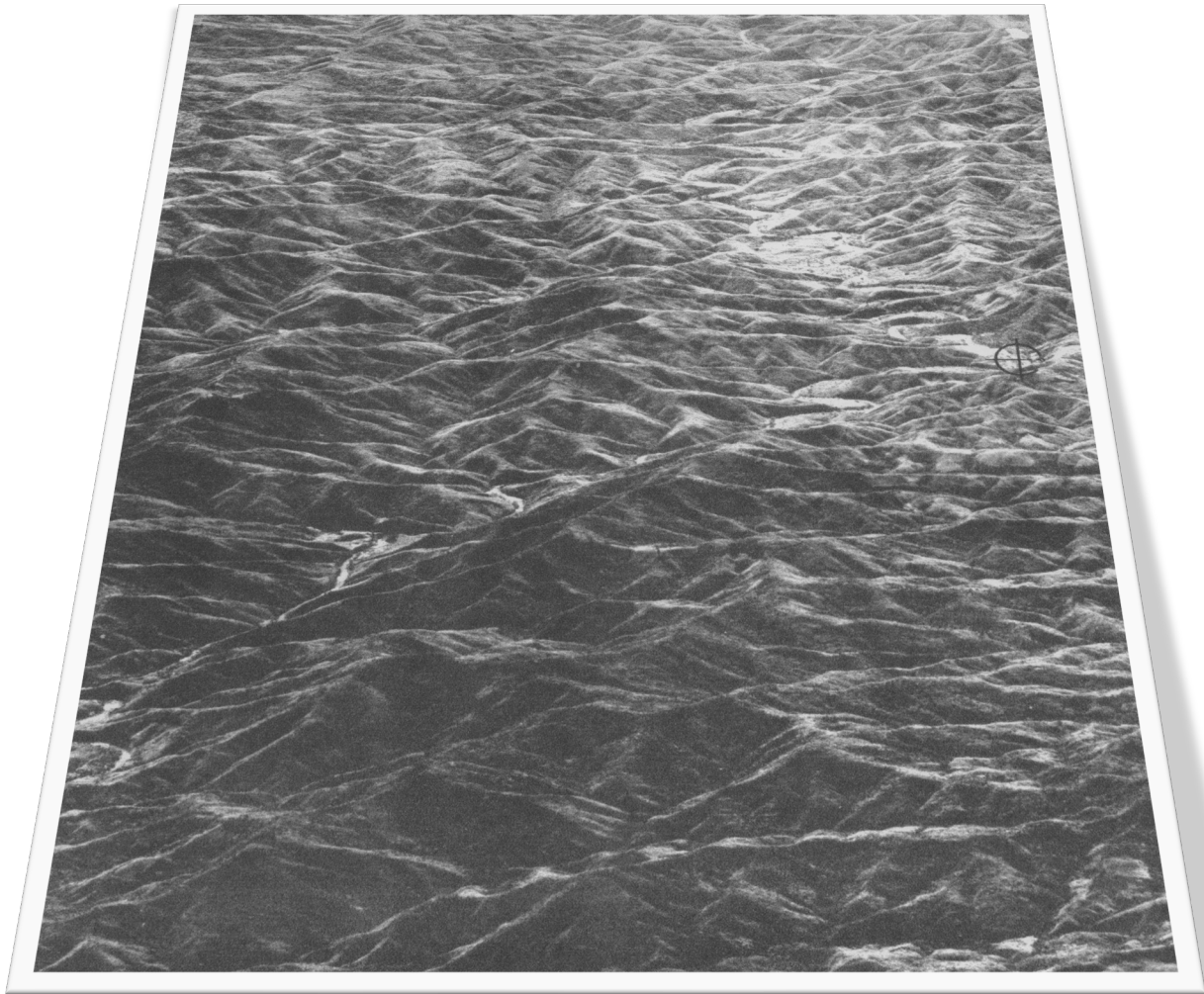
Because morning fog usually formed just before dawn, inundating the river valleys and lower hill areas, I was skeptical about the chance of returning to Site-58 early in the morning.

However, Vint continued to be adamant that I relocate north. As he was the Customer, naturally, I lost the argument.

In the silence and solitude of the cockpit, the twenty-mile flight over the rough no-mans'-land and shadowed ravines seemed inordinately long and bitter. ⁷

⁷ Unknown to me, during the day, a fifty-vehicle convoy was sighted twelve miles east of Site-58, which T-28 pilots were unable to destroy because of heavy triple-A fire. Perhaps I would have been considerably more understanding and willing to depart the site had I known that four to six enemy battalions were rapidly closing on Hua Mung, but then Vint Lawrence was never particularly free with information.

Victor Anthony, 153.



Looking south at a series of ridges and rivers west of Sam Neua. Small villages and cultivated areas were scattered in narrow river valleys.
Author Collection.



With low clouds enveloping the background, a view looking north northeast at historic Phu Pha Thi (LS-85). During the early sixties, Thai PARU conducted radio intercept operations on its heights. Strategically positioned in Houa Phan Province, near Sam Neua, we used the "Rock" to refuel, perform area road watch and SAR missions, and to occasionally RON.

Author Collection.

Even nearing dark, Phu Pha Thi's jutting limestone karst was quite an impressive sight from any altitude. I called it the "Rock" and often hummed "The Big Rock Candy Mountain" after a popular song of the day. Its soaring height and extensive overview of eastern Sam Neua Province were employed by French units as an observation platform during the First Indochina War. The mountain had been captured briefly in 1959 by Pathet Lao units using traitorous Meo guides who defected. Guides were critical to the success of the enemy operation, for only local tribesmen who had lived their entire lives in the immediate area were capable of negotiating the mountain's difficult terrain, hidden trails, and sheer rock cliffs. Loyal and independent-minded Meo had never forgotten the incident and vowed it would never happen again.

Depending on from which direction one approached Pha Thi, the mass could easily be compared to a type of well weathered trapezoid with a mile long, flat, semi-castellated top. It looked somewhat like a medieval fortress and indeed was just that. The entire complex, only separated by narrow and deep channeled river valleys, encompassed much more than a six-mile grid square on a 1:125,000 Joint Operations Graphic map we now carried in the cockpit. The mountain rose straight up from the ground on three sides with a sloped finger pointing toward the Nam Yut and Sam Neua on the southeast portion. A small Meo village was located in defilade toward the upper part of the ridgeline while a 600-foot grass strip rested below at the 4,500-foot level, several hundred feet below the mountain top.

Holding high ground for defensive purposes, especially during conflict, was essential, and one of the primary tenets of any commander's battle plans. Take the high ground, pop red smoke still echoed in my memory from the many classroom and

field exercise hours of learning basic tactical maneuvers at the Camp Barrett Quantico, Officer Basic School facility.

Meo people loved and revered heights for various reasons that included animistic spirit worship and safety. Therefore, it was natural for them to occupy such a site. At present, in addition to functioning as a forward observation post, Pha Thi was used as a forward radio intercept location manned by Thai PARU. The mountain's soil, elevation, and climate all coalesced to produce the most gorgeous opium poppies imaginable. To observe the beautiful variegated flowers almost made one forget the downside of the plant's product: human suffering caused by rendering the pod's white sappy residue.

From miles away, under most VFR conditions, it was impossible to not see the huge rock promontory that projected thousands of feet into the air from the river valleys below. By the time we began an approach, twilight was fading fast into complete darkness, one no pilot should have to experience in an unforgiving mountain environment. Attempting to radio a message south or obtain a relay while aloft continued to be fruitless, and I hoped that the radio operator at Hua Moung would pass the word to Udorn where I was spending the night.

I landed on a flat spot toward the top of the strip and again attempted to call Vientiane or Udorn using the helicopter high frequency set. Through the crackle and static of carrier waves, I thought the radio operator might have received my call, but could not be certain. In the half light, Ben performed a quick flashlight inspection of the ship. Leaving some of the more detailed work for morning, he greased only critical rotor head and tail rotor components. Because the RON had been a last-minute decision, we had not been expected by the locals, who had

departed the strip to the upper village for the night, and the PARU team to their hooch.

After partaking of my emergency rations, I walked around the immediate area. The surrounding topography was quite impressive and the varied rock formations appeared like something one might find on another planet. The sheer vertical drop on the east side toward the Yut River Valley, and the barely discernable mountains in the distance greatly disturbed my depth perception and gave me the impression of immense height--like I was standing on top of the world. Acrophobia, the old fear of heights that troubles many humans, and the corresponding sinking feeling it caused in the pit of my stomach, slightly impacted me. ⁸

While staring into the dark void, suddenly a battle royal commenced at the center of the semi-circular ridgeline four-miles east around Ban Din Den. A fascinating and spectacular pyrotechnic display unfolded before me, as red tracers and flashing mortar fire ricocheted over Meo defensive positions located on the reverse slope of the semi-circular ridge facing Sam Neua Town. I had supplied a few of these outposts in the past, and had not enjoyed the task, as the small pads and downwind conditions afforded very dangerous approaches.

Aware that people were dying, I stood transfixed, admiring the scene. I was first reminded of the "mad-moment," witnessed at night with peers from bleachers in the extensive Quantico area boondocks. During the spectacular show, all the weapons

⁸ Although bothered by heights in some situations like standing on a high ladder or on the edge of a cliff, flying never bothered me. Simulating a room, the cockpit provided an environment in which I was completely comfortable.

available in the local Marine Corps inventory fired simultaneously for sixty seconds. The breathtaking and impressive display of concentrated fire power was tailored to impress and acquaint us fresh-faced lieutenants with the noise and terror night battle could foster.

The light show I witnessed raging to the east was nothing compared to the massive "mad-moment," but caused me to muse and wax philosophical regarding the various aspects of war and man's inhumanity to man. I was reminded of Matthew Arnold's poem, *Dover Beach*, which my progressive and beloved eighth grade English teacher, Mrs. Stover, read to our class, and which I re-explored in a Duke University freshman English course:

*"...And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight
Where ignorant armies clash by night."*

Mrs. Stover, an outstanding and extraordinarily conscientious teacher, continuously pressed our learning capability with emphasis on writing, spelling, and literature exercises. She explained the poem to the class as two lovers gazing across the English Channel at night, while fighting occurred on the beaches of World War One in France. Although the meaning in some poetry is purposely obscure and largely left to the reader's interpretation, in *Dover Beach*, Arnold took a page from the Greek writer Thucydides, a historian who wrote about ancient battles.

The battle in the Din Den crescent eventually waned after an hour. While returning to the Sikorsky Hotel for the night, I mused about others who may have observed such fascinating sights throughout eons of history, and wondered what passed through their minds. It seemed to me that during the course of a human

organism's birth to death life cycle, the contrast of beauty mixed with sorrow was an underlying facet of life.

The following morning dawned cold and clear on top of my unfamiliar world. As I inhaled the delightful, rarified air, little did I realize that, except for my birth, the day would soon result in the most eventful one thus far experienced during my short existence. I was anxious to leave for Site-58 to work, but instead was first directed east across the valley to the semi-circular ridge where the previous night's fighting had so entertained me. After landing on one pad, I retrieved mixed enemy and friendly weapons and a few wounded individuals. At that particular time, everything appeared quiet and I assumed that both contesting parties were spent, taking a break in the action, or busy withdrawing. Upon return to Pha Thi, Lipo, one of the PARU team members conducting radio intercept operation at the site, arrived in the loading area to inform me that a large portion of the eastern Din Den Ridgeline had fallen the previous night. Had I known this beforehand, I would have been considerably more careful and perhaps refused flights close to the area in question. He also cryptically indicated radio contact with Hua Mung had not yet been established. Then he departed for the radio shack located out of sight of the runway.

I had previously met Lipo at Long Tieng. The short, stocky man was a friendly sort, and helpful with information, on a par with Richard, but possessing a more humorous personality without the curious and embarrassing hand-holding tendency of his peer. One time we were on the strip looking east at the inverted ice-cream cone mountains at Phou Khao when he remarked how much they appeared like a woman's breasts. This was done using double entendre Thai language, which made his quip sound quite funny. I

was happy he was at the site, for he spoke excellent English and I trusted him implicitly.

Close to 1000 hours, Lipo returned with the news that a major enemy offensive had begun on Hua Mung at 0200 hours, and portions of the area had subsequently been abandoned. It looked like Vint was completely vindicated and had actually gained some points sending me north out of harm's way. Since the action had apparently slowed to the east and many aircraft were in the area, I was sent down to help.

When I arrived overhead Site-58 the fog had largely dissipated. Like ants following pheromone trails, lines of civilians and troops visible on the high ground of the eastern ridgelines were making their way south toward safety to avoid a repeat of the ruthless enemy's ambush tactics displayed the previous year during the loss of the sites along the southern hills of Route-7. At the behest of a Customer equipped with a hand-held ground to air radio, several helicopters circled waiting to land, retrieve the thousands of refugees gathered at various locations around the area, and deliver them to Na Khang and other temporary locations.

As I continued to orbit and wait my turn to pick up a load, three white phosphorous (WP or "Willy Pete") mortar rounds splashed in quick succession along the degraded runway's centerline. Registering such outstanding accuracy, the tube and mortar crew must have been located only a couple miles east. The mortar fire displayed an upside. It showed that the enemy preferred to lay back and deliver indirect fire, and did not actually occupy the site.

Then Captain Ed Dearborn arrived in a Caribou with the intention of delivering ammunition. We apprised him of the mortar crew's accuracy, but the hard-headed veteran elected to

land his cargo. It seemed foolish to take such a chance and deliver goods to a site that was zeroed in and virtually abandoned, but that was Ed. While he commenced an approach, three more rounds impacted the runway. Unconcerned, he continued the landing. Ed must have lived a charmed life, for after he touched without incident and departed, rounds again began falling on the strip. No more planes landed.

Having gained considerable experience evacuating people in the past, I was well prepared to perform the job. Although there was some urgency to vacate the area, no panic ensued among the natives. Perhaps they were encouraged by the great number of H-34 pilots landing and taking off every few minutes. More likely, I suppose they were just too tired to cause trouble. During innumerable shuttles to Na Khang, Ben performed a yeoman's task counting and loading people of all ages, shapes and sizes, and their pitiful, but treasured belongings. Even though I maintained sufficient rpm and power to launch at the hint of trouble, the shuttles continued unabated throughout the day without enemy interference.

Later, I landed to retrieve another load of passengers on the Route-6 ridgeline, a little south of Hua Moung. While preparing to depart, a disheveled looking man supported by two people on either side staggered toward the helicopter. He was dressed in a soiled white shirt, civilian trousers, and appeared to be wounded, stunned, or shell shocked. I was curious as to his identity, for people milling around the helicopter immediately opened a gap for him. As the trio neared the cabin door, I recognized the "civilian" was none other than BV-27 Commander, Colonel Kham Sao. Continuing his excellent work and difficult job of loading the refugees, Ben Naval ejected people to make room for the colonel and his helpers. After they boarded

and I launched toward Na Khang, I wondered why the colonel was not in uniform and where he had been the past few days.

Following Phoumi's failed coup, the winners commenced a hunt for Phoumist supporters. Like lepers, no one dared allow the outcasts refuge in any major city or at Long Tieng. Therefore, the Sam Tong Americans, after persuading Kham Sao not to participate in the losing cause, arranged to secrete him and other officers in teachers' houses near the school. Jensen did not know the other officers well, but over time he hid six. Funding from over the ridgeline was provided for food and to compensate families for their risk. Suspicious, Vientiane brass visited Sam Tong several times to ask probing questions, but the men's presence was never revealed.

A few days before Hua Moung fell, Vang Pao persuaded Kham Sao to leave his sanctuary and journey to Sam Neua to assist Tong, who was experiencing trouble with troop discipline and general morale. The colonel complied with Vang Pao's wishes, but became disoriented along the way, spending several days wandering in the boonies. Exhausted, he arrived too late to help. After I ferried him to Site-36, he was whisked to Sam Tong to help organize and marshal the refugees sent there from Na Khang. However, Pop and the advisors at Long Tieng talked him out of the plan, for they believed the colonel would never again be an effective administrator after all the trauma he had experienced.⁹

Throughout the day, steel drums containing 115/145 octane fuel were either offloaded or air dropped at Na Khang by Caribous and other transport aircraft. The precious commodity

⁹Blaine Jensen Letter, 07/20/96.

allowed my peers and me to shuttle hundreds of folks to Site-36. Hoping to forestall panic and instill a modicum of normalcy during a bad situation, Vang Pao strutted around the strip in his finest uniform issuing orders and showing the flag. We did not move all the civilians that day, and when enemy fire began to fall again, the remainder began walking south. Toward evening, because of the beehive of activity, a lack of complete security, and a perception that the ax would soon fall there, I was assigned to spend another night at Site-85.

It was already twilight when I made my way toward the northern site. I was not as concerned as the previous evening, for several aircraft were still en route to Long Tieng and Vientiane. Therefore, I would be afforded a narrow window of opportunity to radio the day's flight time or any distress problems I might encounter.

Following the recent coup, corresponding disruption in Vientiane, and now the loss of an important site, I was more than a little depressed. Once again, it appeared that our little world was collapsing around us and increasingly it looked like a crucial month for Laos. I was quite cynical and pessimistic as to the final outcome, for it seemed like we were always losing. But, however harsh this analysis, I recognized that this scenario was predictable, and the multi-year see-saw war bound to continue. If I planned to remain with Air America, I had better get used to it.

I also considered the implications of abandoning Hua Mung. In addition to being an important interdiction site for Route-6 and a primary refugee rally point, we had lost considerable radio equipment and the province's administration center. Moreover, since commencement of Yankee Team operations the previous year, Site-58 had served as a launch pad to provide SAR

coverage north of the Plain of Jars. Although it was a little early to project anything, if held, I supposed Na Khang would assume the identical role that Hua Moung had previously enjoyed as the hub for Sam Neua operations.

Lipo approached the helicopter and inquired if we needed anything. We still had a little canned food left from our personal stocks, but not much. However, Ben's Asian stomach craved a plate of rice, so Lipo returned to his quarters and brought back a large portion of the Asian staple. I took the opportunity to describe to him the day's proceedings at Hua Moung and Na Khang. He seemed genuinely interested in all that was unfolding. I liked the man's attitude, and my estimation of him continued to be highly favorable. In turn, he apprised me of the situation on the ridges to the east. Apparently, it was now relatively quiet, with the enemy attempting to consolidate their gains and our little guys preparing to retake what had been lost. There was no sound and light show that evening.

On the 15th, following the obligatory delay for radio contact and clearance to launch, I returned to Na Khang to "complete" evacuation of remaining refugees who, because of age or infirmity, were unable to walk to the site. Complete was a misnomer, for unknown numbers of persons displaced by the fighting continued for days to move south and west away from the enemy advance. Over the course of a week, they straggled into Na Khang, causing it to overflow with humanity. To relieve pressure created by so many individuals at one location, and to minimize losses should the enemy decide to attack the site, Vang Pao ordered further refugee movement ten miles northwest to the Moung Heim Valley, where FAN troops maintained a presence. Some ethnic Lao resided in the valley, but merely used it as a rallying spot during such emergencies. Normally preferring the

safety of higher elevations, Meo and Lao Theung never settled there. Lao Theung clans travelled mainly south, where there already were established villages around Sop Khao (four rivers). Meo highlanders eventually filtered south and west into the mountains to existing sites, and to establish new ones around Phou Cum (LS-50), San Pa Ka (LS-33) and north to the hills in the Ban Son (LS-29) area. As was customary, considering little merit in remaining at a site that was likely doomed, many troops accompanied their dependents to the new locations. Consequently, their departure created a serious vacuum at LS-36 to fend off invaders. As a primary defensive measure, General Vang Pao reinforced the site with two BV-27 companies serving under Lao Major Douangtha who, after Kham Sao's departure, had been advanced in rank and became the regional commanding officer. The troops hastily prepared for a battle against an enemy attack that never materialized. ¹⁰

While Meo refugees moved into the mountains, our H-34s continued to experience maintenance problems supporting them. On the 12th, Wayne Knight flew Hotel-14 from Tango-08 to the refugee site at San Pa Ka with Joe Siaotong and a maintenance crew to repair and ferry Hotel-23 to Udorn. After a two-and-a-half-hour trip, they recovered well into twilight.

Engine problems continued to proliferate in our snake-bitten helicopter program. On the thirteenth, while departing Phou Vieng (LS-06), Hotel-20's engine failed. The motor burped

¹⁰ The reasons for the non-action are purely speculation on the Author's part, but many enemy units had been trudging over difficult terrain and fighting for over a month. Casualties and sickness had been substantial. In addition, probably not willing to further extend and expose supply lines to continuous T-28 air attack, leaders were satisfied with their recent gains, and took the opportunity to rest and refit.

as the Captain cleared the end of the runway where the terrain dropped abruptly off toward the Nam Khan Valley. Dropping like a rock, the H-34 plunged a few hundred feet, first contacting the slope on the right side and slamming down on a large stump that penetrated the fuselage near the American Flight Mechanic and Blaine Jensen. Both main landing gear struts were sheared at impact, with the right one forced into the rotor blade system. Despite suffering from shock, no one was seriously injured, only incurring bruising. While waiting for a rescue aircraft to arrive, the pilot told Blaine that he had insufficient time to autorotate, and it would not have been effective had he tried.

Hotel-20 was not recovered, as an enemy patrol destroyed the aircraft on 16 February. ¹¹

A current intelligence report stated:

"In a series of recent attacks in northeastern Laos, the communists have cleared pro-government forces from several key positions between Ban Ban and Sam Neua town along Route-6. These moves evidently have the objective of eliminating long standing government pockets within the Pathet Lao 'liberated areas.' They also could be the first steps toward establishing Route-6 as an alternative to Route-7 for supplying the Plaine des Jarres area from North Vietnam." ¹²

¹¹ Ken Conboy, 127.

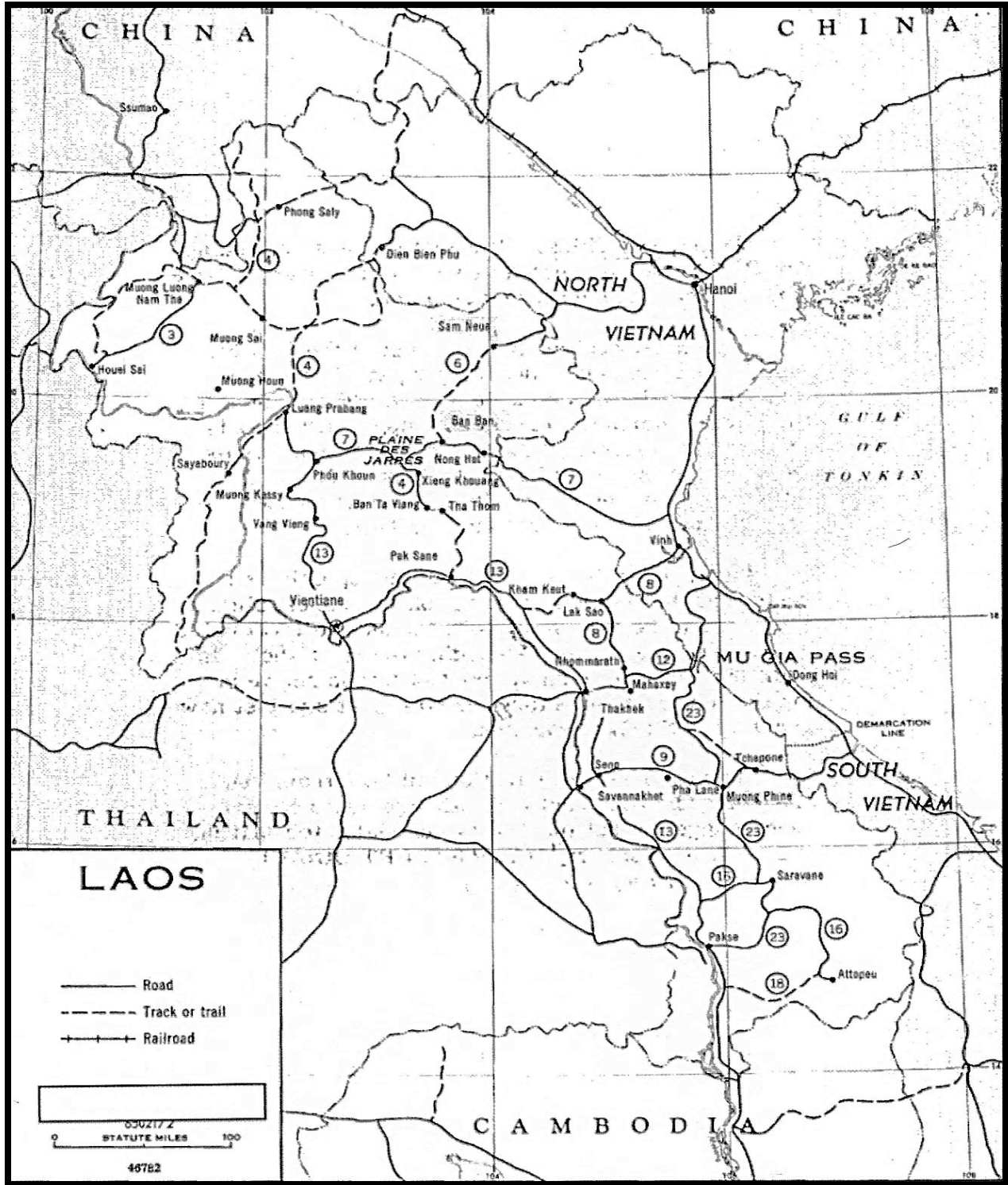
Blaine Jensen Letters, 03/04/97, 03/13/98, 03/25/98.

EW Knight February 1965 Flights.

Joe Leeker, Sikorsky UH-34D, Hotel-20.

Laos Incident List 1960-1969 (Incidents, Casualties, Captures, Accidents, and Unknowns), 01/07/05.

¹² CIA Daily Bulletin, 02/18/65, Laos: The communists are continuing to strengthen their military posture throughout Laos.



Upper portion of the map depicts the Route-6 southwestern track toward the major LOC Route-7 in the Ban Ban valley.

CIA Map, 02/18/65.

As Hua Moung slid down the tubes, with the rest of the area in a state of turmoil and questionable status, ARMA's chief, Colonel Law, was concerned that Meo warriors might be totally defeated in the north, leaving Moung Soui open to attack. Therefore, he recommended government T-28 efforts to be supplemented by substantial U.S. air strikes on enemy supply lines along Routes-6 and 7. The ambassador agreed, and asked Washington leaders to establish maximum emphasis on Military Region Two Barrel Roll missions. He especially wanted timely strikes correlated to the most current intelligence information. Although AIRA's Colonel Tyrrell and FAR G-2 officers identified several lucrative targets, there was no procedure in place yet for immediate strikes. Instead, requests had to be screened and processed through a highly time-consuming chain of command. Therefore, it was two days before the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered CINCPAC to implement the special mission, with no date specified.¹³

I returned to Udorn via Wattay Airport, where I debriefed FIC's Jim Mullens and Bill Solen on my interesting time in the boonies.

WAYNE

Wayne Knight continued personal training and check rides in the Helio Courier STOL plane. Very early in Wayne's Air America career, he had petitioned VPFO Rousselot for permission to transition to the machine, and had been refused. Cross training in disparate aircraft types was frowned upon by Taipei management. However, there was a time in 1963 when we were no

¹³ Victor Anthony, 153-154.

longer flying in Laos that some of us former Marines who had fixed wing experience were offered Helio Courier training. It was a chance to become active and make some money, but the stipulation was that the move would be permanent. Not many of us who loved helicopters accepted the offer. Dick Crafts eventually transitioned to the Helio program and then to larger fixed wing. Sam Jordon took some training, but did not perform well.

Stressing advantages, Knight persisted in lobbying Taipei for Helio training. Once in a management slot, cross training in the Helio was believed useful for contingency, non-operational ferry work like trips to Pits Camp when a regular Helio pilot was not available. Furthermore, since Wayne was normally always present in Udorn, a standby fixed wing pilot would not be necessary in Udorn. Wayne was also cleared for some highly classified missions.

Over the previous months, he gained valuable experience in the machine with Jim Rhyne and Rick Byrne flying Border Police Patrol (BPP) missions to several Tango strips in remote Loei Province and beyond. Some of the training was conducted under original Agency contract PO-66.

On 6 January, Wayne passed a CCAA (Chinese license required to fly the "B" registered ships) check ride with Don Teeters in Helio Courier B-849. Continuing Helio Courier training, on the 19th, he flew in X-ray Whiskey-Papa Bravo Yankee (XW-PBY) to Chiang Khong with Rick Byrne to spend two days in the field observing the region and conduct a proficiency check. During the period, Wayne flew with a pilot in Hotel-26 to the developing site of Xieng Lom and further east to Moung Houn (L-34). Then they flew to another developing area north of Boum Lao in the Beng Valley.

After returning to Udorn and more test flights, the CPH accompanied another new pilot upcountry in Hotel-26 to Hua MOUNG and Long Tieng for two days.

Toward the end of the month, he flew a day flight in Hotel-27 to Xieng Lom with Ben Naval to work and swap helicopters with the PIC of Hotel-29.

During February, Knight occasionally flew in the Helio with Jim Rhyne. On the 15th they transported a Customer to the Air Force base at NKP (T-55). After the successful H-34 mission to Mugia Pass on the 22nd, another less ambitious road watch mission was planned for that night. The value of CPH cross training in the U-10 was evidenced when he and the Customer arranged and paved the way for Air America crews to land, refuel, and eat at the base if necessary after participating in the Lao road watch mission.

Employing a lesson acquired from the first mission, four days prior to mission launch, Lou McCasland was scheduled to conduct night proficiency training. Flying Hotel-15 on Monday, he departed Udorn late afternoon for Thakhet, performed a lengthy night mission, and recovered at Nakhon Phanom. To the consternation of his wife Joan, who worried about him, he did not arrive at the Chet Compound until 0300 hours.

First Officers continued to be upgraded to Captain. Charlie Davis flew at Chiang Khong with Howard Estes prior to his upgrading. During the RON, because of mismanagement, they nearly ran out of fuel, which required Helio Courier driver Paul Severson to deliver a barrel of gas to Moua Su's Meo site at Phou Pang Sang (LS-142). Then, on the 17th, Charlie departed for upcountry with Wayne Knight and Ben Naval in Hotel-15. During an accelerated area familiarization in the Company push to upgrade new pilots, after flying 150 hours in thirty-three days with

various PICs, it was Charlie's final check ride. The proficiency and route check was anticlimactic, with some work around Na Khang hauling refugees and soldiers. At the end of the day, Wayne turned the ship over to Davis and left for Udorn.

The day after his flight with Davis, Wayne returned upcountry for the first time with Jim Rhyne in a Helio and conducted two shuttles from Long Tieng well to the east at San Tiau (LS-02). The CPH did not have much experience in the STOL aircraft at the time, and the rough strip presented one of the most difficult sites where he had ever landed the plane. Most remote strips were substandard with erosion, ruts, and rocks, and were rarely, if ever, properly inspected or maintained. This particular strip was no exception and commanded a lot more respect from Wayne than it previously had while landing a UH-34D helicopter there. The Helio's landing speed was similar to an H-34 during a roll-on landing, but more power variances were required on approach. In addition, the plane was considerably more sensitive to winds, and at a critical juncture, a go-around was impossible. ¹⁴

RESPITE

I was afforded a few days off to rest, arrange, and become accustomed to the bungalow. Employing the Sears and Roebuck catalogue, I ordered a foam topper to lessen the deleterious effects of the brick hard Thai mattress, and sent the company a check in the amount of twenty-five dollars and change.

¹⁴ EW Knight, Emails, 06/10/00, 04/12/01.
EW Knight January and February 1965 Flight Time records.
Joan and Lou McCasland February 1965 Diary and Flight Time Record.
Charlie Davis Book, *Across the Mekong*, 51-54.

During the welcome time off the schedule, I sent a detailed letter home describing events of the past RON. Hazards in our primary work area were assuming an increasingly dangerous level and appeared likely to continue. Therefore, as there was a good possibility of becoming a statistic, I cobbled together a list of my paltry assets and forwarded it to the folks. I did not want to unduly alarm them, but mortality was much on my mind at the time, and since my parents were quite elderly, I was concerned about us all expiring about the same time. Against such a scenario, I solicited their advice as to who should receive the assets, and even suggested an educational trust for younger members of our extended family.

One evening, while preparing for bed, Marius and Bobby kindly directed some Thai dessert my way to help cheer me up and improve my mood. It did.

THEATER ESCALATION

On 7 February 1965, the Viet Cong mortared and machine-gunned a U.S. barracks at Pleiku, South Vietnam, killing eight Americans and wounding over a hundred. Responding to the enemy attack, U.S. planes from carriers *USS Coral Sea*, *Hancock*, and *Ranger* struck military targets the following day. However, weather resulted in a relatively ineffective retaliatory peck on the Vietnamese military barracks at Dong Hoi. The same day, the Secretary of Defense dusted off contingency plans for bombing the north and challenged the Joint Chiefs of Staff to plan an eight-week agenda against North Vietnam in case there were further attacks against American servicemen. Three days later the Viet Cong destroyed a barracks at Qui Non, killing twenty-three American soldiers. A massive strike from three carriers

and USAF units followed on the Chanh Hoa military barracks. Navy pilot, Bob Shumaker, was downed and captured near Vinh. ¹⁵

On the 11th, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and their subordinates placed finishing touches on an extensive plan to attack the North. It included two months of two to four tactical air strikes per week. To implement the program, 350 aircraft were requested, including a fourth carrier, nine USAF fighter squadrons, and thirty B-52s with KC-135 refueling planes. Within two days, President Johnson signed orders to commence what became known as the Rolling Thunder campaign.

Thus, Viet Cong insurgents' back-to-back incidents in South Vietnam provided the catalyst the Administration awaited to commence Phase-2 of a bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Up to this time, hopeful that Barrel Roll would provide the stimulus for North Vietnamese leaders to back down in their aggression against South Vietnam, the Johnson Administration had been cautious to avoid extending the bombing campaign into North Vietnam. Therefore, they had assumed a pragmatic approach during the Barrel Roll program and conducted "tit for tat" reprisals following isolated incidents.

Continuing military deterioration in South Vietnam and Laos, largely ineffective efforts to interdict logistic arteries through Laos, and incidents such as the one in Pleiku and Qui

¹⁵ Seven years later, while in the Agency photo operations room in a building adjacent to the CIA White House across the parking area from the Air America facility, I was curious about a silver bracelet a photo interpreter (PI) officer wore. We wore ID bracelets when kids, but the effeminate looking wristlet appeared odd for a grown man. On it was Robert Shumaker's name. The gesture was a growing effort to recognize the plight of our POWs. These tokens were to be worn by American citizens to remember and honor the MIA/POWs until the crewmen returned home. Perhaps, so as not to create bad luck, incarceration of our people was never discussed among us pilots. It also related to our closed-mouth policy regarding upcountry work and insular environment.

Non stimulated action. After a year of vacillation, a significant USG policy change in the air war against North Vietnam during early 1965 was deemed necessary and authorized. The election was over. Lyndon Johnson, countering overtly war-like Republican Barry Goldwater, whose campaign platform threatened to nuke the bad guys to quickly end the Vietnam problem, had been elected by the mothers of America on the premise of being a peace candidate. However, now politics no longer presented a constraining factor, and foreign and domestic pressure required Johnson to do something positive in Vietnam.

Contingency plans for a greatly expanded bombing campaign coded Rolling Thunder had been sanctioned much earlier by military leaders. They stipulated guidelines for graduated phases of south to north pressure against the North. By February, adequate forces and plans were in place to begin the program. In the Tonkin Gulf, the Seventh Fleet had been augmented by fifteen ships from the First Fleet in the Eastern Pacific and the Atlantic Fleet, with plans to add ten additional vessels. At the end of January, PACAF received authority for high priority construction at the Udorn base, and to effect a realignment of the RF-101 reconnaissance aircraft. Furthermore, land-based air assets in Thai bases close to the theater were either in place or increasing. All that remained was the word to launch.

To create a smoother ease of command and mission scheduling, during the second week in February, General Westmoreland requested the Joint Chiefs of Staff to consolidate Yankee Team, Barrel Roll, and Rolling Thunder into one

coordinated air program against the North. ¹⁶ This concept flowed through high-level channels and was also divulged at a later SEACoord meeting. ¹⁷ Ambassador Sullivan interpreted this proposal as an attempt to extend Barrel Roll and Yankee Team operations from Laos into North Vietnam. Therefore, he considered the concept flawed, because Laos was not capable of defending itself against attack from the DVR, and had no USG commitment for any protection. Indeed, intelligence sources reported evidence of the introduction of fifty jet fighters into Vietnamese air bases and an increase of 350 Chinese fighter planes on the border. This was believed a response to the buildup of theater wide USG air assets. Whatever the cause, it created a potential for limited air raids against Laos.

Sullivan later explained the Westmoreland proposal to Souvanna Phouma. No doubt, with Sullivan's counsel, the Prime Minister squelched the idea, believing it would jeopardize his neutralist role in world opinion, lose Soviet Union support, and weaken his policy of not overtly allowing Lao territory to be used against North Vietnam. The air programs developed for Lao operations had to be maintained separately from those planned for the DVR. If not, he feared hostile acts from Laos would provoke Vietnamese leaders to send additional troops into the country. However, he did not object to clandestine bombing of Vietnamese and Pathet Lao assets in Laos. Ambassador Sullivan concurred, citing possible Chinese intervention.

¹⁶ The North Vietnamese called their country the Democratic Vietnam Republic or DVR.

¹⁷ SEACoord: Coordinating Committee for United States Missions Southeast Asia.

In a message to Washington, Sullivan concurred with PACAF recommendations to establish some Yankee Team missions from Udorn. Exclusively flying over Laos, he believed a small dedicated unit of prop planes, with proper time and experience in the theater, would produce superior intelligence information. He also praised the slow flying A-1H Skyraiders' capabilities during Barrel Roll operations, and their superior ability to loiter on station and to absorb more battle damage than jet planes. Furthermore, he felt this aircraft would be a particularly important asset during SAR operations because it was better suited to remain with and protect rescue helicopters. Citing control problems, MACV opposed any unit being exclusively dedicated to Barrel Roll. However, the military's aversion to relinquish any assets to civilian control likely caused the matter to be tabled.

The Rolling Thunder program was initially planned to last only a few weeks or months. With LBJ's approval, Admiral Sharp scheduled the first Rolling Thunder mission for the 20th. However, political unrest in Saigon and regional bad weather delayed the first four attacks until Rolling Thunder Five commenced

on 2 March. ¹⁸

Four days after AIRA Vientiane generated multiple targets in upper Military Region Two, on the 19th, an F-100 flak suppressor, Spout-21, was shot down in Sam Neua Province while conducting Barrel Roll Mission-30. Eight F-105 and eight F-100 pilots were tasked to destroy four 105mm artillery pieces south of Moung Peun (LS-31), adjacent to Route-6. A FAR unit was poised to launch a counterattack toward the Hua Moung area, but first the gun battery needed to be eliminated. The second target was supposed to include tanks, AAA guns, and a sizeable truck convoy around Ban Houa Xieng. A later assessment revealed that the flight had inexplicably struck trucks and a building in the southern portion of Sam Neua Town, twenty miles north of the original target area. This deviation from the original mission was disconcerting to Ambassador William Sullivan, for the town had been off limits to U.S. bombing since Lao air operations had commenced. By the 21st, after reading a pilot report of the mission, a perplexed Sullivan informed his superiors at State that he would authorize no additional Barrel Roll strikes in Sam

¹⁸ Segment Sources:

Edward Marolda and Oscar Fitzgerald, *The U.S. Navy and Vietnam Conflict from Military Assistance to Combat 1959-1965* (Washington, 1986).

Phillip Davidson. *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford Press, 1991)

William Greenhalgh, *The Air Force in Southeast Asia: the RF-101 Voodoo 1961-1970* (Office of Air Force History, 1979) 161.

John Smith, *Rolling Thunder: The Strategic Bombing Campaign, North Vietnam 1965-1968* (Saint Paul, MN: Phalanx Publishing, 1995) 46-48.

William Sullivan to State, on 22-23 February SEACoord Meeting, 02/26/65.

Interdiction; Victor Anthony, 156, 158.

SNIE, Estimate Communist Military Capabilities and Near-term Intentions in Laos and South Vietnam, 02/04/65.

Neua unless he and his AIRA people were assured that the Air Force pilots were briefed on specific embassy-recommended targets.

Sullivan subsequently discovered that there had been a misunderstanding in target priorities perpetrated by unclear messages. Furthermore, the entrance to the Sam Neua Valley had been selected to identify Route-6 and the initial point to commence a run south to the target. When overhead, the flight leader spotted many vehicles and assumed that was the target convoy now entering the outer limits of Sam Neua. Lacking information that the area or town was off limits, he ordered an attack. After digesting this new information, Sullivan reversed his order to cease U.S. flights in the area.

Probably because of the target discrepancy and difficulty communicating with the orbiting wingman, confusion initially reigned in the embassy directly after the F-100 pilot was shot down. First reports indicated that the pilot was spotted apparently in an area of friendly forces. Based on available reports, the ambassador dispatched an Air America H-34 crew, Victor Control, and American-piloted T-28s to the area. If the pilot was retrieved before the fixed wing aircraft arrived on scene, the planes would be ordered to RTB.

When communications improved and assets approached the area, it was learned that the jet was most likely hit in a dive and that no one observed an ejection. Therefore, the general prognosis for a successful SAR was not good.

Following standby time in the reputed downing area, with no sighting reported, toward dark, the Air America helicopter pilot departed for the staging area for debriefing. After reporting

negative results by FAR troops sent into the area to locate the crash site, the SAR was terminated for the day. ¹⁹

A HAND AND TRUNK

Traveling upcountry to bases to conduct on site face-to-face aircraft swaps was becoming more difficult for crews. Because of aircraft assignments, some exchanges were remote, rides difficult to obtain, and individual luggage cumbersome.

Saturday the 20th, I caught a ride to Long Tieng with the pilot of Hotel-27. From The Alternate, new Captain Charlie Jones ferried me in Hotel-36 to Na Khang, where I assumed command of Hotel-14 with Abuy as my Flight Mechanic. The Customer erroneously related that an USAF recon aircraft from Udorn had been downed over the Ban Ban Valley on Friday. The pilot, a U.S. Navy exchange commander, had flown north after being hit in a dive, and had ridden his plane into the ground. After considerable searching, the wreck was eventually spotted, and the area was still in the process of being neutralized. ²⁰

Later that afternoon, following extensive bombing and strafing missions, the area was declared sterilized, and deemed "safe" enough to proceed with recovery efforts. Accordingly, I was tasked to deliver a special team of Meo ADC troops who were

¹⁹ Message to CINCPAC, 02/19/65.
Victor Anthony, 155.
William Sullivan to State, 02/19/65 (2), 2/21/65 (2).

²⁰ Following the loss of two USAF planes during the Ban Ken Bridge mission the previous month that had incurred General Moore's ire, it was easy to speculate regarding the motive of the experienced Navy officer. He was assigned TDY to the Da Nang squadron to kick ass, take names, and teach the young pups the ropes. Therefore, it was not difficult to imagine the rationalization generated over his death.

thoroughly familiar with the area to recover maps, radios, classified gear, and pilot remains. I launched north and contacted the pilot in command (PIC) of the Victor Control C-7 Caribou on a discrete frequency. Assigned to the mission and also familiar with the area, he directed me to the south side of a hilly, grassy area close to, but south of, the dreaded Sam Neua Valley.

With no prodding, the Meo team took off at high port and struggled up grassy hillside slopes into what looked like wooded and impenetrable mountainous terrain. Despite the Caribou crew's presence overhead, I was quite uncomfortable and apprehensive while sitting exposed in an unfamiliar no-man's-land. Recalling Mike Marshall's earlier unpleasant incident, I elected not to shut down, but continue running the engine and rotors at a moderate RPM setting, calculated for a quick departure. Since there were no other helicopters in the immediate area to aid me or Abuy in a pinch, I considered myself the sole guardian of body and soul. ²¹

After what seemed an eternity, the exceptional Meo troops returned and re-boarded, carrying a few maps, other gear, and one of the pilot's blackened hands. Experienced soldiers, they had accomplished what Lao soldiers were unwilling or unable to perform.

Upon our return to Na Khang, the Customer transferred the items to another aircraft for ferry south to interested parties. I thought the SAR was complete, but the Customer noted that because some sensitive black boxes had not been retrieved, I was

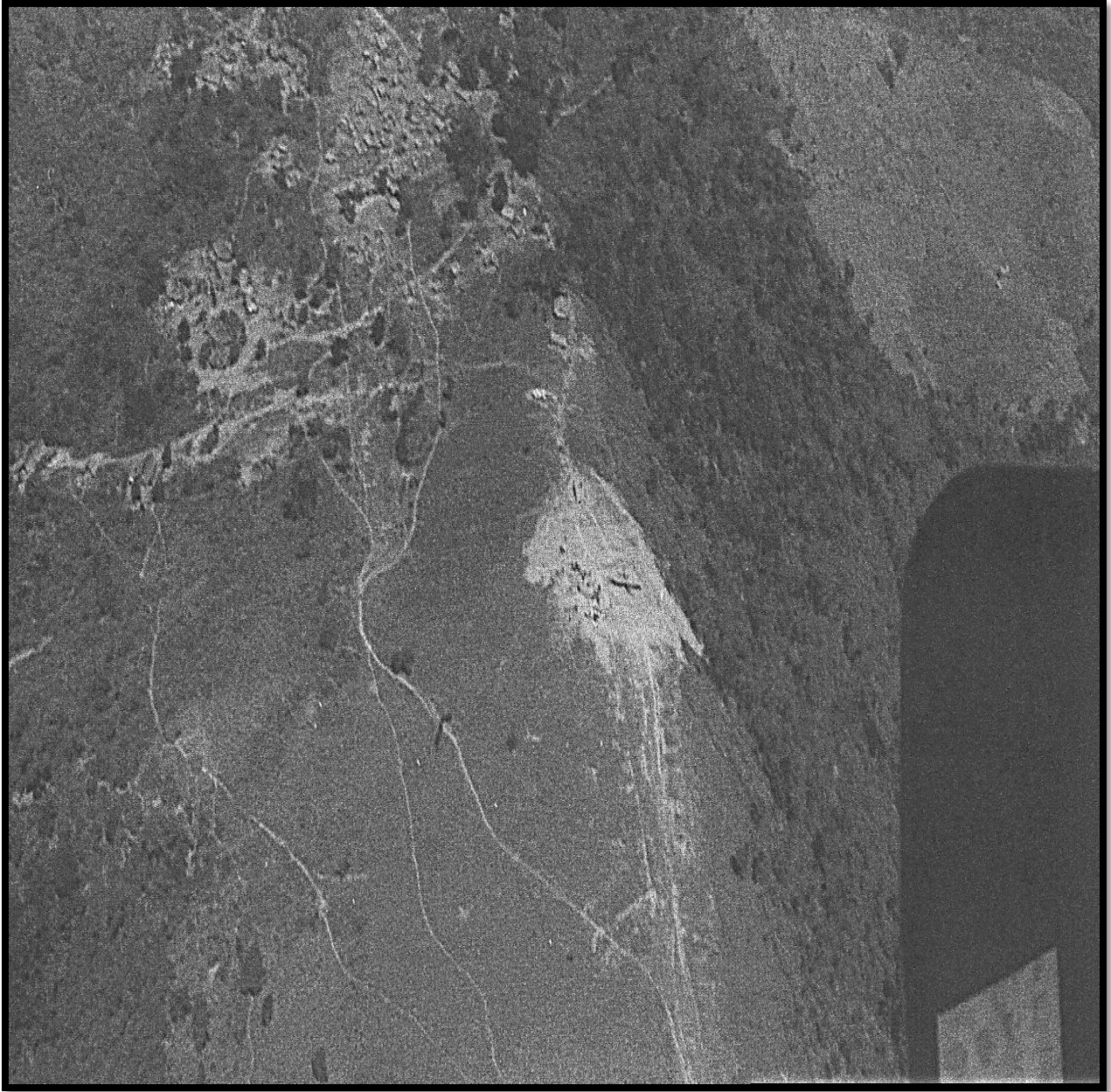
²¹ There might have been other airborne assets overhead or available, but no one informed me of any.

not finished with the high priority mission. Instead, I was directed to LS-85 to RON, and to resume the recovery process the following day.

As during my two recent RONs at Pha Thi, by the time I landed on the "Rock," it was nearly dark. Mountain darkness is a whole different experience compared to "normal" dark within a flatland urban setting. Depending on cloud coverage, except for stars, moon, or a flashlight, there is absolutely no illumination in the mountains. It is tantamount to walking into a dark closet and closing the door. Tactile senses predominated, and I generally did not stray far from the helicopter for fear of accidentally stepping off the edge of the world. Therefore, when Thai PARU Lipo, a radio intercept specialist, came down the hill to graciously offer us accommodation in the PARU hooch, we opted for the familiarity of the Sikorsky Hotel. I believe he understood, for he later brought us a large plate of white rice, which Abuy relished as a Filipino sandwich.

That night I witnessed yet another spectacular sound and light show. However, this one was quite different from the shoot-em-up I had encountered on the 13th. It was not created by man, but by Mother Nature. Part of the northwest monsoon, and consisting of nocturnal thunderstorms, violent weather tore through the area producing an amazing, eerie effect. Lightning flashes, followed by enormous thunder claps, echoed and reverberated through the canyons, deep valleys, riverbeds, and between mountain ranges. Deafening, frightening, impressive, whatever adjectives one could conjure, hardly did justice describing the weather-related phenomenon.

Shortly after sunrise, at approximately 0640 hours, I launched for Na Khang. By then, all traces of the thunder



Early Lima Site-85 located on the southeast slopes of Phu Pha Thi at 4,500 feet. Only thirteen nautical miles south of the North Vietnamese border, and fifteen miles west of Sam Neua Town, high winds, downdrafts, the runway's steep slope, and other adverse conditions could make landings an interesting and often challenging experience for STOL and H-34 pilots.

Vint Lawrence Collection.

boomers had either dissipated or moved south. I had flown between the two sites several times lately, and memorized enough prominent navigational landmarks so that I felt fairly comfortable flying at altitude.

I shuttled ammunition to developing outposts until the Victor Control crew arrived from Vientiane with a load of fuel and hard rice, but primarily to escort me back to the previous day's object of interest. The same Meo team boarded, but this time they had been carefully briefed regarding important equipment to recover from the plane: the primary reason for the exercise. Victor Control's PIC conducted a cursory low recon of the area and reported negative visible activity. Armed with this welcome news, I dropped the team at the site and then departed west for Pha Thi to haul drums of water from the river to the airstrip before returning to Site-36 for fuel and further work. Victor Control continued his assignments, while monitoring his radios for a recall message relayed from the Meo team.

By early afternoon I returned to the site and landed at the landing zone. Victor Control orbited low overhead and scanned the area while I maintained rotor RPM. Apparently, we had miscalculated how long it would take for the Meo team to accomplish the job, for it seemed a very long time before they returned. My neck was becoming sore from constant swiveling while scanning the area to my front, and every thirty seconds glancing right toward the hillside where I expected the team would reappear. I do not believe the crew of the equally exposed Caribou enjoyed the delay any more than I did. With all the air and ground activity following the shoot down and during the previous day, I was amazed that enemy patrols had not moved into the area. Perhaps they were still licking their wounds from the

pasting inflicted by USAF assets, and had not considered the effort worthwhile.

Just when I could barely endure further delay, men exited the woods on the ridgeline, but it was difficult to determine whether they were friend or foe. The distinction between many friendly and irregular enemy troops' clothing was ill defined. Both combatants wore standard black attire common to indigenous Southeast Asian tribes. Derived from similar ethnic groups of Meo and Black Tai, to me all the people looked very much alike. Only the smoother skinned Lao Theung and actual Vietnamese soldiers appeared different. Where Pathet Lao and FAR troops mainly differed was in the table of organization (TO) weapons. Our people carried M-1 rifles and carbines; Pathet Lao troops, if not using our captured weapons, were generally equipped with superior automatic AK-47 assault rifles.

Like ants, the men charged down the gently sloped, grassy hillside. Unsure of their identity, I cranked on 2800 turns, applied collective pitch until the machine was almost hovering, and told Abuy to prepare to fire at any sign of hostile action.

As the little guys closed on the helicopter, I recognized our people. Some of these amazing warriors carried boxes or weapons. Two others slung a stout pole on their shoulders. A short tarpaulin concealed an item dangling under the shaft. I assumed it was the pilot, or what was left of him. I was spot on. They carried the trunk of the dismembered corpse. I wondered what his last thought and utterance might have been: probably the aviator's standard "Oh shit!". I also briefly considered the possibility of this being my fate someday.

When everyone was settled in the cabin, I called the Caribou PIC and informed him of my intention to depart in a westerly direction.

When adding power in an H-34 without generating adequate rudder pressure, torque causes the American-manufactured helicopter with a counter rotating rotor system to yaw right. ²² A conscientious pilot can compensate for yaw by feeding sufficient left pedal to center the ball on the needle ball instrument and use corresponding lateral cyclic control to correctly align the machine during takeoff. This method is stressed in the training command, or on check rides, but sometimes is not realistic while taking off with a heavy load, for application of left pedal also detracts from power available. Complicating the condition, crosswinds can also influence sideward movements. Adverse winds can accentuate and cause a helicopter to yaw (called weather cocking) even further. Therefore, depending on the situation, a tradeoff is often necessary. With insufficient pedal employed and/or weather cocking present, with the cabin door open, a stream of forced air rushes into the cabin, swirls around inside the cavity, and exits upward through open cockpit windows. ²³

Anxious to depart Dodge City before hostile Indians conducted an unscheduled visit, I hastily pulled pitch without much attention to yaw control. Only a few feet off the deck, and while still in rotation, my nasal sensory apparatus was assailed by the repulsive and foul odor of an abattoir. Although not incapacitating, the slaughterhouse stench was so noxious I had trouble concentrating on takeoff procedure. After shaking off initial nausea, reducing power, and establishing coordinated flight during which the fuselage streamlined, the huge rush of

²² In contrast to American helicopters, French rotor systems rotate clockwise.

²³ In June this became a factor during a SAR mission in North Vietnam.

air into the cockpit diminished and the stench became almost tolerable, or perhaps my olfactory senses became more accustomed to the disgusting odor. I wondered how Abuy and the passengers fared on our flight back to Na Khang.

It was difficult to imagine that within the short period of three days, jungle heat, humidity, and the process of decomposition had turned what had been a living, breathing, vibrant human being into little more than a slab of rotting flesh. The thought was quite sobering.

Although I had experience carrying deceased soldiers, tribals, and their associated smells to their home villages, this was nothing similar to the juices that were now draining on the plywood decking. In the absence of body bags (it was years before we received these in our area) the majority of bodies more than a day old were carefully wrapped and tied in layers of Nylon parachute cloth recovered from air drops. Depending on wounds incurred, some body fluids continued to penetrate the material and leak onto the cabin floor. However, none were very odoriferous, even those which were not tightly wrapped.

Superstitious Meo people believed that their true heroes never emitted bad odors when deceased. This distinction was reserved for the hated enemy. Of course, this was adamantly disputed by AID personnel who frequently dealt with corpses. According to their observations, following death, almost without exception, everyone on the planet decomposes, and in the process, emits disagreeable smells. Another feature I experienced hauling bodies was that while climbing to altitude, internal gasses expanded and a corpse might expel flatus, or even occasionally rise to a sitting position. This would invariably wreak havoc with a superstitious Filipino Flight Mechanic.

Lipo later confirmed the thumb rule I had developed that "there is the right way, the wrong way, and the Thai way." He taught me how to cope with battle-incurred odors. It simply consisted to tying a handkerchief around my face and placing a drop or two of Thai cologne that we called "foo-foo juice" on the tip of my nose. More often than not, the Thai way was superior to all others, and I never again had olfactory problems with distasteful tasks.

Although not my first participation in a U.S. military SAR--that had started for us with Navy pilot Chuck Klusmann's downing in June 1964--this episode marked my first actual U.S. military pilot recovery. Although I considered it rather ignominious, for the expired pilot was terribly dismembered, I took solace knowing that the man's family members had remains to inter, and this might afford them some peace of mind and achieve a measure of closure. Though forbidden from talking about the experience because of security reasons, I took great satisfaction and pride in the flawless two-day operation that was completed with minimum assets and no further losses. After transferring my cargo to another helicopter for the trip to Long Tieng and ultimately Udorn, in what would be standard practice following a SAR, I completed the day shuttling locally, and then RTB quite late to Site-20A.

I thought that was the last I would hear about the incident. Then, in early April, a Letter of Appreciation from Major General Moore, Commanding Officer of the 2d Air Division, 13th USAF based in Saigon, appeared in my mailbox. It was accompanied by a cover memorandum from our Base Manager, Ben Moore, and copied to Mister Boyd, Air America's Vice President of Flight Operations in Taipei. Acknowledging my SAR participation, Ben briefly wrote:

"I desire to add my commendation for your excellent performance of duty."

Probably composed earlier, but stamped 30 March 1965, General Moore's letter stated:

"I wish to express my appreciation to you for the outstanding work conducted in connection with the rescue effort on 19 through 21 February 1965. I consider the aggressive and cooperative manner in which you carried out your tasks a true hallmark of professionalism. Such resolute and dedicated performance is cause for deep gratitude. Your immediate response, along with other members of your organization resulted in successfully reaching the downed aircraft.

The USAF in Southeast Asia, at all levels of command, was greatly impressed with the courage and dedication which you, as a pilot, displayed. The result of this effort has had a favorable psychological effect on our pilots.

My sincere congratulations and thanks for a job well done..."

The content of the letter was totally unexpected and initially blew my socks off until, with the exception of the correct date, I realized that it was most likely a standard form letter prepared by a rear echelon clerk. The Meo team members who performed the actual dirty work during the recovery should have been the real people to benefit. I merely provided the means of transport.

As we never talked about SARs or compared letters, I was unaware of whether others received identical letters, and wondered what criteria were involved in receiving one. This was never adequately explained and we did not ask. I certainly had not received any kudos for previous efforts on the fringes of SAR areas. As similar letters accumulated, I eventually posted

them home through Army Post Office (APO) mail for safe keeping and posterity.

The long delay in receiving recognition seemed curious. However, by then the Rolling Thunder air war against the North had cranked up, and planes were being damaged and downed almost daily. With the LBJ Administration's current policy of graduated pressure to bring the enemy to the negotiating table, it looked like this form of conflict would continue indefinitely.

Since our unit was tapped as the primary SAR asset available in Laos, the scenario was not encouraging. Because no provision for remuneration intending to compensate us for this form of extra hazardous work was included in our contract, perhaps Ben Moore and Dave Hickler had initially recommended forwarding letters from the military brass. Then, following discussion, upper echelon military leaders in Saigon settled on this form of recognition, calculated to buoy our spirits and keep us in the ball game until satisfactory Air Force assets were introduced.

The method was indeed wise on their part, for the really difficult SARs were still in the future. Air America's Regional Director Jack McMahon, although using a Marine Corps term, had been spot on when he referred to us as "Plank Owners" during his infamous all pilot meeting (APM) when he indicated that we would never refuse to go on a mission. Although recognition helped sharpen morale somewhat, what Air America management and military leaders did not realize was that no amount of money or "Atta Boys" would ever substitute for the enormous rush and personal satisfaction a man derived from saving another American's life. Even though I disliked the SARs, I accepted them as a fact of life, and knew that I would never refuse

assignment to one. I was sure the majority of my peers felt the same way.

I spent four more days upcountry, mostly working north of the Plain of Jars out of Na Khang, while emphasis on consolidation and the early development phase continued. After replacing the disgraced Kham Sao by default, Colonel Tong wore two hats. He became the Military Region Two subdivision commander (Vang Pao was commanding officer) and acting governor in Sam Neua Province.

A FAR battalion was delivered to Na Khang to protect the southern flank at the recently captured Houei Sa An (LS-127). In addition, Major Douangtha's BV-27 marched eight miles east and assumed defensive positions in the hills around Houei Thom (LS-27). The General Staff eventually sent an infantry battalion from Luang Prabang and another from Vientiane to establish a forward line of defense less than two miles northeast of Site-36.²⁴

Since both fixed wing and helicopter crews constantly worked the site, if one could catch a ride from the south, there was little trouble effecting crew changes. As there was still an abundance of maintenance troubles, I flew three different H-34s in four days (Hotel-14, Hotel-22, and Hotel-23). Sudden engine failures were still my primary worry, especially during the hour-long flight to Long Tieng. Since we worked until almost twilight before returning to base, much of the trip around the horn entailed overflying mountainous terrain covered with thick forests and shadowed deep ravines. Largely uninhabited, few

²⁴ Ken Conboy, 127-128.

areas provided openings suitable for a safe autorotation. Therefore, to alleviate worry, I daydreamed to pass the time.²⁵

The rest of the RON was largely humdrum. Except for one standby at Delta on Tuesday, during which I forfeited three revenue hours, flight time was excellent.

On the 25th, I was relieved at Site-36 and caught a ride to Long Tieng on Hotel-28. From there, I rode to Udorn on our competitor Bird's triple-tailed Pioneer, Papa Bravo Juliet (PBJ).

²⁵ It was virtual suicide for aircraft to fly directly over the Plain of Jars.

I managed three uninterrupted days of rest and then was again scheduled upcountry. However, even though not on the flight schedule and in Udorn, we were subject to being summoned to the airfield for standby at any time to conduct test flights, unforeseen missions, or SAR commitments.

On 1 March, I was assigned Hotel-26 and rejected the ship. We had been experiencing a very nervous and trying period. Our Curtis Wright R-1820 power plants that were failing with a frequency rate far above the norm appalled every pilot. Although engine failures were a fact of life at any time, increased failures were expected during every annual dry season because of high heat and humidity, abrasive dust, and increased power demands because of high density altitude. In perhaps the worst scenario imaginable to impact maintenance types and pilots, there appeared to be no distinct pattern or answer for the current failures. After teardown, engine problems had formerly been attributed to features such as defective cylinder valves or valve springs. So far, since late in the previous year, we had experienced seventeen forced landings and numerous other ground malfunctions, mostly engine related. It was perplexing. While airborne, the engines coughed, momentarily stopped, started again, and quit, but not necessarily in that order. Fortunately, all my engine problems had occurred on the ground and were, at least, temporarily correctable. The situation was quite disconcerting, particularly when one considered other negative factors affecting our operation: working in hostile enemy regions, areas affording few forced landing possibilities, navigation challenges in low visibility caused by smoke, haze, fog, clouds, and ever-increasing SAR demands. With these other

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factors cranked into the operational equation, we really did not need the added worry about an engine, previously deemed reliable, and considered a critical mainstay of the total machine.

Since maintenance problems, particularly those involving engines, remained unresolved, even though it meant diminished flight time, I had little compunction about grounding a questionable machine. I was very methodical while testing an aircraft, and cautious in releasing or taking one upcountry for a hundred hours of operation. I was not the only pilot concerned about the dismal situation. Everyone knew that high flight time and pressure from Customer requirements were exacting a toll on the H-34 program. For the understaffed and overworked Maintenance Department, there was insufficient time available to perform periodic inspections, work off pilot gripes, and release the ships to the flight line in a timely manner. Since the helicopter arrived late in the day, a majority of maintenance work was performed overnight when conditions were more relaxed and supervisors and workers may not have been as diligent in performing their duties. Also, Marine Corps and Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) H-34 parts requirements competed with our needs. Mainly, components subject to wear, such as main and tail rotor blades, were in short supply.

Although it was a tough subject to contemplate, no one was prepared to die, especially at age twenty-nine. Furthermore, confidence in the maintenance department was not enhanced by their inability to discover and resolve the problem. As line pilots flying in hazardous conditions, we demanded positive results, not excuses. Therefore, some of us more senior, cynical types grouched about maintenance problems whenever we gathered, and we began swapping aircraft gripes with each other on the

flight line, and in the bar. This resulted in a collective determination not to take a questionable ship upcountry. Operations bypassed this option by sending the really tough cookies upcountry to take command of a ship, knowing full well that once in the field, pilots rarely returned H-34s early for anything but the worst problems. We complained about the devious policies but, considering the alternatives, tried to strike a happy medium and continue flying the helicopter.

The consequence of constant wrangling between maintenance, operations, and pilots began manifesting in what one could call musical helicopters. This resulted in a nasty situation where one pilot was pitted against another pilot. If one Captain refused a helicopter for any reason, it might be rolled over to another pilot, and another, until someone, perhaps out of sheer frustration, eventually accepted it. ¹ Until we wised up to the deception, I suppose whoever conceived the idea took pleasure in satisfying an operational requirement, but the ploy only exacerbated the problem, and the aircraft were not properly repaired.

The delay involved in obtaining a ship I felt comfortable flying was not excessive. Therefore, I took Hotel-23 to Long Tieng with Abuy as my Flight Mechanic and was sent to Na Khang, where refugee relief, support of FAR troops protecting the site, and those preparing for a move north, continued unabated. Lou McCasland was also upcountry, flying Hotel-22 in the Site-36 area with Moon Centeno.

¹ I heard that eight pilots participated in this drill on one occasion.

We still RON in the Bird and Son Blue House perched on the western hill in The Alternate valley. Aside from his faults, when it came to protecting his men from outside elements, Abadie always showed resolve. The COO did not mince words for those he believed were not fully committed to his philosophy. Therefore, hoping to push the new hostel project at Sam Tong to rapid completion, Abadie sent a poorly veiled sarcastic memorandum to Roy Stitt, the Vientiane General Manager Laos. He stated that months ago, in 1964, he was advised of a plan to build suitable quarters for Air America crews at Site-20. The program was supposed to be completed before the 1965 rainy season commenced, and included improved fueling facilities there and at other upcountry sites. In closing, he caustically asked if crews should plan to spend another rainy season in the Blue House. Stitt, who protected his own turf and was never on the best terms with Abadie, bumped the message to a concerned party with a scathing note condemning Abadie. I am sure this rebuttal never crossed Ab's desk, for he would have had to take action.

There was always some animosity between Udorn and Vientiane management, but it seemed to rise to the worst levels when Stitt was present. The manager considered himself responsible for all facilities in Laos, regardless of who the facilities were supposed to support, and he considered any input from Udorn as meddling in his rice bowl. Wayne Knight did not know Stitt well, considered him generally unpopular, and never met anyone who liked him. He was also Ben Moore's nemesis.

On the other hand, Abadie was not all that popular either, but most individuals dealing with him over time admitted to a certain amount of grudging respect for the man. Among pilot subordinates, he was generally considered a man who was firm, but fair. Moreover, he never formed a rapport with the local

Agency people, but was somewhat better accepted with Deputy Chiefs.

From a line pilot's perspective, I was not the only one to detect arrogance from both Vientiane management and the large aircraft pilot force, particularly in the early, formative days. Perhaps it was because I was just another newbie who had yet to earn his spurs. Of course, we were a generation removed from older, mostly former Air Force pilots. Over time, I detected a distinct change in attitude in the group, and was reasonably sure that our SAR period had much to do with this. There was an exception: the small plane drivers who flew and lived with us in the trenches. Without exception, there was mutual admiration among us. To a man I liked all of them, but I considered KD Nolan my favorite. ²

ROLLING THUNDER

On 2 March, initial Rolling Thunder strikes began on the North Vietnamese ammunition depot at Xom Bong, ten miles north of the DMZ. They were conducted by 104 F-105 Thunderchiefs, B-57 Canberras, and F-100 Super Sabers staged from both Thailand and South Vietnamese bases. In addition, to somewhat justify U.S. participation, several Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) Skyraiders struck the Quang Khe naval base sixty-five miles north of the 17th parallel. Guam-based B-52s were placed on alert, but not utilized. After action reports described attacks as highly successful. However, enemy AAA fire downed six planes--five American--with one American pilot taken prisoner. The steep

² Dave Hickler File University of Texas, Richardson, Texas, Memorandum to GML/Vientiane from PCO/Udorn.
EW Knight Email, 07/26/00.
Lou McCasland March 1965 Flight Time Record.

losses were unexpected, and not viewed favorably by U.S. Air Force (USAF) leaders.

The strike marked the initial time USAF assumed a dominant role. In addition, it marked a major USG change from a retaliatory stance in response to enemy attacks in South Vietnam to an effort to resist aggression on the south.

Because of largely scattered attacks of Barrel Roll operations in late December, the Vientiane Embassy Country Team had trouble assessing the program's impact on North Vietnam leaders' attitude about prosecuting the war. Instead of currently using jet aircraft, which the USAF preferred, the AIRA staff pushed for a manageable Thai-based unit of slower flying A-1H planes to interdict LOCs and perform Lao reconnaissance. They felt that over time, Skyraider pilots would learn the primary target areas well, and respond with increased productivity.³

Even though working locations close to northwestern North Vietnam, we were not yet aware of the Rolling Thunder program, and except for Barrel Roll coverage, there was no requirement for our services across the border. That would be dealt with by USAF, USMC, and VNAF assets from South Vietnamese military bases or Fleet carriers. Because of the excessive distances involved from Laos, our single crew status, and political implications, I seriously doubted we would ever have been called. In addition, with no area maps of Vietnam available, no coordination, and

³ John Smith, 54.

Bowman, *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: Random House, 1986) 107.

Jacob Van Staaveren, *USAF Plans and Operations in Southeast Asia 1965* (Washington: USAF Historical Division Liaison Office, 10/66) 13.
William Sullivan to State, 03/03/65.

poor visibility, there was little chance of us arriving safely, much less attempting a rescue. In fact, I never heard this possibility discussed, but the changing war and resulting pragmatism was fraught with surprises and, as would develop, anything was possible.

About this time, after numerous heated disagreements within various Udorn hierarchies, working standbys for SAR missions, as opposed to complete stand downs at Site-36, were under serious review. In addition, an extension of talks commenced regarding previous SAR standby procedures at Hua Mounng north of the Plain of Jars. Although I cannot recall a requirement for SAR duty at Site-58, generally, like Delta standbys, the designated H-34 crew was required to refrain from all operations until a strike mission was completed or scrubbed.

With the advent of increased air activity in Laos, across the border, and relocation to Na Khang, where a requirement for as many helicopters as available was crucial for Vang Pao's operations, the issue of SAR standby became a hot subject. Air America management argued that static standbys were not required or necessary; numerous H-34 crews worked the area and would respond to a Mayday, perhaps even faster than if standing down on the ground. This logic was debated by a particularly hard-nose Air Force colonel at the Udorn base, who claimed that if not totally dedicated to SAR duty and standing down, some of the helicopter pilots would feign communication problems, or claim maintenance problems, and not respond to a SAR situation. ⁴

⁴ Not much was secret in our organization, and the colonel might have heard "scuttlebutt" regarding a very few misguided pilots doing this in 1964.

CPH Knight, recalling problems during the Klusmann SAR in June 1964, conceded that the colonel might have been partially right where a couple of individuals were concerned, but the successful pilot recovery record by H-34 pilots since that time was truly outstanding. He believed that the problem hampering agreement between military leaders and Air America went far deeper: mainly that the Company was highly resented by many in military circles, except for the pilots we rescued. They were annoyed by the fact that the USAF was not able or allowed to perform the job with their subpar HH-43s, and that Air America was the recipient of several kudos. Also, there was always the issue of the "big money" we were earning to perform the work in Laos. This jealousy and foolishness continued throughout the long war. ⁵

Wrangling continued for a time, but pressure from various Customers to allow our helicopters to perform normal work finally won the day, and never affected our ability to respond to any SAR responsibilities.

The hottest months of March and April in Laos characteristically presented the worst flying conditions. Prior to the spring rice growing season, time honored hill tribe slash and burn agriculture occurred, particularly in refugee areas. During that period, the smoky season reached a peak, causing severe limited regional visibility to VFR flight. To help counter restricted visibility, many pilots flew lower to see the ground and checkpoints. Consequently, they incurred considerably more hostile ground fire and more battle damage than normal.

⁵ EW Knight Email, 04/30/00.

With the influx of refugees from the Hong Non and Hua Moung areas, visibility around Na Khang from smoke and haze was particularly bad. However, there was little impact on low level flight operations within the immediate area while supplying perimeter outposts. Flight a few miles to the east was entirely different. None of us had flown in that direction extensively to establish definitive navigational checkpoints for low visibility conditions. Therefore, not long after launching for Houei Thom and climbing to altitude to avoid hostile fire over Route-6, I lost ground contact and became disoriented. I was not totally on instruments (IFR), but attempting to fly in marginal visibility (VFR) posed a potentially dangerous situation. I knew that I had to fly west, but since enemy patrols were reputed to be wandering throughout the area, I did not want to descend or waste time milling around the sky unaware of my exact location. In addition, a high mountain range was located west of Site-36. After a short while, thoroughly disgusted with myself for being caught in such a situation, I bit the bullet and radioed in the blind for assistance. A friendly Caribou pilot answered my call. This was fortunate, for the former U.S. Army C-7s were still equipped with UHF radios incorporating homing devices, which could provide direction finding (DF) steers to similarly equipped planes. This ability to communicate between us and military aircraft was the primary reason the plane and experienced pilots were often utilized as a Victor Control platform during SAR missions. After briefly explaining my plight, I was provided an accurate steer to Na Khang. I was not far off course, and soon spotted familiar landmarks. The episode was embarrassing, but saved my bacon. After this, I decided that Houei Thom would have to await resupply until a clearer day. Because of the conditions, I illegally logged some actual

instruments (AI) that day. The entire country must have been inundated in smoke and haze, for Lou McCasland logged one-hour AI working Paksane and Savannakhet.

On the third, I conducted a short standby at Delta to cover USAF Barrel Roll strikes on the Plain of Jars road system. Later, along with several other pilots, I was assigned to shuttle Meo troops from Long Tieng to mountain top pads north of the Sala Phou Khoun Route-7/13 road junction, some that had been utilized in the success of the previous year's Triangle operation. With the February loss of Hua Moung, the movement represented a sizeable operation calculated to secure VP's flank, protect Neutralist held Moung Soui, and ensure continued government control of important roads in western Military Region Two. Since most of the landing spots were in virgin territory, it was not easy work. We had to first choose suitable landing zones, and then feel our way in during landings. After that, except for varying wind conditions, loads could be better managed and adjusted according to fuel burn. The operation continued the following day, and after one more night in the Blue House, I was recalled to Udorn.

A COMRADE GOES HOME

Home again, I showered, shaved, donned some civvies, then returned to the field for lunch, to check the mail, and perhaps down a few cool beers. During late afternoon, word filtered down from upcountry that Charlie Jones had bought the farm in Hotel-26. ⁶ It marked the first UH-34D pilot death since I joined

⁶ Bought the farm: Military slang derived from World War Two connoted with dying. Death benefits were believed enough for relatives to purchase a farm.

the organization. Despite half expecting this to occur because of ongoing engine problems, we were all shocked and gathered in the bar awaiting additional information. Details remained sparse, and it was not until crews and ships began recovering at Udorn that we received an abbreviated version of what happened.

Charlie had been engaged in the current operation to shuttle Meo troops into areas west of Sala Phou Khoun. Marius Burke, flying Hotel-15 a few miles away at altitude, was an auditory witness and heard Jones declare a Mayday.⁷ While Captain Burke accelerated toward the area, Charlie continued a dialogue indicating that his engine was running rough--cutting in and out--and he was trying to land at the Foxtrot pad. He was able to keep the engine running by activating the primer button, and he was attempting to land on an open ridgeline. Throughout the drama, Charlie was heard to say, "*I am losing it!*" A few seconds later, after the engine resumed operation, he optimistically said, "*I think I am going to make it!*" Then, less than a few hundred feet from the ridge, as if accepting his fate, Charlie uttered his last transmission, casually reporting the R-1820 had just sputtered for the last time and that he was not going to make the pad. The helicopter crashed, bounced, rolled downhill, and burned to ashes, incinerating Jones and four troopers. The crash occurred within fifty to one hundred feet of the landing pad (TG-3564), seven miles north of Sala Phu Khoun, and two and a half miles west of Phou Lang Mou.

Bill Zeitler, a relatively new First Officer in the Caribou program, was flying a second sortie to MOUNG SOUI with PIC Gary Malmberg. During the smoky season, fixed wing pilots flew

⁷ "Drop Kick" was rarely uttered during an actual crunch.

northern outbound and southern inbound routes a little higher than normal at staggered altitudes, and they reported over prominent check points like Ritaville, Twin Peaks, Peter, or other sites. From altitude they overheard Marius talking and believed it was he who was experiencing the malfunction. While Malmberg flew toward the area, he instructed Bill to perform any relays necessary to Vientiane, for he knew the pilot.

Since no additional radio transmissions were heard, Bill assumed that Marius had crashed. While flying over the crash site, flares from the onboard kit ignited, and arced above the intense fire. It was the first time Zeitler had seen a helicopter burn, including his during the August incident, when he only observed smoke.

Marius landed on the ridge above the site five minutes after the crash. Meo soldiers were carrying the only survivor, Thai PARU advisor Na Pha, up the hill. Although they were friends, Burke did not recognize him because of his severe burns. As the troops approached the cabin door, Na Pha looked at Marius in the cockpit and croaked, "*Thank you, Captain Burke.*" Marius took him to Sam Tong for emergency treatment and then to Long Tieng for evacuation. Because of the PARU's severe injuries, Marius did not believe he would survive the night without adequate medical attention.

When Marius arrived in Udorn most of us were in a sodden condition "crying in our beer." Never-the-less, in addition to what was already known, we learned that Charlie, either prompted by peer pressure, or earlier power plant difficulty, had elected to leave his Filipino Flight Mechanic on another landing zone, in order to carry an adequate load. "Lady Luck" was with that man this day.

This was quite a revelation. Although other pilots admitted to using this procedure on rare occasions, especially during unusual operations such as an external lift when no one else was available for hookup, or when power was required for every ounce of lift for short flights of H-34 fuselages from high ridgelines. However, such policy was not condoned by management, and a Company regulation existed requiring the presence of a Flight Mechanic onboard during all operational flights. It was an alternative I never considered or violated.

Another puzzling feature incidental to the accident was Jones' professed use of the primer button to keep the engine running. This made no sense to anyone who was knowledgeable about H-34 systems, and Charlie was not naive as to H-34 operation. Introducing fuel to the number nine cylinder located at the six-o'clock position, prime fuel was employed only during engine starting. It was unlikely that this small amount would provide sufficient fuel to sustain the thirsty beast's other eight cylinders. However, someone recalled World War Two stories that Charlie had related in the bar about using this method after a particularly hairy engagement to successfully keep his battle-damaged fighter plane engine functioning. Apparently, if all else failed, he had a preconceived plan to use prime fuel, and this had influenced his decision to continue flight rather than seek an alternate place to land. Granted, forced landing spots were almost nonexistent. Steep ravines at the bottom and between hill masses in the area were narrow, heavily wooded, and might have contained enemy patrols, but they were also the only semi-level areas and may have afforded Jones space for a successful autorotation.

Obviously, no one was at the controls of Hotel-26 except Charlie. Therefore, any second guessing prior to a thorough

investigation would probably be erroneous. In addition, it was debatable what any individual might have done in his place. Still, the accident resulted in fatalities that required answers to some very difficult questions: mainly, what exactly had happened.

Operations Manager Tom Penniman had become friendly with Jones in the Club bar when H-34 maintenance problems were increasingly an issue. The older wiser pilots recognized a foolish operation when they saw it, and Jones had expressed concern to Tom regarding the problems. Even Ed Moreland had indicated that he was not going to fly junk. From a non-flying person's perspective, in retrospect, after listening to Jones, Moreland, and Radalinski, Tom had formed an impression that the Company was correct in hiring retired military people to offset unwise Customer decisions. He believed that if there had been more pilots like Ed Moreland, Jones would still be alive. He also thought the Agency should have approached Sikorsky and employed a helicopter technical representative (tech rep) or pilot on the Langley payroll to address questions at that level about how certain aircraft could or could not perform. Instead, they relied on George Doole, a man he considered a political flunky. ⁸

It would be months before a bona fide and experienced investigator, Doug Dreifus, was hired by Taipei management. Meanwhile, operations managers, along with a member of maintenance, and the chief pilot, or his representative,

⁸ Sikorsky did employ Archie Loper, a regional technical representative living in Bangkok, but, more of a playboy, Archie rarely appeared in Udorn. Also, Doole had little to do with our H-34 program.

normally investigated and generated fatality accident reports. Accordingly, on the sixth, Captain Burke flew Tom Penniman, Scratch Kanach, and a person from AMD to the site. Although not a helicopter pilot, during the approach to the pad Tom noted several potential landing spots below where he speculated Charlie might have autorotated, given the proper altitude and technique. ⁹ Penniman assumed, and noted in the joint report, that it appeared that Jones was trying to save the helicopter by attempting to climb up to the pad. Apparently, he nearly succeeded. However, the attempt was obviously a losing proposition, for each time the engine cut out he lost a little more altitude and ground speed.

With Meo assistance employing ropes, the team eased their way several hundred feet down the mountainside to the burned H-34's resting spot. Because of the terrain's steep incline, they did not continue to the bottom of the ravine. Instead, they spent several hours taking photos, obtaining statements, creating diagrams, and examining ashes at the wreck site. Charlie's body was the only one remaining, as he was the largest involved and the others had been previously recovered.

To assist in his recall, Tom carried a small Aiwa tape recorder inside his Samsonite briefcase. He used this device to record a conversation in French with a Meo Lieutenant in charge of guarding the wreckage. Later, when he attempted to transcribe the tape to paper, he could decipher nothing. The officer wore a nickel-plated pistol obtained in barter, but had no ammunition. Acknowledging his help, Tom later sent him a box of shells.

⁹ When I looked at the area later, I observed no viable landing sites that would not have resulted in some form of crash.

While ascending the hill to Marius' H-34, Tom, carrying only a camera and the case, was embarrassed to rely on teenage troops' efforts to help him.

On the way to Vang Vieng to transfer the body and investigating team to a southbound plane, Tom noticed Charlie's crooked and burned arm protruding from the parachute cloth in which he was wrapped. It was a process of muscle contraction common to severely burned bodies.

A couple of days later Penniman was surprised to learn of the existence of the PARU and his survival. Months later, Tom visited Na Pha in a Thai military hospital to obtain a statement. The facility where Na Pha still healed had no air conditioning and the windows were open. The man was still in bad shape. Both ears were missing and his body was wrapped in bandages, wet and nasty from oozing serum.

Previously, while attempting to solve the reason for the difficult accident, Tom had theorized that the PARU had jumped out of the left cockpit window when he believed the helicopter was not going to make the ridgeline. In the process, he stepped on the collective, causing Jones to crash. It was a plausible speculation, but during his talk with the injured PARU, he learned that his preconceived idea about what had happened was erroneous. After the crash, Na Pha had attempted to pull the unconscious Jones from the cockpit, and in the process, the helicopter blew up, tossing and rolling the PARU downhill into the ravine, where searchers subsequently discovered him wandering about the area in a dazed state. ¹⁰

¹⁰ Charlie Jones was so large in comparison to the smaller Thai that even during optimum condition, this would have been virtually impossible.

The Agency sent Na Pha to a hospital in San Antonio for skin grafts. He later became Thailand's most notable parachute free-fall champion in international competition.

All of us were deeply affected by our comrade's loss. Although a relatively new hire, Charlie had made his mark early and had been readily accepted in our group. It seemed ironic that while trying to supplement his retirement pension, the fighter pilot ace had survived two wars only to succumb in an undeclared war in a remote portion of the world only a handful of American people even knew existed. Our low morale suffered even more. We believed that Operations, Maintenance, and the Company had let all of us down, and no one trusted their veracity. There was even some talk about refusing to fly the machines again unless they were properly fixed.

In the days following Charlie's death, many whispered innuendos circulated among Air America employees. Doubts, rumors, bitterness, and recriminations proliferated. This was particularly the case when a rumor arose that Charlie might have committed suicide. Even the thought of this was preposterous, but the unusual discharging of his Flight Mechanic confused an already bewildering and perplexing issue. In addition, someone in the maintenance chain of command was reputed to have placed all blame for the accident on Charlie, indicating that he was too old, too overweight, had physical infirmities (poor eyesight), and was not a proficient aviator. Such allegations tended to cloud the accident's actual cause: an engine malfunction of undetermined origin. The suppositions disgusted us and caused some pilots already on the borderline of staying with the Company to quit or seriously consider leaving Air America. Howard Estes, already highly conflicted because of his

battle damage problems and inability to sleep, was planning to depart shortly after completion of the school year.

The reality of the yet unresolved accident, and thoughts of mortality, brought us back down to earth, refocusing our attention into proper perspective. For myself, I decided to continue the same policy, formulated at the time I was employed: that of working and assessing the situation day by day. Except for my love of flying in the Lao Theater, thirst for combat, and consummate belief that we also performed important work supporting USG policies, as a single man, I could easily return home and start a new life and career at any time of my choosing. Additionally, in considering the recent spate of incidents and bad luck, I was optimistic as to a future resolution. I believed, as in the Biblical passage, "and this too will pass," that our tribulations would also eventually dissipate.

The impact of Charlie's untimely death lingered in our community. It was easy to rationalize that one could be killed in the States during any silly accident like stepping off a curb into an oncoming bus, or being struck in the head by a misdirected golf ball. However, blasé as one attempted to be while mentally resolving a peer's loss, it still impacted one, particularly when that person was someone you had shared many happy moments with. There was a special empathy between fellow pilots in the aviation business, uncommon to other professions or walks of life. Granted, each man was a definite individual in our group, some exceeding normal comprehension, but each person retained a bonding, a special feeling for a fellow pilot, and would go the extra mile to help one in trouble, even to the point of sacrificing his life. I considered sacrificing one's life for another the true definition of a hero.

Jones' demise so traumatized me that I vowed to myself that rather than again be polarized by a similar event, in the future, I would immediately forget the impacted party. It was the only way I could continue to work. However, I recognized that such a commitment was easy enough to espouse, but extremely difficult to implement.

FIXES

Because we continued to experience the worst maintenance problems in the history of the Madriver program, toward the end of the month the Operations and Maintenance Departments jointly admitted in print that there was indeed a problem with carburetors, oil coolers, intake valves, and other items that affected H-34 engine performance. Two memorandums were circulated and were disseminated to anyone and all involved in the Madriver Project. One emanated from the Senior Inspector of Quality Control to the Superintendent of Technical Services (Elmer Gould), the other from John Aspinwall, Supervisor of Aircraft Maintenance.

It was duly noted that many Bendix PD 12-R1 downdraft carburetors had been replaced for various reasons like backfires, engine failure, and excessive RPM drops during idle mixture checks. The latter was a check performed on the ground after the first start of the day and prior to launch to ensure that the carburetor setting was operating properly. Relatively simple, it entailed advancing the carburetor air lever to the direct position and the mixture lever to rich. Engine RPM was set to 2000 and manifold pressure to twenty-five inches of mercury. Then the prime button was depressed intermittently. Any increase in RPM indicated a lean flowing carburetor, which was detrimental to long engine life. A decrease in RPM indicated the

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unit was flowing at the best power or richer. A rise of more than twenty-five RPM indicated the carburetor was metering too rich. Therefore, if there was no increase in engine RPM at the prescribed parameters and the use of intermittent prime showed a drop in RPM, carburetor fuel was flowing at the best power setting. The performance check helped identify potential engine problems, but did not solve them.

As a potential fix, we were advised to operate in full rich mixture position during all ground operations, a technique that would decrease our fuel endurance and necessitate more frequent ground refueling. Naturally, this would cost us flight time.

In lieu of tangible evidence, other stop-gap measures taken to identify and/or alleviate some problems were the cleaning and oiling of carburetor air screens. After the log entry that Hotel-23 engine would only operate on primer, and internal carburetor impact tubes were discovered filled with dust, steps were taken to further "eliminate" dust intake.¹¹

Besides changing the carburetor, the fix included deactivating the air control feature on the mixture quadrant to keep dust from entering the alternate air door. Except to slightly abrogate the original idle mixture check, this measure did not affect our operations, for it was a system not required in the tropics. A second attempt to reduce dust included rotating the carburetor air screen every thirty hours, rather than the previously established fifty hours. The screens were oiled to trap dust and required thorough cleaning. Since the ships often remained upcountry until a hundred-hour check was due, in the future, when facilities permitted, fresh screens

¹¹I had flown the same machine during the first week in March and was indeed lucky not to have experienced the problem.

were planned to be stored at Sam Tong or The Alternate, and the dirty ones rotated to Udorn.

Other potential problems involved the length of a fuel pump vent line that was believed could bow and trap gasoline. Another related to an improperly installed internal O-ring in a carburetor fuel screen. A similar incident had previously occurred to Howard Estes at Sam Tong in 1963, when his Flight Mechanic discovered a piece of "C" ration cardboard packed behind the filter screen during an inspection. Despite speculation, it was never determined if this was caused by sloppy maintenance or outright sabotage. If the latter, it marked the first time any of our ships had been sabotaged.

Delivering his mea culpa, John Aspinwall forwarded a long memorandum to all hands to acquaint new pilots, Flight Mechanics, and service mechanics with present and past maintenance problems. He solicited constructive comments to improve not only the failing operation, but also the reliability of a proven helicopter.

John began with the obvious, stating that the project was experiencing engine problems:

"The burden of responsibility rested with AMD." Then, after admitting that there were no alibis, he indicated *"the number of aircraft assigned versus the manpower available to maintain the helicopters was inadequate. Much had been said verbally and messages floated around concerning the lack of flight mechanics. Yet, there were not enough available, so every capable service mechanic was scrounged from ground maintenance (some kicking and screaming) to attempt to keep the aircraft flyable at outstations. It was a vicious cycle, one which continuously stripped ground mechanics from their duties and led to behind the eight-ball situations. A heavy load fell on F/M's and lead*

men. They were required to fly and then attempt to fix the machines when not flying. Only so much could be accomplished and what was done failed to display quality workmanship. This was evident from repeat logbook squawks. Supervisors and lead men knew the capabilities of their assigned mechanics. However, it was impossible to cover every individual's corrective action." Therefore, he appealed to every mechanic to perform the work correctly, but quickly to maintain the aircraft for assignments.¹²

In a gross understatement Aspinwall continued:

"At the present stage in the operation, practically all pilots have lost faith in AMD and the UH-34D. This was obvious from logbook entries revealing unnecessary remarks in regard to repetitious items. [I was guilty of this.] Prevailing attitudes among pilots were understandable from the past and present number of engine failures." ¹³

¹² The majority of Flight Mechanics flying at this time in Thailand were still Filipinos. They included old-timers Punzalan, John Sibal, Dangoy, Moon Centeno, and newbie's Magpantay, and Joe Gaculais.

¹³ The "within limits" recorded in response to some gripes really peeved us. Therefore, sarcastic remarks like "repeat item" reflected our frustrations with the system and attempted to get maintenance's attention. What particularly bothered me were the logbook entries of "ground checks OK." This was often logged when the only correct means of checking a squawk required a ground run-up. One day, after griping annoying static and whine through my head set, I watched a huge Chinese man from the radio shop stumble across the parking ramp and climb into the cockpit of the machine in question. After he performed whatever checks he deemed necessary and departed, I reviewed his entry in the log. As suspected, it read, "Ground checks OK." The exercise had proved futile and did not solve the problem. Statically, without the generator and inverters operating during a run-up phase, there was no possible way the gripe could be duplicated. This information was instantly reported to management and actually resulted in a few changes. Despite our cynicism, we were becoming more sophisticated in our quest to ferret out irregularities and help improve the program.

Seemingly grasping at straws, John continued with facts and fixes related to current engine problems, asserting:

"...the engine failures attributed to carburetors could be ameliorated by close attention to clean air filters, carb strainers, main fuel strainers and servicing with clean fuel." He cited Hotel-28 as an example *"of sand clogging the carburetor impact tubes after flowing through a dry air filter. This clogging generally led to a lean mixture, which caused the cylinder head and the engine oil temperatures to climb and oil pressure to decrease."* To alleviate this condition, he reiterated *"a need to change the air filter every thirty hours for cleaning and re-lubrication with 1100 engine oil. The filters would be cleaned, prepared, and stored at Udorn until the situation permitted personnel and equipment to be provided at certain outstations to perform this function."*¹⁴

"The hot, dry season caused engine oil coolers to clog."¹⁵ This condition led to high engine oil temperatures, which in turn caused oil pressure to drop. AMD was accused of dereliction of duty if oil coolers were not changed every time high oil temperatures were encountered and reported. Because of a lack of coolers, pilots were encouraged to better diagnose this condition and all perceived engine malfunctions. This could be done by using the ground mixture check to ascertain if the carburetor was the culprit. A lean mixture was believed the most probable cause of engine failure in the detonation range during

¹⁴ The Air America facility at Sam Tong was nearing completion.

¹⁵ Always a problem in the dry season, units installed under the engine gathered dust and chaff from downwash that adhered to the fins, which reduced cooling air flow.

the hot, dusty period of the year. Therefore, to forestall lean conditions, the use of rich mixture was encouraged."

John mentioned sodium-filled intake valve failures, a subject I was well acquainted with from my partial engine failure incurred during my final days of flying in the Corps and with the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) in Udorn (see Book 2).

"Upon failure, liquid sodium was sucked into the induction system where it ignited the fuel-air mixture and exploded loudly. One or two violent backfires from this condition ensured most engines would quit.

There was concern about the exact pressure of fuel booster pumps on the ejection systems of later model UH-34Ds." As the gages were vented overboard, John indicated that we should ignore this item.

"There was also some concern among flight crews regarding oil leaks around the base of cylinders." This gripe was as old as the helicopter, and stimulated jokes regarding "one or two ragger" engines. ¹⁶ The supervisor indicated that it was possible that minor seepage from other sources (rocker boxes) could make it appear like leakage around the base of cylinders. He cautioned the Flight Mechanics:

"...to first attempt to clean the suspected areas to observe leaks and show the pilot the complete picture." In theory John's advice was to be lauded; however, the Flight Mechanic's life was also at stake and he too sought a safe aircraft.

¹⁶ This entailed tying a red clean-up rag around the affected area to soak up excess oil leaks.

John's final item dealt with clutch leaks in the impeller section:

"This component essential for engaging the rotors was frequently reported leaking excessively." (I had one that required a change at Long Tieng). Citing unnecessary field changes, he indicated "two cubic centimeters of Go-90 oil per clutch engagement met specifications in the maintenance manual."

As far as they went in describing the situation, the two memorandums were generally welcomed among the jaded pilot force. For the first time in print, they admitted that a distinct problem existed with the engines, and provided movement toward solving the predicament. However, serious maintenance problems did not begin to taper off or end until Jack Forney was re-assigned to Technical Services Udorn in April. ¹⁷

With the passage of time, after much contemplation, I realized that I had a distinct moral obligation to write to Charlie's widow, Martha, whom I had met at New River at squadron functions. However, because of the elevated secrecy attached to our operation and quasi-loyalty to the Company, I was conflicted as to what action to take. I recalled that when my enormously popular cousin, Bruce Anderson, died in a U.S. Army vehicle

¹⁷ Memorandum, Senior Inspector, Quality Control Udorn to Superintendent Technical Services, 03/29/65.

Memorandum Supervisor, Aircraft Maintenance to all concerned, Copies to: Technical Services Supervisor, Base Manager, Operations Manager, Chief Pilot Helicopters, CLM, PCO, ACH, all Flight Mechanics, all UH-34D pilots, supervisors, lead men, all Udorn Bulletin Boards, File, 03/29/65.

Marius Burke Interview.

Tom Penniman Email.

EW Knight Email, 10/09/00.

EW Knight March Flights, 04/12/01.

Howard Estes Phone Conversation, 09/04/93.

accident in Germany, letters his mom received from his close military friends relating small tidbits of information meant so much to her during the difficult grieving process. Therefore, I began a newsy correspondence hoping to sooth Martha's loss. I attempted to explain that Charlie had died while performing work he dearly loved. Since we never discovered exactly what had happened to the engine, I avoided the subject, for I did not want to be challenged in the future for additional information. Accordingly, I kept the few accident facts of which I was aware to a minimum. I did ask if she had received my typewriter in her husband's personal effects. A future letter divulged that she had not, but had a gray winter jacket with my name on the inside, and she wanted to know if she should return this to me. As this was the bulky winter coat I had given Charlie for upcountry RONS, I replied that it was a gift.

In one depressing letter, she anticipated the difficult time she and her children would encounter with the bread winner gone and attempting to live solely on Charlie's military pension. I knew the Air America Personnel Manual specified payment of a lump sum of 10,000 dollars in the case of a Captain's death during the course of ordinary work. Provisions in the book stipulated this amount could be increased to 20,000 dollars under hostile conditions, but would have to be sanctioned by the Company Board of Directors. Hostile was never defined, and even though the work Jones was performing that day was a prelude to combat operations, I did not know which sum would apply in his case. The episode apparently constituted a gray area. Curious, and feeling obligated to pass whatever information to her I could, I encountered Ben Moore and informed him that I was corresponding with Martha and mentioned her concerns about money. He seemed interested and indicated that

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between Social Security payments and the Longshoreman and Harbors Act, she would receive sizable monthly benefits that would supplement Charlie's pension and continue until the children were eighteen. When I asked if it would be acceptable to relay this information to her, he answered in the affirmative. I did not know it at the time, but there was some management chit chat over my previous relationship with Charlie and correspondence with his widow. Abadie mentioned this to Wayne on one occasion, but no one ever cautioned me to stop writing to her.

I do not know what Charlie told his wife regarding his short stay at Sopa Villa, but one of her letters curiously made obscure references to Sang and a baby. Sang was not even residing at the house at that time, but occasionally stopped by to spend time, see what was going on, and collect a large red one for services rendered. Perhaps Martha had me confused with someone else. She continued to wax sentimental about how tender a newborn's skin felt and how wonderful young babies smelled.

Later during our correspondence, Mrs. Jones' tone changed. I detected nuances that she might be soliciting information for a possible law suit against Air America. Since I planned to remain an employee and was very anxious regarding the impact and long tentacles of government bureaucracy, I did not want do anything to hurt the Company or become involved in a nasty litigation. Therefore, to terminate the dilemma, I ceased all further correspondence with her. The decision produced mental conflict and did not make me feel proud, but I had no other alternative.

Charlie's death caused quite a stir in America that eventually filtered back to Taipei and Udorn. For legal purposes, Ben Moore was advised by his superiors to establish a

visible identity as a civilian organization. Therefore, Ben had Air America pennants and banners strung throughout the facility.

Investigations and court appearances evolved over time. A few overhaul records uncovered by Jones' survivors revealed a Department of Defense (DOD) paper trail, but no mention of Air America. The lines where Air America began and Department of Defense ended were murky where bailed helicopter parts were concerned. One fuel-related component was discovered by lawyers that implicated a shady Los Angeles, California, overhaul shop.

Some former employees, like Howard Estes, were later contacted by lawyers for information.¹⁸ They wanted an affidavit as to Howard's knowledge regarding the accident. After learning that the Company was withholding even the standard 10,000 dollars death benefit pending final resolution of the case, Howard did all he could to help. The family was unable to find a copy of Charlie's contract with Air America. Inferring that it had been destroyed in the fire, Air America representatives falsely stated that pilots took the contract upcountry when they went to work.

Tom Penniman was never subpoenaed to testify, but preparing for what he considered an eventuality, he decided that his statement would indicate the Agency intimidating factor was so great as to prevent pilots from testifying to any Company negligence.

I never heard the results from any lawsuit, but others indicated that the incident was eventually judged a mechanical

¹⁸Martha Jones brother was an attorney.

failure. Knight believed the cause was an engine driven fuel pump failure. ¹⁹

While licking our wounds and speculating about the future of our program, four bailed USMC UH-34Ds entered our system. In early February, as the increase in military strikes and enemy offensives in Laos accelerated in Sam Neua, Company management had requested four more UH-34Ds through appropriate channels. The ships would increase our fleet to sixteen helicopters and replace previously lost aircraft through operations and transfer to the RLAF. Primarily targeted for military SAR duty, they could also be used for normal work. However, Sikorsky no longer manufactured H-34s, and with Air America, Vietnamese Air Force, and the Marine Corps flying them, there were no excess helicopters available in the Pacific Theater. Furthermore, organizations that flew them jealously guarded their assets. After receiving the request for more ships, Admiral Sharp searched his Pacific assets several weeks for helicopters. Finally, he requested the U.S. Navy to supply them from outside his command area.

Forwarding H-34s to Air America for SAR missions grated on Air Force Chief of Staff, General McConnell. Displaying a typical military mentality, he believed it was time to introduce additional USAF helicopters and personnel to supplement the Air Force search and rescue capability. However, Ambassador Sullivan, unwilling to have others sully our considerable accomplishments, took issue with the U.S. military encroaching on his turf, and touted our high success rate in pilot rescues. Besides exerting tight control over his aircraft assets, he preferred to have Air America continue in-country SAR duties; it

¹⁹ EW Knight Email, 05/10/00, 07/03/01.

would be more difficult with the military involved. Air America pilots, terrain and weather wise, highly experienced with most aspects of the country, were better adapted for SAR work. New Air Force units would require a lengthy learning process. In addition, the Geneva Accords prohibited the U.S. military from operating in Laos. Admiral Sharp concurred with Sullivan's point of view. He was convinced that there was no reason to exchange SAR duties in view of our "outstanding performance."

We welcomed the additional UH-34Ds, numbered Hotels-30, 31, 32, and 33, as potentially clean and airworthy aircraft, which would probably not immediately be cursed with the apparently unsolvable engine problems impacting our other ships. Nevertheless, they were meticulously inspected in the hangar, released for airworthiness test flights, and after meeting all our rigid specifications, fed into the field by the third week in March. ²⁰

²⁰ Marius Burke Emails, 03/28/00, 03/30/00, 04/03/00.
Bill Zeitler Email.
Tom Penniman Emails, 02/26/00 (2), 03/02/00, 03/03/00, 03/31/00.
Howard Estes Phone Call, 02/16/96.
Joe Leeker, Aircraft of Air America, Sikorsky UH-34D, H-26 University of Texas at Dallas, 08/15/03.
Joe Leeker, Sikorsky UH-34D Service History.
EW Knight Emails, 07/26/00.
EW Knight March 1965 Flight Time Record.
Victor Anthony, 164.

Our CPH was absent from Udorn at the time of Charlie Jones' death. Since Tom Moher was on medical leave, still recuperating from the noodle shop incident or enjoying STO, Wayne was in Bangkok commencing the start of the 1757 Jansky and Bailey contract, which was later changed to 1845. We had supported this remote radio signal propagation unit for some time on an ad hoc basis, while working for JUSMAAG, but now with urgency to produce reliable radios in the jungle, it required a full-time contract.

The Air America ship used was unique, in that the paint scheme was white. It was a UH-34D (148803), a bailed replacement for a crashed H-34 received 17 October 1961. Initially assigned the identity of Hotel X-ray, the helicopter was received and flown toward the end of the Temporary pilot period. It was then transferred to the International Control Commission (ICC at Wattay Airport) to become CIC-1, for the Geneva Accords watchdog in Laos during the fall of 1962.

During January, CIC-1 was returned to Air America for refurbishing and placement on the J&B contract. It was renumbered 803. There were no specifications that the aircraft had to remain white, but white was an excellent high visibility paint scheme for identification and safety purposes. In addition, working solely in a non-combatant area, it contrasted from our dark green H-34s and it was cheaper not to repaint the ship.

Since dynamic component changes were involved in the repair work, a test flight was required for airworthiness clearance. Wayne Knight performed this with Flight Mechanic Punzalan on 19 February. While Moher was still on STO and attending to his

housing needs, Wayne went to Bangkok on the 5th to meet the Customer and begin the new J&B contract. He remained until the thirteenth, when he gave Moher a proficiency check ride. During the period, he performed interesting Customer sightseeing missions, landing at Khao Yai in a large mountain mass on the south side of the Bangkok to Nong Khai rail line and the stretch of Friendship Highway leading from Saraburi to Korat. Khao Yai--literally high mountain--was a dedicated National Park located in the highlands east of Korat, and a quiet, cool spot to relax and escape the hectic pace of Bangkok. A nature preserve, it was rustic, but really a fine area with cabins, a restaurant, walking trails, and placards warning visitors of tigers.

Another place visited was Pak Chong, again on the highway between Saraburi and Korat. It was here during a taxi trip to Bangkok that I had stopped at a roadside stall in 1962 for Thailand's only fresh irradiated milk, packaged in triangular paper containers. The milk was derived from Chok Chai Farms cows. Commanding what became a highly successful family enterprise, Chok Chai pioneered the early Thai beef and dairy products industry. In addition, the owner was a relative of Wayne's wife Lai. At one time, I had read an interesting article in the *Bangkok Post* touting Thai cowboys and the new industry.

Between sightseeing sorties, and before returning to Udorn, Knight performed resupply missions and crew changes for the J&B organization. ¹

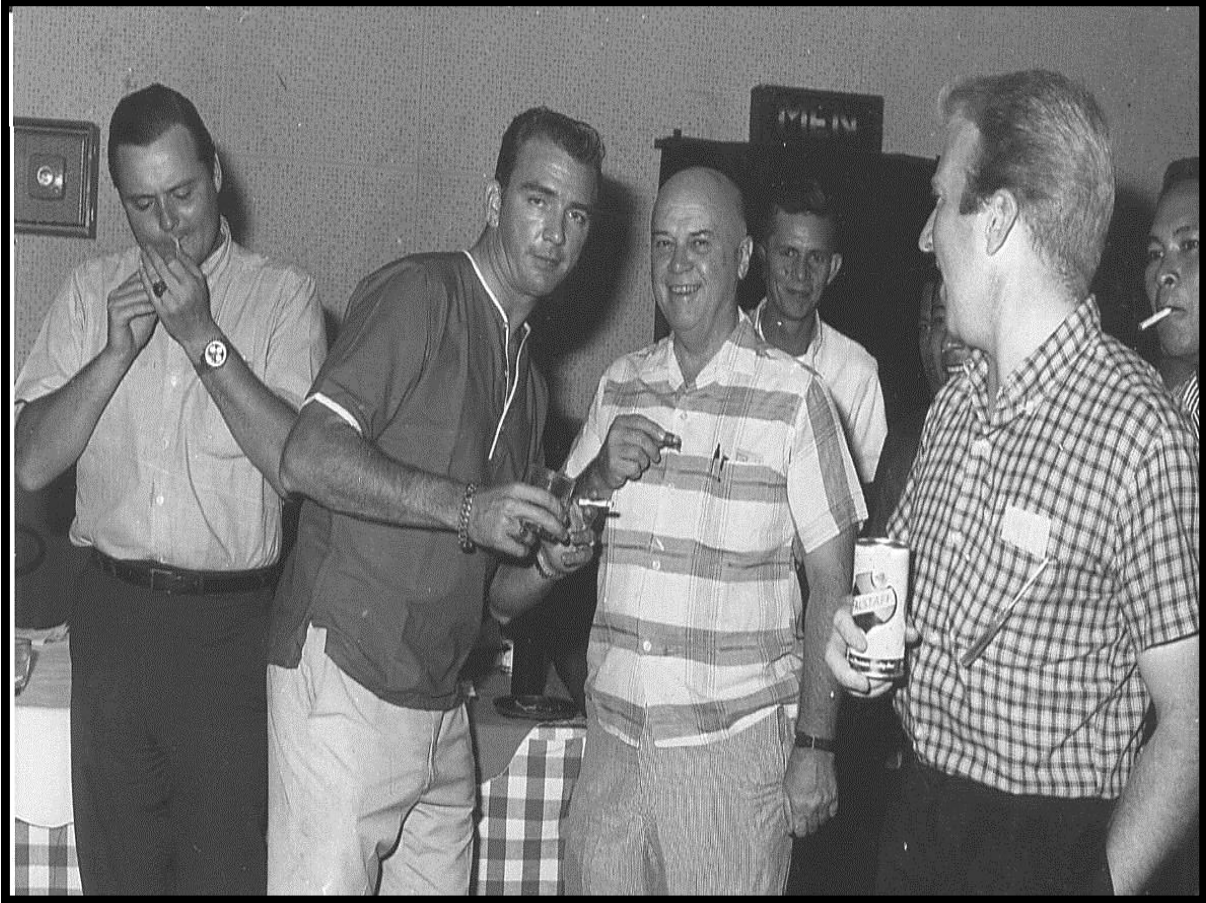
With all the aircraft flowing through the Air America facility, and many T-28s requiring normal inspections and battle

¹ EW Knight March 1965 Flight Time Record, EW Knight Emails, 07/07/00, 07/10/00, 07/11/00, 07/13/00, 04/12/01, 04/14/01, 04/19/01.

damage repair, the Maintenance Department (UMD) had its hands full meeting schedules. Considering the enormous workload involved in maintaining other units' aircraft, it was not surprising that H-34 engine and other maintenance problems escalated. There was just too much work, and not enough personnel to manage it.

Since Wayne was away in Bangkok, and with Scratch involved in Jones' accident investigation, I helped conduct test and ferry flights for two days. One task was with new Thai Flight Mechanic, Saribongse, on Hotel-23. Another was 1335, a Lao helicopter our Maintenance Department was charged to inspect, and keep in an airworthy condition. A third was CIC-5, which I ferried to Vientiane with Louie Moser, and was then required to bum a ride back to Udorn. Before leaving, I went to the commissary where I discovered a suitable refrigerator for what seemed a reasonable price. Since the appliance's motor was being repaired, I elected to place a down payment and retrieve the machine at a later date. After that, I visited Bird and Son Manager, Eric Shilling, and presented him with a hundred-dollar check for the Long Tieng food fund. ² I was still religiously collecting for the fund, and with their increased presence at Long Tieng, active Flight Mechanics were not exempted. For early March, I received a hundred baht, or five U.S. dollars each, from Abuy, Johnny Sibal, Ben Sabino, Rick Decosta, and Ben Naval; from Helio pilots Rick Byrne and Paul Severson; from H-34 pilots Steve Stevens, Art White, Howard Estes, Bob Hitchman, Marius Burke, Jack Connor, Sam Jordan, Bob Nunez, Charlie Weitz

² Eric Shilling: A delightful individual and former Civil Air Transport (CAT) pilot during the early China and Indochina days.



Party in the Club Rendezvous. Left to right: Captains Bobby Nunez, Charlie Weitz, Base Manager Ben Moore, Ground Maintenance Louie Moser, Flight Mechanics Pat McCarthy and Johnny Sibal.

Nichols Collection.

(back from leave), and Phil Goddard. As per our collective agreement, pilots still contributed 200 baht per month.

STO

Taking a welcome break from Udorn and upcountry work, in a preplanned trip, Marius and I journeyed to Bangkok for seven days of scheduled time off. Since Sang's untimely departure in August, I had been enjoying previously abandoned activities. Therefore, in addition to playing hard, I planned several activities, including a trip to the beach resort of Pattaya where I had not been for a couple of years. Even during the supposed cool season, this was an excellent place to spend a couple of days.

Burke was staying at his girlfriend and her mother's house in Bangkok. He had met Vinetra at a jewelry shop where she worked, and a close relationship had developed. Since I had not enjoyed a regular date in many moons, Vinet arranged a date for me with a fellow shop employee. The girl was not bad looking, but certainly no ravishing beauty. The four of us went to an Ice Capades show at the old auditorium across the river in Thonburi, popular for hosting Thai kick-boxing contests. The mostly European cast provided good entertainment. I consumed a large Singha beer and, feeling mellow, grasped my partner's hand. The warmth from her smooth skin was incredible, penetrating deeply into my body, stimulating latent hormones, stirring my loins, and highly exciting me. The human pheromones and sexual chemistry between us melded perfectly. I had not experienced such sensations with a female in a very long time--or ever. Given the opportunity, I would have jumped her bones that very instant. From her reciprocal squeezes and feathery touches, I

inferred that she was similarly inclined, and this portended future enjoyment.

It was quite late when we returned to the house, and I was impatient to pursue my quest of the grail. Following desultory conversation, the other couple retired. Before climbing the stairs, Marius handed me the keys to an ancient vehicle that he housed in Bangkok, so I could ostensibly transport my date home. As I was still in an elevated state of excitement, I recommended that we take a drive. I did not really know where we were going, but she was well aware of my intentions. I eventually spotted a raised multi-story building which I recalled that our randy American Flight Mechanics referred to as "The Riding Academy," a "short-time" establishment liberally employed for private liaisons. After making the necessary arrangements, we entered a room containing a huge wall-to-wall bed, and little else. Since anticipation of our intercourse had built toward a crescendo throughout the evening, little foreplay was necessary, or required, and there was no hesitation by either party. Before long, our pent-up passions raged to astronomical heights, and then exploded and plunged into the depths of relaxed and satisfied expectations. I had not experienced such feelings for a woman in some time, and was amazed that the passionate and generous young lady was as ready for uncomplicated sex as I. Granted, since Sang had disappeared into Udorn town's warren of obscurity, except for occasional unsatisfactory flings with skags solicited at the Chinese noodle shop, I had largely maintained celibacy. However, what I experienced that night was indeed special, and I looked forward to more of the same in the future.

Because of the urgency in our acrobatic coupling, we wore ourselves out and slept little during what was left of the

night. Since Marius and I were leaving for the beach in the morning to link up with Dick Elder, anticipating great times with an apparent soul mate, I asked the lady to accompany me to the beach. Claiming to have an American boyfriend, she coyly declined the offer. Naturally, I was disappointed to lose someone so sexually compatible. That did not always happen in life, and smacked of paradise lost.

After driving across town, at her request, I regretfully dropped her off in the Chinese section which, even at an early hour, was teeming with humanity. When I told Marius where I had spent the night, he was philosophical. After telling Vinetra what happened, she professed to express shock, claiming that she was not aware that her friend was disposed to such fun and games.

Usually, the ritual during STO was to acquire some walking around money from the Company-authorized money changer, Johnson Ma. This required a trip to the Air America office on Patpong Road to obtain Jim Walker's initials on a personal check. While at the office, I inquired as to the time element in the transportation and disposition of Jones's body. After receiving information on the funeral home in North Carolina, I decided to use Long Tieng food fund money (615 baht) to purchase and direct flowers to the appropriate place. There was not a lot of money left in the fund, but feeling it was the proper gesture to show respect and sure that my peers would not object, I initially made the purchase with my own money. ³

³ Since there was never an acknowledgement from the Jones family, I never discovered if the flowers ever arrived at the destination.

The Sam Tong hostel was about to come on line, and previous requirements to eat at The Alternate were approaching an end. Therefore, the expenditure effectively depleted remaining funds and terminated my duties as solicitor, keeper, and distributor of the Long Tieng food fund.

PATTAYA

Pattaya was still a relatively unspoiled, pristine part of Thailand adjacent to the Gulf of Siam. After renting individual rooms on the second floor of an old, brown wooden structure, we sailed the Gulf on Dick Elder's single hulled steel boat. Sailing was almost a new experience for me. While still in the service, Connie Barsky and I had sailed a portion of Subic Bay in a multi-hulled Trimaran while enjoying time off during a lull in action at Subic Bay Naval Air Station. Connie had experience with sailing vessels, so I was just along for the ride. While helping Dick with minor chores, he offered some basic nautical instruction in the art of sailing. He explained that the sail was similar to an aircraft wing or a rotor blade. Using the same aeronautical theory, it exhibited the same characteristics of lift, but only vertically. I really did not have a clear understanding of vertical vs. horizontal lift at this time as it applied to a sail. We anchored near one of the offshore islands, where I snorkeled and marveled at the beauty of the multi-colored tropical fish swimming among the coral reefs. It was great fun and I hoped to do it again during future STOs. ⁴

⁴ Dick Elder's boat later sank during a storm, and was never recovered.

That night, after a rock lobster supper at Barbos, we obtained directions from a local to the Bamboo Hut, a secluded hide-a-way east of the main drag. I am not sure if the establishment was sanctioned by local authorities, because it required a short walk down a narrow path surrounded by tough kuni grass and reeds that soared over our heads. Tarzan would have been happy in such an environment. Hidden from prying eyes within a rough jungle setting, like its name specified, the coarse bar was constructed of bamboo and thatch on a dirt floor. Nevertheless, despite any lack of ambiance, ladies of the night and booze were readily available. Sensations of my recent experience in Bangkok had left me quite randy, and my mind and body were primed to enjoy more female charms. Therefore, I arranged with mama-san to buy a girl out of the bar for the night. She was fairly appealing, but nobody in this world is perfect. While smiling, she displayed a mouthful of snaggle-toothed disarray and, as Thais smiled frequently, this was highly noticeable. Since Elder was married, and Burke, if not already, was considering the same, I was the only one to leave the establishment with a female.

My room included a small bed and lumpy mattress, but we managed to copulate. Like many such rooms in Thailand, this one was constructed with large slatted openings at the top of the walls to allow free air circulation. While I was enjoying myself, I could hear Marius and Dick playfully spouting obscene comments from the street. Not satisfied with this, one of the voyeurs climbed the side of the building, attempting to peek through an opening.

While I was still at MCAF New River, before going overseas, a similar experience took place. Hoping to get lucky in the very sterile environment, a girl was visiting in my BOQ room with

another couple when fellow squadron mate Jim Richardson wandered by, snookered after leaving the base officer's club. Noting that I was entertaining, and hoping to have some fun, he directed a water hose through an open vent into the room. Considering his action extremely poor form, I lost control, stepped outside, and pursued him. I caught up with the perpetrator at the end of the building and, intending to teach Jim a lesson, challenged him to fisticuffs. Well, this was not a particularly wise idea, for I was only slightly more than a five-foot eight-inch runt compared to the tall, lanky, and wiry Richardson. No matter, all my life, I had always fought larger opponents, and generally won the battles. A naked light bulb in the overhead ceiling was the only illumination in the area. Being relatively sober, I calculated that I had a reasonable chance of winning if I could take advantage of his inebriated state. Much like the fighter pilot diving out of the sun on an opponent, I could maneuver and use the semi-blinding effect of the light bulb to my advantage. My methodology proved both right and wrong. We circled, and while managing to avoid his wild gyrations, I delivered solid punches to his solar plexus and heart areas. The guy was tremendously strong and, except for grunts, I was amazed that my best shots did not seem to have any effect on him. If I had any sense, I should have quit then, but I continued flailing until I was completely spent. Unable to even raise my arms, I grabbed and wrestled Jim to the ground. Exhausted, I told my opponent that I was finished and could no longer fight. He accepted this explanation, but insisted that my aggression demanded satisfaction. Therefore, I negotiated three free punches. Considering what he could have done to me, I thought three free shots modest punishment to bear, the physical damage I had surely done him and the pain he would likely endure the

following morning. The shots directed at my face through a small rose bush I was under were fairly accurate, but not particularly destructive, except for several thorns embedded in my face.

I was a mess when I staggered into my room. Female activity that night was over, and all thoughts of pleasure were abandoned. Completely drained of energy and feeling nauseous, I asked my friend Mickey to drive the girls home. Then I stumbled into the shower stall to wash off the perspiration, dirt, and vomit. The next day, I shook Jim's hand and asked how he felt. He admitted that I had delivered some pretty good blows, but he was all right. We never mentioned the incident again. In retrospect, hoping to impress a bit of fluff had proven an illogical move, one not to be repeated.

This time, my companions' infantile efforts were not worth worrying about, so I continued the business at hand. Fortunately, no one broke his neck in the process and, eliciting no response from me, they eventually left me in peace.

Even for a hairy-chested Marine, I was reasonably sated the following morning. Then, as a concession to the continuing void in my life, I made a snap decision and asked gap-tooth to journey to Udorn with me. She allowed that the proposal normally would have been acceptable to her, but a problem at present, since she was still indentured to the madam who owned the bar. Basically, she was little more than a slave, in a country that had previously abolished slavery about a hundred years before. In what I considered similar to her circumstance, I heard that it was possible to purchase a young maiden from a poor family in a rural village for the baht equivalent of fifty dollars. The thought seemed incredulous, and I never knew anyone who had actually committed a transaction, but at times, when very lonely, I was tempted to explore the possibility. Of course,

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because such an act had such a gross legal downside and moral implications, I never actively pursued the rumor.

Curious regarding the Tooth's purported status, with her in tow, I retraced my steps to the Bamboo Bar. Although considering the economic benefit, Madam Greed was reluctant to release "Snaggle Tooth" from her obligated bondage. However, following fervent stroking on my part, she reluctantly agreed, providing an enormous sum was paid. That instantly cooled my ardor. I departed the premises sadder, but somewhat wiser as to Thai procurement methods.

Continuing a discussion with Jim Walker at the Air America office about investing in Thai securities, I learned of a Thai mutual fund that had already appreciated after its inception in 1963. The Thai stock market was new, but without government "safeguards" such as the American Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to protect the investor, Jim cautioned that equities were subject to boiler-room manipulation and corruption. For this reason, mutual funds seemed much safer and offered more potential. Since the World Company sponsoring the fund was located down the street toward the hospital, I visited the manager. Liking what he presented, and anticipating further appreciation, I invested 1,000 dollars in the fund.

Before returning to Udorn, I walked to the Bangkok Christian Hospital to provide blood and fecal specimens and colon washing for another liver function, and the disgusting amoeba test. According to grumpy Doctor Marshall Welles, both tests were negative. Since enduring a "cure" the previous year, I was feeling healthy and confident that no permanent damage had incurred from the beasties. However, entirely realistic as to the dangers inherent in my unsanitary environment, even though attempting to use caution in what I ate and drank, I fully

expected to experience similar problems again. On the plus side, I now knew the amoeba symptoms and how I felt when loaded with the parasites.

I returned to Udorn on the fourteenth, considerably recharged physically and mentally prepared for upcountry work. I wanted to write home and update the folks regarding some of the recent action upcountry and answer my Mother's recent questions. However, before leaving on the last RON, Charlie Jones had borrowed my Olympia script typewriter to send a letter to his wife, and no one had seen it since. The machine was not at his house when his effects were surveyed for shipment to CONUS. I had talked to Charlie on that fateful morning, and he had mentioned nothing regarding the machine. Fortunately, Nunez and Burke both possessed typewriters, so I was able to communicate with the folks in a legible manner. However, I was not yet ready to release information regarding Jones' untimely death.

Early Monday morning, I deadheaded to Vientiane with Flight Mechanic Lou Moser on an outbound H-34. We would ferry CIC-4 south to undergo a one-hundred-hour contractual maintenance inspection. Since the pilot's destination was Long Tieng, I gave him a hundred baht for the houseboy's monthly wages.

In one of two white UH-34Ds, the French pilot of CIC-4 conveyed ICC members to Khang Khay on 4 March. Normally these meetings were pre-announced and all Military Region Two air strikes were placed on hold. In addition to the normal ICC team, Pathet Lao from Vientiane, a Pole, and a Soviet rode along to meet with Pathet Lao leaders. As usual, upon arrival the team was separated on the basis of ideological beliefs, and

unrestricted movement throughout the area was not condoned. Nothing worthy of note was reported from the meeting. ⁵

Since the CIC office was not open, and the logbook and records for the aircraft not yet available, we repaired to the Air America restaurant for a leisurely breakfast. Afterward, I had sufficient time to visit the embassy commissary to check on the state of my refrigerator. Discovering the fridge's motor beyond repair, I cancelled the transaction and retrieved my down payment. While there, I purchased some items not readily available at the Air America store.

After returning to Udorn with CIC-4, I was required to test fly Hotel-29 with Louie Moser. The ship failed to pass muster, and was towed back into the hangar. Hotel-15 appeared in better shape and, with Flight Mechanic Lazaro's assistance, I released it for unrestricted flight.

⁵ William Sullivan to State, 03/06/65.

On 16 March, flying Hotel-21, one of two ships programmed for a nonstandard mission in Military Region Three, Ed Reid and I launched 116 miles east for a remote strip just east of Thakhet Town. After shutdown, the Case Officer, whom I did not know, briefed us on a planned road watch mission early the next morning. A need to know prevailed for this kind of mission, therefore, as was normally the case, the exact reason for the mission was not divulged to us. We could only speculate as to its purpose, but with the air war continuing to heat up, demand for enemy movement and target information for Barrel Roll was high. Despite the continuing air reconnaissance, hard targets could only be reliably provided by boots on the ground. This type of operation had been occurring for many years, with most operations involving troops walking to destinations.

We returned to the Nakhon Phanom base about dark. ¹ Because of an elevated base security, we were met by the operations officer of the day, who arrived in a gray Jeep and arranged for fueling. While Ben Naval put the bird to bed, the officer in charge billeted us at the Pedro barracks. Then we went to the mess hall for a decent supper. The base was still small, with PSP runways and parking areas, a few barracks, a fuel depot, and other structures. A recently erected Officer's Club provided a nightly watering hole for the pilots, who were largely

¹ The Flight Time Record reflects Tango-50 as the riverside town of Nakhon Phanom. This was probably entered in error or as a means to cover the purpose of our mission.

restricted to the remote base. The commanding officer allowed that since we were new guys in the club, we were obligated to drink what was called an "afterburner" (also known in some quarters as a "flaming hooker") in order to obtain a club membership card. Each club had some kind of foolish rule. In the Club Rendezvous bar, a transient, or new person, was first blessed with a hat, the bell rung, and the person challenged by serious peer pressure to buy the house a round of drinks. There were few refusals, and those who elected not to play the game were drummed out of the Club with their heads down in shame. In this case, the "afterburner" consisted of an ignited shot glass of whiskey. A new game to me, it was fun to watch the fiery liquid dribbling down the chins and chests of aspiring, giggling candidates. However, when my time arrived to perform, I was not sure that it was such a good idea. Still, to be one of the boys, I managed to down the nasty looking mixture, while discovering that accomplishing the process appeared much worse than it actually was. As a result, I received a card stating that I was an honorary member of the NKP Afterburner Club, probably one of the first ever issued to an Air America pilot. I carried it for years in my wallet until the dog-eared card eventually disintegrated from sweat and the wear and tear of the jungle environment.

After a quick breakfast, we launched across the river to the remote Thakhet east strip. The troops boarding our ship were dressed in Pathet Lao wash-khaki uniforms and carried Soviet Bloc weapons and equipment. Their attire made me wonder if the soldiers were part of a special guerrilla unit (SGU) formed for long range missions into enemy territory.

Ed, casual as always, led the flight, and it looked like he might have previously performed similar missions. From our
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altitude, the denuded peaks of the karst-blanketed region appeared razor sharp with no visible forced landing areas present. It was scary thinking about landing on one of them. In contrast to the older, weathered, rounded, and forested mountains prevailing in seventy five percent of the country, these limestone projections were obviously newer formations on the linear time scale. I had never flown over such a cluster of needle point type karsts that featured vertical slopes, with each plunging into dark, unknown abysses. Although the time over the points was not lengthy, I did not enjoy flying over such nasty, unforgiving terrain.

Our drop off point was located north of Route-13, about thirty-five miles north-northwest in a river valley surrounded by high mountains. The valley's northwest axis was fifteen miles in length and three miles wide at its lower end. It was bisected on the upper portion by mountains. Route-137, which spurred off Route-13 on the flatlands between the Mekong and the karsts, ran through a gap into the valley. It coursed through the towns of Ban Naan and Ban Houa Na and split into several minor trails and sub-trails that followed the general path of the river and wound throughout the valley, terminating in the mountains, where small villages existed.

We conducted several shuttles into the drop zone, leading me to wonder if this mission was actually a sizeable search and destroy operation calculated to eliminate Pathet Lao influence in the area. It was long recognized that enemy units marshaled their forces in the numerous caves inundating the area. These elements were not only a threat to Thakhet, but also to Route-13 traffic and the tin mine at Grove Jones, where Americans maintained a small presence.

We refueled for a last time at Nakhon Phanom and recovered at Udorn at dark.

I spent the next six days upcountry fighting smoke, haze, and embedded thunderstorms that pervaded the area. On Thursday, once reasonably satisfied with Hotel-22's airworthiness and performance, Lazaro and I flew north to Long Tieng, where we were redirected to Na Khang. Each smoky season was a total relearning process in regard to navigation and recognizable checkpoints. Although I had outbound and inbound routes indelibly burned into my memory banks, there was still room for error when horizontal and slant visibility was minimal. Unable to observe anything except vertically from the right window, slower flight, time-distance, and exact checkpoints were necessary.

At Na Khang, an expanding red slash of a runway was gradually taking shape, and an earthen fort was being developed at the top of the hill overlooking the upper strip and eastern rice paddies. The place was very busy, as planes landed with supplies for us to shuttle to outlying sites and defensive posts. Without the good radio operations normal to Vientiane and Udorn, in the absence of fixed wing relay, and to provide a modicum of safety, we teamed up in a buddy system using the FM radio to look after each other. This was particularly useful if someone was sent to work a fair distance from the site, such as the Moungh Heim Valley or north to Phu Pha Thi. Since the advent of increased engine problems, this was an excellent idea in theory, but not always a capability because the radio required line of sight for contact.

That evening, after recovering at Site-20A, I was redirected to Paksane for the night. In addition to providing an asset at a forward SAR site with sufficient radius of action to

cover area strikes in Military Region Three, there was a concerted effort to stem the increasing tide of enemy incursion in the Tha Thom area. Without General Kham Khong's presence, a Paksane RON was not the same. Officers at the house were friendly enough, but many of the original Phoumists had fled to Thailand since the February coup, been arrested, or reassigned. Of those remaining, I wondered how many were actually ready to work under Vientiane's mandate, and were really loyal to General Kouprasith. Still, I was told to be on the lookout for dissident groups led by Kham Sao and Karbkeo. I nodded acknowledgement, but remained silent on this matter, for helping to capture a true patriot conflicted with my values and was something I was not prepared to honor.

I worked the Paksane and Tha Thom areas most of the day. It was very hot and humid in the Tha Thom Valley, well over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit during mid-day with the sun at its zenith and penetrating the haze. Helping to slake my thirst, the officer in charge of loading and directing flights provided me with fresh coconuts. They were expertly cut at the top enabling me to easily drink the refreshing juice. Recalling problems other pilots had experienced consuming too many coconuts and the juice's laxative qualities, I was judicious in quaffing the drink. Since the area was not considered entirely secure, there was no fuel at the site and I did not shut down.

Later, I landed at Sam Tong before RON at Long Tieng and noted the new hostel's exterior was finally taking shape and appeared ready to receive its first overnights. The runway was in good shape and a new wooden hospital replacing the old thatched affair was positioned to the south of the lower strip with a large offloading area. Other permanent structures like a steel Quonset hut, a replacement for the original thatch

warehouse, to store AID supplies, and to house Pop and his workers was being erected.

There was a logical reason I was sent to Long Tieng for the night. Recent investigation in Udorn during carburetor tear down analysis further revealed dirt clogging internal air impact tubes. Therefore, in an effort to reduce dust intake prevalent during landings, takeoffs, and taxiing, as promised, John Aspinwall's maintenance team began shipping pre-oiled filters upcountry to be swapped every thirty hours or so, and well before the normally scheduled change. In lieu of hard evidence to identify exact engine problems, this was a pragmatic attempt to slow or quell the rash of failures. Dust in the carburetors was not the only disconcerting findings during investigation. During heavy maintenance, after removal, workers discovered up to an inch or more of dirt and grass in the bottom interiors of some fuel cells. Apparently, the tanks had never been inspected before, and the debris accumulated over the years. Without positive evidence that any of this trash entered the engine carburetors through fuel system filters, attempts were made to change or clean the offending cells during heavy maintenance. The jury was still out on the success of the new program.

On Saturday I returned to Paksane for two days. The first day was short, no doubt because of a standby mission covering U.S. Navy pilots from the USS *Hancock* striking targets on the Lao side of Mugia Pass in Military Region Three. Although single pilot, in case of a SAR call, Howard Estes working east from Long Tieng could have joined me at a predetermined site and jumped in the cockpit.

The following day involved maximum flying of eleven hours thirty minutes. At the same time, CPH Knight was working the LS-21 and the LS-95 Phou Sao areas northwest of Tha Thom in

recently acquired UH-34D, Hotel-32. He was conducting a shakedown flight with Moon Centeno and recent hire Jim Brown. Sites in this area provided substantial landing challenge with high and difficult landing zones. Bracketing Routes-4 and 42, control of the high ground was important from the standpoint of intelligence gathering, ground interdiction, and expansion.

On the morning of the 22nd, I was released to Long Tieng, and in turn sent to Na Khang to support the consolidation effort and new site development preceding Tong's slow northern movement toward Hua Moung.

Several helicopter crews worked the site. Knight and Brown comprised one unit. While refueling, I collected ten dollars for The Alternate food fund and learned that Jim was a former Army pilot who later worked as a helicopter test pilot for the Boeing Vertol Company. Performing a loop during test maneuvers, something drastic happened to the Chinook's controls. Bailing from the plunging aircraft while upside down, Brown survived. He was perhaps the only aviator in the world who experienced such an incident and lived to talk about it. Thinking about the accident, it was difficult to consider whether Jim lived a charmed life, or was just unlucky. Jim's father was a doctor, which also made me wonder why he, like Phil Goddard, had chosen to participate in the Lao war's increasingly dangerous work.

The old timer and the newbie worked west of Site-36 at Pha Bong (LS-76), fifteen miles north of the neutralist garrison at Moung Heim (LS-48). The 4,600-foot Meo site was also located seven miles south-southeast of Moung Son (LS-59), east of the Site-48 Valley and Route-621. It was an important area in that it provided an outpost overlooking a traditional North Vietnamese invasion route from the Son La, North Vietnam northwestern military district, which supported the "dreaded"

Vietnamese 316 Division. The Military Regional Headquarters at Son La dealt with military matters relating to the Pathet Lao insurgency in Laos. To protect Na Khang's western flank, officers were busy alerting and marshaling ADC troops in the area to the need for diligence in regard with enemy troop infiltration and of Vang Pao's projected move toward Hua Moung.

There was previous Agency and State Department sanction for guerrilla operation expansion into the original home area to retake and hold enemy areas in Luang Prabang, Sam Neua Provinces, and into new territory toward the DVR border. However, a perceived problem with the U.S. mission refugee program capability to support returning villagers with sufficient rice, medical care, education, and program orchestrators did not envision including entire tribal village populations. Moreover, largely because of the new Rolling Thunder bombing campaign, it was no longer deemed necessary to conduct border ground operations into North Vietnam for the purpose of interdicting Route-7. ²

The next day while performing work for the Sam Tong Customer, Hotel-22's engine began malfunctioning, not performing to acceptable normal idle mixture check specifications. Therefore, I called Udorn, and after explaining the problem, was advised to ferry the helicopter south. Since I did not want to fly directly over rough mountains with a sick engine, I chose a circuitous route through Paksane that provided additional flat areas and rivers should a need to autorotate arise. The course took considerably longer than normal to RTB, but afforded me a

²EW Knight March 1965 Flights.
CIA Washington Message to the Secretary of State, 04/02/65.

perceived safety route and considerably reduced my stress level. Later, after conducting another long ferry flight, I was called to task by Abadie, who reported the Customer complained about the excessive ferry time. I took this admonition into consideration, while recalling Charley Jones's notable advice regarding work in Laos in which he stated a pilot should reserve one hand for the Customer, one hand for yourself, and if necessary, two hands for the principal. With the serious maintenance problems we now faced and with Charlie's recent death, I was not going to be intimidated by the Customer or anyone else in management who failed to understand the miserable conditions we currently experienced. This, even at the cost of termination, for I could always obtain another job, but never another life...

THE AIR WAR

USAF General Johnson forwarded a twenty-one-point program to the White House urging President Johnson to drastically increase the Rolling Thunder campaign. Most of the program was approved on 15 March. This resulted in an increase from eighty aircraft and 1,000 personnel to hundreds of aircraft and thousands of men located at six scattered Royal Thai airfields to implement North Vietnam sorties. Ubon, Korat, Udorn, and Takhli were the main air facilities developed to support Rolling Thunder. The F-105 Thunderchief stationed at Takhli and Korat became the primary plane for delivering munitions in North Vietnam. More than 300 were lost during the almost three-year bombing campaign.

A portion of the General's plan confined Barrel Roll to northern Laos, and created a new air program for southern Laos. To enhance the Barrel Roll program, Washington leaders generally

agreed that the goal required more systematic operations focused on logistical chokepoints and armed reconnaissance of major roads. Consequently, by early March, Embassy and MAVC personnel completed planning a bombing program calculated to slow enemy logistical supply into Laos. The objective envisioned producing difficult-to-bypass chokepoints along primary routes. After severing roads, the chokepoints would be occasionally reseeded with antipersonnel mines and delayed action bombs. Cratering missions normally required sixteen bombers and twelve flak suppressor aircraft. Reseeding operations required twelve bombers and twelve suppressors. CINCPAC basically agreed with Sullivan, but stressed that it was far more important to strike bases supporting enemy infiltration. This interdiction would negate the need to maintain a troop presence in the field during the upcoming rainy season. Sullivan did not agree. He still contended that it would be more logical to obstruct the LOCs immediately and attack the depots in the rainy season when the enemy struggled to resupply their troops.

Using maps, photos, and road watch team reports, CINCPAC planners began researching likely interdiction opportunities around Sam Neua town. Evidence clearly revealed that all vehicle traffic in upper Military Region Two was funneled through Sam Neua on Routes-6 and 65. Several lucrative chokepoints were discovered. One was located on Route-6 along a series of cliffs beside a well-defined hairpin turn five miles south-southwest of Sam Neua Town. At another location, the same road involved sharp turns, overhanging cliffs, narrow wooden bridges, and no

provision for an alternate bypass. All targets were clear of friendly forces, as confirmed by CAS personnel.³

Sullivan was briefed by CINCPAC on the targets during a meeting. He confirmed them contingent on consecutive day strikes in lieu of a single event to avoid massive attacks that might attract media attention and roil Souvanna Phouma. With the advent of the March decision to divide Lao air operations into two portions--Barrel Roll in the north and Steel Tiger operations in the south--it appeared as if Sullivan would be granted increased discretion in planning and implementing future air operations in Military Region Two. However, he failed in his quest to have a dedicated force at his disposal for rapid response situations.

Seeking additional information on the air war, on 14 March, State queried Ambassador Sullivan about his views on the impact Barrel Roll had produced thus far and would likely have on the Lao political and military situation. From dialogue already conducted earlier in the month with State, Sullivan was somewhat conflicted on what he considered a scattered interdiction agenda. As a result, it was difficult for his Country Team to accurately judge what impact the program was having on North Vietnamese leaders. Recently, AIRA had proposed air operations in Sam Neua to help enable Colonel Tong's FAR troops recover lost sites. The plan called for several strikes in the area, one only three miles from Sam Neua Town.

During mid-March meetings, the Johnson Administration considered the Barrel Roll campaign less of a political method to demonstrate USG resolve and more of a military operation to interdict enemy LOCs. Therefore, to better implement projected

³ CAS: Controlled American Source, a term used instead of CIA.

goals, with Sullivan's continuing input, Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended, and LBJ approved, the division of Lao air activity into two distinct areas of responsibility.

By 20 March, State twixed the embassy about a new program named Steel Tiger to commence on 3 April. The new program, designed to stop enemy infiltration into South Vietnam by interdiction of PAVN and Viet Cong routes in the south, would assume priority over U.S. Air Force and Navy Yankee Station missions in Laos, and be dedicated to increased air operations against targets in the Panhandle area.

In Military Region Three and Military Region Four, the operation would extend south of the 17th parallel from Nape Pass where LOCs provided the North's military means to Vietcong subordinates in South Vietnam. This campaign became known as Steel Tiger. Operational restrictions were relaxed in both areas to deal with increasing enemy movement.

Although a new program, the Barrel Roll name would be retained. Activity was reserved for the area extending from Nape Pass north, which included Routes-6 and 7 in Military Region Two. Emphasis particularly focused on Route-7's mountain chokepoints where a measure of combat and logistical support to the Pathet Lao moved across the border through Barthelemy Pass. The program was also responsible for close air support of FAR and Meo troops, plus air interdiction of the Vietnamese supply lines to Pathet Lao in the area. As conceived, this program would be entirely generated by RLG requirements and U.S. Embassy input. Operations could be accelerated or decreased as deemed necessary.

Two days later, believing Barrel Roll could be more effectively administrated, Sullivan concurred with a division of air operations into the two separate entities. He reiterated

that, as a result of Unger's previous tenure, the new programs were still dependent on the political authority granted by Souvanna Phouma. The Prime Minister, disaffected with Vietnamese incursions and violation of the Geneva Accord, readily sanctioned U.S. efforts to thwart their activity.

However, stressing the covert nature of the activity, Souvanna cautioned that care should be exercised in the implementation of the air programs. He also emphasized that Lao villagers were considered a valuable government asset. The Viet Minh largely operated in hostile territory and Lao guerrillas were friendly to the RLG. Therefore, USG operations had to be carefully tailored so as not to disrupt the political ramification of this cooperation.

Souvanna requested answers as to how SAR commitments would be conducted for Steel Tiger and recommended that the USAF assume primary operation responsibility from Nakhon Phanom, supplemented by Air America, Royal Lao Air Force, and other assets.

Members of the military also requested an increase in Rolling Thunder activity. To bolster aircraft protection at the Da Nang, South Vietnam airfield, delivered by the USS *Henrico*, *Union*, and *Vancouver* from Seventh Fleet Amphibious Task Force 76, elements of the Ninth Marine Expeditionary Battalion (MEB) stormed ashore without opposition on 7 March. Shortly thereafter, a Marine air wing arrived and was formed at the site. After a two-week lull, the U.S. Navy launched Rolling Thunder 6 from the Fleet in the Tonkin Gulf. Mollifying previous criticism of Rolling Thunder's catch-as-catch-can operation, a strike package (Rolling Thunder-7) was implemented for an entire week between 19-25 March, or until objectives were achieved. During the new weekly packaging, VNAF planes were no longer

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deemed necessary or required on missions. If military targets were positively identified, the Rules of Engagement (ROE) were relaxed to permit striking rail lines and armed reconnaissance of roads.

A SEACOOD meeting was held in Udorn on the 26th. Representatives from the Lao Embassy Country Team, including Sullivan, Bangkok American Embassy, the Second Air Division, MACV, and Air America addressed operational and coordination matters in regard to the new bombing program in Laos. So as not to overlap or interfere with operations, the parties agreed to well-define Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger boundaries. As previously implemented, COMUSMACV ⁴ would coordinate through the Second Air Division (Moore) all Pacific Air Forces-USAF (PACAF) and Pacific Fleet-USN (PACFLT) operations.

In regard to expanded SAR requirements covering two dedicated areas, the attendees agreed that the Second Air Division would continue to assume primary responsibility for search and rescue operations using HH-43 helicopters based at Nakhon Phanom. Fuel would be staged at key sites in the Panhandle area to increase their combat radius of operations. When possible, UH-34Ds and crews would be staged at Paksane and

⁴ COMUSMACV: Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam-Westmoreland.

Pakse to "supplement" USAF units. ⁵

By 5 February, Sullivan reevaluated his decision after discovering Route-7 was only a fifteen-minute flight from Udorn as opposed to ninety minutes from Saigon. Since Barrel Roll effectiveness largely depended on quick reaction time in developing situations, he wholeheartedly supported RF-101 relocation to Udorn. Therefore, responding to a requirement for additional photo recce in the theater, following Thai government's approval on 25 February for permanent placement of twelve aircraft, during the first week in March, an advanced party of the Fifteenth Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron arrived in Udorn from Kadena Air Force Base, Okinawa. By month's end, four RF-101 Voodoos were in place and pilots began flying Yankee Team missions. Two more planes arrived the next day. After the RTG authorized the placement of additional Voodoos, sufficient planes followed to flesh out the squadron to eleven aircraft.

⁵ Except perhaps in military dreamers' minds, H-43s were never actually considered primary SAR in Laos. They were too fragile for the environment. Since our presence was already well-established north and south of the Plain of Jars with dedicated assets, nothing was mentioned in Sullivan's report with regard to upper Military Region Two. Vientiane Operations Chief, Bill Leonard, never mentioned exclusive SAR duty southern locations in his daily commitment transmissions to Udorn Operations. If H-34s RONG at Pakse and Paksane were actually dedicated to Barrel Roll-Steel Tiger at these places, they were likely imbedded within normal aircraft assignments. This was probably the case, since CPH Knight could not recall positioning a ship at Paksane for exclusive SAR duties.

Note: On 22 September, General Moore lobbied to relocate six RF-101 Voodoos from Tan Son Nhut to Don Muang or Udorn RTAFB. Such a move would ease mission planning, provide shorter missions, and reduce refueling needs. However, Ambassador Sullivan and State were opposed to additional recon flights over Laos until late October.

The unit's planes were named Green Python. Within a week, the unit was fully operational, flying an average of four sorties per day. To cover losses and requirements, additional RF-101 jets continued to arrive in Udorn. ⁶

HELIO CRASH ON PHU BIA

Mike LaDue worked as an Air America "kicker" during 1962-1964. After "falling" out of his second aircraft, AFS LaDue wisely decided on a career change. He was hired by USAID, and returned to work in Laos. He worked out of Sam Tong during the winter-spring period of 1964-1965. AID Chief Charles Mann, who had a fine relationship with Edgar Buell, kept the upcountry unit well supplied.

The evening of 23 March, Mike was in Vientiane attending a dinner at Mann's home. Dinner was followed by a withering game of Cameroons. ⁷

On the afternoon of 24 March, Pop Buell asked Mike to fly to Moung Oum (LS-22) in a valley on the east side of Phu Bia

⁶William Sullivan to State, 03/04/65.
 State to Sullivan, 03/14/65.
 State to Sullivan, 03/20/65.
 William Sullivan to State, 03/22/65.
 John Smith, 54-55, 61-61, 334.
 Edward Marolda, 03/15/65;
 Phillip Van Staaveren, 56-57, 62-63.
 Phillip Van Staaveren, *Gradual Failure: the Air War Over North Vietnam 1965-1966* (Washington, D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program) 96.
 William Sullivan to State, 03/27/65.
 Victor Anthony, 152, 159-160.
 EW Knight Email, 07/24/00.
 Edward Marolda, 45.
 William Greenhalgh, 62-63, 77.

⁷ Cameroons: A French dice game akin to Yatsi {Yahtzee}, but more complex.



Mike LaDue wearing the standard gray Air America uniform mandated by the Company for employees in 1962.

LaDue Collection.

with recently upgraded Helio Courier Captain, Harvey Gulick. They were tasked to obtain a report from the village chief, and on the way back to Sam Tong to stop at MOUNG CHA (VP's Farm) and pick up Meo school teacher, Yu Law Lee.

The sun was beginning to set when Harvey took off and turned south into the smoke and haze to parallel the lush valley and head for Sam Tong. Then he circled to attain a safe en route altitude before proceeding west toward Phu Khao. While Gulick flew B-865 into the reduced visibility, Mike began composing his report for Pop. When he heard full power being applied to the engine, he looked up and noted with consternation that they were in a blind canyon. It was obvious that they were in trouble. A few seconds later the aircraft stalled, the fixed landing gear caught in tree tops, and the nose pitched straight down into the side of the Phu Bia complex.

Most likely because of the Helio Courier's extraordinary short takeoff and landing (STOL) capabilities and rugged aluminum tubular construction fashioned like a cage around the passenger compartment, all three men survived the crash. Adding to passenger survivor ability, the aircraft was stressed to withstand several "G" forces. However, during the sudden stoppage, none of the men escaped without serious injury. Gulick and LaDue were thrown violently against the instrument panel, while the teacher, who was not strapped into a seat, sailed out the door. Parts of the engine penetrated the firewall, pinning Mike's right leg between the seat and console. While gasoline poured on the ground from a torn wing cell, Harvey, who incurred multiple contusions and lacerations, including a broken arm and deep laceration of his left Achilles tendon, struggled to free his passenger. Once free of the wreck, they crawled away from

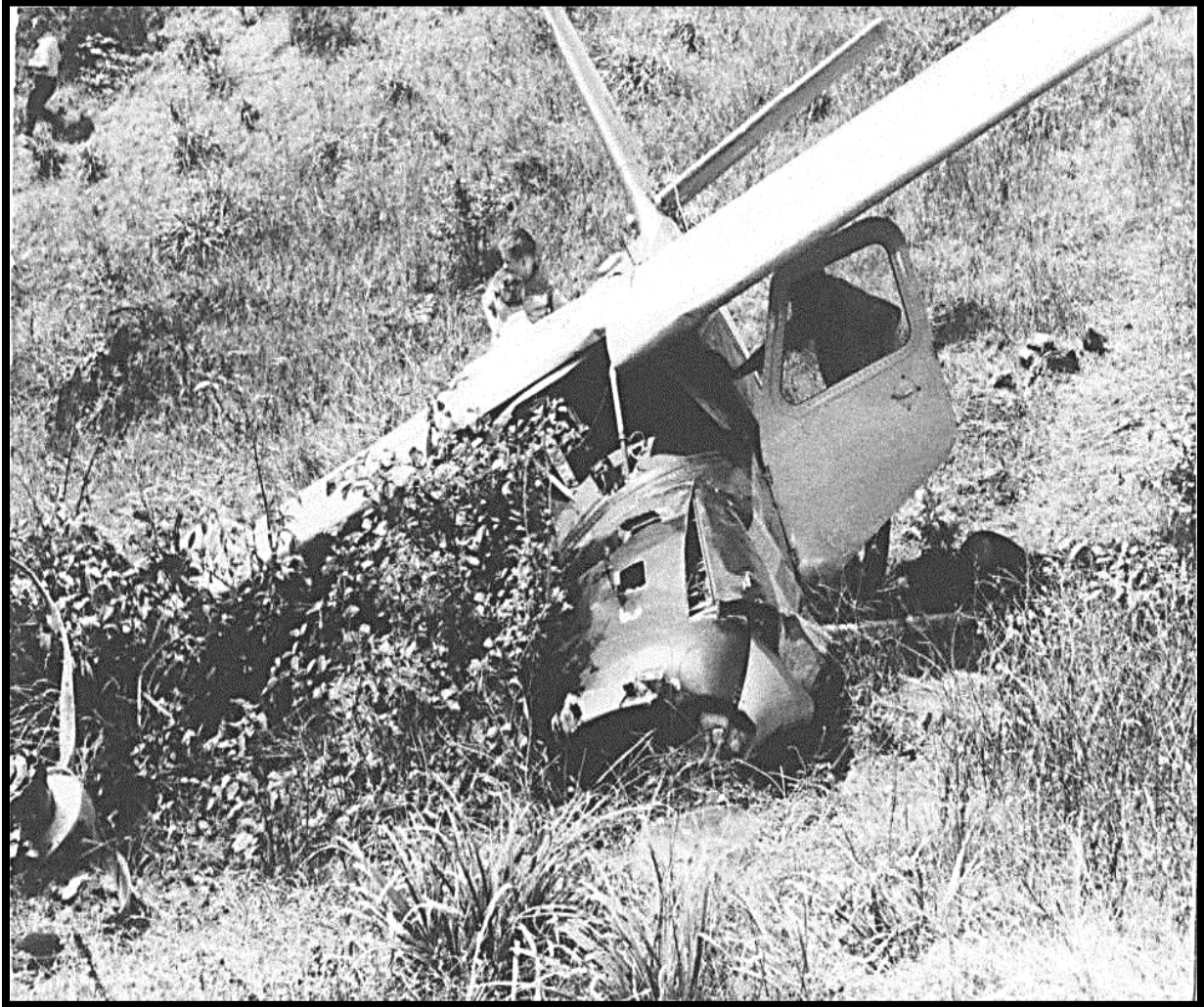
the potential bomb, ministered to their painful wounds, and spent a long, nervous night in the weeds.

When news of the missing plane filtered down to Vientiane, both the Ambassador and Mann arranged for every Air America and Bird and Son aircraft available to participate in a search. At daybreak, the men were thankful to still be alive and not apprehended by an occasional wandering Pathet Lao patrol. Searching aircraft buzzed the area, but radio communications were initially difficult to achieve for several minutes. Soon afterward, Scratch Kanach and another pilot landed upslope from the crash. Doctor Weldon was onboard to diagnose injuries and administer what meager medicine he carried and deemed necessary to stabilize the men. At the time, his prognosis of the Meo was uncertain, but he did not consider Gulick and LaDue's injuries life threatening.

THE 31ST

Scratch Kanach delivered the two Americans to Moung Cha, where a fixed wing pilot ferried them to Wattay Airport. A Caribou crew was assigned to fly them to the Thirty-First U.S. Army Field Hospital located at the RTAFB Korat, Thailand. The wood and tin facility was housed in a two-story medical warehouse built by the Japanese during World War Two, and lacked creature comforts

During February 1964, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Second Lieutenant MacAlan "Mac" Thompson had been assigned to a year tour at Camp Friendship, Korat, Thailand. The 528th Engineering Detachment was tasked to rehabilitate the dilapidated field hospital. Later, when the Vietnam War escalated, the engineering group built a new hospital consisting of a sprawling one-story



A ground team investigating the remains of crashed Helio Courier B-865 located on the side of Phu Bia-circa March 1965.
LaDue Collection.

facility.

At the time of "Mac's" arrival, there were only forty Air Force personnel at the location: one captain and the rest enlisted. 1,200 Army rounded out the American complement.

Two young Thai men--"Nee," a plumber converted to work in supply, and "Wild Bill" Wiboon, a clerk-typist who worked for Thompson in 1964--were later trained by Joint Liaison Detachment (JLD) personnel and became Forward Air Guides (FAG) controllers in Military Region Two. Assigned to the numerous landing zones in the "nut cutting" 1970s, they and many like them with various code names apprised us of the current situation over their hand-held radios.

The hospital staff did not particularly like civilian types being directed to their medical facility from upcountry for two reasons: The patients would not divulge what they were doing in Laos, but primarily because of gut shot Tony Poe's disruptive antics in January. Tony was the worst. Once on the mend, he loudly demanded alcohol. On one occasion, he escaped the ward. Hoping to catch a ride upcountry, he moved toward the runway on a crutch until collapsing and being carried back to bed.

Because of a considerable loss of muscle mass and a mangled right calf and tibia, doctors initially wanted LaDue's permission to amputate. During an examination, one doctor asked him, *"Are you one of them?"*

Through a morphine-induced haze, Mike queried, *"Who are them?"*

"Are you like Tony?"

Instead of opting for amputation, Mike chose two operations and general secondary healing process of the large crater in his lower right leg. Later, he was transferred to the Seventh Day

Hospital in Bangkok for physical therapy and fitted with a leg brace to deal with the foot drop.

Following additional evaluation and medical work at the, Clark AFB Angeles City, Luzon, Philippine Islands, within the year, he was back working upcountry. ⁸

Gulick, whose right arm was broken in several places, was treated and his appendage immobilized in a cast. Unfortunately, the young medic who applied the cast molded it overly tight and gangrene ensued, which resulted in the necessity to amputate Gulick's arm below the elbow. Harvey was fitted with a two-pronged hook prosthesis, with which he entertained and awed us in the Club bar by expertly smoking cigarettes and drinking from glasses when visiting us in the role of a ground instructor.

Teacher Lee's fate proved less favorable. Incurring severe contusions to his left flank, kidney, spleen, and other internal injuries, the Meo succumbed after a few days.

A day after the crash, Case Officer Mike Lynch visited the B-865 crash site to assess the security and damages to the aircraft. Later, Air America pilot Al Rich arrived at the crash site and retrieved the all-important manufacturer's data plate. This was later slapped in the cockpit of a reconstructed Helio Courier at Tainan. After returning to Sam Tong during mid-June,

⁸ Segment Sources and comments:

Mike LaDue is now deceased. However, as of January 2010 Mike had eighty-five percent use of his right leg, but encountered trouble climbing stairs. Exhibiting a positive attitude, he admitted that the episode could have been far worse if they had not been in a sturdy Helio. A head on collision in a less well-constructed Porter or Dornier-28 would have resulted in no survivors.

LaDue once again flew on the new B-865. ⁹

UDORN

Following nine days on the schedule, flying more than sixty-seven hours, I was afforded four days off. I cherished this rest, for the daily pounding of H-34 vibrations manifested in fatigue and a nagging discomfort focused in the back of my neck, as well as an unsettled stomach. The troublesome vertebral condition disappeared after a couple days relaxation. Then it was followed by an itching sensation, something akin to a wound healing. Stomach problems caused by stress-induced production of acid were controlled by substantial consumption of Gelucil tablets obtained at the Air America clinic.

I attempted to analyze the source of the neck pain and decided that some of the problem related to airframe feedback via the cyclic and collective controls that fed through and manifested in my skeletal system. To alleviate the condition, I could only take temporary remedial action, for if the automatic stabilization equipment (ASE) worked properly, I could fly hands off the cyclic during long flights, but not while working local pads. This was not the case with the collective. Because of unreliability, and because of the constant movement of the

⁹ Mike Ladue, *The Night on the Mountain, Air America Log*.
 _____, *Flying in Northern Laos*, Air America Web Site Posted 03/22/06.

Mike LaDue Emails, 01/09/10, 01/16/10, 02/21/10, 03/06/10, 06/28/11.

Leary 1965 Notes Provided the Author.

Department of State Incoming Telegram from Sullivan American Embassy Vientiane, Plane Crash March 24, 03/25/65.

MacAlan Thompson Interview, Jeff Johnson's House North of Bangkok, Thailand, 12/24/96.

Mac Thompson Email, 12/13/98.

collective increasing fuel burn, the ASE channel controlling the collective was deactivated.¹⁰

To prevent the collective from dropping under its own weight, plus tension from a download spring, many pilots applied the knurled friction knob tightly. I did not do this, for many times, if overtorqued, the phenolic blocks froze, requiring the application of the flight mechanic's water pump pliers to free collective movement. Therefore, since flying the UD-34D, I applied only minimum friction to both the lever and throttle mechanism, for I wanted unrestricted capability to drop the lever instantly and roll the throttle off in case of sudden engine failure. This was an especially high priority during the present maintenance problems.

Since it was unreliable and I was not interested in relying on other people's good will for local transportation, I decided to look for a new bicycle. There were several shops in town selling the two wheelers, and I eventually found a recently assembled one that suited me, but, on closer examination I discovered that the hand brakes failed to work properly. Disgusted with the sloppy work, I departed without the bike.

Without going into specific detail, I posted a lengthy letter home describing our current problems and Charlie Jones' death. In her last letter, Mom asked about the change from the cursive typewriter font, so I told her about Charlie borrowing my machine and its subsequent disappearance. I admitted the opportunity to work in Southeast Asia had greatly broadened my

¹⁰ This problem had been discovered while I was still in the Corps.

views on life, and that I would eventually have to write about my experiences, if only for my unborn children to read.

Calculated to bolster employee morale and help soothe the present heavy work load, Ben Moore and Billy P arranged another hugely popular pig barbecue party for all hands outside the Club. Many considered Ben a great Station Manager, especially after a rough taste of Jack McMahon while Moore was on home leave. It was apparent that he knew how to hold people together, make them laugh, and enjoy themselves. As usual, talented Filipino employees slow cooked three large porkers in a fire pit for several hours. To take up the slack until mealtime, Pearson set up his bucking bronco swing. The clever device was constructed from an empty fifty-five-gallon drum suspended from poles near the pit. We quaffed beer and laughed at the foolish attempts of some braver individuals to ride the infernal machine. No one was seriously hurt, but I considered it a miracle. By the time the hog meat was ready to eat, we were all starved from inhaling the appetizing odors flooding the area. The pork was delicious, served with potato salad and other side dishes. But with the hordes of Americans, Filipinos, Chinese, and Thai employees and their dependents gorging themselves, it did not last long. The party was a huge success and we looked forward to the next one.

Soon after our February trip to Hong Kong, Marius and I began planning a sixteen-day trip utilizing CAT's transportation system on 27 April. Flying commercial on a Company aircraft was either free or a minimal cost. Stops would take us to Hong Kong, Taipei, Manila, Okinawa, and Japan. In addition to temporarily removing us from effects of the Lao centrifuge, the round-robin would afford Burke the opportunity to observe how his Chinese buddies were progressing running the export business, and

provide me a chance to visit my cousin, Chaplain Bob Anderson, on Okinawa. Of course, the trip depended on Customer mission requirements and bodies available to man the aircraft. Nothing was set in stone, but by then, new pilots already in the system would probably be upgraded to Captain allowing us to venture on the trip.

A RAY OF LIGHT

As Rendezvous Club clientele grew exponentially, Manager Billy Pearson continued to hire both male and female waiters and waitresses. Because Wai Ying harbored a "tiny" jealous streak common in nearly all Oriental females, Bill had to employ discretion in choosing the ladies. As a result, most of the girls were somewhat pleasant looking, but not ravishing beauties. Most stemming from good families had obtained some higher education, possessed a fair degree of English comprehension and proficiency, and were willing workers. Of course, they were still subject to randy male eyeballing and improper propositions. In January, Bill hired a cute Thai girl with a sunny disposition and captivating smile. Since most Thai names failed to roll easily off an American's tongue, other employees called her PP or Pop-Corn instead of her three-syllable name Prapapon. Having considerably lighter skin than a typical northeastern female, and possessing very different facial features hinting of possible occidental genes, she was an instant success in our provincial society. I, like any other normal male with active hormones, took immediate note of her, mainly because she added a fresh dimension to our dull and exceedingly boring environment. Among other attributes, she was obviously young, charming, and giggled prettily, while obtaining patrons' orders. I took the occasion to talk to her privately in

the movie room a few times and was fascinated by her enchanting demeanor, especially her exceptionally lovely smile, with which she was abundantly generous. During the course of our conversations, I discovered that she was on vacation between semesters at the Bangkok Assumption Commercial Accounting School. While visiting relatives, she learned about the good paying job openings at Air America from a "sister" and, curious as to the possibilities, decided to apply. She indicated that she intended to soon return to school for another semester.

Another time, after returning from upcountry, and while still living at the wooden stilt Sopa Villa house on Soi Wat Po, I boarded the large Company employee bus bound for town. Prapapon was sitting alone in a seat, so, taking advantage of an opportunity for conversation and further relationship away from the workplace, I plopped down next to her and learned that her nickname was Tuie.¹¹

We conversed about mundane items until the driver stopped at Soi Wat Po, at which time I asked her to my home for coffee or a drink (I had neither in the house). A proper girl, she politely refused, indicating that she would be missed, and chastised by her family if she did not return home by a certain time. Ironically, she was staying in the Nisagonrungsee family compound, the same one where Fairy's parents had rented a house and where Sang originally lived with her cousin. Additionally, I had actually visited the house on Adulyadet Road in the past

¹¹ Tuie: Years later, I learned that with the difference between t and d pronunciation blurred, the actual Thai transliteration was closer to Duie, meaning red bird for her strawberry blond hair that was adequately disguised by black coloring in order to blend in with other Thai ladies and avoid any negative comments from friends.

with John Scott, who was attempting to date Bung Orn, one of the older girls.

I had taken my best shot. Tuie was obviously like a blooming flower, yet unsullied by us nasty males, and she planned to remain that way. That was fine with me, for there was plenty of talent in town not so disposed. Therefore, thinking that was the end of any budding relationship, I walked dejectedly down the dark, quiet street to my lonely residence.

A person too good to be true in the Udorn environment, the young lady was hotly pursued by other single males, both American and Thai, and all were generally rebuffed. Even married men were interested. One day, Wai Ying Pearson arrived at the compound, dressed to the nines to observe the new girl everyone was talking about and to judge her husband's demeanor toward the new employee. Helio Courier pilot Bob Abrams made a slight play for her. His attentions were soon relegated to history, for while on home leave, Bob perished during a western air race when his P-51 single engine aircraft failed navigating a pylon.

According to Dick Elder, one of our group's leading gossip mongers, who also seemed to have some interest in PP, Flight Mechanic Joe Marlin later fell deeply in love with her and wanted to marry her. Joe had not been home since arriving in Udorn. Therefore, to further contemplate the serious implications of marriage to someone not of his own race, and to inform his mother of his intentions, he departed on a short home leave. In order to avoid other male attention and proposals, without strings, he provided PP a sizeable sum of money and wanted her to return to the second family house in the Bangkok area across the Chao Prya in Thonburi, for her third year of accounting at Assumption College.

Sadly, Joe never returned to Udorn. One night he complained to his mother that he felt unwell and retired early. The following morning when Joe did not appear for breakfast, Mother Marlin ascended to his bedroom to discover that her son had expired. An autopsy revealed that he had bled out from a ruptured spleen. What actually caused this unusual and untimely death remained a subject for discussion and conjecture. An autopsy revealed a buildup of malaria plasmodium in his spleen, suspected as the likely cause, but others believed that Joe had suffered permanent damage to his organ a year previously when then Chief Pilot Jim Coble viciously kicked him in the stomach during an impromptu foolish altercation that stumped everyone, even the principals. Whatever the cause of Joe's demise, we lost an excellent Flight Mechanic and a cheerful friend.

In anticipation of the ultimate completion and grand opening of the new Air America hostel at Sam Tong, Dale Means was tapped as manager. This often required his presence in Vientiane and Site-20 to check on progress and hire and obtain clearance for competent people to clean, cook, and run the establishment. Even though Means was frequently away, he still maintained a residence in Udorn. Having extra rooms, he had previously arranged for PP to live at his house with her personal maid. Aware that I was lonely and looking for female companionship, one day Marius apprised me of this arrangement and drove me to Means' place on the opposite side of town to visit. I must confess that, although I tried, there was no intimacy. We talked and, while getting acquainted, I taught her how to play 21. I suppose it was a form of courting, although I was unsure of the proper form acceptable in Thailand. I enjoyed her company and took the opportunity to visit her whenever possible.

THE LINE

On Sunday the 28th, I was scheduled for a test flight and departure for Chiang Khong in Hotel-31. Lou McCasland had flown the machine on the 22nd in the Twenty Alternate and Paksane areas, and had returned it to Udorn the following day for mechanical problems. Logging two hours, he tested it on the 27th, which could have consumed several hours counting all the starts and shut downs. Like me, Lou had been a squadron maintenance test pilot, and was careful not to release an aircraft unless it was in fairly good shape. After reviewing previous gripes and determining the ship airworthy, Abuy and I launched for T-516 with a carburetor for AGP (aircraft grounded parts) Hotel-33.

Because of dense smoke and haze, navigation in the region strictly using ground reference was difficult. Consequently, the 230-mile trip was extremely unpleasant, requiring me to fly a river route part of the way for positive orientation. Near Luang Prabang, after taking a bearing on the non-directional beacon, I turned west toward Hong Sa (LS-62) and Xieng Lom. After a time, sighting nothing familiar below, I assumed that the winds aloft were adverse, and I had drifted just inside Nan Province, Thailand. Turning to an estimated heading calculated to intercept the Mekong River, I regained a proper course and followed the river to Chiang Khong.

I worked a few trips, parked for the night at the strip, and was Jeeped to the Bungalow. I had not been there since early January, but little appeared changed. Jib was still as taciturn as ever, and his competent assistants seemed to take charge of most duties.

Another pilot was at the house. He and Flight Mechanic Dangoy had been waiting in the field at Ban Houay Niete, forty

miles east of Chiang Khong, a major portion of the day expecting me and the component. When we had not arrived by late afternoon, they returned on a Helio to Tango-516.

The following morning, as per Udorn instructions, I relinquished command of my ship and, pending H-33's repair, was ordered to RTB. Since my total flight time was high, I rode as Co-Captain to Houay Niete, and hoped I would get credit for the flight. With Jib steadily gaining ethnic groups' confidence, it was deemed a period of considerable RLG expansion and reaction to enemy action to the north and east. Just west of the Nam Tha River, a defensive line was being established inside Houa Khong Province to thwart further enemy encroachment toward that area. The friendly site was also a drop area for big birds supporting Lu tribesmen, but had not yet been assigned a site number.¹²

While I watched impatiently, Dangoy easily switched carbs. I ran the engine to leak check the component, and then made various ground cruise mixture and hover power checks for thirty minutes to determine if it was safe to fly. Following a couple of racetrack patterns around the site to further test the engine's viability under flight conditions, I returned to Chiang Khong to top up for the long trip to Udorn. I was loaded with a Thai team and supplies for Pak Lay (L09), a river site on the lower end of Sayaboury Province. Because USAID was anxious to begin roadwork in the area, there were attempts to introduce teams to pacify and secure the region. Later, it became common practice to air drop supplies from aircraft returning to Udorn and Vientiane.

¹² The site was later designated LS-351.

The smoke appeared even denser than the preceding day, and forward visibility dropped almost to zero. For safety and reference points should a forced landing be necessary, I elected to follow the lengthy river route the entire way to Udorn. I could see straight down but, because of poor conditions, flight was necessarily slow. Since it was still the dry season, large yellow sand bars were visible on the river, particularly south of Luang Prabang. I found Pak Lay without a problem, dropped my load, and proceeded west toward home plate.

By the time I departed the cockpit, I was highly fatigued from the stress of flying a helicopter that I was uncertain would make the trip, and eyestrain from staring into the smoky void. While walking toward the Club anticipating liquid refreshment and a meal, Abadie approached saying he had an aircraft available and had scheduled me for night flying. I informed him of my condition and indicated I could not fly that night. This was reinforced when I discovered that I was on the schedule the following morning. Abadie was a man not used to backtalk or refusals from subordinates, and made an issue of my rejection. However, I was determined not to fly any more that day. Harboring two distinctly different personalities,¹³ we rarely saw eye to eye on any subject, and although semi-cordial, did not often seek the other's counsel. In the final analysis, we did not particularly like each other. At that point, I did not care if he fired me for noncompliance, but with the present need for helicopter Captains and my experience, I did not believe he actually would. He left grumbling, but even though incurring another black mark on his sierra list, I heard nothing

¹³ Perhaps stemming from our dissimilar regional upbringings and my utter disdain for authority.

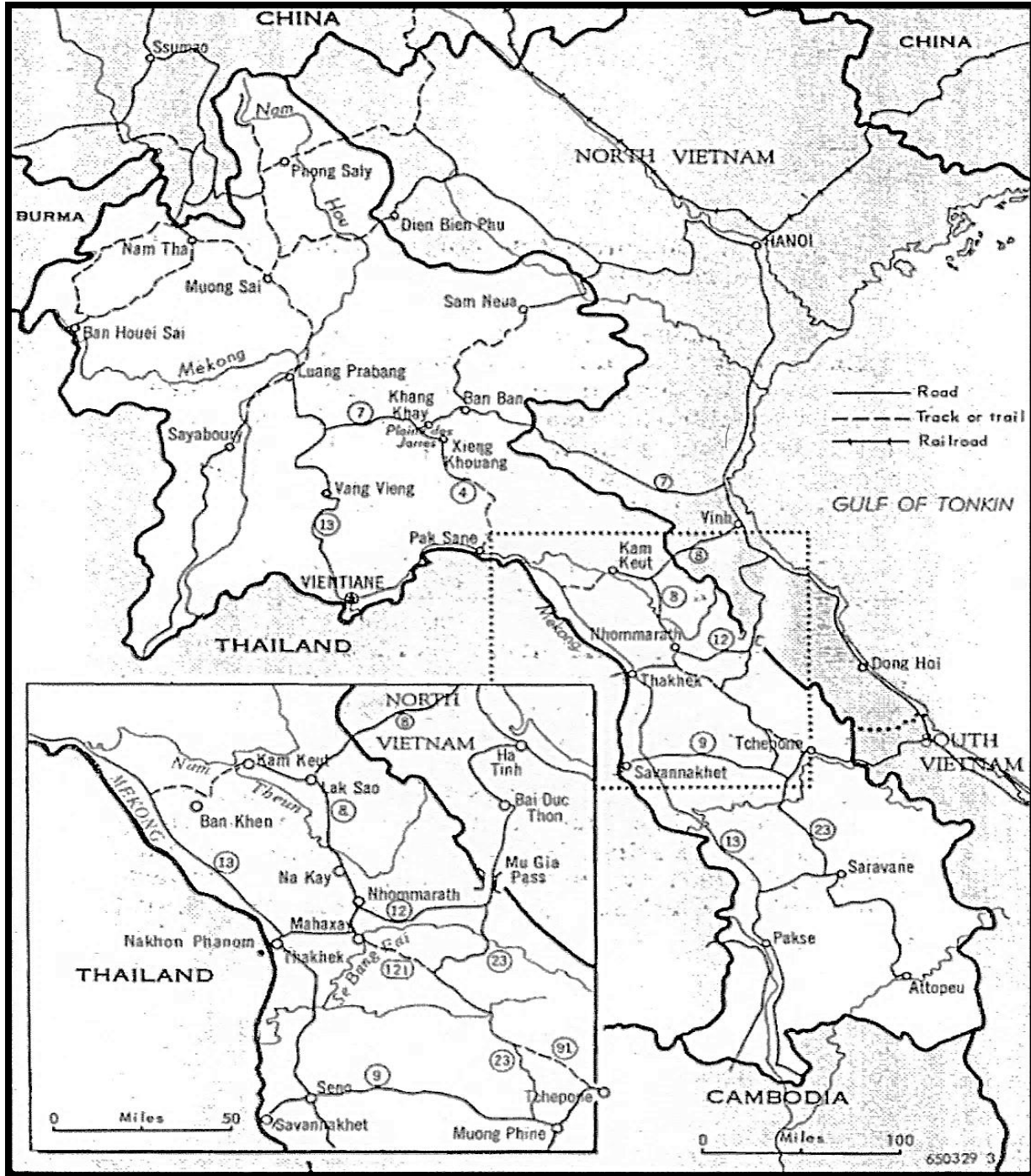
more related to the subject. I fulfilled the quarterly night flying requirement in April.

RUMBLINGS

Although languishing in Thai exile, General Phoumi's influence in Lao politics was still very strong. Consequently, rumblings by southern based Phoumists involved in the February coup resurrected during late March. Supported by two Thakhet Group Mobile regiments and other smaller units, anti-government radio broadcasts were directed toward Vientiane. In a letter to State, Sullivan reported that the uprising had spread from units stationed at the Ca Dinh River area to Thakhet City, which was under control of Colonel Khamsi Sayarth, Commanding Officer of GM-12. While the FAR General Staff initially rushed two GMs to Thakhet, the ambassador installed ARMA personnel at Pakse, Paksane, and Savannakhet to assist in moderating the situation. He also planned to consign another U.S. representative at Grove Jones, where U.S. personnel were considered safe, but restricted to camp after FAR troops opted for Phoumi.

By Monday the 29th, Vientiane troops were forwarded to Paksane to quell the spreading unrest. Representatives were also sent to Long Tieng to persuade Vang Pao to remain neutral.

In conversations with Souvanna Phouma regarding the latest Phoumi insurrection, Sullivan discovered that Kouprasith believed many more troops were involved in the revolt. All were confident that the situation could quickly be brought under control. This proved to be the case and, after officers from offending units crossed the Mekong to the safety of Thailand, the units were reorganized and provided new officers. But the



Military Region Three insert displays the area of Rightist unrest in and around Thakhet.

CIA MAP, 03/30/65.

trouble was far from over. ¹⁴

A 30 March intelligence brief reported:

"Loyal troops from the Se Bang Fai River area this morning occupied Thakhet, the Mekong River town which had been seized by dissident rightists elements this past weekend. Additional government troops have been airdropped into the area by Laotian Air Force planes.

The rebel forces were reported withdrawing to the north, perhaps intending to join with other dissident units located in the region south of the Nam Theum River. Phoumi sympathizers in other areas may have been deterred from similar uprisings by the relative strength and alacrity of the government's reaction to the seizure of Thakhet..." ¹⁵

MR-2

Since no other aircraft were headed north to Long Tieng, I deadheaded on a C-123, N005X Peppergrinder run to Moung Soui, where I relieved the PIC of Hotel-23. Rudy Serafico and I briefly worked the area and then were sent to Na Khang to complete the day. We arrived late at Long Tieng, but Rudy was able to catch a ride south, as he was replaced by Flight Mechanic Magpantay.

The following day I was again assigned to Na Khang, where I was sent to Site-85. During the day, I heard snippets of garbled radio traffic over ultra-high frequency guard channel, and assumed that an aircraft was down. I switched to UHF 282.8, the

¹⁴ Ken Conboy, 125.
Letter William Sullivan to State, 03/29/65.

¹⁵ CIA Brief, 03/30/65. Laos: Government forces have moved swiftly in the effort to nip the rebellion mounted in central Laos by deposed rightist leader General Phoumi.

assigned common SAR frequency, for more cohesive tactical aircraft coverage, but could not determine what, if anything, was occurring in my area. My location was too remote and the hills blocked out much radio wave propagation. Moreover, no one attempted to contact me to assist in any rescue effort.

Operations were expanding in the Sam Neua area, and I worked out of Houei Ma (LS-107) in the 4,000 foot hills just south of the big mountain. Fuel and other supplies had been delivered by air drop to the site. Consequently, we supplied small outposts on the western side of the semi-circular area around Phou Den Din. Although it was difficult because of the language barrier to ascertain much of the current situation, apparently the sites were now quiet after the February pasting from enemy positions to the east. The landing pads still presented a challenge, and it was necessary to conduct mostly air drops to compensate for the dangerous downwind conditions prevailing in the area. Trips also included stops at Houei Kha Moung (LS-111), a high mountain site located, as the crow flies, only nine miles from the North Vietnamese-Lao border. In contrast to the poor grass strip at Houei Ma, this runway was long, wide, and well-fortified with earthworks and trenches rising on a mound at the upper end.

After returning to The Alternate, I was recalled to Udorn. During a very active month and despite all the maintenance problems and quarter mile visibility, I amassed my highest monthly flight time to date: 139-hours and fifty-minutes. Translated into cash, the effort provided a fat pay check, one I had only dreamed of in the revenue-deprived earlier days. It was interesting that I now earned more in one month than I did in one year when initially commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps. Even healthier checks would result during the next

two months, but nearly at the cost of both my physical and mental health.

Despite the loss of Hotel-26 and numerous maintenance problems in March, the addition of replacement aircraft and spares led to the year's highest flight time of over 2,000 hours.

Engine and other maintenance problems with our UH-34Ds continued, and increased unabated despite attempts to rectify the situation. The Maintenance and Flight Departments became increasingly puzzled, frustrated, and anxious to discover solutions. Since the problems had impacted our program since the fall, and culminated in the death of one of our number, each unit lost faith and trust in one another. This tended to exacerbate the situation before palpable improvement to solve the problem occurred. Taking an attitude of "doing something even if it was wrong," maintenance personnel changed parts or engines wholesale with little thought or analysis, thereby increasing the chance for errors. In some instances, for reasons not entirely clear to the readers, pilots logged discrepancies on every burp, bump, and vibration, with little or no detail. Maintenance failed to pursue its own procedures very well, particularly trouble shooting a situation before changing component parts. Questionable cosmetic fixes to temporarily place the helicopters in condition to meet a schedule were not unheard of. Moreover, helicopters were not always operated in the field as specified in the flight handbook. Fingers pointed correctly and incorrectly at certain parties. Blame was lavished in all directions, not a little of it across the club bar or on the parking area.

JACKSON FORNEY

During a period critical to the continued existence of the Madriver Project, and with the seeds of rebellion and revolt escalating among our pilot force, Jackson Forney was assigned to

the Udorn facility. He was pre-armed with Company sanction to accomplish everything possible to solve the maintenance problems that threatened the reputation and viability of the organization.

Forney had begun his Air America career early, working out of his Bangkok office to oversee Southeast Asian Technical Services in Bangkok, Vientiane, Saigon, and Phnom Penh from 1960 until early 1964, after which he was assigned to Tainan, Taiwan, as Director of Contracts and Engineering. After Marine HUS-1s were flown off the USS *Bennington* at the end of March 1961 to commence the Madriver Project, he established a temporary presence in Udorn to aid the Air America maintenance transition from the USMC Marine Air Base Support unit (MABS) and to solve problems between the military and the civilians. Except for duties elsewhere, he generally remained in Udorn for weeks.

With thousands of tiny and large moving parts conspiring to kill them, while airborne, reciprocating engine helicopter pilots normally teetered on borderline paranoia. Working in the neutral country of Laos accentuated this faux mental condition, especially with the addition of negative variables such as weather, everyone with a weapon shooting at helicopters, and Customers and Company who apparently cared little about our maintenance problems, wellbeing, or mortality.

During the especially grim period when we all had collectively reached the depths of despair as to the viability of our machines and survival of the helicopter program, and with the Jones death creating waves in the States, a White Knight with a Darth Vader personality arrived from Tainan to assess the situation, address our problems, and hopefully stabilize or reverse the situation. Because of his tenure and good reputation as an achiever, fortunately he was initially given some slack by

all involved, and a measure of credibility by the home office and the Udorn group.

Jack Forney was intimately familiar with engines. The R-1820 engine was Curtis Wright's version of the Pratt and Whitney R-1830 motor. Both were developed in the 1930s for planes such as the DC-3 (C-47), the Boeing 307 Stratoliner (a forerunner of the B-17), and a variety of fighter aircraft. The 1830, a twin row fourteen-cylinder radial engine, was the overall superior engine, but the 1820 single row nine-cylinder engines had a more advantageous weight-to-horsepower ratio and, because of a smaller rotating mass, improved acceleration. Although this was not important in the DC-3, where two engines were involved, the U.S. Navy generally showed preference for Wright products.

Both engines were employed on a variety of aircraft, including different model crop dusters. Likewise, both were used in early versions of the T-28 circa 1954. A late plane employing the engines was the S-2 Tracker during the 1960s.

The R-1820 was a well-designed engine, but the helicopter application greatly extended its design capabilities. Therefore, as is the case with most reciprocating engines, it always presented an inferior helicopter engine because of the high RPM and power demand ranges required, as opposed to its designed use in fixed wing aircraft. All operating parameters were stretched to maximum limits, and achieving power plant reliability required very well-trained crews and strict adherence to the flight and maintenance manuals. To compensate for deficiencies, the expected life cycle was reduced by the U.S. military from 1500 to 2000 normal usage hours in fixed wing to 600 hours for the HUS-1 (H-34) helicopter. Despite the lower time before overhaul (TBO), from the beginning of the Madriver Project, the UH-34D engine was not equipped to sustain operational challenges

that materialized upcountry. Consequently, most engines never lasted anywhere close to 600 hours, and were generally changed without question between 300 to 400 hours. Actually, current problems over the past months appreciably reduced that figure. Tropical heat, high density altitude, requiring high or maximum power, relatively short flight legs, laterite dust, and other environmental factors all coalesced to quickly degrade the engines.

In COO Clarence Abadie's estimation, some early engine problems had been easy to diagnose, particularly if the pilot provided correct information in relation to a failure. Because many times a pilot failed to do so, it was considerably more difficult to troubleshoot a problem. When Air America received the first H-34s, one pilot, while returning from upcountry, crossed the Mekong and experienced an engine failure. An engine teardown revealed an ingested valve.¹

To help rectify this malfunction, the R-1820 engine went through a series of modifications during overhauls (replacing marginal valves and springs normally retained over three overhauls). In the process, the engine experienced an evolution of its own and very early Air America personnel gained considerable and valuable knowledge regarding the engine by conducting a maintenance function, which the Company controlled, in lieu of the TDY Okinawa MABS unit. In this way, workers could either view the problems for themselves or receive feedback from overhaul facilities.

¹ Such as the one I experienced nine miles east of Udorn while still in the Corps.

In Jack Forney's estimation, pilots were **the** major factor in promoting the continued health of engines. He maintained that it was not necessary to push very far beyond rated RPM and power limits to incur engine damage or get into trouble, and all pilots were neither equally as careful nor professional during operations.² Arriving from different military services, socioeconomic backgrounds, educational levels, prior experience levels in regard to maintenance, and flying experience, it was a miracle that we performed as well as we did.

In a preconceived opinion, Forney, who was an especially tough minded and skeptical person, believed that engine overboosting and overspeeding were not all that infrequent and acceptable since the mission often required it.³ However, the pilot was morally obligated to report an infraction in the logbook so that maintenance could keep a historical record and track or fix future problems. Unfortunately, in the prevailing Udorn culture it was common to rationalize and blame someone or something else for any mishap. He found this true for all factions.

Mainly contributing to engine and all maintenance problems were parts, logistics, and organizational issues. Sikorsky trained John Aspinwall, and many of his subordinates were excellent helicopter technicians who knew their duties well and

² Damage incurred from improper pilot technique was not necessarily immediately evident.

³ Speaking only for himself, the Author does not totally agree with Forney, for, except during extreme emergencies where potential loss of life was concerned, he always performed normal missions within engine operating parameters delineated in the Maintenance and NATOPS manuals.

worked diligently to maintain the helicopter fleet and match the hectic pace of operations, which were ramping upward.

Elmer Gould was not so highly revered. A former B-17 pilot during World War Two, Elmer was originally hired by the Washington office. Based on his long aviation experience, it was believed that he would be welcomed by other Civil Air Transport/Air America employees. Forney met Gould at Tainan to orient and shepherd him to Udorn. The former USAF officer, mainly a paper shuffler, had little experience with maintenance or helicopters prior to assuming the Technical Services supervisory billet, nor was he friendly or able to integrate well with other employees. In spite of this, Jack believed that he was a fairly good administrator, and he did well when finding his niche. I personally thought he typified a grumpy and disgruntled old man, bored with his wife, and who did not want to be where he was.

Local maintenance, management, and planning functionalities were slow in meeting the accelerated operation. The Udorn maintenance facility should have evolved into a total maintenance support depot long before this actually became reality. Instead, the department operated more like an ad hoc field operation; like a military detachment dispatched for a month, but extended far beyond the original plan without adequate logistics support capability.

During the Maddriver Project's first months, everyone involved--Technical Services, Flight Operations, and Management--were relatively naive as to the type of sustained month-in-month-out operations developing at Udorn. Old time Company personnel who knew how operations were conducted successfully elsewhere in the Company system, attempted to apply lessons previously learned through on-the-job training to the Udorn

situation. New personnel, largely military-trained from various services, sought to adapt their particular expertise and experience to the circumstances. These often-different approaches to problems, exacerbated by personal bias and ego, all meant well and were valid on their own terms, but they clashed at critical times. Overall, Technical Services, Flight Operations, and Management failed to initiate collective cooperation on a timely basis.

At first, helicopter parts and tooling were entirely provided by the United States Government. Air America was constrained by USG rules and regulations in regard to stockpiling components and parts. Therefore, conservation consistent with actual operations and safety was necessary to satisfy operational requirements. During the 1964 and 1965 crunch time, Air America did not have the extensive component shops, staffing, tooling, and H-34 repair facilities that were later developed. Moreover, the Company had to depend on the USAF and USG logistics chain for feedback regarding failed parts and engines. Because of the information gap, Udorn maintenance did not receive prompt analysis to help guide corrective actions. In addition, because of technical management problems, in many cases queries were never directed to repair facilities, and personnel did not adequately press suppliers for answers when they did make inquiries. At times, remedies were never available for current problems, mainly because Air America was the world leader in UH-34D airframe hours. Consequently, the Udorn unit experienced H-34 malfunctions and problem rates rarely or never previously experienced by military squadrons or support depots.

For these reasons and others, carburetor and additional engine power plant interruptions escalated well out of hand. Abadie recalled that this critical period stimulated people to

rely on past experience and field expediciencies that included shortcuts not found in any maintenance manual. Many maintenance people were field oriented mechanics who preferred to "work out of their back pocket," relying on previously successful fixes to keep the rotors turning. Relating to engine performance, one person might indicate to fly lean, another to fly rich, or to retard the mixture control lever toward the idle cut-off position in order to make the engine run better. In another example, many workers believed that they knew how to correctly rig a rotor head, but many did not, and this resulted in the machines exhibiting serious vibrations and other problems.

Forney was always pragmatic in his approach to solving problems. As in many classic hindsight B school case studies, the main "fix" over time resulted in returning to basics: i.e., following technical data information and flight handbook instructions to the letter. He discouraged the pressure of urgency to produce operational machines that forced shortcuts in maintenance or flight operation, and which allowed sufficient time to analyze problems before jumping in and doing something. This method was quite unpopular at first. At the time, several "experts" emerged, each with his idea of what was necessary to solve a problem. Unfortunately, proposed solutions were mutually exclusive of the others and involved installing the proponent expert in charge, a circumstance believed tantamount to fomenting a full-blown mutiny.

Reasons for carburetor problems plaguing us since the previous year were allegedly eventually discovered, and helped to partially explain what happened to Howard Estes the evening

while returning to The Alternate from the east. ⁴ There certainly were other explanations for carb problems, but a major one involved defective automatic mixture control units (AMC), a bellows type device mounted at the top of the carburetor air inlet. The component, highly sensitive to pressure changes, signaled altitude and temperature changes to the carb's mechanical computer to adjust the proper fuel air ratio. If the bellows malfunctioned in the rich position, the engine would run rich and rough; in lean, hot and rough under heavy power demands, which might cause it to cut out or falter at heavy loads. In the worst-case scenario, a serious AMC malfunction could cause changes in mixture settings resulting in detrimental lean flowing carbs. This could also result in engine faltering, low power, increased cylinder head temperature, backfiring, and detonation at the highest power settings. A particularly great danger of a lean mixture under heavy power demand was detonation, which would ultimately destroy the engine because of cylinder overheating and valve-cylinder damage. This condition was often manifested at inconvenient times during sudden power changes or during high power use at takeoff, landing, or hover. The AMC's range in either mixture range was limited and not field adjustable. Jack did not believe a failure of the AMC to provide adequate metering during pressure and temperature changes alone was enough to cause an engine failure. It likely involved a combination of factors.

Low power and related issues were fairly common logbook complaints during this particularly **bad** period and during later years. Although many AMCs were changed to correct this condition, more detailed reviews showed that a wider variety of

⁴ See Book-4.

reasons leading to engine problems were to blame. These varied from worn out engines, to pushing the flight envelope during marginal and overweight operation of the helicopter, in combination with "just in, "just out" of limit blades, engines, and rigging. In addition, failure of workers to properly rig all flight and power control systems to optimum specifications during periodic inspections and when changing components, contributed to major problems.

Confusion reigned among all principals involved relating to the cause of our engine malfunctions; even new or overhauled carburetors off the shelf caused problems. Dirt in carburetor impact tubes and clogged air flow filters had been explored before Forney entered the equation, and this occurrence certainly contributed to a negative and modified fuel flow. The main impact of dust-dirt problems was to scour rotor blades and internal engine parts with resulting deterioration over time. Dirt in the carburetor impact tubes did not help fuel metering, but Forney was never certain that this caused larger problems. Nor did he recall a case of air filters clogging seriously enough to degrade engine performance. The filters were greatly oversized and were cleaned, oiled, and regularly replaced. ⁵

Another factor that might have impacted fuel metering flow related to the pliability of internal carburetor diaphragms. This was particularly a question for off-the-shelf components. Overhauled or new units in stock were packed with a storage preservative to prevent corrosion and maintain soft diaphragms. Placing a unit in service required soaking the carb in aviation

⁵ Filters were early suspects and were among the first measures addressed by John Aspinwall et. al., so perhaps this potential problem had been adequately eliminated before Jack Forney was assigned to Udorn.

gasoline for a minimum of eight hours to remove the preservative. Months later, when engine problems appreciably diminished, I was discussing our past carburetor problems with the Filipino man in charge of the supply building. He indicated that many malfunctions related to not soaking the new units for a full twenty-four hours. ⁶

During the introspective period, vibration discrepancies were particularly vexing and difficult to contend with because of their subjective nature. Many pilots had individual standards, commonly referred to as "seat-of-the-pants feel," and this variable had to be assessed along with others. There were a number of cases in which a helicopter was returned to Udorn with no vibrations logged, but heavy write-ups and outright rejection ensued when dispatched on the next schedule. This resulted in many delays and generated considerable skepticism as to pilot veracity from maintenance quarters.

Forney recognized that some pilots seemed to feign complete writer's block, and many who did not exercise the art of brevity in recording logbook squawks. This tendency greatly compounded troubleshooting problems. No doubt, some of this resulted from the returning crew's insensitivity to vibrations that developed gradually over a week of flying the same aircraft--the dead ass syndrome. To such individuals, excessive vibration was normal, largely unnoticed, and thereby never recorded. A new crewmember, re-habituated to solid ground, with all his senses heightened by practices during scheduled time off, and perhaps a bit hung

⁶ I took this information as gospel, for this extraordinary man was well respected and was reputed to have all 5,000 items, along with their stock numbers contained in supply's inventory, committed to memory. Even more of an accomplishment, this feat took place before the computer age.

over, felt vibrations immediately, or by the time they arrived at or passed Vientiane heading north.

Since pilots were far more likely to note and accurately recognize vibration types and sources, the department attempted to encourage people to delineate at the end of a flight as much as possible regarding conditions and symptoms to enable maintenance to develop standard methods of correction, as opposed to the crap shoot approach in vogue at first.

Hoping to remedy this situation, Jack encouraged pilots to record all parameters associated with a maintenance problem, i.e., airspeed, altitude, load, and the sort. These factors were deemed especially important in assessing vibration analysis.

In later years, a dedicated test crew unit, more standardized in maintenance test procedures, helped to produce acceptable machines, and the Maintenance Department did not have to contend with the entire pilot contingent's individual interpretations regarding vibrations. Even then, there were arguments between line and test pilots over vibration levels. In lieu of the time-consuming flag tracking approach, which required an experienced mechanic and a slow hit or miss technique, a search commenced to find accurate electronic vibration test equipment which could be used on the ground and

during test flights to address the gripes. ^{7 8}

In regard to the Flight Mechanic system, hindsight indicated that the department relied too much on these men to maintain a helicopter for long upcountry periods--long periods in terms of hours and type of hours flown, if not days. Expectations were too high under the existing system and difficult working conditions. In the beginning it was a rough and ready period. The Flight Mechanic had a lot to do during the day just supporting flight operation duties. Therefore, fatigue and motivation adversely impacted post flight duties, so necessary to ensure that the ship was ready to fly the following morning.

A Flight Mechanic's tasks included nightly purging grease fittings on the rotor head and tail rotor assembly components. I asked John Aspinwall about this procedure when bad vibrations first surfaced. John indicated that the pressure gun available in Udorn was far more efficient in purging dirt and dust than the Flight Mechanic's hand-held grease guns used upcountry. The unsatisfactory method was a major factor in the excessive

⁷ Electronic tracking equipment was available from the start of the Madriver operation. Rarely used, it sat unused in the hangar because of alleged "malfunctions." More likely, as admitted to me by some maintenance personnel, no one really knew how to correctly install or properly interpret the complicated equipment.

⁸ Author's Note: In deference to Jack Forney's recall, there were pilots in our organization who failed to learn and understand the UH-34Ds systems. They were not equipped to recognize, much less record, an adverse vibration. These individuals were probably unschooled in diagnosing excessive vibrations, were sensitive to destructive vibrations, or totally lacked interest in improving an aircraft. Many simply refused to write anything in the maintenance logbook. Those that did couched gripes in terms worthless to Maintenance Department personnel. Much of this negligence stemmed from greed, ignorance, laziness, or the desire to go home, or to the bar following a long, stressful RON.

wearing of critical component parts and a large cause of vibrations. When Forney arrived, he had a different perspective to greasing moving parts. He maintained, that if properly used, manual guns were capable of delivering the same pressure as air driven guns. The antiquated lubrication system for UH-34Ds was invented for automobiles in the 1920s, but the helicopter could be satisfactorily maintained with a lot of attention to detail. The usual reason for not being able to force grease into a zerk fitting was dirt, a malfunctioning grease gun, or defective nozzles. Such a problem required replacing the fitting, or other corrective work, and especially conscientious attention to detail and adequate time to perform the job.

However, following ten or more hours of flight operations--loading, unloading, fueling--Flight Mechanics were not always as alert and willing to work another two hours in the rain or dark while conducting a post flight, a greasing, and repairing minor discrepancies. Under these difficult conditions, it was easy to defer the duties until the following morning when other variables might intercede. ⁹

In retrospect, a more efficient system for the Flight Mechanic program would have been to dedicate a man to flight operations and directly associated duties, relying on him for only emergency maintenance. Unrealistic because of cost increases to the original bare-bones Madriver Project and Customer objections, this would have required forward maintenance bases with dedicated maintenance crews and adequate

⁹ Since their lives were also at stake, many Flight Mechanics preferred to rise early to perform maintenance when they were somewhat refreshed and could see what they were doing without needing a flashlight.

tooling to address preventive maintenance aspects. Additional helicopters and crews available for upcountry work would have shortened the wear and tear of upcountry tours. Some of this did commence in 1965, and later at Sam Tong, when permanently based ground mechanics greased helicopter components and assisted the Flight Mechanic during afterhours post flight duties.

Although some positive results were immediately noted, the myriad of serious UH-34D problems were not remedied quickly, for they had existed a long time. Maintenance overcame the pressing crisis with persistence, long hours from everyone involved, and cooperation between operations and maintenance. In addition, contributory support from Taipei and Tainan head offices helped.

Although others may disagree with the Author today, I credited Forney with almost individually saving the sinking Madriver Project. As a strong leader, not averse to unpopularity, he "kicked ass and took names" at the correct time. While instituting strict procedure and discipline in the technical operation, adhering to procedures set forth in the Sikorsky Maintenance Manual, he insisted on improved analysis before commencing repairs. He also upgraded routine maintenance standards to more closely exact new standards, and worked with the Flight Operations Department and pilots to instill more confidence in the integrity of what maintenance was doing.

Over time, a forward-looking inspection program was instituted during periodic inspections. This sought to repair anything expected to wear out within the next hundred-hour flight cycle. Erring on the conservative side, when in doubt as to a component's viability, helped to eradicate and smoothed outstanding problems. A dedicated or certificated test pilot program later added a measure of standardization to flight discrepancy reporting and verification of repair. In addition, a

substantial sum of money was allocated for Udorn facility expansion, and a training school for mechanics was begun in 1965, but did not fully meet expectations until 1967.

What Forney managed to accomplish did not occur easily, as an ingrained culture was firmly established. Personnel who had performed maintenance their own way for years had to first be convinced and then dragged kicking and screaming toward Forney's intimidating way of thinking. Given the nature of problems, in achieving what many employees considered impossible, the autocratic, and often sarcastic man tromped on a lot of toes, treated flying subordinates horribly, and ruffled both pilot and mechanic feathers at one time or another.

Hoping to force attention to and solve maintenance problems, especially during the acute engine problem period, many very reliable line pilots "circled the wagons" and became super critical regarding the viability of machines slated for upcountry work. Previously cited, sometimes, in what became nothing more than "musical helicopters," if one pilot refused an H-34, it might be assigned to another and then another until someone was found who would accept the ship.¹⁰ To forego this slight to our judgment, when possible, someone from the CPH office performed an intervening and confirming test flight.

Before departing on home leave, CPH Wayne Knight flew nine test hops. The final flight on 10 April in Hotel-30 was conducted with Jack Forney observing from the left seat to gain an insight into maintenance problems and test flight techniques. Never a particularly fervent Forney fan, Knight often found himself in the middle of heated arguments. He mostly sided with

¹⁰ Eight pilots were involved in this process at one time.

his pilots during disputes, and he and Jack had many disagreements. However, in the years he worked with Forney, Jack never attempted to force an agenda on him. Their flights together were rare, usually at Wayne's request and intended to establish a purpose or to vindicate a pilot's complaint.

During the low point in the helicopter program, there were times when some pilots went too far and the pilot's refusal to fly an aircraft was largely invalid. On one particularly embarrassing occasion, Wayne had just released a ship for flight, and stood on the ramp along with Forney watching Charlie Weitz taxi toward the runway. Suddenly, the generally accepted leader of the pilot group executed a 180-degree turn, and returned to the chocks, claiming a spongy brake problem. Wayne was flabbergasted. While still in the presence of the maintenance protagonist, Weitz's grounding a helicopter for such a minor item caused him to feel about two feet tall. He never believed his friend and neighbor would pull such a trick, and, to save face, he let him know how he felt. Charlie, probably attempting to make a point, eventually accepted the ship.

COO Abadie judged Forney a welcome member of the Udorn facility. Formed from similar sarcastic molds, he considered Jack a stickler to detail in performing correct maintenance. However, like Wayne, Ab did not always agree with Jack, and they clashed on a few items. Forney often desired to implement a certain procedure and, based on what the pilots told him, Ab did not think it would work or was impractical. This sometimes resulted in serious discussion and more than a little unpleasantness. However, like peas in a pod, the two men were often seen standing together on the flight line late in the day waiting for an aircraft and crew to return from upcountry. It was cringe time, for even before shutdown they pounced, and

interrogation and intimidation began with Jack's booming voice demanding to know what deficiencies existed with the helicopter.

In spite of considerable animosity between parties and departments during a very trying time, we somehow managed to field a sufficient number of UH-34Ds to satisfy Customer requirements and continue to support increasing military-generated SARs and the escalating war in Laos. ¹¹

¹¹ Segment Sources:

Jack Forney Emails, 02/02/99, 02/05/99, 02/09/99, 03/10/99.

EW Knight Emails, 05/10/00, 05/13/00, 06/22/00, 04/19/01, 04/23/01.

CJ Abadie Interview Author's House, 05/01/98.

With the advent of two new, and mutually exclusive, air programs in Laos, and increased strike activity in North Vietnam, great numbers of military aircraft were employed during missions, and several succumbed to more efficient enemy AAA fire. In addition, for the first time, dozens of North Vietnamese MiG 15 and 17 fighter jets, in place for some time, entered the picture. Increased U.S. aircraft losses required our almost daily services, and in Military Region Two, it was a rare day we were not tasked to perform in some manner to support military SAR activity.

In Washington, there was concern over political implications regarding disabled Rolling Thunder planes crossing into or crashing in Lao territory. Sullivan attempted to explain to his boss at State that this happened regularly and, as recently as 31 March, an F-100D pilot (Bigoness) on a pre-strike weather mission was recovered using USAF assets. The ambassador had already discussed this aspect of the air war with Souvanna Phouma. Consequently, Lao over-flights were accepted and considered an expediency to avoid capture in North Vietnam.

Pilots of crippled planes were pre-briefed to avoid overflying Laos. Realistically, such incidents were bound to occur, and deemed to be no problem for the Royal Lao Government because of Rolling Thunder mission's clandestine nature. However, in the event of crashes and SARs in Laos, media publicity would be explained as part of RLG-sanctioned

reconnaissance activity. ¹

Following April Fool's Day, I was back on the schedule. Beginning a new month was always somewhat depressing, for it required starting over from zero hours and pressing to reach the coveted overtime target of seventy hours. I often wished for monthly compensation with a more substantial base pay and fewer extra incentives. To me, such a system would be vastly more equitable, allocating additional funds for non-flying periods of injury, sickness, or leave. This would be especially apropos now that we were challenged with more hazardous work and the distinct possibility of being shot down and incurring serious injury. Of course, this system would probably not work well, as there were always conniving malingerers who would take advantage of such a plan.

Hotel-23 necessitated several test flights, and it required most of the day to place the helicopter in a satisfactory condition for upcountry work. Determined not to fly junk, I paid close attention to how maintenance was repairing and clearing logbook gripes on the machines. Accordingly, even before going to the flight line, I went to the hangar, asked questions, and read all logbook historical data and the pilot gripes and maintenance sign-offs--especially repeat items--and focused on these. At this stage in our program, I really did not particularly care if an aircraft left the ramp unless I considered it right. Unfortunately, not all pilots shared my

¹ William Sullivan to State and Subsequent Message Traffic, 04/01-02/65.

(<http://www.angelfire.com/home/laoslist/crl60.html>) Laos Incident List 1960-1969, 6, 05/01/02.

opinions, and often greed, intimidation, or misguided loyalty served their purpose.

It was midafternoon by the time I was satisfied with the product and declared the ship airworthy. I thought the day was ended, but was dispatched to Paksane with Joe Siaotong. To fulfill SAR requirements in regard to increased Barrel Roll, Steel Tiger, and Rolling Thunder missions, it was Flight Operation's intention to place aircraft at prearranged locations no matter how late. Consequently, there was little time left in the day to work.

ROLLING THUNDER

The following day, in addition to Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger air strikes, the farthest north to date and a first on non-military targets, a week-long Rolling Thunder 9A mission commenced to cripple enemy bridges, roads, and major rail infrastructure south of the 20th parallel leading toward Hanoi. Navy and Marine F-8U planes from the USS *Coral Sea* and USS *Hancock* struck the Dong Phoung Thong Bridge seventy miles south of Hanoi on Route-1. After salvoing sixty tons of ordnance, approaches were cratered and the center span dropped. Although MiGs had been sighted during previous missions, for the first time, North Vietnamese fighter pilots went into action. One F-8U was jumped by three MiG-17s over the bridge. His plane severely damaged, the pilot managed to escape downing and RTB. Not so fortunate, an A-4C bomber was downed by AAA fire.

A major newly finished bridge, the Ham Rong (Dragon's Jaw) that spanned the Song Ma, was also targeted by USAF assets. Because of its sheer size and length, seventy-nine F-105, twenty-one F-100, two RF-101 fighter-bombers, and ten KC-135 tankers, were employed against what would become known as the

infamous Thanh Hoa Bridge. The F-100s were staged at various South Vietnamese bases, while the remainder came from Korat and Takhli, Thailand. Planes from Thailand refueled from tankers orbiting the Mekong, flew across Laos to an initial point (IP), where they reformed for the early afternoon strike. Post-strike plans were tailored to fly east into the Tonkin Gulf, reform into formations and RTB. At this marshaling point, a destroyer waited to recover survivors.

Because of its solid construction, an inadequate mix of weaponry that included Bullpup missiles and 750-pound iron bombs, and perhaps inadequate precision bombing, the bridge and rail system remained relatively undamaged. Several planes were damaged by AAA, and an F-100D (Smith) and RF-101 downed (Morgan). North of the target, an A4C bomber was shot down (Vohden).

On 1 April, to support Rolling Thunder and prevent MiG fighter pilots from intervening in the bombing program, Secretary McNamara approved a Joint Chiefs of Staff recommendation to send a USAF F-4C squadron to Udorn for the purpose of MiG combat air patrol (MiGCAP). The plane, the most recent addition to the USAF and Navy inventory, was considered highly sophisticated. Since RF-101s were already operating there, additional jet planes based at Udorn would not set a precedent, but merely add to the increased noise and activity. Reacting in a remarkably short time, crews and Phantoms from George Air Force Base, California, arrived in Udorn on the 7th. Assigned to 120-day TDY, the pilots flew MiGCAP for F-105s on 9 April. No primary strike missions were scheduled for the

fighter-bombers until 30 May. ²

The Panhandle trail system became a major focus of the Steel Tiger air campaign and the strategic logistical hub at Tchepone was repeatedly bombed. Following night missions to discover enemy vehicular traffic, in preparation for daylight strikes on Mugia Pass, early that morning, at the Customer's request, Wayne Knight flew to the most forward USAF base in Thailand at Nakhon Phanom. There he boarded Crown, the HU-16B Albatross selected for the day's flying standby SAR coverage in the Steel Tiger area. Originally based at Naha, Okinawa, the plane was normally utilized for water rescue. At the commencement of the air war, HU-16Bs were hastily retrofitted with communications equipment and sent to Korat, Thailand, in June 1964 to assume the military command and control role aloft during Lao SAR missions. Three other ships were stationed at Da Nang, South Vietnam, to cover Tonkin Gulf SAR missions. These early control and communication aircraft shared SAR burdens with Air America's Victor Control.

Wayne would represent an additional set of eyes and help coordinate Air America helicopters and planes should a viable SAR requirement arise. The Mugia Pass area was the priority area covered with aircraft returning from North Vietnam for a secondary mission. Aloft to cover the numerous missions planned that day, he spent a majority of nine hours and forty minutes in

² John Bowman, 110.
Edward Marolda.
John Smith, 63-64, 334.
The Biography of James R. Risner-
(<http://www.pownetwork.org/bios/r/r039.htm>).
Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986) 113.
Jacob Van Staaveren, *Gradual Failure*, 96, 117.

the cramped, unpressurized, and unheated machine looking out cabin windows. During the long day, he was allowed a little right seat cockpit time.

A few days after the major strike on Mugia Pass, the Tchepone airfield became the primary target.

That flight was Wayne's first and last in the Albatross. That evening he departed on home leave until 15 May. Happily leaving the war, severe maintenance problems, and complaining pilots behind, he journeyed on the CAT jet to Osaka, Japan, with his wife and eldest son, Wayne, to meet his parents arriving from Phoenix to commence their Southeast Asian visit. The group then enjoyed riding the impressive and speedy Bullet Train to Tokyo, where they remained for a week at the new Otani Hotel. With the yen-dollar exchange rates still at 360-1, their stay was considered relatively inexpensive.

From Japan they went to Hong Kong for a week, where Wayne and his father, courtesy of the Taj Mahal Tailors, played golf at the Royal Hong Kong Sports Club.

Returning to Bangkok they all stayed at a house rented from a French family on home leave. They linked up with Tom and Kathy Moher, and during a trip around town in the Renault left for Wayne to drive, they met Tony Poe. Tony was still on the final days of his medical leave after incurring the gut wounding in January. After discovering that Tom and Wayne's mother were both born on 28 June, even though not the same year, they celebrated their common birthdays with many drinks. It was an interesting day. Tony was at his best, well behaved, and issuing no tirades

regarding USG bureaucracies. He managed to charm Wayne's mother, but overwhelmed them all with his enormous capacity for alcohol.³

CONTINUING SARS

On the morning before the heavy air strikes commenced in North Vietnam, I was directed from Paksane to Long Tieng to work. Ensuring that I would be available for regional SAR duty, the Customer had me work east of Padong at Pha Peung (Site-21) and other landing zones on the west side of the soaring Phou Sao mountain. I also worked at Tha Vieng, where Bill Lair's USG-supported Meo program had commenced during January 1961. Site-13 was located on low ground and strategically incorporated part of the Route-4 structure, and often changed hands during hostilities. It marked the first and last time I ever shut down there. I also worked in the Tha Thom Valley, where we were again expanding our operations to new areas well to the east. Although I did not really know what was going on in North Vietnam, radio traffic over guard frequency was heavy. Therefore, landing at these sites had a dual purpose, with the Meo officer asking the local commander questions about jet penetration of the area and sightings of parachutes or crashed planes. While shuttling out of Paksane toward the end of the day, a malfunction developed in the engine. I called Udorn and was told to ferry the ship home. With almost eleven-hours in the air, I landed at dark. After managing to choke down a decent meal, aware that I was on the schedule early the following morning, I left for the house.

³ EW Knight Emails, 07/02/00, 07/11/00, 04/11/01, 04/14/01, 04/18/01.
Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 59.

Heavy Rolling Thunder strikes on the seemingly impervious Ham Rong Bridge continued on the fourth. Despite serious pounding, the bridge survived that day and several years afterward. American aircraft continued to suffer from AAA and MiG-17 cannon fire. Without MiGCAP F-100 pilots in position to ward off the MiGs, at least three USAF planes were lost during the day's activity: two F-105D Thunderchiefs (Magnusson, Harris) over the Ma River and an A1H Skyraider (Draeger) involved in SAR activity, were splashed by MiG pilots. It marked the first American losses to enemy jets.

In Laos, seven B-57 Canberras and three RF-100 Voodoo reconnaissance planes commenced a daytime road-cratering raid on Mugia Pass lines of communication (LOCs).

Continuing the dialogue on the confusing SAR issue in Southeast Asia, incoming and outgoing message traffic indicated overriding political factors (the neutral status) required that Air America helicopters and crews continue to assume responsibility for all Lao SAR operations. Thus far, Ambassador Sullivan did not want Air America pilots venturing into North Vietnam to attempt rescue attempts. He considered this penetration too risky, something that would certainly jeopardize the entire Lao program. With the advent of Rolling Thunder losses, Thailand-based USAF-marked helicopters were to be exclusively used for SAR missions in North Vietnam. If required, they could be prepositioned at Lima Site-36 (Na Khang) for Rolling Thunder operations and could be authorized to refuel near the border at Meo-controlled sites of Mung Moc (LS-46), northeast of Tha Thom and Houei Ma (LS-107) at the base of Phu Pha Thi (LS-85). Exclusively controlled by Meo forces, strict secrecy could be maintained at the remote bases.

U.S. military crews and their aircraft were forbidden to RON at Site-36 or anywhere else in Laos. Until other plans were conceived, in extreme cases, Thai-based U.S. helicopters were sanctioned for use in Laos while operating from Na Khang or Thai bases. In theory this format seemed viable, but the short range HH-43 helicopters were ill equipped to perform long range missions or cross border operations. In addition, the crews had little knowledge of friendly site locations, fluid enemy situations, terrain, or weather patterns in Military Region Two. On the rare occasions when Pedro crews ventured into Military Region Two, mainly for orientation, our H-34 pilots led them to Na Khang and other sites. Some of the Air Force pilots accompanied Air America helicopter pilots in the cockpit to obtain area familiarization. After that they were largely on their own. Although attempts were made to utilize the HH-43s in Military Region Two, results were never particularly fruitful, and the machines were generally consigned to missions east of Nakhon Phanom in the area of Mugia Pass. Therefore, most SAR work for aviators downed in North Vietnam emanated from South Vietnam bases, and the Tonkin Gulf Fleet.

North Vietnamese counter air capabilities increased at an exponential rate. During early April, Strategic Air Command (SAC) U-2 reconnaissance photos revealed construction of a surface-to-air missile (SAM-2) site fifteen miles southeast of Hanoi. Photographs taken by a RF-8A pilot operating from the USS *Coral Sea* confirmed this sighting. By 14 April, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force, and U.S. Navy leaders petitioned their superiors to destroy the site before it could be activated. However, Secretary McNamara and civilian political leaders in Washington refused the request, imprudently believing the SAMs were merely a non-threatening propaganda ploy by Vietnamese

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leaders. They gave more weight to injury or death to a few Russian advisors working at the site than to American pilots' safety. By early May, U-2s photographed a nearly completed SAM site fifteen miles southwest of Hanoi. It was finished in less than two weeks. The end of May revealed three additional sites. Nothing was accomplished for months to eliminate them--until the first American planes began falling from the sky. By the end of 1965, fifty-six SAM sites were reported in place. ⁴

It was a particularly tense time in Southeast Asia. Quite possibly exacerbating the situation, confusing and influencing the LBJ Administration to err on the side of caution, was an engagement with ChiCom MiG-17s south of Hainan Island in which a Navy F-4B was lost. This was followed by the Chinese Air Force being placed on alert for possible military action. ⁵

PAKSANE

The Volkswagen B-Bus driver arrived outside the door at 0530 hours loaded with sleepy and disgruntled crewmembers. Pick-ups were earlier than ever, particularly after the spate of

⁴ It is the Author's opinion that failure to approve destruction of the initial SAM site, and any others under construction, was a slap in the face to every U.S. military aviator and crewman participating in the Vietnam War, and forever a stain on Washington politicians involved in policy making.

⁵ Biography Risner.
 Douglas Pike, 113.
 Edward Marolda.
 Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 59.
 Jacob Van Staaveren, *Plans and Operations in Southeast Asia*, 41.
 Joint State-DOD Message Regarding SARs, 04/05/65.
 John Bowman, 111.
 William Greenhalgh, *Voodoo*.
 Victor Anthony, 165.

maintenance problems. I was already up, dressed and groggy, not especially anxious to return to the Lao killing fields. I could tell that others in the large vehicle were equally tired when minimum conversation ensued during the short drive to the airfield. Since it was too early for breakfast, too dark to preflight, and many of the helicopters were still in the barn, some of us attempted to catch a few minutes sleep in the movie room.

After Hotel-23 was towed from the hangar, first inspected by Magpantay and then myself, and a cruise mixture check performed, I launched again for the FAR garrison at Paksane. Five new pilots in various stages of upgrading had been hired, with the Company goal of reducing our monthly flight time to eighty-five hours. And, more pilots were reported in the pipeline. Few of us believed a reduction in flight time was possible, at least in the near term, because additional helicopters were being fed into Udorn and we were still flying all airworthy machines in a maximum effort. One of the new pilots, Jim Brown, accompanied me to learn the Lima-35 area. In addition, two pilots in the cockpit fulfilled an established SOP for SAR duty implemented after the August Zeitler shoot down. Although I preferred flying by myself, I had no choice in the matter. Furthermore, I was still tired and stressed from nonstop flying the previous month, and actually welcomed someone to assist with the easier aspects of grinding around the sky. At the very least, if that was possible, Brown's presence in the left seat represented an entity to share the work load, and help take my mind off the troubling SAR work.

Through continuing dialogue with Customer and Company principals, Udorn management was led to believe that arrangements were being made for pilot and crew SAR

compensation. However, logging crew SAR time was deemed necessary to convince Customers that there was an issue. Therefore, against a possibility of some future reward for our efforts, CPH Knight, who believed we would eventually receive some form of standby pay, told us to record the number of standby SARs performed each month. He wanted the time specified as either ground standby or Department of Defense SAR in which we actually launched on a mission. Although this plan never achieved fruition, I recorded five in January, seven in February, and fifteen in March. At that escalating rate, I could only speculate that every day upcountry would require some SAR involvement and constitute a worry period. Despite notification of this duty from the Vientiane Operations Manager, unless there was an actual SAR requirement in progress, stand downs were rarely the norm, and working standbys evolved to satisfy Customer missions. I suppose some kind of agreement had been struck between Air America management, the Customer, and 2nd Air Division military leaders in Saigon.

After arriving at our destination, we immediately set to work looking for an AlH Navy pilot (Evans) from the USS *Hancock*, who had spiraled down over Route-23 on the second. Since the number of downed military planes had recently increased in the multi-country theater, borders were considered meaningless and pilots could be scattered over a two-country area. Therefore, we were advised to maintain an alert for emergency signals or radio transmissions while performing normal work or conducting actual searches.

The five days spent at Paksane were very busy, working occasionally with FAR units, covering SAR standby, and performing actual recovery attempts. A gift shower, called a "Mango Rain" by locals, helped to temporarily dissipate area-

wide dense smoke and haze. It also aided visual navigation, but I knew from previous experience that the smoky season was far from over. The tough work did not seem to bother Brown, and he was a great person with whom to share a cockpit. However, I felt regret that new pilots had to endure the stress and strain of real and potential SAR work in addition to sometimes tough normal work during their checkout period. Still, unlike my relatively peaceful interlude as a First Officer, that situation was currently the nature of the beast. To pass time, Jim filled me in on additional details of his narrow escape with death in the ill-fated Chinook helicopter. He also whetted my appetite for a sporty new Ford Mustang vehicle he had purchased when it just came off the assembly line. I had always been a Ford aficionado, and tucked the information away against the time I could investigate further.

Lima-35 area was normally a quiet place to work, familiarize, and train new pilots, but being reasonably close to the border and the changing scene in North Vietnam, all that had become moot. The area became a choice focal point to stage SAR assets that could include missions in almost every compass direction--north, east and south.

Most new pilots appreciated working over the low piney woods area, as opposed to high terrain, during initial training. However, I had one pilot accompany me for a day who went back to Udorn and promptly quit. He complained that Lao's topography was much too rough for him. I do not know where he had previously worked, but we had a good laugh in the bar over his one-day tenure upcountry, and wondered what the man might have thought had he experienced fun and games in the country's mountainous interior.

The days merged at Paksane and I felt my entire being revolved around and inside a vibrating UH-34D airframe. As requests were forwarded to search specific areas, we flew into relatively new locales near the border, and at low altitudes down narrow, unfamiliar jungle-covered valleys. I had not done that since my first two-ship military SAR in June 1964 with Scratch Kanach searching for Chuck Klusmann. Despite covering a wide swath of territory, we never discovered anything or received distinguishable ground fire.

As flight time accumulated, and I tired proportionally, my disposition changed to one of grumpiness. I could not help this, for by day's end, my nerve endings were highly irritated, frazzled, and raw. This condition was caused by navigating in lingering smoke and haze, real or potential SAR missions, aircraft vibrations, radio static, and generator-inverter whine through my hardhat earphones that actually caused me physical pain. At this stage, even moderate vibrations bothered me, and the tightness in the back of my neck returned. I had some respite from the daily grind while staying overnight at General Kham Kong's former residence, but the food was still barely palatable. I sincerely missed the genial general's presence, and I was truly sorry that he was in prison.

U.S. planes were crashing in adjoining theaters at alarming rates, and it appeared to some of us that the military was needlessly losing an inordinate number of jets, especially highly trained men. ⁶ One factor in the losses involved a failure

⁶ When I participated in the NAS Pensacola training command syllabus, probably to motivate us, we were informed that the extended program had cost the taxpayer 100,000 dollars. By 1965, one could only imagine what it cost USG to train a man in newer generation jet planes.

to employ suitable ordnance contained in the inventory to eliminate enemy AAA capability. Napalm was still forbidden, considered an inhumane weapon, and the anti-personnel cluster bomb units (CBU), if employed at all, were used sparingly. In Laos, despite the substantial expense and effort involved, thus far when called to action, we all responded and managed to rescue most live downed aviators from enemy-held areas. Despite a lack of kudos, additional pay, or thanks, we basked in the personal satisfaction of rescuing our military American brothers.

On the seventh we worked the Paksane area in the morning and then were summoned to The Alternate where a SAR armada was forming. A B-57B Canberra out of Bien Hoa Airbase had disappeared with two crewmembers (Lewis, Baker) after targeting vehicle traffic along Route-7 in Military Region Two, eighteen miles west of the border. Captain Lewis was last seen by his wingman as he descended through a cloud layer. Another member of the multi-aircraft flight heard the PIC radio "off target and outbound."

A massive search effort began by Air America helicopter and fixed wing assets that continued through 12 April. Without a sighting, beacon, or friendly ground report, apparently swallowed by dense jungle, the men were declared missing in action (MIA). ⁷

⁷Biography James Wimberley Lewis,
(<http://www.taskforceomegainc.org/L021.html>).
Laos Incident List 1960-1969, 6.
William Sullivan to State, 04/09/65.

STATE

The substantial increase in wide-ranging military air activity and search, and almost daily rescue requirements throughout the region elicited rare comments from Ambassador Sullivan to Air America in Taipei management. Recent SAR operations revealed problems that required prompt attention. Because of a lack of military control aircraft (two HU-16s), additional Air America command and control ships and helicopter assets were required in the Steel Tiger area of the Lao Panhandle. Also needing to be addressed was the distinct probability of U.S. planes crashing in North Vietnam outside the current SAR plan covering Rolling Thunder and designated assets that would handle such rescue attempts. ⁸

Sullivan went on to comment on the Victor Control function. Victor Control was the call sign for Air America C-123s already used in Military Region Two during Lao SAR operations, and now tasked to supplement the HU-16B Crown control ships in Military Region Three. Whenever there was military air activity planned in North Vietnam or Laos, a HU-16B orbited the Lao-Thai border. The Albatross flew at altitudes high enough to maintain contact with the ASOC office in Udorn and strike aircraft. However, sometimes rules of engagement (ROE) restricted the ship during SAR operations. Air America had no such limitations. The ambassador pointed to the well-known fact that most C-123s

⁸ Unfortunately, further details of this part of the message were censored in paperwork read by the Author at the University of Texas LBJ Library in Austin, Texas. However, from interpolation, it is clear to the Author that from recovery efforts in North Vietnam only two months later, Air America would cover this cross-border task when necessary. Gray areas in the annual contract often permitted interim tweaking, and the Company rarely backed down on such issues.

lacked ultra-high frequency radios and were not outfitted with critical UHF-direction finding radio equipment imperative for rescue beacon homing purposes.⁹

Despite this deficiency and other issues with the C-123, Sullivan's team believed HU-16Bs should continue to be employed if Air America assets were still to be utilized for SAR operations in Military Region Two. However, should a SAR requirement arise in the Panhandle before an agreement was reached on the new SAR plan, then Victor Control would be used to complement or supplement Crown. He believed aircraft used on SAR missions should be Thailand-based and helicopters, staged through Laos. Search and rescue penetration into North Vietnam could be implemented by U.S. marked helicopters, such as those HH-43s at Nakhon Phanom near Paksane, or at Na Khang near the DVR border.¹⁰ He recommended the daily pre-positioning of U.S.-marked helicopters at one or more of these sites, since they afforded little chance of detection.

For SAR escort purposes, he recommended that Lao military assistance program (MAP) T-28s based at Udorn be equipped with USAF markings and flown by USAF SAW detachment pilots (Waterpump) operating from Udorn and Nakhon Phanom. In addition, USAF and Navy pilots would have to continue providing RESCAP tasks as well as control tasks for all operations actually penetrating the Democratic Vietnamese Republic (DVR).

⁹ Caribou planes had this equipment and were used as Victor Control during the previous year. However, the STOL C-7 lacked the C-123's power and altitude capability. C-123s were later retrofitted with UHF radios and homing equipment.

¹⁰ Ambassador Sullivan still unrealistically believed USAF HH-43 crews could perform the job.

Contained in a later message to the State Department, the U.S. Ambassador noted that Theater wide rains had commenced earlier than in previous years. Heavy truck traffic, protected by substantial AAA emplacements, was reported along Route-23 in Military Region Three, suggesting a rush to stockpile supplies before the roads were washed out or an impending FAR operation could take place.

Within a few days, 400 enemy troops were reported twenty kilometers north of Moung Phalane located on Route-9. Victor Control, working on primary UHF frequency 364.2 (243.0 secondary) would fly in the area with an RLAF officer to relay messages between Lao T-28 pilots and American planes.

On 14 April, in the first known instance of Thai-based U.S. Air Force aircraft employed in a close air support role of Lao ground troops, sixteen F-105s from Korat RTAFB struck the Moung Phalane area in Military Region Three. They were guided to the target by T-28 pilots, who marked the area with smoke rockets. The pilot in command (PIC) of Victor Control coordinated the entire mission. Even though battle damage assessment was unknown, the concept of a mixed USAF-Air America-Lao force was proven successful. The joint venture's achievement prompted General Moore to recommend formation of a four-aircraft quick reaction jet fighter-bomber alert force at Thai bases. It was not the dedicated force Sullivan actually desired. However, it was second best in reacting to emergency requests from beleaguered ground troops. Therefore, the Ambassador assented to the plan, as did Thai

leaders. ¹¹

KUDOS

In regard to the Lao conflict escalation, the air war, and our continuing participation in SARs, Dave Hickler forwarded a message to President Grundy cautioning his superior that Air America would soon require a full-time organization to satisfy SAR work. A daily SAR demand for assets caused routine work to suffer and upset the Customer. The military pilot recovery record to date was outstanding, and one could only hope this would continue.

Frankly addressing the subject of helicopter crews, Dave stated: *"Serious thought has to be given to provide additional compensation for UH-34D crews while participating in SAR activities. These men are going through hell both in nervous tension while waiting and while actually going in for the pickup. [Dave was realistic and had his pulse on the situation.] We give them all the protection we can, but are going to have to give them more. Other people (T-28 Alpha crews who flew at least eight paid missions during March and April) get special compensation, and the helicopter pilots feel they should get something too."* Hickler, who was always on our side when operational matters were involved, added that he recommended we receive additional funds for our efforts.

Whenever Dave thought pilot actions deserved commendation, he forwarded his opinions and details to Ben Moore. Always very

¹¹ William Sullivan Message to Air America Management, 04/07/65.
William Sullivan to State, 04/12/65.
Message, 04/18/65.
Victor Anthony, 165-166.

cooperative in regard to the helicopter program, he carried it a step further and, upon learning of numerous occurrences of credible performance, he came to Wayne Knight one day saying, "Don't you believe these guys deserve a letter?" Wayne was in agreement and in turn would petition Ben when he believed positive action deserved a commendation.

Far removed from the intricacies of our theater of operation, Taipei management was never considered a viable entity capable of understanding or managing remote field organizations, and those responsible at the "head shed" were generally slow in recognizing and understanding our needs and accomplishments. ¹²

Despite Hickler's intercession on our part, leaders at the head shed would never initiate anything costing the Customer additional money. However, it was a different matter with Customer-fostered changes in the program. This tendency was difficult to comprehend, and it appeared the further up the chain of command a person went, the less concerned he was for those involved on a lower echelon who were assuming all the risks. According to Wayne Knight, applying this same assumption on a local level, Abadie more or less fit this description. Ben Moore and Dave Hickler did not. ¹³

¹² For an example of remoteness leading to ignorance and misinformation, I offer Bob Rousselot's statement to me in Taipei regarding improvements in "the field" since my June 1962 departure from Udorn. In addition, even though the VPFO conducted periodic trips to Southeast Asia and briefed me about newly completed infrastructure items in Udorn, after arriving, I observed that nothing of note had been implemented. After Rouss departed the Company in 1963, I cannot recall seeing a high-level management person in Udorn for a considerable period.

¹³ Bill Leary Notes: Dave Hickler Message to Hugh Grundy, 04/10/65. EW Knight Emails, 05/03/00, 07/22/00.

In lieu of monetary remuneration for our SAR services rendered "above and beyond the call of duty," we received standardized commendations and letters of appreciation. ¹⁴ There were no ruffles and flourishes or award ceremonies. Sealed envelopes just appeared in our mailboxes. The first letter I received was the one previously described from General Moore for the February recovery of parts of the Navy pilot. Subsequent ones received about mid-April were issued from General Manager Laos, Dave Hickler and Udorn Base Manager, Ben Moore.

Written on Air America stationary, Dave's letter of 8 April was timely and substantive. It said in part:

"I wish to personally convey to you my sincere appreciation and commendation on you for your excellent display of professional flying skill in the recent SAR operation conducted on the 5th of April 1965. Your skill and ability as well as your selfless devotion and dedication to your assignment was a reflection on your interest in the safety and wellbeing of your fellow airmen. Your efforts and deeds are well known and appreciated by those far above me..."

Obviously, a shotgun style form letter to cover all participants, it probably was sent to several individuals working assigned areas that day. ¹⁵

Abbreviated cover letters from Ben Moore accompanied the Hickler-General Moore letter. The letters actually had the

¹⁴ If we were still in the military, medals would have been forthcoming.

¹⁵ I could never pinpoint the specific event, but we were so busy that week with search and recovery attempts that it could have covered any particular day. However, on 5 April Captain T Gay, flying 59-1742 from Takhli in Route Package-3, was shot down. He was subsequently recovered.

intended objective and I felt pretty good about myself, my organization, and our collectively successful work. However, never having retrieved a live military pilot tended to gall me, and I wondered if I would ever experience this honor-and at what cost.

At some point, probably after friendly bombing incidents, efforts were finally made to acquaint Fleet pilots in the Tonkin Gulf to the fact that American H-34 helicopter pilots worked in Laos. The men were well adapted to SAR work--ready, willing, and capable to attempt rescues. To acquaint and reinforce this information to U.S. Navy and Marine pilots, Phil Goddard was flown to a carrier. Even though Rolling Thunder aviators were briefed to avoid flying deep into Laos, Steel Tiger and Barrel Roll interdiction programs in Military Region Two and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail system encompassing Navy and USAF planes continued strike missions. During the course of his Ready Room briefings, Phil was surprised to discover that Navy and Marine pilots possessed little real knowledge of Laos, Air America's presence there, or the rescue capability. The men were not aware that many friendly areas along the Mekong were preferred safe ejection areas. He attempted to emphasize that when seriously hit by AAA, their chances of survival might hinge on heading south away from enemy held territory.

Briefings were also conducted at Thai USAF bases by a U.S. Lao Embassy Air Attaché. Perhaps the captain's intentions were credible and honest, but in delivering messages essentially the same as Goddard's, he added that Air America pilots were rewarded 1,500 dollars for each successful pilot rescue. Obviously, by divulging a false motivation related to our actual commitment and altruistic willingness to recover them, the confused individual's declaration was intended to bolster

military pilots' lagging morale. Perhaps the falsehood did lift the Air Force pilots' spirits, but it had a grossly negative impact on us. When rumors of the defamation reached us, we were devastated and incensed, but could do nothing except deny it. We certainly would have welcomed some monetary incentive, but ten dollars per hour project pay was a little less than the stipulated amount. Consequently, the accusation left a bad taste in every helicopter pilot's mouth, especially since we constantly placed our lives on the line in a humanitarian effort for individuals who apparently harbored the thought that we were only mercenaries. ¹⁶

I was happy to get home, but it only lasted one day. Using Nunez's typewriter for a letter home, I related a little regarding our maintenance problems and a hope that the problems had been resolved by implementing certain measures. I mentioned that Marius and I still planned our trip around the CAT system on the 27th, and that I would write my cousin on Okinawa to apprise him of my journey. However, I was unsure about postal delivery. The APO mail from Bangkok was not presently reliable,

¹⁶The galling and often misunderstood term, "mercenary", although generically applied to us, was never warranted in our situation. It is true that we were seemingly well paid for our work, but other individuals like oil field workers and other overseas workers were also well compensated for their efforts. One could rightfully argue that we worked for a foreign government and army for money like some former military men had done in parts of Africa. Despite the subject of colorful adventure movies and books, this scenario never applied to us. We never took an oath of allegiance to, or were paid by, a foreign government. In actuality, we were merely an instrument and functionary of USG foreign policy implemented through the CIA, a U.S. government formed, funded, and sanctioned entity. Had we truly worked for the RLG, we would have forfeited our passports, rights as U.S. citizens, and essentially become individuals without a country.

for the New Zealand Bristol aircraft was no longer running on schedule. This also affected JUSMAAG movie delivery to our area.

PAKSE

On Saturday, after Hotel-33 was cleared by maintenance, I performed the prescribed ground checks, and launched for Pakse. Flying southeast on a 128-degree heading, Rick Decosta and I crewed the machine 220 nautical miles to L-11. Since Hotel-33 was newly obtained from the USMC, it still contained functional TACAN navigation equipment with distance measuring equipment (DME). By merely dialing Channel-31, I was able to establish and maintain an outbound heading and known distance from Tango-08 until losing the line-of-sight signal.¹⁷ Most of our H-34s did not have TACAN equipment installed, so I considered it a luxury, and something of immense value during the smoke and haze season.¹⁸

Because USAF activity had increased at several Thai Air Force bases, we were encouraged to contact and use tactical radar sites (called ground control intercept or GCI) while flying cross-country in Thailand. This and positive IFF (identification friend or foe) contact would prevent any confusion as to who we actually were. USAF controlling unit Brigham Control was located at Udorn Airport (UHF 278.4), Invert at the NPK base (278.4), Lion at Ubon Airport (316.0), and Dressy Lady at Don Muang Airport (278.4) north of Bangkok. Besides being a mandatory procedure, it was a good system to use

¹⁷ At a five to seven-hundred-foot cruise altitude, this could be twenty miles.

¹⁸ Because Udorn maintenance was not equipped to repair TACAN equipment, when it malfunctioned the unit was removed.

when able for positive control, one that provided navigational steers when asked, particularly in the current smoky season when navigation and aircraft separation was especially important. Because of our relatively low-level flying, it was not always possible to use the system, but when contact was established, the units would track us for as long as possible, then pass us off to the next facility. This assistance was welcome, especially in the busy Ubon area.

We landed at Lima-11 by midafternoon and closed out our flight plan with the Chinese radio operator located in a combination work-living building at the airfield. Most of my work had centered on the Military Region Two area since we began flying again in Laos during the spring of 1963. Consequently, I had not returned to Pakse since the fall of 1962, and that was only an abbreviated three days area familiarization as a First Officer with Captain Nick Burke.

We did not perform a lot of work this time, but I was again exposed to the Plateau des Bolovens, Ban Houei Khong (L-56) where the missionary Davis family lived, Saravane, and some of Military Region Four's Route-13 structure.

I remembered what Nick had told or cautioned me about enemy hot spots (mostly around the Lao Ngam foothills), but that was a long time ago, and the situation was sure to have changed appreciably. Prohibited from carrying tools of war in latter 1962, and working exclusively for AID, I did not see or meet any FAR officers or Agency types. At the time, Pakse was commonly regarded by all pilots as the country club of Laos--a most relaxing place to work, usually reserved for senior pilots. Assuming the situation there was the same, I looked forward to a little respite from SAR standbys, associated missions, and the strain of working in the fluid Military Region Two shot pattern.

However, I was not yet aware of our U.S. military's southern H-34 SAR requirement reserved for Steel Tiger operations.

Charlie Davis and Ben Naval had recently departed Lima-11 on a ferry flight to Udorn in a ship that had incurred battle damage. The relatively new Captain had just completed a mission to Attopeu. Instead of tracking a reciprocal route to Pakse over the relative safety of the heavily jungled and sparsely populated Bolovens Plateau, Charlie elected to fly at a lower altitude directly over southern flatlands paralleling the southern edge of the Plateau. Two thousand feet above sea level (ASL) did not place him high enough above ground level (AGL), and positioned him just within small arms range. Receiving his "baptism under fire," the ship was hit five times. Without incurring serious damage, actually the only real injury was to Charlie's ego. In all fairness, Charlie had never been briefed on enemy presence in the area, nor did Woodchuck, Pakse's casual Case Officer, Flynn Perry, know that Davis was a spanking new pilot with no previous experience in the area.

The incident did reinforce managements' interest in establishing a Flight Information Center (FIC) at the Udorn facility to brief pilots regarding their work areas. After discussing the incident with Abadie, the boss agreed that the influx of new pilots necessitated improved intelligence dissemination not presently available in Udorn. A stop and briefing at FIC Vientiane during southern flights was far out of the way and no longer realistic. Therefore, such a facility was more than warranted at Udorn. ¹⁹

¹⁹ Charlie Davis Book, 64-65.
Charlie Davis Phone Call, 03/10/96.

FIC UDORN

Actually, at this time measures were already underway to form a FIC pilot briefing operation in Udorn. Consequently, during April the Flight Information Center Udorn was officially established. Former Cleveland, Ohio, policemen, Richard (Dick) Ford, who had attended OCS training and served in Army intelligence, retired on 31 January 1965. In early February, Dick Ford travelled to Saigon as a FIC operative. After a short stay in South Vietnam, he was transferred to Udorn and arrived in May to commence a new FIC operation. Tom Penniman met Dick at the Thai Airways terminal and noted that his briefcase displayed his initials followed by Lieutenant Colonel U.S. Army. Tom thought this marking was not an auspicious beginning for the new man. Tom later discovered that Dick had spent time on Taiwanese islands, counting daily incoming Chinese rounds on Quemoy and Matsu, and reporting the count to Washington.

Dick was allocated a small office space in the old administration building.²⁰ Located between Ben Moore and the CPH's office, the stark, eight-foot-wide room contained no window. Like his Vientiane FIC counterparts when they initially began their operation, he failed to receive an abundance of AB-1 cooperation regarding upcountry intelligence information.

He and Penniman were often at odds over matters relating to the job. Even though Dick retained a top-secret Army clearance, it bothered him that he was obligated to wait three months for the opportunity to meet, talk to, and solicit information from Pat Landry. Moreover, Tom perceived that Dick was irked and highly resented him. Only a youngster, he had never achieved

²⁰ Sometimes referred to as Administration Building Two (AB-2).

Dick's rank, but yet was cleared for contact with AB-1.²¹ During the waiting period, their relationship waxed and waned, as Tom had to keep reminding the exasperated Ford that he was not cleared for certain information. For intelligence people that constituted a very irritating situation. Dick never did blend in with Landry and company.

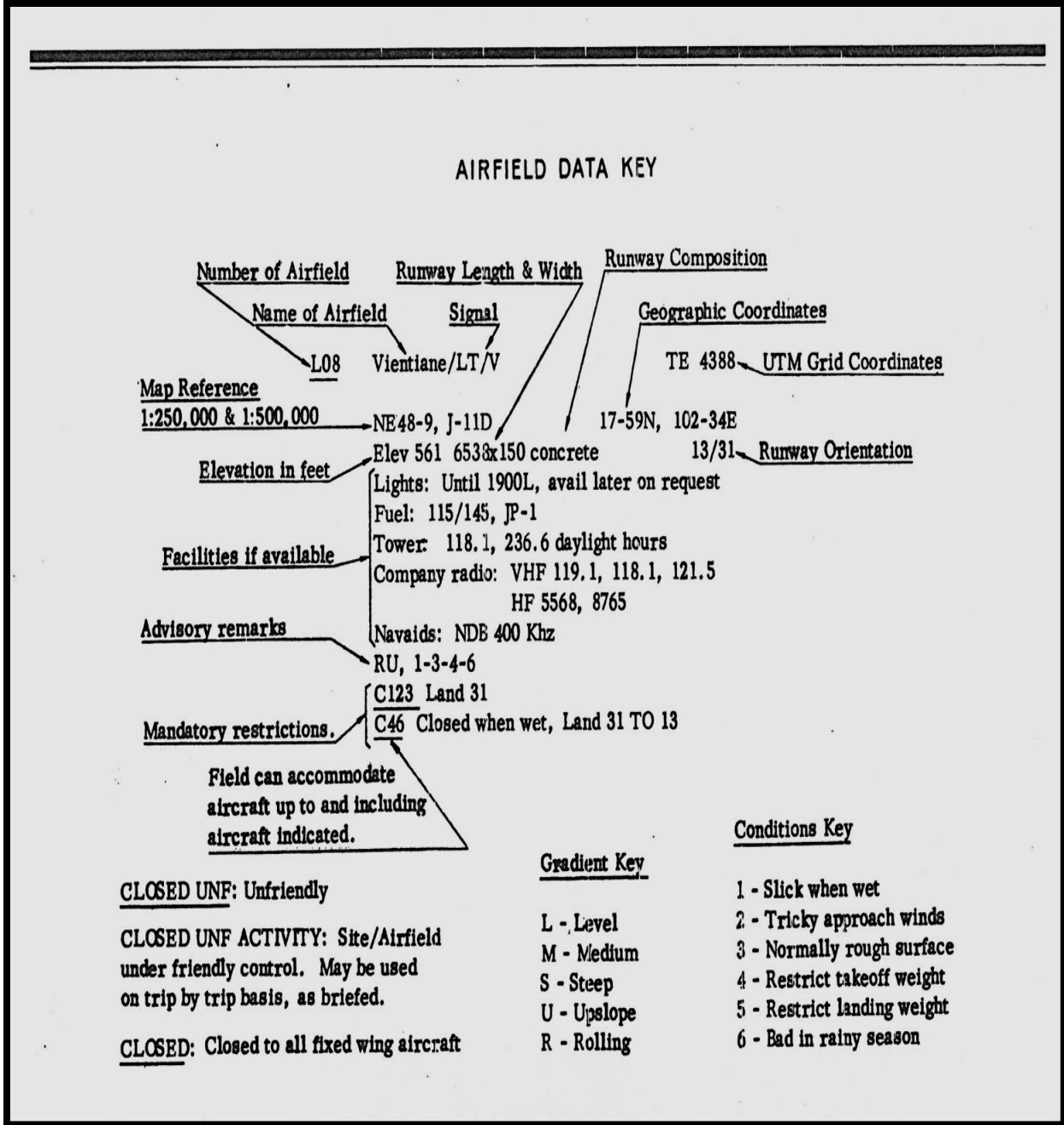
During the first months of relative inactivity, since Dick had little work to do in FIC without access to pertinent information, he accompanied Tom to accident sites and took photographs. As accidents became nastier, an oil of wintergreen vial was added to the investigation kit to moderate the smell of corpses. Dick had used this technique in Cleveland when removing ripe corpses from flop houses in the summer. The wintergreen was added to a handkerchief which was then placed over one's face.

As FIC-issued Lao and Thailand Air Facility Data Pamphlets were corrected and expanded for pilots, Tom and Dick disagreed over inserting flight information such as ADF sites and frequencies in the rear of the book. Penniman also pushed to include instrument let down plates near major airfields. Abadie eventually agreed with Tom's proposals, and Dick never forgave Tom.^{22 23}

²¹ USAF liaison officer, Captain Don Cherry, also had limited access to AB-1's map room.

²² Men who worked with or succeeded Ford in FIC operations over the years were: John Rock, John Bashaw, Bill Yarborough, Paul Montgomery, Jim Alexander, Jim Wilson, and Jeff Blanchford. Ford and Yarborough never got along well, and Yarborough gravitated upcountry to become the hostel manager at Sam Tong. Others moved into the Flight Operations Department.

²³ Richard Ford Emails, 10/02/99. Ford Letter, 10/14/99. Tom Penniman, Emails, 02/26/00, 03/02/00, 03/04/00, 04/02/00. EW Knight Emails, 07/07/00, 07/10/00, 07/24/00.



Site legend from the Flight Information Center-issued Air Facilities
Data Pamphlet.
Author Collection.

While the fuel truck slid alongside my helicopter, a Customer arrived in a Jeep requesting that I conduct a trip to Ban La Khong Pheng (LS-159). Since everyone still considered Pakse's region really a gentleman's non-war zone, and it was the weekend, I was surprised that I was assigned a mission, but accepted the trip as I had not flown any project time that day.

Most of the known Vietnamese supply roads were located northwest toward Tchepone, or beyond the mountains well north and east of Saravane, so I was not particularly concerned about not obtaining a decent briefing. I just asked if there were Pathet Lao in the area, and received a negative answer, knowing full well that there were always enemy patrols present. Like other areas of Laos, I planned to fly high enough to avoid a chance encounter with a wandering patrol. I found this easy to implement, since there was virtually no smoke and little haze in this sector of Laos this year where highland slash and burn agriculture was not a factor.

Lima Site-159 was located on Route-13, forty-five miles north northwest of Pakse. I supposed the garrison had its sierra together, for a white "L" signal was displayed within a reasonable time of my arrival. The trip was uneventful, and after the loading and unloading, I managed to squeeze in over two hours of project time. When checking with the Chinese radio operator for an additional work assignment, I found nothing scheduled on Sunday. Even if not scheduled to fly, the established procedure was to standby at the radio shack until released by a Customer. Rick, a very conscientious Flight Mechanic, elected to perform his post flight duties the following morning in daylight and when he was fresh.

The duty Jeep driver drove Rick and me through the west portion of town and across the Se Don River Bridge into the main

part of town. Rick had previously crewed at Pakse and recommended that we stay overnight at the Chinese hotel, which some judged the best accommodations in town. I suppose if one considered, like Udorn's Prachapakdi Hotel's policy, that no prostitutes were allowed in the premises by management, then it was the best, and if not the best, certainly the most moral. In fact, the multistory, yellow cement building looked similar to the Prach. Even the female receptionist reminded me of the Prach's aging mama san from whom I often purchased freshly baked bread. All resemblances ended there, and we were obligated to climb an impressive white marble staircase to our assigned floor. The 700-kip rooms were nothing to crow about. They provided standard basics, a lumpy mattress bed and a long pole fan. The only toilet and shower were located a few steps down the hall. Still, the tariff was reasonable and provided a place to flop.

There was no food available at the hotel so, after cleaning up, we walked a short distance toward the main drag to a combination Chinese restaurant-hotel located on the north corner. The eating area was open sided and well patronized, portending good food. We selected a table that afforded us through the open doors a view of the street and the Saturday night activity. The streets were not particularly crowded, but the Lao adaptation of a samlor passed in review, as did young sarong-dressed girls pedaling bicycles to display their charms for a future mate. There were few if any motorized vehicles at that time of evening. I forget what I ate, but it was most likely noodle soup, reputed to be the finest in all Laos.

The Jeep driver retrieved us early the following morning. On the airport side of the river, we stopped at a Vietnamese bakery where fresh-baked mini-loaves of French bread were sold.

They were popular with the locals and one had to arrive early to ensure a purchase. These were perfect for lunch, for one could split the pistolette, smear on canned meat, and call it a sandwich. The shop also sold four-ounce citrus drinks canned in Japan. I purchased one to stimulate my vital juices. The old standby drink, hot Ovaltine, laced with liberal amounts of condensed milk, was also available.

The driver knew where Perry lived, so I asked him to drive past the house in the hope that he was awake and might have a mission planned for us. The house was set back in a very large yard surrounded by a wooden fence. By luck, Flynn, sans his cowboy outfit, was outside playing with his children. He did not have a mission for us, but indicated that he would on Monday.

While Rick completed his maintenance duties on Hotel-33, I flopped on a chair in the breezeway between the radio room and the radio operator's quarters observing the parking ramp and anticipating a mission to alleviate the boredom. Although warm and humid, the heat of the April day still had not risen to the discomfort level that would chase me inside. When it did, I found that the two Chinese men who monitored the radio twenty-four hours, possessed a refrigerator loaded with quart bottles of cold water. The men were very cordial, caring-sharing individuals who called me Captain. While not sleeping, one man had to contend with housekeeping duties and tend to the thirsty generator. They weakly complained that their allotments were not large and most everything had to be scrounged to maintain a semblance of a lifestyle and the operation. It looked like they did a good job, and I particularly enjoyed watching one twirl the psychrometer to obtain a dew point reading.

Some FAR officers arrived at mid-morning wanting to ship goods and people to Saravane. I welcomed the two-hour round trip

as a relief from boredom. It would provide "safe" flight time over flat terrain and allow me to enjoy relatively cool air at altitude. I returned to Pakse with a few passengers anticipating another trip to L-44. However, no one was visible at the parking ramp. When I asked the radio operator to call the fuel depot, no one answered the phone. A simple glance at my watch revealed that it was noon, and of course the French-inspired siesta time gladly adopted by the Asians. This period normally spanned a major portion of two hours, but as it was Sunday, anyone returning to the airfield to work would mark an unknown quantity. Since the war work ceased, to keep sweating to a minimum, I went inside the air-conditioned radio room and enjoyed a cool one on the radio operator--a glass of water.

Mid-afternoon some soldiers began gathering at Hotel-33's cabin door. The second trippers had finally arrived, so we cranked up, taxied out of the dust, and launched north. By the time we returned everyone on the ramp had disappeared again, but a phone call resulted in a timely appearance of the fuel truck driver. Before we departed for town, Perry called to confirm that he had a full day's work scheduled the following day.

Pakse town inhabitants' lifestyle was very leisurely, and a Westerner was obligated to patiently wait for almost everything. Screaming, shouting, or showing disfavor or impatience never helped any situation in Asia. Such a display only tended to aggravate the circumstance and caused the turtles to move even slower. Eventually our Jeep driver arrived. We rechecked into the Chinese hotel, and again made the trek to the two-story corner Chinese restaurant for supper. I was famished. After consuming a cold beer, I wolfed down a considerable amount of surprisingly delicious food. I deferred to Rick's judgment and he made excellent selections that included pork, fried rice, and

an Oriental dish like noodle soup that was a staple for Westerners. Theoretically, it was well cooked, served piping hot, and considered safe to eat. More comfortable with my surroundings, I noted a wooden staircase along the wall that led to rooms, little more than cribs, on the floor above us. While we ate, giggling men and women constantly beat a track up and down the stairs. I asked Rick about this and he indicated that while not actually classified a whorehouse, the hotel's upstairs section was employed for short-time liaisons.

Customer Perry was as good as his word, arriving at the airport at a reasonable time. After exchanging pleasantries, he explained that I would be shuttling troops to a forward position on the Bolovens, where a FAR operation was about to commence. Possibly chastened by Charlie Davis's recent incident, and aware of my long absence since working the area, he joined me in the cockpit for a trip up the Plateau road and farther east to Houei Kong at road's end. Strangled by thick jungle on each side, at a junction the macadam road turned north continuing to Paksong (Lima-05), the only large town in the area. Just east past a small extinct volcano where rich soil supported a coffee plantation, the hard-topped road turned into a dirt trail barely visible from the air.

At the Lima-56 airstrip, Perry consulted with missionary John Davis regarding the current area situation. John and his growing family no longer lived in the bare-bones thatched structure along the runway. By 1965, the villagers had fully accepted the growing Davis family and built them a two-story house in their village.

John was away a lot, still pushing his motorcycle far into the jungle to remote villages where he conducted work with lepers. He was well respected by local Agency personnel for his



Extinct volcano protruding from the Bolovens Plateau along the road to Ban Houei Kong.

Author Collection.

vast knowledge of the area and current attitudes of Plateau tribal groups. Although the minister had put on some weight since I last saw him, he appeared robust and was still affable. However, his blond wife, whom I previously judged one of the prettiest women on the planet, had changed considerably, ravaged by either sickness, childbirth, or the drudgery of her nursing duties. She was still comely, but nothing like I had recalled. Brian O'Connor was also present. Ostensibly still working as an IVS volunteer, Brian had first spent time at Sam Tong with Blaine Jensen during 1963-1964 building a school and teacher's quarters until Pop split them up. Then, moving south until mid-1965, he was in the process of changing organization affiliations, and lived a couple of hundred yards from the Davis family. He did not have much contact with them, but had journeyed into the hinterland once with John to visit leper villages. His casual work with former Kha marquis and input in the area was also deemed valuable. ²⁴

What I did not know at the time was that to counter enemy infiltration on the extensive LOCs using raids and trail watchers, there was renewed interest at General Westmoreland's MACV headquarters in reviving the twelve Lao Theung (Kha) guerrilla companies Colonel "Bull" Simons White Star Special Forces teams had formed in 1962 specifically for Bolovens clearing activity. If reconstituted, it was allegedly a core unit that would represent a cadre to recruit many additional ethnic types. A joint MACV-Studies and Observations Group (SOG, established January 1964) led by Kha militia, was proposed to

²⁴ Brian O'Connor Emails, 04/05/97, 12/05/97.
Blaine Jensen Letter.

implement varied operations east of the Bolovens. Ambassador Sullivan, wanting to avoid visible U.S. forces in Laos was not keen on the idea of a new military organization meddling in Laos, but CIA-sponsored operations on the Plateau eventually went forward to represent a substantial special guerrilla force (SGU) in the south.

Further explaining his position, Sullivan wrote to State regarding cross border operations. He agreed to ARVN assets operating in three zones and adhering to their SOPs. U.S. advisors were allowed in the two southern zones providing they only penetrated the border twenty kilometers and remained in the areas no longer than ten days. There were to be no paratroop drops, insertions by helicopter, or small aircraft used. Since Route-9 was highly sensitive, well-guarded by the enemy, and the chance of capture great, he would not allow U.S. advisors to work there.

The ambassador took a dim view of the U.S. using what he considered "stone age" Kha tribals to interdict the trail system. The hilly areas of the Panhandle accessible from the Bolovens were sparsely populated by perhaps 15,000 people. Still hunting with crude crossbows, the people were very primitive. Firearms originally provided by White Star were turned in and collected by the FAR in 1962 because the Lao government did not consider it safe to have such people armed. Instead, Sullivan believed that scouting, sabotage, and interdiction could be effected by South Vietnamese counterinsurgency assets in

southern Panhandle areas. ²⁵

The ambassador believed that Agency assets already operating and expanding in the Panhandle were the most promising method of intelligence gathering. Road watch teams were becoming more efficient in reporting, and they relayed that the enemy had developed a shuttle system between fixed supply points to foil air interdiction. On 22 April road watch teams reported sixty-five trucks moving north, twenty-nine miles south, and on the 23rd, eleven moving north and twenty miles south.

Finally, to gain additional information regarding Agency Panhandle operations, Sullivan recommended that SOG representatives visit the Udorn 333 headquarters for orientation and detailed briefings. ²⁶

Flynn showed me where to land a few miles east of Houei Kong near the Plateau's rim. Then, after I shuttled a few tribals to the landing zone, we returned to Pakse for another load of FAR soldiers. Since the operation was conducted in a fluid area containing mixed FAR and tribal units, while I still had his attention, I asked him to provide Decosta with a defensive weapon for use to suppress unanticipated, but always possible, ground fire. Some Filipino Flight Mechanics carried personal weapons upcountry, but others with families, fearing Company repercussion and termination, chose not to pack. There

²⁵ This, plus the signing of the Geneva Accords of 1962, was the reason the Kha program was abandoned. However, this action occurred before Sullivan's tenure, and he was probably unaware that many weapons had been secretly preserved, packed, and deposited in numerous caches around Saravane.

²⁶ Ken Conboy, 143.
William Sullivan to State, 04/23/65.
Jacob Van Staaveren, 61.

was also the aspect of negative enemy reaction should the crew be captured with weapons. Rick was one of these, and I had to respect his decision. However, he was not loath to employ and use a Customer-provided weapon.

I suppose I passed Perry's muster requirements, or he, like Bill Young and other Customers, disliked flying in helicopters, for he elected to remain on the ground for the remainder of the operation. After a second shuttle, Flynn returned with an M-2 carbine. I knew the M-1 rifle well, as it constituted one of my table of organization (TO) weapons during Marine AOC training at Quantico. I had fired the weapon on the range at Quantico in the middle of a harsh winter, and was highly impressed with its accuracy, striking power, and ability to function in very cold weather. However, I had never handled an M-2 carbine. Manufactured during World War Two, more suited for an H-34 cockpit, this weapon was lighter and shorter than the M-1, and it fired a smaller .30 caliber round of lesser range and striking power. To compensate for this deficiency, the M-2 had a fire selector switch that enabled the shooter to quickly switch from single shot to fully automatic fire. I would have preferred a trusty BAR and a host of packed magazines for crowd control, but this formidable weapon was not readily available to Woodchuck.

After another trip, although apprised that the lift was not complete, there were no more troops available to move that day. I could only surmise that the reluctant warriors were sick, lame, or lazy. Fortunately, a trip was scheduled to Ban Saphat, thirty-five nautical miles north of Pakse. Site-175 was located on the north side of the Se Don on a spur road leading from Route-13 to Saravane. Saphat was another FAR hard point situated on flat lands that formed an east-west defense line between

Pakse and mountainous foothills. Beyond this point lay bad guy territory in the expansive Toumlan Valley and additional denied area stretching many miles to the border.

On Tuesday, I completed the Bolovens lift and was assigned to work at Savannakhet. There could have been a couple of reasons for this move to Lima-39. Perry and the FAR could have exhausted their mission requirements, the Savannakhet and Pakse Customers shared a machine, or, more likely, "the powers that be" wanted an H-34 and crew closer to the eastern interdiction area to provide SAR coverage for ongoing air strikes. Whatever the reason, the round trip back to Lima-11 consumed a lot of ferry time.

Following a local trip the next day, and since the helicopter was almost timed out, I was instructed to return to Udorn (RTB). I informed Perry and asked him if I might retain the carbine for use upcountry. He was well aware of our hairy SAR commitments and did not show much objection so, after admonishing me to forget where I had obtained the rifle, the carbine became part of my personal arsenal, and one I retained during my remaining Southeast Asia tenure.

The RON had been fruitful, interesting, and above all, restful. In addition to flying over thirty hours, the work had not been especially taxing, the machine virtually maintenance trouble free, and one actually a pleasure to fly. Furthermore, Flynn Perry represented a most genial Customer who had "lent" me a weapon. Lastly, the Pakse countryside was pleasurable to scan from the air, especially the lush rolling hills of the Plateau where rivers and waterfalls abounded. I looked forward to another trip to Pakse in the future, one which tended to break up the incessant grind in stressful Military Region Two.

After parking, securing, and entering time and gripes in H-33's logbook, I learned that I was not finished flying. Abadie and Rudy Serafico were in the final testing stage of Hotel-27, so I was tapped to satisfy the Company-mandated six-month proficiency requirement, something that had slipped lately because of excessive requirements for ships and crews upcountry. While Wayne was still on leave, Ab conducted many training and test functions along with Burke and Kanach's assistance when they were not flying the line. From previous flights, Abadie knew how I flew, so working around jet departures and arrivals, the standard maneuvers and power recovery autorotations around the taxiway and grass median were perfunctory. At this juncture, we had little time or patience for harassment or undue criticism.

After flying ninety-four hours in the first two weeks of April, I spent the next few days resting and reflecting on the current situation until Operations took advantage of my presence to schedule night flying with Ed Reid on the 15th. With USAF planes launching and recovering from some of the first night missions over North Vietnam, even under positive radar and tower control, we had to be very careful while working around the airfield.

I read and reread the few letters of commendation received for SAR participation, while attempting to resolve their true meaning and intent. Reflecting on what others quietly and privately whispered in the bar, I was a little cynical about having to journey into the mouth of death to rescue military pilots, which I felt should have had their own organization to handle the job. Confused as to actual Company motives, I believed the Company received compensation for our rescue efforts, but did not allocate any of it to us. It smacked of a

situation akin to the original flap over project pay when Tom Moher discovered a provision for it in the Madriver contract.²⁷

Four additional military UH-34D helicopters were programmed for delivery to Air America. Even though additional aircraft would require more pilots, most of us believed that this was a good omen and would reflect excellent paychecks for the foreseeable future.

I was still searching for a refrigerator, but discovered that such appliances were quite expensive items in Udorn town, mainly because of an outrageous import tax that added a hundred percent to the retail export price. In lieu of this, I was attempting to acquire one through my Filipino friend at the Army post exchange.

Normally, depending on the number of days in a month, we were allotted six or seven continuous days off the flight schedule. Called STO (scheduled time off) the rest period was almost sacrosanct until the pressure of high demand flying entered the picture and STO scheduling became a problem. To make the trip around the CAT system, I requested back-to-back STOs encompassing the end of April and beginning of May.

On Monday, I was assigned field standby to test Hotel-33, when and if the ship exited maintenance. Major components had been changed and it took two days and between two and three flight hours and many more on the scorching ramp to produce an acceptable machine. I could tell by the dark looks and hard questions from maintenance personnel that they were not happy

²⁷ Although I suspect that there were "Catch-22" provisions in the Madriver contract tailored to cover special situations like SARs, we had no access to the document. If this was the case, it was never revealed to the man in the field.

with my refusal to release Hotel-33, but I was not going to pass a bad ship on to another pilot. In a similar case, I sincerely hoped a peer would do the same.

COUP AFTERMATH

Dissatisfaction with results of the failed February coup still plagued some in the FAR army, and yet another anti-Kouprasith and Vientiane revolt erupted in Paksane. A few days previously, in an apparent mutiny against the FAR General Staff, Colonel Kham Sao appeared in the forests and jungle to join Major Karbkeo and elements of old BV-22. Along with several hundred loyal officers and men they moved north from Paksane. Like Spartacus in his conflict against Roman legions, Kham Sao and Karbkeo's forces gathered strength, eventually outnumbering local troops massed in an area around Moung Houn, and Mong Do north and northwest of Borikhane. For a time, the situation appeared potentially serious, one calculated to test the mettle of the General Staff's political acumen and tactical ability. GM-17 was flown down from Vientiane to address the matter. When pressured, many rebels surrendered; those who did not were dealt with harshly. Kham Sao escaped, but Karbkeo was executed. ²⁸

Lou McCasland spent five days working Paksane during the revolt, and after measures were taken to quell the uprising. As GM-17 troops arrived at the airfield by Air America fixed wing, he moved them north to Tha Thom. He also supported action near Nam Kadin twenty miles east of Paksane and north of Route-13. After logging almost fifty hours, to effect an engine intake

²⁸ Ken Conboy, 125.
William Sullivan to State, 04/19/65.

filter change and repair other problems, McCasland returned the machine to Udorn late on the afternoon of 20 April. I was still testing Hotel-33 and took the opportunity to talk to Lou on the ramp. He filled me in on what he knew regarding the latest situation around Paksane and the problems between various FAR factions.

Since abandoning plans to have a house built, because of Thai chicanery, Lou and Joan had been searching for a larger residence. The opportunity recently arose when Caribou pilot Bob LaTurner, who rented a two-story house across the dirt road from Chet's compound, was transferred back to Vientiane. Pending agreements with the LaTurners and the landlord, it looked like a rental deal could be finalized by month's end.

We also made plans to resume our tennis games at the Royal Thai Army court the next time we were off the schedule together. Since we had been working so much, our game had suffered from inaction. Except for the helicopter "massage," there was little time for serious exercise, something we both recognized would benefit our tortured bodies and help relieve the stress and strain of combat flying.

CONFLICT

Before departing for the house, the nightly flight schedule revealed that I would be replacing Lou McCasland at Paksane the following morning. I would be RONing in the same helicopter. Scratch, who was temporarily working in the CPH office filling in for the vacationing Knight, indicated that I would likely be searching for Colonel Kham Sao. I had found myself in this position before, and insisted that I was definitely not going to fly troops into the bush to search for and help capture and perhaps kill a man I greatly admired. Scratch paused for a

moment, and then profoundly stated in his casual manner that I should merely perform my job and not let politics cloud my judgment. It was good advice from another man I respected, but to live with myself, I had **my** values to uphold. From an early age, superego and Christian values, along with God and Country, had been drilled into me by a very strict Father, and the Cub, and Boy Scout organizations. There was no way I could or would ever change my views at this stage of my life.

Hotel-27 was scheduled for a test and go on the 21st. Some perfunctory maintenance had been performed overnight. The machine was far from perfect, but nearly acceptable. One item that troubled me more than others, the throttle seemed slightly out of rig. I wondered if Lou had flown with and reported this problem. Sometimes this mechanical glitch required several hours to repair, for cowls had to be removed above the cockpit, and rigging pins installed in the hydraulic servo section. Above all, someone who knew exactly what he was doing was essential to perform the work. The procedure was aptly described in the shop maintenance manual, but Forney's methods of going by the book were still far from being accepted, standardized, and fully implemented by all employees.

There was a great deal of pressure from the Customer to stage an H-34 and crew at Paksane to provide daily SAR coverage and, because of contractual requirements, there was generally hell to pay if this function was not fulfilled. Therefore, I consulted Scratch regarding Hotel-27's deficiencies. Stressing the importance of positioning the machine to the field, he proposed that if I took Hotel-27 to Paksane, after flying all day and the machine was still not right, I could return that night for repairs. Hindsight dictated that I should have gotten this RTB offer in writing. Scratch could be quite persuasive,

and likely believed that if I took the aircraft into the field, I would remain there. Believing I could safely handle throttle manipulation in the lowlands, and understanding that I had the option to RTB, I took the bait and launched with Johnny Sibal.

It was a long day shuttling troops north to Borikhane, Tha Thom, and other landing zones, and I managed to avoid busting my fanny or searching for Kham Sao. However, the throttle problem did not improve, and my Flight Mechanic was not equipped to fix it so, despite being well into overtime, I RTB.

I approached the Club anticipating a little liquid refreshment and a nutritious supper, when Abadie intercepted me and in his typically imperious manner demanded to know why I had returned from the field. Obviously, he had not read my log book write ups. In addition, since Kanach, after standing the early watch, had long since departed the facility, he was probably unaware of the verbal agreement I had struck with Scratch. I patiently attempted to explain what transpired during the day, but as during previous unsatisfactory encounters with Abadie, like the Banny flap and firecracker incident, he appeared unconvinced and noncommittal. It was not a good time to challenge my knowledge and feel for the H-34, for I was tired, irritated, and generally "spring loaded to the pissed off position." Therefore, as the third degree continued and tended to mount, I became quite angry. Exasperated by his superior and always sarcastic attitude, I suggested that if he doubted what I described, then he should fly the machine himself. He indicated that he would, and stormed off toward the flight line. After several years of working together in the same organization, we were still not on the same wave length. His demeanor implied that I had better be right in my assessment of the aircraft. Butting heads with such a critical and intimidating boss worried

me a little but, confident I was right, I took solace in the fact that management could ill afford to lose any of us over a minor disagreement at this time.

As I ascended the steps toward the dining room door my anger continued to increase. This was my third confrontation with Abadie in which he challenged my veracity. Although he did not actually call me a liar on this particular occasion, by his actions, it was certainly implied. Accusation of lying was a catalyst to executing a vow I previously made to myself that if he ever used such a derogatory term again, I would have to take physical action which could result in serious injury or death blows to one or both of us.

I was perplexed by Abadie's negative attitudes about what pilots said about returned H-34s. I also wondered if his skepticism and harassment were an attempt to side with and placate Forney, who obviously had Taipei's ear and blessing in finding ways to field helicopters. Since ceasing line pilot responsibilities, Abadie had never really been a friend of the line pilot, and even though Scratch maintained that he was firm but fair, I was still not sure, and reserved my judgment. Management by intimidation did not seem a correct procedure to ensure loyalty and job performance from the rank and file. Now as COO, except for filling in when Wayne and Marius were absent, Ab was normally divorced from our daily problems. He had little appreciation for the line pilot's desire to fly airworthy machines we trusted to take us into enemy territory and back home, especially during hazardous SAR work. His management style was difficult to comprehend, but obviously one with which we had to contend.

Dyspeptic and conflicted, I wolfed down supper. Leaving the Club, intending to go home, I encountered Abadie walking in from

the parking ramp. I inquired about the test flight. Surprisingly, he allowed that I had been exactly right regarding the throttle analysis. He added that there were other unspecified problems requiring additional maintenance attention. There was no apology proffered, for that was not part of the man's style. In actuality, I had probably won the battle, but lost the war with a cranky boss. Relieved, I felt vindicated in my decision to return with the ship, but in retrospect, I never should have left the ramp that day until the throttle problem was rectified. This incident was a good object lesson, one I was not soon likely to repeat.

The following day I walked to Lou and Joan McCasland's house with a dual purpose. I wanted to learn if Lou had experienced a throttle problem while flying Hotel-27, and to play tennis if he was so disposed. Joan was still teaching at the school, but was experiencing problems with dissatisfied mothers and especially the counsel's wife, Maureen Jans, a prickly woman with an especially sharp tongue with whom she had recently had a quarrel. However, this unpleasantness did not prevent the McCaslands from attending a cocktail party hosted by the Jans.

As it was early, I was invited to eat breakfast with the couple. I liked to associate with Joan and Lou, and enjoyed their generous hospitality and friendly natures. In addition, as they entertained a lot with both Air America and U.S. Air Force personnel, I took advantage of my visits to glean reliable information about what was going on in and around the locale.

A victim of SAR stress and increasing health problems, Don Buxton and wife Julie were leaving Air America. There was going to be a going away party for them in the Club bar the next

night. Joining the increasing number of cars on the road, Lou bought Don's Ford Anglia for 1,300 dollars.

At the time that Buxton was processing out at Taipei headquarters, the Southern Air Transport MAC contract was slated to commence, and the traffic division required additional people. Therefore, the personnel office offered Don a job as Assistant Director of the traffic division. He accepted the non-flying billet and remained in Southeast Asia. ²⁹

Continuing the number of retired Marines entering our program, representing new-old blood, Charlie Davis's former New River HMM-262 squadron Commanding Officer, Harold "Swede" Larson, arrived in Udorn. Larson was in his mid-forties, and desk job duties had prevented him from flying other than the required four hours per month to earn flight pay. Therefore, acting in the capacity of a "safety pilot," Charlie had accompanied Larson on local training flights before leaving for Southeast Asia. Davis noted that "Swede" did not appear too serious about regaining proficiency in the H-34, and wanted to flat hat. Charlie expected two other former squadron mates, George Carroll and Tom Hoppe, to soon follow his commanding officer. ³⁰

An APM was scheduled the following evening at 1900 hours. These pilot meetings were never relished by us, as most information divulged was generally negative. It was no different this time. After being told that the U.S Air Force would assume the SAR reins soon with improved helicopters, we were now

²⁹ Joan McCasland April 1965 Diary.
Tom Penniman Email, 03/03/00.

³⁰ Charlie Davis, Phone Call to Author, 03/10/96.

informed that it would be some time before this change would actually take place. In the meantime, we were still relegated to time in the barrel. To compensate for our efforts, plans were in the mill to increase our base pay by a measly 120 dollars per month. Probably calculated to dissuade more pilots from leaving, the sum mentioned appeared paltry, but amounted to something. At least we had Buxton's party to attend afterward, where we could commiserate with each other and speculate on future requirements. As SAR work was becoming increasingly dangerous, I personally wondered when and where it would all end. Long term, the odds were bad for those of us involved, and I wondered who would live and who would be the next to die?

Because of a last-minute commitment, Marius could not travel around the CAT Southeast Asia circuit as we had planned. Not wanting to make the journey by myself, on the 27th I rescheduled an abbreviated trip for 3 May to the Philippines.

I had thought I was finished flying for the month, but when Operations noted that I had cancelled my trip, I was scheduled upcountry with First Officer, Tom Pitkin. There were so many new pilots assigned to Udorn, and with few management types available to train them, it was inevitable that we old timers who were available would share area familiarization duties.³¹

Hotel-31 was not ready, so we did not arrive at Long Tieng until late morning. Tom, a former Marine, was from the West Coast and had gone through flight training at Pensacola during the same time period as Abadie. Trying his best to be friendly, Tom talked incessantly and annoyingly through a bobbing

³¹ Wayne was still on leave and, except for acceptance flights at Udorn, Abadie rarely went upcountry. That left Marius, Scratch, and a few of us to help train the gaggle of newbies.

toothpick about a currently popular musical group called the Beach Boys, of which I had no knowledge, and even less interest. A captive audience, I listened politely, but was unimpressed with the information.

The Sam Tong hostel was not fully operational yet or equipped to accommodate overnight crews, but we could obtain sandwiches there before journeying to Na Khang for the day. A Company-sponsored project, there was no charge for food at first, so we took advantage of the service. Empty fuel drums were no longer returned to Bangkok for cleaning and refilling. It had become too expensive. A new more efficient bladder fuel system was in the process of installation until tankers became available. ³² Targeted to be in service shortly, it would enable hot refueling (without the necessity to shut down), speed the operation, and enhance our daily flight time.

Pop's second at Sam Tong, Tom Ward, had completed his tour in the field, and he had already transferred to USAID Bangkok. Before Tom departed, Vang Pao threw a large party for him at Long Tieng. Several of the AID support staff attended from Vientiane. It must have been a successful party for, like the Ed Reid incident during the Meo marriage dinner, one of the men was discovered the following morning sleeping in a pig sty employing the bellies of two pot belly sows for a pillow. ³³

We spent the entire day at Site-36 and the Phu Pha Thi areas. Working and refueling out of Houei Ma, we supplied the eastern crescent in the mountains across the river. I have

³² Designed specifically for field work, I had used this system in the military.

³³ Blaine Jensen Letter, 03/02/96.

previously described how rough and difficult the landing zones were to access at the time, and I am sure Pitkin's eyes opened wider than normal after some hairy approaches and Abuy's performance in air dropping supplies. It was probably beneficial that he experienced the worst of the worst early, that might preclude a future accident by his seeing and learning from my techniques.

Before leaving for Na Khang and The Alternate for the night, a "red beret" lieutenant passenger requested that I make one more stop at Houei Ma. Since it was getting late, I told him to hurry with his business. There were two reasons: fuel was low and smoke spiraled upward from a grass fire creeping up the forward slope of the ridge. I almost miscalculated. Fingers of flame soon reached the forward crest of the hill and appeared to accelerate toward the helicopter. Concerned about our safety, I considered departing for Site-36. Then, as if reading my mind, the lieutenant returned. By then the blaze nearly tickled the underside of Hotel-31's nose. The incident just added an additional dimension to the many unforeseen hazards Laos presented.

Because I was running away from the pack with high flight time, I was reassigned to Hotel-23, a bird slated to RTB for maintenance. After less than two hours of flying locally, Moon Centeno and I headed for the house. As was their customary practice, the stern-faced duo of Abadie and Forney met the helicopter. Since I did not fly Hotel-23 long enough to really assess problems, they would have to rely on what was contained in the logbook. At this time, Abadie informed me that I was finished flying for April, and because of my high total flight time, probably well into the future. Being finished for the month came as no surprise for, because of my impending trip, I

had pushed to acquire flight time. However, the future had me puzzled, for I had no idea that I had surpassed others in the first few months of the year.

STERGAR

Former U.S. Army Major Frank Stergar arrived in April. Frank represented another old timer, a generation divorced from us young pups. He had experienced the joys of Korea, but was not in the same age category as Jones, Radalinski, and Moreland--perhaps more like "Swede" Larson. During a long acceptance ride with Abadie, Frank believed he did well, greasing many autorotations onto the deck. However, the often reticent Abadie confused and conflicted him. Oddly, there were no briefings or debriefings conducted, and Frank had difficulty determining the man's modus operandi. He had completed the second Army Huey instructor pilot course, and believed Abadie's methods contradicted all he had learned regarding the instructing business. Unimpressed, he considered leaving Udorn on the first available aircraft. However, directly after the flight Ab joined him in the Club and was very amiable and informative, so Frank elected to stay. After that first dubious impression, they got along fine, but Frank normally allowed Abadie to make the first overture, because one never was able to determine the man's current mood. Over time, he believed that Abadie was just an inexperienced young fellow with huge responsibilities, who had matured with time and performed an exceptional job.

Frank had arrived during an especially turbulent period of serious maintenance problems and pilot unrest. During a tour with MAAG China, he was impressed with the Air Asia maintenance facility at Tainan, and the CAT line maintenance in Taipei. Therefore, he was very curious about the Udorn situation, for he

considered it a primary determining factor in a decision to remain with Air America. Frank gained favorable impressions of the Maintenance Department while watching Jack Forney observing the flight line. Forney had the respect and fear of the mechanics, and appeared to know his job well. One day when Weitz was smoking less than fifty feet from a helicopter, he overheard Forney telling Charlie that he fired people when he caught them smoking around the aircraft. He would read all the informative Forney grams in detail and listen to the mechanics talk, and he was aware that the shop had good close supervision.

Frank and I would shortly experience the event of a lifetime. ³⁴

Emulating the "best laid plans of mice and men," on the last day of the month Abadie sent a B-bus driver to the house looking for me to fly a test flight on Hotel-21. I assumed he had canvassed everyone else and I was absolutely the last bull on the Pampas. I had had a few too many beers the previous night and was not in great shape. I reminded him of what he said two days previously, but he just shrugged and said that was the way things were. After reminding me what I had said years before that I would fly anywhere, anytime, and badgering me, I agreed to take the flight.

The long, hot day was accentuated by the time-consuming requirement to ground run a new engine, then track, flight test, and complete the slow flight engine run in. I did not leave the flight line until well after dark. Even then the job was not complete. Another surprise awaited me when the schedule revealed that I was scheduled to test Hotel-21 again the following

³⁴ Frank Stergar Letter Circa 07/96.

morning and launch for Twenty Alternate with Ed Hall as my copilot. That duty and the ensuing RON upcountry effectively ruined my planned trip.

On 29 April, USAF Captain Charles Ervin Shelton was shot down while piloting a RF-101C Voodoo reconnaissance jet close to enemy held Sam Neua Town. Escorted by an armed F-105, he had launched from Udorn at 1100 hours on a special mission in Military Region Two. Charlie was TDY on thirty-day rotations from Kadena USAF base, Okinawa, where his sizable family resided.

Regional foul weather prevented photographing the scheduled target, so Shelton and his wingman elected a secondary target at Sam Neua. About noon, while descending to 3,000 feet AGL and lining up for the first run, Shelton's plane was hammered by intense ground fire. Ascertaining that the plane was on fire, he ejected. His wingman watched the parachute blossom and Charlie safely touch the ground. Then he radioed the pilot's position to Crown and to command headquarters, beginning perhaps the largest joint military-Air America SAR operation to date, encompassing 148 missions and 360 hours. Since Air America statistics were not available to the military, these figures did not include those flown by Air America aircraft.

Rescue aircraft later spotted the Captain on a tree-covered ridgeline. Communicating with him by radio, they indicated that help was on the way. C-123 pilot, Al White, knew Charlie from the service. To assist him with the demanding photo work, Al had previously given Charlie an area orientation of Military Region Two. Shepherding two H-34s, C-123 pilot, Al White, while looking for his friend, dangerously buzzed the Sam Neua grass strip at 300 feet. He claimed spotting Charlie running from a nearby cave

waving a white handkerchief. However, deteriorating weather and impending darkness prevented an H-34 rescue attempt.

Although further rescue attempts were conducted the next day, low clouds and deteriorating weather thwarted progress to extract the aviator. Pathet Lao Radio claimed enemy forces had shot down a jet plane near Sam Neua, but failed to mention the pilot's disposition. ¹

As new people were hired, at times I was assigned to fly with both a new Copilot and inexperienced Flight Mechanics. Gaza Eiler had been hired on 10 April as a Flight Mechanic and was quickly cleared to fly upcountry. Gaza had an interesting history. He had arrived in the States from Hungary as a youngster, after the country's aborted uprising against the Soviet Union. The lanky fellow had grown up in America and seemed to emulate any other citizen. He also lived only a few yards away from me in a Godnoma compound bungalow with his new blond wife, Carolyn.

Short and rotund, the puffy, pasty, pockmarked-faced Ed Hall was certainly not a handsome man. He represented yet another former Army pilot filtering into our helicopter program. We had no input with Operations as to who rode with us upcountry and this could introduce potential problems for the PIC at a time of increased SAR requirements. Therefore, we had to take them by the hand and lead them through the paces. Inexperienced

¹ Charles E. Shelton Biography:
(<http://www.acun.com/dentons/col.htm>).
U.S. Veteran Dispatch Staff Report, September/October, 1994 Issue,
Colonel Charles E. Shelton: "Another Empty Casket Burial."
(<http://www.usvetdsp.com/story41.htm>).
Bill Leary, April 1965 Notes.
William Sullivan to State, 05/01/65.
William Greenhalgh, 166.



A profane Flight Mechanic Gaza Eiler presenting the Hungarian salute.
Author Collection.

aviators placed a burden on us, for they were naive regarding hostile situations, navigating, or how to perform once arriving at a location. Unless other pilots previously knew individuals in the service or their reputation preceded them, we had little knowledge of their ability to perform missions in the mountains or under fire, and we had precious little time to discover this.

I generally employed one criterion to judge a man's mettle: performance under fire or intense stress. Most newbies had never been exposed to ground fire, and presented an unknown quantity as to how they could be vetted during times of extreme pressure. Consequently, if one of us old timers were killed or disabled in combat, there was some doubt if some of the new guys could have saved the aircraft and crew. This was not a pleasant scenario to contemplate, one that normally remained a TBA (to be announced) until an actual hostile encounter.

After further extensive testing, I finally determined Hotel-21 acceptable and airworthy, and we launched for Long Tieng. Loaded with troops and supplies, we headed for Na Khang. From there it was a short distance to the Pha Thi area to link up with Ed Reid. Ed had been previously assigned to the Shelton search and, using abbreviated details, briefed me over the radio. "Brief on Guard" was not the best method for such a high-risk mission, but one our informal group had generally accepted since the advent of SAR duty. It was easy to nickel and dime a briefing, but often precious time was consumed doing this. Therefore, we normally opted to launch first and evaluate a situation first hand. Then it would be easier to judge what action to take. Since the Klusmann SAR, we were well aware that time was the downed aviator's enemy. The longer one spent on the ground in enemy territory, the greater the odds of capture. Apparently, Captain Shelton had been sighted, and Ed had been

attempting to land a Meo guerrilla team at coordinates near the last sighting area. ² However, adverse weather conditions precluded any serious attempt to enter the area. On a more personal note, Reid, who seemed to know everyone who was anyone, had lifted a few cups with Shelton at the base, and was highly motivated to conduct a rescue attempt. At least that is the way it appeared to me.

While Victor Control circled overhead Houei Ma, we launched for Sam Neua. Except for the Navy pilot recovery, I never had an occasion to fly near or into the Site-04 valley, or to know the location of AAA positions. Therefore, I had to rely on Ed's common sense, judgment, and experience gained during the past few days. Still, the time element since the pilot had been shot down made me wary about any success. If he had not been captured or killed by then, certainly the extensive air activity had alerted Pathet Lao military assets.

As senior man, Ed led the mission. Acting as his SAR ship, but recalling the shooting incident flying wing on Red Alston, I generally followed at a respectable distance. It was about twenty-five nautical miles to the target, and Ed planned to intercept and cross Route-6 south of the area, then turn north and head directly into the valley. We did not get far before Victor's PIC radioed that thick clouds were too low in the valley to attempt the mission. In addition, no pilot sightings had been made that day, although weak intermittent beacon signals were received by aircraft aloft. Accordingly, we reversed course and returned to Houei Ma to refuel and wait. We made one final attempt late in the afternoon, aborted again for

² These teams were normally composed of hardy, courageous men who knew the area well and often had relatives living nearby in the hills.

weather, and then, after receiving a radio call from Vientiane with RON instructions, landed at Site-85.

Our PARU buddy Lipo invited us to spend the night in the PARU hut, and this time Ed and I took advantage of his gracious invitation. Lipo was at his best as host. Rice, weeds, and Japanese beer were served on the typical porcelain covered metal plates. Famished, I consumed everything and was happy to obtain something to eat. A large split bamboo pallet provided an elevated place to sleep. Static from the radio operating twenty-four hours to intercept enemy transmissions, and speculation about the next day's activity, kept me awake for a time, but I eventually drifted off to sleep. Suddenly, I awoke to the rapid patter of little feet, as large, black rats scurried along the long rafters. Fully dressed, I had my trusty Ruger strapped to my chest and wanted to blast them in the worst way, but elected to abstain because of the panic that might ensue. Instead, I rolled over and attempted to return to sleep, amid the booms of numerous thunderstorms reverberating off surrounding rocks, and thousands of feet down sheer cliffs into the river valley floor. Sleep eventually returned, amid dreams of shooting rats.

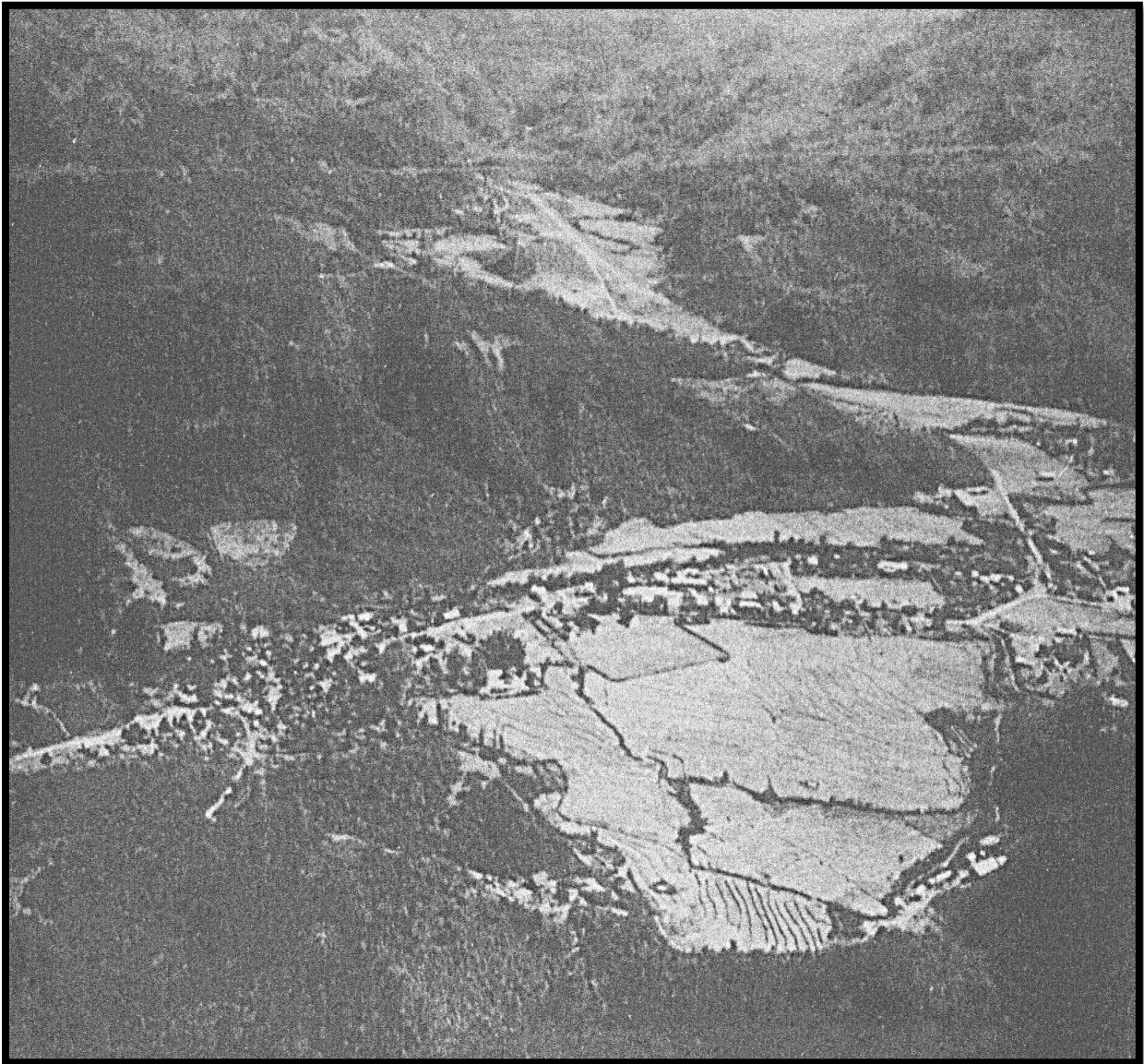
On Sunday we waited impatiently at LS-85 until word was passed to Lipo's people from Victor Control to launch. Signals on the 243.0 kilocycle frequency emanating from the emergency beacon had again been received from the downed area. However, we did not go far. Like the previous day, a low overcast covering hills and valleys, and fog, prevented visual contact with the ground and entry into the valley. While Victor Control and Air Force planes loitered in the area, we recovered at Houei Ma to refuel and standby until further notice.

By mid-afternoon, the low cloud layer lifted a little over the target area, and we were advised to attempt a team

insertion. T-28 Alpha pilots had already launched from Wattay Airport and we were supposed to join up prior to reaching the Sam Neua Valley entrance. However, we knew from experience that their endurance and time on station was minimal, so Ed elected to proceed with the mission and tentatively join up in the valley. As planned, we flew directly east, skirting the now unfriendly site at Hong Non. We crossed over Route-6, but I never saw the ill-defined artery amid the tangled forest.

After intercepting a long, wide rice-paddy valley, we turned north into a narrower valley leading toward the mouth of the open Sam Neua area. Visibility was good underneath the stratus cloud cover, but to enter the area we were forced down low, well within small arms range. At this point, the plan was revealed as somewhat flawed, for even though flying in the middle of the valley, we did not take into account how close our flight path paralleled Route-6. While I nervously scanned higher terrain to my left, a heavy volley of multiple red tracers erupted from the hillside. ³ By design, I flew in a loose trail formation and the projectiles passed between both helicopters. Since enemy leaders were not stupid and had noted several attempts to rescue the downed pilot over the past few days, gunners patiently waited for us to reappear. As if they had been tracking us, and their commanding officer ordered, "Ready, aim, fire", everyone shot at once. I do not know exactly what was being fired, but it was likely a combination of vehicle-mounted machine guns and automatic AK-47 rifle fire. To mask my aircraft and avoid further fire, I quickly darted into the overcast and

³ Approximately every fourth or fifth bullet in a strip is a tracer marking round, so one can only imagine the abundance of fire directed at us.



Encroached upon by surrounding mountains, Sam Neua area and airstrip in northern Military Region Two. Capital of Houa Phan Province, the Pathet Lao stronghold was located in one of the upland valleys in the northern portion of the eastern mountain and plateau region of Laos. The town served as headquarters of the Lao People's Party for most of the war years. Route-6 wound generally northeast-southwest through the Sam Neua area. From terrain to the left, Reid and the Author were fired upon entering and exiting the valley, searching for information about Charles Shelton.

Author Collection.

broke radio silence to apprise Ed of what had just occurred. In a nonchalant voice, he claimed that he never saw the discharge. Such was Ed's blasé attitude regarding most situations, always seemingly unconcerned. At any rate, from that point on, I was highly sensitized to the dangers involved in the mission.

About the time I heard Alphas pilots talking, I began taking 12.7mm fire from a prominent pinnacle to my right. I recognized Jim Rhyne's comforting voice over the air, so I asked him to direct a couple of rockets at the suspected place. I was elated, and proud of Jim when he placed his missiles exactly on the position. It was payback time for the good guys. During the heat of battle, one rarely knew the results of the immediate action, but I took solace that particular gun never fired at me again. I thanked Jim for his good work and continued toward the main valley.

However, during the short period I had evaded ground fire and acted as a forward observer during the strike on the 12.7mm position, Ed had continued into the valley and I lost all visual, but not radio contact. Since I did not know exactly where he was, and there had been no further radio signals or contact with the downed pilot, I elected to commence my own search. While orbiting the high mountains bordering and overlooking the southern portion of the valley, I observed a distinctive "T," a white cloth panel lying on a ridgeline. No one was visible on top of the ridge, but I thought I detected a man's head momentarily emerge from the far side of the hill, which then immediately withdrew. A ground signal without positive human sighting and other visual cues indicating a friendly presence was suspicious, but the signal alone could indicate something regarding the pilot. In addition, I recalled Tony's past guidance that in case of problems friendly tribals

lived in the hills surrounding Sam Neua town. Father "B" also had spent considerable time in the area and stated that there were 5,000 Christians living in the province.

After briefing my crew, I decided to chance a landing to investigate. It was probably not the wisest decision in my life, but we were there to rescue an American, and during these periods thoughts of personal safety were usually secondary to the mission. Before departing the cockpit, I told Hall to maintain high RPM and depart immediately if I encountered any trouble. Gaza also covered me with his personal weapon.

My feet had barely touched the ground when a thin, older, brown-skinned man appeared from the downhill side of the ridge. He was naked except for numerous blue tinted religious tattoos on his legs, and a faded red loin cloth covering his privates. I could not determine what ethnic group he represented, only that he did not have the appearance of a Meo. Neither of us was armed and we greeted each other with our hands clasped together at chest level in the customary Asian wai. The man appeared friendly and since he was alone, I felt reasonably secure. Besides, my large helicopter did not seem to intimidate him, so I assumed he had previously seen or had some interaction with one. Just as I began to feel comfortable, two more men hiked to the top of the hill. They were also unarmed and deferred to the obvious leader I was facing.

I attempted to communicate with my new friend in limited Thai-Lao, but instantly recognized this as worthless. Therefore, I decided to begin an abbreviated dialogue in rudimentary sign language and pantomime. Since arriving in Southeast Asia and flying in Laos, I had achieved measurable success using this method of talking. I began by pointing to the sky, shooting an imaginary gun with my finger, and a plane being hit. Then I

gestured toward the valley and cupped my hands like a parachute descending from the sky. I mimicked a person with hands tied behind his back being led off toward caves. The elderly man's face illuminated with understanding. His response was amazing. He nodded indicating that he had seen the plane shot down and in perfect sequence duplicated the pilot parachuting into the valley, being captured, and led away. He probably had a ringside seat, witnessing all the events from this elevated vantage spot. After gaining this information, not wanting to push my luck in the denied area, I shook the old boy's hand and reentered the cockpit.

We had been in the area a considerable period. The T-28 pilots with little time on station had already departed. Victor Control was still orbiting the vicinity, so I relayed the information I had obtained while on the ground. Ed, with whom I never lost radio contact, had just completed dropping his team at an appropriate site on the valley's southern rim and was on the way out. To avoid losing contact, I joined on Ed in a fairly tight formation. With the weather continuing to deteriorate and the day rapidly waning, it was past time to vacate that hostile valley. There was only one way to exit the area, and the course once again took us through the deadly choke point. As expected, the bad guys were waiting for us. In the gathering darkness, enhanced by the dark cloud cover, red pin-points of light flashed from the direction of Route-6. Apparently, my Thai Buddha, suspended from a gold neck chain, worked that day, and neither ship was hit. However, to skew the odds even more in my favor, this time I flew in an echelon left formation close to the overcast while taking advantage of the other H-34 to mask fire from our right side. I am not sure Reid observed the volleys directed at us, for he again took no evasive action or

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made any comments over the radio. Either he was the most courageous guy I had ever flown with, or both cockpit crew members had their heads up and locked.

To ensure a safe landing with his large load, calculating approximately what he required for the mission, Ed had loaded minimum fuel. Now low on fuel, it was imperative that we fly directly to Site-107 or to another friendly site close by without undue delay. Once on top of the extensive cloud layer, Victor Control's PIC forged ahead and fortuitously discovered a hole in the Houei Ma area. By the time we arrived at our destination, Ed was flying on the low-level fuel warning light. We recovered, and discovered only a few drums of fuel left. Our operations had depleted most of the emergency fuel staged for SAR work, and the bad weather had precluded recent resupply drops. ⁴ Since the team insertion phase of the SAR mission had been successfully accomplished, and there would probably be a delay in further developments during their search and movements, I decided to RTB Long Tieng. Ed elected to RON and utilize the last remaining fuel for a possible extraction. If needed, I could return the following morning carrying additional fuel drums.

During the more than an hour trip to The Alternate I had sufficient time to recapitulate the day's events. The mission had been demanding and particularly hairy. I had been shot at numerous times, directed an air strike, and had landed at a site of unknown viability. The ground fire was by far the heaviest I had yet experienced. Even during incidents involving only single shots, I considered being whacked a very personal and

⁴ Fuel stocks at forward sites depended on daily pilot inventory levels relayed to the Vientiane Operations Manager.

frustrating experience, because of the minimum I could do to counter the fire. I could equate this somewhat to what aviators in other wars must have experienced during times of duress. It certainly was quite different from the relatively calm, relaxed period I enjoyed when first flying in the hills of Laos. What really concerned me about this particular mission was the fact that the SAR work seemed to be progressing further north into enemy-controlled territory that contained substantial AAA capability. This was not a good trend. Where would our talents be required next: North Vietnam? That indeed was a grim scenario to contemplate.

While I cleared the hill north of Sam Tong, flew across the bowl, and headed for Skyline Ridge, I felt some kinship for Ed Hall. In a relatively short time, he had received an eyeful regarding our current operations. Furthermore, immeasurably more important, he had taken the combat flying and more-than-normal ground fire completely in stride. He also performed well while I was "conversing" with the tribal leader. His performance was all I could expect from a trip upcountry, while assessing a new man.

After a number of days, on the 3rd, the weather cleared in Sam Neua, but nothing further was seen or heard from Shelton, and the odds of his rescue diminished with each succeeding day. We remained in the Twenty Alternate area working and flying maximum time to eastern sites and those in the Paksane area.

The following day was much the same. No requirement for H-34 SAR duty, but lots of "normal" work.

Then on Wednesday we were sent to Na Khang. Our mission entailed working the area and providing an extraction unit should the Meo team sight Shelton. Except for an occasional call from Victor Control, and hearing some traffic on guard frequency, there was not a lot of coordination involved in the

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operation, and although I nervously anticipated another run into Sam Neua, the call never came. Hundreds of hours and missions had already been expended during the search, and marshalling all the assets necessary for a recovery proved difficult and expensive. Later that day, I learned through Victor that the USAF had called off the military search, and Shelton was officially declared missing in action (MIA).⁵

The Meo team delivered by Reid was still present in the area and continued to obtain information regarding the captain's disposition. While tracking enemy units, they reported observing a captured American being led into a cave in the Sam Neua Valley. With their intelligence mission complete, after several days in the bush, a partial team extraction was mounted on 14 May involving pilots flying Victor Control, two H-34 crews, and six T-28s. Three members of the indigenous team remained near the incarceration site to observe and report on further developments, while the rest withdrew to the extraction zone. As a H-34 pilot hovered and the Flight Mechanic hoisted the men into the cabin, AAA fire impacted the ship. While the helicopter pilot departed the area, directed by Victor, covering Alpha pilots attacked enemy guns. After Keith "KD" Nolan's plane was badly hit, he headed for Na Khang, the only viable strip close enough that might accommodate a T-28 emergency landing. His escort, Jim Rhyne, advised Nolan to land gear up, but he elected

⁵ Although USAF officially canceled further attempts to recover Shelton, the Agency and Air America did not. As long as bombing and military flight personnel losses continued in Laos, this became the norm. During the long air war over Laos there were only two known airmen recoveries-U.S. Navy pilots Chuck Klusmann and Dieter Dengler. However, efforts continued, often at the cost of some very brave tribals.

to ignore this. Because of a malfunctioning engine, "KD" carried higher airspeed than normal during the approach and touchdown. Then, as a result of the speed and minimum braking action afforded on the wet strip, he subsequently hit stumps, careened off the upper end of the runway and flipped upside down. "KD" was a tough individual, and refusing to give up, dug his way out of the cockpit.

Nolan's primary job was flying the Helio Courier. Therefore, I had the opportunity to talk to him several times during refueling periods at Long Tieng. As with most Helio pilots and other STOL drivers who worked in the trenches with us, I really liked the guy. Sometime after his incident in upper Military Region Two, I saw him at Site-20A and cautioned him about being more careful while conducting Alpha missions. As usual, the conversation eventually got around to other pilots and their merits. "KD" had a very high regard for our H-34 pilot group. After hearing this, I told him that I considered myself merely an average pilot. He laughed at the statement and said he did not agree. I left with my chest and ego puffed up.

For some time, Ambassador Sullivan had been highly conflicted over using Alpha pilots for escort work. The political risks were great. However, he could not rely on A-1H Sandy aircraft from the carriers, for they were rarely available for an Udorn alert. They were also utilized in other missions and, even when available, the lag time to target was excessive.

In March, Sullivan requested that Udorn-based USAF Det-6 T-28 pilots be allowed to perform SAR work in Laos. However, this was rejected as not included in the Waterpump training operation and RTG approval was considered doubtful. After Nolan's close encounter with death, Sullivan again requested USAF T-28 pilots be granted permission to fly SAR missions when necessary. The

appeal went forward, and by early June the Thai Supreme Command authorized the move.

Intelligence gleaned by members of the Meo team revealed that Shelton was captured on or about the second morning after ejecting from his crippled Voodoo. Constantly moved from cave to cave, he was believed first held four miles east of Sam Neua Town. Then he was shuttled to Xieng Su, eight miles east-southeast, and later to Nam Ku, eight miles east. These locations were in the vicinity of Ban Nakay Teu and Ban Nakay Neua, sites of the Pathet Lao military high command.

The next day an Air America armada returned to the valley to retrieve the remaining three team members. The men never arrived at the designated landing zone, and all efforts to contact the team ended in failure. Because of the extreme danger involved, further missions were scrubbed. However, other teams continued to observe, search, and report on enemy area movements. Additionally, the unsung tribal heroes continued to provide information on POWs and attempt rescues of captured pilots throughout the entire war. Unfortunately, an escape and evasion net for downed pilots like the successful one employed in France during World War Two was never developed during the Southeast Asian war.

Reports regarding Shelton's capture and disposition surfaced for a long time. He was never repatriated. A Pathet Lao source, stationed in Houa Phan Province until June 1965, claimed that he observed an American pilot on 29 April shortly after his capture by the Pathet Lao. As noted in the man's diary, the pilot was wearing a coverall-type flight suit and a helmet with a hose attached.

Another source indicated that an American pilot was captured by enemy troops on the third day of a bombing attack in

an area approximately one kilometer north of the Pathet Lao Supreme Command Headquarters cave located at Ban Na Kay Teu. Ten jets circled the area where the pilot landed, while a helicopter attempted to rescue him. The pilot was over sixty-eight inches tall, medium build, and clean shaven. He had a long face and short, light-colored hair. He was taken to headquarters and then to an unknown location for interrogation conducted by a Lao who used a foreign student as an interpreter. Afterward, the pilot was detained at an unknown location.

Following April air raids in the Sam Neua area, PL leaders moved the command post to Tham Sadet cave, fifteen kilometers east southeast of Sam Neua town. By August, Prince Souphannouvong, Kaysone Phomvihan, and Generals Khantay Siphandone and Sithon Komnuoan were residents. Three Chinese and fifteen North Vietnamese officers and advisors were also in the cave.

During early August, an enemy truck driver reported seeing four American pilots bathing in a stream near the Sadet cave. The unfettered pilots, wearing Pathet Lao style uniforms, appeared to be in fair condition. Guards informed him the men were fed twice a day and provided the identical treatment as other prisoners. The source did not observe or obtain further

information after 6 August 65. ⁶

LATE RECOVERY

Thinking we were off the hook, I breathed a little easier, but toward late afternoon an urgent radio request arrived from the Vientiane Operations Manager for me to fly to a remote region in upper Luang Prabang Province near the border and historic Dien Bien Phu Valley. Apparently, one of our STOL aircraft had crashed, or was disabled at a northern site, and I was charged with retrieving the pilot. While Eiler and an indigenous ground crew attended to fueling, I formed a semblance of a plan. The area in question covered portions of three sectional 1:250,000 charts. This was academic, for I did not possess sufficient maps covering the region to plot an accurate course. Nevertheless, I estimated the trip well over a hundred miles away, and more than an hour flight from Site-36. To forestall landing in an unfamiliar area should a maintenance problem arise, I would have normally opted to fly a "safer" course toward Luang Prabang, and then turned north. However, because of the lateness of the hour and a desire to complete the

⁶ Earl Tilford, *USAF in Southeast Asia: Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961-1975* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1992) 68.

William Leary 1965 Notes, UTD.

William Sullivan to State, 05/15/65.

Victor Anthony, 166; CIA Archives, Pathet Lao account of his witnessing the capture of two Downed American Pilots, 12/13/65, (foia.ucia.gov/scripts/cgiserv).

Sighting of Two U.S. Pilots Captured by Pathet Lao in Sam Neua Province, 12/04/71, (foia/ucia.govb/scripts/cgiserv).

From the same Internet Site, CIA Intelligence Cable 01/31/66 Regarding a 08/06/65 Pathet Lao Account of Seeing American Pilots in Captivity in Houa Phan Province.

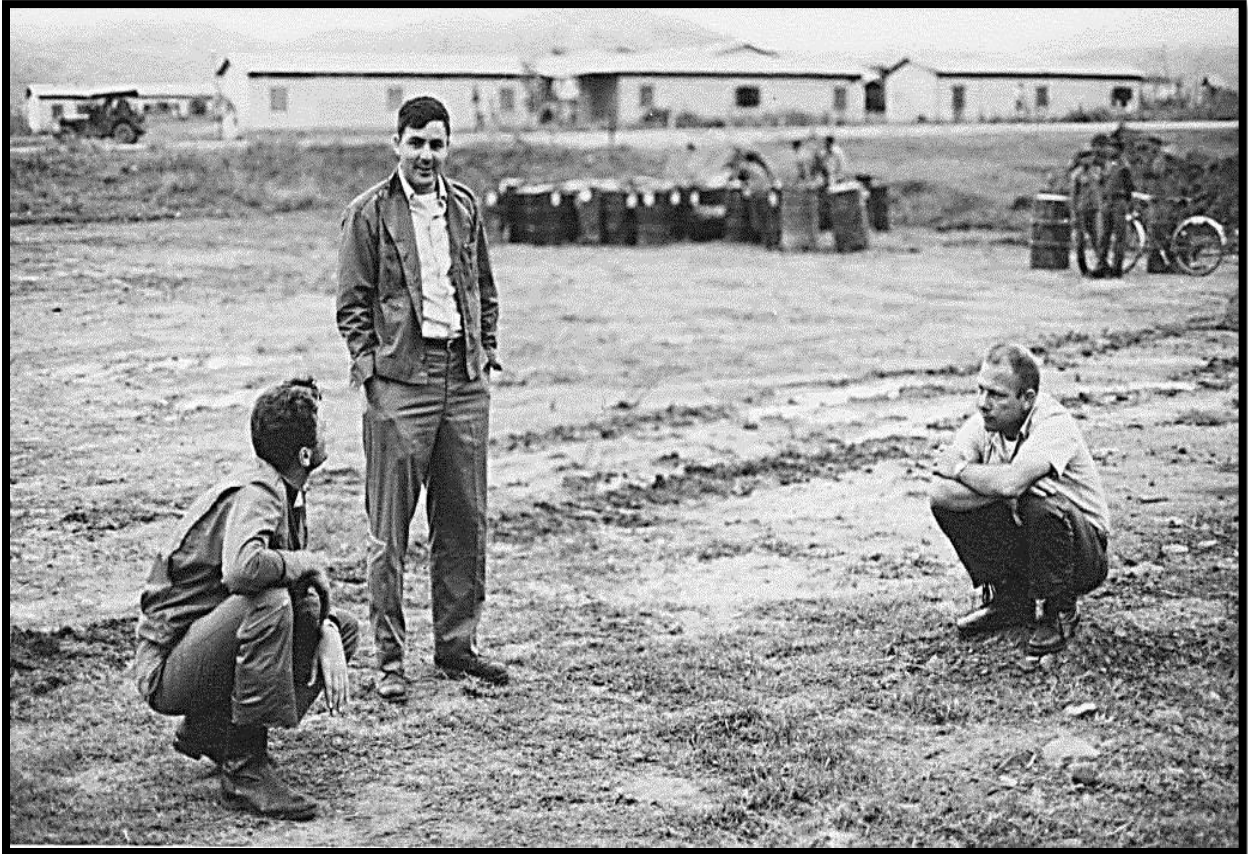
mission prior to dark, I had no other option than to launch northwest in a general direction over territory which I had never flown. Fortunately, a big bird pilot who had recently talked to the pilot on the ground provided a more refined heading to the site and agreed to loiter and remain in contact with me as long as possible. This knowledge somewhat buoyed my spirits, which were seriously flagging because of all the unusual and demanding requests over the past few days. One had to agree, there was rarely a dull moment working in the Lao patch these days. After an hour, but still some distance from the site, despite my altitude, I lost contact with my mentor aircraft. A feeling of loneliness pervaded the cockpit, and I was glad Hall was present, if only for his company.

Then just when I began considering a turn toward Luang Prabang, a familiar voice boomed loud and clear over guard frequency. It was Captain Dick Crafts, a former helicopter pilot and fellow Marine, who had transitioned to the Helio Courier. Dick was also a member of the elite T-28 Alpha program. When within range, Dick provided me a UHF steer, and I soon spotted the red slash of a recently built dirt strip in the distance. A smiling Crafts quickly hopped into the cabin section and informed me that he had damaged a tail section and wheel assembly on the uneven, rutted strip during landing. This was a common occurrence with pilots who flew the plane. Nam Houn (LS-243), a Meo site located deep inside Phong Saly Province, was in an area mostly controlled by the enemy.

With over an hour's flight time south to Luang Prabang, we climbed to and cruised at 8,000 feet, touching down after dark. Then, closing out with the Chinese radio operator, and with just over eleven hours in the logbook, I secured. We caught a Jeep ride into town, where we stayed at the government Bungalow. I

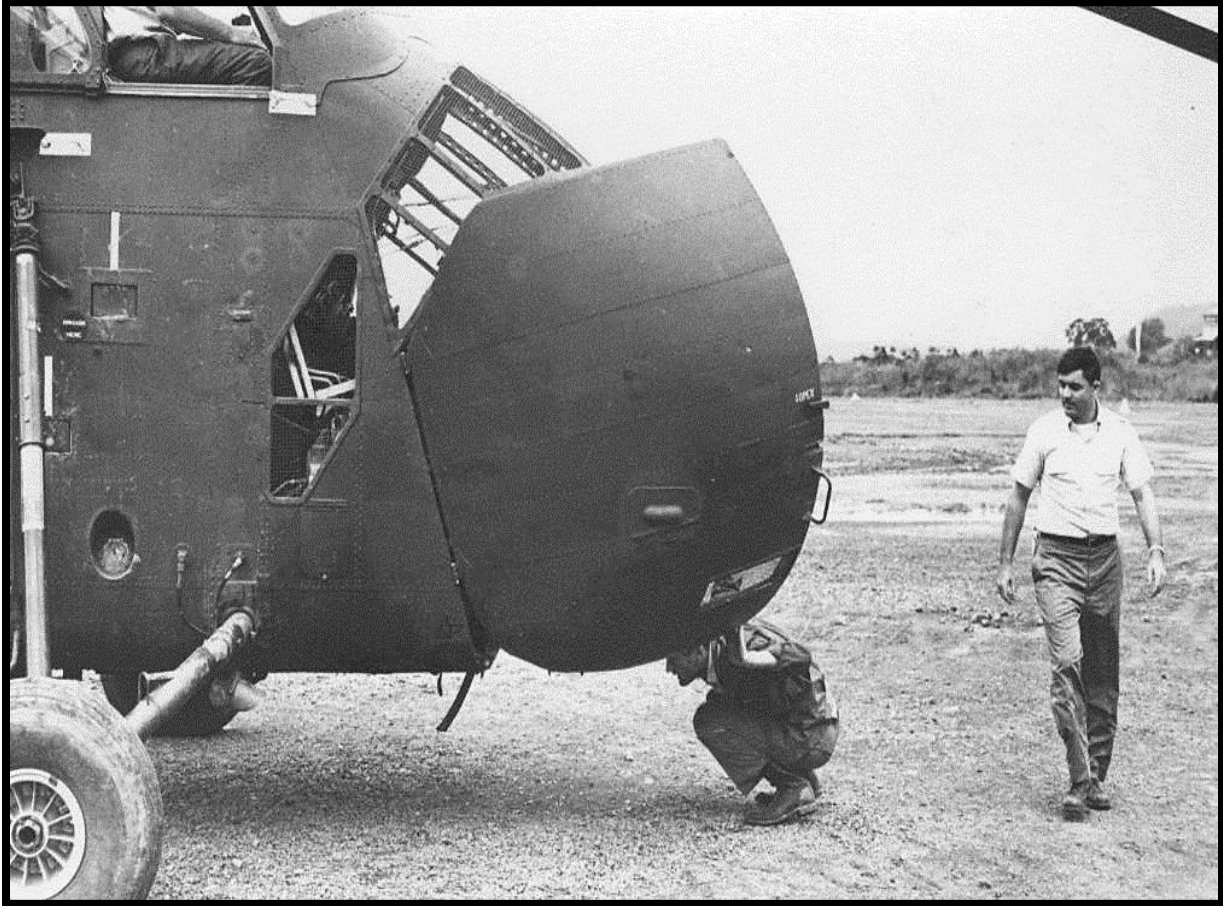
was whipped, but managed to wolf down the standard fare of steak and fries. I followed this with a somewhat peaceful night's sleep. That was almost a luxury after the night at Site-85, and others at the Blue House. At least there were no rats to disturb my sleep.

Since we landed so late, after the long tiring day Eiler elected to forego his nightly inspections and maintenance tasks until morning. While we both conducted independent inspections, Crafts snapped pictures of us and the machine. I had never gotten to know Dick well by choice, for he had a reputation as being an aggressive person. and he exhibited tendencies of a macho and highly volatile individual. From observing and conversing with him in the bar, at the very minimum, I thought he harbored the potential for extreme violence. Mainly, he had a strange look in his eye, especially when in his cups, that warned the wise of a potential violent nature. Dick was also gregarious, friendly and colorful, and hosted the first helicopter pilots' "one hundred-thousand-dollar celebration" in the Club bar. These rare parties commemorated the achievement of those earning that targeted and coveted goal. It was a tentative objective we all sought, one believed at the time that would throw off enough income to insure an individual a satisfactory retirement. However, after achieving this objective, because of future inflationary pressures, few if any pilots actually left the employ of Air America. I guess Dick really felt beholden to me for retrieving him, as he was extra pleasant, even offering to buy the beer in the bar when we returned to Udorn. Common practice among Marine aviators who enjoyed the nectar of the gods and performed an act above and beyond the call, this seemed an acceptable proposition for a task I would normally perform



1965 photo of the Author waxing eloquent to his squatting crew, Flight Mechanic Gaza Eiler and First Officer Ed Hall at Luang Prabang, Laos, the morning after we retrieved Dick Crafts at Nam Houn, Laos.

Author Collection, photo provided by Dick Crafts.



While the Author strolls by Hotel-21 following a morning pre-flight inspection, Flight Mechanic Gaza Eiler conducts a final check of the engine compartment for damage and oil leaks prior to start-up at Luang Prabang. Ed Hall is in the cockpit going through the pre-start check list.

Author Collection, photo provided by Dick Crafts.



Part of the aircraft recovery team, Flight Mechanic "Chris" Crisologo stands in front of the Helio Courier Dick Crafts planted at Nam Houn, Laos (LS-243).

Steve Nichols Collection.

for anyone in trouble, but especially a fellow Marine, for Marines **never** leave someone in the field.

After surviving all the upcountry horse sierra and gun smoke over the previous days, I decided Hall deserved to fly from the right seat, for he had displayed a calm demeanor and fairly good technique from the left seat during the periods I allowed him to fly. Besides, we were headed home via Long Tieng, so there would little demand for him to perform any further tasks under extreme duress.

Local people were always anxious to journey to Vientiane to visit relatives, conduct purchases, or whatever else people do in a large city. It was no different in this case.

After enjoying lunch at Papa Chu's Air America-sponsored restaurant and cashing a check for a hundred dollars, I debriefed Bill Solin regarding the ongoing SAR in Sam Neua and our encounter with enemy groundfire. As always, Bill was calm, attentive, and informative, updating the large situation wall map as I talked. He confided in me that the fixed wing planes needed better equipment, mainly UHF and DF steer capability to coordinate with Crown and our aircraft. As a continuing task, he and Jim Mullen had been hard at work updating and correcting the Laos Airfield Directory. Previously compiled by operation managers, the copies were fraught with errors. New copies of the site book would be issued shortly to all the pilots, and reviewed periodically by FIC.

Then we discussed Dick Ford's recent hiring to commence and staff the fledgling Udorn FIC. Solin indicated that properly establishing the department would constitute a large step in improving the substance of intelligence briefings and, for the first time, enable FIC to debrief **all** air crews operating in Laos. Bill revealed that General Manager Laos (GML) Dave Hickler

had recommended that he journey to Udorn to properly inaugurate the operation. The primary function of Udorn FIC would be to brief and debrief pilots flying in Laos. Without current AB-1 and military cooperation divulging intelligence matters, it was the only method available to inform pilots of danger spots. It was also considered beneficial for someone experienced like him to begin the project and assist Dick Ford. He and Jim already had seventeen months on-the-job-training (OJT), had developed the Vientiane FIC without any initial guidelines, and had accumulated knowledge of the entire Lao operation. It was deemed essential for the FIC Udorn to work hand in hand with the Vientiane Center. Therefore, while the Vientiane Specialist was temporarily in Udorn, it was recommended that the naive newbie in Lao operations, Dick Ford, be temporarily assigned to Vientiane for additional briefings and orientation regarding FIC and the operation there. ⁷

Prior to employment with Air America, George Richard Ford had an interesting career in law enforcement and military intelligence. Starting in 1937, he worked for Eliot Ness of "Untouchables" fame in the Cleveland police vice squad. At one time, he arrested notorious gangster Al Capone. During and after World War Two and Korea, Dick worked in various high-level U.S.

⁷ Solin eventually did transfer to Udorn, and with pilot cooperation helped establish the new FIC office along the recognized parameters. The program was timely, for, even in the field, we could not always obtain briefings. Even when we did, many times the information was skewed because of a need to know, or Customer ignorance. Also, with SAR requirements escalating, we required all the current information obtainable, particularly in denied areas.

8. Richard Ford Obit, *StarTribune.com* Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota. Dick Achieved the Tender Age of 96-RIP.

Army intelligence jobs and retired as a lieutenant colonel in 1965.⁸

Calculated to more expeditiously exploit targets of opportunity generated by indigenous road watch teams (RWT) in Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger areas, top theater civilian and military leaders pushed to provide USAF on-call alert aircraft stationed at Thai bases. As with any new military plan, this recent program entailed minute preparations and involved several chains of command. This included approval from the Thai Government for operations from the bases, the RLAf, and air attaches from Vientiane and Bangkok. Rules of Engagement were formulated restricting strikes of both fixed and moving targets to within 200 yards of sanctioned roads. In addition, an air controller was required to spot and direct the jet to the road watch teams-generated targets.

With all details completed, four squadron planes from the eighteen F-4C Phantoms stationed at Ubon Air Force Base were the first assets assigned fifteen-minute strip alert. Call sign for the F-4 alert aircraft was Bango. Similar arrangements eventually evolved at Takhli and Korat with F-105s designated Whiplash alert. Udorn AFB Second Air Division Deputy Commander, Jack McCreery, assumed strike control and launch provisions, predicated on the Vientiane U.S. Embassy's approval, and a "thumbs up" assent from the air attaché.

Military leaders did not have to wait long to assess the new program. On 5 May, AIRA learned that a dozen enemy tanks were rolling uncontested on the Plain of Jars. However, foul weather prevented T-28 pilots from immediately discovering and targeting them. Then, on 9 May, the tanks were spotted approaching Mung Kheung on the Plain's northwest corner. Thai-piloted T-28s and Ubon-based F-4C Bango jets were scrambled.

T28 pilots struck the armored column. After expending ordnance, the pilots marked the target and acted as FACs for the Bango unit. The combined force destroyed four and damaged seven additional tanks. Despite heavy groundfire and a hit on one T-28, all planes successfully RTB to their respective bases.

Specifically designated for Military Region Three's Steel Tiger operations, an initial Whiplash strike on an enemy village occurred on 23 May. Victor Control, with a Lao observer onboard to coordinate operations, satisfied the ROE forward air control function.

The need was so great that U.S. military alert aircraft launched almost daily during the next two weeks.

With the alert status concept operating successfully, original objectives of the plan soon modified to include close air support for FAR, Vang Pao's ground troops, and SAR requirements. ¹

MR-2

Following two days off the flight schedule, I was assigned to test Hotel-23 with Flight Mechanic Dangoy. Jim Brown was to be my cockpit mate for a second time. Pressured to depart because of ongoing Military Region Two SAR requirements, we arrived at Long Tieng in the afternoon and performed local missions until dark. While working east of Padong Ridge, looking through gaps in the mountains, I occasionally caught a glimpse

¹ Jacob Van Staaveren, 58, 63, 65.
Victor Anthony, 168-169.

of dust plumes on the Plain of Jars induced by "fast mover" iron bombs. ²

We spent the entire following day working out of Na Khang. Marking a rare appearance at the site, two USAF HH-43s and crews were parked in the fuel pit waiting for a Rolling Thunder SAR commitment. Their mere presence moderated some of the pressure and anxiety I normally felt while working at the site, but I was well aware of the Huskey's range and altitude limitations and the necessity for us to back them up.

In response to Colonel Tong's planned expansion and movement northwest on Route-6 toward Hua Mung, by late April, 200 enemy troops quietly moved west from the Houei Sa An (LS-23) area and crossed Route-6, eight miles south of Site-36's southern flank. The enemy unit bypassed a FAR site and attacked the high mountain village of Pha Poun (later designated LS-230 in the site book). Two people were killed and three wounded during the lightning raid. ³

One year later the area would again be visited by death and suffering, this time involving Air America personnel.

SHORT ROUNDS

While we headed south for Udorn, growing pains associated with interdiction in the Steel Tiger area surfaced. Two Navy jets mistakenly hit two civilian busses travelling on Route-9 three miles west of Mung Phalane. Many dependents onboard from

² Fast mover: A term we used to differentiate jet aircraft from slower A-1E and T-28 propeller planes.

³William Sullivan to State, 05/01/65.

a nearby FAR military strongpoint were either killed or wounded. The wounded were evacuated to Seno RLAFB for treatment. The carcass of one badly damaged and blood soaked blue and white bus remained at the scene.

Further confusing investigators regarding the incident, the weather was "severe clear" and the planes forty miles beyond their authorized strike area. ⁴

At the time, carrier-based planes flew missions off TACAN radials provided by the parent ship. However, pertinent area navigation and visual target acquisition prior to strikes were always pilot responsibility.

As a result of the incident, largely to pacify Souvanna Phouma and FAR leaders, Ambassador Sullivan cancelled all American Steel Tiger operations pending the problems being rectified. After eight days review and terse reminders to interested parties of current ROEs, operations resumed.

Despite steps employed to avoid friendly fire incidents, on 22 May they reached a crescendo. Inexplicably, Navy fighter bombers struck GM-15, the identical unit whose dependents were impacted by friendly fire eleven days before. Another incident occurred in MR-2, this time perpetrated by USAF jets, while conducting a SAR mission. Several FAR military were killed or wounded.

This time Sullivan cancelled all USG Steel Tiger operations until 7 June, pending another review and better coordination between all parties. Boundaries were shrunk, off limits areas

⁴Although the errant jet pilots were not USAF this time, but from a U.S. Navy carrier, my forty-mile thumb rule for U.S. military navigation errors was constantly being reinforced.

specified, and altitudes designated. Furthermore, to track and assist strike aircraft, all planes entering Laos were required to contact the designated USAF radar control unit, Invert, at Nakhon Phanom Air Base. They were required to remain in radio contact throughout operations and squawk appropriate codes using identification friend or foe equipment (IFF). ⁵

HOPPE

Pilot hiring for the UH-34D continued. Former U.S. Marine pilot Tom Hoppe's employment process typified that of the period. Hoppe had completed his service commitment in April 1965. His last duty station and ground assignment at the large Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, base was a billet functioning as a battalion air logistics officer. Although still involved in flying, during the previous year and a half his sole flying had been in the C-45 Twin Beech. ⁶ While socializing with former squadron comrades at the nearby New River MCAF, he learned that Charlie Davis and Commanding Officer Harold "Swede" Larson were going to Southeast Asia to work as helicopter pilots with a hush-hush paramilitary organization called Air America. They provided him with the personnel office address in Washington and indicated that if he could not immediately find work, to join them and experience some interesting flying.

Following Tom's April military separation, prior to returning home to Saint Paul, Minnesota, he stopped at the FAA

⁵ Jacob Van Staaveren, 68-70.
William Sullivan to State, 05/13/65.

⁶ C-45: Fondly called the SNB, or "Secret Navy Bomber" in the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps.

Building on 1815 Independence Avenue in Washington, where he was interviewed by a personnel type and completed the required paperwork. Follow-up forms and phone calls resulted in his hiring, but without a flight program specified. Soon he was advised to obtain necessary vaccinations, a passport, and the proper visas. An airline ticket arrived in the mail and he embarked first class on Northwest Orient from New York, Chicago, and Seattle to Japan. After overnighing in Tokyo, he boarded the Civil Air Transport 880 Mandarin jet (fondly known by employees as the Golden Worm) for Taipei, Taiwan.

Hoppe remained in Taipei more than a week undergoing indoctrination, filling out forms, cleaning up his logbooks, and completing an aviation test. While there, he met new helicopter pilot Jim Williams, wife Iva, and others.

Williams became quite popular with the bar crowd for his good humor and storytelling ability. Iva, who accompanied Jim at the bar, was quite tall, made even taller by her enormous Beehive hairstyle. Ben Moore, for one, was fascinated with the hairdo. It was so unusual that several pilots in their cups wanted to touch the towering mass. However, they were always dissuaded when she threatened them with severe bodily harm.

The Williams family remained with the Company for some time, but Jim incurred trouble with his eyes that caused him to continuously blink. Off the flight schedule for a long period, some employees believed it was an excuse for not flying. Jim did improve and flew a while before leaving Air America.

At the time, the flight department was struggling to consign pilots to the correct program. Some flew PBYS flying supply runs to Quemoy and Matsu Islands. Hoppe was still not cognizant of the far-reaching scope of the Southeast Asian

operation, but was aware that he would end up somewhere in Thailand to work performing supply missions. In talking to one individual, he received a distinct impression that the entire Air America operation revolved around Taiwan. Once Indochina was secured for the West and a negotiated peace with North Vietnam achieved, the Nationalist Chinese were expected to return to the Mainland. Following this accomplishment, Civil Air Transport, Air America, and Air Asia would operate a giant airline in China.

On the first leg to Thailand, Hoppe flew to Hong Kong on a DC-6. There he met his first active duty line pilot, Dick Crafts, who was on the backside of an STO. Dick generously showed Tom the town. Tom found his mentor loud, vocal, and abrasive, but very informative. Crafts unselfishly held nothing back, informing him about fixed wing, helicopters, and other aspects of the operation.

Although Tom continued to Bangkok on the plush CAT plane in the first-class section, Dick was relegated to the economy section. Prior to boarding, Crafts told Tom to meet him outside the terminal after the plane arrived at Don Muang. The new hire was impressed with Dick's technique arguing loud and long with cabbies to obtain a reasonable fare into the city. During the eighteen-mile trip, Dick discussed sharing a Plaza hotel room near the Air America office on Patpong Road. Unaware of Company policy, Tom considered this unusual, for according to what he learned in Taipei from new hires, line pilots were earning excellent money and would not share rooms. It was still early after checking into the hotel, so Tom's host showed him around the area that night. They went to the Starlight Club and made

quick appearances at establishments on Patpong Road, including the Mizou Kitchen.

At the time, Hoppe was unaware of his ultimate flight program or exact duty station location. Therefore, the following morning, while Crafts left for Vientiane, Tom walked to the Company office to check in and obtain information. Two days of orientation and an assignment followed. Because of his most recent SNB flight experience, Tom assumed he would be assigned somewhere in the fixed wing program. To resolve the issue, he requested the Personnel Manager and others in the office to issue a decision. Tom's query seemingly stumped them, and his questions were answered by additional questions. Mainly, they wanted to know his latest specialty while serving in the USMC. Tom mentioned the UH-34D, SNB, and T-28. H-34 experience triggered an immediate response and a private consultation of those involved in the conversation. Within fifteen minutes, a comely Asian secretary returned to the waiting room saying, *"There will be tickets issued for you later on the all-night train to Udorn."*

That night on the train he met Flight Mechanics Bill Murphy and Pat McCarthy, and a few newly hired Chinese employees.

Along with the influx of pilots, many new Flight Mechanics were hired during the mechanical problem and helicopter expansion period. Most were American, but some new hires included Filipino nationals. From April, and accelerating during May through July, a few Flight Mechanics included Gaza Eiler, Dick Conrad, Frank Smith, Orvil Mock, Horan, Mitch Drew, Frankie Claveria, Maldonado, McDonald, Steve Nichols, Bill Murphy, Gurht, and Andre. Some former Filipino flight crew members, working on the ground for personal reasons, were temporarily

tasked to crew local test flights. They included Ben Naval, Louie Moser, Pete Mayor, Lazaro, and "C" Decosta, who was about to be terminated for a town brawl incident.

The train arrived early. No one from the Company was present to meet and greet the new hires. Tom thought this strange, as up to that point along the lengthy route to the job, he had been well treated with a representative meeting him at the Japanese and Taiwanese airports. Consequently, the stranded men hired samlor drivers and proceeded slowly through town to the airbase on Tahon Tanon on Airport Road-Hoppe's first impression of Udorn from the pedicab ride was that of a small provincial town consisting of one main street with one stop light, shops, a movie theater, two traffic circles, and some side streets.

After clearing the guarded pole lift-type barrier comprising the Air America facility gate, he met Marius Burke, Clarence Abadie, and later Wayne Knight. Professing that they were not forewarned of his arrival by train, all evidenced surprise at his appearance. ⁷

At the time, without seeing an organizational chart, he was not aware of the facility's management pecking order. (We never had one.) The managers showed Tom the pool and the Club. He considered the complex a pleasant sanctuary within an Oriental environment. During the niceties, after the COO learned of Tom's latest fixed wing flight experience, he was informed that he would not be going upcountry for a while. Instead, he would

⁷ Tom Hoppe's experience was not unlike others, including the Author's. Although Taipei message traffic was generally excellent, the Bangkok communication pipeline often failed to inform the Udorn office of personnel movement.

accompany pilots on local area test flights to re-familiarize himself with the H-34. Recent arrivals themselves, former squadron mates Charlie Davis and "Swede" Larson provided familiar and friendly faces and eased his area acclimatization.

Hoppe rented a room for a month at the new Victory Hotel close to the police station. He discovered the cotton stuffed mattress hard and uncomfortable. Only cold water flowed from the shower head. Unaccustomed to new Asian bacteria and virus strains, his immune and gastro-intestinal systems were compromised. Almost immediately he became very ill with a serious bout of diarrhea for a week. He speculated that his condition probably resulted from contaminated drinking water stored in the refrigerator on the lower floor of the hotel. Naturally, he quickly learned the Thai word for toilet paper--gradat sum. At the clinic, Doctor Kao provided him with what seemed like gallons of chalky Kaopectate, insisting the he hydrate with copious amounts of clean water--or die. At the time, he was less than 140 pounds. The preparation helped plug him up and his condition improved.

Eventually feeling better, Tom began flying on 23 May. CPH Wayne Knight reiterated that because he had not operated an H-34 or any helicopter for over a year, he would be restricted to local test flights to re-acquire necessary skills in the machine. He suspected that it also represented a period for the CPH to carefully evaluate his performance. Following three days of local test flights, Tom journeyed upcountry on a day mission with Scratch Kanach. They flew in the Long Tieng, Tha Vieng, and Tha Thom areas. Marking his first experience with commencement of the rainy season, he noted low ceilings and almost constant rain. On the 31st, he accompanied Abadie on a test flight and

believed this constituted a final blessing for him to be cleared for upcountry flight and continue area familiarization. Later in the day, he and Bob Hitchman ROned at Long Tieng. They worked landing zones around The Alternate and he had a good look at many pads south of the Plain. ⁸

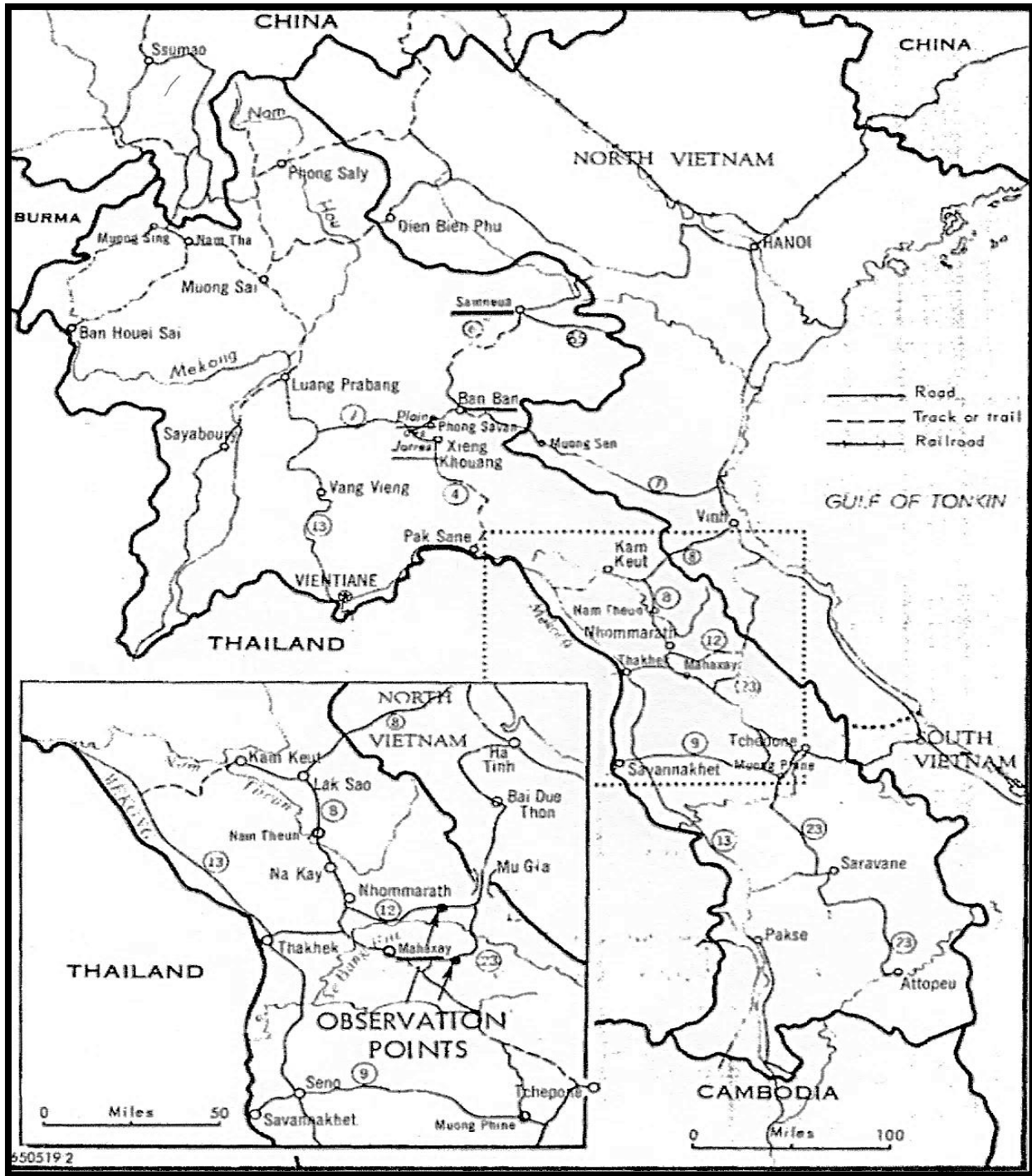
BOMBING PAUSE

"[In Military Region Three] on the key Route-23 infiltration route the rate of southbound truck movement so far this month has been only half that observed by road watch teams in April, which was the heaviest month for traffic this year. In sharp contrast there has been at the same time a heavy movement of trucks back toward North Vietnam. Normally Route-23 becomes impassable in late May or early June...

Limited deployment of troops may also be underway. For the first time since January substantial numbers of troops have been sighted moving along Route-12. According to a road watch team, on 15 May about 225 troops were seen moving east from the Mahaxay area, and two days later some 500 moved west.

Recently received photography [from upper Military Region Two] indicates that the communists are continuing efforts to improve the security of Route-65 which connects Sam Neua town with North Vietnam. Various support buildings and some antiaircraft sites have been camouflaged and moved from vulnerable locations. Roads to the west and southwest of Sam

⁸ Tom Hoppe Phone Conversation, 06/11/96.
Tom Hoppe Interview during a weather layover at the Landmark Hotel, Metairie, Louisiana, 07/08/96.
Tom Hoppe Hand Written Letter, late summer of 1996.
EW Knight Emails, 07/20/00, 07/22/00, 04/14/01, 04/18/01.



Insert shows the primary Agency road watch areas along enemy-controlled logistical arteries in the Military Region Three Panhandle. The upper portion of the map depicts the road system west of Sam Neua toward North Vietnam.

CIA Bulletin, 05/20/65.

Neua are being extended in an apparent effort to supply communist forces which have been operating against pockets of government guerrillas since January." ⁹

Perhaps the enemy drawdown in Military Region Three because of impending seasonal changes somewhat influenced decision-making in Washington. From 12 to 18 May 1965, the Johnson Administration suspended Rolling Thunder operations. Ostensibly for "operational reasons," ¹⁰ it was later explained that the temporary halt was to provide a means for Vietnamese leaders to cease hostilities and sue for peace. They rejected these overtures, claiming USG was only gearing up for larger war and attempting to curry positive world opinion. Washington's cessation of air strikes constituted the first of several halts, which were always ignored and which the enemy took full advantage of to safely move men and supplies along the logistic routes to South Vietnam. During these periods, they also repaired bridges, roads, and railway lines.

The bombing halt over the Democratic Vietnamese Republic (DVR), and Sullivan's cessation of Steel Tiger operations, afforded more assets for the Barrel Roll area. Additional air in MR-2 and the beginning of larger aircraft delivery to the recently-completed strip at Na Khang contributed greatly to combined FAR force's morale in that area.

At the time of the bombing halt, Ambassador Sullivan demurred on the subject of a proposed international conference

⁹ CIA Bulletin, 05/20/65. Laos: The communists may be sending trucks from the Laotian panhandle back to North Vietnam prior to the onset of the rainy season.

¹⁰ Which we inferred signified a reduced number of bombs available.

on Laos. For good reasons, he was reluctant to have U.S. violations of the Geneva Accords of 1962 exposed to the world by the enemy, which would certainly curtail or suspend many activities.

In his argument to Rusk to discourage any U.S. participation in a conference, he recapitulated some of the activities conducted from the beginning when the only illegal violations in Laos were Air America's covert activities. At the present time, USG conducted about fifty daily combat air sorties in Laos, maintained a 20,000-man clandestine guerrilla force, installed and supported a Thai artillery battalion at Moung Soui, operated a fleet of Air America and Bird Air aircraft engaged in paramilitary activity, and conducted a yearly fifty-million-dollar clandestine military aid program.

To implement the varied programs, many Americans had risked their lives daily and some had died. Helping to cover the activities, collusion with Lao leaders and a tight noose controlled loose talk among Americans.

American leaders agreed to suppress a conference. ¹¹

HERB BAKER

On the 12th, Operations scheduled me to work at Savannakhet (Lima-39). Because of limited access to Laos during my lengthy time as a First Officer, it would mark my first RON there. That

¹¹ Segment Includes Information from: Bowman, 115.

John Smith, *Rolling Thunder*, 73.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 128.

William Sullivan to State, 05/13/65.

Dean Rusk to State London, 05/14/65.

Memorandum Between Averill Harriman and Deputy Assistant to the Secretary of State Far Eastern Affairs (Unger), 05/14/65.

day I was assigned to fly Hotel-15. However, the machine did not meet the established standards of airworthiness during a test flight, and I was reassigned Hotel-34, one the newest H-34 arrivals. The crew was fleshed out by Flight Mechanic Gaza Eiler, in whom I had the utmost confidence for his common sense, maintenance competence, and his recent performance while I "talked" to the native in the hills overlooking Sam Neua valley.

Re-hire Herb Baker was assigned my cockpit mate (DOH, 04/01/65). Herb was another character among the many that graced our organization. I first met Herb in VMO's hangar at the Marine Corps Air Facility Futema, Okinawa, in 1961. He had recently returned from interviewing Air America personnel in Taipei, followed by a trip to Udorn. He had possessed the most current information on the helicopter operation, which he generously shared with a few of us in HMM-261 indicating interest in Air America. Herb was already employed by the Company and residing in Udorn when I arrived on location in September 1962. When flight time dried up in late 1962 and early 1963, like many others at the time who decided to quit, he sent his family home to reside in California and obtain schooling before he actually left Southeast Asia. His was a classic tale of sending a majority of his earnings home to create a future nest egg. After relocating, Charlotte never believed that Herb would return alive from Southeast Asia. Therefore, upon return to CONUS, he discovered that his wife had spent all their seed money. Herb bravely accepted her explanation at face value, and worked for a time as a civilian instructor pilot for the U.S. Navy in the San Diego area. When Air America began hiring helicopter pilots in 1965, he opted to return, and resubmitted an application to the Washington personnel office. Since the Company was desperate for

experienced H-34 Captains in the field, hiring Herb was an easy choice. With his prior experience in the machine and the theater, he would be quickly upgraded. Herb's return to the fold would represent numerous coming and goings during his Company employment.

This time, most likely to keep an eye on Charlotte and more closely oversee his money, but also because there was a Company-sponsored school operating at the Air America facility, Herb's family accompanied him. Charlotte, a most charming lady, informed me that she had previously been an opera singer. Since the opinionated Herb--but not to the extent of the abrasive Bob Hitchman--was considered a little odd by members of our group, some believed the couple's union an enigma. One of Herb's "idiotsyncrasies"¹² was to employ a very long cigarette holder, something one saw high society female stars brandish in old black and white flicks. The reason for the jaunty cigarette holder remained buried in Herb's psyche. However, some pilots believed he might be attempting to affect a Roosevelt-like countenance.

Shortly after Herb's return from the States, I talked to him in the bar lounge. I had just read an embellished article in a pulp magazine about the roots and machinations of the John Birch Society. Therefore, our conversation centered on the radical ultra-conservative organization. As usual, the all-knowing Herb knew everything about it. Swinging his cigarette holder in a wide arc with aplomb, he waxed eloquent on the

¹² Idiotsyncrasy: A humorous term my Training and Test Regiment drill instructor gunny sergeant frequently used while making a sarcastic remark.

subject. I learned that he was virulently anti-Negro, and a true bigot. He even revealed that he was a member of the Minute Men organization, a conservative white male faction, even more extreme than the John Birch Society that was gathering strength in the American southwest. Well, that meant virtually nothing to me, for I had never heard the name and knew nothing about the organization. Apparently, it was dedicated to counter the Martin Luther King civil rights movement occurring within the U.S. Not everyone considered the nonviolent Negro pressure group a particularly good omen for America, but some within our group considered the Minute Men organization much too far right for the American democratic society. Others considered Herb's opinions regarding the subject a continuing dislike for most individuals, regardless of race, creed, or other values.

Despite his vast knowledge, intelligence, and opinionated attitudes, Herb did curious things at times. People still recalled the time he tossed a lighted cigarette into a pool of aviation gasoline lying on the ground in the refueling pit at Pakse. He was attempting to make a point with his flight mechanic that gasoline in a liquid state was not combustible. That may have been true in theory, but he completely forgot or never considered the existence of a highly volatile mixed fuel oxygen layer immediately above the liquid and its highly flammable potential. The foolish action nearly resulted in the incineration of an H-34 before he could taxi the machine out of harm's way. The fire's origin was not divulged in the official incident report, as incomplete reports were often filed after

embarrassing events like this one. ¹³

It was quite late by the time I finished wrangling with maintenance, completed testing Hotel-34, and launched. After flying southeast for 123 nautical miles, we arrived at Lima-39 and secured for the night. While Gaza attended to fueling and the nightly inspection, we were Jeeped into town by our designated driver. Since Herb possessed previous knowledge of Savannakhet accommodations and cuisine, I relied on his judgment to select a suitable hotel and eating establishment. We dined on tasty steak and potatoes on the roof of a three-story building close to the local movie theater, where balmy evening breezes added to our comfort.

The following morning, we ferried an investigating team to the site of the recent short round incident. Because of damage inflicted on Lao civilian dependents by U.S. aircraft, there was much displeasure among higher echelon FAR leaders over American war efforts in the Panhandle. RLAF Commanding Officer General Ma was especially unhappy, and adamant about ensuring that these incidents would not happen again. Because of serious repercussions, there was an effort to make amends by providing money and other goodies to families of those involved. Upon return to Savannakhet about noon, our Lao officers disappeared in a Jeep without assigning further missions. However, one of them who spoke passable English told us to remain at the airport and wait at the helicopter. To my knowledge there was no palatable food available on the airport grounds, and the laterite parking area was brutally hot during mid-day. Thinking

¹³ Tom Penniman Emails, 02/27/00, 03/12/00, 03/13/00.
EW Knight Email, 07/11/00.

someone would return momentarily to assign additional missions, we remained inside the oven-like cabin section baking and stewing in the heat. Hours passed before someone returned and we received a respite from the torture. If it was FAR leaders' intent to punish all foreign devils for the short round incidents, they succeeded. However, they also reinforced our negative opinion of the entire regular FAR forces, and our disdain for their callous methods. It was little wonder that we were never enthused to work for them, and eternally grateful to have Meo allies.

That night prior to dinner Herb and I commenced an area walkabout. Just past the movie theater, a local whorehouse fronted the same area. In passing, we stopped and talked to three honeys either sitting on the stoop or standing outside the establishment. One hefty gal, intent on drumming up early customers, casually hoisted her dress to display the business portion of her trade to me. Explicit in her solicitation, she wore no panties and exhibited a bald mons pubis. Even as the jaded Orientalophile I considered myself, I was shocked and quite surprised over the girl's brazen display of her female genital wares. Her boldness engendered exactly the opposite effect than she intended, and I recommended to Herb that we move on.

The following day, exhausting the few FAR requirements at L-39, we moved south to Pakse, where considerably better planning and bona fide helicopter requirements existed. Since additional helicopters had been received in excess of Military Region Two needs, and a presence for SAR coverage was ongoing in Military Region Five, FAR-Agency programs at Lima-11 greatly expanded.

One assignment took us to Ban Saphat (later LS-175, as only coordinates delineated the site then), forty miles north of Pakse on Route 160 and the Sedone River, to support a combination village security and community development project named WAPI. I had flown to the area in April, but lacked knowledge of its significance at the time. I was not the only one supporting security in the area, for Lou McCasland worked there at the end of April and beginning of May. Lou also supported Ban Nong Boua (LS-134) operations, ten miles east of Saravane (L-44) on feeder Route-162. ¹⁴

WAPI

In 1963 a USAID "village cluster" program evolved in Laos and was initiated in the Mekong Valley south of Ritaville in Military Region Five. Intending to concentrate friendly Lao and establish a security net in potentially threatened areas, the concept closely paralleled similar village defense or strategic hamlet programs in South Vietnam. However, at the time, local Lao commanders were not especially keen about distributing weapons to local people for fear that they would fall in the hands of the communists. Therefore, security generally involved FAR units.

By December 1963, work at five additional sites throughout the country had commenced and were in various stages of development. However, American mismanagement from Vientiane curtailed progress at Ban Keng Kok (LS-139) east of Savannakhet in Military Region Three. Similar village projects were started

¹⁴ Lou McCasland, Flight Time Reports April/May 1965.

at Ban Houei Mun (Houaymun, later LS-310) and Houei Kong on the Bolovens Plateau. Because of the earlier White Star work with hundreds of Nja Hune tribes located there, and the presence rapport of the Davis family and Brian O'Connor, security was already largely in place. Consequently, without threat of enemy interference, the village program flourished by the summer of 1964.

In the Pakse area of southern Laos, General Phasouk Somly, an unusually enlightened leader among peers not similarly disposed, envisioned merit in commencing a program that would arm friendly Lao and help develop their village infrastructure in Wapikhamtong Province north of Pakse. The program would also tend to foster "villager identification with the national government, provide intelligence on the communists, and deny the enemy all material aid." Initial reluctance of the Lao to join the army had to be overcome, which Phasouk managed, convincing the people that protection of their homes was a realistic goal.

With the General's assent, the fledgling program, supported by CIA, AID, RO, and Deputy Chief JUSMAG Thailand had commenced in 1964 when the Agency authorized funds for a program at La Phone Kheng (LS-159). AID, previously involved in the area, continued furnishing resources and advisors for rural development programs to include schools, roads, wells, agriculture, education, and public health, while CIA provided the training and guidance for the ADC military. Coordination and communication was enhanced with FAR headquarters, using radio contact with the "radio hill" site overlooking Pakse from the east. Then regular FAR units supplemented village security if a situation warranted.

By April 1965, Ambassador Unger authorized a substantial expansion of the WAPI project. Over time, the trial WAPI program thrived and greatly expanded to include much of the Lao Theung-populated rice-growing Sedone Valley between Saravane, Lao Ngam (formerly controlled by the Pathet Lao), and Pakse. Even though PL forces had previously enjoyed free reign in the area, they had largely alienated the local people. Therefore, they were more confident in the village defense system and government troops supplementing the effort, and enemy influence waned in the area.

By late spring of 1966, with only minor enemy harassment, much of the valley was overtly quiet. Many defectors and refugees had arrived from eastern enemy territory.

The overall program continued until 1967, when "more important" priorities took precedence to the east, training and utilizing SGU for road operations. ¹⁵

At strictly face value, Baker appeared to be another annoying know-it-all individual. However, beneath his superiority exterior, I judged that he was a fine person who actually knew what he was talking about. Displaying substantial knowledge regarding the UH-34D, and perhaps to impress me, Herb continued to bombard me with "valuable" information. He seemed to have his facts committed to memory, and as I had little

¹⁵ Segment Sources:

Douglas Blaufarb (Chief of Station Vientiane), *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970* (Rand Studies, 01/72) 39-40-reprinted by Dalley Book Service, 90 Kimball Lane Christiansburg, VA, 24073.

Thomas L. Ahern Jr. (CIA History Staff), *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* (Washington, DC, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006) 196-200.

Ken Conboy, 141.

knowledge of what he talked about, I was in no position to challenge him while in the cockpit. If I attempted to quiz him on points with which I did not fully agree, he always responded with logical arguments. He talked about the rarely utilized green charts in the rear of our flight manuals that included difficult-to-interpret climb, range, and endurance, and other performance parameters. Since most of our flying experience in Laos was gained by OJT, feel, or word of mouth, these charts were not frayed or worn from overuse. If we had consulted the charts on every landing and takeoff, and abided by what test pilots determined at sea level on a hard surfaced, pristine facility, our operation would have ground to a virtual halt. No Customer would have continued to use us if we only carried a payload of a couple hundred pounds to altitude. No, we had to perform the job safely our way.

By then, having learned and successfully applied mountain techniques mostly from trial and error and experience, I was a seasoned H-34 pilot. Despite this, I considered flying a UH-34D to be a continuous learning process and therefore some of Herb's information was actually helpful. He showed me cruise RPM settings down to 2,200 and below that would supposedly minimize fuel burn during cruise. ¹⁶

While passing 3,000-foot Phu Batiene en route to the Bolovens Plateau along Route-23, he soared close to the slopes, taking advantage of updrafts to gain altitude without adding power. I could definitely see value in employing that technique.

¹⁶ Rotor blades cone at lower RPM and I wondered if he actually used these settings while carrying heavy loads at altitude and in turbulence, when blade stall constituted a possibility.

I did not agree with everything Herb professed or did, particularly employing a side flare to quickly stop the helicopter's forward motion. Since the flight manual established a time limit of one minute for a 360-degree turn, the flare technique seemed likely to overstress and perhaps wrinkle the tail cone skin and structural components. He also used another procedure that I failed to condone, and which I considered reduced engine time before overhaul (TBO). He insisted on using maximum power on every takeoff regardless of the load or situation. I considered this only necessary for heavy loads or the first flight of the day.

I seriously doubted one particular Herbism. Most of the Plateau was often obscured in low fog or an area wide cloud layer in the morning. Instead of waiting for the sun to rise and subsequently lift or burn off clouds, he claimed that he left a beacon we carried during the early years at a site, with instructions for the individual on the ground to activate it when he heard him circling. Then, if there was adequate ground to cloud clearance reported, Baker would commence an ersatz IFR approach to the site. Without knowing the cloud-to-ground clearance underneath, this procedure seemed a little dangerous and far-fetched to me, but I did not pursue the issue.

As the only H-34 crew in Pakse supporting the WAPI AID project, we were authorized to stay overnight at the USAID hostel. The one-story wooden structure was not elaborate, but afforded decent shelter and a cook. In the morning, I relished eating scrambled eggs ¹⁷ smothered with mainland China's tasty

¹⁷ To ensure destruction of debilitating parasites, so touted in a *Bangkok Post* article, I avoided uncooked or partially cooked eggs.

Pearl River soy sauce, or the Swiss manufactured Maggi sauce, local sausage and toast. There was no bias in Pakse attached to the use of communist products. All consumables, like the soy sauce, Tsingtao Beer, and many other items, were shipped upriver through Cambodia. I was not particular when it came to using communist Chinese products, as evidenced by my purchase of Chinese stamps for my Father while in Hong Kong. I was not even sure about the source of the rosewood woodcarvings purchased there while in the service. In addition, the communist store there had provided parts required for my British water filter. When items were scarce, one could ill afford being choosy about where they were manufactured. At one time, I purchased a Chinese alarm clock at a local store in Pakse at a price much less expensive than those sold in Thailand. In fact, many Thai people journeyed across the river to the market town to obtain more reasonably priced items.

After working a second day around Pakse, we were called to Savannakhet, probably to deliver a verbal message and to provide cover for afternoon airstrikes on the eastern Trail system. When released, we returned to Pakse. As it was too late for the rigidly-scheduled evening supper at the AID hostel, we repaired to Henri's open-air shop on the corner of the main street for some liquid refreshment prior to finding a place to eat. Henri, a friendly Chinese-Vietnamese of undetermined age, peddled cold drinks, served peanuts, and liberally supplied us with local gossip. Henri's extended family was quite wealthy, owning most of the buildings on the block. An outside wooden table afforded us a view of town activity. This included young sarong-clad

lovelies cycling back and forth on their bicycles. To cut the day's dust, Herb and I shared an ice-cold quart of the delicious Tsingtao rice beer, fermented and bottled on China's east coast at a plant installed many years before by a German brewmeister. The beer slaked my thirst, but had a considerable effect on my dehydrated body. I had been previously cautioned about not drinking the foul-tasting canned Beaujolais wine, and confirmed the warning with a sip from Gaza's can.

Since returning to upcountry flying in 1963, I had worked mostly in Military Region Two with Vang Pao's Meo guerrillas, where, as the premier fighting group in Laos, major emphasis centered on their operations. As I had obtained limited experience at Pakse, like at Savannakhet, Herb actually was an asset in finding places to eat. After a short period at Henri's, we took a samlor (a little different than the Thai version) to the eastern part of town and stopped at the "French" nightclub and restaurant. Set back from the main road, the outside of the green two-story establishment was festooned with multi-colored Christmas type lights. The interior looked just as intended, a small dance hall with wooden benches lining the walls. As we entered, considerable eyeballing commenced by ladies perched like hungry vultures awaiting their marks.

Herb informed the proprietor that we were only interested in eating. The dark man ushered us up a rickety staircase to the second-floor balcony and offered us a table next to a wooden railing overlooking the front courtyard. The building must have been quite old, had settled, or the carpenters were smoking opium during construction, for the floor was sloped. Curiously, this failed to appreciably affect either table or chairs. Unable

to read the menu, presupposing it was hot and safe to eat, we ordered a standard fare of steak and fries.

Toward the end of our meal, a rotund, bubbly individual in his twenties approached our table. He introduced himself as Tammy Arbuckle, a roving reporter working out of Vientiane. Red flag. He had such an unusual name, one emulating an early movie star comic, that I was immediately suspicious about the man's name and occupation. Coupled with the fact that we wore the distinctive Air America prison gray uniforms and were recognizable, I was reluctant to talk to him. Besides, I had never heard him mentioned before. From the beginning of our hiring, we had been pre-warned about discourse with reporters and had been exposed to the vehement Poe bias regarding all media representatives. I had not been accosted by one since the elevator incident at the Plaza Hotel in Bangkok years before.

As it turned out, Arbuckle was not ostensibly seeking information. He just wanted friendly conversation, and perhaps for future reference, to inform us that he was sanctioned by the Agency to fly on our equipment. He maintained that his clearance was allowed because he always produced positive articles about USG involvement in Laos, not the sensationalized drivel other freelance reporters sent to their news agencies.

Still unsure about his self-professed bona fides, we were courteous, but reluctant to open up to him. After a few minutes, he left and I never saw him again. ¹⁸

After three long days of excellent flight time that often extended into twilight, we headed home. This was Baker's final

¹⁸ Some of Arbuckle's work was later quoted in Congressional subcommittee hearings on Lao refugee matters.

trip as a First Officer before upgrading to Captain on the 22nd, and the last time I shared a cockpit with him. I was happy to leave, for I had quite enough of Herb and his quirky ideas. During the long, boring trip home, another of the man's "idiotsyncrasies" surfaced. Herb actively sought out and flew through the only thunderstorm in sight "to wash the helicopter." Never mind the possible presence of very heavy rain, dangerous lightening and turbulence associated with most thunder bumpers. I could only shake my head and wonder at the man's proclivity to do things my training had taught me to avoid.

During two days off the flight schedule, as both Marius and Bobby were away working and I had no access to a typewriter, I sent a barely legible handwritten letter home briefly describing our Shelton mission in Sam Neua. In retrospect, I probably took a chance mentioning my clandestine activities, but since we did not discuss our work in the bar or between ourselves, I had to find some catharsis from the activity, or go crazy. Therefore, I used my parents as an outlet. In my mind, the odds were diminishing. I was beginning to doubt if I would survive this phase in the war and wanted some documentation for posterity. ¹⁹

I officially announced that despite the first ever hike in base pay, Howard Estes and his family was planning to depart Air America soon. Because of his continuing bad luck, it was probably a wise decision. I purchased Patti's girls' bicycle that Howard had obtained in Vientiane. After all the mechanical trouble I incurred with my motorbike and the subsequent theft, I vowed to never again provide tempting fodder for thieves, and a

¹⁹ Had I known the Agency was opening international mail since 1952, I might have taken a different tact. But it was a time of risk taking. Actually, I am not positive APO mail was scanned.

pedal machine seemed a logical substitute. In addition, I had seen the results of too many accidents on two-wheeled motorized vehicles, and four-wheeled vehicular traffic in the town was considerably heavier now. Busses provided adequate transportation to the downtown USIS library, but I enjoyed the added freedom and exercise a bicycle afforded.

ADDITIONAL PILOT LOSES IN SAM NEUA PROVINCE

Early on 18 May, the daytime Rolling Thunder missions resumed over North Vietnam, and Captain David Louis Hrdlicka was shot down in Sam Neua Province becoming another MIA. Flying out of Takhli, the USAF Captain was leading four F-105D jets on a Route 641 interdiction mission, eleven miles southeast of Sam Neua Town. Cloud layers prevented observation of the strike area, so the flight orbited until the target was visible. While pulling up after a bombing run, Hrdlicka reported a fire warning light in the cockpit. With his plane confirmed on fire, the pilot climbed to 10,000 feet and ejected. His parachute deployed and he landed near a village. The pilot was observed by his wingman being led away by apparently unarmed Lao.

Ground fire made SAR work difficult, but an Air America helicopter pilot later landed in the vicinity with troops, who were informed that the pilot had been captured by a Pathet Lao unit.

The latest downing elicited a message from Ambassador Sullivan to State containing a warning about continued use of Alpha T-28 pilots for SAR cover.

"For the past few weeks, I have been required ever more frequently to authorize Air America pilots to fly T-28s to provide low cover for helicopters engaged in rescue attempts

both in Laos and adjacent areas in North Vietnam. This had been necessitated by the fact that the Navy has been unable to provide A1H aircraft on standby basis at Udorn. They have often been unavailable from the carrier in time to be effective in rescue operations. Naturally, when we can get Navy aircraft, we prefer them, for they do an excellent job.

Every time I authorize Air America pilots in RLAF planes, I am consciously jeopardizing the entire Air America operations in this country and risking severe embarrassment to both the U.S. and Lao governments...²⁰

There are four of them [T-28s] in the air right now in a rescue mission near Sam Neua. We risk the next going down will be in enemy terrain."

A subsequent message dealt with SAR cover. Sullivan explained that A1E planes (call sign Sandy) were dispatched directly from the carrier when possible, without resorting to using Thai air bases for staging purposes. For SAR missions exceeding a day, in which Skyraiders might be required to cover mission helicopters, he desired authority to retain them overnight at the Udorn facility. This was a rare occurrence and he wondered if it required blanket Fleet approval or Thai leaders' clearance. Since Sandy assistance was often not available without great delay, in their absence he requested authorization to use the Det-6 special air warfare group to fly U.S Air Force-marked T-28s instead of Air America pilots and RLAF T-28s.

²⁰ Ambassador William Sullivan referenced Captain KD Nolan's T-28 crash at LS-36.

A Pathet Lao source, who recorded dates and information in his diary, claimed to have witnessed Hrdlicka's capture. The account stated that the American did not have visible injuries, but complained of a sore back.

Two American pilots were separately incarcerated in caves 800 meters northwest of Ban Na Kay Tay, twenty-eight kilometers northeast of Sam Neua. They were visited daily by a medic and provided Lao food and rice in sufficient quantities. A Lao official from a radio station at Ban Bac, a Vietnamese officer, and a Lao officer from the intelligence headquarters at Ban Na Kay Neua, interrogated the Americans. The Pathet Lao did not torture the prisoners or employ brain-washing techniques, and the Pathet Lao did not kill prisoners after using interrogation and propaganda. ^{21 22}

The day following Hrdlicka's downing, Frank Stergar, Joe Gaculais, and I crewed Hotel-22 to Paksane for a day mission. In reality, we covered the southern flank of the SAR operation still in progress.

In addition to more pilots, the influx of helicopters required working Flight Mechanics. These were divided between American and Filipino men. I was particularly happy to have Joe

²¹ This statement is highly suspect, for only two POWs returned to CONUS after the peace negotiations.

²² Hrdlicka, David Louis, Captain U.S. Air Force, POW 18 May 65, (<http://harleytrike.com/html/pow/david.html>), 02/18/02.
Hrdlicka, David Louis, Compiled by Task Force Omega, Inc., (<http://www.taskforceomegainc.org/h102.html>), 02/18/02.
William Sullivan to State, 05/18/65.
William Sullivan, 05/19/65;
CIA Archives, Pathet Lao Account of his Witnessing the Capture of two Downed American Pilots, 12/13/65, (foia.icia.gov/scrips/cgiserv).

along. He was a sharp individual, a modern-day Filipino who communicated over the intercom system in clear, concise English. As Joe became a regular, he was highly regarded, trusted, and well liked.

Joe Gaculais had some unfortunate incidents over the years. Like many Company employees, Joe had purchased an automobile. While returning to Udorn late after enjoying a Bangkok STO, he hit and killed a mentally deranged man wandering aimlessly in the middle of the dark Friendship Highway thrusting over the Korat Plateau. Always on the take, local police claimed that the man's nonexistent relatives demanded restitution. Rather than chance a long jail sentence, Joe acquiesced to police extortion and paid an enormous sum. Such was life in Thailand for a foreigner. The incident refreshed memories of poignant Thai sayings, such as that the owner a car had one foot in jail. The other, if you were involved in an accident, then you as an American were wrong, for you were not born in Thailand. ²³

Duplicating a relatively benign period working around Pakse, the 19th was another long day of "normal" work while waiting for a call to assist in the Sam Neua SAR we knew was still in progress. Stergar had previously experienced combat in Korea, and seemed to commiserate with my concerns regarding the necessary, but highly dangerous rescue work. He, too, was an advocate of Gelucil and carried the antacid preparation to help quell excessive stomach acid build up from the stress and strain of the unknown. Much pill swapping ensued during the day.

²³ Joe Gaculais was later badly injured in an accident that took the life of two Air America pilots in the Luang Prabang area. Details of this incident will unfold in a later book.

Consistent with RLG and Agency attempts to reestablish and expand government control in areas of Military Region One, Case Officer Howard Freeman, a former member of the U.S. Army Special Forces assigned to Luang Prabang, established a camp near the village of Boum Lao (LS-174). The site was situated in the wide Beng River Valley seventeen miles northeast of Ban Pak Beng, a small town on the Mekong River. Eighty miles northeast toward the upper reaches of the Nam Beng lay the enemy stronghold of Moung Sai. "Advised" by U.S. White Star Special Forces teams, several FAR operations in the early years that were calculated to take and hold sites there had resulted in devastating failure, with the FAR breaking their lines and running when pressured by mixed PL-NVA enemy units. These actions invariably resulted in FAR abandoning White Star advisors, who required evacuation by Air America helicopter pilots. When a final uncoordinated pincer movement toward Moung Sai by FAR Nam Tha units and those in the Beng Valley also failed miserably, after the spring of 1962 the area had largely been abandoned to the enemy by the Lao government.

To create a base of operations for recruiting indigenous Meo and Lao Theung ADC, Freeman, aided by the two Royal Thai Special Forces teams assigned to Sayaboury Province and FAR units, began the Boum Lao project to recruit and train new people and commence an offensive. Construction of a dirt runway began during early May and less than a handful of planes had landed on it.

Case Officer Terry Burke departed Long Tieng in late 1964 charged with the task of reconstructing friendly ADC tribal units, first in the hills of Sayaboury Province, and then at

Xieng Lom. Considering work at the latter site far too tame, the aggressive former Marine lobbied his boss, Bill Lair, for an assignment closer to the front lines. He realized his wish when Howie Freeman's health deteriorated to the point that he had to be hospitalized.

On the 21st, Orvil Robbie Robertson, Joe Gaculais, and I ferried Hotel-29 to Long Tieng. My First Officer was a rangy new hire who had served in an army aviation company in South Vietnam in the capacity of a Bell Huey gunship pilot. The RON would represent his first trip upcountry. I had met Robbie in the Club bar two days previously and noted that he enjoyed his sauce. In Virginia natives' soft, dulcet tones, he regaled those present with South Vietnam war stories, one being centered on continuously unloading rockets on an enemy machine gun position that he and his peers never completely managed to silence. Curiously, the intensity of his stories and the amount of beer he consumed were directly proportional to the sparks seemingly flashing from his eyes. During his Nam tour, Robertson had been shot down at least once, suffering burns to his hands. As a result of the injuries, or a mental quirk, he had an annoying habit of picking or cutting dead skin from his hands with a fingernail clipper.

Other former U.S. Army pilots in our group knew "Robbie." Therefore, his reputation as an excellent H-34 pilot circulated quickly among our people. Requiring a break from the daily grind, I welcomed this knowledge and encouraged him to assume the PIC seat. I was not disappointed in this decision. His technique and H-34 proficiency exceeded my expectations. For the first time in Military Region Two, I found that I could relax and almost enjoy the experience, while marshalling my energy for more taxing problems sure to soon emerge.

We worked all morning on pads east of Long Tieng until receiving a call from the Vientiane Operations Manager to immediately return to The Alternate, top off, and proceed to Site-69A. As usual, no further details were forthcoming. It had already been a rough month, and after all the extra-curricular activity occurring, I expected the worst. Robbie was still driving, and with confidence in his abilities increasing, I saw no reason to switch seats. If what I expected was going to occur, I wanted him to experience it from the command position. Then I could truly judge if he would be an asset to our program. The nearly two-hour flight afforded me ample time to worry and stew over the unknown. By the time we reached our destination at Xieng Lom, I was tightly coiled, spring loaded to the pissed off position.

DEEP IN THE TRENCHES

During a casual evening on 20 May, Agency Case Officer Terry Burke had been assured by a recently assigned FAR lieutenant colonel from Vientiane that a proper perimeter defense and adequate forward listening posts he had recently been carping about were indeed fully implemented. In keeping with Marine Corps training and procedures he had developed while staying overnight in forward positions, ready to bug out at a moment's notice, Burke retired to his hut wearing jacket, trousers, and boots. Weapons, ammunition, and personal items lay on a mat next to him. He shared the thatched hut that overlooked the village with two Thai Special Forces officers.

Burke had ample reason for concern that night. The size of the FAR build-up and airfield construction at Boum Lao had immediately been detected by local enemy sympathizers, and spies had passed the information along the pipeline to Pathet Lao

intelligence. It also included the fact an American was at the site. By mid-May, two companies of the 408 Pathet Lao Battalion, with North Vietnamese advisors, were on the move toward the site. They were led toward the village by a child, the future village chief. During the early morning of the 21st, the units were staged in attack formation from the south.

At 0500 hours, Burke was rudely awakened by an enormous explosion. The enemy knew the American's exact location, and the first mortar splashed close to Burke's hut, sending the thatched wall spinning away in the darkness. The second deafening round splattered dirt through the opening. While automatic weapons fire tore through the area, Terry shouted for his roommates to hustle out the door and head north toward the airstrip.

Already dressed and ready for action, Terry quickly grabbed pre-positioned bandoleers of .30 caliber rifle ammunition, and jammed as many grenades as he could into his jacket pocket.

While still gathering his equipment, he observed two enemy troopers standing in the doorway, sky-lighted in the false dawn. With their American prey still undetected in the dark hut, they began to sweep the interior with AK-47 rifle fire. Unhurt, Burke snatched his M-1 carbine and dropped both men. Peeking cautiously out the door, he observed additional enemy shouting and charging from the river bank toward the hut. It was time to go. While departing he tripped, fell, rolled over, and barely avoided being hit by numerous mortar rounds impacting the ground.

Terry reached a rally point between a group of huts and the airstrip. Then he regrouped some Thai team members and whoever else was available with an intention of launching a counterattack against the enemy in the hut area. For some reason, the Lao colonel struck out toward the huts and was hit

by grenade fragments, losing part of his hand. Terry dashed forward to retrieve him, and in turn received a superficial wound to his forehead. At this point, most supporting FAR troops faded into the jungle, so the counterattack was abandoned and Burke's group withdrew to the opposite side of the airstrip. At that point a machine gun opened up, barking rapid staccato fire and effectively pinning the men down. A couple well directed grenades silenced the gun.

They cautiously moved up the strip to a defensive fighting position on a knoll, where Terry yelled for the weapons unit to direct mortar and recoilless rifle fire at the enemy. Chagrined, he soon discovered the pit empty. Using fire and maneuver tactics, the enemy continued a disciplined advance up the strip. Burke knocked a few men down, but during the exchange of fire Juke, the team leader, was wounded in the foot. After other team members received minor wounds, he advised them to withdraw with Juke, while he and another Thai attempted to temporarily slow the attack. At one point, the enemy surged so close to their location, the deadly duo were bouncing hand grenades off their chests. Eventually, they joined the others taking advantage of the dense jungle for cover and concealment.

Later, a Helio Courier flew overhead with intentions of landing. It was piloted by Jack Blaylock, a former Texas lawyer, ferrying Customer Louis O'Jibway from Chiang Kong to discover why the site had not conducted the customary morning radio check. Unaware of the drama unfolding below, Jack commenced an approach. Greeted by premature fire from raw troops with itchy trigger fingers, he managed to wave off without serious damage. After escaping the volley, he passed the word to Vientiane that the strip had been overrun.

Carrying wounded comrades, Terry and his small group moved further into the jungle. For a time, he established an ambush site to slow or discourage further enemy penetration toward them. At about 0900 hours he heard the high whine of a Pilatus Porter engine.

THE SAGA OF ERNIE BRACE

Korean War veteran and U.S Marine Corps aviator Ernest Brace had been shot down and escaped capture during the early Fifties conflict. Following the war, the highly decorated senior captain had transitioned to helicopters and served in HMR-461, a twin-engine H-37 helicopter squadron with Nick Burke and Marius Burke (no relation) at the same time that I was a member of HMR-261.

Stories circulated about Ernie's exploits in Korea. Reputedly, he twice purloined the commanding general's car for personal activities. Everyone in the squadron thought this account of his exploits was very funny. Marius considered the man highly intelligent and a good pilot. ¹ However, another person he served with believed that one either loved or hated Brace: there was no in between. In fact, one Marine officer punched another one in the officer's bar for mentioning or inquiring about Brace.

Despite one's opinion of the man, everyone agreed that Ernie was indeed a character. During a Caribbean cruise, while onshore at Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, Brace was placed in charge of the detachment. After staggering from the Navy

¹ I heard that Ernie Brace was the youngest captain in the Corps with a very high GCT (intelligence quotient) score.

officers club one night, he stole a Jeep for a joy ride. Chased by the shore patrol, he was caught and placed in hack (house arrest). The following night, with help from a pilot from another squadron, he flew an H-37 helicopter to San Juan. At the Carib Hilton, he rubbed shoulders at the crap tables with the same individuals who had placed him in hack, while they cheered him on.

Throughout his career, Brace participated in many illegal activities that often resulted in serious trouble. Nick Burke recalled another Brace incident while at New River. Maintaining a current R-4D rating, Brace conducted several booze runs to Puerto Rico, returning each time with huge loads of liquor to accommodate all the senior colonels and generals in the Jacksonville, North Carolina area. The importation of cheap and untaxed alcohol, although a time honored, traditional practice among Navy and Marine personnel, avoided U.S. Customs and was totally illegal. Prompted by disclosure of the large amount of spirits being imported, U.S. Internal Revenue Agents eventually began checking officer club records of who signed for the whiskey. Not surprisingly, it was always Ernie. Since no senior officer admitted to anything illegal, like a good soldier, Brace assumed the entire blame.

Like the "good old fair-haired boy," Brace lived a surprisingly charmed life. Skating from one troubling incident to another, he could get away with almost anything. He knew everyone who was anyone, and all the high brass knew him. In addition to being well known for his earlier peccadilloes, but highly respected for his war record, he was considered a rising star in the Corps. Against this end, he was assigned to Quantico Junior School in preparation for advancement to the rank of major. At this time, he became involved in high stakes gambling

operations and amassed an enormous debt with Washington gamblers.

While on a cross country in a HUS-1 from New River to Washington, Hal Yanofsky and I landed at the Quantico, Virginia Air Station to refuel. During the stop, the group duty officer related the most bazaar story regarding Brace I had ever heard. To escape Washington gamblers' threats of death or dismemberment for marker nonpayment, Brace planned to fake his death. However, miscalculating unforeseen variables, he failed miserably. Hoping to satisfy pending debts and provide sufficient funds for his family, he purchased a large life insurance policy. Early in January 1961, he then arranged a flight north in an AH-1J Skyraider plane. At a strategic spot, he planned to turn the aircraft toward the ocean, engage the autopilot, bail out, and disappear. In his mind, the plot appeared foolproof. However, the plan began to unravel from the beginning when, prior to takeoff, the Spad encountered mechanical problems. The plane was grounded and Ernie had to settle for the only available aircraft, a T-28.

Too far along with the planning to alter course, he proceeded with the scheme. En route, faking an emergency situation consisting of an engine chip light immediately followed by engine failure, he radioed a Mayday in the blind. Without benefit of an autopilot, he pointed the ship toward the Potomac River and jumped from the cockpit. Once on the ground, he buried his parachute, changed to civvies, went into Washington, and initially holed up in a cheap hotel. What he did not know at the time was that the plane failed to "deep six," but continued on course and spiraled into the ground.

Hearing about the T-28 crash and Brace's purported death, Marius Burke prophetically said to his mates at New River,

"Knowing Ernie, he is probably out in some night club tonight having a ball." The squadron sent a contingent to Quantico for Brace's memorial service.

Brace's checkered past failed to go unnoticed by suspicious FBI agents. This was especially the case after a preliminary investigation revealed no discernable mechanical problem with the plane or its engine, and the absence of a body. Therefore, investigation continued until Brace's buried chute and flight gear were discovered. While agents checked further into Brace's recent activities, all the facts pointed to a plot conceived to deceive the gamblers, the USMC, and the insurance company. Within a few days, Brace, then in South Carolina, heard over a radio news broadcast that he was being sought by the feds. Realizing that his asinine plan had failed, he turned himself in to authorities.

Marius stopped at Quantico later to visit Ernie. At the time, he was confined to base house arrest pending further investigation and a Courts Martial proceeding. Burke noted that Brace was confident, and did not seem overly concerned about his lot.

Brace was never convicted of any of his questionable exploits. In July, to prevent undue embarrassment to the Marine Corps the messy case and adverse publicity would have fostered in public, he was allowed to quietly resign his commission and received a general discharge. In addition, he was never subjected to a civil trial for insurance fraud because of possibility of double jeopardy.

Three months after his time in the dock, Brace appeared at Quantico. He was working for the Hughes Helicopter Company demonstrating classified weapons systems. A general recognized him and informed Hughes that if they did not immediately

terminate Brace, there would be no chance of a contract with the USMC.

The next time Marius Burke saw Ernie was at the Don Muang terminal. Despite Brace's convoluted and shaded history, Bird and Son hired him in July 1964. Stationed at Chiang Mai in May 1965, he flew daily Porter missions in Thailand and Laos. When I heard that the man was working in Southeast Asia, I was shocked, cynical, and evidenced disbelief. *Where was the vaunted reliability and validity investigation by the National Security Agency supposedly conducted on all of us at hiring and periodically afterward?* However, I had to admit that the Agency had also dropped the ball when hiring all time con artist and bogus check writer, John George. I speculated that Bird must have been really desperate for airplane pilots to hire such an individual whose background and reputation preceded him, and of which most former USMC pilots were aware. Perhaps the Bird Company did not have as stringent a security requirement and investigation system as Air America. Despite never having personally met the man, I felt that I knew him by proxy, and what I knew, I did not particularly like, or condone. Mainly, I heartedly despised him for besmirching the Corps' reputation, and I sincerely hoped that we would never meet.

Like the leopard who never changes spots, after transitioning to civilian aviation Brace continued with his freewheeling ways. While working at the joint Thai-Agency training facility at Pitts Camp, Phitsanulok, Thailand (T-603), Ernie managed another faux faux. He wagered an acquaintance that he could land his Porter within a hundred feet after touching down. The distance was marked off on the runway and Ernie made the approach. Almost precisely at the one-hundred-foot mark, the aircraft nosed over, with the propeller impacting the ground

just inside the line. He won the bet, but the chief pilot and maintenance supervisor were less than impressed with the damage to his plane.

BRACE IN CAPTIVITY

On 20 May, Brace landed at Boum Lao without the benefit of a proper ground signal. Terry Burke had previously cautioned Ernie about the danger of such a practice. After working at the site, Brace launched to deliver a Lao colonel to Luang Prabang and then RTB Chiang Mai. Scheduled to return to Boum Lao the following morning, with a mechanic to accomplish preventative maintenance on the radio unit's generator, he was reminded by Burke about the site's ground safety signal.

Brace and Filipino mechanic Tony Alfonte departed Chiang Mai to deposit a Thai border policeman (BPP) at a base on the Burmese border near San Tan Dau village. With that mission completed, they continued to Xieng Lom, Sayaboury Province, the supply base and central hub for smaller sites in western MR-1. At Site-69A, Alfonte was bumped in lieu of priority cargo consisting of five passengers: two Lao soldiers, a dependent with a baby, a Thai Special Forces man, some sacks of rice, salt, and dried fish.

Brace departed Site-69 Alpha at 0830 hours for the thirty-minute flight across the river. According to the Customer at Xieng Lom, there had been no radio contact with Boum Lao that morning. However, because of the ancient equipment and frequent malfunctions, this was not considered particularly significant at most upcountry sites. According to Ernie, everything appeared normal when he arrived overhead the strip. The correct signal, a

large white "L" made from scrounged parachute cloth was displayed.²

Since "Jib's and Blaylock's near miss, radio calls in the blind had been periodically transmitted throughout the region not to land at Boum Lao. Somehow Brace did not receive the word, probably because of his well-known habit of turning the radio volume down to imperceptible levels. After landing, rifle fire tore through the windscreen, wounding the Lao trooper's wife. The soldier jumped out, and was dropped by machine gun fire. Brace increase power and attempted to taxi to the end of the runway for takeoff. He did not make it.

Early that morning AID veterinarian Bill Taylor was a passenger in a Helio Courier heading to Ban Houei Sai from Vientiane. By then, the word had circulated that Boum Lao was unfriendly. From altitude, the pilot and Bill observed the Porter landing. However, all attempts to contact the pilot by radio failed and they were too far away to attract his attention.

Terry Burke estimated he was 300 yards from the strip when Brace touched down. He heard engine RPM increase while the pilot taxied and attempted to depart. Then there was the sound of gun fire, after which the engine spooled down and quit. Burke wanted to investigate, but the remaining Lao disappeared. At that point, Burke, his Thai interpreter and a former Pathet Lao defector Juke, and the Lao colonel were all who remained--and the latter two required carrying.

² Normally a signal was laid out by personnel only after an aircraft circled for landing. For obvious reasons I considered a fixed signal tantamount to none at all.

The group began moving south. They temporarily linked up with other soldiers intent on fleeing the area. Burke's attempts to organize them into a counter attacking force failed. Within two hours, using a signal mirror, Burke was able make contact with a Helio Courier pilot.

Air America helicopter pilots Captain Jack Connor and First Officer Frank Stergar were working the Chiang Kong-Xieng Lom areas when they received a radio call from Vientiane over the high frequency radio to proceed to LS-174. Only vague details regarding a Bird and Son Porter involved in hostile action were passed. Upon arrival overhead, they observed the Porter on the ground, but no signs of life. Jack was not keen about conducting a thorough area search and reconnaissance, as he treated the area as denied. After a time, they returned and landed at 69A to report what they had observed. Frank considered the entire mission abominable and hoped he never required assistance.

Head Customer Bill Lair was at work in his Udorn AB-1 headquarters when he learned that a Porter flown by Brace was missing. Later information revealed that a Porter was spotted sitting on the Boum Lom strip and there was something strange about it. Bill next received a phone call from the Vientiane Embassy indicating that Ambassador Sullivan wanted him to proceed immediately to the area and discover exactly what had happened. Apprehensive that an American had been captured or killed, and fearing negative publicity, Sullivan demanded information prior to sundown. To achieve timely results, theater assets were placed at Lair's disposal--mainly jet and American-flown T-28 aircraft.

Lair's personal pilot and friend, Bob Hamblin, drove him to Xieng Lom in a Dornier. They took a command radio unit to

coordinate with the airborne assets as necessary. In addition, Ed Dearborn and Bill Zeitler were tasked to assume command and control in a Caribou.

After making visual contact with Burke and his party along the Beng River, the Helio Courier pilot and Louis O'Jibway returned to 69-Alpha, where Jib transferred to Phil Goddard's H-34. Then, together with helicopters flown by Dick Elder and Ray Semora, they formed a rescue team and extracted the original group. ³ Other members of the Thai team were later recovered. During the activity, someone reported possibly seeing someone in the Porter cockpit. While en route to Xieng Lom, F-105 pilots checked in with the Command-and-Control plane, so Terry directed the controller to have the jets strike an ammunition storage area near the FAR camp.

What Terry Burke or anyone did not know at the time was that Brace and other FAR and Thai men were gathered alongside the strip under guard, while preparing to move north. During confusion caused by the bombing, Pathet Lao and Vietnamese troops had scurried for cover. In the process, they withdrew from the vicinity, leaving their captives unguarded. Taking advantage of the fortuitous situation, all escaped--except the American. ⁴ Curiously, when informed that they were departing the area, Ernie was totally unresponsive. Whether dejected, shell shocked, or merely accepting his fate, he was last observed sitting beside the strip with his head between his knees. The

³ Dick Elder had been working in the Xieng Lom area and had heard other aircraft attempting to call Brace with information that Boum Lao was unfriendly.

⁴ Joe Flipse later talked to one FAR medic assigned to Nam Thouei who to claimed to have been an escapee.

Thai men, one gut shot, made their way to the Beng River. With the aid of logs, they floated downstream to a point where they were later discovered and extracted by an H-34 pilot.

Robbie and I landed just before Captain Goddard deposited his load at Xieng Lom. I still did not have a clear idea of the problem, but when I saw the number of aircraft on the ground and the circle of pilots stretched out on the grass, I knew that whatever was in store for me would not be appealing. This feeling was reinforced when I noted that I was the center of attention. Everyone was smiling and staring intently at me, like the Cheshire cat who had just eaten the rat. As I moved toward the group, someone mentioned that a Porter had been shot down at Boum Lao and I would be tasked to land and check the aircraft for the man or his body. During the past year, I had already survived several close calls and believed that I had done considerably more than my share of hairy work. At that point, I did not choose to hear any more. All the pent-up tension and emotion within my body exploded. I shook my head and blurted, *"Bull shit! Why does it always have to be me?"* Most of my peers knew my negative attitude regarding the dangerous SAR work. Like some others in the helicopter program, I was not bashful about voicing my opinion and opposition to extra hazardous work that I believed U.S. military units should be performing. My outburst elicited howls and gales of laughter among the onlookers. It was an expected response from individuals relieved that they were not tapped to perform the mission. Unsure of my next action, extremely angry, I wheeled and started toward Hotel-29. Aware that there were people already present who could perform the job, I required time to cool down and think. It did not take me long to return to earth. I climbed into the cockpit and grabbed my security blanket, a soiled flack vest. Donning it while



Western view of the Xieng Lom Valley and the grass airstrip.
Mac Thompson Collection.

ambling toward the expanded circle of my peers, I concluded and rationalized that because we were the only double crewed ship in the group, it was proper and correct that we perform the mission. Of course, that was the exact reason we were sent the great distance from Long Tieng.

While Bill Lair and I discussed details of the mission, Goddard landed with the Customer. I had not seen Terry Burke for months and was shocked at his gaunt, wan appearance. After he launched into a description of the unbelievable events that day, I better understood the reason for his disheveled look and the situation confronting us. Upon learning that the missing pilot was Ernie Brace, I nearly choked. At first, I had mixed emotions about doing anything to help someone I considered a supreme scoundrel, but did not say anything. Even though I considered him a prime scumbag, the guy was also an American and fellow aviator. Under the circumstances, his past no longer mattered, and morally I was obligated to do all in my power to find him, dead or alive.

Details were limited regarding the site or the current situation. Bango alert USAF F-4s from Ubon had reportedly prepped the area earlier and the latest airborne intelligence gathered by Bob Hamblin in his Dornier indicated no present enemy activity sighted in the immediate location of the aircraft. None of us were particularly enthusiastic about the proposed mission. Surprisingly, despite his harrowing experience that morning, Burke, a typical gung-ho Marine, insisted on accompanying us to the landing strip. He, Dachar Adulyadet a Thai Moslem, and reputedly one of the finest PARU to ever graduate from Lair's early program, would investigate the Porter for evidence of Brace after we landed adjacent to the plane. Providing welcome escort, T-28 Alpha Team pilots would accompany

us when they arrived from the temporary Luang Prabang base. Another H-34 pilot would cover our activity from altitude.

We did not have long to wait for our escort, and struck out from Xieng Lom by late afternoon. Before departing to accomplish the mission, I had a frank talk with Robertson. I had utmost confidence in him, and thought he might enjoy flying this mission, and even consider it his very first combat flight upcountry with Air America under a baptism of fire. If what I had heard about the man was true, such conflict would be nothing new to him. After explaining what was expected of us, I offered to let him remain in the right seat with the express understanding that I would make all gross decisions and assume helicopter control if the situation warranted. He readily agreed. I felt fairly comfortable and confident knowing that I would share the cockpit with a person who was an excellent pilot, knew the taste of combat, and was not likely to panic under fire. I would sit "shotgun," monitor the situation, conduct radio calls, provide assistance in an emergency, and, if required, offer covering fire to our exposed left flank with the M-2 carbine recently acquired from Customer Flynn Perry at Pakse.

We sailed past the Mekong and Pak Beng. When the Alphas came on the air, of the four aircraft and pilots involved, I recognized Don Romes and Jim Rhyne's voices (Joe Potter and Bill McShane also participated). We joined a few miles south of the target. I briefed Jim that before commencing our landing approach I would like him to provide a couple east-west dry passes along each side of the runway. If anyone was waiting for us on the ground, the dry runs would tend to draw premature fire from "Nervous Nellies" and reveal their positions. In addition, this technique would conserve their limited .50 caliber

ammunition for our actual approach. Then hoping to minimize exposure and time on the approach, I briefed Robbie to make a low, high-speed approach, followed by a hasty deceleration to landing. It comprised one of the maneuvers practiced in the Navy-Fleet Marine Corps training syllabus, and I trusted Army helicopter training also included the coordinated drill. I further advised Robbie to maintain 2800 rpm and sufficient pitch to facilitate an instant takeoff should it become necessary. Then, with the intention of further reducing ground time, I advised Burke to make all possible haste in accomplishing his portion of the mission.

Despite limited planning and briefing, mission execution occurred like clockwork. As we closed on the Porter, the Alpha pilots set up a daisy chain, squirrel cage type pattern. With gun systems hot they hosed the sides of the strip with .50 caliber fire. Robbie expertly drove the bird toward the dirt runway, performed a hairy flare, and plunked our ship down a few yards from the wounded Porter facing us. During approach I carefully scanned the dense tree line set back a few yards from the strip's perimeter, for it afforded likely ambush sites and potential sources of trouble. Happily, I detected no overt movement or activity. On the downside, I observed no evidence of holes or debris from the purported jet strikes, and wondered where the Air Force prep bombing had been conducted.

Pre-alerted, at touchdown Burke and Dachar both leaped from the cabin door. While Dachar covered Terry's advance with an automatic weapon, the young man dashed at high port toward the Porter's door. Fearing the entrance might be booby-trapped, Terry hopped on the wheel strut step and peered inside. With no human in evidence and us waving frantically for him to return to the helicopter, he dashed back to Hotel-29 at amazing speed.

Although only a few minutes actually evolved, our ground time seemed an eternity.

After our passengers were settled, I gave a "thumbs up" and Robbie launched down strip at full power. To discourage shooting from any hidden last-minute heroes, with the M-2 set on full automatic, I opened up and sprayed the tree line with a full magazine of .30 caliber rounds. The absence of actual battle conditions was fortunate, for as presenting a sitting duck, we would have created a tempting target for even the least proficient rifleman. Since I had not observed any fire, my action was mostly bravado to release some of my nervous tension. I felt better, but the dramatic event probably had the net result of scaring my passengers into believing we were under fire, as reported by some principals. ⁵

Heeding my instructions, to remain low, Robbie paralleled the strip, accelerating until clearing the runway and reaching the jungle. Then, following my hand signal, he instantly turned south, raised the nose, and traded airspeed for a high-speed climb to altitude. Confident that we were safely out of the danger zone, I released the Tangos and they went about their business, expending unused ordnance on pre-briefed targets.

The T-28 pilots RTB Luang Prabang, while another set of aircraft replaced them. Anticipating a worst possible scenario in which we might catch hell, I was elated at how trouble-free the mission had actually been conducted. Apparently, Lady Luck still rode shotgun with me, at least that day. Most of all, I

⁵ Terry Burke later revealed that the T-28 pilots making a pass alongside the strip almost hit him, and as he was running for the helicopter, ground fire erupted from the village. I never heard or observed any fire.

was impressed with "Robbie's" sterling performance, and hoped that he had obtained an adequate appreciation for what was now becoming a daily upcountry occurrence. I believed that he would fit perfectly into our group. If granted the option, in the time-honored tradition of granting battlefield commissions, I would have instantly promoted him to a Captain.

Charlie Davis and Flight Mechanic Champanil had spent the previous two nights at Luang Prabang. On the 21st, Charlie received a call to proceed to LS-174. Checking his map, he headed toward the site and arrived overhead about the time we were on final approach to the Boum Lao strip. Not having been briefed as to the situation or mission, he thought it strange that we were going to land beside the Porter. After we departed, Charlie remained alone in the area, flying over the jungle looking for signs of movement, until other aircraft returned and he recovered at Site-69 for fuel. He recalled me being unshaven and looking unkempt. This was not uncommon, for I had a heavy dark beard then.

Within a half hour, we RTB Xieng Lom, dropped our passengers, and in addition to a relay from his airborne command and control of a negative American sighting, debriefed Bill Lair on the mission results. Later, Bill released us to return to the Boum Lao area and loiter in a search mode in case Brace was sighted or attempted to make contact. In addition, we provided SAR coverage and target information for Burke and Hamblin in a recon aircraft, and for Alpha pilots who shuttled in and out of the area from Luang Prabang, raising havoc on villages and suspected enemy positions along the high northwestern ridge lines overlooking the Beng Valley. Based on information provided by Pop Buell, they also struck a few known enemy areas. Bill Lair, intending to create a diversion and possibly help Brace

escape, directed Jim Rhyne and his flight to strike a choice interdiction site in the valley near Mounng Sai. The three aircraft aimed solely at military targets, but with darkness descending, some bombs went astray hitting a Buddhist wat. Rhyne's T-28 was hit in the belly, causing smoke in the cockpit, but he RTB safely.

Hoping for some indication of Brace's location and a possible recovery attempt, we remained in the area until after sunset, recovering at Xieng Lom long after dark. Bill Lair and Hamblin had already departed for Udorn before we landed. They left word that the search would resume the following morning. Because of the time and our double crew capability, we were advised to RON at Xieng Lom with Charlie Davis and Champanil. This likely marked a first for us helicopter pilots.

That night we dined on cold "C" rations and slept in the Customer bunker. It was little more than a pit in the ground, lined and fortified with sand bags and dirt filled fifty-five-gallon steel drums. Dank and grimy, it certainly was no Hilton Hotel, totally lacking a pleasant ambiance. The pad looked exposed. I wondered about area security, and what the Customer knew and was not telling me.

The following day unfolded much the same as during the post 21st mission, with many aircraft participating. It consisted of standing-by, searching, targeting, trail interdiction, and SAR coverage of Alpha T-28 bombing and strafing activity. Elder and Semora landed troops behind a T-28 strike within a mile of Boum Lao. During a second trip to the area, the passengers with Brace were recovered. Back at Xieng Lom during the debriefing, it was then learned that Ernie had curiously refused to leave during the confusion fostered by an air strike.

Between refueling periods and during down time, I had a chance to talk with and observe Bill Lair at work. Seemingly an unflappable person, he remained on the radio coordinating the entire air operation. In addition to his T-28 air assets, Lair could summon a previously-formed elite Thai rescue team on standby at Pitts Camp, and two SGU companies from Vang Pao's resources. The be-spectacled, kindly looking gentleman, who reminded me of a college professor, seemed totally out of place beside us scruffy individuals. In soft spoken tones, he patiently replied to my questions and explained the latest situation. Excited by Air America's highly unusual first time James Bond 007 license-to-kill air activity, initiated expressly for this particular SAR, I was proud of Bill's and my organization.

We had learned our SAR lessons well, evolving from the dark days of the tentative handling during Bill Zeitler's incident. Striking back at enemy areas previously declared off-limits was infectious, and created a cozy feeling among us combatants. Moreover, it represented the ultimate payback for all the previous incidents in which we formed the sole target.

I thought Bill really showed his mettle that day and I became very fond of him. Feeling more comfortable with the man, seeking further rapport, I asked him if he might be related to my Mother's cousin, actor Judson Lair, who appeared with Peggy Wood as the father Lars in the popular early black and white TV series, *I Remember Mama*. He replied in the negative. If there was any family relationship, it was probably generations removed, as Bill was originally from Texas and Mom's cousin from the Northeast.

By afternoon, four Whiplash 105 pilots from Takhli arrived in the area and rendezvoused with C-123 Victor Control to act as

high combat air patrol for the ongoing SAR. The jet's mission was to only use their 20mm cannon and rockets to protect our H-34s and T-28 pilots flying low cover. However, Victor Control's enthusiastic pilot seized the opportunity to conduct a strike on an area north of Boum Lao toward Mounq Sai. The unauthorized error resulted in the deaths and wounding of over thirty friendly FAR and civilians purportedly near, or in, a Buddhist wat.

In the afternoon, during my final refueling interval, Bill Lair received word from Ambassador Sullivan to immediately cease all indiscriminate bombing in the Beng Valley. Somehow, he had learned that "innocent" civilian villagers were being killed, and was concerned regarding public disclosure. Angry at this interruption of our fun, Lair's jaw tightened, and I finally detected a little emotion from the normally placid man. Additionally, it was the first time (except from the highly emotional Poe) I had seen such determination from a high-level Customer intent on destroying the enemy. Using the excuse of a downed aviator, we wanted the bombing to continue and drive the enemy to his knees. Perhaps Sullivan's edict was a "CYA" wink-wink, or Lair simply chose to ignore it, for T-28 strikes continued until dark.

After flying less than two hours on the 23rd, I was relieved on station and deadheaded home on PCD. Robbie remained with Hotel-29 and his replacement Captain. I was conflicted about leaving the area before achieving positive results in our quest for Brace. I had invested a lot of time and sweat in the last few days, and believed that I had every right to rescue the man.

Davis remained until the morning of the 24th. Performing some searching that was mostly done by fixed wing pilots on semi-standby, he worked a little for the Site-69 Customer.

The last few days had provided an overabundance of excitement in our group. No civilian American aircrew member had been captured since the Air America C-46 was shot down near Tchepone in September 1963. Because of the lack of information, assets, support, and enemy activity, that early SAR had not been particularly rewarding, and, because of political considerations Ambassador Unger had terminated the SAR early. During Billy Zeitler's downing the previous August, more gumption by higher ups had eventually been displayed, and the entire episode was handled somewhat more efficiently. Obviously, each succeeding incident contributed to our maturation process. Consequently, the Brace episode definitely marked the most coordinated and well-supported SAR effort to date for one of our own people.

Brace's recent capture renewed thoughts regarding my actions if ever encountering an identical situation. *How would I perform if confronted with imminent capture? Would I chance shooting my way out of a situation to achieve safety, or merely accept my fate?* Such a circumstance presented a conundrum. We were, after all, nonmilitary personnel with posted rewards on our heads, and could easily be construed as spies. Of course, during talk sessions most pilots divulged their macho sides, professing never to be taken alive. However, realizing that each situation was different, deep down in my innards, I was really not sure how I would actually react and hoped never to find out.

Air activity and physical ground interdiction continued for days in the form of action teams placed by H-34 pilots along trails through Houng Hong (LS-134) and beyond. Escorted by Alphas, restricted from their previous lethal activity, Terry

Burke flew with Bob Hamblin in the Bird Beech Baron targeting legal sites, searching, and dropping leaflets announcing a substantial reward for recovery of the captive Brace. Using indigenous information, attempts were made to pinpoint Ernie's exact location for Pitt's Camp commando units patiently standing by at Long Tieng. Timely information was invariably lacking, reported hours or days after Brace had been moved to new locations. He was initially tracked to Moung Sai, where he was mistreated for the purported errant wat bombing, and then marched onward toward Dien Bien Phu. After three weeks of walking on jungle trails, he arrived at Moung Lao on the North Vietnamese border, and was then trucked to a prison camp. ⁶

During the weeks following Brace's capture, I attempted to keep apprised on the latest developments of his whereabouts. Intelligence revealed that Brace had been moved on remote trails from prison to prison. Like a beast of burden, he was last reported being prodded northward toward the Chinese border under the weight of a hundred kilo sack of rice (220 pounds). Then,

⁶ Terry Burke received only the 16th Intelligence Star ever awarded by CIA for his work during the Brace incident.

Never substantiated, Terry later heard from a credible source that he had been a prime target of the 21 May attack on Boum Lao, and that General Ouane Rathikone was involved. The opium trade was a key source of Ouane's income. During his time in Sayaboury Province and in the Beng Valley, Terry had been discouraging the people from opium agriculture. He preferred the men to function as soldiers.

After many harrowing experiences in Laos, Burke departed Southeast Asia in June on a well-deserved extended vacation. For about two years he underwent advanced training and language courses until 1967, and then was assigned to Manila, PI, for three years. Upon return, he transferred to the U.S. Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (DEA). Following additional training, and after a Miami, Florida, assignment, Terry responded to DEA's search for individuals with overseas experience and ended up in the hills of Afghanistan. Before retiring and his subsequent formation of an investigative business, he had attained the position of DEA's Acting Director.

all trace of the man ended. As reports and other events took precedence, thoughts of Brace faded.

In 1973, I read a lengthy *Life Magazine* interview with one of the POWs just released from the Hanoi Hilton. The pilot's account related a night in late 1968 when a new man was hurled into the next cell. By then, a communications system consisting of wall tapping Morse code had been instituted by prisoners to circumvent the Vietnamese no talking policy. The newcomer was crying and failed to acknowledge the tapping signals at first. It was Brace, who after years of being shuttled through the jungle from prison to prison, and eventually held in a cave near Dien Bien Phu for two years, had finally arrived at the central lockup.

The last time I encountered Brace's name was after leaving a volatile and revolutionary Iran in 1979 and temporarily residing in New Jersey. While I was conducting a job search of companies seeking aviation employees, Brace's name was listed as a senior manager in the Evergreen Helicopter organization. Aware of the company's Agency ties, I was surprised to find someone with his dark history listed in authority. It appeared that the amazing Brace still maintained ties to those in high places and had once again managed to overcome adversity. Not wanting anything to do with such a man, I never sent a resume to Evergreen.

According to Marius Burke and other accounts, Brace had conducted himself well while a POW in Hanoi. This had likely resulted in his Evergreen employment. Before the fall of South Vietnam, while Marius still worked in Saigon during March 1975, Brace arrived as an Evergreen representative. At that point in the war, the company was going to assume the Air America contract, and Ernie was negotiating aircraft purchase.

During subsequent years, Brace worked for Sikorsky Helicopters performing representative duties in China for three years. During this period, Marius had occasion to talk to him and learned that Ernie was attempting to have his general discharge reversed to obtain military credit for his extended time in Southeast Asia. Burke does not doubt that he succeeded.⁷

UPCOUNTRY AGAIN

After two nights at home, I was scheduled to switch Hotel-12 with Hotel-14 at Na Khang. It was late in the month, and as I was well over a hundred hours, I fully expected to be scheduled for such trash work. Theoretically at least, the trip might not expose me to the jaws of death. Consistent with the rush to hire

⁷ Sources:

Terry Burke, Letter to Ernie Brace, 05/10/73.
 Terry Burke Emails, 03/09/03, 03/10/03.
 Terry Burke *Early Days* Memoir, 09/10/06.
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 Wayne Knight Emails, 07/12/00, 07/14/00.
 Charlie Davis, Phone Call, 03/10/96.
 Charlie Davis Letter, 03/20/96.
 Author Note: Brace authored a book that differs in many ways from what the Author and others recall regarding his adventures while in the Marine Corps, and in the Beng Valley. I suggest that those interested read the book, compare, and judge the content for themselves. Ernest Brace, *A Code to Keep: The True Story of America's Longest-Held Civilian Prisoner of War in Vietnam* (New York, N. Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1988).
 Victor Anthony, 169, (Anthony writes about the USAF alert aircraft bombing in Luang Prabang Province. However, I believe that due to the secret nature of the Brace SAR, his facts are necessarily skewed, and relate to the same incident.)

new people, Chuck Eckerle was my First Officer and Mitch Drew the Flight Mechanic. Eckerle did not remain very long with Air America. He was one of a new breed who claimed to understand the aviation industry from a Stateside perspective, and always complained about less-than-satisfying living conditions upcountry. This was voiced after we RON and enjoyed the creature comforts at the Sam Tong hostel. Whenever I heard such complaints, I chuckled, and was reminded of the long RONS without hot water to shower, any decent food, and huge rats frolicking throughout our living area. Eckerle was also the first individual I recalled who indicated that our organization required a union. No, this was not a job for those of his ilk.

After a short test flight, we stopped at Vientiane, where I introduced the new man to FIC personnel and procedures used in the office. We also topped off and on-loaded passengers for The Alternate. Using standard routes to avoid enemy areas, we arrived at Site-36 within two hours.

I was not thrilled with the prospect of ferrying a ship south with a sick engine, but that was my task. Consistent with previous ferry flights, and despite Abadie's admonishment not to waste time during maintenance RTBs, using whatever routes I considered safe, we flew the long way home through Paksane. The flight took a little more than three hours and we spent the last fifty minutes after sunset, but taxied into the parking area without incident.

A flight on the 29th ended another full, exciting, and exhausting month. Flight Mechanic Magpantay and I worked day missions out of Paksane. I was without a First Officer for the first time in several upcountry flights. This did not bother me, as I enjoyed flying by myself, but did wonder what would occur

should I be summoned into a SAR situation without benefit of a partner.

UDORN

Billy Pearson resigned as the Rendezvous Club Manager. There were certainly numerous reasons involved, which merged to influence his decision. Pilots were in short supply and his prior years of upcountry experience would be welcomed by the Flight Department. Divorced from upcountry work, he felt rankled to be left out of most pilot conversations, particularly those involving SAR situations. This, plus our excellent monthly paychecks, undoubtedly influenced him to resign.

Paramount to Billy's decision, he was tiring of the daily requirements of the mundane Club Manager position. Just short of a nervous breakdown, he had quite enough of the large crowds invading the Club because of increased civilian and military personnel, and of requirements to hire sufficient waiters and waitresses to service the patrons. He was also constantly roiled by wild children running and yelling throughout the compound, inattentive and complaining mothers, and the huge task of providing sufficient food and drink for all Club members. Ben Moore had twice previously restricted the number of military personnel allowed access to the Club, and was entertaining thoughts of doing it again to provide unrestricted access to Company employees, Customers, and visiting VIPs. ¹

In order to restore his equilibrium, Bill and his family departed Udorn for extended home leave. He was replaced by Art Lee Angelo, a retired U.S. Army sergeant who had obtained major experience in club management while in the service.

¹ EW Knight Email, 04/18/01.
Ben Moore May 1965 Monthly Report.

The face of the Royal Thai Udorn Airbase was fast changing for both civilian and military efforts. Preparations were being made to support and house additional USAF planes and personnel. On the Air America side, Moore and Abadie were dickering with the RTA adjacent to our facility to obtain additional land near the school and old administration building, and another small plot in the rear of the hangar. These would be used to build apartments and maintenance facilities. The construction of a new Operations-Administration building was envisioned to begin soon. Other future projects considered were a hard surface for the dusty laterite taxiway, more concrete ramps in front of the two hangars, and construction of a third hangar.

The month of June represented a momentous month in the Author's life, both in regard to mortality and in Air America's participation and contribution to USG military SAR work. It was one in which difficult personal decisions had to be weighed concerning plans to remain with the Company, or terminate employment and return to the USA.

Day one of June began with a newsy, scrawled handwritten letter home. Martha Jones still inquired about my missing typewriter. I was as mystified as she as to the machine's disposition, and was resigned to the fact that it was probably gone forever. I was a little concerned that she would feel obligated to replace it.

Managing Director Jim Coble had not replied to my query regarding the concrete block project in Kuala Lumpur. However, we had some information forwarded by a director who had recently visited the site. After being shipped to Australia by mistake, the Besser machinery was installed, and the plant was nearly finished, except for the roof. However, utilities were not yet in place. Apparently, a government contract for production of

eight million blocks was in hand that would provide work for three years.

All the delays were difficult to understand, for a year had elapsed since the project's commencement. We had all been aware that it would be slow, but not this slow. Still, I was optimistic that the project would make money in the long run if Coble was diligent and careful as a manager. To further assess the situation, I planned a trip there in July.

The rumored 120 dollar increase in monthly base pay became a reality. With Continental Airlines entering the theater shortly to compete with Air America for Air Force contracts, and was likely interested in luring away some of our fixed wing pilots, although a paltry raise, it was inevitable the Company would do something to influence us to stay.

I was upgraded to permanent Captain, which entitled me to full monthly pay when on annual, home, or sick leave. Another new benefit, at year's end and subsequent ones, I would be entitled to a fifty dollar raise in base pay. There was a ten-year upper limit to these raises.

I received a statement from Taipei that I had accumulated 2,500 dollars in the retirement fund, the only worthwhile Company fringe benefit I considered suitable for the future.

The Estes family was actually leaving Air America. Howard was not the only pilot having nightmares, for I was unconsciously doing my fair share of bed thrashing. He was taking early home leave with the idea of tacking on twenty-one additional days of sick leave consistent with the time required for the amoeba cure. He planned to have Taipei's Company doctor authorize this once he arrived there. However, the request was denied, and the family never returned to Southeast Asia.

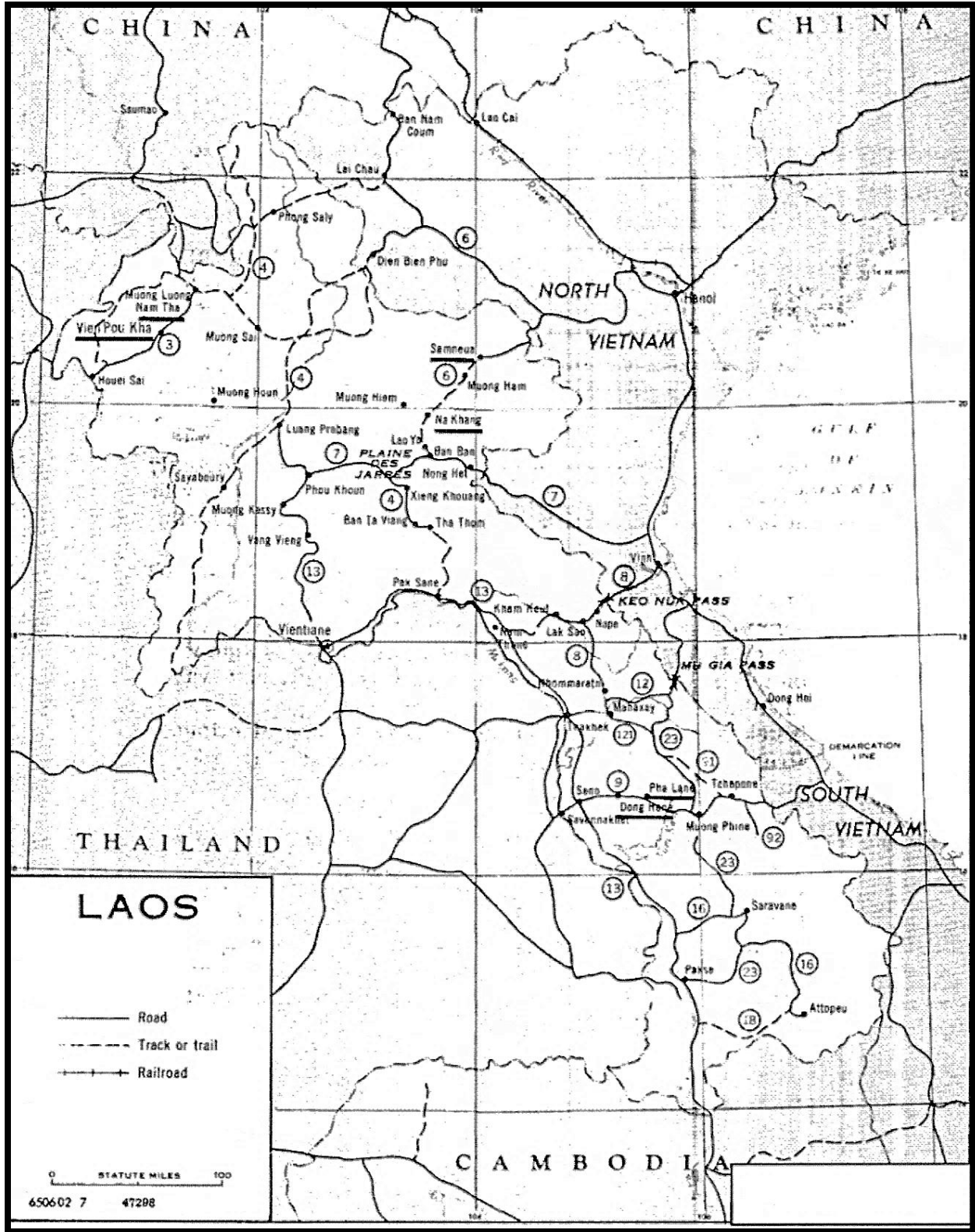
In reply to Dad's inquiry regarding stamps, I informed him that Tom Moher was in Bangkok and not available to talk about them anymore. The ones I had recently sent him came from my girlfriend (Tuie), who received letters from a friend in India. This was the first mention to my parents regarding my future wife. With the negative reaction I had received from my previous query regarding marriage to a Thai woman in 1963, for the time being, I chose to tread lightly and first test the waters this time.

UPCOUNTRY at NA KHANG WITH COLONEL TONG

During June, in addition to staying overnight at the newly opened Sam Tong hostel, we began one-night RONS at Na Khang. Except for providing a rude thatched hut that allowed crews to maintain a semblance of shelter in bad weather, the upcountry site was ill equipped with creature comforts. Also, living among filth and rats was reminiscent of our early experience in Pop Buell's Sam Tong warehouse. RONS there did tend to diminish ferry time to the site, especially during the rainy season and at a time when serious friendly movement toward Hua Moung was underway.

On the third, an intelligence report stated:

"To the east in Sam Neua Province, an uneasy quiet prevails following a series of sharp but futile communist attempts to dislodge government forces on Route-6 north of Na Khang. Despite the communists' failure to clear the road, they continue to extend its motorable section southwest of Sam Neua town. This will facilitate both the supply of troops engaged in the clearing operation and the longer-range objective of opening



Underlined sites denote current trouble areas.
CIA Bulletin, 06/03/65.

another supply route from North Vietnam [to Ban Ban and] the Plaine des Jarres." ²

Charlie Davis might have been one of the first H-34 pilots to remain overnight at Site-36. Another first for him was meeting Lieutenant Colonel Tong, government leader of the mixed FAR and Meo forces in Sam Neua Province. Not having experience in the area prior to the fall of Hua Moung and other sites, Charlie was quite uneasy flying to unfamiliar outlying sites to the north. During the course of the day, while loading to supply one of the forward outposts was underway, a tall, wiry man wearing no insignia walked to the H-34. Exuding authority, he climbed the left side of the helicopter. Then he pointed to himself, the seat, his eyes, and the front of the helicopter. Charlie understood the pantomime to mean that he wanted to enter the cockpit and guide him to a site. Davis, happy to have company during the lonely work, acceded to his request. As he watched the man expertly buckle the somewhat difficult safety restraints, he thought that this guy had done this before and knew his way around a helicopter.

When they reached the position, the man nimbly departed, indicating that Charlie should wait a few minutes and he would be right back. The pilot was surprised and pleased at the man's good English. Curious as to who he was, he watched the "guide" conducting rounds of the outpost, talking with the men and officers, and studying a map. Most of all, he was impressed that those he came in contact with snapped to attention and showed respect. Despite his long-haired, rag-tag appearance, he was obviously someone of an elevated rank.

² Central Intelligence Agency Daily Brief, Laos, 06/03/65.

That night, after stowing their sleeping bags in the long crew hut above and adjacent to the runway, Charlie and his Flight Mechanic Joe Siaotong were invited to eat with the FAR officers and visitor Pop Buell. Seeing Pop, Davis thought his RON probably had something to do with providing an escape mechanism for the head AID representative upcountry should the situation warrant. As they ate sticky rice and weeds from the common dipping pot, and happy to have that, Pop introduced Charlie to the "guide," Colonel Tong. A long conversation ensued between the two, which revealed a very intelligent and interesting man. Tong, who had attended U.S. Army courses at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and travelled a little in the States, was eager to learn more about the USA. He queried Charlie about Virginia and his home state of Tennessee, and flying in the Marine Corps. Before leaving for the sleeping quarters, Davis considered that he had formed a good rapport with the Colonel, and believed that with leaders like Tong commanding, the region was relatively safe from communist takeover.

Tong was familiar with the area, and would guide Davis several times in the future. ³

DUCK SOUP-APRIL TO OCTOBER

Another reason for H-34 crew RONs at Na Khang was the recent discovery that DVR-based transport planes had blatantly conducted twilight drop missions in Sam Neua Province. Although there had been several rumors of such activity, there had never

³Charlie Davis Book, 81-83.
Charlie Davis Letter, 03/20/96.

been actual valid and reliable sightings of covert enemy air flying over the country since the Soviet air lift terminated in November 1962.

By 13 April an intelligence brief revealed:

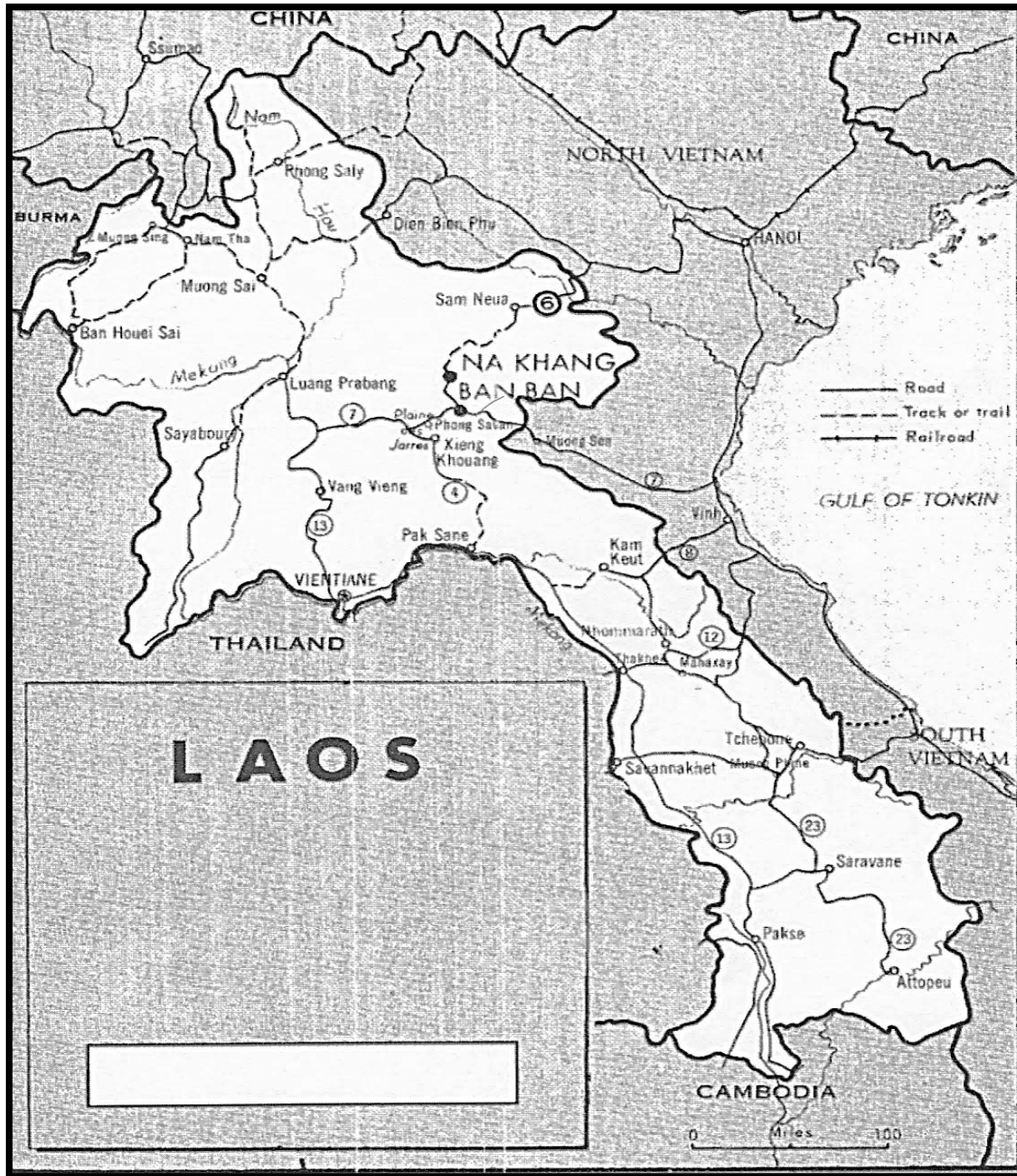
"On the night of 7 April aircraft 'from the east' were [redacted] circling over communist positions near Na Khang in the hills north of Ban Ban. The next night additional aircraft [redacted] were spotted dropping supplies in the same general area..."

These flights may reflect a one-time response to the particular tactical situation in the area, where the communists have been pressing to gain control over Route-6. Occasional flights to other key areas-presumably on an ad hoc basis to provide emergency support-have been noted since the Soviet airlift ended in the fall of 1962.

*On the other hand, these flights could presage more systematic aerial resupply efforts by the communists. U.S. and Laotian air strikes at key transportation points, coupled with the impending rainy season, are likely to make overland resupply operations increasingly difficult..."*⁴

During the middle of April unconfirmed road watch team reports claimed that Il-14 type cargo planes were conducting airdrop activity. Because of a lack of positive information, and the possibility of an international incident should dignitaries be killed during an attack on ICC aircraft flying to Vientiane from Hanoi, no intercepts were immediately approved.

⁴ CIA Brief, 04/13/65. Laos: The North Vietnamese appear to be engaged in aerial resupply of advance communist positions in northeastern Laos.



Enemy cargo airdrop resupply missions were observed in the Na Khang area (LS-36) during April 1965 in upper Military Region Two.
 CIA Map, 04/13/65.

By 17 April, following relaxation of USG control over air operations, LBJ sanctioned hot pursuit intercepts. Later Yankee Team reconnaissance photographs confirmed a Soviet Li-14 parked at the Sam Neua airfield. Since Sam Neua was still off limits to bombing, GCI units at Nakhon Phanom and Udorn continued to track the Li-14 in May. It was discovered that planes flew day-twilight missions, sometimes to the Plain of Jars. The radar units plotted flights involving regular patterns of two fixed routes and drop areas.

Enemy planes were observed by indigenous troops and Americans alike from both the Na Khang and Houei Thom (LS-27) areas, parachuting supplies throughout the Hua Moung area. With Ambassador Sullivan's advice, Souvanna Phouma authorized U.S. interdiction within the established rules of engagement (ROE), which stipulated that the enemy planes had to be engaged during an actual supply activity.

Tom Penniman, exhausting his monthly Bangkok STO, was at Don Muang trying to thumb a ride back to Udorn. It was late, and he had not yet achieved satisfaction boarding Air America flights to Udorn. However, there was a Bird Beech Baron parked on the ramp waiting for a VIP. Discovering that the aircraft was Udorn bound, Tom solicited a ride from PIC Bob Hamblin. Generally amenable to Air America employee requests for a ride, Bob was initially unable to guarantee anything, but Tom decided to wait and take a chance. A little later, Bill Lair arrived with CIA Director Richard Helms in tow. Tom had never met Lair and was surprised and pleased when Bill allowed him to ride with them. Tom sat in the right front seat with the two high-stroke spooks in the rear.

Within such tight quarters, Tom could overhear every word the men uttered. The conversation centered on the Duck Soup

operation. Lair had received reports that unidentified aircraft were flying at night on the Plain of Jars and upper Military Region Two. Based on this information, he wanted to know what Dick Helms proposed to do about it. Helms casually indicated that he could prevent all military flights from entering that area for several days at which time any aircraft seen in the area either visually or electronically on radar was fair game. Although he kept the conversation to himself, Penniman was amazed at being privy to such classified information and frank remarks.

Weather permitting, tentative plans went forward to conduct an initial Duck Soup intercept on 3 June. This entailed careful planning and coordination by the Vientiane Embassy Attaché with local air activity and ground troops. To aid in the endeavor, a competent Asian Forward Air Control (FAC) team was to be installed at Lima Site-27. F-105s from Korat would be employed to intercept the offending cargo planes. Victor Control would coordinate between the ground FAGs and the striking flight.

From the beginning, the Duck Soup program encountered problems. During the first week in June, the initial mission was scrubbed, as a double aircraft downing required the services of Victor Control to coordinate SAR rescue attempts. Additionally, because of a pressing requirement for the C-123 to ferry supplies to Site-36 for the impending Hua Mounng offensive, the ambassador requested that one of the newly arrived high flying USAF HC-54 planes based at Udorn be used for SAR work in lieu of the rotating HU-16s. Since logistic requirements for Na Khang and outlying drop zones required numerous Air America and Bird transport planes to fly late, the Duck Soup operation remained in abeyance.

By 25 June, attempts were made to resurrect the program using various mixes of aircraft, including two T-28 Alpha pilots flying aircraft staged at Long Tieng. Considering it fortunate that no American-piloted T-28s had been lost during dangerous SAR missions, State refused authorization to employ Air America-piloted T-28s for Duck Soup. The supposed logic behind this ruling, according to Director Trueheart, was that captured civilians who engaged in hostilities were generally treated by our enemy as underprivileged belligerents or possibly spies. Should Air America pilots flying combat missions be shot down and captured, then USG might have no legal basis to request treatment of the individual as a prisoner of war (POW) in accordance with (IAW) POW conventions or accepted international law practice. Capture of an Alpha pilot would lend credence to communist media charges regarding the paramilitary character of Air America. It would undermine USG's position with respect to Air America, RLAF T-28s, and support for the Geneva Accords.⁵ Instead of American civilians, the use of highly trained Lao or Thai pilots was proposed. After further consideration, Washington planners denied this concept because none of the pilots were proficient enough to launch and land T-28s at the forward Long Tieng strip. Also, because of language problems and projected night operations, such an operation was deemed far too

⁵ In the Author's estimation, Director Trueheart's paraphrased statement was not logical. It represented muddled thinking, for at this time the statement did not consider the current use of Alphas for SAR operations. If there was so much concern about Alpha pilots, then why were they even flying SAR or any missions? The same danger applied to any operation. Also, the hostiles we engaged did not honor any standard POW convention agreements.

dangerous for the Asian pilots to fly in the proximity of Na Khang.

Despite the Joint Chiefs of Staff request to provide Sullivan necessary authority to execute Duck Soup without first contacting Washington, over the next few months, further efforts to commence Duck Soup failed. Consequently, alert status military aircraft dedicated to the program were cancelled.

During September, in a rehash of the operation to address Vientiane Embassy queries and concerns, State concluded that political risks of Duck Soup were high and involved information outside the scope of their mission. Use of American T-28 pilots for intercepts was again reviewed, but still frowned on because of the extreme risks involved. A qualifying statement indicated that State accepted the risks to pilots for SAR operations, but was reluctant to conduct Duck Soup until evidence of enemy supply missions provided a distinct military advantage. State did not rule out employing Air America T-28 pilots, but wanted to review the question of their use when the next air supply drops were reported.

From 2 through 12 October, seventeen enemy planes were reported dropping cargo at night in Military Region Two. However, with political risks considered high, few or no enemy resupply sightings actually confirmed, and State objections to the interception program continuing, the interdiction mission petered out. As a result, no North Vietnamese transport plane was ever downed by friendly air.

I suspect that enemy air supply was conducted in greater proportions throughout the country than was reported, or we ever imagined. In April, while working late along the southeastern rim of the Bolovens Plateau, I observed a green C-47 type plane circling in the hills across the Se Kong river valley ten miles

to the east. I was suspicious, for the territory involved was certainly not occupied by us, and encompassed a fledgling logistical trail-road system along the high ground paralleling the Se Kong. Since neither Air America nor RLA planes flew similarly-painted aircraft, I could only assume it was an enemy plane dropping to troops in the field. I thought about flying across the valley and investigating further, but since I was the only friendly aircraft aloft, did not want to become a statistic. I reported my sighting to the Pakse Customer, but never discovered what action, if any, was taken.

Such unfriendly air activity in Military Region Four tends to be substantiated by Ken Conboy in his voluminous book *Shadow War*, in which he states in a footnote that:

"...foreign air support along the Trail continued until mid-1965. Throughout that summer, Indonesian An-12 transports, refueling in Phnom Penh, made periodic night drops to PAVN and Pathet Lao forces in southern Laos. This, offered in token support to Indochinese Communist forces by Indonesian President Sukarno, ended with the October 1965 takeover of Jakarta by anti-Communist military officers." ⁶

To discourage RLG interference with their nocturnal resupply missions, and press toward Site-36, the enemy attacked Houei Thom again on the 18th. However, reinforced by supplies and munitions flown into Na Khang and distributed to the site,

⁶William Sullivan to State, 06/02/65.
 Memorandum Dexter-Unger, 06/26/65.
 Washington Memorandum, 07/01/65.
 Telegram State to Sullivan, 09/28/65.
 Victor Anthony, 171-175, 184.
 Memorandum Office of Southeast Asian Affairs-Trueheart to Bundy, 09/17/65.
 Ken Conboy, 148 fn-4.

Colonel Douangtha's BV-27 defenders steadfastly held the position.

As a consequence, without actually realizing the reason, except by rumor, we were becoming more involved in both day and night operations. Therefore, in addition to our SAR asset presence, Customer-mandated RONS at Site-36 were authorized against the possibility of a sneak paratrooper airdrop on Na Khang, or U.S. intercept activity leading to a hasty SAR requirement.

Na Khang RONS became a nightly affair rather than a casual event. CPH Wayne Knight only RONSed there once in August. Previous to that, he became embroiled in many arguments with the AB-1 Customer regarding the suitability of helicopter crews remaining there overnight. Ever on the side of his pilots, he argued for Sam Tong RONS with early launches to Na Khang. He based this opinion on several reasons: security, comfort, crew rest, aircraft support, adequate communications, and other reasons. Sam Tong RONS would not have jeopardized the SAR effort in any way. Despite the CPH's objections, Site-36 RONS continued for reasons we suspected, but were not fully cognizant.⁷

SNIE-SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

By June, U.S. intelligence estimated Pathet Lao troop strength at 30,000. Supported by Vientiane regulars, they increasingly controlled larger portions of north, central and southern Lao supply routes to South Vietnam. Heavy jungle foliage and monsoon rains had further complicated U.S. bombing

⁷ Charlie Davis, *Across the Mekong*, 81-83.
Tom Penniman Emails, 03/31/00, 04/02/00.
EW Knight Emails, 07/24/00 (3).

programs over the previous month. Therefore, there was constant evaluation and reappraisal to improve the restrictive Lao bombing program.

Collective thinking among Theater military leaders and American officials in Vientiane concluded that enormous damage could be inflicted on the Pathet Lao if systematic bombing attacks were performed against the numerous hard target supply depots throughout enemy territory. Such attacks could commence in southern Laos and move steadily north over a three-week period. When details were presented to Souvanna Phouma he stated that a major hindrance to such a program was the fact that enemy forces used civilian population centers as principal warehouse storage areas. To counter collateral damage, methods of ensuring that the civilians had departed before strikes commenced needed to be pursued.

There was also speculation that the enemy transportation system was in heavy use on the Nam Ou north of Luang Prabang in Military Region One, and on the Se Kong east of the Bolovens Plateau in Military Region Four. Again, there were problems and restrictions levied on striking river boats, mainly because no positive method existed to ascertain whether natives or Pathet Lao troops were in the boats. Therefore, it was recommended that air strike targets concentrate on land traffic delivering supplies to embarkation points.

Pushing for increased bombing in North Vietnam, PACAF leaders indicated that such action would vastly improve the military situation in South Vietnam.

Washington Defense Intelligence Agency analysts were more specific as to the benefits of rainy season bombing, stating that in June air strikes had prevented the enemy from rolling up normal portions of northern Laos, and improved RLA morale.

On June 5, my birthday, three Lao Theung road watch teams were in place at Mugia, and two in the vicinity of Moung Phine, generating targeting information in Military Region Three. Route-12 bridges had been replaced by underwater causeways, but only the heavy monsoons closed the trail system to vehicular traffic.

Because of impenetrable and wide spread triple canopy jungle covering some areas in eastern Laos, Yankee Team photo reconnaissance failed to reveal communist logistic routes. The hands-on Ambassador Sullivan, wanting to see this for himself, was flown in an H-34 to a recently-captured section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Before landing, he noted that the road was not visible from the air. From the ground, little light filtered through the trees. Furthermore, the road was considered useable even during the monsoon season.

On the basis of the trip, he concluded that defoliants were required to clear the jungle, with infra-red bombing in lieu of visual means, and saturation tactics to create choke points.

Originally only a rudimentary system, in response to Rolling Thunder, the North Vietnamese military was forced to hastily establish an air defense system using sizeable amounts of Soviet and Chinese aid. However, the Vietnamese did not possess enough experienced pilots, radar operators, or Ground Control Intercept controllers to satisfy these needs. Therefore, a June Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) predicted that the Vietnamese leaders would request, and China would provide, additional air defense support. By the sixth, Second Division People's Volunteers entered the DVR to train operators and work on defenses and communications.

Despite early success against U.S. jets, by late summer the North Vietnamese Air Force had lost six MiGs. To rectify this

deficiency, a majority of the NVAF and technicians were rotated to Southern China for unhampered training. ⁸

SAM NEUA SAR-PAUL ING

Howard Estes' decision to depart Air America was timely. Despite persistent statements from local management that the USAF was soon going to assume SAR duties with superior machinery, the excitement and danger for us beleaguered helicopter crews continued unabated.

On Thursday, 3 June, Tom Hoppe rode upcountry with Bob Hitchman to continue area familiarization and mountain training. They worked around Site-20, and then were sent to Na Khang for the remainder of the day. Tom found Hitch not as conservative as Scratch in regard to aircraft loads. Bob would have an extra bag of actual or "hard rice" loaded and say, "Look at them smile." Tom did not believe smiling was a particularly accurate method of determining payloads, or that an extra bag of rice would win the war. He considered Bob's and some other pilots' techniques a little cavalier, and operating on a thin edge, particularly when they rolled or staggered off the ground, blades slapping, with enormous loads and then settled hard into some landing zones. He failed to condone the practice.

Prior to securing for the night, word filtered down to Long Tieng regarding a Navy A4D pilot shot down eleven miles east of

⁸ Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 68-70.
Telegram William Sullivan to State, Future Bombing Program in Laos, 05/20/65.
SNIE, June Estimates of Reactions to a Program of Attacks Against Air Defenses in the DVR.
Telegram William Sullivan to State, 06/21/65.
John Smith, *Rolling Thunder*, 80.

Sam Neua town. After this was relayed to, and collated in, the Udorn USAF rescue control center, and permission to enter the area granted by Ambassador Sullivan, Joe Hazen and Bill Zeitler entered the area in Caribou 392. However, they were unable to establish contact with the pilot, and were driven off by heavy ground fire. Because of the delay, time of day, and enemy resistance, it was too late to mount a serious rescue mission utilizing escort aircraft and H-34s. This was not a fortunate development, for previous SAR evidence indicated that if a downed aviator was not retrieved within thirty minutes, his odds of rescue were greatly diminished.

That night at dinner, and later in the Blue House, H-34 Captains were abuzz with nervous conversation about venturing into the area for a rescue attempt early the following morning. However, because of a dearth of information, they discussed only in general terms what they were going to do after arriving in Sam Neua. Mostly, they appeared interested in obtaining firearms. The new First Officers, seemingly only along for the ride, were generally left out of the conversation. All this activity was highly confusing to Hoppe, for, until that time, he was not even aware that Air America was involved in such work. He had naïvely joined the organization under the misconception that he was merely a supply pilot, and was not going to become involved in a war.

Lieutenant Paul Ilg, a Fleet pilot with Navy A-4D Attack Squadron-22, using the Beefeater call sign, was participating in a "routine" late afternoon armed reconnaissance mission following strikes in the Sam Neua area. It was his 29th combat mission. Suddenly, his Skyhawk was buffeted by a tremendous jolt. With flames shooting from both sides of the fuselage, he ejected. The automatic ripcord failed, but he deployed the

parachute at the last moment before thudding into a wooded area. The delay was actually fortunate, minimizing his time aloft from the heavy ground fire inundating the area. Attempts to contact his wingman failed. After hearing the sounds of enemy troops tramping through the bushes, he crawled into thickets and waited. During this period two people approached within 15 feet of his hiding spot. When the searchers moved on, he walked for a time toward a ravine. At dark, he found himself close to an enemy bivouac area. He slept for several hours, then crossed a clearing in the dark and ran into a volleyball net. Recovering from the shock, he continued to another area affording cover and concealment. This consisted of two-foot-high saw grass and heavy undergrowth. Satisfied with this setting, he again slept.

The Air America SAR armada formed early at Vientiane and Long Tieng, but because of early valley fog all parties were obligated to wait a short time until the hindrance to VFR flight cleared in the Sam Neua area. Several H-34s flown by PICs Hitchman, Connor, and others left Site-20 Alternate carrying drums of fuel in the belly to Lima Sites-36, 107, and 85 to await a sighting and a positive contact with the downed aviator. While passing Agony (LS-16), T-28 Alpha pilots joined them. A couple of H-34 pilots continued to Phu Pha Thi to top off, devise a plan and wait for the word to launch east. Hitchman did little in the way of briefing Hoppe on his duties, or what to expect during the SAR. Instead, he retrieved a .38 caliber revolver from his luggage. Tom, possessing no firearm, wondered what use the handgun could possibly be other than for personal defense against snakes or individuals on the ground during an escape and evasion (E&E) exercise.

Joe Hazen flew into the area in B-402, a VHF-UHF-equipped Caribou to act as Victor Control. Bill Zeitler was scheduled to

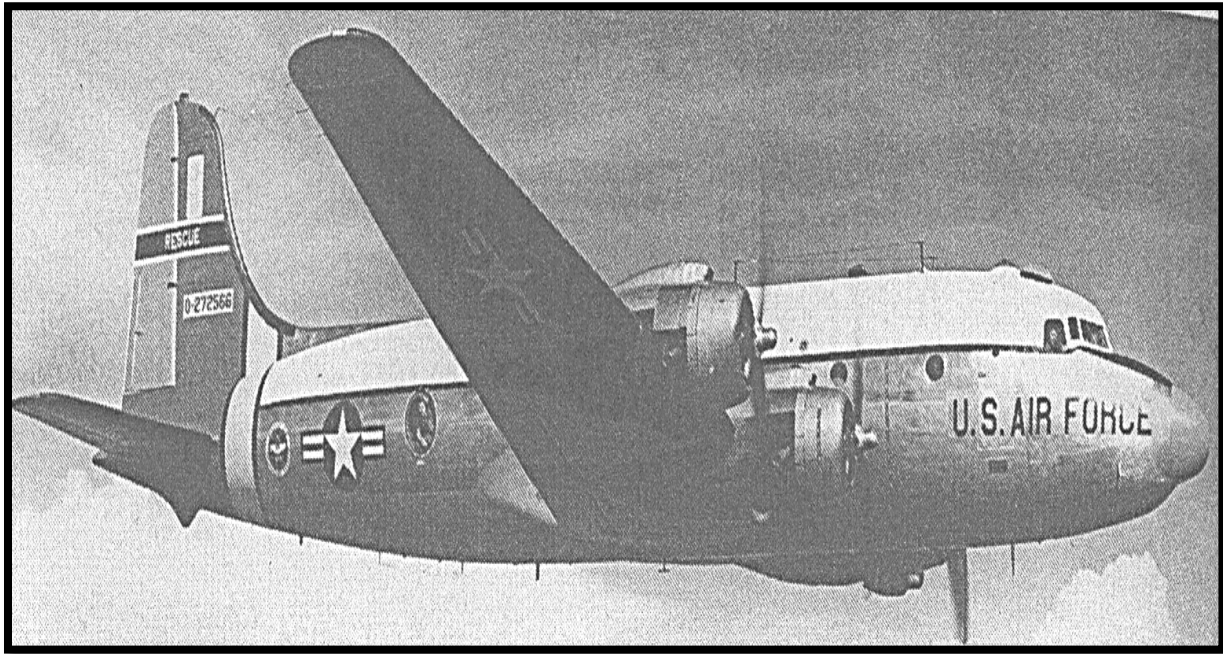
crew again with Joe, but while talking about the mission, he regurgitated a large amount of blood. Unable to perform the airman duty, he was replaced by Jerry Stemwettle.⁹

From his hiding place somewhere in Sam Neua, Ilg's hope of rescue soared when he heard the welcome sounds of aircraft at 1000 hours. Shortly afterward, the entire area erupted in anti-aircraft fire. Up to that point he had not realized the guns' proximity or their considerable number.

In June, three Douglas SC-54s--a version of the C-54 Skymaster--were dispatched on temporary duty (TDY) to Udorn from the 79th Air Rescue Squadron Guam and the 36th ARS Tachikawa, Japan. They were equipped with extra fuel tanks providing extra endurance of eighteen hours. Crammed with extra essential radio units, they replaced the less efficient Grumman HU-16s recently repositioned to Udorn to be closer than Korat to the MR-2 and North Vietnamese areas in contention. After arrival of the SC-54s, Albatross rotated to Danang, South Vietnam, to aid in rescues. Assuming a Crown call sign, the SC-54 crew was responsible for controlling helicopters and various fixed wing planes comprising the SAR forces. (I occasionally called the ship Clown.)

The Rescuemasters only served in the Theater for six months, until December, when two more powerful and better-

⁹ Bill Zeitler, believing the problem might have been associated with nerves and a bleeding ulcer, subsequently went to the Bangkok Christian Hospital. During an initial evaluation by a nurse before seeing Doctor Welles, he revealed that he had been using a nasal inhalant for membranes and clogged Eustachian tubes while flying at high altitude. The nurse immediately knew the cause of his trouble. Overuse of the medication had dried out Bill's esophagus, stimulating the bleeding.



USAF SC-54 "Rescuemaster" dispatched to Udorn, in June 1965 to replace the less desirable HU-16 during SAR missions. Also known to us as Crown, the ship had more endurance, the latest electronic and communication equipment, and could operate above most known enemy AAA fire. The ship continued in the Theater until replaced in December by improved HC-130H aircraft.

Tilford, *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia*, 26.

equipped HC-130H Hercules planes became available. At that time, the identifying call sign changed from Crown to King.

Coordinating with Crown, after some time Hazen established contact with Ilg on the 243.0 emergency frequency. Joe spotted the pilot in a field next to a village. He noted enemy troops were searching for him, but they were walking in the wrong direction.

With word of positive contact, helicopter pilots surged into the area. Hoppe noted a beehive of activity with jets and every available fighter-bomber available liberally dropping ordnance to suppress some of the enemy fire. Crown, circling well above and to the side of all the activity, coordinated the action. As helicopters flashed by him, Ilg talked or keyed his emergency radio. Direction finding cockpit readings revealed that he was close to an active gun emplacement.

Hitch remained at altitude while the sky exploded in black flak and blazing tracer fire from machine guns. He became excited, jinking back and forth, hoping to avoid the fire. Tom, new to combat, naively said, *"Do not worry. The shells are exploding well above us."*

Hitch sarcastically countered, *"Yeah. How do you think they got there?"*

One helicopter pilot dove down to attempt a rescue, but could not locate the man's exact location. During the endeavor, Ilg was heard to say, *"I am over here."*

Following a T-28 diving run, one of Joe Potter's 2.75-inch rockets failed to fully exit its pod. Observing the hang fire smoking under his wing, Joe bailed out and safely reached the ground. Moments later Jack Connor and Matt Luca retrieved Joe and quickly departed the area.

With AAA fire continuing to saturate the sky, one U.S. Navy Sandy AH-1H was hit and limped south to Udorn. While the helicopters returned to Site-85 and Houei Ma for fuel and to await further instructions, bad weather began obscuring the target area. Observing clouds closing in, Hazen advised Paul Ing to wait until dark, cross the southwest ridgeline toward a friendly village, and await a rescue attempt the following morning. At that moment, several 37mm shells burst near the Caribou. Therefore, Joe immediately broke to the right and departed the area. Shortly afterward, the remaining H-34 pilots standing by at various sites were advised that the mission was aborted for the day. Crews dispersed, with Hoppe returning to Udorn.

Because Hitchman informed management that Hoppe was not ready to upgrade, Tom spent a few more days flying test fights with various pilots. He believed that Hitch pressed the H-34 flight envelope, and because he did not do the same, Hitch thought his First Officer a little too tentative and slow while performing. Tom later flew with Dick Elder and other pilots who showed him different areas and explained the "ropes."

As with all extended SAR events, there was urgency to utilize all available assets. Lou McCasland was not listed on the flight schedule that day and was surprised when the B-bus arrived at his house early with a summons to report to the airfield. Because the request specified only a day mission Lou did not take RON gear. In short order, he and Flight Mechanic Orvil Mock went upcountry with Hotel-28, where, working out of Na Khang and Houei Ma, they participated in the SAR. In order to be close to the following day's projected rescue attempt, they RON at Site-36. Because of the continuing SAR, the anticipated Duck Soup intercept operations were suspended until it was

resolved. When Lou did not return to Udorn that night his wife worried that he would freeze without his RON equipment.

With the loss of one T-28 and damage to other aircraft, the rescue attempt presented civilian and military SAR assets a barnburner of a day. However, there were some positive results. During the intense bombing, several pesky AAA sites had been eliminated. After action reports lent credence to the fact that the area contained something very sensitive, since it was more highly protected than anything encountered previously. One control aircraft reported seeing a camouflaged structure in the opening of the jungle. Intelligence officers suspected the presence of a rumored radar station.

Like many previous rescue attempts, I participated in the Ilg SAR in only a minor way from afar. Double crewed and upcountry, I represented an extra rescue asset should the need arise. First Officer Harold "Swede" Larson, Rudy Serafico, and I launched on a day mission north of Vientiane. Larson, in his forties, was another retired Marine type. Like Radalinski, he was neither proficient in the H-34 nor able to adapt to the extreme rigors of the helicopter program. He ultimately opted to transfer to Company fixed wing programs in Vientiane or Tachikawa, Japan.

Flying Hotel-15, we worked a fuel load supplying and ferrying people between Ban Keun (LS-44), a site located on the Vientiane plain adjacent to the Nam Ngum, north to villages in the broad, lightly populated Ngum Valley behind Ritaville Ridge. Government people-to-people projects had long been underway in the region against the day when the gap in the ridgeline would be dammed by multi-national efforts and the valley filled with water to create hydro-electric power. The power would be sold to Thailand and provide an economic boon to Laos. It was the same

area where H-34 Temporary pilot Ed Shore, his Flight Mechanic Morrow, and commercial photographer Grant Wolfkill were captured by a Pathet Lao patrol in 1961 after a tail rotor malfunction and forced landing.¹⁰

I considered "Swede" a friendly and engaging individual, but was unsure about his proficiency, behavior under fire, or the extent of his helpfulness during a hairy SAR situation. As with all new pilots, I attempted to convince him that the job was rewarding, except for the potentially deadly SAR requirements.

While refueling at Vientiane, we conducted a helicopter swap with the PIC of Hotel-34. The rest of the day was spent working ten miles north of the morning's activity in a tight valley between the hamlet of Keng Noi on the Ngum's east bank and Pha Se Mountain. Never called into the Sam Neua grinder, we worked late, fueled for a last time at Vientiane, and secured at Udorn well after dark.

When weather permitted the next morning, Joe Hazen returned to the target area and established radio contact with four AD pilots from the Fleet. Communicating with Ilg, Joe learned that he had discovered huts on the crest of the hill, and had therefore failed to cross the ridgeline under the cover of darkness. The Victor Control PIC then instructed the AD pilots to eliminate the huts, which they did with 20mm cannon fire. Ilg was then instructed to move southwest toward the friendly village, and to report when he was in place for a pickup.

There were numerous helicopters involved in the final chapter of the SAR. While aircraft and crews rotated in and out

¹⁰For the full account of this incident, see *Book One-Genesis*.

of the area, because of maintenance requirements and pilot flight time, only the principals changed. Dick Crafts left Udorn before dawn in bad weather to be in position to provide SAR coverage for the Alpha pilots working at their extreme range. McCasland arrived after spending the night at Na Khang.

At 1600 hours, Ilg established contact with Hazen. As a helicopter approached the spot, he popped an illuminating flare.

Alpha T-28 pilot Don Romes was orbiting near the village providing cover as Captain Scratch Kanach approached the downed pilot. Spotting a cloud of dust on the road approaching him, and believing it to be an armored vehicle, Ilg asked Don to investigate. Don made several runs on the object, but could not obtain a good visual because of billowing dust and nature of the terrain. While the cloud of dust neared the hill where Ilg waited for rescue, hoping to make a final assessment, Romes dove close to the ground and discovered that the object in question was only a frightened horse.

The flare was not discernable behind the H-34 pilot, so Hazen advised him to reverse direction and hover. Ilg's second flare was readily spotted and Scratch quickly moved into position to retrieve him. Flight Mechanic Louie Moser, who normally worked as a ground supervisor, lowered the hoist cable into dense foliage. Ilg then placed the yellow "horse collar" over his head and under his arms, and was raised through light tree branches into the cabin section.

While flying toward Na Khang, Louie kept asking Ilg if he was hurt. Exasperated, Ilg inquired why he was continually asked the same question. Moser revealed that while he was being hoisted toward the cabin, the helicopter had banked sharply right. As a result, his automatic weapon had slid out the cabin door and plunged down the cable.

Hazen landed and waited at Site-36 to ferry the rescued pilot to Udorn, but it was discovered one of the Caribou's two nose wheel tires was flat. Rather than chance a problem on takeoff from the newly constructed strip, Joe opted to wait for a new tire. Ilg was consequently flown to Udorn in an H-34.

Ilg was rushed to AB-1 and isolated from USAF intelligence types for a couple of hours. This angered them greatly and attested to the mistrust and lack of inter-service cooperation in those early days. Jim Rhyne (a Lair favorite) called Tom Penniman from AB-1 requesting him to purchase a steak and fry dinner from the Air America dining room and rush it to the starving pilot. Tom was never compensated. ¹¹

Digesting after-action reports of the SAR, FIC extolled the merits of the superior U.S. Navy survival PRC-49A radio. Mullen and Solin discovered that the Navy radio had functioned without a problem for almost forty-eight hours, emitting UHF signals and providing two-way voice communications. In contrast to the Air America URC-4 radio, it was technologically advanced at only half the weight.

Since the rescue was accomplished late, McCasland and Mock did not return to Site-36 until almost twilight. Lou was advised to leave Hotel-28 at the site and ferry H-36 to Udorn. Conducting a rare mountain night flight, the trip required two hours and thirty-seven minutes, during which Lou logged two ten night time. Joan had gone to the Club to view a movie at the Club and was surprised when Lou appeared at 2000 hours.

¹¹ Ilg remained in Naval service, eventually attaining the rank of admiral. Appearing at an Air America reunion with a presentation, he did not forget the experience or Air America's participation in his rescue.

Ilg's difficult and successful rescue enhanced our reputation with all hands involved in Lao air work. Colonel Robert Tyrrell, U.S. Air Attaché, Laos (AIRA), forwarded a commendation message to General Manager Vientiane Dave Hickler, thanking him for Air America's past SAR efforts. He went on:

"The most recent rescue mission of June 5 was an outstanding example of dedicated performance by members of your organization. With many instances of Air America aircraft encountering hostile fire, your pilots have risked their lives on several occasions to pick up downed aircrews from the very heart of unfriendly areas."

A telegram from General Moore, Commanding Officer of the 2nd Air Division to the American Embassy Vientiane, expressed appreciation for the:

"outstanding rescue work in connection with a successful recovery of the downed Navy F-4C pilot on June 5. The highly professional manner in which this mission was conducted in the face of adversities encountered should cause each individual concerned to feel justifiably proud of the part they played in this humanitarian effort."

Hickler in turn cabled President Grundy in Taipei that:

"Our SAR efforts continue to be spectacular. Those chopper pilots have just got to get some extra compensation. Their work

in the SAR effort cannot be beat by anyone." ¹²

SAM TONG RONS

Rejecting Hotel-15 after a couple of test fights, Frank Stergar, Orvil Mock, and I launched north in Hotel-32. For seven days following the Ilg SAR, we worked in Military Region Two and RON at the newly opened Sam Tong hostel. Others RONing there during the period included Lou McCasland with another new Flight Mechanic, Steve Nichols. I had previously flown with Frank, and felt comfortable with the confident, competent, and knowledgeable man. Like many others, Mock was a relatively new Flight Mechanic. Unimpressive, except for height, he wore thick black, horn-rimmed glasses, but moved with the confidence of someone with experience.

Living and working at Sam Tong presented both positive and negative aspects for crews. Mainly, it afforded a break from difficult situations with occasional relatively easy work for

¹² Segment Sources:

Tom Hoppe, Interview Landmark Hotel, Metairie, Louisiana, 07/08/96.
 Tom Hoppe Letter Summer-fall 1996.
 William Leary 06/65 Notes from 08/06/65.
Life Magazine Article Regarding the Ilg Incident.
 Interview with Joe Hazen Regarding the Ilg SAR.
 Tyrrell Message to Hickler, 06/15/65.
 Moore Telegram to Vientiane Embassy, 06/05/65.
 Dave Hickler Message to President Grundy, 06/07/65.
 FIC to ATOG.
 Bill Zeitler Interview at Author's House, 09/0101.
 Tom Penniman, Email, 02/26/00.
 Lou McCasland 06/65 Flight Time Report.
 Joan McCasland Diary.
Air America Log, Paul Ilg SAR, Volume-14, #2 06/97.
 EW Knight Email, 07/12/00.
 John Smith, *Rolling Thunder: The Strategic Bombing Campaign North Vietnam 1965-1968* (Saint Paul: Phalanx Publishing, 1995) 287.
 Earl Tilford, 64.

AID and RO missions out of Moung Soui. Both generally kept us out of the current shot pattern. On the downside, by staying overnight at Site-20, we sacrificed all important Customer rapport, and the benefit of current intelligence previously gained by living and dining at Long Tieng. Granted, a lot of regional knowledge and bonding was lost after our mentor and aggressive handler Tony Poe was badly wounded, and younger less experienced or concerned Case Officers descended on the Long Tieng valley. Even at Sam Tong the increasing number of new AID employees tended to be more clannish. It appeared the operation had evolved considerably from its inception, perhaps even to the point of outgrowing itself.

Considering the horrible conditions we had formerly endured at Sam Tong, living and eating at the new hostel was quite refreshing. After the upgrading, some of us wondered why it had taken so long to complete. Even though we liked to believe Air America had the hostel built solely for crew rest and health, it was more likely Customer driven, for it allowed Pop and the AID employees to squeeze more work out of a day. In the early period, there were competing demands for the limited number of aircraft. When a ship returned to Vientiane or Udorn, sometimes a replacement aircraft was not available for several days. Having planes and helicopters overnight at Site-20 provided more control and additional daylight flying hours. Finally, from AID Vientiane's perspective, having additional ships RON upcountry would substantially reduce the high costs of daily ferry time.

Since the AID-funded building program had commenced, thanks to Tom Cole and his crew, Sam Tong's landscape had changed appreciably. In addition to the hostel, there were plans for support buildings to conduct aircraft maintenance. For the AID

program, a steel Quonset hut to replace the old warehouse and provide quarters for the American workers was erected.

In concert with Charlie Mann's intent to boost Sam Tong out of the Stone Age and into the twentieth century, plans were in the mill for imported Thai artisans to erect permanent stone houses from natural rock. Pop was slated to receive a new house, built in his absence when he was on home leave. Upon return, he was reported to be "furious" because of his new living accommodations. I thought this new style of living in such relative luxury was diametrically opposed to Buell's proclivity to "live like the natives." Nevertheless, I noted Pop that did not refuse to live in the new house.

A new housing construction phase began later when Pop accepted a female American secretary and nurse to work at Sam Tong. He did not consider it realistic to have women sleep in the warehouse with several randy males. After these houses were completed, the building boom continued in the valley.

Although not everything was completed as specified, the wooden crew hostel eventually provided all the basic amenities that had been denied over-night flight crews for so many years. Captains bunked two to a room. This still did not fulfill all the requirements delineated in the Personnel Manual for those of the rank of Captain, but went a long way toward providing a restful sleep after a tiring day in the field. That is, if the bunk mate did not snore. The ability to shower with either cold or hot water was welcome, particularly from an olfactory aspect. Hot breakfasts, dinners, and especially a brown bag containing two ham and cheese sandwiches slathered with mayo, went a long way toward providing nourishing lunchtime energy required under stressful flying conditions.

At the behest of his superiors, Dale Means opened and managed the Sam Tong hostel for several months. Believing his job was created to see the hostel up and running, he had no intention of remaining there long, and ran a particularly loose operation. In addition, Dale liked his booze, and usually commenced his nightly IW Harper cocktail time as we secured in the evening.

Some individuals believed Means was either involved with, or an Agency employee. He was perceived by a few as evasive, someone who directly avoided answering questions, purportedly because he did not think the individual had the need to know. In actuality, Dale was quite hearing impaired, and usually failed to clearly hear or understand a question. And, it was likely that he was in his cups.

Means remained at Sam Tong for several months, and generally enjoyed the low-key lifestyle, but departed over a minor policy dispute with the Company regarding his accounting system, of which there actually was none. He unrealistically believed that Air America should care for the pilots and mechanics by subsidizing the operational costs of the hostel. This was the policy at first, but when food costs escalated--it was too good a deal and everyone took advantage of the amenities--like had been done in the early days for overnights at the Plaza Hotel Bangkok, the Company began withholding a prorated portion of our monthly provisional allowance. Vientiane and Udorn management were of the opinion that all of us were earning big money and should help defray all expenses related to the hostel and elsewhere. This soured Means and he asked the Company to seek another soul for the upcountry duty.

AID workers like Blaine Jensen paid for their food if they ate at the hostel. Each maintained an account that was settled

once a month in kip. The kip in turn was employed to pay local salaries and purchase fresh vegetables and fruit in the Vientiane market.

After Dale Means returned to Vientiane, a management type who worked for Operations Manager Tom Krohn, journeyed to Sam Tong twice a week to oversee the operation, learn what the cooks needed, and radio the requests to Vientiane. This went on until Bill Yarbrough was hired as a full-time hostel manager.

While still in Vientiane, Means met and married an Agency woman. Through her contacts, he persuaded Agency people, who held him in high regard, to send him to computer school. Before leaving Southeast Asia in 1966, Tom Penniman and others in Udorn management arranged a farewell party for Dale and his future wife at the Udorn Club through Art Angelo. After a year's training, Means returned to the Far East as an "Air America" employee to head the Hong Kong-based data processing department for Company flight logs. The new department was established to satisfy a Taiwanese government mandate to electronically filter all data leaving their country. Means remained in this billet until it was phased out in 1974. After that he left for east Texas, where he had previously obtained oil rights for wildcatters, and began a fish-shrimp farming operation. That venture failed, but the land value appreciated substantially to create a nice profit.

One outstanding and highly positive aspect of all AID construction work at Sam Tong related to the widening and extension of the runway, which allowed larger planes to deliver heavy equipment for road work.

In 1964, Pop Buell and Jiggs Weldon decided to airlift lumber into Site-20 from Vientiane to build the first portion of the new hospital. ¹³ Therefore, to accommodate a Bird and Son C-47 with its increased wing-span, the STOL strip was lengthened and widened by locals who, using only hoes and drag mechanisms, lowered the hills northwest toward the top.

The next construction phase at Sam Tong in late 1964 involved further hand cutting hills and extending the top of the runway to accommodate both Caribous and to provide a risky landing for a C-123 pilot. When completed, Fred Walker landed with necessary equipment, including a small rock crusher. Landing was no problem, but taking off empty did produce some anxious moments. ¹⁴

On the day in question, Fred was not quite airborne when he ran out of runway. The area at the southeast approach end dropped off sharply into a lower valley, so he gently eased the plane into the valley to achieve climb airspeed. ¹⁵ It required two complete 360 degree turns in the narrow valley before he obtained sufficient climb speed to safely clear Skyline.

With the help of earthmovers and the rock crusher, Tom Cole's employees extended, graded, topped with rock particles,

¹³ The portable saw mill at Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72) had only recently begun operating, and was not yet capable of producing large numbers of boards.

¹⁴ These early C-123 models only incorporated ADI, a water-fish oil mixture, to cool the engines and provide an additional power boost for takeoff from short strips. Later K-model C-123s were equipped with two small kerosene-fed jet engines attached under outboard wings to provide takeoff thrust. They worked well, but regardless of the takeoff assist system, while deadheading, I was always tight jawed while departing The Alternate and just clearing the mountain tops.

¹⁵ This was similar to what we were obligated to do taking off downwind from some high landing zones with heavy loads.

and rolled the runway to provide for the safe operation of C-123 planes.

When fuel bladders and later Jeep drawn portable fuel tankers were introduced at Sam Tong, hand fueling became archaic at the site. This method enabled us to "hot refuel" without shutting down. The process not only helped us to obtain more flight time, it benefitted the Customer by increasing the amount of work we were able to perform in a day. On the negative side, the new procedure did not afford us the ability to get out of the cockpit to rest a bit. However, we always had the option to shut down.

Forbidden to land at Long Tieng, ¹⁶ ICC helicopter crews and passengers occasionally landed at Sam Tong for fuel and food at the hostel. When they were in the area, both Vang Pao and the RO representative dispatched troops to guard the helicopters while on the ground. With permission to land radioed well ahead, Blaine Jensen was instructed to meet the helicopter, welcome the Canadian, Indian, and Polish commission representatives, offer them food and drink, and shepherd them safely back to the white helicopter. Blaine considered the entire ICC operation a waste of his time and money, which could be better utilized on AID projects.

After the permanent Quonset hut was completed, a bulldozer driver began punching a road from Sam Tong toward Skyline Ridge along existing contour terrain lines, and down into the Long Tieng valley. Tom Cole had previously told Pop that he could complete such a road capable of accommodating vehicular traffic

¹⁶ Long Tieng: Not plotted on any aeronautical map, the site officially did not exist.

within two months. In contrast, Americans with the Bureau of Lao Public Roads indicated they would have an all-weather artery finished in six months and would further guarantee it to be useable year-round. Pop opted for Cole's plan, and the road was actually completed in sixty days. Tops of discarded fuel drums were cut off and the drums welded together, creating culvert pipes to help divert rainwater from eroding and undermining the dirt road. Despite the effort, the road was never useable by vehicular traffic during the rainy season. In addition, it cost the Agency a lot of money to re-open it each year at VP's request.

After the road was complete, scuttlebutt revealed that Blaine Jensen had walked from Sam Tong to Long Tieng. Buell had been harassing him about not being able to walk out of Site-20 with the people in a difficult situation, as Pop had previously done in pressured areas when necessary. So challenged, and to prove a point, Jensen decided to do it. The hike took several hours, but he considered it enjoyable.

From the beginning, Pop was not particularly fond of Blaine. After a few belts of Lao Lao, and in the proper mood, Pop, who was poorly educated, would rant about "*Them educated fools.*" This included most of AID and Embassy desk personnel in Vientiane and Washington. It also included Jensen, who had amassed considerable education.

Blaine always had great respect for Pop, and what he represented and had accomplished over the years in regard to Lao refugee work. However, after getting to know the man better, he realized that much of the Buell spiel regarding many incidents amounted to pure fabrication. The truth and facts emerged after Pop retired, and it was revealed to Blaine what actually had

happened. Others verifying or expanding on Pop's musings were Pat Landry, Bill Lair, and Leonard Unger.

For example, Pop, an accomplished master of hyperbole, claimed that he and **his** people had departed Lat Houang (LS-09) and skirting the Plain of Jars, walked to Padong (LS-05) at the end of 1960, when FAR was on the run and the enemy rolled up the area. He also claimed that it was he who had convinced Vang Pao and the Meo to take a stand at Padong. Years later, Pop admitted that during the time in question, he was actually evacuated to Bangkok.

At first, Agency "civil affairs" operatives, later Bill Lair and Pat Landry, supported Vang Pao to a degree through much of 1960 and into 1961, when Laos reached a critical mass, and there was little American representation upcountry in Military Region Two. After Vang Pao was well established at Padong, and later at Pha Khao (LS-14), when it appeared that USG was officially going back into Laos, Pop made it known to the right people that he wanted to return and help. Embassy people in Thailand, including Len Unger, arranged a meeting between Lair, Landry, and Buell. Pop proposed to execute all in his power to care for families and relatives of Meo guerrillas actually fighting the communists. The offer fit nicely into AB-1 and Washington's plans to stem the advance of further communist encroachment.

Pop was flown to Pha Khao, provided with soldiers, and told to walk the area and find a suitable base for a civilian operation. He would be supported financially for the small venture. In brief, that was eventually how Sam Tong was established.

The Agency still supported much of the Sam Tong operation when Jensen arrived in late 1963 with the International

Volunteer Service (IVS) organization. Supplementing Agency funds, Pop was receiving private donations through IVS and other connections in America. International Volunteer Service's Chairman of the Board was a well-known, respected man with many contacts throughout USG, the voluntary agencies, the churches, and big business. Jensen believes that he arranged most of the funding and donations that arrived at Sam Tong, and USAID paid the shipping costs. (USAID still does this for donated items.)^{17, 18}

During the RON, I learned that former Army Major Stergar had attended the Military Assistance Institute in 1960. Six of the men were slated to go to Laos, so some of the courses included facts regarding Lao history, the situation, and about the country's topography. While serving with MAAG China, Stergar had gained high altitude mountain flying experience in both

¹⁷ An aside: to place much of the Lao war and events into perspective, Jensen opined about the Thai factor. While the Eisenhower "Domino Theory" failed to achieve fruition in Southeast Asia, that did not confirm it would not have done so, provided a different set of circumstances. From an early period, it was in the interest and policy of the Thai Government to keep fighting localized in neighboring countries, and not on Thai soil. This was the RTG's underlying rationale in allowing AB-1 to operate from Thailand; the U.S. military to establish bases and ultimately use these bases to bomb North Vietnam. Throughout all the events leading to the April 1975 collapse of South Vietnam, the Vietnamese Theater was always a secondary priority to Thai leaders; their primary concern was protecting the Thai people and preserving the country's customs and mores. Jensen's opinions are his own, but the Author concurs with most of his viewpoints.

¹⁸ Dale Means, Emails, 03/06/00, 03/07/00, 03/11/00.
 Tom Penniman, Emails, 02/19/00, 02/21/00, 02/22/00, 03/31/00, 04/13/00.
 Blaine Jensen Letters, 03/02/96, 04/17/96, 07/01/96, 07/25/97, 08/13/96, 09/05/96, 10/16/96.
 Mike LaDue Email, 03/06/10.

reciprocating and turbine engine helicopters. He had also performed high altitude test flights at Edwards Air Force Base. While in Taipei he met Arnold Dibble, from Civil Air Transport Public Relations, Civil Air Transport pilots Bigony, Cockrell, and others. Since Air Asia performed heavy maintenance on the Army ships, on occasion, he journeyed to Tainan. Stergar was quite impressed with the Air Asia work and indigenous workers' training. He also liked the CAT line maintenance in Taipei. Stergar had remained in touch with Dibble, who eventually helped him obtain Air America employment.

In the process of performing our duties, I showed Frank where Charlie Jones had "bought the farm" in March. ¹⁹ Upon later reflection, Frank believed that our shared trip had been an overall good operational confidence builder, one where I had performed a creditable job in Customer relations and had carried respectable loads, while he had learned a lot about his peers. ²⁰

Because of the new rapid fueling procedures at Sam Tong, other than to obtain a briefing or relieve ourselves, we rarely shut down at Long Tieng. Here also was the beginning of an ambitious runway project, calculated to more efficiently realign, widen, and lengthen the strip to accommodate larger birds. Curiously, the work was funded--at least up front--from

¹⁹ The term "bought the farm" etymology is still debated today. Meaning to die, the military phrase likely related to the U.S. Government insurance policy covering a death being used by a surviving family to purchase a farm mortgage.

²⁰ Frank Stergar Email, 06/06/96.
Stergar Letter, 07/96.

the USAID budget but it was more likely reimbursed by the Agency. ²¹

With construction work underway, there was a lot of dust churned up by helicopters taxiing to the new loading area located behind the tall karst at the northwest end of the Long Tieng Valley. George Smith, a recent addition to the American personnel working at Site-20 Alternate, along with two Meo, became the air operations specialist and loader. At first, he ingested our dust generated by taxiing to the parking ramp behind the karsts. To help counter the problem, he began wearing a handkerchief over his face. After the dust began affecting the masked man's lungs and overall health, he departed Long Tieng, along with Tony Poe, in the fall to briefly work and live at Nam Yu in Military Region One. George later worked out of the AB-1 warehouse across the parking ramp from the Air America facility.

Departing Sam Tong early in the morning with our brown bags crammed with sandwiches, we operated out of the Na Khang area four of the six days upcountry. Lou McCasland worked assorted missions east of Long Tieng at Khang Kho (LS-204), Paksane, and Moung Cha (LS-113). On the 11th he overlapped with us at Na Khang. ²²

Working in the capacity of a standby asset for SAR duty, we may have been alerted, but were not actively involved in any rescue attempts. However, with Rolling Thunder operations moving continuously north adjacent to, but not yet targeting Hanoi missile sites and the city, I fully expected to be called to perform rescue work at any time, and was always on edge.

²¹ Blaine Jensen Letter, 08//13/96.

²² Lou McCasland 1965 June Flight Time Record.

However, I had no clue about how we would conduct a rescue attempt that far into North Vietnam. Local operations gave way to trips to Site-85 to deliver water and to supply the landing zones strung along the eastern crescent. Frank Stergar was a good "stick buddy" ²³ and helped keep me stable during a bad period. I think the old warrior got a kick out of the work. As for my health, my stomach was still bothering me, so we yakked, and swapped Gelucil tablets and sticks of gum.

Despite his previous helicopter experience, Frank was not infallible working in the hills. Conducting a mission between Sam Tong and Ban Na, while landing on an undeveloped, grass covered ridgeline, Frank failed to conduct a recon or arrive at a low hover before touching down in high grass. I was shocked and surprised, for the grass could have easily concealed a large stump or boulder that might have penetrated Hotel-32's belly. We had enough problems with maintenance and providing ships for daily use without foolishly damaging one. After landing, recalling my experience as a passive First Officer with PIC Dan Gardner when landing without benefit of a recon on a grassy hummock, I made an issue of Frank's error. As an object lesson, I was purposely a little harsh with Stergar, and trusted that he took it as constructive criticism and learned something from the experience. During a very trying period, the episode provided one more example of the issues which we PICs had to contend with while flying with inexperienced pilots in the mountains and rough topography of Laos.

²³ Stick buddy: A term used exclusively by U.S. Army pilots to describe a second pilot in the cockpit.

FIC UDORN

Working behind the scenes, FIC representative Dick Ford attempted to improve the overall intelligence-gathering system and dissemination process for Air America pilots. On the eighth, he spent an entire day attending a meeting in Vientiane with Mister Swank, Sullivan's assistant (DMC); U.S. Embassy, USAID's Chief, Charlie Mann; and FIC duo, Jim Mullen and Bill Solin. The agenda included the availability of current and pertinent information relating to flight safety. There was general agreement relating to the essential requirement for vital information, which continued to be lacking on a daily basis. Also discussed was the feasibility of consolidating reports on Air America's participation in U.S. military SAR operations.

Ford was intent on strengthening his position. With plans for a new two-story operations-administration building afoot, he requested the Company to hire another man to assist him. He also suggested that the responsibility for the Thailand Operations Data Handbook be assigned to FIC Udorn. He was confident that information could be maintained on a current basis, and a handbook published at regular intervals.

As to Lao sites, a rudimentary file of updated Lima and Lima site cards had been completed by FIC.

Dick also contacted the appropriate department (MFP) in Taipei to upgrade old FIC maps. A shipment of maps had recently gone astray in the Bangkok area, and almost two weeks elapsed before the package arrived in Udorn. Noting that some maps within an operational area had been discontinued by the Air Force, with no replacement planned, and looking toward future needs, he solicited the Taipei office to help resolve the issue. In July, another memorandum specified the maps required. They were those prepared under the direction of the Defense

Intelligence Agency and published by the Aeronautical Chart and Information Center, and included Indochina and Thailand-1:250,000 JOG (A), Series 1501, Edition 1.

During June, Ford, at the direction of Project Chief of Operation Clarence Abadie, visited Sam Tong to conduct a survey of RON facilities available for the helicopter crews. Afterward, he forwarded a detailed report to the PCO.

FIC Udorn's growing problems continued. From the beginning of his tenure, Dick conscientiously attended morning Air Force briefing sessions at the Air Support Operations Center. One day, ASOC Director Lieutenant Colonel Stabley was informed by the JUSMAG liaison officer, Major Nathan, that Ford's name did not appear on the list of individuals cleared for briefings. As a result, the ASOC director was obligated to deny the Air America FIC representative access to the meetings. This action sharply reduced information exchange which had previously benefitted all parties. Ford complained to Ben Moore who in turn, requested Taipei to expedite the necessary clearances for a list of persons previously submitted, and to add his new assistant, Operations Specialist John Rock.

Helicopter pilots had recently complained about deficient nondirectional beacons (NDB) at LS-50 and LS-15. The Phu Cum beacon could not be received by all H-34 radio equipment. The Delta signal at Ban Na appeared to be overridden by a bogus signal from the Plain of Jars. Therefore, frequency changes were in the mill for both locations.

By 15 July, the frequency of the Site-50 was changed to the satisfaction of most helicopter pilots. Nothing had been accomplished regarding the Delta site. ²⁴

Highly sensitive "Sneaky Pete" work occurred on the 13th. That day, a Sunday, Russian and Chinese officials gathered at the Vientiane Soviet Embassy. Anxious to know who was in the group, the Agency arranged for an H-34 pilot and special camera crew to snoop on the proceedings. Because he was accorded a "five" rating, and the nature of the proposed flight was highly classified, Wayne Knight was the only crewmember selected to fly the machine. At a prescribed time, he flew Hotel-15 to Wattay Airport, where long-range cameras and two Agency photographers were loaded. With operative R. Tallest in the belly, he flew almost six hours circling Vientiane, while the men snapped pictures. Attempting not to be too obvious, Wayne avoided circling directly over the embassy. He also conducted a few takeoffs and landings, simulating a training flight. ²⁵

NEEDS for SARs

Rolling Thunder missions continued to move north and west. As I had predicted, along with a harbinger of events about to transpire in our SAR participation, on the 14th, USAF F-105 pilot Major Larry Guárico was shot down west of Hanoi. As a result, Ambassador Sullivan twixed CINCPAC concerning helicopter rescue attempts in North Vietnam:

²⁴ Dick Ford, FIC-Udorn-Operations Manager Emails, 06/08/65, 06/19/65, 06/26/65, 07/13, 14, 15/65.

²⁵ EWKnight Emails, 07/30/00, 07/31/00, 04/14/01, 04/19/01.

"Although we have never asked for so many responsibilities for SAR operations to recover Rolling Thunder pilots down or in near-by North Vietnam, we have in fact, provided such assistance on a number of occasions. However, we are not staffed or prepositioned to do this as a regular feature.

On 14 June, we were unable to position our helicopters over the pilot downed at VH6093 before he was captured. In any event, the pilot was probably captured too soon for rescue attempt.²⁶ Since it is indicated that the need will continue, I would suggest two actions that would ease our problem. Swank and I discussed with you my feelings that long-range Sikorsky helicopters should be assigned to Air Force units at NKP and Udorn with the capacity to function within the DVR. I would urge early deployment of such aircraft.

More prudent perhaps and certainly more urgent is the need to expand helicopter maintenance service. We now have a fleet of 18 H-34s maintained and operated by Air America at Udorn; two additional H-34s loaned to the RLAF also receive maintenance assistance from Udorn. Despite two months effort to augment their staff, Air America has not been able to provide more than 8-9 helicopters a day for flight operations, including SAR. If the USAF and Marine Corps, on a crash basis, assign 2-3 maintenance teams TDY to Udorn until Air America can hire civilian replacements, it would make the burdens easier to increase our capabilities. If you concur, suggest your

²⁶ Author Note: Since there is no specification of make or model of helicopter mentioned, one can only speculate if Sullivan's references were to Air America H-34s, or USAF HH-43s, or a combination standing by at Na Khang. At any rate, range probably would have been a problem for either model helicopter.

headquarters work on this directly with Air America and touch base with the Embassy Bangkok. Speed is essential." ²⁷

Bad mouthing Air America Udorn's inability to provide sufficient aircraft for upcountry operations continued through July. This stimulated Base Manager Ben Moore to comment to Taipei headquarters in his monthly July report:

"With the exception of the 1841 customer, a kind word for this operation is almost unheard of. Our daily bill of fare is almost invariably criticism and implications that idiocy runs rampant in Udorn. This gets a bit galling at times, since it is obvious that most of the criticism comes from folks who know little or nothing of any other helicopter operation. At long last we can now offer what another outfit claims. Taken from the 25 May 1965 issue of Aviation Weekly, it is stated that this organization had 300 helicopters which fly an average of 80 hours a month. (Not bad for them.) We don't know what the ground rules are for that average (whether they count all assigned aircraft they operate, or whether they don't count a machine when it is in IRAN or heavy maintenance). We are assigned 18 choppers for operation and count all, whether they are long time repair jobs or not.

In July we flew about 3,250 hours, averaging 180 plus hours per helicopter. One chopper was in the hanger the entire month for extensive repairs, so if deleted, the average increased to 191 plus hours. Also, it should be noted that eight out of the eighteen helicopters were flown over 200 hours each. If we loafed along at an average of 80 hours per month, we would need

²⁷ Ambassador Sullivan to Admiral Sharp, 06/14/65.

at least 40 choppers to do what is now being accomplished with 18. Also, we would need many more people, supplies and funds..." ²⁸

Our organization attempted to meet Customer commitments, often to the detriment of flight safety. With Jack Forney cracking the whip, quick maintenance "turn-around" of H-34s were generally the norm. Consequently, pressure to deliver ships for Customer field requirements often involved errors in both commission and omission. Arriving late from upcountry, most UH-34D inspections were conducted at night in a dimly lighted hangar environment. In such conditions, even while using flashlights for back-up, many cracks and evidence of battle damage were virtually impossible to detect. Sometimes these were only evident on the parking ramp during preflight in the bright morning sun. This was evidenced by times when I discovered battle damage to the leading edge of a rotor blade spar, and a large crack on a transmission sway brace.

UDORN UPDATE

On 15 June, I went to City Park at night to enjoy several Thai boxing matches. The youngsters were fun to watch and the bouts often quite bloody. I noted that the dark-skinned one-armed man, who wore a checkered cloth over the affected shoulder I had seen in the past, while still in the Marine Corps, still attended the fights. Obviously well known by those in the crowd, he ministered to their avid gambling selections.

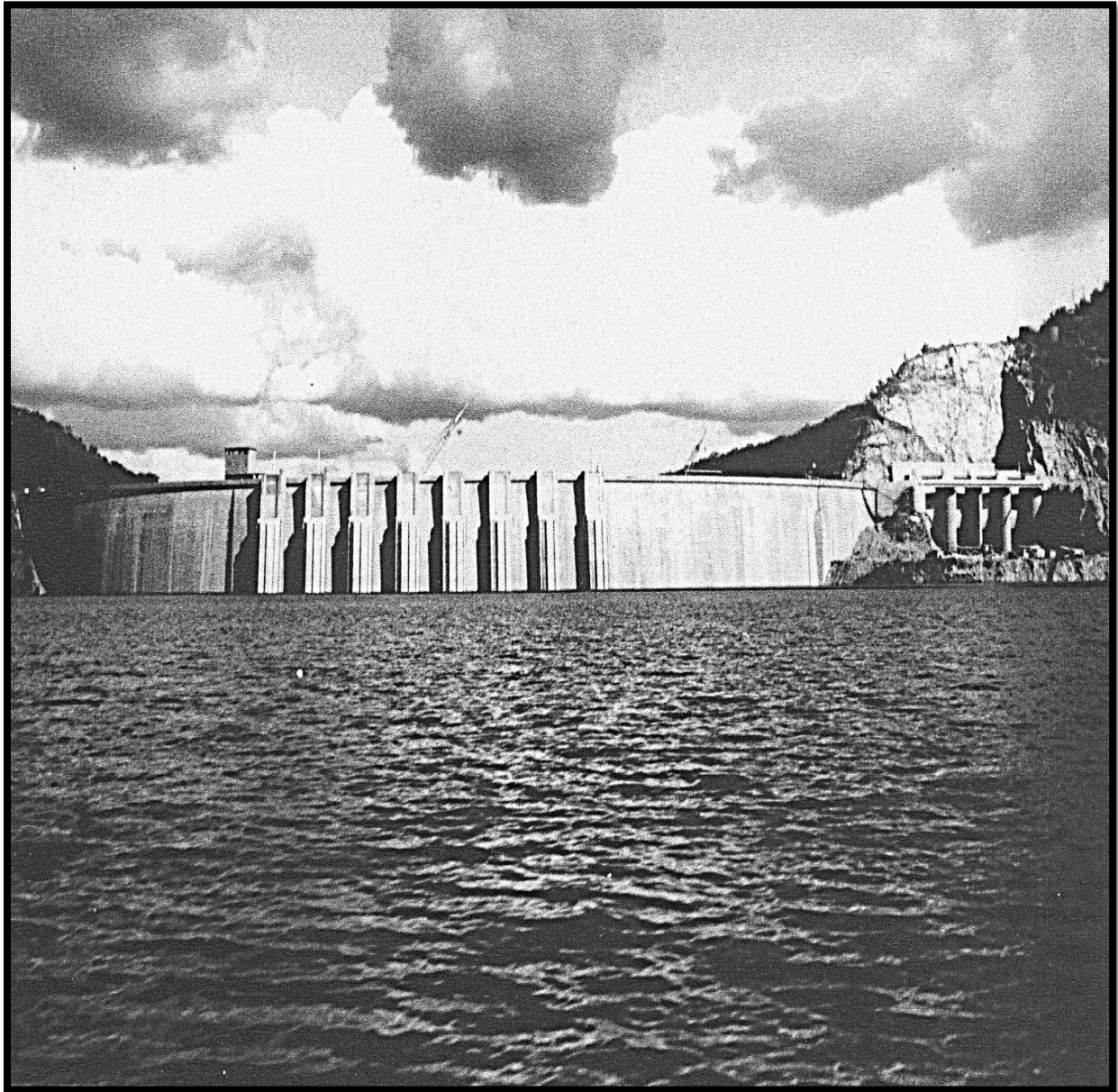
From the time I had arrived in Thailand with the Marines, I had attended these colorful events when possible, and learned hard lessons regarding the vagaries of the rainy season, mainly that it invariably rained when one planned an outing. Therefore,

²⁸ Ben Moore, July 1965 Udorn Monthly Report.

in subsequent years, I always carried a raincoat and umbrella to such events. This night was no exception. Halfway through the fights, the heavens opened and it poured. Despite prepared for inclement weather, I chose not to remain.

Because I was scheduled to fly on the 17th, I dashed a letter off to the folks describing current events in our area. I began by saying that many of the First Officers had been upgraded, and I believed that the days of the large paychecks would soon be over. Because some old timers were departing, I was fast becoming a senior man in the program.

Major changes were occurring in Udorn that boded well for an improved lifestyle. Using funds allocated by the USAF, the airport road was being torn up and widened. Hydroelectric power bringing us reliable and steady electricity was imminent from the recently completed Nam Pung Dam, a hundred miles south of us near Khon Kaen. Infrastructure to transmit high voltage electricity was largely completed, with concrete poles erected and lines being strung. However, this proved too late for the motor of my three-week-old refrigerator, which gave up the ghost because of the fluctuating nighttime power supply. The nighttime low power state required someone present to increase the step-up transformer dial to maximum. Even this action normally did not guarantee or approach the 120-volt level required to adequately operate a stateside appliance. Power eventually increased, usually later in the evening when town folks retired. At that time, a voltage surge occurred to all electrical units. A buzzer was incorporated in the step-up unit to alert one to that fact, but if no one was available, this was academic. Unless one instantly turned the dial down to reflect the actual voltage required, the potential to damage electrical items was great. So, a resident enjoyed the worst of all scenarios. If one did



Nam Pung Dam and hydro-electric project that went into full operation in 1966 on the Phong River southwest of Udorn, Thailand.
Author Collection.

not turn the transformer up low power could quickly damage electrical units, and if one did not turn it down, a power surge would also damage equipment. At times, I would simply shut the fridge off and rely on daytime cooling to last through the night. However, since I was not home that often, I had little knowledge of what transpired when I was upcountry. Before long, in addition to the refrigerator motor being fried, the transformer also burned up because of inattention. This ridiculous situation was predicated on actually receiving town power, which could fail at any time without warning. I had lived with this deficiency so long that it rarely bothered me. I just reached for the kerosene lamp, a candle, or simply went to bed.

Because of increased USAF personnel presence, money, and requirements to provide entertainment, Udorn was growing fast. In addition, consistent with the inflation caused by too much money chasing too few goods and services, prices inevitably rose proportionally. New houses and structures popped up all over town. More trucks, cars, and especially taxis, driven by men or boys with little experience, added to road hazards and noxious fumes. We used to joke that the drivers had only recently descended from the trees. Samlor drivers still plied their trade to accommodate the masses, but had to be very careful, as did those of us who still traveled by bicycle.

Screeching jet engine noise accentuated by aircraft launching in afterburner and recovering either day or night, rendered the Air America facility an almost intolerable place during peak launch times. The high-pitched engine whines were even heard where I lived on Soi Mahamit, because my location was perpendicular to the duty runway. Since everyone assumed that a long, escalating war was in store for Southeast Asia, we could only dream of the good old days when silence reined most of the

time, and hope that we would quickly become somewhat accustomed to the racket.

Because of a substantial influx of military men and machines at the airfield, over suds in the bar, we speculated as to when the communists would overtly begin attacking the lucrative targets we provided. It happened in Nam, why not Udorn?

BIG JOHN FONBURG

On Thursday, John Fonburg, Mitch Drew, and I took Hotel-30 on a day mission to Vang Vieng. Because of former USMC Major Fonburg's consistently good work as a "Temporary" pilot in 1961, Wayne Knight, who knew John well from his former squadron and with Air America, had been instrumental in his rehiring. His actual hiring date was 1 June, and he arrived in Udorn following the standard Taipei check-in process. Wayne found it especially satisfying to conduct John's initial checks after he returned to Air America, for John was highly proficient and they had a good previous relationship.

After the abbreviated day and observing his work, it was obvious to me John would not remain a First Officer very long.

From previous information gleaned in the bar, and talking to him, I learned that Fonburg was reputedly quite sophisticated when it came to investing in the Wall Street New York stock exchange market, a place I had visited a few times with my Father in my youth. Since I was always attempting to increase the value of my portfolio holdings, we had many discussions about investing and wealth creation in general. John received the James Dine investment letter, which touted gold's attributes, and purported near term appreciation. Silver commodities were also in vogue then. Always willing to assume

risks to increase their net worth, some employees like CJ Abadie purchased shares in Lucky Friday Silver stock in the hopes of quick appreciation.

Dines was ultimately correct regarding the price of gold, but years too early with his predictions. Metal prices failed to soar until Richard Nixon and Congress passed laws whereby USG no longer backed the time honored and stable gold price at thirty-five dollars an ounce, and allowed it to escalate to 800 dollars per ounce in the early seventies.

Fonburg's reputation for extreme frugality, bordering on that of an "el cheapo," preceded him by all those who knew John in the Corps, and as a Temporary in 1961. Because we were generally in other helicopter programs, I missed a substantial portion of the Fonburg teasing by his peers. Knight never made fun of John like others did, but he believed that although John did not react, he knew exactly what was going on. Fonburg may have been a bit gullible, but like Tony Poe and his covert drinking ruses, he responded like a fox. Every organization had its class clown. However, John did not work at illuminating or enhancing such a dubious title, and sometimes I felt a little sorry for him. Seeming to relish the good or not so good digs, he never defended himself. Despite the ribbing he endured, I honestly believe that he enjoyed both the notoriety and the center of attention garnered over the years.

When Tom Penniman first arrived in Udorn, Wayne Knight related a story about John Fonburg, the cheapest person he ever knew from the early "Temporary" days. The man would spend hours dismantling Thai brass lamps for shipment to the States by APO mail duty free. He intended to sell them at a substantial profit.

Tom was in FIC when John entered the office shaking his head from side to side to obtain a site book and make notations on his charts. He made a statement that the situation in Laos appeared the same as it was in 1961. This caused Tom to consider that we were not making any progress in the country.

Some individuals considered Fonburg a comic character of gargantuan and epic proportions. Some would argue that he became an object of more stories than Tom Moher. Many early accounts relating to his peculiarities have already appeared in Book One. However, these continued to evolve over his many years with Air America, and a few are worth repeating at this time. We savored and dearly loved our colorful characters. Therefore, the stories are offered not to denigrate or demean a person, but to help enlighten the reader's ability to better understand Fonburg's convoluted and often humorous nature.

After John was upgraded to H-34 Captain, I was working in the hills of the Long Pot area south of Sam Tong. Because of the negative radio wave propagation characteristics attributed to mountainous terrain and associated difficulties, one day I was unable to contact the Delta radio operator at Ban Na to transmit the required hourly operations normal report. After hearing John talking on the radio frequency, I requested that he relay my report. For some reason, feigned or not, he professed trouble understanding exactly what I wanted. Frustrated after several attempts, I gave up and uttered, *"Oh, never mind."* The inevitable happened. The next thing I heard was John talking to the Site-15 operator reporting that Hotel XX was operations normal at *"point never mind."*

Sometimes our bored pilots became exceptionally playful over the air. Fonburg received his comeuppance one day while flying north of the Plain of Jars. He was told to stand by for

an important message from a friend. The perpetrator of the fixed wing aircraft then had his kicker hold his microphone close to a squealing pig in the cargo hold. John never acknowledged the call, but many feigned pig squeals were heard over the airways for the next few minutes.

Almost every story circulating regarding John's stinginess and "idiotsyncrasies" were tinged with half-truths. While in the Corps, he withdrew from the officer's BOQ mess to avoid having the food allowance deducted from his monthly pay. Instead, he ate gee-dunk hamburgers and caged food off other pilots' plates in the morning.

He loaned his mother money for an item and requested an audience with his commanding officer for advice as to how much interest to charge her.

While gathering in the Air America Club bar, pilots and mechanics shared ten cent drinks, each in turn paying for a round during happy hour. Many times, John timed his entry into the bar, when his turn to buy was last. If the drinking session continued long enough, and if it looked like he would have to buy a round, he became very jumpy. Then, before his time arrived to buy the round, he would find an excuse to leave to avoid buying, or else he totally refused to ring the bell saying, "*I did not ask those guys to buy me a beer.*"

John bought a car. One day he asked Wayne Knight to listen to the vehicle while running and inform him why it was making so much noise. From the noise and location, Wayne instantly knew that the source of the noise was a broken muffler, or a break in the exhaust pipe. After examination, a hole in the exhaust pipe was discovered. When John wanted to know what to do next, Wayne recommended that he drive the car to a garage and have the section of pipe replaced. A few days later, John came by the CPH

office and said, "Hey, remember that problem with my exhaust pipe? I took the car to the garage and the Thai mechanic wanted 300 baht to fix it. While it was on the lift, I looked at the underside and decided I could fix it myself. You know those tinfoil covers used on TV dinners? Well, I wired a couple of those around the pipe and now it is as quiet as a mouse." Wayne was amused. Knowing the tinfoil sheets were thin and would burn through quickly, he asked John how long he thought they would last.

John's answer, "That is alright, I have lots of TV dinners."

John was very heavy, at times approaching the point of morbidity. Naturally in our group he took a lot of kidding about his size. At the time, John was under pressure to lose weight and was actually grounded for a short time by Doctor Ma. Reportedly, he told Ma his weight was no problem, for he could immediately lose fifteen pounds with a healthy defecation.

John liked his scotch neat. One night in the bar one of the pilots, Phil Payton, approached the big man with mirth in mind, and asked him if he was aware whiskey caused weight gain. During the evening, Phil kept badgering John, telling him that he should switch to gin, which burned off fat. John looked slow-eyed at Peyton and grunted that he did not believe him.

A few days later, Knight found Fonburg in the bar by himself. He was drinking martinis, the first time Wayne had seen him do this.

John's capacity to eat and drink to excess was unparalleled in our group. After Tony Poe departed Long Tieng for Nam Yu in the fall, we all shared work assignments there. To help defray the cost of food and drink, Tony charged crewmembers a small sum. John was renowned for carrying huge loads to local landing

zones. Tony loved this quality in the man, but after a couple RONS he had to bar John from the camp, for during each RON, he ate most of the food and drank at least a case of beer at a single seating.

John's overeating tendencies had consequences for all of us. During a particularly busy time at Pakse, cots were placed in the USAID house to accommodate the crew overload. I arrived late one evening and was relegated to a hallway cot. Fonburg had a cot nearby. Early in the morning, I was awakened suddenly by loud sounds of belching and flatulence. Unconsciously, reminding me of risqué Chaucerian prose, John was simultaneously emitting loud, foul noises at both ends. I had never heard anyone do that before, and had I not been trying to sleep, I would have been impressed. Instead, I yelled at him to cease and desist. A grunt was his only reply.

Another nocturnal story evolved at Sam Tong. Both Fonburg and "Pogo" Hunter were in residence. There was much talk by others about how difficult it was to sleep in the same room with either champion snorer. "Pogo" represented the nervous, whistling type, while John emulated a deep, contented snorer. To preclude the loss of sleep among normal humans, one of the pilots arranged that only two beds were available for John and "Pogo" in one room. Of course, John and "Pogo" were totally naive concerning the ruse. Aware that the night snoring session would result in a champion emerging, the other pilots eagerly awaited the outcome. The following morning, "Pogo's" bed was in the hallway in front of the room. During the night, he had pulled his bed outside, leaving Fonburg the clear all-time winner of the snoring contest.

John was always on the lookout for a bargain when it came to filling his belly at minimum cost. Later in the war, when the



Captain John Fonburg, Assistant Chief Pilot (ACP) Captain Jerry McEntee, and Operations Department and Chief Pilot Helicopter (CPH) scheduling clerk Somsak standing in front of the helicopter pilot status board.

Knight Collection.

USAF was the predominant group at the RTAF base at Udorn, Air America flight crews were allowed to purchase in-flight box lunches from the Air Force kitchen located across the parking ramp. A menu described the lunches and inexpensive costs. At night, crewmembers filled out a form, which was sent to the kitchen for delivery the following morning. Fonburg analyzed the food list and entered Wayne's office one day indicating a certain chicken sandwich combination provided more chicken than that in a chicken dinner, and it was cheaper. Two boxes were all John ever ordered. The box lunch also included a hardboiled egg. Some of us were flying the Bell helicopter at the time, and John would crack the egg on the cyclic grip. This method invariably scattered shells on the cockpit floor. After several Flight Mechanics complained about the mess, one substituted a fresh egg for the boiled one. When John did his thing, there was egg everywhere, on the pilot, on the cyclic, and on the floor. Reportedly, John changed his methodology in consuming eggs.

John was highly inquisitive in a semi-unobtrusive manner. Pilots who observed him in the Chief Pilot's office swore and joked that he could read papers upside down. Wayne never knew if John was proficient at this, but noted that he used to give his desk a through look, sometimes cocking his head in an attempt to read items. And, he did not make a serious effort at disguising his actions.

When Phil Goddard worked in the Chief Pilot's office, either as Wayne's assistant or as the CPH, John would visit to chat or talk about the schedule. There was usually a can of pistachio nuts on Phil's desk that John always attacked with vigor. However, he never replaced what he consumed. Phil soon tired of the depletion of his goodies. Therefore, to emphasize a point, he collected and placed all un-cracked nuts in a can. One

day the can was full. During John's next visit, he continued his freeloading style, but was unable to open any nuts. Much to the amusement of those in the know, he never caught onto the gag, and left frustrated.

Then there was the "Fonburg Circle" story that later circulated within the pilot group. The technique involved John performing extra orbits at altitude before terminating for the night at places like Sam Tong. There may have been a good reason for his actions, possibly to relay messages from other pilots, or to radio stations south. However, some chose to portray it as an attempt on his part to extend his daily flight time, for additional time in the air earned more money. ²⁹

LOOSE LIPS

As an example of the confidentiality Air America, the U.S. military, and the Customer attached to SAR work, a loose-lipped new First Officer by the name of Carlson was terminated for policy noncompliance.

Well in advance of larger military rescue equipment's arrival, a couple of Air Force helicopter crews had preceded Carlson to Udorn. With suitable accommodations not yet available on base, they were temporarily billeted in town at the new Udorn Hotel. ³⁰

Captain Bob Nunez, having previously served with some of the pilots, spent time at the hotel bar reminiscing with his buddies. They eventually heard scuttlebutt that we were being

²⁹ Wayne Knight Emails, 07/11/00. 07/13/00, 07/14/00, 07/15/00, 07/16/00, 07/17/00, 07/18/00.
Tom Penniman Email, 03/31/00.

³⁰ Udorn Hotel: The hotel was built on property formerly housing Asian Acres, an early bungalow compound rented by Air America employees.

paid 10,000 dollars for successful pilot rescues, so Nunez spent several hours, and many drinks, attempting to convince them that we received nothing for our efforts but hazard pay and ulcers.

Carlson, an older former Army type, having worked as a civilian contract instructor pilot for Ross Aviation at Fort Rucker, was also staying at the Udorn Hotel. He had an initial acceptance ride and conducted one round-trip familiarization flight to Savannakhet with a PIC to deliver parts for a grounded H-34. A confirmed alcoholic, he was drunk when Air Force helicopter crews entered the bar after work. Carlson was standing when the crews greeted him with the standard American phrase, *"How are you doing?"*

"OK. Pretty good. Had a tough one today. We had to go out east and got the shit shot out of us, but we made the pilot pickup."

Impressed, an Air Force pilot said, *"Oh, that is neat."*

"Yeah. I earned ten grand for my effort. Not a bad day's work."

Naturally, word of Carlson's fraudulent bragging caused quite a stir in all quarters. Thinking Nunez had shattered their trust, and lied to them about pilot rescue pay, the pilots tracked Bob down and accused him of being a *"lying sack of shit."*

As housemates, Bob informed ACP Marius Burke about the incident. Burke, who regarded it too egregious to ignore, in turn mentioned the falsehood to Abadie.

Ben Moore was livid after learning of Carlson's security breach, and especially the affront to those of us who actively conducted SAR work. Therefore, out of respect for our efforts, in probably the first termination of its kind, Ben summarily and

immediately discharged Carlson from Air America. The man was on the way back to CONUS the following day.

It was fortunate that the man was already gone when word of his folly reached the lower ranks, for he might have been challenged to a serious encounter with fisticuffs...or worse. ³¹

³¹ Marius Burke, Interview.
EW Knight Email, 05/10/00

The period from 20 to 22 June constituted the most challenging and undeniably the worst three days of my young life. During the previous year, although participating in some way in a couple dozen SAR situations, I had never been in position to conduct an actual live military pilot rescue, and envied those who had saved an American life. So far, it had always been the other guy (a term coined after Englishman Guy Fawks) who was "Johnny on the spot."¹ Even though risks might be similar, credit was seldom accorded to those operating on the periphery of these actions. Because of the notoriety, and enhanced reputation attained in a rescue of an American military pilot, it was difficult not to be envious of our group members who already possessed a save or two under their belt.

Despite debatable rumors of USAF resources and crews soon assuming all search and rescue (SAR) duties, those of us flying helicopters in Laos were well aware that SAR duty was far from over for us. On a personal level, with the air war in Laos and Viet Nam continuing unabated, without any idea of timing or place, I knew that I would eventually be accorded my time in the barrel. Because of a helicopter pilot's ingrained superstitious nature, flying a machine with numerous working parts that might fail at any given point over a unique area overwhelmed with a plethora of hazards to flight, I was an adherent of calculating

¹ I did not count the deceased pilot episode as a rescue, merely as a recovery.

survival odds. Unlike the infernal random generators placed in casino slot machines, I did not believe the odds reset to zero with each event, but sequentially mounted toward an end result. Therefore, by constantly working in Military Region Two and areas beyond where much of the SAR action took place, I was reasonably certain my "moment of truth" was soon at hand.

As a counter measure to USG's Rolling Thunder campaign steadily advancing north, Soviet-provided MiG-15 and 17 aircraft entered the air war over North Vietnam. A U.S. Navy F-8 Crusader was damaged by a hostile during the first week in April. The following day, four MiG-17s from Phuc Yen Airfield near Hanoi encountered and shot down two USAF F-105 Thunderchiefs (Thuds), which were striking the Ham Rong Bridge over the Ma River in Than Hoa Province.

Responding to latest developments and requirements in the air war, on 4 April, four flights of F-4C Phantom jets belonging to the 45th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS) launched from MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, to commence a three-day ferry flight to the Royal Thai Air Force Base at Ubon. The pilots' mission was to supplement F-4s already located at Udorn and protect the Thunderchiefs with an air umbrella called MiGCAP. When the aircraft arrived at Ubon and taxied to the chocks, the pilots were greeted with cold beer and a characteristic "*What's up, mate?*" from Australian counterpart mechanics and pilots, a portion of a South Eastern Treaty Organization (SEATO) F-86 force already established there.

During the fifties, when war appeared likely in Indochina, several air bases and runways in pro-western Thailand had been improved by a blend of military and civilian construction teams. Strategically positioned close to southern Laos, Ubon was one of these. Since then, little else had been developed at the

facility in the form of creature comforts that would satisfy young Air Force aircrews accustomed to luxury accommodations enjoyed in the U.S. Dirt roads and screened "hooches" with sheet metal louvered siding provided Spartan living accommodations for the first Phantom squadron crews arriving there. One item circulated the base in abundance: diarrhea was shared by all hands, lots of diarrhea.

Predictably, the initial MiGCAP assignments only lasted three days. Considered too valuable an asset to utilize on only a single mission, F-4 drivers were additionally tasked STRIKECAP missions in which they first bombed an assigned target, and then climbed to altitude to assume MiGCAP responsibilities for the F-105 pilots who struck the same targets. This was facetiously and sarcastically referred to as, "bombing the smoking holes." Targets generated during the period were barracks, supply depots, and fuel storage tanks. In addition, there was some escort work covering electronic counter measure (ECM) planes flying established patterns along the Viet Nam coastline.

During May, F-4 pilots also participated in "Bango Alert" missions. This program consisted of a fifteen-minute strip alert to include targets of opportunity. The alert missions added a little more zest to the aviator's dull life at Ubon, as pilot briefings were abbreviated, no fuel programmed, and no SAR capability was available. Without normal support, the pilots generally relied on their initiative and common sense. On one occasion, F-4 pilots were scrambled to attack supply ships in the Vinh area. Pilots reported incredible flack, akin to World War Two conditions. After releasing their bombs, the pilots

immediately departed the area and it was doubtful that any of the numerous ships were hit. ²

Another day, rockets were used against troops in contact (TIC) in the Lao Panhandle. The F-4 flight was controlled by a T-28 "English speaker" referring to himself as "Golden Eagle." The mission was judged successful, with good battle damage assessment (BDA) reported.

AN ILL-FATED ROLLING THUNDER MISSION

"U.S. Republic of Vietnam [RVN] air activity during June 1965 increased by approximately one-third over that performed during May." ³

Consistent with the Johnson Administration's pragmatic approach and cautious management of the air war over North Vietnam, and Hanoi leaders' reluctance to cease or slow continued aggression against South Vietnam, it was not long before the war slowly expanded farther north. On 18 June, as part of Rolling Thunder eighteen through forty-seven, authorizing a small number of targets, jets from the 45th TFS provided MiGCAP for F-101 Voodoos performing photo reconnaissance of the Son La Valley a number of miles northwest of Hanoi. At the completion of the flight, after action critique classified the mission as routine, with no observed ground fire.

Two days after the photo mission, strike elements of the 45th were assigned to destroy the 316 Division's training barracks at Son La, in an area reputed to be one of the largest

² Gun cameras were not installed on F-4s at this time.

³ Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume 3, Vietnam, June-December 1965. #57, 07/14/65, Memorandum from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Wheeler) to Secretary of Defense McNamara. Washington. Over-all Appraisal of Air Strikes Against North Vietnam through 30 June 1965.

and most heavily defended target complexes in northwestern North Vietnam. The Son La region included the main artery, Route-6, which wound south from China, eventually connecting Sam Neua LOCs. The route was utilized to transport a vast amount of supplies and men earmarked to support Pathet Lao and Vietnamese "advisor" activity in Laos. In addition, military considerations relating to the Pathet Lao effort in northern Laos were managed through the Northwest Military Regional Headquarters at Son La. North Vietnamese Army support for the Pathet Lao effort against the Royal Lao Government was essential to the insurgency. Pathet Lao leadership relied on Vietnamese advisors, who conducted military and political training courses, provided education to technicians, and furnished logistical supply. Without "assistance" from these so-called advisors, it was believed that the Pathet Lao war machine could not function properly. ⁴

Native populations in the northwest region of North Vietnam were predominately from Tai Dam clans, with scattered minority groups of Meo and Tha Khao. The Son La area was also an agricultural market center where farmers produced corn, tea, rice, cotton, and livestock. Many feeder trails and paths fed into Route-6, which wound through the valley on its way north to the historic Dien Bien Phu Valley.

Except for aerial photographs, and because of a lack of accurate charts and intelligence, there was not much hard information available regarding the area or designated target. As customary, the squadron briefing officer presented target details, and placed pertinent graphics on the blackboard. After

⁴ Rand Abstract-RM-5688-Advanced Research Project Agency (ARPA). 69, Langer-Zaslloff. Jacob Van Staaveren, *Gradual Failure*, 138.

completion of the intelligence briefing, the pilots chose an initial point (IP), a prominent landmark on the ground, and selected a run-in heading five to ten miles from the target. Consistent with safety regulations in effect at the time, to reduce exposure to AAA fire, each individual plane was scheduled to conduct a single pass over the target at 5,000 feet above ground level (AGL) and salvo the entire load of 750-pound general purpose bombs.

USAF Captain Curtis H. Briggs was one participant in the Son La mission. Curt, graduating first in his USAF flight training school class, had eagerly anticipated flying combat jets, when "needs of the service" reared its ugly head. Instead, he and other members of his class were assigned to back seat weapons systems duty in F-4Cs with the title of Pilot Systems Officers (PSO). The frustrated fighter jocks morale was not favorable upon arrival at Ubon. Briggs, who participated in the reconnaissance mission of Son La breathed easy, considering his 56th mission would amount to a "piece of cake." He was wrong.

After topping off from a KC-135 tanker, and despite annoying cloud layers, the flight found the IP with assistance of the onboard inertial guidance system.

Flight Commander Casper Beirman conducted the first pass. From his PSO seat in the second ship, Briggs heard his Aircraft Commander, Captain Paul Anthony Kari, curse, "*The dumb bastard hit the wrong target.*"

As Kari commenced a dive-bombing run, Curt began reporting altitude increments over the intercommunication system (ICS). Because of a terrain miscalculation by the briefing officer, they dropped the bombs at 3,500 feet instead of 5,000 feet above the ground. While pulling off the target, Briggs felt the jet shudder. He also observed multiple air bursts from what were



Broad scale map of Southeast Asia covering hundreds of miles of terrain. By 20 June 1965 the Rolling Thunder bombing program had progressed north from the established demilitarized zone (DMZ) parallel to a training and logistic area around Son La-Na San, depicted in the upper center. The black line delineates the approximate route flown by the two Air America UH-34 crews to the downed F-4C SAR site.

most likely radar-controlled 37mm guns. Kari jinked wildly left, right, and up and down to break the radar lock, but his evasive movements failed to evade the enemy fire. Simultaneously, both engine fire warning lights illuminated while climbing through 6,000 feet. Tongues of fire spurted from the left engine and sheets of flame rose above the cockpit. In addition, dense white hydraulic smoke seeped into the cockpit. Attempting to clear the air, Kari jettisoned both canopies. Less than a minute later hydraulic pressure was lost and the ICS ceased to function. At 8,000 feet, with the plane on fire and rolling uncontrollably to the left, PIC Kari motioned to eject. Briggs reached down between his legs, grabbed and activated the manual ejection seat release lever on the Martin Baker device, and punched out of the dying bird (serial number 64-0685). It marked the beginning of a very trying SAR.

Terry Johnson and James D. Buckerfield were flying in the formation's fourth slot. They observed Kari pulling off target when hit. While the PIC began a climb for altitude, flames streamed behind the plane. When flames enveloped the aircraft, Paul shut the engines down. Two chutes were spotted and they observed the men landing about two miles apart. Buckerfield then obtained the Lat-Long (latitude and longitude) coordinates from the inertial guidance system and radioed for SAR assistance. ⁵

GOOD MEN, POOR POLICY

"...whosoever saves a life, it is as if you have saved the world."

Talmud: Sanhedrin 37a

⁵ This flight marked Paul Kari's 64th combat mission.

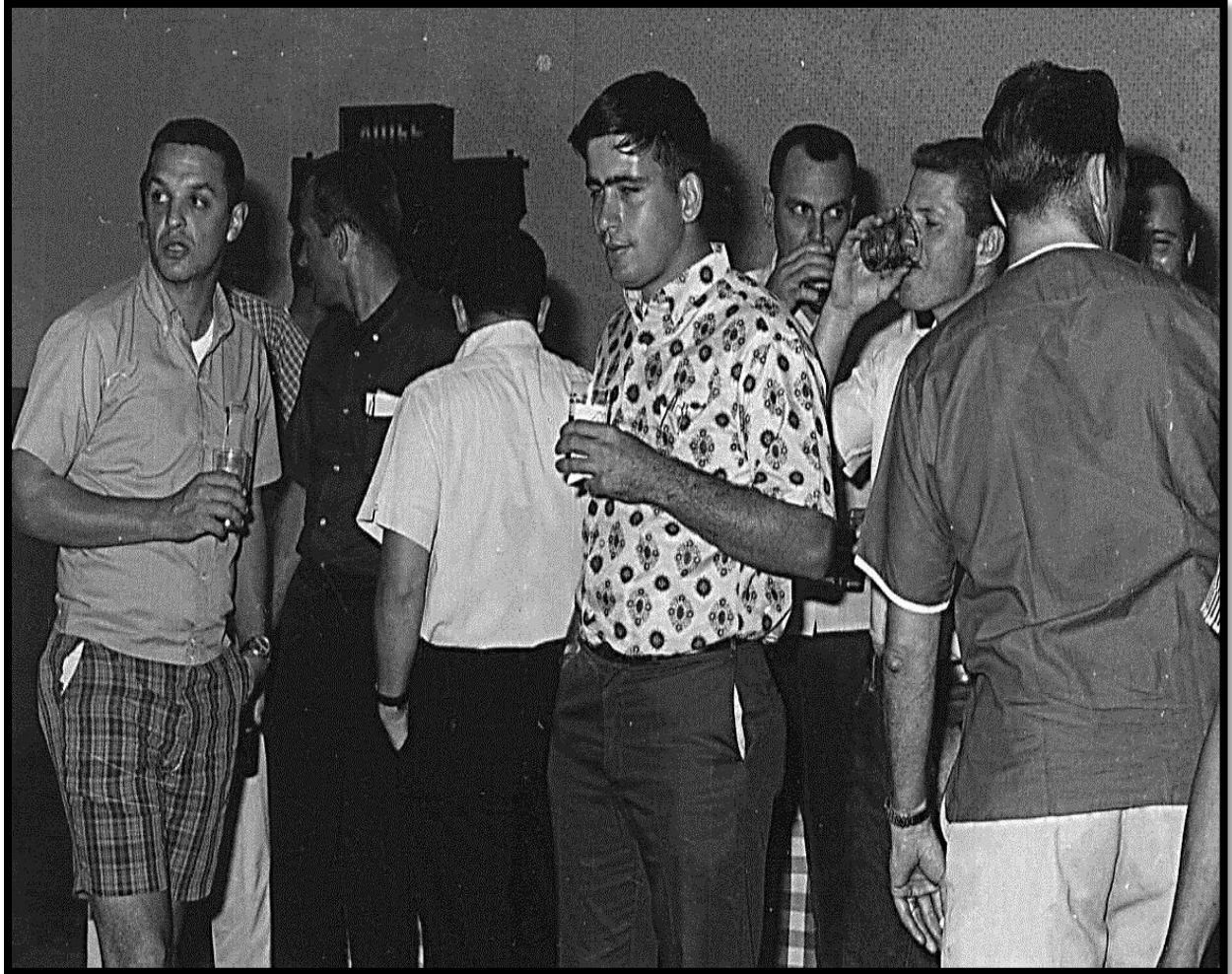
I celebrated my thirtieth birthday on 5 June. It nearly marked my last. Fifteen days later, on Sunday, I was scheduled to fly Hotel-33 for my second June upcountry RON in Military Region Two. My crew consisted of two fairly new employees, First Officer Frank Stergar and Flight Mechanic Steve Nichols.

Earlier in June, Frank, a former Army Major and Korean War veteran, and I had spent an amicable fifty-five hours together in the H-34 cockpit. He was an old cold war warrior, acclimating easily to the rigors and pressures of the present-day paramilitary Air America operations. An avid tennis player, he was in extraordinarily good physical condition for an older helicopter pilot type, and easily put some of the former Marine retirees to shame. Additionally, as I would discover within hours, Frank was considerably tougher than nails.

Former U.S. Navy enlisted man Steve Nichols had also only been in Udorn about a month. The young man had recently worked for a week upcountry in the capacity of a training Flight Mechanic. When Phil Goddard parked an H-34 at Moug Soui with a sick engine, Steve participated in an R-1820 field engine change. Checked out the previous week as a trainee with Captain Sam Jordan and Flight Mechanic Rudy Serafico, the flight would mark his first unsupervised trip into the Laotian hills.

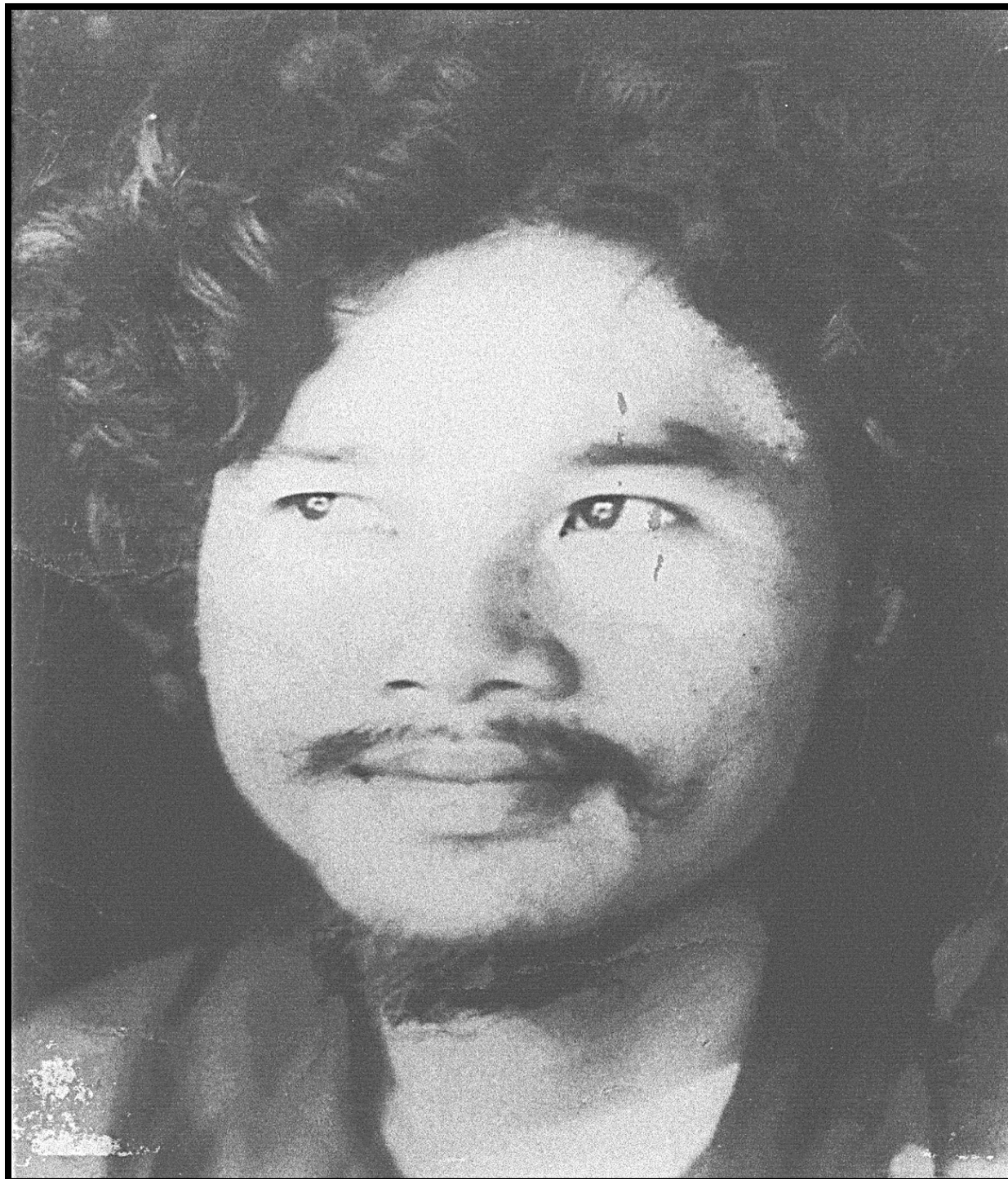
Following a Long Tieng briefing, we worked a few loads around the local area and then were directed to Na Khang. We popped across Skyline Ridge, the hill dividing the two complexes and, while the fuel tanks were topped off at Sam Tong, we obtained a couple of ham and cheese sandwiches for later consumption.

Like so many recent assignments, the rest of the day was to be spent supporting FAR units in and around Na Khang, a site far to the north that interdicted Route-6, one of the important



Center: An introspective Steve Nichols at a Rendezvous Club party. Standing left to right: Flight Mechanic Bill Murphy, Unknown, the back of Matt Luca, Steve Nichols, Harvey Potter, "Rusty" Irons, Charlie Weitz's rear, Bob Nunez's head.

Nichols Collection.



Legendary long-haired Lao Military Region Two warrior, Lieutenant Colonel Tong Vonggrassamay, Commanding Officer of Volunteer Battalion 26 in the RLG-controlled Sam Neua, Laos, subdivision in MR-2 Houa Khong Province.

Frank Stergar Collection, presented to him by retired Agency Case Officer Tony Poshepny.

enemy logistic feeder roads to the Plain of Jars (PDJ). The unimproved road almost invisibly traced forested mountain trails and contours from Sam Neua Town into the Ban Ban valley, and connected with the more developed Route-7 lines of communication (LOC).

Site-36, located deep in enemy territory was commanded by legendary Lao Colonel Tong Vonggrassamay (Vongpangdy), avid communist hater, a feared and respected FAR leader by both friend and foe. Because of their smart appearance and outstanding fighting ability, Tong's Volunteer Battalion-26 (BV-26) personnel were the envy of Commanding Officer Military Region-2 (MR-2) General Vang Pao's mixed ethnic forces. The U.S.-trained officer kept a tight rein on his men, always demanding utmost discipline and devotion to duty. Highly motivated like Tong, most of the tough, experienced mountain troops vowed never to cut their long hair until every communist troop had been driven from Sam Neua Province. The man was a conundrum. Although seemingly mild mannered in appearance and speech, Tong's leadership technique was often harsh. Moreover, he liked to shoot dogs as a vivid example to his men that summary execution could result as a penalty for even minor military infractions.

A participant of the 1954 and 1962 Geneva Accords on Indochina and Laos, USG was reluctant to admit any involvement bombing neutral country Laos and North Vietnam. Unfortunately, in over a year of ever-increasing air activity, the U.S. military still lacked adequate air resources to support long range pilot rescue attempts. This was influenced by a perceived necessity to exhibit a non-involvement façade, a ridiculous assumption since the Soviet bloc and enemy was well aware of our actions. This policy, the lack of proper assets, and incomplete

briefings cost men's lives. Therefore, like it or not, Air America civilian crews were designated the primary SAR unit in Laos. During a one-year period, our efforts had resulted in a reported eighty percent save rate. The hazardous work was performed with little military support for our machines or crews. Incredulously, even while this perilous work was being undertaken, the U.S State Department still officially denied us the right to carry defensive weapons. Unofficially, according to each individual's conscience and preference, we carried a hodgepodge of personal survival weapons. Generally, while upcountry and when challenged by a SAR requirement in a denied area, we relied on an understanding and generous Customer to supply some firepower in the form of an armed onboard trooper, or an automatic weapon for the flight mechanic.

In all fairness, the U.S Air Force did introduce the Kaman-manufactured HH-43 "Husky" to the Air Force base at Nakhon Phanom (NKP). However, the machine's fragility and short range greatly limited its ability to perform the mission. Therefore, most HH-43 coverage was restricted to SAR missions east in the Panhandle region of Military Region Three. Still, pressure from higher echelon pogues resulted in occasional machine and crew deployment to Na Khang, mostly on a trial basis. In the beginning, when the "Husky" appeared in Military Region Two, crews unfamiliar with the area had to be led to the site by our pilots. Over time, savvy and innovative Air Force crews cleverly developed methods of hand refueling in the air to extend range, but efforts to effectively use the machines in Military Region Two were at best highly dangerous and generally a wasted effort. In addition, American Embassy regulations prevented crews from overnight stays in the country. Foul weather always restricted their usage. Consequently, because of our daily presence working

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within denied areas and availability close to target areas, we continued to incur the lion's share of SAR work.

Following the loss of Hua Moung, since mid-March Lima Site-36 had become a multilateral facility for several functions. Perhaps the most important, it gradually evolved into a joint USAF-Air America staging area and launch pad for potential or actual SAR missions covering Barrel Roll in Laos and Rolling Thunder operations in North Vietnam. With the inception of U.S. military over-flights in Laos and shoot downs in June 1964, our military rescue attempts had almost exclusively been confined to Laos. Like all other phases of our Lao work, SARs were considered highly confidential. With threats of a ticket home hanging over our heads, we did not converse about SAR operations with others, or between ourselves in the bar, or even upcountry. Such events were to be forgotten, as if they never occurred. With no outlet to vent the strain of such work, many of us turned to the comforts of booze and male companionship in the air-conditioned Club Rendezvous bar. Normally a popular hangout, it became even more the focal point of our non-flying time off.

THE BEGINNING OF A BAD DAY

Halfway to Na Khang, we were contacted by a crewmember in one of our planes aloft. He relayed information from the Vientiane Operations Manager (possibly Tom Khrone) to proceed to LS-36, shut down, and await further instructions. This caused a sinking feeling in my stomach, for I knew it could mean only one thing: an impending SAR.

It was mid-morning when we rolled onto the recently improved laterite red clay strip. The mixed Meo-Lao fortress was located in a small valley at 4,400 feet above sea level (ASL). Ringed with higher hills on three sides, and adjoining rice

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paddies to the east, the long strip was sloped and oriented for fixed wing to land from the south southwest. For years, the base had changed hands from one side to the other, but after the loss of Hua Mung and other northern positions earlier in the year, it had assumed increased importance as the focal point and locus of the Royal Lao Army (RLA also known as the FAR) resistance to communist advances in upper Military Region Two. Although not actually in Houa Phan Province, the border site also adopted the role of provincial headquarters for Sam Neua.

Also alerted for the SAR, and preceding us to LS-36, were Captain Phil Goddard, First Officer George Carroll, and Flight Mechanic Mitch Drew crewing Hotel-22. Like Stergar, Carroll was a First Officer receiving on-the-job training (OJT), and was also a recent arrival to the H-34 program. Drew was barely more seasoned. After parking in the fuel pit on the east side and halfway up the dirt runway, we instructed our Flight Mechanics and First Officers to service the machines, scrounge whatever weapons were available, and stand by for further instructions. Anxious to learn what was occurring, Phil and I hurried up the strip toward the stronghold's thatched command center located on the northwest portion of the hilly complex. Colonel Tong, tall for a Lao, black hair piled high on his head, flaring in all directions from under his helmet was waiting for us outside the shack with his perennial smile. Grasping a large situation map, he professed to have obtained the latest "skinny" relayed over the radio net regarding the projected SAR.

After the initial Mayday report raced through Air Force channels, the control ship, a Crown crewman had radioed through the CIA's single side band radio net that an F-4C pilot was down in North Vietnam at UMT coordinates VJ-0756. We had never intentionally flown into North Vietnam before. Since there was

no requirement to carry maps of the area, we had little idea of the topography, were unable to plot the site, and had little appreciation or understanding of what we faced--only that it could not be good. Although a bit shocked, I was not completely surprised by the projected mission. Given circumstances of the SAR work and the progression of the Rolling Thunder air war north, for some time I had suspected that someone--certainly the other guy--would eventually be tasked to cross the border. I do not know what was going through Phil's mind at the time, but as the stark reality of the potential mission sank in, I entered a state of semi-denial. In addition, had we been aware that the downing site was about ninety miles from our present position in the center of "Indian Country", near the Na San Airfield in the long broad Son La Valley, fifty miles southeast of the Chinese border, and over a hundred miles northwest of the Hanoi airfield complex, we might have rejected the mission. ⁶

Relegated to a standby mode, waiting for additional information concerning a positive sighting, the aviator's status, and Air America assets to be assembled, we were not even sure the mission would occur. However, we knew that if it actually commenced, it would mark a totally new phase in our SAR operations.

Since mid-1964, particularly after Captain Billy Zeitler's downing, Search and Rescue standard operating procedures (SOP) had been examined, dissected, greatly enhanced, and were constantly evolving. They were closely tailored to improve our chances of survival. A provision in our guidelines allowed a

⁶ As part of the SAR standard operating procedures structure, we were accorded that option.

pilot-in-command to refuse a mission he deemed extra hazardous to his aircraft and crew. Even though Air America management and Air Force personnel at Udorn frankly anticipated that some of those who participated in the operations would be killed during these encounters, pilots rarely, if ever, refused to comply with an assignment. Because details were generally lacking and largely unknown regarding any given situation in the downed area, my philosophy and that of others, was to proceed to the scene, take a thorough, honest look at the situation, and then assess whether to or how to proceed. It was not the best of all worlds, for the policy almost guaranteed we would attempt any mission. Along with strong peer pressure to conduct the extremely hazardous job, we appreciated the stark reality that American lives were at risk. We also entertained a belief that, given similar circumstances, someone would go the extra mile, attempting to help rescue us when our moment of truth arrived. From the onset of military SAR work, as a morale factor for our allies, we were counseled to pick up any downed Lao, Thai, or American airman in Laos. Feeling a kinship for all airmen in our theater, I decided that such instructions included friend or foe, regardless of their ethnics, politics, or ideology.

Despite extreme stress caused by hazardous SAR operations and fear of the unknown, Air America helicopter pilots were extremely proud of their military pilot recoveries, and of their efforts despite some failed attempts, and were willing to continue the work. In fact, a few overzealous pilots competed for the honor of retrieving a downed pilot, often assuming excessive risks to be the first on scene to a crash site. Top U.S. military commanders in Saigon and Vientiane AIRA attaches were also pleased with our work. Since we received no monetary reward for pilot retrievals, Ben Moore and Dave Hickler had

previously solicited and received a few selected letters of commendation from Seventh Air Force top brass for some SAR participants. Kudos slowly filtered down through the chain of command, eventually reaching the line pilot level. In lieu of hard compensation, recognition of our accomplishments had the desired effect. They tended to provide us with a sense of accomplishment by participating in the overall effort, and internationalizing our war. Additionally, because of the highly specialized work involved and our outstanding success rate, we were informed our jobs were now deemed more secure. However, no one in their right senses really believed that carrot--we were always subject to the whims of our masters.

THE CONTINUING BRIGGS' ORDEAL

Although rendered temporarily unconscious from high "G" forces--the effect of gravity on the body--Captain Curt Briggs considered the ejection phase from the cockpit very smooth. There was a loud thump, and he was deployed in the parachute. The opening shock was mild and the sequence so rapid that he hardly recalled leaving the cockpit seat. Within seconds he had departed the terrifying noise and smoke to absolute quiet--except for a gentle wind pleasantly humming through the taut parachute lines. Contrasting to the cockpit chaos, he deemed the experience peaceful, until reality returned and he realized his chaotic state of affairs.

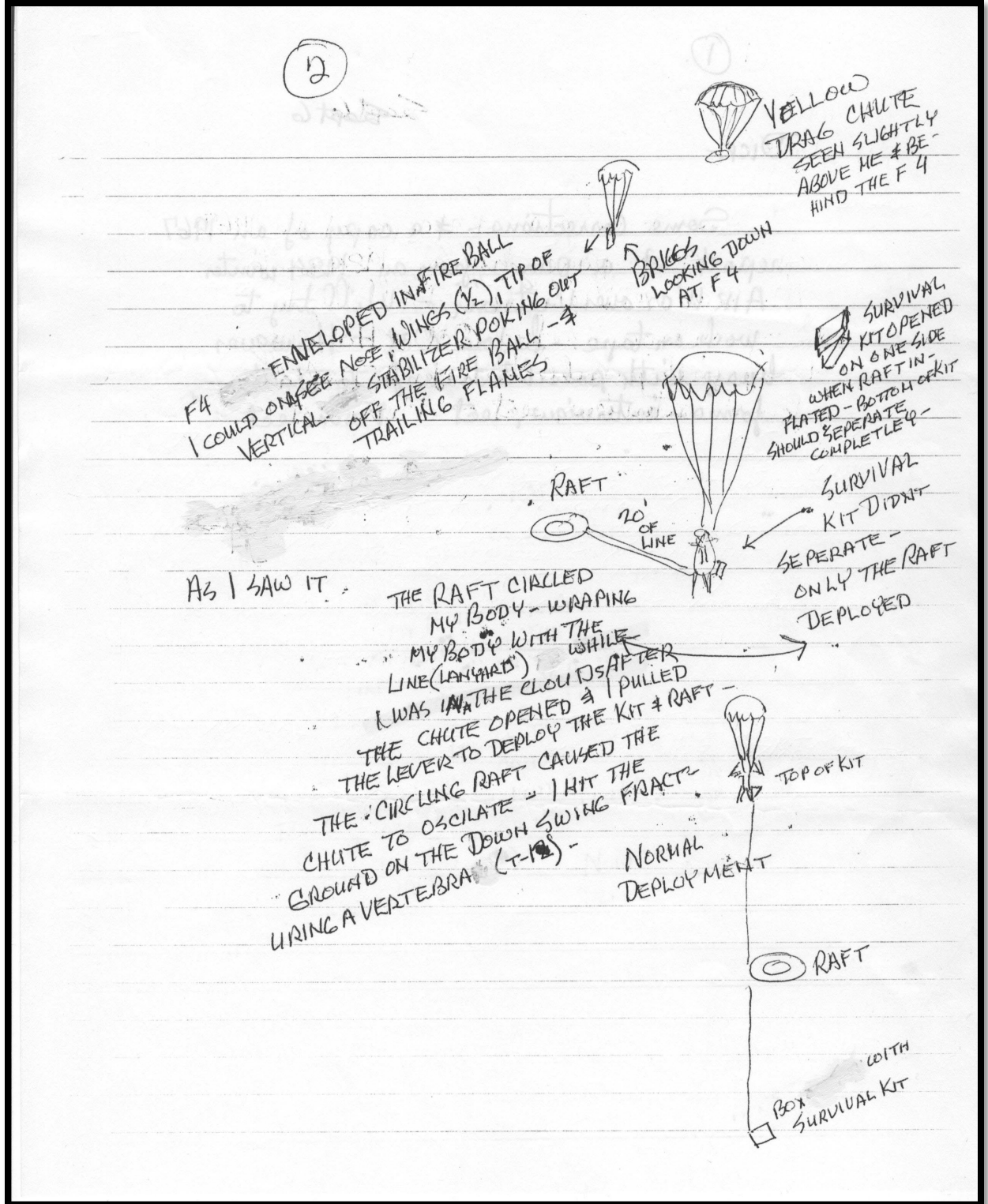
A thousand feet below, through holes in the clouds, Curt observed his doomed Phantom engulfed in flames. Plummeting straight down, only the nose, half the wings, and the vertical stabilizer poked through the enormous fire ball. Slightly above and behind the crippled F-4, Curt sighted two chutes. One was white, the other orange and white. Certain that Captain Kari was

in the white parachute, he speculated that the colored one was a drogue device torn loose from the aircraft.

Curt deployed the survival kit. Incorporated into the pilot seat, the fiberglass box contained a life raft and survival kit that, when activated, was programmed to fall free from the parachute harness. The raft inflated, but the heavier kit, designed to fall first and align the unit on a long line under the pilot failed to detach. With nothing to weigh it down, the raft, attached to twenty feet of line, aerodynamically sailed at eye level. More disconcertingly, the flying raft constantly circled the pilot, wrapping him mummy-like in white lanyard, and causing the parachute and his body to oscillate. Nearing the ground, he frantically worked to disengage the kit and free himself from the restrictive cocoon. He managed to accomplish this at the last moment, but had no time to dampen the oscillations. As a result, he landed backward on the down swing of the chute. Consequently, he slammed into the ground with such force that he believed he had broken his back.

It was 1030 hours when he touched the ground in the unfriendly upland valley of Na San-Son La, North Vietnam.

Suffering minor shock and with pain-deadening endorphins coursing through his body, Curt temporarily forgot the back pain. He hastily slashed the life raft with his boot knife and hid both the raft and parachute under one of numerous bushes permeating the area. Then he looked around for Paul Kari who, lacking intercommunications contact, had first signaled by hand and departed the plane. Looking to the northeast for black, greasy smoke that would indicate a petroleum fire, he saw none. Still, he calculated that Paul could not be more than a quarter mile away. However, not sure of the other pilot's exact



Briggs' rough graphic and narrative of his experience after ejecting from the burning F-4C aircraft.

Provided to the Author by Curtis Briggs.

location, he discounted thoughts of attempting a rendezvous as too dangerous. Immediate safety considerations and a suitable hiding spot took precedence.

Briggs, like Paul Kari, was from Ohio. Curt was a self-professed loner and avid woodsman in his youth. Derived from a family touting a drop of Cherokee Indian blood, he had also been an eager animal tracker in his formative years. Because of this expertise, he was confident that he could evade any ground forces that he knew would soon be searching for him. Survival school instructors had taught that when in such a situation to head for a concealing tree line. Therefore, spying favorable terrain, he stealthily crept toward a prominent stand of trees located on a rise near a ridgeline. Growing on a rocky shelf under a ledge at the base of a ridge, he discovered bushes displaying an identical color scheme as his green flight suit. He concealed himself there, rested, and awaited developments, noting with satisfaction that the vantage point was exceptionally well chosen. He could scan most of the western area and observe movement in much of the broad Na San Valley.

While collecting his thoughts, considering everything he possessed valuable, he took inventory of items in the survival kit. The canvas bag contained food rations, water, flares, a mirror, and other essential items. Removing the signal mirror from its covering, he placed the lanyard around his neck and slipped the device into a zippered pocket. Then, as instructed in survival school, to reduce the chance of being seen, he sliced all shiny name tags and insignia from his flight suit and waited impatiently for someone to rescue him.

While hunkered down, despite his perilous situation Curt was somewhat comforted and heartened by the welcome sounds of U.S. aircraft overhead. He heard his flight depart and other

aircraft replace them. He recognized the sweet moaning sounds of the F-4 engines as the pilots modulated their throttles. ⁷ F-105s flew over, while big enemy guns tracked them. Firing was loud to the west. Booms and concussions could be felt and heard reverberating throughout the valley. In addition, enemy small arms fire rocketed skyward seeking additional kills on invading foreign devils.

About an hour and a half after finding refuge, Briggs was startled and somewhat unnerved by sing-song voices of people walking on the ledge above him. He calculated them to be only fifteen to twenty feet from his hiding place. Groups of about three men each continued to walk through the area. With the passage of a third team, fear gripped his stomach. Terrified over the anticipation of discovery and capture, he thought, *"Damn it, if they are going to get me, why don't they get it over?"* In all, he counted six groups of hostiles.

THE LAUNCH

After he finished talking to us, Colonel Tong, well known and respected for his courage and rashness in the heat of combat, calmly indicated that he was going with us to act as a guide. This was quite a revelation and totally unexpected. In the past, he had ridden with pilots to assuage fears of the unknown and guide us to new front-line positions. He was one of those rare individuals who seemed to enjoy danger and personal participation in extra hazardous work. However happy we were to have this lucky piece along, we were not particularly keen on

⁷ Johnson and Buckerfield returned later in the afternoon. They heard a beeper, but were unable to spot anyone on the ground.

exposing the extraordinary leader to the unknown dangers we assumed lay ahead of us. Then, in a soft voice and without delving into detail, Tong revealed that over the years, during the course of his recruiting activities, he had traversed much of the Son La Province area on the ground, enlisting support and gathering important intelligence from spies and local Meo and Black Tai regarding enemy disposition and AAA defenses. It was the first time I had heard this from anyone, but aware of the man's reputation, did not doubt or dare dispute it. In the end, as neither Phil nor I possessed charts of the target region, and it was time to launch, we assented, and were actually relieved to have such a knowledgeable and apparently indestructible person once again show us the way. ⁸

Predicated on minimum facts and a host of intangibles regarding the impending SAR, out of necessity our plan of action was brief and largely pragmatic. We would rely on experience and innate ability. As the senior pilot of the two helicopter SAR team, by tradition, I was obligated to attempt the pilot rescue. After waiting so long for a chance, I wondered how I would measure up to the task. Initial navigation was not considered a problem. Phil and I both were familiar with the route to the border. Phil, with Tong onboard as guide would lead us toward and into the area where fixed wing presence would provide further instructions on how to proceed. Once in the target area, assuming a prior pilot sighting by searching fixed wing aircraft, I would descend for the rescue attempt. Phil would revert to SAR ship and adopt a back-up aircraft role. Until

⁸ Because of support considerations and tight enemy control over the people and territory, USG did not sanction northwestern DVR penetration by guerrilla teams until October 1965. Ken Conboy.

learning more, we would have to rely heavily on our radios to keep abreast of the fluid situation. ⁹ Our plan was sketchy, but the best we could muster at the time.

Halfway down the strip in the loading area, final preparations were being conducted to launch. Mitch Drew, who had already experienced hairy SAR missions, had just completed safety wiring a .30 caliber machine gun in the passenger compartment door, and was complaining to Steve Nichols that the unfolding affair was completely nuts, and he was not enthusiastic about participating in such a dangerous SAR. Having left my M-2 carbine in Udorn, I asked Tong for an automatic weapon or two for Frank and Steve to effect counter-fire suppression if required. However, nothing was available on short notice. The only weapon onboard would be my trusty .22 caliber Ruger Magnum pistol in the holster strapped under my right armpit. Although I did not wear the gun often because the long barrel protruded from the bottom of the holster and chaffed my side, the weapon did provide a small measure of psychological confidence. An unopened wooden case containing hand grenades was placed on the bucket seat across from Steve in the cabin. To help protect the "family jewels" against small arms and shrapnel, I tucked the Company survival kit into the hollow seat pan. At the last minute, a young unarmed soldier arrived at the helicopter to accompany us. Hardly more than a boy, he had been wounded recently and still had an arm in a sling. In the event that we were forced down, his function would be to interpret and help us walk out of North Vietnam to safety.

Mercifully, we did not have to wait long. When Crown passed the word to launch, it was relayed to us through C-123 PIC Al

⁹Hence, the "brief on Guard" philosophy.

White commanding the Victor Control ship, and we were ready. Apparently, a pilot had been identified and fast movers (jet aircraft) were working over the area.

Our T-28 escort team never materialized. Unknown to us, Alpha pilots had been alerted for the mission and prepared to launch. One seasoned pilot, Captain Tom Jenny, calculated that they had enough fuel to escort us into the area and back to Na Khang with fifteen minutes loiter time. Air Force Captain Batson, an Embassy AIRA type, controlled T-28 activity. Not believing the planes had sufficient endurance available for such a long flight (over 200 miles to the target), he summarily scrubbed the mission. Batson, who Jenny considered merely a "hand-shaker," was the same individual who, as a confidence builder for the sorry lack of military SAR capability at the time, briefed Thailand-based Air Force squadrons that Air America helicopter pilots were receiving 1,500 dollars per rescue and were motivated to earn that money.

Phil Goddard led the flight, with Tong in the cabin section to point the way. Phil ascended slowly north, while trying to establish visual and radio contact with Victor Control. Part of the plan entailed joining up with Victor and then all aircraft proceeding as one cohesive unit into the target area. Rapidly building late morning monsoon clouds already ascended above our flight level. The cumulus clouds vertical convection masked forward visibility, negating any serious attempts of formation flight. By prearrangement, Victor Control was supposed to hold over Houei Ma (Lima Site-107) near the definitive Phu Pha Thi outcropping but, because of heavy clouds we were unable to establish visual contact with the plane, and attempts to use UHF DF steers were unsuccessful. Therefore, instead of wasting precious time and fuel conducting a join-up, Goddard advised

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White to continue north into the crash area, determine what he could, and wait for us to enter the area. Typically, we were on our own.

In order to allow Tong to observe the terrain and navigate from the cabin section, Goddard descended below the cloud bases. Our loose flight became separated for a short time, finally rejoining north of Site-85 near Lima Site-111. Located close to the border, this outpost at Houei Kha Moun marked the northernmost Meo (government) position in Sam Neua Province, but was considered a shaky site since the enemy's February push. Marking another first, neither Phil nor I had ever flown north of this position. Moreover, our dipping and diving to avoid clouds and maintain visual ground contact was not a good omen. Even without deviations, the trip was sure to be lengthy and costly in fuel consumption, hence loiter time in the target area would be minimized. Even under the best conditions our three-plus hour fuel load would have to be judiciously utilized.

With sufficient time to reflect and speculate about what lay ahead of us, I began experiencing a distressing gut feeling regarding the mission's attributes. Our plans were already going astray, and the established SOPs were breaking down. It was evident that we were entering uncharted territory never encountered before in Air America helicopter SAR operations. Inability to join up with the control ship, a lack of escort aircraft, marginal en route weather, restricted fuel endurance for the mission, and a sketchy briefing all contributed to my mounting discomfort. It was evident that we were about to play hardball in the enemy's backyard with few positive aspects going for us, and there were too many unknown variables to develop a complete plan of action. At such times, I liked to weigh the

odds of success. In this case, the odds presented a dismal picture.

Hugging the steep mountainous terrain at a lower altitude to avoid river valleys and potential trouble areas, we proceeded northerly along the Nam Het River system. At the enemy crossroads town of Nong Het near the border, we commenced another climb toward 10,000 feet, turned due north paralleling the wide Song Ma River, and crossed into dreaded North Vietnamese airspace. At 9,000 feet a thick cloud layer stretched as far as one could see, which would provide welcome cover from enemy visual ground surveillance. Large 37mm and 57mm caliber anti-aircraft guns (AAA) that we assumed were radar controlled, were reported somewhere in the area. Therefore, we needed every aid or wile we could muster to safely proceed into the region—and, one might add, an ample dose of good luck.

After passing out of the formidable Annamite Mountain spine and east of the 5,000-foot hard surfaced Na San Airfield, I could see through open patches in the cloud layer fortifications, complex road networks, lengthy zigzag type trenches, and elongated tin-roofed buildings.¹⁰ Surprised and alarmed at the disclosure, I abruptly pushed the nose of the aircraft over and increased pitch to accelerate quickly over what I speculated was a communist military bivouac or training area. At our altitude, vibrations unmercifully buffeted the aircraft. Simultaneously, over ICS I remarked to no one in particular, *"If the bad guys have any big guns down there, we are dead."* As we passed out of the danger area, I was surprised at the sprawling flat appearing terrain unfolding below me, for I believed we would be confronted with more of the northern Lao

¹⁰ At the time I was unschooled as to the area's history.

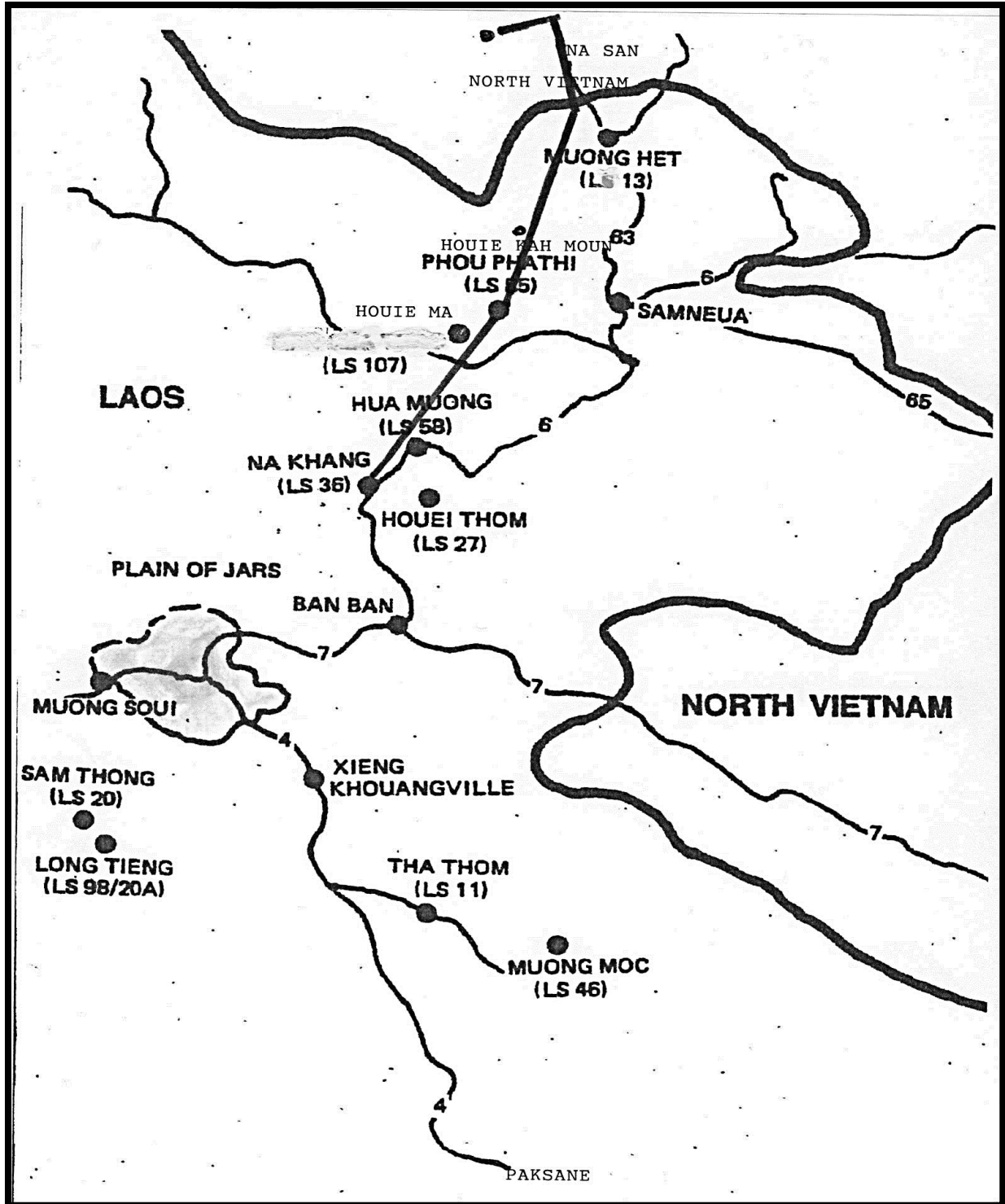
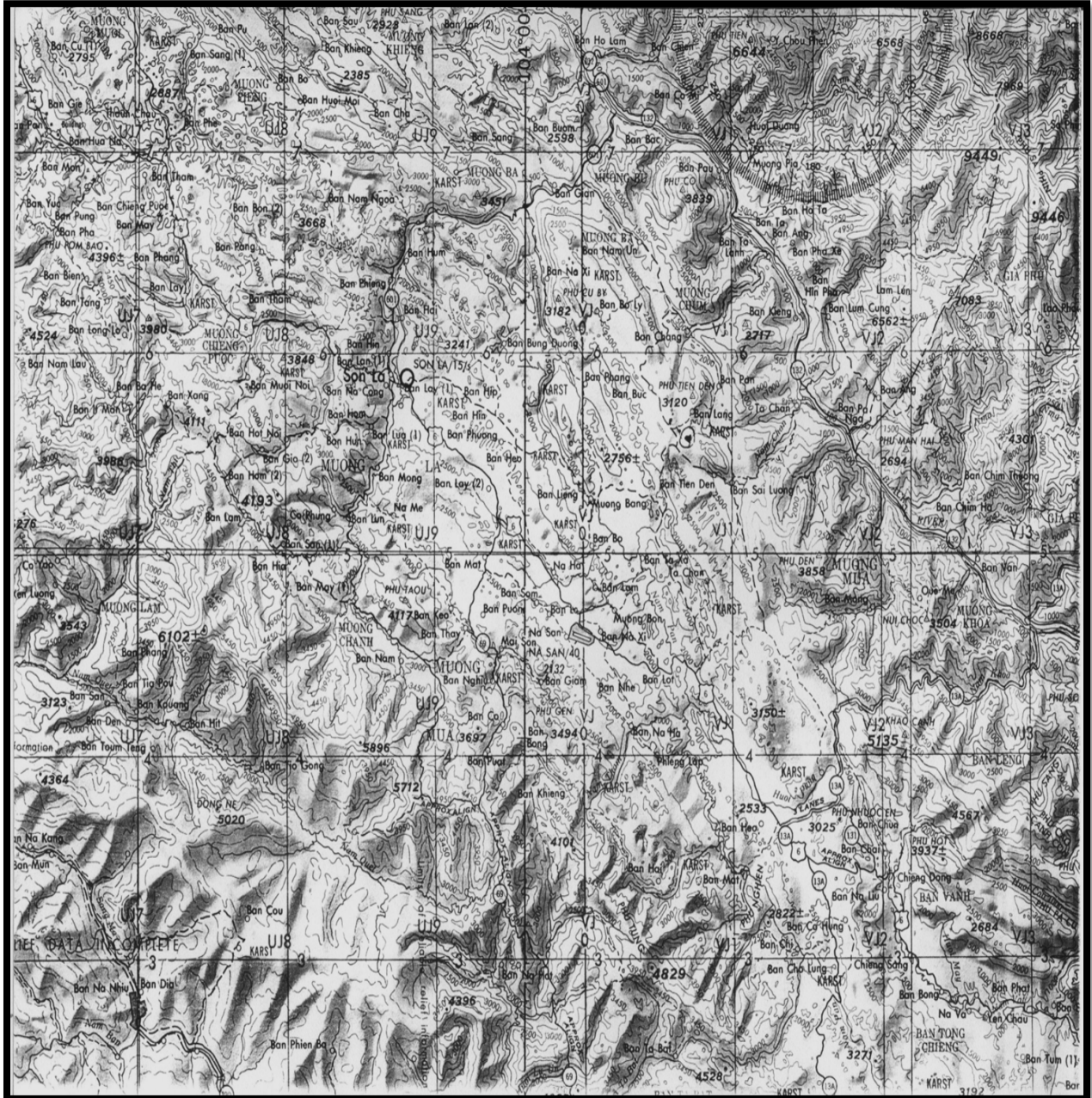


Diagram depicting the approximate route flown into North Vietnam by the Casterlin-Goddard H-34 SAR contingent on 20 June 1965. The return flight was basically the same, but recovery was conducted to the Meo site of Houei Ma (LS-107) close to Phou Pha Thi.

Author Collection.



1:250,000 scale Joint Operations Graphic (Air) chart of the Na San-Son La Valley area surrounded by harsh mountainous terrain. Circled dot depicts the approximate reported coordinates of the downed USAF F-4C. Author Collection.

type mountainous topography, similar to what we had just exited. In any other context, the wide valley could almost be called beautiful had I not been aware that deadly forces awaited us on the ground.

SURPRISE IN THE VALLEY

Now the cloud cover dissipated and the wide Black River, sister to the eastern and parallel Red River, both constituting a major northern drainage system, came into view. Naïve as to climatic conditions in the country, unaware that the monsoon season occurred later in North Vietnam than in Laos, I was surprised to see huge, exposed sandbars choking portions of the river.

Victor Control, who had preceded us into the area and had been in constant contact with Crown, advised us to turn to a northwesterly heading at the Black River and commence a search for **pilots** in an area almost equidistant between the river and the Na San airfield.

Wait a minute. Commence a search? Pilots? What the hell was the man talking about...? These were shocking and fateful words, for such a revelation would only compound our problems. The pilots (we now learned that two pilots were onboard the aircraft) had never actually been sighted on the ground as previously reported. Whether a break-down in Air Force communications, or an outright falsehood perpetrated by zeal, and calculated to prematurely suck us into the area, was really academic at this juncture. Despite this major setback in our plans, in what was fast turning into a comedy of errors or "can of worms," we were already deep inside the core of harm's way, committed to the task ahead, and resigned to search.

Characteristic of past missions, when SARs close to climax reached a fever pitch, all radio discipline failed. Although not visible to us, F-4s were orbiting to the north, attempting to direct and convince us that enemy were not a factor and all was quiet in the valley. With high speed and a huge turning radius, I wondered how they could possibly know this. Chatter from fixed wing aircraft was incessant, making communication between Goddard and myself very difficult. Further cluttering the airwaves was an eerie pulsating tone, an emergency beeper was "cooking off" on 243.0 megacycles. Attempts to home on the weak signal proved useless, while the time-honored rescue call, "Beeper-Beeper, come up voice," rang throughout the valley.

Then Crown passed the mantel, designating Captain White to control the low cover aircraft (helicopters). The Air Force controller was probably ignorant of our jointly established SOPs, or in the heat of battle chose to disregard them. His action constituted yet another deviation from our established SOPs, for the helicopter pilots, best qualified and better situated to assess the recovery situation, were supposed to assume this role.

Now that critical factors regarding the mission had been drastically altered, so did our original plans. Because the pilot had been previously "spotted," we never envisioned conducting a search. With about an hour of ferry time required for return to safety in Laos, I wondered if our fuel burn would allow sufficient loiter time to accomplish anything tangible.

With the onset of Clausevitz's "fog of war" concept and Murphy's untimely appearance to drastically change the equation, all bets were off. Goddard, preceding me in the lead ship, independently elected to descend into the target area. With roles now reversed because of unforeseen developments, I

remained at a reasonable altitude to visually scan a wider area and act as a back-up SAR for Hotel-22, if the situation warranted. While orbiting, I noted a couple F-4s orbiting to the northwest. This was probably our cover aircraft, but with no tactical frequency supplied for contact and considering a fast mover an ineffective escort for our foot-dragging piston slappers, I elected to focus on the job at hand. After this first sighting, I never observed the jets again.

I continued to orbit aloft as Phil searched. Thus far, there had been no indication or mention of ground fire. While flying above the flat, savanna-like landscape, George Carroll spotted what he described as little people placing brush over aircraft parts, and Goddard reported seeing scattered parts in the brush. At sixty feet above the ground (AGL), he slowed to thirty knots to confirm what appeared to be an airman. He was wrong. Within seconds, Hotel-22 and the crew began receiving heavy volleys of automatic fire that resulted in battle damage. Immediately abandoning further rescue attempts, Phil climbed to 5,000 feet, loosely joining on us. Looking out the cabin door, Steve Nichols noted that the copilot seat was empty and thought Drew might have been hit. Steve also reported fuel streaming from Hotel-22's aft cell. Beset with serious battle damage, Phil announced that he was departing the area. In addition, he informed us of a wounded man onboard, but did not indicate that Colonel Tong, while answering enemy fire with the strap-mounted machine gun, had received a bullet in the gut.

Overhearing Phil's intentions to depart the area, highly animated F-4 drivers frantically screamed over the UHF frequency, "*Pick up the pilot! Pick up the pilot!*" Immersed in the heat of battle, their excitement became infectious. Animated and charged with adrenalin, I was reluctant to leave the area

without looking for one or more downed aviators, who I believed lurked somewhere on the deck. Therefore, I requested Phil to direct me to the jet wreckage and wait five minutes while I made a final search of the area from a lower altitude.

From concealment, Captain Briggs heard the characteristic throaty piston engine sound of a helicopter. This surprised him, as his flight had not been briefed regarding any USAF SAR capability in the region. Curious, he crawled out of his hiding spot and from the location observed a helicopter advancing toward him from the far end of the valley. Seeing only one helicopter, he edged cautiously toward a clearing and began flashing a signal mirror. ¹¹

While circling and scanning the countryside from 1,500 feet, I spotted intermittent, intense flashes from a signal mirror about an eighth of a mile north of a trail intersection. While the rest of my crew confirmed my sighting, I relayed this information to Goddard. Unfortunately, from our altitude, the magnitude of the bright flashes made it impossible to accurately determine who was actually behind the mirror. However, from the tentative outline of the person, he appeared taller than an Asian. Furthermore, as a former squadron flight equipment officer, I knew that not everyone could manipulate a mirror properly as a signal, and was reasonably sure that it was an American with some experience using the device. Also, the combination of the mirror and a beeper in proximity to each other tended to convince me an American pilot or pilots were at

¹¹ During this early phase of the air war, emergency radios equipped with both voice and signal beacon were in short supply. Therefore, only the front seat PIC of an F-4C was equipped with a transmit-receive function.

this location, and one did not leave a fellow countryman on the ground in enemy territory. Morally, I had an obligation to myself to attempt a rescue. During past SAR efforts, I had made a decision that, if challenged to perform, I would never turn back. If I did not at least make an honest rescue effort, I would never feel comfortable flying in Laos again, and would most likely have to terminate my Air America employment.

Despite a strong visceral feeling and developed sixth sense that I increasingly relied on recently that an American was in the weeds, I was fully aware that the signals could easily be an enemy dangling a lure to suck me into a death trap. Although more time had passed, this had occurred before during the first Moher-Cook-U.S. Navy Lieutenant Chuck Klusmann SAR in 1964. This attempt would involve and constitute a calculated risk.

Using as much caution as possible in such a critical situation, I descended and began a series of lower high-speed passes over the area for my crew and me to further assess an enemy presence, intentions, and hopefully determine a "safe" approach path into the pilot's position. Although we had not yet been hit, Nichols could hear a constant rattle of gunfire below. After my first pass, Stergar, feeling completely naked in the left seat asked me to pass him my .22 caliber Ruger Blackhawk in order that he might in some way participate in the one-sided battle. Compared to a military rifle or machinegun, the Ruger was only a popgun, but was infinitively better than no weapon at all. From Frank's perspective, exposed and with nothing better to do but watch the unfolding scene, I wondered how I would react as a new First Officer under similar circumstances. For all of Frank's lack of experience in this demanding work, he was quiet and unusually composed. With the gun firmly clutched in his hand and folded arms, I was aware that I would now likely

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have to contend with the report of gunshots in the cockpit, and this would certainly further distract me from my chore and tear at my nerves.

Pressure to depart the mean-spirited valley mounted. Without explanation, Phil kept insisting that it was imperative he leave-now. Beset with prevailing conditions, we would have been completely justified if we had left. Fuel was rapidly depleting, especially on Hotel-22, and armed hostiles were obviously scattered throughout the valley in large numbers.

During one pass Steve reported that he could actually observe a pilot behind a bush. The man was frantically waving at us with a mirror. The rescue had to be attempted now. There was no time to dally. This was our very last opportunity.

The high-speed passes were conducted on cardinal headings to maintain reference to my target. My final pass would generally be on a line from west to east. I informed the crew of my intentions to descend to ground level. Next, I alerted Nichols to pay out most of the hundred-foot hoist cable, coil it in the cabin, secure the yellow horse collar to the hook, and then wait for my orders to deploy the rescue apparatus. By pre-arranging this, I reasoned that in the event that we would be unable to land or achieve a steady hover because of hostile action, there was a remote possibility of performing a slow running snatch of our pilot. Without proper communication or coordination with the man on the ground, I realized that it was a feeble and dangerous plan at best, but the only viable option at the moment. The next few minutes would constitute yet another moment of truth and climax in the worst day of my life.

The time for assessment and planning was complete--movement to the barricades was now warranted. Steve was ready; Frank was ready; I was ready. The little wounded Meo soldier onboard was

probably scared to death. Previous training, experience, and positive action would all now coalesce to culminate in success or failure. Drawing on what little adrenalin remained coursing through my body, and taking several deep breaths, I descended for a final desperate rescue attempt. Decelerating about 200 feet away from the airman, I experienced a surge of confidence. If all went well, I actually anticipated a successful extraction. However, the fates willed against this supposition.

The next few minutes evolved in slow motion. Minutes seemed like hours; seconds seemed like minutes, with actions highly confusing and demanding. While on short final to a hover, all hell broke loose, and chaos simultaneously ensued in that tiny patch of planet earth. Cranking off rounds from my puny pistol, Frank appeared to be having a fine time creating a tremendous din in the cockpit; a staccato of ground fire was heard through earphones in my hard hat, and Steve began animated chattering over ICS.

While I decelerated and approached a hover, fixating on a small tree to my right front for orientation, ground fire and earsplitting sounds like I had never experienced before enveloped the helicopter. As numerous thwacks, pings, concussions, and various odors of expended ammunition permeated Hotel-33, all my senses and nerve endings initially focused on the job at hand, and then to survival.

In his compartment directly below me, Steve heard the slow fire of a heavy machine gun and observed holes streaming rays of daylight into the fuselage. Hotel-33 was receiving hits. When I asked for his appraisal based on what he observed and heard, he calmly advised that we had better depart the area. *Calmly? How could any person remain calm during this situation?* As he relayed this information to the cockpit, abandoning all thoughts

of a rescue attempt, I was already of a similar persuasion. Therefore, I instinctively commenced emergency efforts "to get out of Dodge."

Power! I need power! Reacting mostly by reflex, I aborted the hover, simultaneously wrapping on throttle and pulling pitch. The action marked the first time I ever applied full power to an H-34 engine (in the trade called a throttle burst) without first carefully scanning my triple needle tachometer, and other instruments to remain within established engine and transmission parameters. Of course, all that was academic. At that precise moment, departing the deadly fire threatening to tear us apart provided me immediate and primary motivation.

Oh, Murphy you little imp! Unexpectedly, a kaleidoscope of tiny, multi-colored paper flew up into the cockpit from the rear of the black instrument panel. Momentarily stunned by the haze of battle, bizarre thoughts flashed through my mind: ***Frank, why the hell are you shooting paper wad cutters instead of firing real bullets at the commie bastards?***

SAVED-ALMOST...

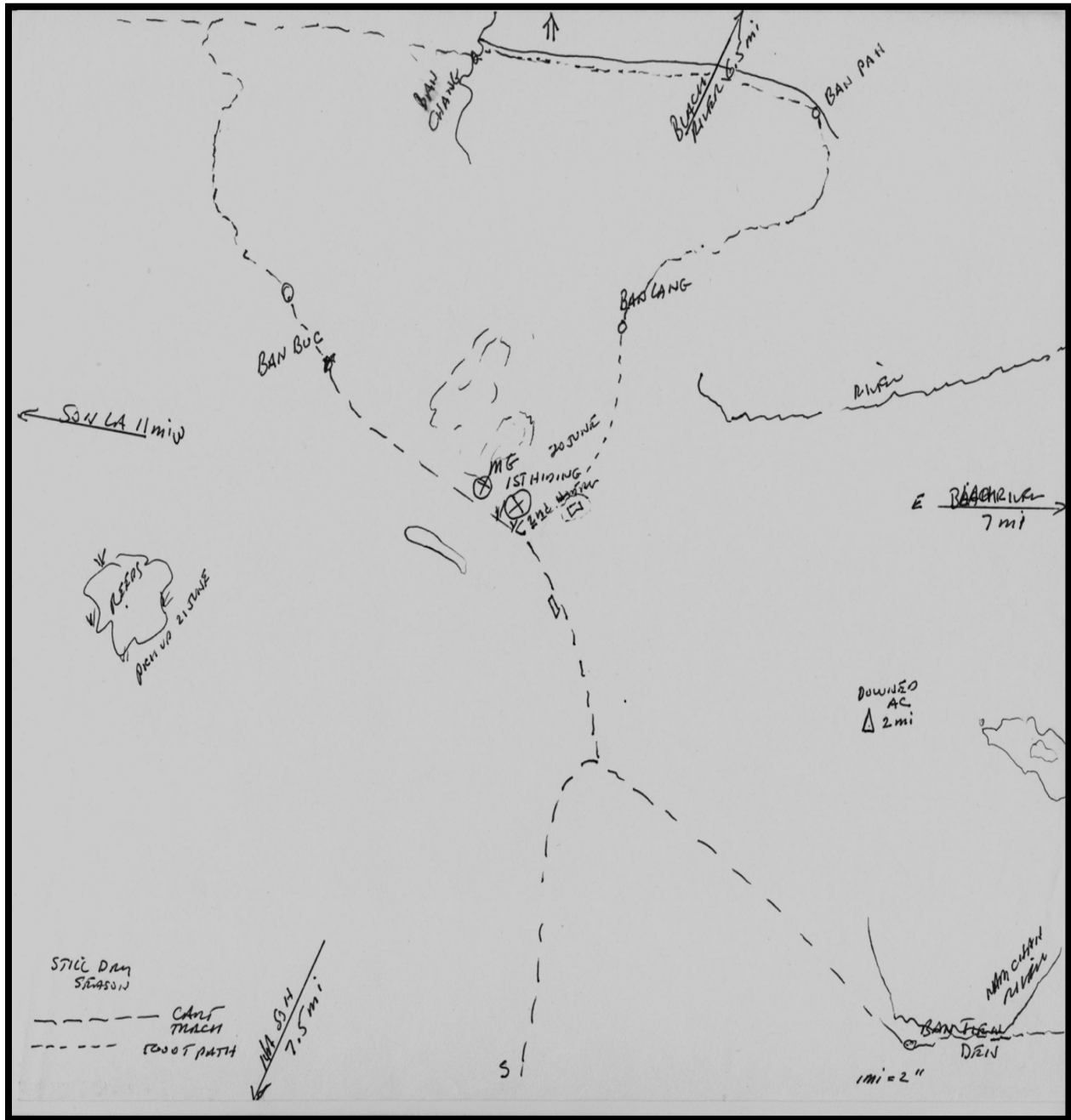
As the helicopter descended on final, Briggs recalled from his survival training classes that he should provide the pilot a smoke signal to indicate wind direction. He extracted a day-night flare from his escape and evasion kit. Never removing his eyes from the approaching H-34, he opened the end, pulled the striker wire, ignited the flare, and hurled it a short distance into the brown, grassy clearing. A few seconds passed while he waited for red smoke to billow up. Nothing happened. All he could hear was the device hissing in the weeds. Then he

recoiled, realizing that in his haste, he had inadvertently popped the night end of the signal device. ¹² In retrospect, it was fortunate that the white-hot magnesium flare did not ignite the grass and draw enemy attention to his position.

Soon the helicopter was close enough to observe a hoist cable lowering. Abandoning his "bug-out bag" and temporary hiding spot, with eyes glued to the partially deployed hoist, he rose and moved swiftly toward the clearing to establish a position for extraction. With salvation only a hundred feet away he was about to run for the machine, when a previously unobserved machine gun began chattering loudly. It poured high volumes of murderous fire into and around the ship. The weapon appeared to be located about 200 feet up a path above his original hiding spot. The ensuing racket was unbelievable. The hammering noise sounded like someone had rested a gun barrel on his shoulder. He compared the action to a movie version of an old western gun fight with rounds splattering throughout the area pinging and ricocheting against and off metal, rocks, and brush.

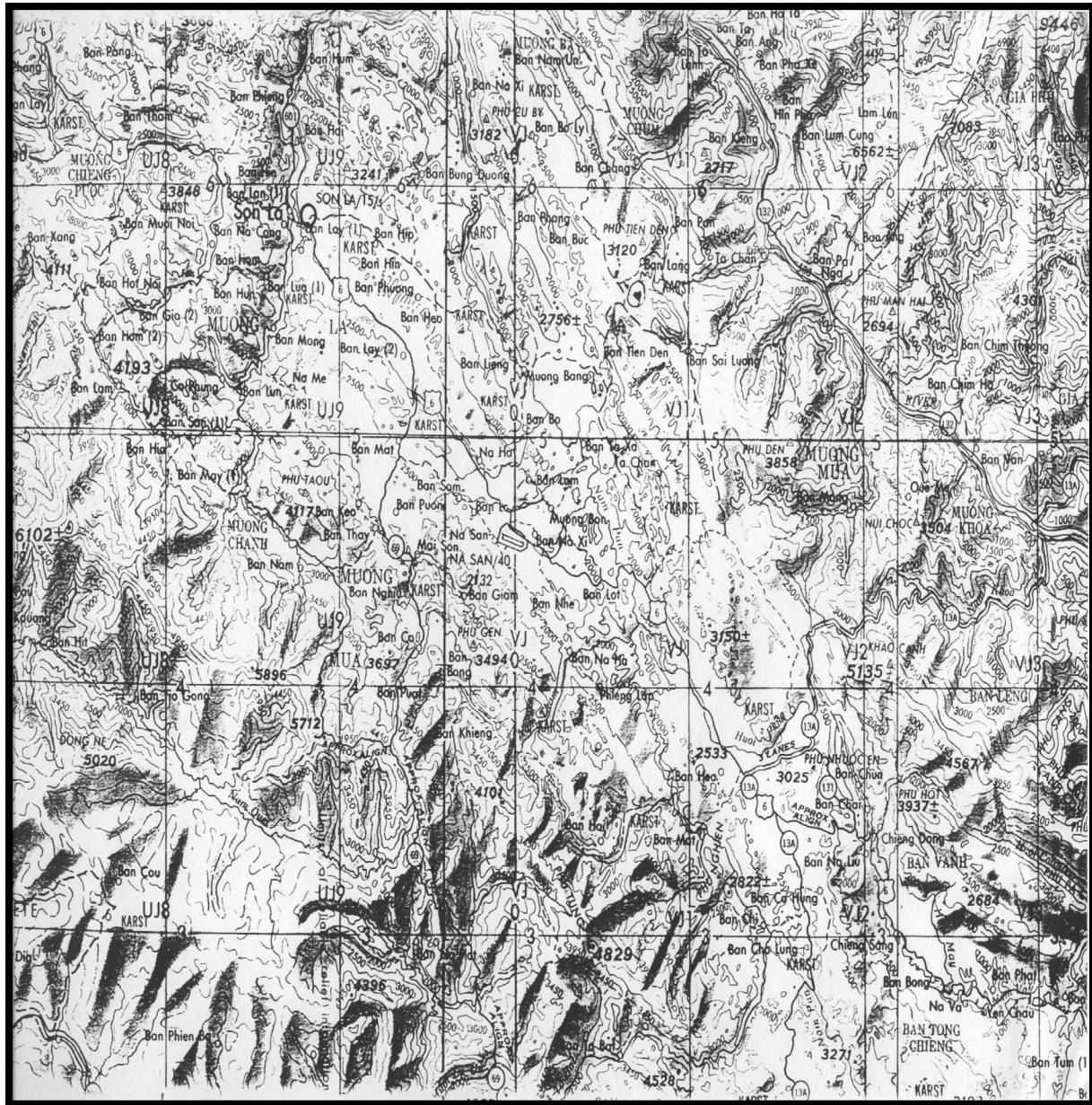
When the pilot added full power to evade the crippling fire, Curt heard the engine sputter and run rough. At this precise moment, his spirits plunged, as he believed that the engine was seriously damaged and the H-34 about to crash. Watching the only asset available in the one-sided situation, and his ticket home slowly climbing away elicited a profound effect on Briggs' damaged psyche. At that precise time, his initial elation at the thought of a rescue changed to deep depression. It was akin to snatching candy from a child. He

¹² The night end of the flare had a circle of raised dimples for tactile recognition during any conditions.



Curt Briggs' diagram of the first (middle) and (left center) second (far left) recovery sites and estimated distances to the Black River, Na San and Son La.

Author Collection.



Expanded 1:250,000 chart of 20-21 Briggs SAR. Route-6 wound north through Na San (upper left portion) and Son La to the border at Dien Bien Phu.

Chart Author Collection.

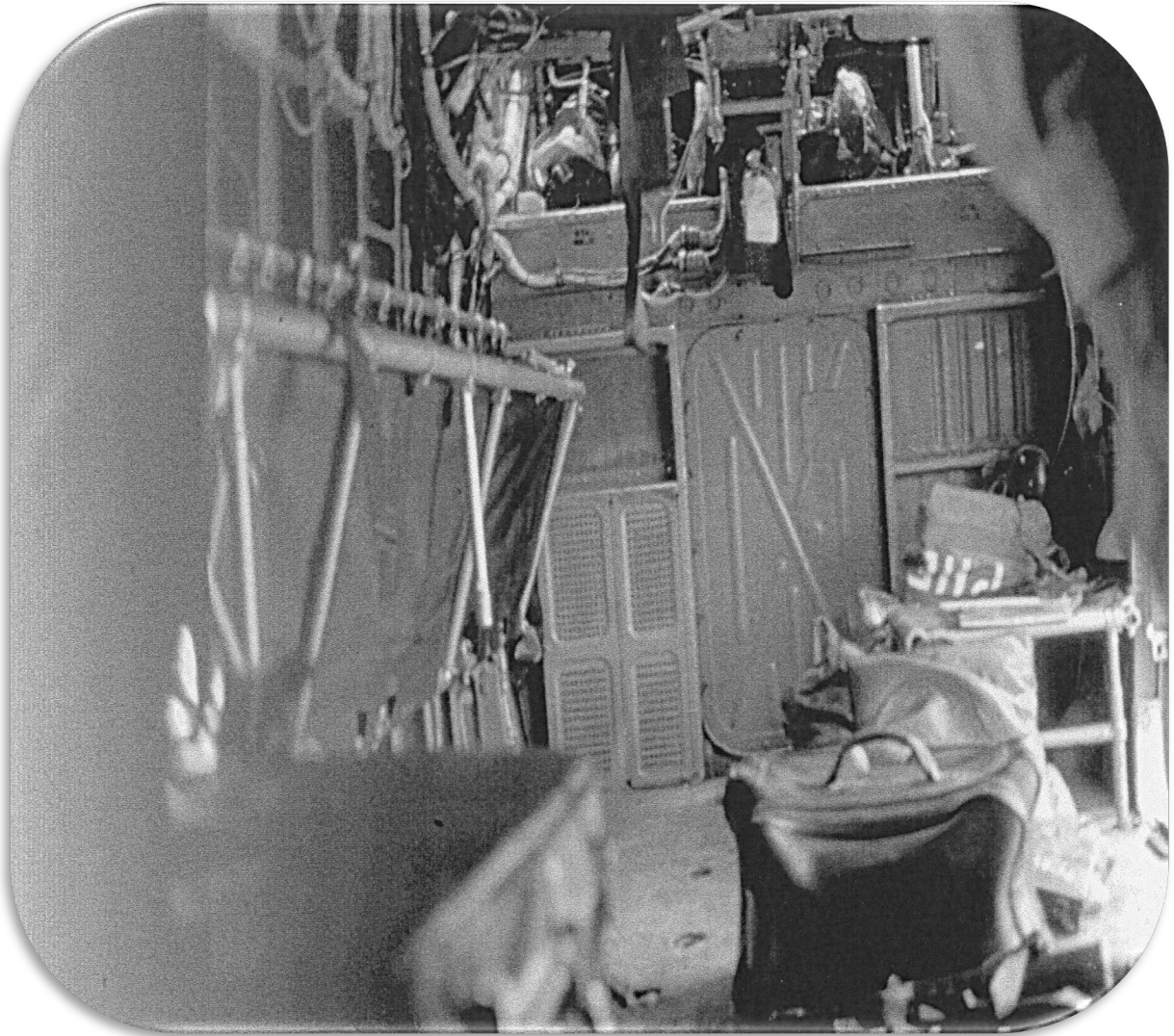
began thinking, *"It is going to be a long time before I get out of here."* Then his mood shifted to one of sheer rage, and he silently cursed, *"You miserable SOBs. I am going to make you pay for that."* Without fear of personal safety, in true Audie Murphy or Sergeant Alvin York style, he aggressively started moving toward the offending machine gun, .38 pistol in hand, intent on killing the bad guys who had denied him freedom. However, before taking three steps, a tiny voice in his head cautioned: *"Do not be stupid buddy, there is always tomorrow."* Then stopping short, he reasoned, *"Yeah. This is really stupid."*

EGRESS

By some miracle of fate, or simply blind luck, my helicopter remained airborne, climbing slowly while staggering east in the direction of the Black River, away from almost certain death or capture. Exacerbating an already tenuous situation, immediately following the throttle burst, I momentarily detected a heavy raw fuel odor. *Damn Murphy again.*

That development was scary, for without actually being aware of the true problem, this indicated to me a possible punctured fuel line that could result in a fire or rapid fuel exhaustion. Frantically cross-checking cockpit engine, transmission, and hydraulic instruments, failed to reveal any serious damage indicated by needle drops or rises. That was a positive sign.

In the meantime, while Steve removed fasteners from the clutch compartment hatch from the forward cabin bulkhead to listen to engine sounds and inspect for visible fuel leaks, the heavy gas odor dissipated. Unable to detect any visible problem, he next dropped to the plywood decking and leaned out the door looking for leaks emanating from the belly area.



Forward portion of a UH-34D cabin section. The mechanic's seat is to the right side of the fuselage near the cabin door and below the PIC seat. The clutch compartment cover, secured by several "zeus keys" is the large rectangular shaped panel fastened to the bulkhead. The louvered battery compartment cover is to the left. The lower portion of the cockpit deck is seen at the top.

Author Collection.

In the cockpit, pertinent instruments continued to divulge no immediate problem, the R1820 engine sounded normal and functioned well. This was reassuring, however, since we were such a long distance from a friendly site in Laos, my short-term plan included landing the aircraft in a reasonably safe area and conducting a rapid assessment of visual damage, to determine if a flight south was feasible. I was still concerned regarding the gasoline aspect. I had a healthy respect for fire and possessed eyewitness knowledge of what searing heat could do to a man's body. Furthermore, since the beginning of my flying career, Naval ground and flight instructors at Pensacola had drummed into me an exaggerated fear of perishing in a fire. Also, under the right conditions, I was aware that magnesium, once ignited, would quickly turn the machine into an uncontrollable blazing inferno or a flying bomb.

Problems escalated. While continuing to scan the cockpit for impending trouble, I observed the mixture control lever located between the pilot seats was still in the normal operating setting. In my haste to vacate the vicious shot pattern, I had neglected to advance the lever forward to the full rich position. Therefore, anticipating a possible climb to altitude, I eased the device forward. This was the wrong thing to do. Three quarters of the way toward the forward detent, I felt resistance to my throttle grip and a distinct rolling movement ensued. Forcing the lever forward rotated the throttle toward a higher RPM setting. This was a first, but aware that such a condition indicated serious control damage in the engine compartment, I became increasingly concerned for our ultimate safety, and a successful escape from that dreaded valley. From information obtained in H-34 training classes over the years, I recalled that if a throttle cable to the Bendix carburetor

parted, the unit was spring-loaded to maximum, automatically increasing fuel flow and engine power. This feature was intended as a last-ditch safety feature to prevent engine failure because of fuel starvation. However, in this condition, without the ability to control power, pilot options were limited. To prevent airspeed from exceeding maximum limits (VNE), eventually resulting in blade stall, a climb was the only alternative to an autorotation, something at that point I was not sure could be accomplished after the severe hosing I suspected we had received. Still deep in enemy territory, a climb south toward the border was preferable to the latter. However, limited to controllability in rarified air, such a climb would eventually result in reaching the H-34s service ceiling, somewhere above 12,000 feet, where lift or aircraft controllability could no longer be maintained. At that point, prior to stall, shutting down the engine was the only viable option. Thankfully, I would apparently not have to immediately make that decision, for I had numerous other problems and demons to contend with at that moment.

Paramount to the situation, I had one objective: survival. I believed that before too long, perhaps within seconds or minutes, it would be imperative to land and exit the aircraft either before the engine quit or the machine exploded. It was akin to a medical triage in a combat situation; my first priority remained centered on landing at a "safe" place. Faced with potential multiple difficulties, any one which could place us on the ground in harm's way or foster a cinder, and including those not yet evidenced, Frank and I enthusiastically began scanning north and east terrain for likely forced landing sites. Frank suggested that we land in one of the forested karsts to our left quarter, adjacent to the river.

However, faced with suspected throttle problems, I was not particularly interested in unduly exercising the controls or employing any more power than necessary. Therefore, seeking an alternative, I opted to land on one of the large sand bars lying in the Black River, ones I had first noted before turning toward the target area. In my mind such a plan was preferable to landing in a rough, confined spot that might require hovering. Furthermore, no reconnaissance was necessary. The islands were level, devoid of undergrowth, and if hard packed, conducive to a minimum power run-on landing. Then, pending a hurried inspection to ascertain airworthiness, if further flight south was deemed impossible, Phil could quickly retrieve us.

As I gently nursed and mentally willed the ship eastward, gingerly adding and testing power applications and minimizing control inputs, I attempted to contact Goddard with my near-term intentions. Contact was very difficult. Radio traffic was constant and intense, blocking my calls. Someone transmitting and jamming the airwaves from Victor Control seemed to be a prime offender. This was aggravating, for traditionally, radio silence was mandatory, and a given constant during any final rescue phase. Angry, frustrated, reluctant to remove my hands from the controls for even an instant, I attempted contact again and again. Following several failed attempts, I switched the radio selector switch to Fox Mike (FM).

"Hotel-22 this is Hotel-33, over."

"Go ahead 33."

"Phil, I suspect this helicopter has been severely damaged and I am not sure we can make it back to Laos. Right now, I am thinking about plunking this beast onto the large sand bar in the river. Then, if it is determined not flyable, we will torch the machine and you can pick us up."

"Don't do it," Phil retorted in clipped English tones. ¹³

GOOD RIDDANCE TO NORTH VIETNAM

Phil's reply was both shocking and definitive. Unaware of the full extent of Hotel-22's battle damage or other problems, I realized that Goddard had no intention of retrieving us should it become necessary. We were strictly on our own and despite our own battle damage and tribulations, I had no alternative but to turn south, attempt to ascend to altitude, and continue flying toward the border. Fortunately, during the few minutes since being hit, no adverse indications had prompted an immediate need to land. By then, I was almost convinced that Hotel-33 was somewhat airworthy--at least for the moment. More correctly, that had to be the case. Therefore, trapped in an ambiguous situation, I turned south and commenced a slow climb toward 10,000 feet.

Engine pressures and temperatures remained in the normal range (in the green) as we passed through angels nine and ten; except for the cylinder head temperature (CHT), which rose to just below the red line during the protracted ascent. This condition was of immediate concern, for it could lead to a possibility of detonation (premature cylinder firing). The high temperature could be easily explained by a lean running engine and rarified air, caused by my inability to adjust the mixture lever forward to a full rich position. What worried me more than any other factor was the possibility of undetermined battle damage that might lead to sudden and catastrophic failure of a

¹³ Unknown to me, with a badly damaged ship and a severely wounded man on board, Goddard was already on the way back to Laos.

critical component. Regardless of what happened, while cruising at 10,000 feet, and not overly confident about arriving safely in Laos, I was fully committed, and established a course out of that dreaded valley.

Because of the fuel cell battle damage, Goddard's ship was very low on the precious fluid. Unable to return to Na Khang, he planned to land at Houei Ma (LS-107), a small Meo site located adjacent to and below the southeast side of the towering Phu Pha Thi site. A random check of my fuel quantity gage indicated that the R-1820 engine was still consuming gas at a normal rate, thus it was unlikely that we had been hit in one of the non-self-sealing fuel bladders. At our present flight level, I had sufficient juice to push on to Na Khang, but, as it was close to dark, I elected to follow Goddard to Site-107, cover him, and not extend my luck. Not wanting to exceed the maximum allowable CHT and possibly incur detonation, I continued to restrict cruise power. Proceeding at a slower speed, I was barely able to maintain visual contact with Hotel-22, then miles ahead on the horizon. Except for the comfort of knowing a fellow airman was still in my airspace, it really did not matter, for a pilot always knows the way home.

As planned, Captain Al White, C-123 PIC of Victor Control, flew ahead to help coordinate our egress from North Vietnam. He would scout the weather at our projected destination and also arrange to have a STOL plane available for the wounded man in order to rush him to a medical facility in Thailand.

MUSING IN UNFRIENDLY SKIES

As my wounded bird slowly clawed through rarified air toward the border, the same high broken cloud layer was available to us while approaching the mountain ranges. Without

Tong to guide us around known AAA guns, we took satisfaction that nature had provided sufficient cover to mask the helicopters from potential unfriendly ground fire. A respite from cockpit duties afforded me ample opportunity to scan the area for potential forced landing spots. We had passed from the valley's relatively flat terrain. Through openings in the cloud layer, I observed heavily forested, rough saw-toothed mountains, and deep, plunging ravines beneath me. From my altitude, the prospect of a successful autorotation was not encouraging. Certainly no one could survive an uncontrolled crash in that inhospitable chain of Annamite rock and jungle. Since our ships were then separated by miles, I was bothered by the realization that if one of us became committed to a forced landing, there was little or nothing the other PIC could do to help.

It was still a considerable distance to "home"--an eternity in the confused mind of a conflicted aviator. Since the situation was no joking matter, we did not converse or engage in normal small talk. Actually, what was there to say in such a situation; like the old Indian adage, it is a good day to die? With little else to do but allow the ASE equipment to control pitch, roll, and yaw modes and monitor instrument gages, the lull provided adequate time to reflect on one's mortality. It was also time for serious introspection, and time for soul searching regarding one's short life span and unaccomplished goals on an earth where we were merely visitors.

During this interlude, my thoughts turned to the aborted mission and its multiple facets. I was extremely unhappy abandoning my first live airman to a fate where he would certainly suffer death or imprisonment at the hands of the communists. I additionally cursed my stupidity by allowing my machine and crew to become involved in perhaps a terminal

situation. Did I not first have an obligation to my passenger and crew? While searching my mind for a principle to blame for my problems, rationalization came easy. I became angry with the Company and the U.S. military for sending us into no-win situations in which helicopters, and particularly unarmed civilians, were placed in harm's way with insufficient resources to ensure success. *What were they thinking?* I had had enough over the past year. I vowed that I would quit Air America if fortunate enough to escape the current predicament. At that moment, despite the presence of other crew members, I felt totally helpless and alone. I sincerely desired to be anywhere else in the world.

Although having learned the principle doctrines while attending Episcopalian and Presbyterian churches during my formative years, but not overly religious since, I sought the comfort of prayer. Praying as never before, I mentally made absurd and childish promises that I could never keep. I invoked Almighty God, Lord Buddha, and any other past or present deity or entity who I thought might note my desperate plight, and pleas for deliverance from this difficult situation. I did this while nervously clutching and stroking the golden clad Buddhist images hanging loosely from my twenty-four-carat gold neck chain. Later, in retrospect, I truly believed that I made peace with my Maker during that seemingly never-ending tortuous flight back to Laos, possibly maturing years beyond my calendar age. At any rate, I calculated that my previous history was zeroed out, and the rest of my life commenced at that time.

Only Phil's cheery Brit voice at periodic intervals over FM, checking our status and progress, broke the thick silence in the cockpit and helped raise me out of an uncharacteristic funk.

Then Captain White called. Redeeming themselves somewhat after continuously cluttering the air waves during a very tenuous part of the SAR mission, the Victor Control cockpit crew assisted us in discovering a break in the cloud layer directly over LS-107. It was a godsend in the unpredictable and constantly changing weather pattern during the afternoon monsoon season. At that time, I was on top of the clouds with only 300 pounds indicated on the fuel quantity gage.

At last, I sighted Lima Site-111. *Only a few minutes more to the Houei Ma sanctuary. If this machine holds together, we have this made.* My spirits soared. Not wanting to proceed any further than absolutely necessary, I briefly considered terminating at Houei Kah Moung, but after recalling that there was no fuel available at the forward site, rejected that option. Craving the fuzzy warmth and companionship stemming from successfully escaping impossible odds, I urgently needed conversation that the crew of Hotel-22 might provide, particularly Goddard's input regarding his portion of the mission. As a means of catharsis, I wanted to thoroughly critique the experience, so I might continue my life and career in aviation.

After flying ten minutes with the low-level fuel warning light illuminated, Goddard landed safely on the short grassy strip at Houei Ma. By now we had learned the devastating news that the wounded man on board was Colonel Tong. Helio Courier pilot Lee Mullins, was already waiting there with Doctor "Jiggs" Weldon's wife, Doctor Pat McCreedy, to minister to the severely wounded Colonel Tong and ferry him south to adequate medical facilities.

Udorn Oscar Mike Tom Penniman was standing near the rice warehouse across the parking area from Air America when Tong

arrived. The colonel lay on a stretcher, while a C-123 crew arrived to ferry him to the U.S. Army military hospital at Korat. Father B was attempting to provide the colonel last rites, but Tom pushed him aside so Doctor Ma could take a pulse and examine him. Within ten minutes, the Provider departed. While a B-bus driver took the Company people back to the Air America compound, Ma inquired about the important woman he just examined. ¹⁴

Several minutes after Goddard landed, unsure of the extent of damage Hotel-33 had incurred in "death valley," minimizing control inputs, I rolled the helicopter slowly onto the narrow ridgeline at a low power setting. With a light fuel load, the touchdown was a piece of cake. I was amazed and pleased that other than minimal throttle and collective stiffness, no major problem had developed during landing. Although merely an inanimate object created by man, I considered my flying machine a living, breathing entity, one that had just brought me through an unbelievable experience. I would wager that there are a few other pilots still alive in this world who have a similar affection for the UH-34D.

BRIGGS IN THE VALLEY

Once Briggs rejected his irrational idea of charging the enemy machine gun nest, he jammed his pistol into the waist belt of his "G" suit, then crouched down and crawled away from the immediate area. He soon encountered a narrow footpath awash with three-foot-high grass and clumps of low bushes, but little else

¹⁴ This was a natural assumption, for Tong had very long hair, a cultural trademark in his determination to vanquish the enemy in Sam Neua.

in the way of cover. Aware that he should seek and secure adequate concealment without delay before darkness settled in to the valley, he discovered four-foot-high bushes and began backing off the path between them. Grasping for his pistol, he discovered it missing. Uncomfortable, lacking the dubious security his personal Smith and Wesson mentally provided, he retraced his steps and discovered the weapon twenty feet down the trail. Once again, he backed off the path, pushing the grass back into place, as he squirmed deeper into the dense undergrowth. Soon, deeply imbedded and concealed in the brushes, he lay motionless on his belly, gloved hands clasped together to cover his exposed neck.

While resting and contemplating the remote chance of a second rescue attempt that day, Briggs considered his precarious situation in the enemy's backyard. He acknowledged that it had been fortunate indeed that the signal flare had not ignited correctly, for any distinctive smoke would have confirmed his presence to the enemy, and made his present circumstances even worse. Hell, he might have already been captured. Resigned to a lengthy wait, he reasoned that he should rearrange his immediate survival priorities to, above all, avoid capture and maintain a position to be rescued.

He cocked his head slightly to observe the immediate surroundings. He was surprised to see swarms of one-quarter inch black ants beating a path ten inches in front of his face. In his haste to evade, he unexpectedly selected an ant hill on which to hide. As the activity around him increased he was unable to move, but still carefully monitored the busy insects. Fortunately, for the rest of the day, intent only on their pre-programmed activities, and less aggressive than biting red fire ants, the colony never bothered him.

The enemy search for the downed airman was extremely well organized. It was nothing like the briefing or situation described in the U.S. Air Force survival school he had attended. Whistles, gun shots, and voice commands were employed to coordinate the pursuers' movements.

As Vietnamese gunners constantly fired at orbiting U.S. aircraft, he listened with satisfaction to the high-pitched whine of American jet engines high above the valley. Then, an hour after the H-34 pilot's aborted rescue attempt, all the American jet fighters vacated the area. Later, he heard what must have been MiG fighters fly down the valley. He deduced these planes were not U.S. jets from a different and characteristic low moaning sound of the Soviet planes.

From that moment on, the search for him intensified. Numerous people walked close to his position. During the late afternoon, a man approached, violently shook bushes six feet from the American's location, and screamed a two-word command in Vietnamese. ¹⁵

Lodged deep within his childhood memories, Briggs was reminded of a novice hunter cautiously trying to flush a cowering bird or rabbit from hiding. Emulating a similar situation, it was obvious to him that the man was attempting to intimidate him into surrendering. He also speculated that the Vietnamese, afraid to stick his face into the bushes, really was not interested in discovering the ugly foreign devil. He resolved that he was going to win this battle of nerves and mind games. He was not going to move or be spooked by such obvious

¹⁵ Although Briggs was not familiar with the Asian language, its meaning was quite clear. A military person might use the exclamation, Dau Hang!-pronounced Do Han-meaning surrender.

ruses. Consequently, the hunt increasingly became a study in adversary psychology.

HOU EI MA-BATTLE DAMAGE

After securing Hotel-33, thirsty and drained of energy, I climbed down the side of the fuselage. Anxious to view the extent of battle damage, I proceeded on wobbly knees toward the front of the ship where Flight Mechanic Nichols was in the process of opening the clamshell doors.

"How bad is it?"

"Take a look," Steve replied, pointing to a small bullet hole in the left door. The puncture masked internal damage that revealed battle damage as bad as we had surmised. Inside the engine compartment a single round had penetrated the side of the throttle box almost dead center. With the precision of a surgeon's scalpel, the bullet had clipped off the front portion of throttle, mixture, and carburetor control pulleys. Upon closer inspection it was evident that the projectile's impact had jammed all three pulleys firmly against the far wall of the throttle box housing unit. Above the throttle box, four strands of the steel braided mixture cable had been severed by flying shrapnel. It appeared that just a fraction of an inch had made all the difference in our survival that day. Further examination of the helicopter revealed multiple hits to all main rotor blade pockets. The presence of popped BIM sight gage indicators on two blades divulged a breach in main rotor blade aluminum spars, fostering the loss of nitrogen gas. While crouching on the transmission deck platform, Steve discovered one of four transmission mounts had been damaged with a hole drilled

completely through the footing. Completing his inspection, Steve discovered that two additional holes in the tail pylon, and other superficial fuselage skin damage. He estimated that we had incurred approximately thirteen hits. From the way bullets had

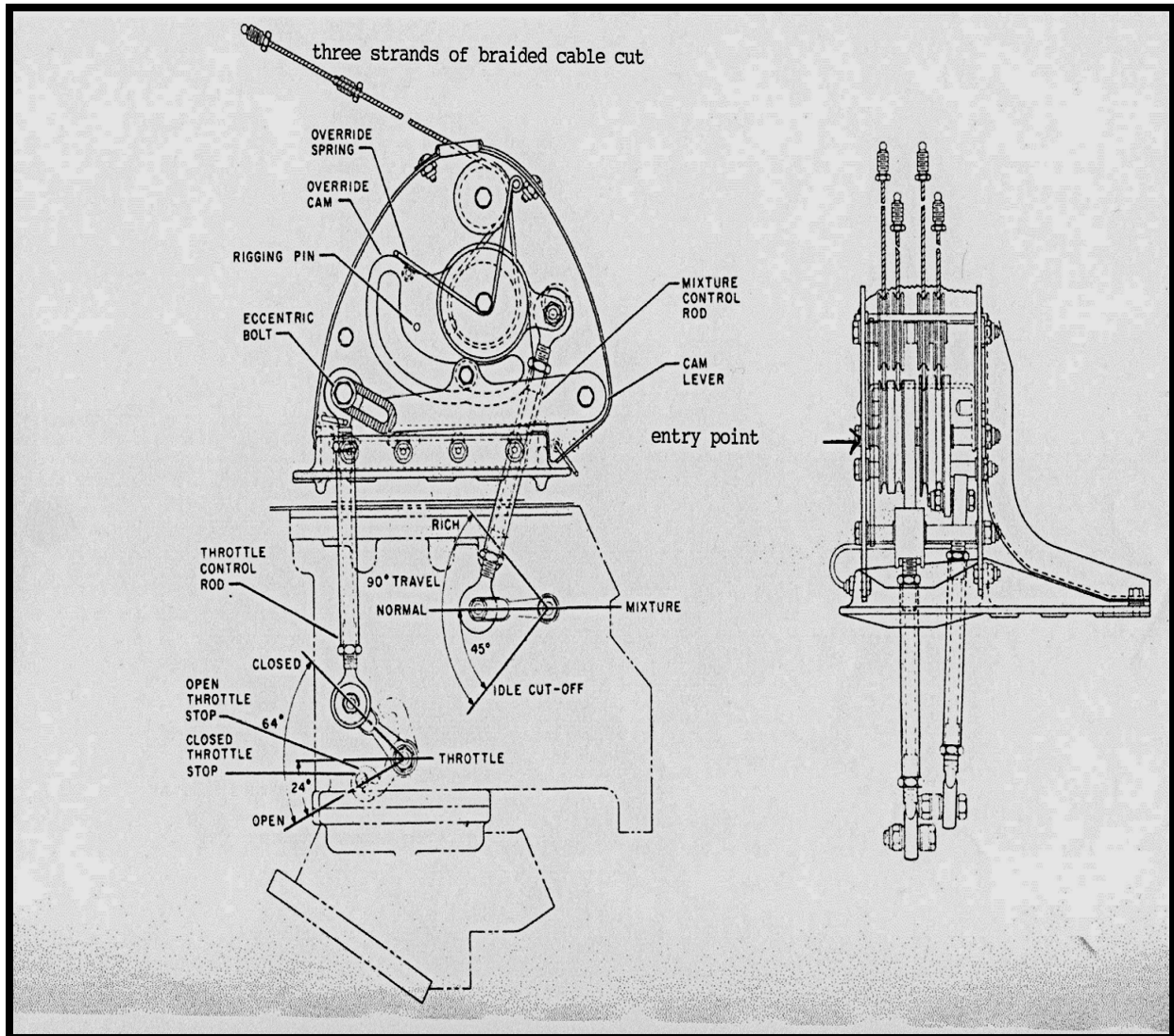


Diagram of a UH-34D throttle box similar to the one damaged on Hotel-33 at Na San, North Vietnam on 05/20/65. The right display shows the penetration point of the bullet that struck the machine at maximum velocity. After severing edges of three large pulleys, the projectile's force drove all three pulleys against the right housing. Instead of a normal capability of independent movement, this had the effect of fusing them together as a single unit. Thus, when the mixture lever was activated, it resulted in turning the throttle in

the cockpit. Flying shrapnel cut a few strands of braided cable above the throttle box.

H-34 Pocket Guide, Sikorsky Aircraft, Stratford, Connecticut, 1962 in the Author's possession.

impacted and penetrated the ship, Steve deduced that several weapons must have been firing at us from various angles and directions. At any rate, it was obvious that Hotel-33 was AGP (aircraft grounded for parts), and would not fly again until undergoing field repairs involving substantial maintenance work.

I do not know what was relayed to Udorn through the radio net by the control ship regarding our aborted mission, but management anxiously awaited a detailed report on the airworthy status of both helicopters. After several attempted contacts over the marginal high frequency radio net, we managed to forward a list of damage and parts required to reestablish an airworthy ship capable of ferry flight to Udorn. Through the annoying crackle and static of high frequency carrier waves, I attempted to convey to CJ Abadie that, presented with intense gunfire around the pilot, I believed the pilot on the ground was surrounded, beyond further rescue attempts, and was probably already captured or dead.

Discovering that Hotel-22 was damaged, but considered flyable, Ab directed Goddard to return to Udorn. My crew was advised to RON at Site-107 to await replacement aircraft and parts the following morning. I did not relish this order, for I was quite anxious to return home and repair to the Club bar for a drink--or two, or three, or more.

While the forward tank of Hotel-22 was being manually topped off for the trip home, I learned from George Carroll that a single bullet had struck Tong in the lower back close to his

spine, while he was exposed in the cabin door manning the machine gun. During an opportune moment, George had gone below to provide whatever assistance he could. Finding Drew unhurt, but somewhat dazed, he pressed gauze compresses from his survival pack into the colonel's wound to staunch the flow of blood. Then, applying his belt tightly to secure the dressings, he returned to the cockpit to apprise Phil of Tong's condition.

It began raining. Late in the day, with weather conditions steadily deteriorating, Phil was anxious to launch ASAP for Udorn. The trip would probably require a considerably longer time than the normal two hours, for with only the forward fuel tank usable, he would have to refuel again by using leap-frog techniques from site to site.

Deep in thought, I ambled back to Hotel-33, then surrounded by numerous curious tribesmen. Suddenly thoughts flashed through my mind. *Remaining here is total bullshit! My aircraft is not operational. I can do nothing else worthwhile; besides, I am quitting anyway. I am justified in leaving.*

Informing Steve and Frank of my decision, and indicating that they should hurry if they also desired to leave, I grabbed my black RON bag and dashed through the mud for Hotel-22. The rotor blades were already turning when I yelled up to Goddard that I was going with him. Smiling grimly at Drew, I grabbed the hand-hold by the door and began to swing up into the passenger compartment, when I spotted pools of dark, partially congealed blood liberally covering the varnished, but scuffed plywood decking. Informed that the gore stemmed from Tong's wounds, I backed off in horror. I had already been subjected to excessive stress that day and was unwilling to endure any more. The thought of riding for more than two hours staring at Tong's spilled vital fluids nearly made me ill. Instead, I turned away

from the helicopter shaking my head and indicating that Phil should leave. I waved at him as he pulled pitch and dove down the west slope into the heavy rain and mist. In an instant he was swallowed up by the clouds. Mentally, I wished him well, as I slogged tired and wet toward my magnesium and aluminum quarters to spend another night in the "Sikorsky Hotel" with Frank and Steve.

"*What the hell is this?*" I asked while retrieving the damaged aircraft logbook partially concealed under Steve's suitcase. To pass time during the lengthy flight into North Vietnam and not think about what lay ahead, Steve had studied logbook discrepancies and then stuck the maintenance record under his luggage. During our initial critique, Steve indicated that ground fire crackled the entire time we were in the valley. The din was constant and intense, as if strings of firecrackers were continuously exploding. During the largely unilateral shootout while we were exiting the area, a bullet had sheared off corners of the bottom and top aluminum logbook covers. Steve pointed to a small hole in the left fuselage, an inch or so above the floor and one foot aft of the battery compartment. A round entering this point had struck the logbook, deflected, and clipped an upper corner off the wooden grenade box. Missing the grenades, the high velocity bullet slowed significantly, and spun upward from almost point-blank range. Then it pierced overhead honeycomb in the roof structure during its flight into the transmission compartment. From the angle of flight, he speculated that had the buffering objects not been present he would have certainly taken the projectile directly in his chest. One ricochet, or nearly expended round, entering the cabin had rattled around and had come to rest on the floorboards. Steve

pocketed the bullet as a souvenir, but misplaced it within the next few days.

Now the mystery of multi-colored confetti paper that floated upward from behind the console, and soared through the cockpit as we were being blasted by enemy fire and so spooked us, was revealed. The small pieces were obviously shredded yellow, pink, white, and black carbon paper emanating from the logbook pages. But what initiated the up-welling of paper sucked into the cockpit? I recalled that we still had a slight forward momentum when hit. Devoid of a cross wind, whatever slipstream created should have been directly aft. However, in the heat of battle and my zeal to get the hell out of there, perhaps I had wavered off laterally, or more likely induced a slip by not feeding enough right anti-torque pedal to counter the initial throttle burst. At the precise moment the bullet impacted Hotel-33's logbook, this yawing action must have forced air currents upward into the cabin and cockpit sections. The theory was logical, but as the issue could never be totally resolved, the strange phenomenon would have to remain one of life's inexplicable items.

SEARCHING FOR BRIGGS

Just as curious as the logbook damage, at exactly 1700 hours, whistles, shouts, and gunshots terminated in the Na San-Son La Valley. Apparently, the organized military search for the American was officially terminated for the day. Then Briggs heard diverse sounds. A woman's lilting voice and a laugh echoed in the distance. Female voices indicated that the hunt for him continued, but was now conducted by civilians. Just prior to dark, another individual grabbed the bushes near him and yelled something loudly in Vietnamese. (Perhaps Di ra! Get out!) Once

again, he remained still and the foe moved on. He admiringly thought that the civilians were far superior to, and less tentative than the military men, and they performed a more efficient job of looking for him.

As a black veil of darkness enveloped the valley, all noises ceased and the search was discontinued. He wondered why. Then the answer became abundantly clear as the abrupt cloak of night introduced new unpleasantness to his adventure. Swarms of flying insects plagued him and buzzed in his ears. Unable to hear what was occurring outside his clump of bushes, and greatly tormented, he sliced a strip of cloth from the lower left leg of his flight suit and fashioned a protective head covering.

LIMA SITE-107

At sundown, storms did not abate at our site in northeastern Laos. Instead, they continued sporadically maneuvering through the Sam Neua area in unending waves. Just before dark, USAID coordinator Pop Buell's assistant, Tongsar, and village Naiban, Captain Gia Too, arrived at Hotel-33's cabin door. Tongsar indicated that the village chief and area warlord was extending an invitation to be his honored guests and enjoy an evening meal in the Meo village down the hill. At any other time, I would have been more than happy to accept such an offer, but feeling greatly fatigued and not particularly hungry or sociable, I politely refused. Taking my example, the rest of my crew was similarly inclined. Foregoing the Meo cuisine of rice and weeds and its possible implications on our churning stomachs, a bland "C" ration supper sustained us, while I bored Frank and Steve by declaring over and over, *"If I ever get back to Udorn, I will quit and do something else with my life."*

Later, during a lull in the storms, the fat chief arrived again. This time he held a quart sized glass bottle of the locally manufactured Lao Lao whiskey. Except for a strange, dark herb at the bottom of the corncob corked bottle, the liquid was clear. At the time, I could have used a stiff drink to ease my disquiet. However, aware of the disastrous effect of the fiery native brew on my already nervous stomach and agitated system,¹⁶ I politely declined his kind offer. The guy must have thought we were horrible people by continually refusing his hospitality.

As the demons of war, and anticipation of what lay ahead for us the following day disturbed me, blessed and healing sleep did not come easily. Overtired, I was still charged with excitement from the day's extraordinary events, and my nerves jangled unceasingly. Additionally, many other factors combined to deny us peace of mind and prevent the rest our bodies required. Never designed to accommodate sleepers, it was virtually impossible to assume a comfortable position for very long in the Sikorsky Hotel. Curved aluminum supports poked through the canvas bucket seats, jabbing and impacting soft tissue and tender body parts. Additionally, thunder-boomers echoed and churned through the mountains most of the night, dumping copious amounts of rain on our site, tattooing unwanted rhythms on the fuselage. Also, parts of Hotel-33 leaked like a sieve and each time a dry spot was discovered, water perversely ran along a stringer and dripped in a new direction. Nichols equated it to a continuous Chinese water torture. Adding to the discomfort of a miserable night, restless young soldiers

¹⁶ Pop Buell, in his unique homespun way, claimed the brew chapped his lips.

assigned to guard us milled around the aircraft, talking loudly and touching the machine. Throughout the long night, like the child taking solace hugging a security blanket, I clutched my Blackhawk tightly against my chest for protection in that unsecure bastion located deep in the bowels of Sam Neua Province.

THE NA SAN VALLEY-BRIGGS MOVING

Briggs eventually exited his hiding place, partially to escape annoying insects, but also to more easily observe what was happening in his immediate vicinity. Nothing. The area was perfectly quiet. Through breaks in the clouds, he attempted to orient himself. Observing one of the Dipper star constellations, he believed that he had a good idea of where north was located. He moved in what he considered an easterly direction and, according to his vinyl escape and evasion map toward the Black River. He agonized from anticipation of capture. The whistling swish he made through the tall grass bothered him. In the stillness, hypersensitive to all sounds, he was sure the dull crunch of his slow movement would be heard for great distances, reminding him of the well-worn cliché of a bull in a china shop.

Finally, he arrived at a wide rutted path. It appeared to have rained recently, as mud puddles lay randomly scattered along the trail. He was constantly thirsty since departing the F-4C cockpit. He had initially conserved his water for a later time, and now regretted leaving the canvas survival bag containing the canned water behind when the helicopter arrived. For hours he had been dehydrated, but continued to experience frequent and uncomfortable urges to urinate. Stopping to perform the call of nature, he noted with dismay the urine discharge burned his urethra, and increasingly displayed a very dark

color. Even though exceedingly parched he rejected an impulse to drink from the puddles, aware that later he was sure to suffer the effects of cramps and diarrhea. Instead, he occasionally paused to lick dew drops from broad leafed plants.

Through diminished moonlight, Briggs observed the path wandering from the direction of the first hiding area where the aborted rescue attempt had taken place. It was clear to him now the easy access enemy troops had moving onto the ridgeline above him. He remained on the trail, as it was possible to move without creating noise. Following the track for about a hundred yards, he arrived at a fork in the road. ¹⁷ Proceeding along the right branch another fifty yards, he arrived abruptly at a wooden house. The structure was so close to the path that he could have reached out and knocked on the front door. Instructed in survival school classes to avoid inhabited areas, he backtracked to the split, this time taking the left turn, hoping the path led to the river. Moving cautiously another fifty yards, he came to yet another house with an adjacent garden, all surrounded by a split rail fence. He worked his way around the building and was in the backyard when he heard frog sounds and other distinctive swamp noises. Not anxious to stumble into a wet area, he retraced his steps. Then he departed the trail and began to push his way through underbrush. Unable to penetrate the thick bushes any distance, Curt backed out, re-acquired the path and moved away from the house. Later, he again attempted to penetrate the bushes as he laboriously kept moving to the left in saw-tooth fashion, trying to discover an area small enough to

¹⁷ Curt Briggs disregarded Yogi Berra's admonition that when you "come to a fork in the road take it."

squeeze through. All attempts were conducted by feel, for now it was so dark that visibility was zero. Then he stopped. After evading for hours, he was thoroughly exhausted and had to rest.

About 0200 hours, through a fog of semi-consciousness, he heard voices. Two men, probably farmers, passed close to his location. Based on their sounds, for all his efforts to move deep into the brush, he estimated that he had moved no more than twenty feet off the path. Before the Vietnamese had fully vacated the area, he mercifully sank into a deep slumber.

Near daybreak, feeling much refreshed, he heard the sound of an F-4 jet pass overhead. Excited, he switched on his single purpose emergency radio beacon, a back-seater issue that emitted an intermittent tone on 243.0 UHF Guard frequency. When the aircraft departed, he turned the beacon off to conserve precious battery power.

Forty-Fifth Tactical Fighter Squadron Commander Beirman and PSP James D. Buckerfield, Curt Brigg's best friend, were flying the first SAR reconnaissance mission of the morning. Receiving a beeper signal, but achieving no actual sighting, because Air America's Search and Rescue Standard Operation Procedures required positive ID before helicopters were dispatched, Jim elected to radio erroneous information to the Udorn SAR rescue center that an airman had been located on the ground. This fabrication, more than likely motivated by Buckerfield's desire to retrieve his friend, triggered a second SAR attempt by Air America assets.

In the partial light of pre-dawn, Briggs noted that the thickets he had so vigorously attempted to infiltrate in the dark were densely packed together, similar to European hedgerows. The thin multi-branched bushes, intertwined with adjoining ones, presented a formidable barrier to upright

movement. Closer examination revealed that if he dropped close to the ground on his hands and knees, he could just manage to squeeze between the trunks. This was an important discovery, for he considered it imperative to immediately move farther away from the path, since with the advent of daylight and fresh jet activity, the North Vietnamese would resume an enthusiastic search for him, using shrill whistles, small arms fire, and screeching commands.

MORNING REPLACEMENTS

The restless night for Hotel-33's crew mercifully ended at dawn. Most of the nightly rain had ceased, but leaden-tinted clouds lingered on the mountain tops. Peering out the cabin door, I judged that it would be sometime before parts and relief arrived from Udorn, and I might be able to return home.

We shared and consumed what was left of our meager provisions. Before long, I felt the urgent call of nature and hastily departed the cabin door at high port. Rapidly picking my way through the mud, I surged down the ridgeline's west slope, where I thought I would have some privacy. Secure in this knowledge, I dropped my gray trousers and skivvies and squatted facing the downhill slope. At the same time, I had an odd sensation that I was being observed. This was puzzling, as I thought I had been extra careful to avoid the village, top of the ridge, or any trails. Turning slowly, I observed a tight semi-circle of black and white pigs of various sizes and shapes on the high ground above me. They patiently and silently watched me perform my business. Besides being scary, it was also a ludicrous scene, one that would have been comical had I been aware of the animals' exact intention. Concerned about the large gathering, I gathered my clothes and scrambled up the hill,

screaming and waving my arms for a shock effect. As soon as I cleared their ranks, oinking and grunting porkers quickly converged on the steaming deposit. Sometimes mountain life local color assumed strange twists for the naive and uninitiated person.

By mid-morning two Sikorsky H-34s and crews arrived at Site-107. Neither ship carried parts, blades, or a maintenance team to repair Hotel-33. Suspicious, but in the back of my mind having a hunch what their presence indicated, I noted that both cockpits contained only one pilot. *What the hell were they up to?* Captain Bobby Nunez was driving Hotel-21 and Captain Robbie Robertson the second ship. ¹⁸ Udorn Operations, extremely short on Flight Mechanics, had summarily conscripted Lindayh to fly with Bobby and another Filipino man with "Robbie." Both men were from facility maintenance shops and were not regular Flight Mechanics. I could see from their taut, concerned faces that they were not eager to participate in any difficult endeavor. ¹⁹

Craving peer companionship, I was happy to see both pilots, but when Nunez informed me that I was going to be his Co-Captain returning to the scene of the previous day's activity, my mood changed and I came unglued. I told him that he was blinking mad.

¹⁸ As I had surmised from his outstanding performance with me in the Beng Valley during the Ernie Brace SAR, "Robbie" was upgraded to Captain almost immediately.

¹⁹ They were not the only souls reluctant to journey into North Vietnam that morning. Years later I was informed by CPH Wayne Knight that Captain Bob Hitchman was scheduled to relieve me on the second day. Whether a valid excuse or merely a ruse, claiming sickness, Bob managed to opt out of the assignment after vomiting on the shoe of a management type. By the time I learned this, I was indifferent, for the episode was ancient history and had dimmed in my memory, assuming a back seat to many additional and almost equally hairy experiences.

I was definitely not returning to that Pandora's Box of evil forces. Rationalizing and presenting the last known facts, I stated that when we departed the valley, the pilot was surrounded. Furthermore, there had been constant shooting throughout the valley, and I genuinely believed that the pilot had been captured or killed. Nunez countered, saying the latest intelligence indicated that the aviator was still at large and had moved during the night. Today, we were guaranteed A-1H escort at the border. ²⁰ Despite this information, I hotly insisted that Bobby get on the "horn" and explain to operations that I was ill (at least mentally), and could never return to that hornet's nest. Much to his credit, Bob took a firm stand and informed me I would have to do that myself.

Regardless of my protestations about returning to North Vietnam, Captain Abadie refused to sanction my excuses. However, just voicing my opinions and objections served to help my mental state considerably. He reiterated the information Nunez had just revealed to me, and rightly insisted that there was no one else in authority who knew the correct flight path to the target area. As an adroit manager, used to dealing with reluctant pilots, his points were persuasive and well taken, especially the latter argument--I knew the way. In the end, having little other choice, I made the decision to accompany Bob.

While nervously awaiting the launch call, I again covered with the crews all the lurid details regarding the previous rescue attempt. My account of the hairy ordeal was vividly reinforced by the wreck of Hotel-33 forlornly perched on the

²⁰ We all loved these Sandy aircraft for protection, as they hauled more than their weight in stores and could loiter for hours.

ridge. As we continued to discuss our chances for mission success, the air became charged with doubt and apprehension. We were all aware that the enemy employed large caliber guns, manned by eager crews waiting for us to return to the valley. Furthermore, the year had been tough enough thus far, and no one in his right mind wanted to get his butt shot off now that the USAF was eventually reputed to assume more of the SAR responsibility.

After calming somewhat and assigning priorities, we collectively decided seniority dictated that the crew of Hotel-21 lead the show and assume the primary rescue function. Stergar volunteered to accompany Robertson in the second ship as our SAR and a back-up primary. I personally was happy to have Robbie factored into the equation as a stabilizing influence. Also, I was reasonably certain that he and Frank would "go the extra mile" to pick us up if downed. Bobby insisted on flying right seat. This was fine with me. Bobby was a seasoned, responsible pilot and had already displayed courage under fire during his heroic extraction of the wounded Tony Poe in January. Moreover, I was still unsettled and fatigued from both the exciting incident and sleepless night. Reassuringly, Nunez stated that if he heard one round of ground fire, he was going to abort the SAR and immediately depart the area. That sounded fair enough to me. As standard procedure we would take a look and see what transpired.

HIDE AND SEEK

About 1000 hours, Captain Briggs heard the comforting whirr of piston engine airplanes, as two U.S. Navy A-1H pilots soared over the valley. Excited, he again switched on the pulsating survival beacon. He watched as the "Spads" flew a lazy search

pattern overhead. One A-1 tracked inbound on the beeper signal from the north, while the other homed in from the east to an intersection point. Then the pilot made a ninety-degree crosshatch directly over him. A Skyraider pilot peeled off, making an expert low pass over the intercept in a thirty-degree bank. The maneuver placed him 300 feet in front of and 300 feet above the downed airman. The pass was executed so flawlessly that Briggs clearly saw the pilot's face and helmet visor. He assumed that the man was looking directly at him. Then, not to give Briggs' position away, the pilot pulled up abruptly and both aircraft moved to the north end of the valley, where they assumed an orbit. Curt had to grudgingly admit that the Navy boys were good.

Re-assured that help would soon be on the way, he then reflected on his situation. *It is all out of my hands. The only thing to do is wait patiently for the helicopter.* Like so many other military personnel in similar circumstances, he began praying, hoping to draw on greater strength. *Sir, if You get me out of here, I'll be a good guy and go to church every Sunday.* Then he stopped. *Here I am praying and I'm about to be captured if that SOB Skyraider pilot failed to spot me.*

Disconcertingly, a long hour passed with no sign of rescue ships. Now he seriously began to doubt that the A-1 pilot had seen him. Then, while he watched a Skyraider roll out of a left-hand turn, a plan occurred to him. As one plane executed a left-hand orbit and pointed his nose at him, Curt turned off his survival radio. Reacting to the signal loss, the Navy driver rolled out and headed straight toward him. When the plane was directly overhead, Briggs cycled the beeper from off to on to off. The "Spad" rolled up on a wing, marked the position, and made another low pass. Thinking it was now or never, he stood up

and frantically waved his white handkerchief as a recognition signal. In response to the positive detection, the A-1 pilot rocked his wings and dropped his landing gear. Elated, and assured that he was definitely sighted, he thought. *Now you SOB; now you saw me.*

Enemy pursuers continued to comb the downed aircraft area. With air activity increasing, they began shooting at the American invaders and redoubled their efforts to discover their prey.

With the enemy closing on him, Briggs was obliged to move. When whistles and commands of the searchers became uncomfortably close, he scrambled away to find another more secure hiding place in the grassy valley. As the A-1s followed his progress, he managed to place several almost-impenetrable "hedgerows" between himself and the enemy by crawling between the trunks of thickets. Finally, he arrived at a small clearing surrounded by a five-foot-high stand of reeds and grass with a matted area in the center. It appeared that a deer or other large animal had slept there at one time and beaten the grass down. Believing that he had discovered a perfect hiding spot, adequately shielded from ground observation, but still visible from the air, he lay down in the tall reeds, clutching his .38, praying and waiting.

After resting a few minutes, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a rifle barrel at the edge of the clearing, Terror stricken for the second time in as many days, he blinked, looked again and saw that the "gun" was merely a bent reed. The stress of the ordeal was beginning to affect his mind, and because of exhaustion and dehydration his imagination had begun to play tricks on him. The mistake tended to return him to reality. Recalling the aborted rescue attempt of the previous day, he

attempted to formulate a plan should the same set of conditions arise again. He decided that if a hostile was between him and the rescue helicopter, he would kill the adversary without hesitation or compunction. Eventually, he heard the welcome rumble of a helicopter engine.

SECOND DAY OPERATIONS

Alerted that a pilot had actually been sighted in the Son La Valley, we were about to "crank up" when Nichols climbed the right side of the aircraft to inform Bobby that he would crew with us. Lindayh, very unsettled and terrified, did not want to go on the mission. He indicated that if they were forced down and captured the Americans would be taken prisoner. The Filipinos would be murdered. Therefore, as a compassionate gesture, Nichols told the older man that he would replace him if he performed a thirty-hour maintenance inspection on the crippled Hotel-33. Hearing Nichols' intention, Nunez thought for a second, turned right, stared hard at the young man, and shouted, "Are you crazy?" Like "Robbie, I considered Steve's offer to accompany us commendable, and was happy to have his talents to rely on.

Once airborne, as in previous difficult combat situations, I began to feel more comfortable and positive regarding my part in mission goals. However, I could tell from Bobby's demeanor that he was not thrilled to be heading north. This was a case in which special trust and confidence entered the equation among cockpit crews. Although I had flown with and trained (OJT) Bobby for several days while he was checking out in the UH-34D, I had to accept his ability to perform a mission without personal knowledge of how he would react under fire. Missions the previous year were conducted under considerably more favorable

conditions, never rivaling what we were about to face now. Granted, since that time he had gained a wealth of experience, even courageously rescuing Tony Poe and a few Thai PARU under fire. Based on this hairy experience, I decided that Bobby would do just fine...but I was not equally sure about myself. Would I be equal to the task?

Unlike the previous day, Navy pilots flying a brace of gray A-1H propeller planes joined us near the border. Now, with all the necessary items satisfied for a SAR mission, they were welcome. The Sandy aircraft had the speed, ordnance, communications, and ability to absorb a great deal of punishment and still perform the mission. Escort by such rugged and dependable aircraft flown by competent aviators was a great confidence builder, for we knew the heavily laden Douglas Skyraiders were able to loiter for hours and remain with us throughout the entire flight. Others in their division were tasked to troll, find, and protect the pilot. Then they would vector us to him, while suppressing any enemy ground fire. It was encouraging, and as the situation appeared to be developing satisfactorily, I thought the trip might be considerably different from that of the previous day. Combat veterans late in the Korean War, the beautiful reciprocating engine machines were considered a real asset to a former Marine helicopter pilot, well indoctrinated in the concept of vertical envelopment, and close air support. I particularly liked their four wing-mounted 20mm cannon and capability to mix 7,000 pounds of ordnance on racks in the form of rockets, bombs, cluster bomb units (CBU), and napalm canisters. In the hands of a talented driver, the plane was a formidable close air support weapon, particularly against enemy troops in the open (TIC). In addition, the plane was able to deal with almost any target encountered. At least

the day was starting off well. This time we would be entering the dreaded valley with some terrain familiarity, and fewer unknowns with which to cope.

While the Skyraider pilots reassuringly orbited slowly around us, we basically followed the same inbound route, again at altitude, but with far less cloud cover. Not much was said in the cockpit, as both of us remained deep in thought about what awaited us at our destination. ²¹

All the chess pieces were falling nicely into place when the Crown control ship confirmed that the pilot had indeed been sighted, thus negating the depressing "Dog and Pony show" that had occurred the previous day. Saving precious time and fuel by not flying to the Black River, we were vectored directly to the downed pilot site, where another pair of Skyraiders orbited to the west. Seeing the new location, I was surprised that the American had moved two miles west, toward more populated areas rather than north or east toward the Black River, where forested karsts and hills afforded more effective cover and concealment.²²

NUT CUTTING TIME

Close to noon, observing a helicopter approaching, Briggs holstered his pistol and prepared for the pick-up.

He was crouching in a small grassy clearing. At first, it appeared as if he had displayed an orange signal marker, but

²¹ The worst portion of any SAR mission was always the en route phase, which allowed one's mental demons to emerge and fester, allowing the pilot too much time to think about the what ifs.

²² In retrospect, had Briggs moved in this direction, the rescue attempt presumably would have been more difficult, or even impossible.

after descending lower, we saw that it was only seasonal orange colored vegetation.

Not wanting to waste a second, foregoing any recon, Bobby commenced a straight in approach from the east. Everything was proceeding according to plan, and for once all seemed perfect. No ground fire was detected yet and the pilot was clearly in sight. Years of training and discipline now controlled my motor and mental functions. I was totally prepared for the ordeal. All unpleasantness of the previous day was suppressed and momentarily forgotten. My senses were sharp. I was eager to monitor and assist Nunez in recovering the man. At that point, since to my knowledge we had not been fired at, I harbored an exhilarating gut feeling that we were going to be successful in our endeavor.

In order to clear tall shrubbery in the small clearing and minimize debris blowing up into the rotor system from high power rotor downwash, Bobby approached slowly to an out-of-ground effect hover.²³ Haste was all important in this unknown situation. From my side of the cockpit, I could no longer see the pilot. Therefore, I scanned the area to my left and front, monitored the instruments, and despite the exhaust stack roar through the open window, intently listened for ground fire, while waiting for a completed extraction.

The operation seemed to be progressing well, except it seemed to be taking too long. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Nunez became highly agitated. He keyed the ICS button shouting, *"We are being shot at! We are being shot at!"* I was amazed and puzzled at his outburst, for neither I nor Steve had observed or

²³ OGE-Out of Ground Effect: An altitude generally exceeding five feet, requiring additional power to hover.

heard any ground fire. The outburst was a little embarrassing, and I hoped my cockpit mate had not mashed the button all the way to the cyclic and transmitted this to all monitoring our frequency.

The helicopter suddenly began turning slowly to the right, and then spun faster. Bob turned 360 degrees, and then began another turn. *What the hell was Bobby doing?* Then it became obvious to me that Bob had lost sight of the pilot, and had become unnerved at the same time. To counter what obviously was fast becoming an uncontrollable situation, I positioned my hands and feet on the flight controls and, with a death grip, stabilized the aircraft on a westerly heading until Nichols hoisted Briggs into the cabin. Only after Steve assured me that the pilot was safely in the cabin section did I fully relinquish the controls. ²⁴

SALVATION

Staring at the hoist cable from the ground, Briggs had positioned himself in the clearing for pick-up. He would not be denied freedom this time. As the helicopter drifted within range, he grabbed the yellow horse collar, dove into and wrapped it around himself, expecting to be hoisted into the helicopter. Instead, he was abruptly dragged along the ground underneath the ship. From the left underbelly of the H-34, he observed the crew chief doubled over shouting and inquiring if he was ever going to get into the helicopter. Then, with the helicopter hovering

²⁴ It was not the first time I had taken control of an H-34 from a PIC in an emergency situation. I did this on a trip to the heavy maintenance facility at Jacksonville, Florida when the PIC unknowingly descended toward high power lines.

dangerously low, Briggs rose and rushed toward the door still clutching the horse collar. The short dash seemed like an eternity after spending twenty-six hours on the ground in enemy territory. Finally, he was lifted a few feet into the womb-like safety of the passenger compartment.

Seeking what he believed was maximum security, he ran to the rear of the cabin shouting, *"Get the fuck out of here! They are all over the place!"* Exhausted, he flopped into a seat and strapped on every available seat belt he could wrap around his body. Then, feeling more secure than he had in what seemed ages, very thirsty from his ordeal, he requested water. Steve handed him a canteen, which he immediately began to consume.

"Don't drink so much water," Steve admonished, *"It will make you sick."* After a pause, Steve inquired, *"Where is your buddy?"*

Through large gulps of the most delicious liquid he had ever quaffed, Briggs choked, *"I don't know. I never saw him."* Then, after thinking a moment, shouting at Steve through the din of drumming rotors and transmission whine, he added, *"I thought you guys had it yesterday."*

"Nah, this is another helicopter. The one we were in before is sitting on a mountaintop in Laos."

I was elated over the successful and relatively easy extraction. What a difference a day had made. I felt vindicated from my miscalculations and errors of the previous day, and at that exact moment was ready to perform another SAR mission again if necessary. The effort had been worthwhile. However, the saga was only fifty percent complete. We still had to finish the total package--return passenger, crew, and machine safely to Laos.

While we began an eastbound climb, Robertson circled the area creating a diversion, while the gutsy Stergar dropped six fragmentation grenades in quick succession to discourage ground fire. This unannounced action proved so realistic that the A-1 drivers pulled off the target, radioing that they were receiving air bursts.

As we departed the dreaded valley for an uneventful trip south, radio chatter increased. A voice boomed over the UHF net inquiring if the airman we just retrieved was bald-headed. In the same breath, he requested the pilot's name. I relayed this message to Steve and in a few seconds, he answered "Briggs". Immediately after I transmitted this name, the ensuing silence was deafening. ²⁵ ²⁶

On the jubilant and thankfully uneventful trip back to LS-107, we heard that F-4 pilots had successfully leveled the Son La Army Barracks. ²⁷

²⁵ Front-seat pilot, Captain Paul Kari had never actually been sighted. Paul was captured shortly after landing and spent seven years and eight months in prison. From the ground he had observed a helicopter flying low in his area. The following day he saw F-105 jets flying in the area.

Mistreated during captivity, a soldier slugged him in the head with a rifle butt, which ruptured an ear drum. Four years in solitary confinement and a poor diet contributed to a beriberi disease, and ocular problems that exist today. After release on 12 February 1973, Kari returned to the USA. He retired from the USAF as a lieutenant colonel and eventually worked for the Federal Aviation Administration.

²⁶ The Author talked to Paul Kari on the phone on 03/11/13. He indicated that a ghost writer was going to produce a book relating to his ordeal.

²⁷ Luck for aviators in this area continued dismal, for on 29 June a RF-101C was lost and the pilot listed as MIA.

HOU EI MA-STANDBY DEBRIEFING

Because one pilot was still missing and his disposition yet unknown, Vientiane Operations assigned us static standby at Houei Ma. It appeared that there was a better than average possibility of returning to North Vietnam that day. Despite our recent success and initial euphoria, after some reflection, I was not particularly thrilled with the new requirement. One could only stir a bee's nest so long before being stung. Furthermore, we knew from the Klusmann incident that SAR missions could continue for days. Although still pumped up from our achievement, I reserved judgment for a return to the valley at the time the balloon actually went up. At any rate, replacement parts and a maintenance team had still not arrived to repair Hotel-33, so, without transportation, I was virtually trapped at the isolated outpost.

While the helicopters were being fueled and readied for a possible return to "Indian Country," we had a chance to discuss the two-day ordeal with Captain Curt Briggs. It was indeed a rare and fortunate opportunity to attach a name and face to the object of our efforts. However, we had to hurry, for a Helio Courier pilot was currently inbound to ferry him to Udorn.

Curt, an individual over six feet tall, was stooped over and looked much shorter than his actual height. He was disheveled from pounding the brush, sustenance deprivation, and looked completely drained from his harrowing experience. Interestingly, cloth from the lower left leg of his flight suit was missing. When I inquired about this, he indicated that he had torn the fabric to fashion a protective headgear. Unaware of a plague of biting insects, I erroneously assumed this was to provide shade from the sun. In its place he had stuffed a vinyl escape and evasion (E&E) map. At first Briggs was slightly

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withdrawn, perhaps still experiencing shock and intimidated by the presence of two shabby looking helicopter crews and numerous chattering Meo tribesmen, some dressed in cowboy hats and Levi jeans.

When coaxed to talk about the experience, he said his PIC might have flown through their bomb blast because of an erroneous pre-briefed altitude.²⁸ He went on to say that he managed to evade capture the previous night by walking down a trail until hearing voices. Then he jumped into bushes and waited until it was clear to proceed again. He was surprised when we informed him that he had travelled about two miles from the initial rescue site on the 20th. He was further shocked to learn that his progress had been west toward a populated area, for he believed he had been moving steadily east toward the river. During previous SARs, I had a distinct impression enemy searchers used dogs to ferret out pilots. However, Curt indicated that to his knowledge none were used. Then one wag added a bit of humor to the conversation, interjecting there were no dogs employed because "the slopes" had eaten them.

Then I took Curt aside and personally walked him over to Hotel-33. After showing him my damaged helicopter, he privately thought, *"You fucking guys were crazy! With all the bullets hitting the aircraft, you were a sitting duck."*

During our casual walk around the ship, I inquired if he had seen a machine gun firing at us. Answering in the affirmative, he indicated the fire was coming from just above him and he had his pistol out at the ready. I wanted to ask him

²⁸ This was something Curt later denied saying, but it was heard by those of us present.

why he had not attempted to shoot the gunner so we could proceed with our job of rescuing him. However, in deference to his horrible appearance and supreme evasion effort, I let the matter drop.

After returning to the group, someone asked the inevitable question which we were all interested--the rumor that we were paid 1,500 dollars per successful pilot rescue. Smacking of mercenary implications, the subject was hotly resented among those of us who altruistically placed our lives on the line to perform these hazardous SARs. Since hearing the "pay for pilots" rumor, most Air America helicopter pilots were eager to confirm if the story was actually being disseminated throughout the Thailand-based U.S. military squadrons. Briggs indicated, yes, he had heard the rumor that we were paid a tidy sum for pilot retrievals. Stories also circulated regarding our high pay and lavish parties held when the sum of 100,000 dollars was attained. Hoping to dispel any misinformation and bias for our efforts, I curtly informed the Air Force pilot that in addition to our base pay, we were compensated ten dollars hazard pay per hour while flying within denied areas. I further requested that upon returning to his Ubon squadron, he set the record straight among his comrades. In his exhausted state he looked at me with a sidewise glance like he failed to comprehend, or believe what I said.

Actually, the Captain was thinking, *"Gee, if I had known Air America was not paying you guys shit for getting my ass out of there, I would have been a lot more worried than I was."*

I turned away in disgust, regretting that the pay subject ever was mentioned. Perhaps over a few drinks and jokes at another place and time the subject would have been acceptable, but in this environment, I considered it bad taste. However, it

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remained difficult to resolve the lie circulating throughout the squadrons about the fictitious rescue pay. Following the outburst, the conversation diminished to small talk. While we were thus engaged, Stergar relieved Curt of his survival gear, which Frank used for the next three years.

Tongsar, wearing a cowboy hat and jeans intervened and attempted to purchase Briggs' Smith and Wesson. Curt would not relinquish the weapon. Although his personal weapon, he told the Lao that the gun was USAF property. Instead, he presented Tongsar with a handful of tracer ammunition for his .38 pistol. Seemingly satisfied, he inquired if Curt could fire a crossbow. The American had handled all manner of weapons while a small boy in Ohio, and easily placed a wooden shaft in the center of a target. The Meo and villagers were delighted, so "out of allied friendship," Tongsar presented the native artifact to Briggs. Then, with true Pop Buell bombast, he launched into a lengthy speech regarding the friendship of the Meo-Lao-American people.²⁹ At first, I was envious and felt pangs of unwarranted jealousy at the presentation of the gift, for I had never received one.

Then Helio Courier pilot, Captain Lee Mullins, landed to usher Briggs south. I was always amazed at how Helio pilots managed to land and take off on a short strip without damaging the plane. Briggs was flown directly to Udorn, where the USAF flight surgeon preformed a cursory examination and administered a tetanus injection for a facial cut he had suffered during the ejection process. Two Air Force lieutenant colonels escorted him to their quarters for a bath, and supplied him with a uniform. After relaxing a bit, they accompanied him to the Air America

²⁹Tongsar had learned public relations (PR) well from his mentors, especially how to charm his listeners.

Club for drinks and dinner. Sort of a celebrity, he was introduced by an Air America type to several people as the helicopter pilots' latest "pluck-ee."³⁰

Herb Baker, who was in the bar the previous night discussing the ongoing SAR, scoffed, calling both Phil Goddard and me kids, his favorite term for almost everyone except himself. Although people generally made allowances for most of Herb's foolishness, this statement was not well received by other patrons.

Two U.S. Navy "Spad" pilots who covered Curt that day were also in the bar sucking up free suds. Earlier that morning he had believed that one of the pilots read his mind while accomplishing the second sighting. However, when Curt approached the men to offer thanks and show appreciation for the effort, perhaps well into their cups, the pilots barely acknowledged his presence.³¹

After dinner, feeling unwell and still considerably fatigued from his time in the field, Curt departed the Club early for much needed rest.

MORE OF THE SAME

While the disposition and search for Paul Kari continued over the Na San-Son La Valley, we stood by on the ground at Houei Ma nervously anticipating another run into North Vietnam.

³⁰ CPH Knight believed no one else could have made this statement but Captain Phil Goddard.

³¹ Sandy pilots were never allowed to purchase their own drinks in the Udorn Club Rendezvous bar. These men were the same pilots from the A-1H division flight who shot down the MiG-17 on the 20th. Rotating through Udorn, as per the ambassador's request and SAR SOPs for ongoing operations, they remained overnight for continuing SAR duty, while pilots credited with the kill returned to the carrier.

The SAR was not terminated for hours, and we were not released from the stressful duty until late afternoon. No other aircraft arrived that day with relief or parts for Hotel-33, so I was again obligated to remain upcountry. Lack of pilots, a continuing SAR, and the age-old practice of placing a pilot back in the cockpit immediately following a bad experience probably influenced Udorn management's decision to leave me in the field. At twilight, with the shroud of darkness beginning to envelop the Sam Tong bowl, the concept of a decent meal and comparatively restful night at the Air America hostel seemed a most agreeable alternative to another wretched night at Houei Ma.

BRIGGS' DISPOSITION

The following morning Briggs was flown to Ton Son Nut Air Force Base in a T-39. He spent three days undergoing intensive debriefings. During the process, he was queried by an Air Force general who mistook him for Captain Charles Sheldon, the Voodoo pilot Ed Reid, I, and others had looked for in early May. When the general discovered that Briggs was not Shelton, his interest waned, and he abruptly terminated the conversation. Before leaving South Vietnam, additional medical examinations revealed a twenty percent compression fracture to Briggs' number twelve thoracic vertebrae, likely incurred from the hurried ejection and hard landing.

Admonished to divulge nothing relating to the North Vietnam incident, not even to his squadron mates, he returned to the Ubon base. After a short period at his home base, he was shipped back to the United States.

The incident marked several firsts in the war: Briggs was able to claim the unique distinction of crewing the first F-4C

ever shot down during the first combat mission in northwestern North Vietnam, and the first downed USAF pilot to return safely from North Vietnamese territory.

The back injury grounded Briggs for nine months. Furthermore, strict Air Force policy prohibited him from returning to Southeast Asia. He had been on the ground in enemy territory for more than twenty-four hours and had left behind critical identification. Should he be shot down again and captured, he would not be afforded protection under the Geneva Convention and could be executed as a spy. ³²

Curt Briggs was awarded a Purple Heart and Distinguished Flying Cross for his perseverance and uncanny survival ability that contributed to his Na San recovery. ³³

AFTERMATH

I was rejuvenated by good food, a cleansing, soothing hot shower, and a full night of stress free, uninterrupted sleep at the Sam Tong hostel. When I inquired as to Tong's condition from Blaine Jensen and Dale Means, I was informed the latest word they received was that he was in stable condition and recovering at the Korat hospital. The following morning, we were assigned local flights around Sam Tong and Moung Soui. Then we were dispatched to Na Khang to await parts and the field maintenance repair team for Hotel-33. Double crewed, I also suspected that we were at the top of the queue returning to the Na Son Valley

³² This was academic, for the North Vietnamese did not honor the Geneva Convention for prisoners of war.

³³ After departing the military, Curt opted for a commercial pilot career with Pan American and later Delta Airlines. During later years, while still conducting research for this book, I visited his home in the Tennessee hills twice to gain additional information and relive our unique experience in North Vietnam.

10-15-91

CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF
THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

TO

CURTIS H. BRIGGS

Captain Curtis H. Briggs distinguished himself by heroism while participating in aerial flight as Pilot of an F-4C Fighter-Bomber over North Vietnam on 20 June 1965. On that date, Captain Briggs' flight was tasked to bomb one of the largest and most heavily defended target complexes in North Vietnam. Displaying complete disregard for his own safety, despite adverse weather conditions which necessitated a last minute change in attack leading, Captain Briggs braved intense antiaircraft fire to direct his teammates in a highly successful strike. Immediately after bomb release, Captain Briggs' aircraft was hit by ground fire causing it to burst into flames thus forcing him to eject in the midst of a heavy concentration of hostile troops. Although suffering from a fractured vertebra, Captain Briggs displayed great courage by not exposing himself during initial rescue efforts for fear of endangering the recovery aircraft, but instead, painfully made his way to a more favorable area thus contributing greatly to the safety of a subsequent rescue. The outstanding heroism and selfless devotion to duty displayed by Captain Briggs reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.



USAF paperwork accompanying Captain Curtis Briggs DFC medal. Briggs certainly deserved a medal for his amazing adventure, however, the citation is embellished with inaccuracies; for one he was not the PIC. If interested, the reader can decide as to the contents' authenticity after reading the Author's narrative.

Briggs Collection.

should the other pilot be sighted. When the repair team arrived at Site-36 on a large fixed wing, we shuttled the men and parts, including main rotor blades north to Houei Ma. The Filipino crew was supervised by Gaza Eiler. By this time, after a bullet had penetrated the deck between Eiler's feet and slipped between his flack vest and shirt during a SAR, he had stopped flying as a line Flight Mechanic. Carolyn had just given birth to a girl, and I surmised that he wanted to see her grow up. Following that incident, he rarely flew upcountry, other than in the capacity of Chief Flight Mechanic, or to oversee H-34 Maintenance Department recovery missions. While the team feverishly struggled to place Hotel-33 in an airworthiness condition for a ferry to Udorn, we worked pads around Site-36. Late in the day, we received word that the ship was almost ready. When Bobby dropped Nichols and me off at Site-107, the maintenance team, not wanting to spend a minute at the site unnecessarily was still hurrying to complete the task. However, the machine still required the obligatory and time-consuming blade tracking, a short ground run, and test flight to verify acceptable functioning of the newly installed throttle box and re-rigged carburetor mechanism. By the time I was satisfied and collected everyone, it was too late for a flight to Sam Tong. Therefore, we stopped at Na Khang, and secured for the night. Because of Tong's injury, the mood among the Customer and the troops was somber, for there was no one of the same caliber believed available to replace him.

WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW WON'T KILL YOU, OR DOUBLE DANGER

Long after the fact I learned that while we were exiting North Vietnam at altitude, Captain Al White heard **SKYLARK RED**

broadcast in the blind, a military code phrase for a MiG alert. (I was not acquainted with the term.)

Well to the southeast, a deadly drama was being acted out. For only the second time in aviation history, an enemy jet plane was downed by an American propeller driven aircraft. ³⁴

As reported in an official report:

"...DVR MiGs reacted to the presence of our aircraft over North Vietnam...resulting in air combat engagements.

...on 20 June, supported by sequence of events, indicates a deliberate enemy interception effort by two MiG-17/FRESCOs against four A1H Navy aircraft while providing air cover on a SAR operation for a downed USAF F4C earlier involved against Son La Barracks 100 [nautical miles] west northwest of Hanoi.

During an approximate five-minute engagement, the MiG [pilots] fired unguided rockets at extreme range which burned out before reaching the A1Hs.

One MiG was hit and exploded upon crashing." ³⁵

At noon aboard the USS Midway (CVA-41), four VA-25 squadron A-1H Skyraiders pilots, Lieutenant Commander Edwin A. Greathouse, LTJG J.S. Lynne, Lieutenant Clinton B. Johnson, and Lieutenant Junior Grade Charles W. Hartman, were alerted to provide cover for the downed F-4C SAR. For various reasons, the planes were tardy departing the carrier. After twice being placed on hold, they launched during the late afternoon. "Loaded for bear," each "Sandy" carried the standard RESCAP complement of four LAU-3 pods, each containing nineteen 2.75-inch rockets

³⁴ During the Korean conflict, an F-4U Corsair pilot splashed a MiG.

³⁵ FRUS, #57, 07/14/65. This was the official Washington version, as opposed to the more detailed pilot account.

and 800 rounds of 20mm ammunition to feed the four wing canons. In addition to these stores, they also mounted two 150-gallon drop tanks. Seventy miles inland, en route beneath a 12,000-foot ceiling and without MiGCAP escort, Canasta Spad flight was alerted by the radar picket destroyer USS *Strauss* (DE-408) that "bandits" were quickly closing on them. Apparently, the MiGs vectored toward two Skyraiders to the south had failed to acquire their targets and were redirected toward the Canasta flight. ³⁶

Within a relatively short time, the Navy aviators were engaged in lethal combat with two Soviet-built Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-17s vectored into a firing position by ground radar controllers. ³⁷

As deadly missiles soared around the Skyraiders, in "deep Kimshi," the Navy pilots dropped their wing-mounted fuel tanks and external stores to prepare for battle, and then dove vertically for the deck to take evasive action. Level at 500 feet AGL, Flight Leader Greathouse split his flight in two sections and began a series of high "G" weaving, tight defensive circles.

After five minutes of maneuvering at treetop level and through small valleys, the Navy pilots managed to separate the MiGs. While one enemy pilot ran for home, another overconfident MiG-17 pilot, intent on downing American planes, was sucked into a trap while attempting to close on the Greathouse section's six o'clock position. Johnson fired to divert the enemy pilot's attention from the flight leader, who now focused his wrath on

³⁶ When sent to South Vietnam in 1962, nomenclature for the AD-1 Spad was changed to A-1.

³⁷ MiG-17: NATO designated Fresco, the aircraft could be armed with rockets, two 23mm and one 37mm canon in the nose.

the second section of Spads. While the pilot circled and made a high-speed pass toward them, Hartmann and Johnson simultaneously fired all their 20 mike-mike canons. Effective, rounds appeared to enter the intake, splattering the wing roots and along the top of the fuselage into the cockpit. The enemy jet never returned fire. Trailing smoke, the aircraft rolled inverted, clipped a small hill, broke apart, exploded, and burned in a farmer's field.

With additional bandits reputedly headed their way and daylight waning, the flight rejoined and scooted for the *Midway* for a night landing.

Hartman and Johnson were eventually credited with each downing half a MiG. They were awarded the Silver Star. Greathouse and Lynne received the Distinguished Flying Cross. In addition, all four men journeyed to Saigon the following day to receive the South Vietnamese Air Gallantry Medals and honorary commissions in the South Vietnamese Air Force from Primer Nyuen Cao Ky.

The heroic Navy pilots' action that day quite possibly saved our lives. Had I known what those men accomplished, I would have likely planted an enormous wet kiss on both their cheeks for, isolated, defenseless, and likely never spotting the Soviet jets, we certainly would have afforded the MiG pilots an

easy kill. ³⁸ ³⁹

ADDITIONAL SARs

Apparently, our episode was not the last unique SAR during the period, as two other rescue operations were underway during the same time frame. With varying degrees of success, attempts were conducted by Meo ground teams to find and retrieve Hrdlicka and Sheldon in the Sam Neua area. A report emanated from an outpost and was relayed to the embassy regarding the presence of one of the pilots who had been walked into friendly territory. An H-34 crew was being dispatched to the area to retrieve the man.

Ambassador Sullivan was concerned that information and details regarding the rescue, that might compromise future operations and lives of those involved, not be publicized. He wanted this order disseminated to all Udorn echelons.

³⁸ Because of the high level of confidentiality demanded in SAR work, lack of debriefings among our own people, and especially the dearth of interaction with military personnel, I did not learn about this interesting twist to our rescue episode from Professor William Leary until the late 1980s. It was better that I had no knowledge of it at the time, for I had quite enough to contend with that day rather than sweat potential MiG threats.

The MiG kill was not the final one for reciprocating engine U.S. Navy pilots, for a second MiG-17 was later splashed during October 1966.

³⁹ Air Combat, Skyraider, 62-63. Article passed to me by Curt Briggs.

Van Jacob Staaveren, *Gradual Failure*, 144-145.

CINCPAC Report, *The U.S. Navy in the Pacific*, 1965, 90-96.

John Smith, *Rolling Thunder*, 310, 339.

Edward Marolda, *Carrier Operations: The Illustrated History of the Vietnam War* (New York, N.Y., Bantam, 1987) 39, 61-62.

Bill Leary, 1965 Notes.

Captain Clinton Johnson, USNR (Ret), *June 20, 1965: A-1 Skyraider MiG Killers*,

(http://www.vnafinamn.com/Skyraider_vs_MIG17.html).

In the end, the account of the pilot rescue proved untrue. Although Meo teams were normally involved in SAR operations throughout the entire war, not one American military pilot was ever liberated from Sam Neua province.

For some time ACPH Marius Burke had requested consideration to enter the T-28 Alpha program. Eventually he was selected, processed, and completed training. He noted that the pilots performed more SAR work than interdiction. They had to exercise caution, as the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane was nervous about people and the media learning of the program.

From the beginning in 1964, the Alpha Team program was supposed to be highly classified, and caution was employed to avoid compromise or expose the activity. However, like all secrets not kept by more than one individual, we all were aware of the Alpha program, but never talked about it. Not all were as careful, for early one morning a Transportation Department B-bus driver arrived at the Godnoma compound, banging on Burke's window and shouting, "*Captain Burke, you have to get up for a T-28 flight.*"

For a long time, reports surfaced from Meo teams in the Sam Neua area regarding the disposition of U.S. pilots. One time, responding to continuing reports of an American pilot escaping and establishing contact with friendly elements, the U.S. Embassy and Customer wanted H-34 pilots to extract the aviator. Bob Nunez and Marius Burke were selected for one job with Bobby in charge of the mission. They were equipped with tactical military radio frequencies and assigned Navy escort planes from a Tonkin Gulf carrier. In order to enter the area, one had to traverse Route-6, always a difficult task because of a 37mm threat. Therefore, the pilots remained on the west side of the

road awaiting Sandy cover. Marius noted Bobby, in the capacity of his SAR ship, was so high that he could barely see him.

When the A-4Ds arrived, Marius briefed them on the situation. Disliking what they heard, the Navy pilots departed the scene. Marius was so angry he could hardly see. Then, looking at the ground, he realized that he was on the east side of the road, and had probably crossed the bad spot many times. Therefore, because they were in the area and could see the destination, he recommended that they proceed to the target.

He landed and talked to a team leader who indicated that the pilot was not with his group, but with another one, which was moving and would not be in place until the following day. The H-34 pilots then retraced their track, as an entire flanking hillside erupted in ground fire. That night Marius was relieved.

The following day, the ambassador elected to use his T-28 assets, and Marius joined a three aircraft flight led by Jim Rhyne. The flight escorted the H-34 pilots into the area, but the pilots failed to accomplish a rescue. After accompanying the helicopters back across Route-6, the Alphas dropped their entire ordnance load on the offending hill. Burke achieved great satisfaction in this action.

A steady diet of SAR work continued. Another rescue occurred on the 23rd when Major Robert Wilson's F-105 was hit and he ejected in southwestern North Vietnam. Using his URC-11 survival radio, he contacted the Crown HC-54 aircraft orbiting along the Thai-Lao border. Air Force A-1 pilots arrived and, after identifying and fixing his position, loitered away from the area to await the HH-43s arrival. Only ninety minutes after punching out of the cockpit, the major was on board the Nakhon Phanom-bound helicopter.

POLITICAL CONCERNS

Ambassador Sullivan was not overly pleased by Air America's recent SAR role in North Vietnam and the dire political implications of possible crew capture. On the 22nd, he forwarded a telegram to Admiral Sharp at CINCPAC Headquarters:

"Becoming increasingly concerned about the political risks we are accepting for ourselves and the RLG by continuing to use Air America for rescue operation in the DVR [Democratic Vietnamese Republic]. Although there has never been a formal request for our people to perform these SAR missions for Rolling Thunder casualties, our actions to date have been voluntary. The fact is that we have been doing these jobs more and more regularly. In a two-day effort 20-21 June, when we finally picked up one F-4C pilot, we had two helicopters very badly shot up, one of which went back to Lao territory with a shattered rotor blade. If we had lost either of these choppers in the DVR...Partial answer to the problem would be long-range Sikorsky helicopter for USAF to fly out of Udorn. This is not likely to be immediate for the next emergency SAR call. ⁴⁰

The second solution, which my air attaché had discussed at least twice, would provide immediate relief from current political risks. This would involve prepositioning JP fuel at selected and forward sites [LS-36, 46, 107] for use by USAF HH-43 helicopters based in Thailand.

For reasons not clear to me, 2nd Air Division has not followed up on these suggestions, presumably because they are awaiting word from higher headquarters. HH-43s could fly into

⁴⁰ In the spring, the USAF ordered six combat Sikorsky HH-3 helicopters. However, the promised delivery time was not until October.

forward sites, refuel, and have long enough range to conduct SAR, return to forward sites for 2nd refueling and have enough range to get back to a Thai base. If you concur in this concept, would appreciate your actions in getting the machinery into action."

Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) agreed with Sullivan's concern regarding the burgeoning risk in the Air America SAR operation. Admiral Sharp regarded pilot rescues a military matter that would be addressed ASAP. CINCPAC then contacted top USAF leaders who desired to enter the SAR business and replace Air America assets as the only viable rescue force. As a consequence, the Joint Chiefs of Staff authorized two CH-3Cs and crews transferred to Nakhon Phanom for ninety-day TDY. By the 26th, the Royal Thai Government had authorized the CH-3 deployment.

In the loop while discussion of the Air America SAR quandary continued, Secretary of State Dean Rusk agreed with Ambassador Sullivan's concern over the potential of an Air America crewman's death, capture, and resulting publicity in the DVR. He concurred that pre-positioning JP-4 fuel at forward sites for use by USAF H-43s on a temporary basis was an excellent idea, pending arrival of larger long-range Sikorsky helicopters in October. Rusk evidenced State's concern about U.S. marked helicopters being observed operating from Lao bases for SAR purposes. He wanted additional information regarding which sites were involved, the security situation, and elements holding the area. By the 26th, fuel had been staged to forward sites in Laos and the HH-43s became factors in remote SAR missions.

The long trip home on the 23rd was interrupted by a final stop at Long Tieng to inspect the ship, refuel, and inquire as to Tong's status.

It was close to lunchtime when we taxied onto the Air America parking ramp and secured.

I urgently needed to talk to someone about the incident or anything, just human discourse, but no one from management met us on the hot ramp. Curious, expecting a semi-celebrity status of some sort, I wondered if I was being treated like a pariah with a contagious disease. But that was generally management's methodology. Regardless of the circumstances, life and events rolled on. There were no accolades, no bugles, no fife and drum rolls, or ruffles and flourishes for conquering heroes. They expected an employee to silently perform a job without fanfare or kudos. Perhaps after Goddard and other members of the SAR crew had had their say and their day in the sun, debriefing from me was deemed unnecessary. This applied equally to Steve Nichols, for no one talked to him regarding our episode in the

north. ⁴¹ ⁴²

⁴¹ Frank Stergar also indicated to me that he was never debriefed.

⁴² Comments and Sources for this Segment:

Curtis Briggs made a surprising telephone call to the Author on Christmas Eve 12/24/90. After twenty-five years, Curt had obtained my phone number from fellow commercial airline and former Air America pilot Captain Dan "Red" Alston. I was shocked, for I had not thought about the historic SAR for many years.

Taped Interview at Briggs' Home by the Author, 10/15/91.

Letters from Curt Briggs.

Curt Briggs Statement: Ejection from F-4C aircraft, 04/18/67.

Curt Briggs Phone Call Conversations, 01/18/91, 03/06/91.

Curt Briggs Corrections and Additions to Author's Draft of the Incident dated 07/31/91.

Ben Addison, Staff Writer, *Rogersville Review*, Rogersville, Tennessee Reunion of War-four-part series, 10/24/91, 10/31/91, 11/14/91, 11/21/91.

EW Knight Email, 07/13/00.

Steven I. Nichols Telephone Interviews, 01/26/91, 04/14/91.

Steve Nichols Tape 7/91.

Steve Nichols Book, *Air America in Laos: The Flight Mechanic's Stories, Rescue Mission*, 27-31, 2013.

Frank Stergar Email, 07/13/96.

Frank Stergar Tape, c 1996

George Carroll-Frank Stergar Manuscript of the *First Day of the Son La-Na San SAR*-The men called the Author and asked him to participate. He refused and because of errors in the narrative, later regretted it.

George Carroll Interview at a 05/29/13 Air America Reunion in New Orleans.

Tom Jenny Telephone Conversation, 05/08/00.

Professor William Leary 1965 Notes Regarding the SAR.

Frank Stergar Tape to Bill Leary, 06/18/87.

William Sullivan Message to State, 06/20-21/65, to Sharp, 06/22/65.

Skyraider, Air Combat, 62.

Victor Anthony, 167.

Earl Tilford, 66-67.

Edward Greenhalgh, Appendix 3.

John Smith, 286.

Blaine Jensen Letter, 03/19/96.

Tom Penniman Emails, 02/26/00, 03/06/00.

Marius Burke Interview.

A CATHARSIS OR QUIT

Foregoing lunch, I repaired to a nearly empty bar. I settled casually on a stool smack in the center of the long wooden bar, newly bedecked with our individually carved initials and amply varnished to a high sheen. When I ordered a beer, relatively new Club Manager, curly, gray-haired Art Angelo sidled next to me and sat down. I considered Art a great guy, a genuine public relations man who had learned his trade well while in the U.S. Army. As I attempted to pay for my beer with the obligatory chit book Ben Moore had instituted to eliminate money exchange, and prevent employee thievery, Art informed me that today my money was no good in the bar. All the drinks I could consume were on the house. Well, that had never happened before, but it made no real difference, for I intended to get snookered regardless. Still, I wondered whose decision it was to present me freebies-Art or someone in management.

After Billy Pearson vacated the Rendezvous Club Manager's position to resume flying the line, Art really had his work cut out for him. With the influx of mostly USAF military personnel supporting the Air Operations Center and the new jet crews, the Rendezvous Club was taxed to provide services. Success of the greatly increased patronage almost caused a meltdown in the operation. Therefore, in order to create a more manageable situation, Ben Moore was forced to exclude Club use to many individuals previously allowed to use the facility. Of course, this unpopular policy was implemented at the expense of lower ranked officers and enlisted men.



Air America party in the Rendezvous Club. Left to right: partial view of Steve Stevens, Club Manager Art Angelo, Ground Mechanic Tom Kothe, FIC "clean" Jim Wilson and Flight Mechanic Bill Murphy.

Nichols Collection.

To counter some of the existing pressure, a new bar was being built at the expense of the movie hall. ⁴³

Deep in my alcoholic reverie, I lost all track of time. Several hours swiftly passed, and I felt considerably better. However, though highly anesthetized, but far from a knee-walking drunk condition, I still harbored bad memories regarding the negative aspects of the Son La experience.

My quest for catharsis from my demons continued. Through the gathering haze I noted people coming and going, but there was always seemed to be someone by my side with whom to joke and talk.

Later in the evening, with mostly booze talking, a deeply ingrained subject emerged. I began to wax maudlin and moan over and over again about how far an unknown **they** were going to push us. Considering myself among peers and friends, I began to verbally speculate regarding our participation in future SAR missions. Not allowed to talk about SAR work, I did not make direct reference to the Company or the U.S. Air Force. However, disgusted and disillusioned, I had a lot to get off my chest, and really did not fear management consequences at the time. I logically concluded that Hanoi would be the next stop in our SAR work. I loudly vowed that I would never again return to North Vietnam. At one point, perhaps hearing a spy's report regarding my increasing rants, Abadie and Dick Ford entered the bar. It was unusual to see them there, for I never saw either man take a drink. The bar and atmosphere were reasonably quiet at that time, so they said nothing and promptly departed. In retrospect, I wish that they had pulled me out of the bar and sent me home.

⁴³ Ben Moore June 1965 Monthly Report.

Following a lull in conversation, my tirades continued and it was evident that I was highly conflicted. I guess I was pretty abusive, for out of the corner of my eye, I observed Wayne leaving and shaking his head. I did little to enhance my reputation that night, for Dick Crafts later informed me that he honestly believed that I had completely lost my nerve. However, little did anyone know that monumental drunk did more to restore my equilibrium than any other single item.

Fortunately, some kind soul escorted me to my home in the Godnoma compound, for at that point I was incapable of negotiating much of anything. Tuie could not believe my condition when I slammed open the screen door. She had seen me blasted before, but nothing like that night. For some unknown reason, the landlady's son stood in the center of the living room. From the recesses of my beer-soaked mind, I recalled some of the Americans living in the compound had recently suspected him of pilfering items. Therefore, as a safeguard, I went into the bathroom and placed my gold Omega watch in the medicine cabinet drawer, promptly forgot it, and collapsed into bed.

The next afternoon, after recovering somewhat, I elected to go to the Air America compound to check the mail, flight schedule, and request a few days off. After showering and dressing in the uniform of the day (shirt, shorts and shower shoes), I looked for my watch. It was missing. I considered this strange, but reserved my judgment and decided to conduct a more thorough search when I returned home.

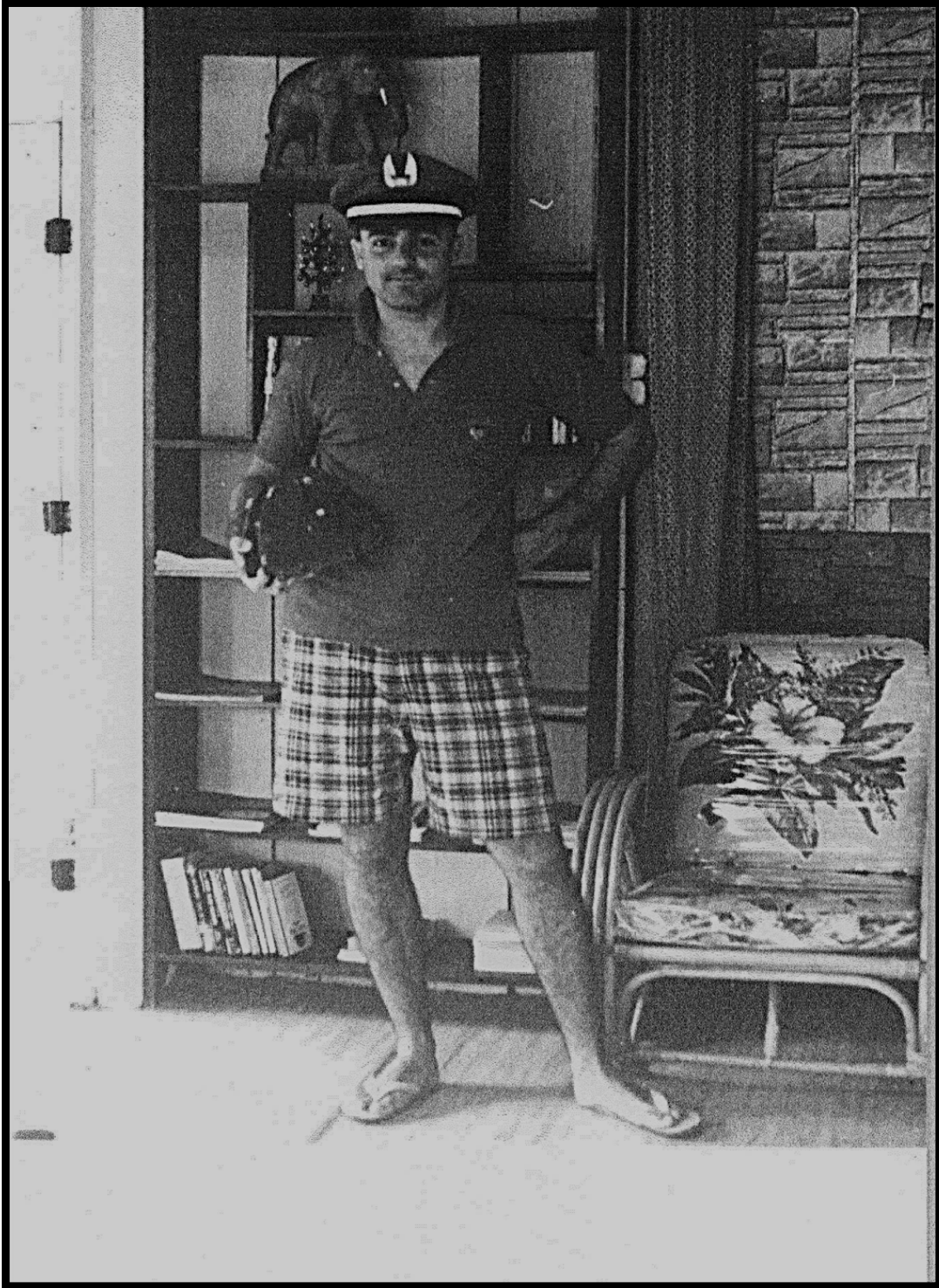
Wayne informed me that he wanted me to fly for a couple more days, and then I could enjoy a back-to-back STO. This sounded good to me. I realized that with all the action lately and requirements for dual pilot crewed aircraft, he was probably very short on pilot availability. However, I also understood

management's policy: the psychology, and necessity for a senior pilot who had recently endured an unusually traumatic experience to get back in the right seat. Then the CPH said there was considerable high-level interest in the first day of the Briggs/Kari rescue attempt. He wanted a written statement regarding details of the mission, but properly sanitized for upper echelon types, not reflecting our bitterness over the non-existent pay for pilot controversy. I agreed that I would compose something readable. Although still conflicted over my experience, I left his office without mentioning plans to quit Air America. Actually, I was still unsure what I would do.

Before leaving the facility, I sauntered to the hangar to check the progress ground mechanics were making in patching Hotel-33. It looked like they would require extra time before repairing some of the damage. Gaza spied me and said to wait a moment. Then he returned from one of the shops with the holed throttle box and presented it to me. I placed the green trophy in a prominent place in the house as a conversation piece and a constant reminder of the ordeal. ⁴⁴

My watch was still missing. I recalled the landlady's kid in the house when I staggered in the door the previous night, and assuming he had an ulterior motive for being there, thought he might have pilfered it. Accusing him by innuendo, I talked to

⁴⁴ The damaged throttle box accompanied our household goods shipment when Air America closed business in Udorn at the end of June 1974. The component lay in storage until 1979, when we returned to New Jersey from revolutionary plagued Iran. Unable to ship everything to New Orleans, I gave away several artifacts, including the throttle box, to a neighborhood youngster. It was foolish. I wish that I had kept it as a memento and outstanding conversation piece.



An unshaven, unruly looking Author in his Soi Mahamit bungalow attired in the "summer service uniform of the day," complete with a Company barracks cap and grasping Hotel-33's damaged throttle box.

Author Collection.

Longmoun Godnoma and her husband to find out if they might have seen it. Well, the major was livid. Apparently, the kid had stolen items in the past, for the next thing I knew angry sounds surged from their house, as his father kicked him--and kicking was definitely an accomplished Thai thing.

After that entire hubbub, the Omega was still missing. It seemed that I had and would always have issues with motorcycles, refrigerators, watches, typewriters, women, and other mundane items.

The next two days produced high time day missions, leaving Udorn early, working out of Paksane, and returning to the Udorn base well after dark. It was not management's interest to immediately return a senior pilot with a hairy SAR experience into harm's way. However, because the Vientiane Operations Manager was rarely aware of the H-34 crew composition, like the repetitious SAR stand-bys on the ground at Ban Na, this did occasionally occur in Military Region Two. To forestall an immediate SAR occurrence, Udorn operations often assigned such pilots to less hostile areas, if that was possible.

On Friday the 25th First Officer Jack Barnheisel, Flight Mechanic Magpantay, and I crewed Hotel-21. Consistent with Washington office personnel's quest to fill slots, they were still hiring pilots with few hours in the H-34, or other throttle twister machines. Barnheisel was no exception: he had been a U.S. Army pilot flying turbine engine helicopters. Jack, with the nickname "Barney," was a big, friendly guy who talked a lot about himself and claimed that he spoke several languages fluently, including Korean. He was impressive, intelligent, and I was happy to have company that day. Like Hitchman and a couple of other individuals in our program, self-promoter or not,

through all his blarney, I easily recognized that he was a climber.

Wayne indicated he did not do me any favors assigning "Barney" to me that day. After flying with him, he considered Barnheisel a terrible H-34 pilot, and he did not remain long in the program. Like other former turbine engine helicopter pilots, he was unable to master manual throttle manipulation, and the necessary RPM control required to operate a piston engine helicopter. This was especially apparent in August to CPH Knight during a two-day evaluation trip to the LS-36 area. When Wayne later informed Jack that he had failed the proficiency upgrading check, the man broke down and cried in the office. Unable to utilize him as a line pilot and with no permanent First Officer billets available, Udorn management sent him to Taipei. From there he was recycled to Chiang Mai to fly in a program involving 204B Bell helicopter, 96-Whiskey, and work alongside Captain Jack Kemp. Following that, he went to Vientiane as an Assistant Base Manager, a job Wayne had previously turned down when offered by Dave Hickler. Jack's Chinese wife was the subject of controversy, and there were many negative innuendoes relating to her shady activities, but they were largely covered up. In addition to his other claims, Jack professed to speak Cantonese. His knowledge was found to be only rudimentary when Wayne asked Lai to converse in Cantonese with him in the Plaza Hotel. Barnheisel wrote well and an interesting monthly report came to President Grundy's attention. Therefore, when the Saigon Base Manager was overwhelmed by drinking problems, Grundy

offered Jack the job. Wayne had regular contact with Jack over the years, but they never achieved much ease with each other. ⁴⁵

My final day of the month on the flight schedule was with Steve Nichols in Hotel-30. We flew directly to Tha Thom and spent the day working around the Paksane area.

SAR CRITIQUE

The promised time off eventually materialized. However, before journeying to Bangkok, on 28 June, I spent several hours reconstructing the SAR event in a written report delineating the first day of the Briggs SAR. I attempted to provide a factual, somewhat sanitized short narrative condensed to three pages. Without attempting to alienate my readers, I concluded that in using my written version of a "bully pulpit," this was an excellent time to add my "two cents" regarding deficient SAR particulars that had been bothering me for over a year.

For too long I considered that the joint Air America-USAF SAR procedures had been conducted in too haphazard a manner. Launch immediately and "Brief on Guard" could no longer be tolerated or employed as the primary ingredient for a macho method of conducting these extended missions--they were becoming just too dangerous. Therefore, at the end of my statement, I included several items considered serious omissions or commissions by both Air Force and Air America units involved in the operations. I also integrated additional recommendations that I considered might assist crews during future SAR missions. I seriously believed that we all needed to improve our methods,

⁴⁵ EW Knight Emails, 05/03/00, 07/13/00, 07/14/00, 08/23/00.

mainly to obey the rules already sanctioned, or few of us would survive.

I was particularly disappointed in the Victor Control plane's electronic configuration and particularly the crews lack of radio discipline. The deficiency in proper C-123 radio navigation equipment had prevented us from joining up with the control ship using our standard military UHF/DF equipment. Moreover, without mentioning names, it appeared that the PIC of the C-123 was totally unfamiliar with our SAR-SOPs. ⁴⁶

After Crown relinquished control during the pick-up phase, Captain White had wrongly assumed low cover responsibility, when this should have reverted to the primary helicopter crew, who had a better feel for the situation close to the ground. As a result, there was an abundance of unnecessary radio chatter at a critical time when total radio silence should have prevailed. Granted, all SOPs were word of mouth. Probably to maintain some kind of secrecy, published SOPs to guide us were never disseminated nor a joint helicopter-fixed wing crew briefing held. As far as Victor Control's mission was concerned, it had long been established that the PIC's job was to simply aid, not direct our operations.

The fact that helicopters were summoned into a target area without "slow-mover" aircraft to escort, protect, and derive positive pilot identification had proved an inexcusable error, bordering on criminal action. Those omissions had jeopardized the entire SAR contingent and almost resulted in additional

⁴⁶ Granted, we never conducted joint SAR instruction, procedures, or briefings with our fixed wing counterparts. For that matter, probably for security reasons, management never briefed us on what to expect on these missions. We were largely on our own, and I suppose all this was assumed to be absorbed by OJT and osmosis.

aircraft and crews on the ground. Because of our limited fuel endurance, even if Goddard's ship had not been hit, our task would have been rushed and relegated to a minimal search exercise.

Regarding U.S. Air Force crews' emergency radio equipment, I suggested that **all** USAF pilots should be provided combination voice and beacon survival radios for positive identification and a means to aid the helicopter pilot during the final rescue phase. Furthermore, the downed pilot, being in the best position to assess the immediate ground situation, should assume final SAR control during the pick-up phase.

I indicated that a signal mirror had been **the** significant factor in locating the airman, but positive identification was initially difficult behind the bright flashes.

As to UH-34D requirements for future missions, I recommended that removable armor plating be provided or permanently installed in our seat pans. Furthermore, because of the high altitudes flown over likely anti-aircraft areas, parachutes be made available to the crews. There were so many prohibited items I could never place on paper.

One unmentionable was what every living, breathing Marine was aware to--never enter a projected gunfight without a large gun and sufficient ammunition to perform the job. Air America, the Customer, and USG would not have been sympathetic or amenable to this stipulation. This would have to wait several more years.

My statement was forwarded to AB-1 and kicked up the line for further disposition. A copy was not retained at the local

Air America facility. Wayne later told me the account was read by people who were impressed by some of my flowery language. ⁴⁷ ⁴⁸

Although Air America was fast approaching the end of serious SAR missions across the border, I liked to believe that dissemination of my suggestions to higher echelon poguees helped smooth, implement, and improve future SAR procedures. ⁴⁹

I was never satisfied with the sometimes-overwhelming requirements heaped on us supposedly non-combatant, unarmed civilians. Therefore, I later verbally recommended to Udorn management, CJ Abadie in particular, that if SAR work was going to continue at the same pace, then thoughts should be accorded to forming a special in-house SAR unit; sort of like the civilian T-28 Alpha pilot program. The cadre should consist of particularly hairy-chested pilots who enjoyed zesty combat missions, and were handsomely rewarded for their efforts. The reader can imagine the reception my suggestion fostered. The management rationale was that such a unit was impossible to create for a multitude of reasons: not enough pilots, problems with locating the ships, losing daily aircraft usage for normal contract work, problems with funding, political considerations, ad nauseam. Besides, something like I recommended would come to naught and conflict with Air Force efforts, which at the time were reputedly on the verge of assuming total responsibility for Theater wide SAR business. Of course, like an ever-larger

⁴⁷ I suppose people considered all helicopter pilots stupid and not capable of writing anything coherent.

⁴⁸ EW Knight Email, 05/01/00.

⁴⁹ During research for this book, whether coincidental or not, I noted in Earl Tillman's work on search and rescue that some of the same recommendations I had made were actually adopted by the USAF.

fishhook snaring one's mouth, for over a year, we had been fed this line of reasoning so many times that no one capable of even minute thinking believed it anymore.

Except for the open bar, provided me courtesy of Art Angelo, there was no letter of appreciation, commendation, or even a thank-you-sir forthcoming for participants of the Son La-Na San mission. Like the Ernie Brace SAR, I supposed it was considered just another highly sensitive operation, one that never occurred.

Later, Air America crews were only called upon one final time to my knowledge to attempt a rescue inside North Vietnam. Just as I had predicted, this time it was near Hanoi. However, the participants were recalled before reaching the target area. Not involved, fortunately, I was not challenged to make a difficult decision.

I would remain with Air America until the Madriver operation ceased in Laos during June 1974, but at times in 1965 I seriously harbored doubts that I would survive the year. As a matter of fact, while reflecting on the incident over the years, I believe that I symbolically perished on that trip out of hell valley on 20 June 1965, and I considered the rest of my life a supreme gift. It was up to me how I would use my remaining time on earth. For quite a period, I was a troubled man, as evidenced by nocturnal gyrations that were beginning to tell on me physically and mentally. One morning upon awaking, Tuie indicated that I had been mumbling, rolling around, thrashing, and whacking her severely about the head and shoulders. What really concerned me was that I did not recall any of this. Also disturbing, with the details of the SAR business held so closely to one's vest, had I expired, no one would have known of my exploits. They would be buried for all time along with me.

Consequently, after my head appreciably cleared, I decided to place the episode behind me and continue to work for Air America--at least for the short term.

As a further catharsis, when time allowed, I also made a difficult decision in July to inform my folks about what I was doing. The entire operation was considered secret, so I admonished them to be covertly proud. Knowing my Father was the type of individual who saved everything, without going into detail, and aware of the consequences of disclosure, along with all the letters of commendation and appreciation, I sent my original written statement depicting the Son La-Na San incident home along with an abbreviated description of our second day in North Vietnam. Titled "for posterity," I recorded my bitterness at the USAF's blasé approach to our dangerous SAR work. Hoping my parents had sufficient information and were savvy enough to read between the lines, I went on to affirm that I was totally committed to my work and wanted to win. Money was not all that important anymore. The next letter I sent followed the same theme:

"You talk about your exciting war books and movies, well this past four months, I have lived more exciting moments than I have ever read about. This little blurb I wrote does not half tell the story...the [commendation] letters are few for my efforts and there should be a couple dozen. I do not care what other people think and say about me, but if they ever say that I am a mercenary, you show them some of these letters and tell them I am doing this gratis."

I signed the letter-a flying phantom of Laos. ⁵⁰

⁵⁰ The mercenary inference attached to our people still bothered me.

TONG PASSES

Tong died late on 23 June 1965. His injury was similar to the one Tony Poe had suffered in January and survived so well. The doctors at the Korat 31st U.S. Army Field Hospital were amazed and puzzled at Tong's demise, for he had been apparently recuperating, when he suddenly succumbed. It was only then that everyone realized how costly the Briggs operation had been to all friendly parties. I had not only lost a portion of my youth, but more importantly, the Meo and Lao Theung freedom fighters had lost an extraordinary leader, one who could never be replaced. USG and the military had lost a man who selflessly aided in the rescue of several of its sons.

Because Mike LaDue had recently been released from the Korat hospital, knew the layout and personnel, and had worked with Tong in the past, he was chosen by Pop Buell and Vang Pao to take possession of the body. Some Army medics and Mike dressed him in a new army fatigue uniform, which was not an easy task since rigor mortis had commenced. LaDue then signed the Certificate of Removal and started back to Vientiane. From that location, the coffin was delivered to Sam Tong and deposited in the warehouse, pending an elaborate hero's funeral.

Two days after Tong's demise, at mid-day a lavish military funeral ceremony was conducted at Sam Tong, with a closed casket viewing in a Quonset hut. In Vientiane, FAR wives prepared Lao

Standard Form 523a
Promulgated August 1954
By Bureau of the Budget
Circular A-32 (Rev.)

CLINICAL RECORD	DISPOSITION OF BODY
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RECEIPT OF BODY AT MORGUE

The body of THON (other name unknown) (Name) was placed in Morgue at 31st Fld Hosp. A. M. P. M. on At 0015 hrs. 24 June 1965 (Date)

Jack H. Pugh
(Signature)

CERTIFICATE OF REMOVAL

The body of THON (other name unknown) (Name) was removed by Mike LaDue (US Embassy Vientiane) (Name and address of undertaker) at Korat A. M. P. M. on 11.00 25 June 65 (Date)

Hereward K. Cal. MC (Signature of person releasing body to undertaker) x Michael R. [Signature] (Signature of representative of undertaker)
US Embassy Vientiane

The following statement shall be completed only when specifically ordered.

PHYSICIAN'S STATEMENT REGARDING CONDITION OF REMAINS AS RELEASED (Describe post-mortem, surface discolorations, abrasions, lesions, incisions, whether remains were embalmed, etc.)

(Signature of physician)

PATIENT'S IDENTIFICATION (For typed or written entries give: Name—Last, first, middle; grade; date; hospital or medical facility)	REGISTER NO.	WARD NO.
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DISPOSITION OF BODY
Standard Form 523a
FPBIC, Japan

Disposition of Body form for Lieutenant Colonel Tong Vonggrassamay. LaDue Collection.

food for the funeral. Taking credit for everything as usual, Pop Buell had both food and the wives delivered to Site-20. ⁵¹

A large crowd of Asians and a few Westerners attended the cremation, including Ambassador William Sullivan. ACP Captain Marius Burke, Flight Mechanic Steve Nichols, and Tom Penniman represented Air America. Tom drank considerable Lao Lao, and accumulated many white wrist strings, which he wore long after the ceremony. Just prior to the cremation, soldiers distributed eight-inch white candles to the people, which were lighted and placed on the eight-foot logs as a sign of respect.

The cremation pyre was assembled in the valley, an area that later became the main market and shops at Sam Tong. During the wet, miserable day, difficulty was encountered igniting the damp wood, and five-gallon containers of kerosene had to be liberally sloshed on the fire. There was a tribal legend and myth that an exalted leader's body never decomposed and was not odoriferous, even after a few days. However, most noted that by the time a three-day Lao funeral was completed one body smelled just as bad as any other. For this reason, Blaine Jensen always stood respectfully in the rear of the crowd.

Following the ceremony, Mike LaDue, Ambassador Sullivan and his accompanying staff boarded Burke's helicopter for the return flight to Vientiane. However, Marius had to turn around twice and circumnavigate because of low clouds and deteriorating weather conditions. Concerned, LaDue thought, "*Geeze, I recently recovered from an aircraft crash in Xieng Khouang. Is this going to be repeated?*"

⁵¹ His assistants acknowledged the many times Buell took credit for things he never performed. Rationalizing, they said, "That was Pop's way."



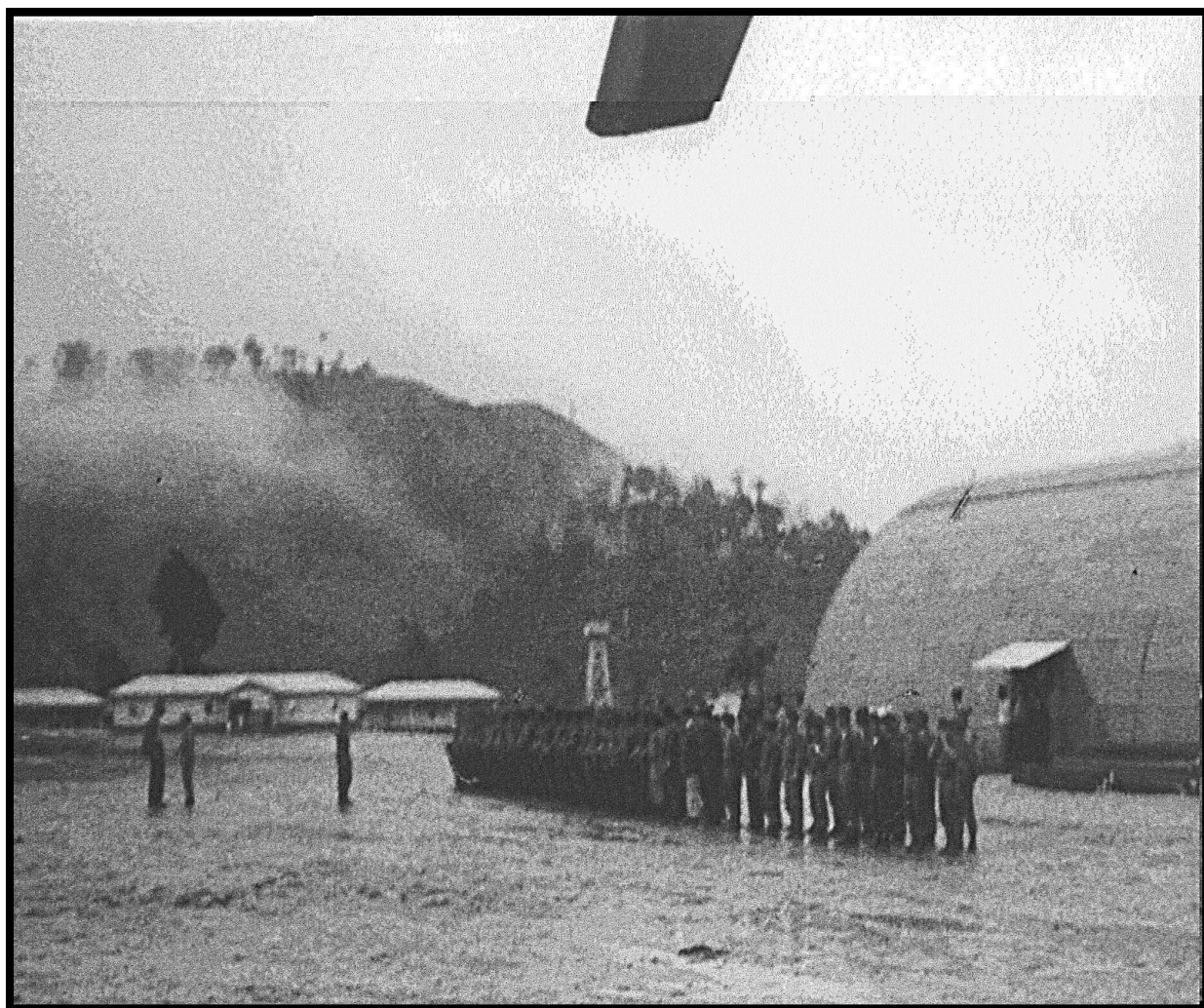
Colonel Tong Vonggrassamy lies in state in the new USAID Quonset-type warehouse at Sam Tong, Laos.

Marius Burke Collection.



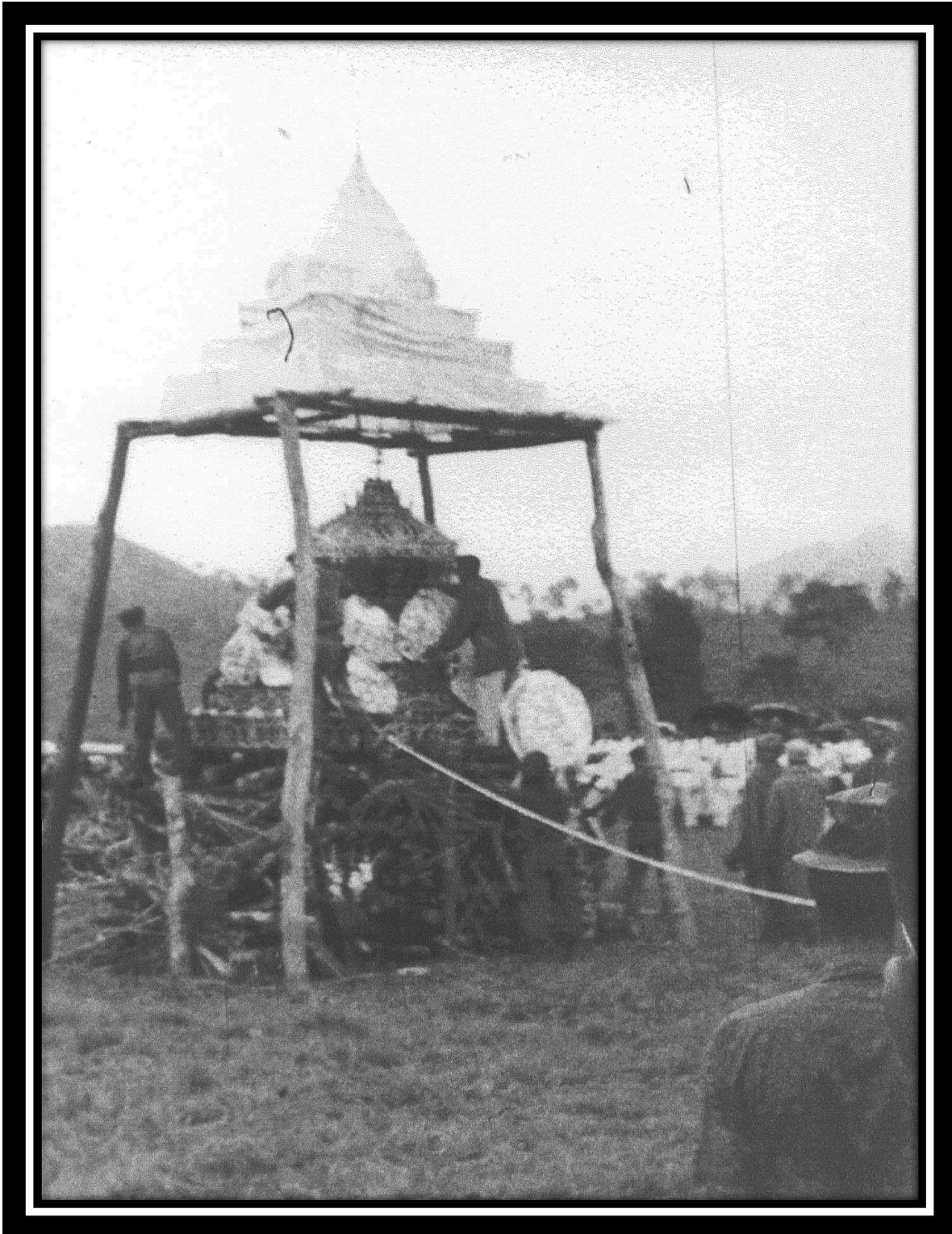
With bloused boots and dressed in fatigues, a Meo honor guard stands guard over Colonel Tong's casket in the Sam Tong AID warehouse.

Burke Collection.



Inclement weather and muddy conditions prevailed during Tong's funeral as Van Pao's honor guard muster in front of the new AID warehouse prior to the cremation ceremonies. A rotor blade of Marius Burke's UH-34D is visible in the upper center.

Burke Collection.



Because of wet conditions, considerable difficulty was encountered lighting Tong's cremation pyre.

Burke Collection.

During a secret ceremony at the embassy, Tong was posthumously awarded a Silver Star that was subsequently presented to his wife.

After Tong's untimely demise, a deep gloom settled over most friendly guerrilla forces in northeastern Laos, especially among Vang Pao and the Americans. Tong's shattering loss was mourned by all of us close to him, particularly his elite troops in the field. The quality force, so sharp in appearance and highly disciplined that he had laboriously created and maintained, faded away until the troops at LS-36 resembled most other rag-tag units. Before long, it was obvious that no one in Laos could quite duplicate his indomitable fighting spirit. One of a kind, he had indeed been an inspiration, a flaming torch of leadership, and living legend, among an assortment of Lao military do nothings. Although some of the Tong legend was based partly on fact, partly attributed to myth cobbled together by a few Americans, he was still respected by friend and foe alike for his alleged exploits. He was the type of courageous leader who, reputedly impervious to enemy fire, led his men over the top, sword bared, shearing heads as he charged toward the objective. Furthermore, in all my contacts with him, he had been a gentleman and most helpful to us aviators.

Tong's passing generally did not greatly affect the FAR or Vientiane General Staff, since they considered him merely a Vang Pao puppet. They viewed Military Region Two operations in Sam Neua as American-inspired and generated-completely out of the realm of their command and control. Their preference was to maintain MR-2 FAR-FAN forces at Vang Vieng and Moung Soui, and not become highly enmeshed in CIA-AID operations. The only reason FAR families were located at Sam Tong was because Moung

Soui had become unsafe and the soldiers could not afford to support them in Vientiane.

It was easy to imagine the joyous enemy celebrations conducted in Sam Neua Town and Hanoi when news of Tong's death circulated. With the communist hating hero eliminated, the friendly forces' resolve to wage war in Sam Neua Province waned, and realizing this, the enemy took steps to exploit the weakness.

Afterward, there was talk upcountry between Pop, Doctor "Jiggs" Weldon, and some of the regulars, that Tong had become increasingly concerned his time on this earth was approaching an end. The more superstitious among us took note, when Pop mentioned that when he was wounded the colonel was not wearing certain special talismans that he always carried to ward off potential evil. ⁵²

HISTORY

While gathering research for this book, I later learned that the Na San area was a site of considerable historic significance during the First Indochina War involving French and Viet Minh forces. In 1952, complying with political and other geopolitical factors, France was challenged to defend friendly tribal groups, such as the T'ai and Meo, allied religious groups, and portions of the ancient Indochinese empire. To protect these people, Hanoi, and the country of Laos south of

⁵² Blaine Jensen Letters, 05/06/97, 08/27/98.
Tom Penniman Email, 02/26/00.
Marius Burke Interview.
Mike LaDue Letter, 03/01/10.
Mike LaDue Email, 03/13/10.
Author's phone conversation with Steve Nichols, 02/02/17.

the [General] De Lattre Line, the French forces created and held a series of remote outposts along the Fan Si Pan Mountain range located between the Red and Black Rivers and the Black River Valley. Southwest of the Black River, a string of French forts stretched from Lai Chau in the northwest through Son La, Na San to Moc Chau in the southwest.

As enemy units attacked and seized parts of Lai Chau and Son La provinces, late in October 1952, to divert the enemy from the Black River region, the French committed to Operation Lorraine. The large offensive effort was calculated to relieve pressure on the northwest region and allow the Na San base blocking Provincial Route-41 to be enlarged, completed, and fortified. Hampered by line of communication (LOC) problems, Lorraine began unwinding by 19 November.

General of what was then known as the Viet Minh National Army, Giap's battle plan was to win indigenous T'ai people to the communist side. He also required Na San and the area around it to form a logistics base to support his projected operations against Laos. With this plan in mind, his troops conquered French forts between the parallel Red and Black Rivers during October 1952. Thereafter, French forces reinforced their garrisons at Lai Chau and Na San.

Located in a valley deep in the bowels of enemy territory, French forces had previously parachuted into the jungle and began developing an outpost and defensive complex at Na San during May 1952. Surrounded by twenty-four hills, the commanding high ground was well suited to contribute to the base's defense. Constituting a portion of the Black River defense line, the strategic fifteen square kilometer strongpoint was eventually fortified and manned by nine complete battalions, five 105mm

howitzer batteries, and an airstrip. Denied road access by the enemy, air drops supplied the entire operation.

During creation of the base, "a hedgehog" type defense was implemented. The concept consisted of outposts surrounded by armed positions tied together with zigzag trench systems and barbed wire. The intention was to induce the enemy into a frontal assault during which time mutual interlocking fire from sharply angling defense positions would decimate enemy ranks. The tactic proved so effective that it was employed until the end of the war.

In November enemy infantry captured Moc Chau. The 308th Division approached Na San by the 23rd. Over confident of victory, 88 Regiment of the 308 Division attacked an outpost that same evening and was repulsed twice by the Franco-Vietnamese troops during heavy fighting.

Attacks continued each night at different strong points to test the French defense system.

Seven days later, early in the evening nine battalions from two Viet Minh regiments vigorously attacked two defensive hard points between the complex's headquarters. After several hours of intensive fighting, the sites were lost. Since the positions were adjacent to the headquarters bunker, the commanding officer ordered a counterattack at dawn on 1 December. Under cover of artillery barrages, airborne troops retook the two positions.

Seeing his initiative dissolving, at 2100 hours, Giap ordered a final massive offensive on Na San. Throughout the night, vicious frontal assaults commenced on several positions. Some outposts endured at least five assaults, but French defenses held. While French planes dropped flares and delivered bombs, howitzers fired into enemy ranks. By mid-morning, the

battle was over. Giap's forces left the immediate field and pulled back from area on the fourth.

Despite incurring severe casualties, Viet Minh attacks were very well planned and executed. Without regard to the brutal loss of life in his ranks, bloody General Giap was determined to eject the French and their allies whatever the cost in human lives. Over 1,500 hundred enemy dead were counted, almost 2,000 wounded prisoners taken and thousands of Vietminh casualties were estimated for the entire operation. The French forces lost the equivalent of two battalions.

Although the French loudly trumpeted their successful defense of Na San as an important victory, an evaluation team from U.S. CINCPAC headquarters, present during the fighting, reported the battle inconclusive. Their after-action findings were judged on the basis of French numerical superiority, lines of communications, and command of the air. They were particularly unimpressed that the French command had waited until the enemy assembled their forces and attacked in force instead of taking the battle to the enemy.

Giap withdrew from the immediate battlefield, but ordered sizable forces north to seal off the vicinity of Na San.

In early December, Giap's forces bypassed French strong points and moved into Laos, where they overran several weak positions along the border. Their ultimate objective was to capture Sam Neua, but corvee labor disappeared, and failure to supply his troops caused Giap to recall his men by late December.

Because of the French people's rumbling and lack of support for the war, the government was looking for ways to depart Indochina. Therefore, before Giap could mount yet another massive attack, French commanders, realizing that Na San,

sustained only by constant airdrop, was untenable long term, began air evacuation by 8 August. Over a period of several weeks, the garrison was subsequently reduced from 12,000 to 5,000 men. Evacuations continued until only one battalion remained. This feat occurred without enemy knowledge, and without incurring a casualty.

The successful action at Na San had far reaching consequences for future French efforts in Indochina. Contempt for the Asian enemy, Na San's overwhelming success, and other minor successes at Luang Prabang and the Plain of Jars camp at the Xieng Khouang airstrip, clouded French military planners' judgment. They unwisely concluded that a large fortified offensive base camp could be established deep in enemy territory, entirely supplied by air and, made invulnerable to enemy attack. They believed fortified airheads could be held, and if necessary, evacuated without serious losses. The flawed concept failed to grasp General Giap's ruthless modus operandi in matters of war, or to appreciate his persistence in prosecuting a goal and complete disregard for human life while pursuing military objectives.

Architect of the Dien Bien Phu operation French General Navarre calculated that a similar, but much expanded set piece battle could be staged and won on the valley floor of that historic stage.⁵³ The general erroneously believed that a conclusion to the long war might even be the end result. This proved the case, but not in the manner the general had envisioned. Ironically, during the ensuing bloody battle, it was

⁵³ Dien is translated as big; Bien as frontier. Therefore, Dien Bien Phu was equivalent to the big administrative center on the frontier.

not Vietnamese and indigenous troop slaughter, but that of French forces that contributed to the war's conclusion in 1954.⁵⁴

THAILAND INSURGENCY

Insurgency conditions in Thailand were a little disturbing. By mid-1965, communist-led rebels and patriotic leaders in Thailand were actively pursuing Mao Tse-tung's teachings for a revolutionary seizure of power. This included forming an army and command and control organizations in isolated base areas calculated to wage a military and political war against the central government.

A paper filed by the U.S. State Department Officer in Charge of Thailand Affairs, Laurence Pickering, aptly described Thailand mid-year conditions. During a 3 to 20 June trip by Helio Courier, he visited Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Udorn, Nakhon Phanom Ubon, Roi Et, and Korat. During this period, he met with provincial governors, Americans, senior Thai officials in Bangkok and all senior officers in the U.S. mission.

Pickering had previously gained extensive experience in Thailand and was well suited to comment about current affairs. He observed that the communists were active in northeast Thailand, but the situation was not that intensive yet. Still, the assassination of a village leader in Nakhon Phanom where a rural development project (ADR) was located occurred one day before General Praphat visited.

⁵⁴ Ronald Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years of the United States Army in Vietnam 1941-1960* (New York: The Free Press), 159.

Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975*.

Roy, Jules, *The Battle of Dien Bien Phu* (NY: Harper and Row, 1965).

USG investment in roads, particularly the lengthy Friendship Highway running between Bangkok and Non Khai, had joined the northeast (Isan) to the rest of the country. Even the more remote Roi Et town benefitted. As a direct result of these improved roads, and a long period of political and economic stability, the economic advantage to the average Isan villager had increased measurably in recent years.

Mobile Development Unit (MDU) work produced tangible results, and the Rural Development (ADR) program was reaching a point where it would begin to display success. Such projects were underway in six provinces, with five additional ones projected to begin during the next dry season. The main emphasis would concentrate on road development. Pickering did note a lack of coordination between the ADR and MDU programs.

After years of neglect from Bangkok, even though uneasy over the scope of commitment to the U.S, Thai leaders recognized the extent of the problem and evidenced a willingness to undertake reforms to rectify this deficiency. Already, there was total agreement to delegate authority and budgeting to provincial governors for ADR programs. Furthermore, in Nakhon Phanom Province, a tough, effective governor had been assigned with authority over security forces. The basis for needed reforms extended to the Thai National Police, which the U.S. mission was handling. It was also deemed that Thailand was ready for similar reforms in the armed forces and civil bureaucracy.

Pickering had first visited Udorn during March 1961 to assess the Joint Chiefs of Staff plan to commit 300 Okinawa-based Marines from MABS-26 for a helicopter support unit to service Air America, Inc. helicopters. There were only seven Americans, mostly missionaries, living in town at the time, and considerable discussion regarding the impact this influx of men

would have on the area economy and culture ensued. Since then, the effect of the U.S. military buildup in the northeast had been substantial, with Americans numbering almost 1,500. Larger numbers resided at Ubon and Korat, also 200 at Nakhon Phanom.⁵⁵

Because of substantial air activity in and out of Thailand, and since almost all the raids on North Vietnam emanated from Thai bases, the U.S. presence was felt throughout the region. Over the following year, as the aircraft build-up accelerated and air activity increased, Pickering believed that the Thai government would receive complaints from communist countries that would present problems of a political nature in the country. Also, the local economies would prosper for some of the more affluent, but rampant inflation was sure to anger the poorer residents.

There was a distinct danger that during the American build-up, only beginning with increased construction, staff augmentation, and aircraft, the Thai armed forces, especially the RTAF, would be relegated to a position of insignificance. Senior American leaders commented regarding the outstanding contribution that Thai T-28 pilots were making during the first effective use of air power in Laos. Therefore, a good working relationship between the U.S. and Thai had to be maintained.

With a 1965 fiscal year Military Assistance Program supplemental budget under review by Washington agencies, Secretary McNamara insisted that the RLG focus on effective counterinsurgency methods and develop a balanced military. Against this end, MAP funds were increased to pay for battalion posts located in Muang Nan and Sakon Nakhon Provinces.

⁵⁵ Over 24,000 Americans resided in Thailand.

Monies had been approved for the Kabinburi-Korat road, the Korat POL tank farm, and the Ban Sattahip port on the lower Siam gulf. The millions involved would provide a dual-purpose civilian-military use, and influence the Thai as to USG commitment in Southeast Asia.

With assurances that the RTG was rapidly proceeding in a positive direction specified by the Defense Secretary, consideration of increased 1966 funding for projects requested by Ambassador Martin could move forward. He cited a recent commitment to reorganize the Thai police system, and believed the Thai were receptive to reform and modernization of the previous sacrosanct organizations. After addressing the police, the military could be next. ⁵⁶

BEN MOORE'S PLANS

By month's end, Ben Moore noted in his monthly report to Taipei that the rainy season had begun with a vengeance. However, it provided some relief to the water shortage always encountered during the dry season.

⁵⁶ Segment sources:

Thai-Chinese Communist Relations, 04/09/68, 5-6, (foia,ucia.gov/scripts/cgise).

Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Bundy) to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), 298, 07/05/65, Attachment, Paper Prepared by the Officer in Charge of Thailand Affairs (Laurence Pickering), 06/28/65, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume 27, Mainland Southeast Asia.

Regional Affairs (Department of State, Washington, DC).

For Additional Information Regarding MDU Activity in Northeast Thailand and the Author's Participation, see Book Three.

Letter McNaughton to Bundy, Military Assistance Program Thailand, FRUS 1965, Thailand, 06/04/65.

Under Jack Forney's apt tutelage, helicopter maintenance showed slow improvement in producing airworthy aircraft for the field.

Ben then transmitted his thoughts to the head shed regarding facility planning:

"The expansion of this facility has not kept pace with the requirements, mostly due to waiting for requirements to become firm before taking action. The result has been a continuous "crash" effort to catch up with increasing requirements which are dumped on us before proper preparations are made. It would appear that all interested parties should make a cold, hard evaluation of the existing and probably future situation, and take action accordingly to get moving now on these future needs as they are likely to develop at least two years from the present. Some folks who have advocated such a course are getting a little tired of being on the receiving end of jibes..."

Having gotten that off his chest, Ben continued about an imminent building program planned to add or augment badly required facilities to the Air America compound. One would include a new administration-operations building. As usual, work would commence during the rainy season. ⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Ben Moore, June 1965 Monthly Report.

Tuie and I purchased tickets on the overnight train to Bangkok for a needed rest away from the escalating shot pattern, and all the bad memories associated with the Briggs SAR. We spent three nights at the Suriwongse Hotel, close to the Air America office and money changer on Patpong Road. The place was far from being rated as a four-star hotel, but at the very economical rate of a hundred baht per day, many Air America personnel preferred it to the more expensive Plaza. We ate some very good food at the Keynote Club and other dining establishments on Patpong Road. One evening, we went to the movie district across town and watched *My Fair Lady* on a wide-angle screen. ¹

On Thursday, 1 July, I hired a taxi to take us to the Gulf resort town of Pattaya, on the eastern Thai peninsula. Originally a fishing village, Pattaya had become an unspoiled, favorite weekend location for Bangkok Thais. Similarly, since Americans arrived, during time off, they also gravitated there to swim, water ski, boat, skin dive, and enjoy all the benefits of a beach lifestyle. Before leaving Udorn, Lou McCasland had informed me that he and Joan would be in Pattaya at a duplex they normally rented for 150 baht per day. Consisting of a two-duplex complex, the owners rarely used the place during the hot season, preferring the cooler months. He also indicated that Billy and Molly Zeitler would be leaving and the unit next to them empty on the first.

¹ We enjoyed the movie immensely and today still view videos of the classic film.

Our duplex was not large, but adequate. Bedrooms were located on the second story with a small kitchen and a hibachi cooking pot on the ground level. Other than being located directly on the Gulf of Siam, what really created a unique ambiance to the place was the large, tree-shaded flagstone patio, where one could relax without enduring the hubbub of human activity. It was exactly what I needed, a place to rest and suck up Singha beer, while listening to soothing Gulf waves lap the lower portion of the rock retaining wall. The owners provided a local gal, Da, as a maid who, for a nominal sum, made up the beds, shopped, and generally looked after both the renters' and owners' interests.

Bill Zeitler, Jack Connor, Scratch Kanach, Ed Reid, and some other pilots had purchased shares in a large Thai fishing boat equipped with a diesel engine. It was overseen by "Louie," a Thai boy, who lived nearby, and acted as a coordinator and translator for us. Louie's older brother, a fisherman by trade, was assigned as custodian and driver for the owners. He was allowed to use the boat when none of the principals were in town. Lou and I went out and bottom fished that morning, but failed to catch anything significant. It really did not matter, for seafood was abundant at the market. That afternoon, for two baht, Da rode the "Baht Bus" to the afternoon market and

purchased shrimp that Joan fried for supper. ²

Lou and Joan departed the following morning. They were replaced by Scratch Kanach and his latest honey, Pien, who lived in Chet's compound. We water skied and swam. In contrast to rainy, overcast conditions in Udorn, Gulf weather was excellent and I began feeling like a human being again.

We were alone at last and had the complex and, except for a few local natives, virtually the entire beach to ourselves. Bangkok folks normally arrived on the weekend, but rarely on weekdays. Set in a pristine backdrop of palm trees, the clean, white beaches were a thing of beauty, although not quite as breathtaking as those I had encountered and enjoyed in Pensacola, Florida. In 1965, everything appeared unsullied by man's nasty, contaminating hand. One morning we rented ponies and, guided by the youthful handler, wound our way through the King's hill preserve area south of the village.

Sated with seafood and solitude, our few days at the beach house were ending and we planned a return to Bangkok about 1000 o'clock Wednesday morning to beat the heat of the day and increasingly difficult traffic. Having business in Bangkok, Da and another maid working the other duplex asked to ride along with us. Da would arrange to hire the taxi.

²The boat arrangement lasted for some time and was enormous fun. Then it became a liability, as greed, or the Thai way assumed greater proportions. The fisherman began fishing all night and, depending on the catch, sometimes for two days. At times when the owners arrived anxious to fish, the boat was absent, or the caretaker was sleeping and not available to take them out. This process continued, with abundant excuses and much rationalization from the English-speaking Louie. However, it eventually became apparent that the guy simply came to believe the boat belonged to him. Finally, we were informed that the boat sank. Actually, he had sold it to someone in town and fled the scene.

Arising early, I elected to do a little boating for a couple of hours. Confident of my seamanship derived from Dick Elder's sailing lessons on his steel hulled boat, I rented a small single mast Sailfish. The boat was so puny that I judged anyone could sail it. The one masted, flat-decked vessel had a wooden centerboard keel to help stabilize it. The weather was perfect and winds were light. We launched, and I began maneuvering along the shoreline. I was doing fine, when I decided to come about before straying too far from our starting point. Naturally, I turned the wrong way, which resulted in the light boat doing a slow roll. When the craft was completely inverted, I pushed Tuie up onto its bottom. Then I hyperventilated, dove underneath, and collapsed the sail. After surfacing and catching a breath, I dove down again and slid the cumbersome centerboard from its slot, intending to use it to paddle to shore. As luck would have it, the tide was running offshore, and I made absolutely no headway in the direction of land. All I accomplished was to wear myself out. About the time I despaired of ever reaching shore, and feared that we would drift farther out to sea where we might perish, the boatman from whom I had rented water ski services and the Sailfish arrived, and towed us to the beach, where Da and the taxi driver waited. When I asked how he knew we were having trouble, he said that when we did not return to the duplex at the departure time, Da arrived and inquired about us. A hasty search of the horizon revealed the upturned boat and the pathetic crew. Having lost much face that morning, the embarrassing incident marked the end of my sailing career.

That day I cashed a check at the moneychanger for 250 dollars to cover vacation expenses and those in Udorn. The extended time off was just what I had needed to clear my head. I

felt good both physically and mentally, and was ready to return for another round of Southeast Asian war games.

CONTINENTAL AIR SERVICES, INC.

In 1958, former Marine aviator and Chennault Flying Tiger hand in China, RL "Dutch" Brongersma, who later flew hazardous missions with other Civil Air Transport pilots over the unfriendly skies of Dien Bien Phu, obtained several old civil aircraft (mostly C-46s) and offered their services for hire to the Lao government flying rice into the mountains. The operation prospered, but required additional financing. William Bird actively engaged in Southeast Asian construction projects, envisioning profit in such an air operation, became the owner of Bird and Son. Like Air America, the company did not publicize its work to the world. USAID and other USG agencies welcomed the outfit as a politically overt competitor to Air America and a means of receiving lower cost bids during government airlift contract negotiations. ³

A man by the name of Boyd became quite wealthy during the Cape Canaveral operations and later entered aviation as an owner of World Airways, which enjoyed a profitable trans-Pacific military supply contract (MATS) with routes to Okinawa. Robert Six, domestic Continental Airlines owner, harbored aspirations to acquire international routes to Hawaii and Japan, but was rejected by FAA officials because the airline and Bob Six possessed no international experience. To overcome this

³ The smoke and mirrors aspect of this process was encouraged by the Agency as it tended to partially obscure Air America's clandestine operations.

deficiency, Six proposed to buy World Airways, which Boyd subsequently turned down.

In passing, former Air America VPFO, Robert Rousselot, mentioned to Six that Bill Bird owned a small operation in Laos and he might consider selling his company for the right price. Consequently, Six along with his movie star wife, Audrey Meadows, arrived in Bangkok and journeyed to Vientiane to view the operation and talk to Bird about the possibility of selling his business. To smooth the way, they were entertained by the very smooth-talking Jack Leister, a former Marine Corps helicopter squadron mate of CJ Abadie and Charlie Weitz. He had been in Southeast Asia as long as the other two men, but had chosen management slots in both Air America and Bird in lieu of flying, and knew the turf well.

After examination of Bird assets and much conversation, Six informed Bird that he desired to purchase the Vientiane operation. He stressed that everyone involved would benefit. By concluding such a purchase, Six would obtain coveted international experience through the backdoor to qualify for FAA approval for trans-Pacific Continental routes. Bird would exit the transaction with funds to plough back into his equipment and construction enterprise. Bird agreed to the sale, but when Six inquired as to how much he wanted for the enterprise, Bird had little idea how to appraise its total worth. Bird later informed William MacCormick that he looked at a Wall Street Journal for the current price of Continental stock. He calculated it sold for six times book value. Therefore, Bill requested his accountant provide him a realistic figure for Bird and Son company book value, which he then multiplied by a factor of six. To Robert Six, the amount calculated of over four million dollars, compared to the benefits and potential it would

provide, constituted merely petty cash. Therefore, the transaction was completed and Bird and Son became Continental Air Services, Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of Continental Airlines.

The package included a mix of twenty-two former Bird planes, hangar space at Wattay Airport, and a luxurious crew compound with a swimming pool outside the airport gate. The new company officially became Continental Air Services, Inc. (CASI) by 28 August.

It was likely that Bill Bird really did not need the money, and was tired of the responsibility of owning an ersatz airline. In addition, although he had funded his company with a small amount in the beginning, he made a tidy sum in the final transaction. Moreover, although profitable from USAID contracts, problems abounded, for Bird's organization endured considerable litigation from many pilot error accidents and shoot downs. In July, four of the latest Pratt and Whitney PC-6C turbine engine Pilatus Porters had crashed.

Before and during the purchasing process many rumors regarding the transaction assailed our ears. One was that Pierre Salinger, a chief spokesman in the Kennedy administration, then working for Continental, had formerly gained access to all the particulars of the Lao war and had been somewhat instrumental in touting the new South Pacific route for Continental, the purchase of Bird, and later obtaining AID contracts. Like all rumor, this unsubstantiated information was probably half-truth.

Bob Rousselot had originally been offered the presidency of World Airways, but new Bird owner, Robert Six, sweetened the World offer and lured former Air America VPFO Rouss out of retirement in Oklahoma to run CASI, as it became known. Long a Bird employee, Dutch Brongersma was named General Manager.

Intent on taking business away from Air America, Rouss soon hired Ed Dearborn as Chief Pilot, plus Larry Joseph, and any other key warm bodies or pilots he could persuade to leave Air America.

Tony Poe, after returning from his extended convalescent leave, predicted that the company was going to earn millions from USAID contracts, and advised us to purchase the security for rapid appreciation. By the time I wrote home regarding the stock purchase, the price had advanced a bit, but I still asked Dad to research it for me, with the aid of Thompson McKinnon Customer Man, Gordon Fuller, who was married to Dad's cousin. Then if he thought it financially sound and worthy, I requested he purchase one hundred shares. Since the price had increased in the interim, a purchase was never accomplished. ⁴

KUALA LUMPUR

Wayne Knight received a rare, but highly encouraging letter from Jim Coble in Kuala Lumpur stating that the Concrete Masonry block factory was beginning production. The missive gushed about the Malaysian government ordering 50,000 blocks with the potential of ordering millions more. Apparently, two billion dollars was going to be allocated over the next five years to erect low-income housing projects. Such a contract would keep our one Besser machine busy for four years. Based on the good prospects in KL, Jim wanted to erect a similar plant in Johore State to service that and the Singapore area. Coble also

⁴ Ken Conboy, 130.
Aviation Daily, 03/07/67.
Tom Penniman Email Through William MacCormick, 05/01/00.
Ted Shackley *Spymaster: My life in the CIA*, (Virginia: Potomac Books, 2005) 177-178.

indicated he that was besieged with offers to invest in Asian American Company.

New Era, the waste oil refining company, in which I was an absentee director, had not started operating yet, but was expected to within a month. And there were other projects Asian American and AMCOR were pursuing.

At long last, after several delays, the seemingly snake-bitten Kuala Lumpur project looked promising, and might provide jobs for some of us there one day. Of course, that was predicated on the success of the business, how long I could stand my job, and how much I could save for a future "grub stake." It looked so promising that I planned to visit the facility.

Back in Laos, with RLAF and Thai B Team T-28 pilots leading the way, and USAF Whiplash and Bango alert close air "support," rainy season offenses commenced near Sam Neua in Military Region Two, around Attopeu in Military Region Four, and north of Dong Hene in Military Region Three.

As of 1 July, over 18,000 North Vietnamese Army personnel were believed to be in Laos. As stiffeners, over 4,500 Vietnamese regulars were attached to Pathet Lao battalions in platoon to company strength. Seven hundred additional Vietnamese were integrated into Pathet Lao battalions as advisors. The rest included engineers, coolies, and those providing medical, supply, transportation, signal, and command support activities. ⁵

⁵ John Pratt, *CHECO-The Royal Lao Air Force*, 27.
CIA, Estimate of the North Vietnamese Order of Battle.

RITAVILLE SAR

Upcountry SAR work continued unabated for Air America crews. On the third, Tom Hoppe and Sam Jordon were flying together in the Vang Vieng area when they heard a USAF pilot from the 563 Tactical Fighter Squadron based at Takhli announce over guard frequency that he was heading south to Udorn in an F-105D (series number 62-43298). The plane had engine damage, a low fuel state, and the pilot assessed that the aircraft was coming apart. Nearing Ritaville Ridge, pilot K. Johnson ejected. Since the area was quasi friendly and located fairly close to our normal work areas, all available aircraft quickly converged on the scene while the pilot discharged pen flares through the jungle canopy.

An Air Force helicopter from Udorn was reported inbound, but Herb Baker, hurrying to reach the pilot first, began the delicate process of extracting him. The yellow horse collar was lowered through tall trees. Johnson managed to enter the rescue device, but halfway up the tree, his parachute harness became tangled in the chute and tree limbs. Determined and feeling pressure to rescue the man before a military helicopter arrived on scene, Herb struggled to free Johnson, and in the process, he jerked him around a bit. The more Baker attempted to bring him up, the more the pilot became entangled in branches. Finally, he passed out, either from the delayed shock of ejection, injuries, or the tree hugging exercise.

Herb persisted in his quest, but to no avail. Hovering continuously between 2700 and 2800 RPM (there was a five-minute limit at 2800), he was burning gasoline at an alarming rate of 800 pounds an hour, and quickly depleting his fuel supply. He would soon be required to make a decision to continue with the rescue attempt or leave. Finally, with the hoist cable

irretrievably entangled in branches and unable to break free, low on fuel, and simply out of ideas, Baker told the Flight Mechanic to sever the cable. The mechanic activated the guillotine switch, but nothing happened. The system was effectively deactivated, as the shotgun shell had never been installed. When all else failed, the mechanic rummaged in his tool box and extracted bolt cutters. Then he feverishly began to cut the cable before the helicopter exhausted all fuel, or Herb burned up the engine. With this accomplished, Baker was free to RTB. ⁶

The Air Force HH-43 helicopter arrived with all the proper rescue gear plus an extra crewmember descend on the hoist and assist the pilot. The trained crew managed a successful rescue.

Later, Baker's Flight Mechanic visited Wayne Knight's office to complain about his Captain's flying, and informed the CPH about the dangerous rescue attempt. He mentioned that in Herb's haste to extract the pilot before the Air Force helicopter crew arrived, he feared for the downed pilot's life. It would not be the only time Flight Mechanics complained about Baker. But no action was ever taken. ⁷

⁶After the fact, a spirited debate ensued between Operations and the Maintenance Department about installing guillotine cartridges. Because of premature and accidental activations, the shells had originally been removed in the Corps. Air America had none. Moreover, there was reluctance to arm the system, as it was expensive, and there was concern over an accidental firing with someone on the hoist. I had learned about the absence of a charge in November 1964 the hard way while slinging a H-34 fuselage to Sam Tong. To my knowledge, the system was never activated.

⁷ Tom Hoppe Account, Written Summer 1996.
Laos Incident List 1960-1969, 05/01/02, 7,
(<http://www.angelfire.com/home/laoslist/cr60.html>).
EW Knight Emails, 07/13/00, 07/14/00, 08/23/00.

THE JOLLY GREEN GIANT

Starting in July, new and improved USAF SAR efforts in the Theater were beginning to kick into high gear. To enhance coordination, Detachment 3, Pacific Air Rescue Center became the 38th Air Rescue Squadron charged with the mission of running the Joint Search and Rescue Center (JSRC) embedded in the Air Operations Center at Tan Son Nhut, South Vietnam.

In operation since 1962, the JSRC was responsible for rescue operations within the Bangkok-Saigon regions. In addition, the unit was accorded coordination control for rescue activities in South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and most of North Vietnam. The Seventh Fleet assumed control of SAR in the Gulf off of North Vietnam. Acting as liaison, Da Nang and Udorn rescue control centers adopted regional responsibilities.

The Udorn Rescue Control Center was responsible for coordinating SARs in northern Thailand, North Vietnam, and Laos when requested by Ambassador Sullivan. Special political realities relating to SAR work were involved in Laos. Therefore, problems were resolved and guidelines established in ongoing meetings by representatives of the Royal Lao Government, the U.S. Ambassador, the Deputy Commander, 2nd Air Division/13th Air Force at Udorn, CIA representatives, and the commander of the 2nd Air Division.

On 2 July, Tactical Air Warfare Center, Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, loaned the Air Rescue Service (ARS) two combat-modified CH-3C helicopters. The ships arrived at Nakhon Phanom on the sixth and were assigned to Detachment One of the 38th Air Rescue Squadron.

Original CH-3 models were manufactured by Sikorsky at Stratford, Connecticut, with the first flight occurring in March 1959. Like many Navy aircraft adopted by the USAF, the

helicopter was first developed for antisubmarine warfare and designated Sea King. By June 1963, the Air Force was flying the CH-3C with a redesigned fuselage, rear cargo ramp, and tricycle landing gear.

During July 1964, leaders in the 4488th Test Squadron of the 4485 Test Wing elected to have cargo model CH-3s painted a green and tan camouflage color. They were flown to Pensacola Naval Air Station from Eglin Air Force Base to effect this change. Upon return to Eglin, one of mechanics standing on the parking ramp stated, "*Look, it is the Jolly Green Giant.*"

With the demand for more adequate combat rescue helicopters to supplement or replace the unsuitable HH-43s, and perform a job Air America was not deemed properly equipped for or considered politically feasible to perform, the cargo ships had been hurriedly converted for combat status. To provide substantially more range than HH-43 models, the fix incorporated a large fiberglass fuel tank firmly secured to the cargo compartment deck. A four-to six-man crew was protected by armor, and the machine could carry more weight. Guns at side ports afforded the ability to suppress enemy small arms fire. The retrofit was envisioned as only temporary while Sikorsky manufactured a hundred percent capable SAR helicopter that was specifically designed for combat missions.

During the first week in July 1965, Captains Fred Liebert, George Martin, James Stambaugh, David King, and maintenance support personnel were sent TDY and arrived at Nakhon Phanom to crew a brace of CH-3 aircraft and begin rescue operations in Laos and North Vietnam. It really marked the commencement of serious and sustained USAF SAR participation in Southeast Asia with adequate equipment. When the crews were canvassed to select a call sign, to a man they agreed on Jolly Green. Unlike

fighter-bomber missions which used different call signs daily, because the enemy was aware that a helicopter crew would attempt to rescue a downed pilot, there was no logic in assigning different call signs. The nomenclature stuck, and Jolly Green forever became the watchword for USAF SAR units.

Prior to their arrival in Southeast Asia, the CH-3s had been first authorized for SAR work in North Vietnam. However, because of Ambassador Sullivan's June request to increase Air America UH-34Ds inventory to twenty-six for SAR missions, there was interest by the U.S. Army representative assigned to DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to hasten introduction of the Air Force helicopters in Military Region Two.

Meetings were conducted at Udorn and Vientiane to consider the proposed concept to employ Air Force helicopters in Military Region Two. Except for Sullivan, who purportedly admired Air America personnel and their outstanding SAR success, his Embassy Country Team agreed with the military regarding using Air Force helicopters in Laos.

Memorandums regarding using and staging USAF-marked helicopters for SAR operations in Laos in lieu of Air America's assets flowed through the chain of command. They generally stated that Air Force SAR resources in Thailand for use in Laos totaled two H-43s and Ch-3s at NKP, and one H-43 at Udorn. CH-3s currently used in SAR operations in South Vietnam could be transferred to Thailand.

Turbine engine fuel (refined kerosene with additives) for the H-43 and CH-3Cs was prepositioned at dispersed forward sites of Na Khang, Moug Moc, and Houei Ma. The risk of exposure from the media was considered remote during fueling operations, for the sites were isolated, and well off the path of ordinary people. Lima Site-36 was well defended and logistically equipped

for USAF helicopters and crews to permanently stage there. For the first time, deviating from the policy of having all USAF helicopters and crews out of Laos before nightfall, Emory Swank, Sullivan's deputy and author of one message, proposed repositioning two Ch-3s at Na Khang on a quasi-permanent basis. His outline further specified that crews could be rotated weekly to Thailand or some other base. The forward base in upper Military Region Two would afford the CH-3s good reaction time to launch for SAR missions in central and eastern Laos, and in the western and northern DVR. Accommodations to feed and house Air Force crews and a small maintenance team could be accomplished. An Air America pilot familiar with the terrain would be stationed at LS-36 to act as a navigator on SAR missions until Air Force pilots were confident in flying in the area.

It was noted that SAR operations in the Panhandle area created fewer demands on assets than northern Laos. Since the authorization had been issued to use USAF helicopters for in-country SARs, AIRA proposed utilizing H-43s or CH-3s when more than two were available at NKP. On that basis, UH-34D pilots would no longer be required to standby on the ground for SAR operations, but allowed to work for USAID and other priority airlift missions. Air America would be engaged only when closer to a downed aircraft than USAF helicopters, or when unforeseen circumstances dictated their use.

USAF helicopters had already been employed in Laos during two SARs. ⁸ No problem was envisioned in gaining Souvanna Phouma's authorization. If the rule change was properly explained to him, it would stress improving the effectiveness of

⁸ The latest was during the 3 July Herb Baker fiasco.

the overall SAR operation in the face of increased air strikes against the Pathet Lao and DVR.

By 5 August, Washington leaders supported a decision that politics dictated that Air America helicopter crewmembers continue all SAR work in the Barrel Roll area and in Laos. Thailand-based Air Force helicopters would be employed solely for North Vietnam SARs, and were authorized to stand alert duty at Na Khang. However, there were always "Catch-22" allowances for extenuating and mitigating circumstances when pilots' lives were at stake. When there was no other option available in Lao territory to rescue a downed American pilot, quaintly called "in extremis" with a sly wink-wink, the Department of Defense sanctioned use of Air Force helicopters. Stand-by at Lima Sites-107 or 46 was not authorized, and the sites would only be used for refueling. At that time, no crewmember or Air Force aircraft were permitted to overnight in Laos. ⁹

This policy was modified toward the end of August when foul weather prevented Air Force crews from launching from NKP to attempt rescue of an F-105 pilot. Therefore, given adequate security at Na Khang, RONS there were approved. ¹⁰

⁹ Top secret joint State/ Defense Department telegram to the U.S. Embassy Vientiane, SAR in Laos, dated 08/05/65. In addition to other agencies, routing was authorized to Bangkok, Saigon Embassies, and CINCPAC

¹⁰ Segment Sources:
Earl Tilford, 69, 73-74.
Jerry Jennings, Origins of the Name "Jolly Green Giants"
(http://www.jollygreen.org/Stories/origins_of_the_name_jolly_green_giant.htm).
Air Force Magazine.
Embassy Vientiane, 07/06/65.
Victor Anthony, 176, 178, 179.
John Smith, *Rolling Thunder*, 289.

TOP SECRET

HR70-14

APPROVED FOR
RELEASE DATE:

OUTGOING TELEGRAM Department of State 02319

INDICATE: COLLECT
 CHARGE TO

TS# 721 ~~TOP SECRET~~

85
Origin
55
Info

ACTION: AmEmbassy VIENTIANE 92
INFO: AmEmbassy BANGKOK 206
 SAIGON 338
CINCPAC

AUG 5 4 07 PM '65

JOINT STATE/DEFENSE MESSAGE

LIMDIS

Cable Sec
LIMDIS Embtel 94; Deptel 56

Routing SAR in Laos

1
DDI-3
D/DC-1
D/ONE-5
LDDP-6

7-9
10

11

1. Political factors require that Air America helicopters continue to assume responsibility for all SAR operations in Laos.

2. For SAR missions in North Vietnam, Thailand-based USAF-marked helicopters are to be used and for this purpose may be, if necessary, prepositioned on ground in Laos at Site 36 as required for scheduled Rolling Thunder operations, and may at your discretion be authorized to refuel at Sites 46 and 107.

3. USAF-marked aircraft and associated personnel are not authorized to remain over night at Site 36 or elsewhere in Laos.

4. CINCPAC's proposal at your request for increasing helicopter UE to 21 being considered by JCS and will be subject of septel. For temporary period only pending resolution of this matter, Thailand-based USAF-marked helicopters may be used in

Drafted by: FE:SEA:RFS:slutz, Jr.:ew 8/4/ 5 Telegraphic transmission and classification approved by: FE - Leonard Unger

Clearance: FE-SEA - Mr. Barbis OASDRR/ISA: Adm. Blouin #11
 Mr. Trueheart (JS-J3 - Adm. Mustin)
 Mr. Pickering
L/FE - Mr. Frank Aldrich TOP SECRET
FE - Mr. Cowhard

FORM DS-322

State Department message (paragraph one) certifying Air America's role in SAR work in Laos. The duty continued throughout the entire war.

HIRING

With the advent of additional work in all areas of Laos, and extra equipment entering the system, in 1965 Air America hired 303 pilots for all flying programs. From June 1965 through November, over 200 new pilots arrived in Southeast Asia. The middle months constituted the heaviest influx of helicopter pilots. A few men entering the system, not in any order of hiring and including some mentioned earlier were: Bob Hitchman (01/10/65), Herb Baker (a returnee, 04/01/65), Harold "Swede" Larson (04/06/65), Charlie Davis, Jim Brown, Tom Pitkin, Orville Robbie Robertson (04/15/65), Herb Baker (04/01/65), Tom Hoppe, Jim Williams, Ed Hall, Frank Stergar (03/04/65), John Fonburg (06/01/65), George Carroll, Larry Wilderom (06/20/65), Jack Barnheisel (06/01/65), Carlson, Tony Byrne (08/08/65), Mike Jarina (07/08/65), Bob Mitchell (left and rehired 06/24/70), Chuck Eckerle, Ron Dubinsky (c08/65; left and rehired 06/15/70), Verne Clarkson, Lloyd Higgins (09/05/65), Dick Lieberth, John Tarn, Wayne Webb (04/13/65), Roy Hickman (c 04/13/65), Mayville, John Grassi (07/65), Mick Prulhiere (10/13/65), "Pogo" Hunter (10/14/65), Bill Wilmot (c Oct), Nelson, Al Rose, Voss, Jim Hastings, Alex Nadalini, and Ed Rudolfs (10/13/65).

There were others, like Carlson, who made brief appearances with the Company but, for their own reasons, or because of deficient proficiency, did not remain long. Like a revolving door, some individuals terminated for personal reasons and were later rehired.

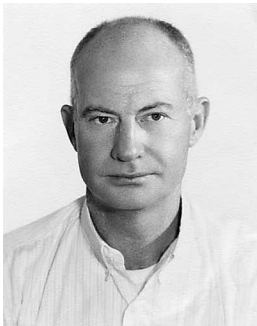
From the CPH's perspective, the pace of events in 1965 in the H-34 program was unbelievable. Work generally required Wayne Knight's daily presence at the airfield from 0430 until 1900 or 2000 hours, juggling SAR and normal work. At times there were



John Fonburg



Mick Prulhiere



Lloyd Higgins



Mike Jarina

Four of many helicopter pilots hired by Air America in 1965.

several emergencies occurring upcountry at once. There were sometimes twenty-one new hires present requiring some form of processing, training, or upgrading. Individuals working in the CPH office flew all the test flights, which often required over twenty flights per day. Many of these maintenance flights were combined with new hire acceptance rides or training.

Of course, for ease of cycling new Captains into the field, Wayne, who had been totally unimpressed by the previous influx of senior citizens, preferred the Washington office personnel to hire younger pilots with H-34 experience. However, "Red" Dawson indicated that recruiting pilots for Southeast Asia duty was not like turning a water tap on, and sometimes workloads diminished suddenly, just as a hiring drive was in full swing. As a consequence, not all pilots hired had experience as throttle twisters. Those that did required very little work for upgrading, but others, like Barnheisel and Lieberth, possessing only turbine engine experience, required basic primary training.¹¹

MIKE JARINA

Mike Jarina, one of the new men arriving mid-year, became number twenty-six in the pilot pool. He represented an older pilot type the Company was obligated to hire because the war in South Vietnam had claimed younger men. A highly proficient pilot in both fixed wing and rotorcraft, Jarina's hiring was an

¹¹ Wayne Knight Email, 05/10/00, 07/11/00.

excellent choice, adding experience and class to our program. Mike remained with Air America for many years. ¹²

Following college graduation, toward the end of World War Two, Mike had joined the Coast Guard, a junior service then considered part of the military. After a year, he realized that Coast Guard life would not be his life's ambition. Therefore, he obtained a convenience-of-the-government discharge, with the provision that he re-enlist in the Pensacola Training Command's Naval Cadet program within twenty-four hours. Following the mandatory training syllabus, he was commissioned as an ensign, and received the coveted "Wings of Gold" in February 1945. He was then assigned cruiser pilot duty, flying float planes off the USS *Dayton* and *Rochester*.

During the Korean conflict, Mike elected to become a carrier pilot. He flew Grumman planes performing anti-submarine warfare missions in the South China Sea. He did not experience any heavy action, and most work entailed all weather, day and night missions off Jeep carriers.

Jarina journeyed to Washington to acquire his next assignment. There he expressed a desire to fly carrier-based ADs. Informed that the billet was filled, his final choice was helicopters. The placement officer said he could send Mike to helicopter training immediately, after which, he would be sent back to North Island, San Diego, where he could dicker with the

¹² During my research I discovered that Mike Jarina was an atypical individual and highly skilled aviator. Therefore, tracking his career with Air America, and his valuable observations, were deemed worthwhile. They would greatly enhance the narrative, especially when I was absent from Southeast Asia, or not flying in the Theater. Over time, and many interviews, Mike provided a wealth of stories, logs, and photographs.

assignments officer for a duty station. Mike admitted that he would like to fly rotorcraft, but did not desire to make a career out of them.

He later served a tour in the Antarctic flying C-47s, and gaining helicopter mountain experience. When he returned to the mainland, the war was beginning in South Vietnam. He evidenced interest in participating in the war, but at forty-five, he was informed that he was too old to fly without a safety pilot and had to be content with shore duty. Instead, he was assigned to a helicopter training squadron at Ellyson Field, a small outlying base between the Pensacola Naval Air Station facility and NAS Whiting Field. Serving in the capacity of an instructor pilot, and with the dual pilot requirement waived, he flew every aircraft in the base inventory: T-28s, SNBs, Bell HTL-6s, H-34s, HO4s, and HUPs. His days were occupied, and on weekends he flew the C-47 to fulfill NAS Mainside requirements.

After completing over twenty years military service, Jarina was slated to retire in 1965. He had a friend also leaving the Navy who considered applying for an instructor job at the Fort Rucker, Alabama, Army helicopter training base. Interested, a member of the local instrument board, arranged a flight with him to Rucker to provide the necessary flight qualifications for an instrument card and also inquire about a job. While eating lunch, Mike met Bill Cook, a former Air America helicopter pilot. At the time, Mike had little information about the Company, so he questioned Bill for more details. Cook allowed that if Mike was serious about flying for a civilian organization, Air America was the best choice. Further touting the Company, he indicated that the supply system had military parts back-up, and the maintenance was superior to any other organization. Cook's words confused Mike. If the Company and job

were so good, then why had Bill left? Without going into detail, Cook confessed that he had a disagreement with the Base Manager, Ben Moore.

Mike had a friend at Ellyson: Marine Corps Major Blades. Blades was a manly, good-looking, poster image Marine type everyone fondly called "Razor Blades." Early in 1965, Blades, an early Viet Nam veteran, asked Mike what he planned to do after retiring from the Navy. Mike said he might go to Fort Rucker or perhaps fly a Beechcraft to the Bahamas. And then there was Air America, about which he acknowledged little information. Blades had heard of Air America while in Southeast Asia, and encouraged his friend to choose that option. He was sure Mike would enjoy it. *"The pay was \$2,000 a month and all the lead your ass can hold."* Mike indicated that was a fair exchange. Blades said, *"I knew it would appeal to you. That is the job for you."*

Mike went to Washington to further investigate the Air America option, and to submit a job application. While there he met the Company Personnel Manager, "Red" Dawson. During the interview, Jarina informed him about the aircraft he had flown. "Red" said he could use Mike immediately if he wanted to go to Southeast Asia, although he interjected that Mike was a little old to fly helicopters. ¹³

Pointing out the negative aspects of flying helicopters, he continued that H-34 pilots had a difficult life. Pretty much on their own, they RON upcountry in sleeping bags, were obligated to carry their own food, and so forth. Noting that Mike had C-47 time, "Red" indicated he would hire Jarina as a C-47 pilot, to which Mike retorted, *"OK, I am a C-47 pilot."*

¹³ The recent memory of oldsters Charlie Jones, "Rad" Radalinski, and "Swede" Larson lingered in the organization.

With the prospects of Air America employment bolstering him, Mike returned to his training billet. A telegram soon arrived from Washington offering him the job. A travel voucher followed for travel on the 4th of July. However, because of the busy weekend, no commercial air seats were available and he had to wait until after the holiday.

Jarina arrived in Taipei the second week in July. The VPFO asked him what he wanted to fly, and listed available openings. One option was a wheeled PBY-5A seaplane he observed on the ramp. He could also fly a Beech C-45 (Navy version, SNB) based in Okinawa. However, this would require remaining in Taiwan for some time to obtain a Chinese license. Mike indicated that he was not particularly interested in flying a C-45. He did not come to Southeast Asia to vacation; he would like to begin work ASAP. Then his mentor interjected, *"I see you have helicopter experience. If you opt for the UH-34D program, after completing a two-day survival school, I can have you on your way to Thailand inside of a week."*

Mike assented, *"OK, I am a helicopter pilot."* The decision marked the first time in his flying career he would exclusively fly helicopters. ¹⁴

A retired Air Force lieutenant colonel hired as Company security officer maintained a headquarters office in the same building as Personnel, VPFO, and other clerical offices. Before Mike departed Taiwan, the man presented a standard, sanitized employee briefing regarding Air America operations, functions,

¹⁴ Two years later, Dawson conducted a trip to Udorn. While walking from the flight line to operations, Mike spotted him conversing with Dick Ford. He did not think "Red" would recall him, but after Ford made introductions, Dawson said, *"What are you doing with that silly hard hat? I hired you as a C-47 pilot?"*



Mike Jarina (right) next to Udorn Air America manager CJ Abadie in later years.

Wayne Knight Collection.

and status. Pre-briefed by Major "Razor Blades" at Ellyson Field, Mike smiled when the man informed him that Air America was only a small private company. The organization satisfied fully funded contracts for USG and did not have to advertise for work. Company aircraft flew for USAID in Vietnam, Laos, and other parts of Southeast Asia. The Company furnished air transportation consisting of *rice, rooftops, and refugees* (the eventual titles for these books). The man covered a long list of things not to do or say, for Air America discouraged any publicity. Under threat of termination, employees were not allowed to maintain a diary, write books, take pictures, talk to newspaper people, and other perceived offenses. During the briefing, while looking directly into the man's eyes and thinking, *you lying SOB*, Jarina struggled to maintain his composure.

After completing all required forms, interviews, and classes, he was off for Bangkok.

Upon arrival at the Air America facility in Udorn, Jarina initially met managers Wayne Knight and Marius Burke. Abadie and Moore were not immediately available. Since it was the weekend, he was told to become situated and return on Monday for an acceptance ride. Puzzled, Mike knew nothing about the area, and asked where he could find accommodations. Wayne, beleaguered by the influx of new pilots, offered, "*Stay anywhere you want. Find a hotel in town.*" It was Mike's first inkling that people were not very free with information.

Mike spent his first night in a wooden hotel. The Spartan room provided neither air conditioning nor adequate lighting. He had difficulty getting the proprietor to provide a light for him to read in bed. Left a little wiser from this experience,

before checking into another hotel, he inquired if there was an air conditioner available.

During the check in process, Mike met Dick Ford in the FIC office. At that time FIC was still a bare bones operation with a single desk in the center of the room used to assemble maps and photographs, which Dick then placed on the wall. It was through Ford that Jarina learned there was an extra room available at the "Duck House," logically named for numerous ducks living in the compound. Typifying Udorn landlords, a Thai family generally owned two houses. They rented one and lived in the other. The large four room house was close to a cross street, where an indoor-outdoor barber shop sat on the corner. Mike formed a threesome with Ford and a U.S. Signal Corps Army captain who worked at Udorn and then the Ramasun base a few miles south of the Udorn RTAFB.

RAMASUN

During March, Don Collins, assigned to the 5th Radio Relay Unit, arrived in Bangkok. From there he was directed to Udorn with an advanced party of a new Detachment D. He spent a year in the area establishing what would become the 7th Radio Relay Field Station.

The unit initially billeted in an old barracks on the air base, then moved to the 207th Army Signal Corps compound (STRACOM). The radio vans and equipment were parked at the 207th, and operations began there. Then when the site was deemed too dangerous because of proximity to the Air Force ammunition dump, the operation moved to the 207th's concrete parking lot for six months.

By early March 1966, the unit moved down the Friendship Highway next to the village of Nong Soong. A large roofed

structure was erected to shield the M-292 vans from the burning rays of the sun. What later became the sizeable Ramasun Field Station was built east of this site. ¹⁵

PROBLEMS WITH NEW HIRES

During 1965's huge influx of personnel, pressured to fill numerous vacant slots and newly created positions, Air America hired more than a few dysfunctional individuals. A few drunks, liars, and perverts all passed through the system over the years. I am not certain if the vetting process was deficient, but, fortunately, as in past years, bad seeds generally weeded themselves out of the organization before too long. Not long after being hired to start FIC Udorn, envisioning a much larger operation in the future, Ford requested an assistant. John Rock was hired, purporting to be a retired U.S. Army major and former intelligence officer. As a portion of his bona fides, he carried a red Air Force identification card, which he used to purchase items in the Air Force PX-commissary. Soon after he was hired, Dick began to suspect that Rock's credentials were not quite as he portrayed. Ford had several photos that he was attempting to line up to form a larger picture. When he asked Rock to "feather edge" them, he did not seem to comprehend the term. Since he indicated on his resume that he was an expert in photo interpretations, Ford was further puzzled when his assistant had great difficulty matching even two photographs. ¹⁶

¹⁵ Don Collins, Beginnings of Ramasun Station,
(www.topsecretsi.com/users/bogart/DonCollinsPics.html)

¹⁶ Dick Ford would have been further concerned had he known that his assistant had fabricated his resume and had been RIFed while a junior officer.

In addition to being a complete phony, Rock was also a boozer. He lived with Art Clausawitz, an engineer in Facility Maintenance. Art formerly owned a construction company building houses in the States. Over time, the prosperous business netted him a million dollars, but both he and his wife were heavy drinkers and he lost all the money. Therefore, he had sought work overseas.

As part of his relaxation at the end of the day, Art stored a bottle of his favorite whiskey in the refrigerator. When the alcohol began to disappear, Art complained. Rock said he would replace it, which he did, but drank this before Art had a chance to have one drink.

For some reason, likely the Oriental squeeze, we were required to maintain a logbook for Lao authorities, so Mike inquired where he could purchase one. Abadie indicated that we were using ones sent from Taipei. Mike ordered twenty, at five dollars each, and sold some to other pilots for the same price. He left the remaining ten with Rock to sell. The next time he went into FIC the logs were all gone and Mike inquired about the money. John gave Mike the equivalent of two fifty each, saying that was the price he had sold them for.

Consistent with his thorny relationships with other subordinates, Ford did not get along well with Rock. After a relatively short time, Rock was transferred to Vientiane. He moved into a house and agreed to purchase the previous occupant's furniture. Although using the furniture, he never paid anything. Finally, the company terminated him. Before leaving Southeast Asia, he bilked a Chinese moneychanger out of four hundred dollars.

After obtaining tailored uniforms in town, pilots were obligated to pass the Base Manager's inspection in order to obtain the Company clothing allowance. ¹⁷

When his full complement of clothes was finished, Mike carried them in his military B-4 bag into Ben Moore's office, and immediately realized that he had met the Base Manager before while standing duty officer of the day at the NAS North Ireland facility, San Diego, California. Ben and two other senior officers had entered the flight operations office to file a flight plan for a cross-country in a Beechcraft. He easily recalled Ben because of his pleasant attitude and unusual looks, particularly his primary physical trademark: a shiny, bald head. For as long as both men were with Air America, Mike only heard good comments regarding Captain Moore. ¹⁸

LAO POLITICS

Never-ending political problems were once again creating turmoil in Laos. More forceful coup rumors than normal circulated. Troop movements were envisioned prior to the 18 July National Assembly elections. Several former Phoumists, along with key military and civilian principals, were reputed to be involved. These included Air Force Chief, General Thao Ma; Commanding General of Military Region Two, Vang Pao; and perhaps

¹⁷ Supply provided the material, but did not stock uniforms or boots. We were still required to initially pay for clothes and were later reimbursed 150.00 dollars.

¹⁸ Mike Jarina Many Taped Interviews at his Bagdad, Florida Home, 09/10/96, 09/13-15/97, 10/01/98; 09/20/99.
Mike Jarina Phone Conversation, 06/10/96.
Mike Jarina Taped Interviews at the Author's House, 04/18-20/00.
Further References to Mike Jarina will be Noted as Jarina Interviews.

Neutralist General Kong Le. A primary reason for the disquiet was deemed the increasing military and political dominance of the Sithadone and Kouprasith faction in Vientiane. The Coup Group, so named for identification, asserted that Vientiane leaders neglected requests of military commands for proper supplies outside Vientiane. They further claimed that there were misappropriations of USAID supplies, and failure to conduct a strong, effective war against Pathet Lao forces. The leaders also were unhappy over the Prime Minister's lack of leadership, and reports that indicated there were plans to depose him during a European journey. General Staff members stated that the current coup rumors reflected the family, regional, and factional rivalries continuing to trouble Laos. Embassy personnel believed that U.S. pressure on frustrated Lao leaders would measurably calm the situation. In addition, opening up supply lines to the provinces and allowing high ranking personalities like General Ma a greater role in the military establishment would prove beneficial.

On 7 July, representatives from the Southern Coup Group arrived at Sam Tong with a ruling on Vang Pao's request to postpone any near-term coup moves. Largely because they required VP's support to succeed, they informed Vang Pao of their leaders' decision not to start any military movements until after the national elections, and until the quality of the new government had been ascertained.

However, this decision was predicated on two caveats. USG had to attempt to prevent the Oudone Sananikone-Kouprasith Abhay faction from assassinating or employing any other method to

eliminate its members. ¹⁹ Also, should the Vientiane group start any military move during the cooling off period, the Southern Groups' agreement not to act would be considered null and void. A second condition required that neither the Neutralists nor the Sananikones would instigate a revolution. The Coup Group was adamant about not allowing either of the above factions to control Vientiane.

Commenting regarding the meeting, Vang Pao and the Southern Group believed USG was making a gross mistake thinking it could control and force Vientiane power groups into a workable solution. They did not believe that embassy pressure could maintain quiet in Vientiane until the elections. There was also considerable concern over adequate protection for top leaders outside Vientiane in the struggle for their country.

Restricted elections for seats in the National Assembly were held on 18 July. An elite middle-class electorate restricted to 20,000 military officers, government officials, and teachers, voters chose fifty-nine deputies to a special two-year term. No Pathet Lao representatives were present as they boycotted the elections. The new assembly was deemed younger, energetic, and more capable than the former one. It portended a generally favorable outcome for the country's stability.

Despite some uncertainty, threats, and bribery, no group won such an overwhelming majority that the others felt compelled to resort to a coup to restore their position. "Young Nationalists," mostly civil servants and junior cabinet officers, considered a hard-working and relatively honest faction, who were aligned with Sisouk na Champassak increased their numbers. Members of the powerful Sananikone family were

¹⁹ They remembered Karbo's murder after the last coup attempt.

the chief losers. However, they, former Premier Phoui, and General Kouprasith expressed overall satisfaction with the election results.

As predicted before and during the election, coup rumors proliferated. Among intelligence advisors and the U.S. Embassy crowd this was accepted as a continuing threat to stability so long as command relationships remained in contention and distrust persisted among military leaders, i.e., between the Vientiane General Staff and field commanders. Such dissension could erupt at any time to destroy the stability perceived in the new government.

Since communist participation in the RLG had virtually ended in the spring of 1963 when Souphannouvong and other ministers departed for the Plain of Jars, some cabinet posts remained open for the return of pro-communist representatives. However, their reluctance to resume these posts out of concern for their safety resulted in a more rightist-neutralist coalition, with the rightists' influence increasing. As a result of this and increases in hostilities, Souvanna gradually became more anti-communist.

It was believed that during formation of the new Lao government a period of tension in Vientiane and some problems in Pathet Lao relations would occur. A handful of Pathet Lao representatives remaining in the city were expected to instigate propaganda attacks in regard to the new assembly. However, formation of a rival government was not envisioned.

General Phoumi's exile following the February coup attempt eliminated a primary source of political instability in the country. Although he retained support among FAR middle officer ranks, Phoumi was seen as posing little threat to the existing Lao government. As a result, Souvanna Phouma achieved moderate

support from a majority of non-communist political factions. The King supported Souvanna, and conservative Sananikone family members abided by his policies. Because the Prime Minister symbolized adherence to the Geneva Accords pact, most Lao politicians considered his continuance in office essential. Because of this, Phouma maintained tight control over foreign affairs and increased his command over the sources of power in the government, but left most everyday management of governmental duties to other people. ²⁰

THE LINE

I began flying again on 10 July and thereafter for fifteen days. The first flight was a short night training hop with Scratch Kanach and Filipino Flight Mechanic Magpantay. I assumed that in addition to being a warm-up flight, it had a dual purpose: to fulfill the night flying requirement and for someone associated with management to observe my mental state, and how I reacted in the cockpit. Except for jet traffic around the field, the flight was no problem. I had resolved most of my demons and was ready and willing to resume my job upcountry.

MR-3

The next day, following a rejected test flight of Hotel-35 in which a newly installed carburetor metered too rich a mixture, former Army pilot and First Officer Larry Wilderom (DOH

²⁰ Memorandum Bundy, 07/09/65.
Internet, Agreement of Coup Group to Postpone Action until after Elections, 07/7-8/65, (www.foia.icia.gov/scripts/cgiserv).
Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) with Augment, Short Term Prospect for Laos, 08/05/65.

06/20/65) and Magpantay accompanied me in Hotel-14 to Savannakhet (Lima-39). The drill was the same. Work a little for FAR and be available to launch on a moment's notice for a SAR mission. I suspected this requirement was especially prevalent when maintenance problems curtailed use of the Nakhon Phanom Huskies. At this particular time, I was not aware that CH-3s were already located at the base.

From L-39 we flew to Thakhet to receive a pre-briefing from the Customer regarding a behind-the-karsts road watch team mission the following day. Calculated to avoid detection, early missions still generally walked to their destinations. However, with commencement of an ever-expanding air war, increased enemy infiltration, and corresponding requirements for targets, requirements to place larger road watch teams in more remote field areas required air transportation. We (I) did not perform much of this work until later years, but had participated in earlier road watch work during a two-ship mission with Ed Reid.

In addition to intelligence gathering regarding enemy infiltration, road watch teams were tasked an ancillary mission: to search for missing and captured airmen. They operated under this premise until the war's completion as an unconventional entity to normal SAR operations. However, their recovery rate was miniscule. ²¹

Within Military Region Three and Military Region Four, road watch teams were providing important information regarding enemy infiltration along the Ho Chi Minh Trail system. No traffic was reported on Route-23 north of Mounng Phine from the fourth week in May to mid-July. The same was true on Route-92 northeast of

²¹ Earl Tilford, 68-69.

Saravane since 5 May. However, the teams observed vehicle movements on other portions of Route-92, where supplies were allegedly carried into South Vietnam. From 1 June, during a period encompassing about a month and a half, teams tabulated more than 20,000 enemy troops moving on the Moung Sen-Moung Phine segment of Route-23.

The importance of the information that Agency-trained and funded teams provided to intelligence specialists would be evidenced during coming years when Air America helicopter crews increasingly participated in sizeable road watch missions.²²

That night, and for two additional evenings, we RON at the Nakhon Phanom base with a couple of other H-34 crews. The stay afforded us opportunity to drink with Air Force crews in the After-Burner Club, and bunk with and swap war stories with a few A-1E pilots. Since they helped to protect our backsides during the deep penetration SARs, I really held these pilots in high esteem. During conversations, we learned the tardy, but welcome news that CH-3 aircraft and crews, after shake-down and some familiarity flights in Military Region Two, would soon be assigned Na Khang alert duty.

Monday and Tuesday were spent performing missions from Thakhet west, a remote, secure site well removed from prying eyes. Since A-1 drivers were assigned escort duty, briefings at the Air Force base were conducted in a large auditorium. The information included lengthy and boring talks regarding regulations and weather-related items. The Air Force military way was a lot different from our methods of launching and asking questions while en route or afterward. After all the delays,

²² Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 78.

including loading and unloading, the day's work netted only 6+30 hours and extended well past twilight into dark.

Fuel drums had been previously staged at L-40A. A check revealed rusty container contents. This slowed the operation down a bit and required refueling at Nakhon Phanom, something we looked forward to, since decent food and drink was always available in the mess hall. It was an interesting experience, but I was happy to recover at Udorn on the 14th.

SAM NEUA SAR

Despite the USAF contribution to rescue efforts in Laos and North Vietnam, our U.S. military SAR obligations were not over. The same day I went home, sometime after 1800 hours, while on a mission to destroy a bridge near Sam Neua, an A-6A Intruder pilot based on the USS *Independence* (VA-75) in the Tonkin Gulf incurred a Mark-82, 500-pound malfunction that destroyed one engine. A recent addition to the war, the A-6 was the first such plane to go down. Additionally, the ensuing eighteen-hour survival episode and ultimately successful rescue provided another shining feather in the cap of Air America flight personnel.

Forming a strike force of two aircraft, the A-6 Intruder in question was crewed by PIC Don Boecker and bombardier-navigator, Don Eaton. After arming his bombs, Boecker rolled in from 19,000 feet and discharged his weapons. Shortly afterward, a violent explosion shook the plane. Fire warning lights illuminated and fuel gage needles spun south. With the plane rolling and the wingman advising that they were on fire, the men sitting in a side-by-side cockpit configuration punched out.

Boecker drifted directly toward the middle of a small hilltop village, but at the last moment a gust of wind lifted

him 200 yards down slope to the southeast. After tugging at his shroud lines to avoid an open rice paddy, Eaton landed in tall grass south of his cockpit mate. Drawing on information learned at the Pensacola survival school, both men headed for cover and concealment in heavy undergrowth. Progress was slow, but likely contributed to evading the enemy searching force. The search continued throughout the night by lantern light, preventing the men from obtaining any sleep.

Tall, soft spoken Virginian Captain Sam Jordan, flying with new First Officer Dick Lieberth in the left seat of Hotel-32 and Flight Mechanic Dave McDonald in the belly, were conducting a late final run to supply an outpost near Na Khang. Completing the load delivery, Sam was returning to Site-36 for the night when he overheard a call from a RESCAP aircraft about a downed plane. Southwest of the area, he could have arrived in the area within fifteen minutes had another H-34 and crew been present to satisfy the two aircraft SAR SOP requirements.

The SAR commenced early the next morning. Two divisions of Sandy aircraft from the USS *Coral Sea* (CVA-43) Yankee Station, with a Firewood call sign from VA-165, launched at 0400 hours in order to be on station by dawn. At the Lao border, the second division of Skyraiders, led by Executive Officer Harry Parode, continued on to Udorn for refueling and standby. The first division, consisting of Skipper Ken Knoizen, Walt Darran, JEB Stuart, and Bill Lyons, rendezvoused with two Air America UH-34Ds crewed by Captains Scratch Kanach, Phil Goddard, and their co-pilots and Flight Mechanics to join the search. Also, before dawn, even before the Skyraiders arrived, Victor Control was orbiting the area to coordinate Air America assets. The Navy aviators on the ground attempted to call Victor using their PC-49 radios. Boecker's transmitter worked, but not his receiver.

The reverse was true for Eaton who was separated from his PIC by about a mile.

After spending a restless night in rat heaven, Sam Jordan arose early at Na Khang. Checking in with the Vientiane Oscar Mike, he was informed that two H-34 crews were on the way upcountry to conduct the rescue attempt. Relegated to a backup role, Sam was advised to continue resupply missions for the LS-36 outposts, but to closely monitor his radios.

Despite continuous attempts to establish radio contact, Boecker received no indication that his transmissions were being received. Attempting a different tactic, at quarter past seven, he radioed the A-1s to rock their wings if they read him. He was much relieved and invigorated when the aircraft began to acknowledge the reception.

One helicopter pilot flew directly toward Eaton, who moved into the open for better recognition. However, despite a crewmember waving at him, the ship bypassed him. Scratch Kanach then sighted Boecker, but after several low passes, his ship incurred battle damage to a fuel tank. Steaming fuel, he headed south toward safety. Goddard followed, and was hit in the hydraulic system while crossing Route-6. Soon after the H-34s departed, enemy forces spotted their quarry. Boecker dashed away from the immediate area, while Sandy pilots proceeded to blast the area. Eaton too moved out of the immediate area, and was almost hit by friendly 20 Mike-Mike and rocket fire.

While supporting northern outposts, Jordan tuned his radios to the proper SAR frequencies and was alert for developments regarding the SAR. After an hour, he was informed that he was now part of the SAR and to RTB Na Khang to refuel. Since the target zone was generally located at the 4,000-foot level, he instructed the Flight Mechanic to add only half a normal fuel

load. When another H-34 crew and Jolly Green from Nakhon Phanom arrived, Sam was ordered to launch. To avoid the main highway leading into Sam Neua, Jordan elected to enter the area from the northwest, then turn east, and approach the area from the north. After entering the target area, they were joined by Air America T-28 Alpha pilots.

With the influx of additional aircraft, Eaton moved from dense cover to an open area in short grass, where he activated a signal device. Then while wondering if the smoke had been observed, a T-28 pilot turned toward him and flashed by at low level. Behind him was an H-34. Jordan had seen the pilot standing on a ridgeline in a somewhat accessible spot. As per established SAR procedures, he loitered until the T-28 pilot confirmed the sighting. Responding to a positive ID, he approached and maintained a low hover while Eaton dove into the cabin. Eaton did not know the exact location of Blocker, only that he was close. Sam heard directions transmitted from the downed airman, but received no answer to his requests for additional information. As Sam circled, red smoke rose from the jungle about a mile west of where Eaton had been rescued. With the A-1s targeting the village, Blocker made a dash for open ground and transmitted his new position. While the two other helicopters searched the area without success, Jordan's Flight Mechanic sighted the pilot down slope next to a large tree, and began directing Sam over the man.

Jordan hovered over Boecker for what seemed an eternity—perhaps thirty minutes. Then he observed white gunfire flashes at the jungle's edge. A hasty call for help resulted in T-28 pilots silencing the fire. At times he lost communications with Flight Mechanic McDonald, who had removed his hard hat while struggling with the hoist cable. The H-34 was still equipped

with only a hundred-foot cable and yellow horse collar, which kept tangling in the tree next to Boecker.²³

The helicopter's time on station and short line prompted the frustrated Boecker to make a desperate leap for the rescue device when it descended to about three feet above him.

Finally, Dave informed Jordan that he had retrieved the pilot. Assuming that the man was safely inside the cabin, Sam added power, rapidly climbing at sixty knots for altitude. Unknown to him, the Navy pilot hung onto the collar by one arm at 2,000 feet AGL, while the Flight Mechanic frantically attempted to reel him into the cabin. Finally, the pilot was reported safely onboard.

The extended length of time required to accomplish the rescue and the high-power hovering consumed almost all the H-34s available fuel. Therefore, Sam was forced to recover at LS-107, where fresh fuel drums were staged specifically for SAR missions. A barrel was hand pumped into the forward tank and the happy occupants continued south to Site-36, where a Caribou waited to ferry the Navy survivors to Thailand.

After expending their ordnance on the area, the Skyraider pilots recovered at Udorn and repaired to the Air America bar for an obligatory liquid "debriefing." Drinks were proffered by those present, celebrating yet another successful rescue. Assuming a Udorn RON, they were surprised when a terse message from the *USS Coral Sea* arrived, requesting their immediate presence. The order resulted in some spectacular landings on the carrier after dark.

²³ Although constituting a well-known problem when hovering over the high trees of Laos, no definitive action to lengthen the hoist cable had yet been implemented.

Following the successful SAR, when the facts were circulated, questions arose among the Air America helicopter pilot force and management regarding the failure of members of the double-crewed, armed, high performance, heavily armored, twin-engine CH-3C to attempt the pickup. It was discovered that the Air Support Operations Center (AOC) Udorn had ordered the CH-3 pilots to stand off and permit the H-34 pilot to perform the job. Because of general bitterness fomented by this lack of execution by the CH-3 crew, Wayne Knight journeyed to the Udorn Seventh Air Force headquarters to seek a plausible explanation and discover what Air America could expect in the future from Air Force helicopter crews. He was informed that this ship was their sole rescue asset of that type at the time. It was not considered fully operational, and merely happened to be in the area conducting a familiarization flight. Air America management was not pleased with the senior Air Force officer's response, and it became abundantly clear that we would never be completely off the hook as to SAR operations. ²⁴ ²⁵

²⁴ Boecker and Eaton each eventually achieved Admiral Flag Officer Rank. A-1 Sandy driver Walt Darran later joined Air America and flew the On Mark B-26 out of Udorn, and later the Pilatus Porter for CASI. EW Knight Email, 07/13/00.

²⁵ LeDonne McCarthy, *USN Tailhook, The First Day of the Rest of Their Lives* (NAS Patuxent River Public Affairs Office, Spring Edition 1991) 34-39.
Samuel Jordon, *...All in a Day's Work* Appearing on p 40 in the Hook Article.
Walt Darran, *Sea Stories: ResCap, The Able Dog Sea Stories*, (<http://www.abledogs.com/Stories/ResCap.htm>).
Mac Thompson Email, 04/08/04.
Steve Nichols-Author 2013 Phone Conversations.
Bert Martin Email, 03/14/13.

UPCOUNTRY

The same day Jordon achieved history, George Carroll, Flight Mechanic Bill Murphy, and I flew Hotel-31 to Luang Prabang to conduct a Special Mission. I had not talked with George regarding our first day in Son La Province. From his perspective, he filled me in on what had transpired in their ship on that fateful day, especially that a round had penetrated a survival pack around his waist. It was an interesting conversation, but neither of us chose to belabor the incident. Murphy was fairly new, one of the American additions to the Maintenance Department's Flight Mechanics during the previous two months.

We started north for Luang Prabang late, but upon arrival inclement weather prevented us from immediately performing the mission. We eventually launched twenty-three miles north-northwest of the royal capitol toward the vicinity of Ban Phou Keu, a remote point between the Mekong, the Beng Valley, and Moug Sai. Neither of us had ever worked the position before, and I assumed government expansion in Military Region One coincided with that occurring in upper Military Region Two. After working the area, we returned to Sam Tong, landing well after dark. As the rainy season was in full swing, I parked as close to the hostel as possible to avoid slogging too far through the ample, sticky mud bordering the runway. To help alleviate muddy conditions, a few raised wooden pallets had been advantageously placed on terrain leading to the hostel. The elevated wooden sidewalk enabled us to avoid accumulating an additional couple of inches of gooey mud on our soles, and provided a mechanism to scrape our boots prior to entering the living accommodations.

Supporting his assumptions of limited Meo expansion in Sam Neua and Luang Prabang Provinces, Ambassador Sullivan stated:

"...These approvals were granted by me and concurred in by the Department of State...By the term of expansions, I refer to the arming of able-bodied tribal elements in their home areas and reclaiming these areas from PL control, bringing them within U.S. Mission's refugee program and supporting them with rice, medical care, education, etc. It is well beyond our capability and of questionable desirability at this time to plan such expansions into territory controlled by the DVR. I have limited my approvals for operations inside the DVR from Laos to small scale intelligence probes to determine popular attitudes and the recruitment of indigenous assets to provide intelligence and support to teams sent in from Laos. I have authorized commitments to individuals only and not to village populations or tribal groups as such..." ²⁶

HOPPE

Tom Hoppe, conducting his final upcountry flights prior to upgrading, was assigned to fly with me. Tom had most recently flown with Art White for four days during RONs at Chiang Khong and Nam Yu (LS-118A), the recently opened military sister site to the refugee center at Nam Thouei (LS-118). Following the RON, Tom hitched a ride home to Udorn with Robbie Robertson. En route, they landed at Xieng Lom (LS-69A), where a passenger talked Robbie into landing at a site lodged in a tight bowl. Circling on takeoff, attempting to gain climb airspeed, they

²⁶ CIA-Washington to Secretary of State, Ambassador Sullivan's Comments, 07/14/65.

barely managed to escape the unprepared landing zone, and Hoppe thought they would crash. It was much like my hairy situation in the Long Pot area southwest of Long Tieng, but this time with a more successful outcome.

We started early and worked most of the day out of Long Tieng and Tha Thom. Tom would soon be on his own, and as we were working in relatively benign areas that did not require my full attention, I attempted to pass along pertinent techniques and items of interest I had learned since joining Air America. As the H-34 was the only conduit for our paychecks and our lifeline, I stressed employing the utmost care of the machine in all aspects, to include warming the engine properly before engaging the rotors, and cooling the powerplant at idle prior to shut down. ²⁷

After a final refueling, the air operations person directed us to Site-36 for RON. I did not like the idea very much, especially when there was a perfectly good hostel available at Sam Tong, but I was not making decisions. I knew our boss rotated crews at Na Khang and it was only fair that we take our turn staying there. However, I did not consider the site the safest place to overnight. Even though two FAR battalions had established a defensive perimeter thirteen miles north, we were still very close to the front lines and elite Vietnamese sappers were believed talented enough to infiltrate any defenses.

Excellent reasons for one or two H-34 crews to RON at Site-36 existed. In addition to the presence of Thai PARU, there were generally between two to four Americans staying overnight at the

²⁷ Evidently this advice stuck with Tom over the years, and he carried it with him into the jet age. As a Trans World Air (TWA) Captain, he stuck to this principle and never experienced the engine problems of some other less conscientious pilots.

site. Two Agency Case Officers, Tony Poe and Mike Lynch, call sign Watts, were in attendance to monitor and advise Vang Pao's northerly march to retake Hua Moung and other sites lost during January and February. After recovering from hepatitis, Lynch had returned to Laos in February 1965. He did not return to Long Tieng until May. First visiting Na Khang on almost a daily basis to help Vang Pao coordinate operations, he had moved to the site permanently by early summer.

After Tony departed for MR-1 in the fall, Jerry Daniels, call sign Hog, moved into the site to supplement or complement Lynch. Should trouble erupt at night, theoretically, we were their insurance policy out of the valley.

As increased importance was accorded Site-36, personnel expanded and changed there. Not long after Colonel Tong's untimely death, Lieutenant Colonel Phan Siharat from Paksane had been selected and assigned to replace Tong at Na Khang. A large task for anyone to assume, he was charged to command BV-26 and administer Tong's other duties. In addition, several Royal Thai Air Force majors arrived to control Thai B-Team T-28 strikes. Another Thai major acted as Vang Pao's air liaison advisor. A seventeen-man PARU detachment was either on site or assigned to area outposts to commence 105mm artillery training and to actually operate the guns during the northern advance.

AIR COMBAT CONTROL COMES OF AGE IN MR-2

American presence in Laos, particularly in the form of U.S. military upcountry, had always been a sensitive issue in the State Department. Since the fall of 1964, there had been Det-6 complaints of T-28 weather aborts, perhaps reaching thirty percent in northern Laos filtering back to Air Commando headquarters at Eglin Air Force Base. To air operations

planners, there was an obvious requirement for a weather network in Laos. However, any action was tabled until Vientiane Embassy AIRA chief Colonel Tyrrell was replaced.

The more realistic Colonel Paul Pettigrew, who replaced Colonel Tyrrell, was searching for someone to establish a weather reporting station, control airstrikes, and coordinate with Vang Pao's troops in Sam Neua Province during the operation to reclaim Hua Mung and other lost territory. Lack of proper training, and enthusiasm to hit worthless targets, precluded successful use of PARU and Lao individuals. Therefore, Air Commando Captain John "Jack" O. Teague was assigned TDY to Na Khang from Det-6 (mid-June to late November). Teague functioned as a forward air guide (FAG), assisting in target selection and coordination of U.S. sorties in Military Region Two. Teague replaced Captain Glenn Duke, member of the loosely organized two-man Air Operations Center in Vientiane, who worked with Case Officer Lynch as a combat controller and weather briefer for about a month during mid-year.

Case Officers, mostly Tony Poe, and Vang Pao identified a target (s). During his tour, Teague examined the tactical situation and evaluated target information, determined the most advantageous ordnance, and time on target. Then he radioed a strike request to Vientiane over the HF set. On the day of the strike, he was delivered by helicopter to a nearby ground location to direct the mission. Using the call sign Cherokee, he contacted USAF fighter-bomber pilots on the UHF PRC-41. After establishing his bona fides, he described the target and had troops mark it with "Willy Pete." Then he recommended bombing headings, and the most advantageous direction to fly should a bailout be necessary. T-28 pilots were contacted and directed by his contingent of Thai FACs on his Bayside 900 radio.

Teague also directed strikes from Air America and Bird (CASI) aircraft.

Charlie Jones replaced Teague in the late fall. Duke did not direct air strikes during his visits to Na Khang, but established a lot of groundwork for close cooperation with the U.S Air Force. He provided Mike Lynch with insight into pilot-ground controller technique that later proved beneficial to Lynch during crunch time. As a result, he became proficient and experienced in directing air strikes. This would prove especially valuable during 1966.

Technical Sergeant Stan Monnie accompanied Captain Teague to Na Khang. A medic from the Waterpump contingent, his medical expertise extended to treating local ailments, and the wounded. Stan was also cross trained as a combat controller. He functioned well and later, under the auspices of "Jiggs" Weldon, went to work at Ban Nam Thouei with Joe Flipse.

When Teague contracted dengue fever and was treated in the Weldon home for ten days, Captain Keith Grimes journeyed into upper Military Region Two. He acted as a combat controller, assessed the weather net potential, and offered suggestions to AIRA for a more effective operation. He discovered that there were twelve scattered sites, all with PARU presence, who, equipped with radios and compasses, were actually capable of reporting tactical weather conditions. He returned to Vientiane to report his findings to AIRA and Ambassador Sullivan. As a result of his work and better reporting, weather aborts reportedly declined.

Years later, Case Officer Mike Lynch commented to Professor Leary that the weather network had served a useful purpose in helping the USAF with long range forecasts for attacks on fixed targets in the general area and across the border. Airstrikes

generated from Na Khang were generally of the close air support variety. In addition, during the march on Hua Mung and later, they were established daily, as targets and friendly troop dispositions were fluid. In similar fashion, tactical weather reporting was forwarded to Vientiane each morning by single side band or contract pilots. Overall, Mike considered this method more valuable for daily, hourly, or last-minute targeting decisions. Pilot reporting (pireps) was also beneficial.

Commensurate with annual changes in the weather and previous operational SOPs, most Vietnamese troops that had participated in the victorious march south on Route-6 had withdrawn across the border to rest and refit. Taking advantage of this information, and other encouraging intelligence from his local spy network, Vang Pao ordered a rainy season offensive to commence on 5 July. Relatively unimpeded, except by terrain and weather, and supported by moveable artillery pieces and close air support, five battalions slowly advanced north toward the prime objective: Hua Mung. Ground forces included ADC units from BV-26, 27, and Paksane-based BV-22, delivered to site 36 by C-123 and Caribou crews.

During the operation, Mike LaDue was at Na Khang when Jack Teague asked if he would like to accompany Vang Pao and him to the front lines, where the general wanted to confer with his officers, and Jack would act as the FAC. They flew to the nearest landing zone, from where they were obligated to walk toward the forward operating area. Because of the clumsy leg brace he wore filling with dirt, Mike soon fell well behind the others and was on his own near the fighting. While resting, a USAF jet roared in overhead and the pilot triggered a long, noisy burst of Vulcan machine gun fire, which streamed fifty yards past him. That was enough fun for the day. Mike reversed

course and began walking back to the landing zone. At his pace, it took about an hour to reach the pad, where he waited for Teague and VP to return.

Even before the offensive commenced, with forward outposts already established and the enemy pushed back, Vang Pao wanted people from western refugee villages to resettle at Na Khang. His logic was simple. When military families were separated, during slow periods, the men would leave and return to the resettlement villages to visit. With families closer, the men would likely be more available for defense and operations.

During a meeting at Sam Tong with Pop and attending Nai Kongs, Vang Pao stressed the importance in his thinking. Such relocation would increase an overall number of military personnel available at the site. He also touted Na Khang's excellent potential to grow rice. An abundant water supply flowed from a stream winding through the valley east of the strip. He particularly emphasized resettling inhabitants of the old refugee village at San Pa Kha (LS-33), in the hills six miles north of Phou Cum (LS-50), where the refugees were not yet completely self-sufficient since moving there during the January-February 1965 period. Vang Pao requested that they walk twenty miles east to the new location. When no one elected to go, clan leaders were flown to Site-36 on a command tour to assure them that Na Khang was completely safe and a good place to live. However, the people, tired from constantly moving from place to place, still refused to relocate to a lower level. Therefore, rice drops were temporarily cancelled at Site-33 to encourage them to move. This method had been used effectively in the past to coerce a village population into complying with VP's wishes. The strategy worked again in this case. After the Meo families arrived, the rice quota was resumed, and continued

until they could plant new crops. The troops were happy and Vang Pao was happy, as he could now rely on a full complement of military units. ²⁸

Arriving at Site-36 and discharging our passengers, we commenced shuttles to local outposts until nearly dark. Since 105mm guns were heavily employed to pave the way for the troops, large supplies of shells were required to service the thirsty guns. Delivering them was our job. Still not allowed to RON in Laos, a CH-3 crew was preparing to leave the strip for Nakhon Phanom. Spending so much time in transit seemed a wasteful process. While watching the machine hover prior to departure, I noted that the pilot appeared to have difficulty clearing the strip, and wondered about the machine's viability to perform SAR work at these elevations.

It was nearly dark when we struggled uphill through sloppy mud to the thatched crew hut facing, and looking down upon the long strip. Since our arrival, I had not observed any American Customers, and assumed they were probably in the headquarters "hooch" at the top of the hill, or not actually on site. It really did not matter, for with Tong gone, I did not feel the same rapport and need to communicate with Na Khang Customers. Another crew was already eating rations, mostly canned food, in the hut. Except for flashlights, the hut was dark. I managed to find an empty cot, sat down on the filthy sleeping bag, and began rummaging through my RON bag for something to pass for a meal. After eleven and a half hours in the air, I was more

²⁸ Ken Conboy, 128, 129.
Bill Leary 1965 Notes, UTD.
USAID Worker Paul White's End of Tour Report at the Asia Training Center Honolulu, Hawaii, 1966, 12.
Mike LaDue Email, 03/06/10, 03/13/10.



UH-34D crews retrieving recoverable pieces of a Helio Courier from the hills of San Pa Ka, Laos (LS-33).
Ladue Collection.

fatigued than hungry. I strung the mosquito net and removed my boots, hanging them on the pole to keep unwanted nocturnal creatures out. Then, with the agility of a contortionist, I managed to remove my trousers and crawl into the sack.

Since staying at the Sam Tong hostel, I had not dealt with the prolific rat populations, and had almost forgotten the vermin's' effect on one's psyche. Now at Na Khang, I once again had the opportunity to enjoy the rodents' antics. Like in Pop's old warehouse, the underside of the roof had been lined with parachute panels to prevent fine dust particles filtering down on occupants. The arrangement worked, but also served as an amusement park for the rat colony inhabiting the hut and surrounding area. All night long the beasts dashed up and down the drooping chutes, screeching, foraging, and fornicating. As tired as I was, it was often difficult to sleep, and I had nightmares about the pests. At times, like the night in the PARU hut at Phu Pha Thi, I considered shooting at them while they scurried out the back of the hut. However, caution interceded, for such a report might have triggered a general alarm and uncontrolled uproar among skittish troops.

After time upcountry, Hoppe wondered if he should obtain a firearm. All he carried in the helicopter was a supply-issued survival pack and a Camp King jack knife. Throughout his entire tour with Air America, he never obtained or carried a weapon. Sometime later, his parents forwarded him a Crossman .22 caliber CO2 pellet gun that he requested for vermin control at LS-36. The air gun incorporated a high and low power setting with which he dispatched many rats at Na Khang. ²⁹

²⁹ Tom Hoppe Interview.

In addition to their sleep-invading racket, the rodents were carriers of many diseases, and presented serious potential health implications for all of us. ³⁰ Because of the occurrence of the problem in South Vietnam, a plague vaccine injection was mandatory for all flight crews. Not a fun shot it hurt going in and for long afterward.

Even God's man in Laos was not exempt from the wrath of rats. While sleeping in the hut one evening, Father "B" awakened to see a large creature from hell, probably an alpha rodent, perched on the blanket where his feet peaked. Despite the darkness, Luke clearly observed bright beady eyes glinting and staring intently at him. He was about to take action when the disgusting mammal leaped toward his face, chomping him mightily on the chin. Although shaken, the good Father had the presence of mind to brush the hungry rat aside. However, as a consequence of the frightening incident and a nasty wound, he was obligated to endure a twenty-day series of painful rabies injections between his abdomen muscles.

On the 17th we worked equally long as the previous day supplying and supporting the push toward Hua Moung. Since enemy resistance to FAR forces had not yet been encountered, nothing out of the ordinary occurred that day. The machine was nearly timed out for the required maintenance inspection, but by the time we received a message to RTB, it was too late to conduct a trip south and clear the mountains before dark. Happy to enjoy a decent meal and wash the Na Khang stink from our bodies, we RON at the Site-20 hostel.

After breakfast we ferried Hotel-31 to Udorn.

³⁰ Remember during the Middle Ages the fifteenth century European plagues from Yersina Pestis?

The CPH office was short of personnel to test fly aircraft, so I was tapped to flight check Hotel-36 before going home and scratching out a letter home.

Because I had less total flight time than other pilots, early the next morning, a B-Bus driver fetched me for six additional high time days upcountry. Hotel-31 was towed out of the barn by a tug after a rapid overnight hundred-hour inspection turn around. Having previously flown the machine, and aware of logging minimum squawks, I had no objection to launching for Long Tieng with Moon Centeno.

Refueling four times at The Alternate, we worked a full day while shuttling to eastern pads. Because of the large number of H-34s and crews supporting the Hua Mung operation, the hostel was full. Therefore, we RON at Long Tieng's Blue House that night.

JARINA

During Jarina's relatively short checkout, Mike believed that he was generally afforded the best H-34 indoctrination, and was scheduled with the highest quality instructors anyone could have provided from the available Captains. Soon after an obligatory acceptance ride, Mike was sent upcountry with Bob Hitchman to learn the Military Region Two area. During the course of the day, Bob pointed out a low ridgeline where an H-34 had crashed.

Because of an urgent need for more helicopters, it was a time when the Maintenance Department was gearing up for heavy maintenance and complete reconstruction of damaged H-34s. Somehow Air America had obtained microfiche films of jigs used by Sikorsky to build H-34s. From these plans, talented artisans at the Udorn facility manufactured jigs to correct specification

and the overhaul unit was in business. Officers from the Sikorsky company were less than elated when rumor of what Air America was doing reached their ears, but apparently nothing could be done without revealing too much about the Company.

After Udorn Maintenance proved that they could rebuild H-34s, a survey of old crash sites was conducted in the hopes of finding and recovering useable components like difficult-to-obtain "tubs" essential to mounting engines. Most hulks, rotting in the jungle for years, were not acceptable. One tail cone section discovered during the search was being used by natives as a chicken coop.

Hitch indicated to Mike that if even a data plate could be retrieved, a new helicopter could be constructed from scratch. Recovery of this important item, or other components, was predicated on the ability of FAR troops to retake and secure an area.

The overgrown site where they worked looked like it could have once been an airstrip. Fighting was occurring on a hill close by. Under Tony Poe's direction, friendly troops pounded the hill with artillery rounds. When FAR (Meo) units eventually climbed the hill and attempted to capture the position, enemy exited their fighting holes and caves and savagely repulsed the assault.

Mike considered the hostel at Sam Tong first rate under the apt management of Dale Means. There were single rooms for pilots, a place to hang your hat, a desk to fill out the logbook, and an easy chair to relax. However, as the requirement to accommodate additional personnel increased, in time all the comforts were removed to create a bunk house type barracks.

Air America paid Papa and Mama Chu, proprietors of the Wattay Airport restaurant, to loan a cook for the purpose of

training Meo and Black Tai who were hired to operate the kitchen and dining room. One morning the old Chinese cook offered the patrons biscuits. No one could eat them. Therefore, Dale summoned the cook and said the biscuits were terrible. What had he done to them? The man looked quizzically at Means, and then returned to the kitchen to retrieve the Bisquick box. He pointed to the picture on the front. Indeed, the biscuits looked exactly the same, and yes, they even tasted the same as the box--just like cardboard. ³¹

With Hitchman on the premises, it was impossible to keep jars of pickled cherry tomato peppers in stock, for he greedily consumed an entire bottle at one sitting.

MARCH TOWARD HUA MOUNG

Moon Centeno and I went to work in the Na Khang area on the 20th. We remained throughout the following day hauling 105mm ammunition, mortar shells, and other supplies to front line sites. On both days, I logged three hours SAR time supporting air activity during the initial stages of the Hua Moug offensive. Even though I was single-crewed, should it become necessary to conduct a SAR mission, there were several H-34 crews available in and around the area. Then, should "the balloon go up," one or more of the pilots could shut down and contribute to a single double-crewed cockpit.

From the beginning of ground SAR standbys in 1964, we collectively forfeited substantial pay. Since early 1965 there had been an honest effort by local Air America management to

³¹ Mike Jarina Interview.
Blaine Jensen Letter, 10/16/96.

accomplish a means to alleviate our loss of income. However, logging of actual ground and airborne SAR time was still deemed necessary to reinforce the argument and convince Customers that there was an actual issue. Therefore, Wayne and others in management who continued to harbor a belief that some kind of pilot remuneration was imminent, encouraged us to compile an accurate list of SAR standby time against the day when we would be retroactively compensated for our work. Of course, that mythical day never occurred, likely because of the complexity involved, and the fact that additional Air Force rescue assets finally entered the picture. ³²

The same mountain that Jarina and Hitch had observed being splashed by incoming artillery fire on the 19th now became subject to combined U.S. and Lao (Thai piloted) heavy air strikes. With enemy burrowed deep in fortified bunkers, largely unfazed by artillery fire, the Na Khang-based FAG and Thai FACs moved forward to control B-Team T-28 "Willie Pete" strikes. Following these sorties, the USAF combat controller called in and directed F-4 and F-105 fighter bombers, which substantially lowered the hill top with 750-pound iron bombs. Giap's policy of ruthlessly expending men to achieve his policy was decidedly evident when our people landed on Phou Then on the 24th. Ordered to remain and die, the entrenched Vietnamese refused to retreat and most were torn apart or entombed in their foxholes and bunkers. However, a few isolated enemy survivors kept our forces busy for an additional four days before organized resistance was officially declared over, and our forces could move on to the next objective.

³² EW Knight Email, 07/15/00.

With assistance from H-34 pilots Tom Hoppe and others, who moved the big guns and shells forward, the process of advancing from mountain to mountain continued, and our troops converged on the enemy stronghold at Phou Phak Lod. Tom recalled that during this phase of the operation poor weather caused John Fonburg some anxious moments when he was socked in on an insecure forward pad. The incident later gave Tom pause to speculate that many times that "we were moments away from terror and death, but generally failed to realize it."

Echoing a general gripe, Tom disliked Site-36 RONS because of numerous rats and the potential danger from sappers. The first time he stayed at Na Khang, the strip was small. Only a Caribou could land safely. After the strip was extended north, a C-47 could land, but was unable to takeoff with anything more than a minimal payload. Trying to sleep in the metal and thatched shack was difficult, for rats drawn to the area by trash thrown behind the building by the natives drove him crazy. The houseboy, "Din" wore rats that he killed on his belt for later dining. Rats climbed on the counter where crews ate. Traps were set under the beds, which reduced the rat population somewhat, as evidenced by less squeaking. Attempting everything to eradicate them, cats were later introduced in 1966.³³

Sam Jordon carried a wicker basket of food for Site-36 RONS. The more enterprising rats would squeeze into the container, have a party, and create a racket.

The rat-hole disgusted Frank Stergar so much that he would occasionally sleep in the Sikorsky Hotel parked in the fueling area off to the right of the runway. It rained hard one night

³³ Tom Hoppe Interview.

while he and Steve Nichols used these accommodations. Frank awoke dry in the morning, but Steve, used to leaky conditions, was sleeping soundly on the bench seat even though it was saturated with water.³⁴

Using tactical methods similar to the previous objective, the next enemy redoubt was systematically reduced by artillery fire, supplemented by air strikes.

During the second week in August, Mike Jarina flew missions from LS-36 with newly-upgraded Captain Wayne Webb. A former Army pilot, Webb claimed being "Gung Ho" in helping the guys win the battle to retake Hua Mung. Despite Webb's macho words, Jarina was silently critical of the man's overall performance. Disregarding fuel burn that allowed additional payload, on subsequent shuttles he consistently carried only light loads at sixty knots outbound and seventy knots inbound in a no-turbulence situation. In contrast, Mike carried heavier loads, and flew his shuttles at eighty knots out and ninety knots back. Reminiscent of Hitchman, but unlike Weitz or Kanach, Jarina believed Webb milked the system.

Tony and Vang Pao oversaw the bombing campaign on the enemy-controlled mountain around Hua Mung, and closely monitored air strikes. At one time, Mike overheard Poe remark, "*We have them now. We have jets coming in and we are going to rack this place.*" He noted that destruction on the hill was so massive that not a tree stood.

H-34s approached the friendly landing zone low on the backside of the hill. Mike was highly impressed with the way pilots negotiated the landing zones while resupplying the

³⁴ Frank Stergar Tape.

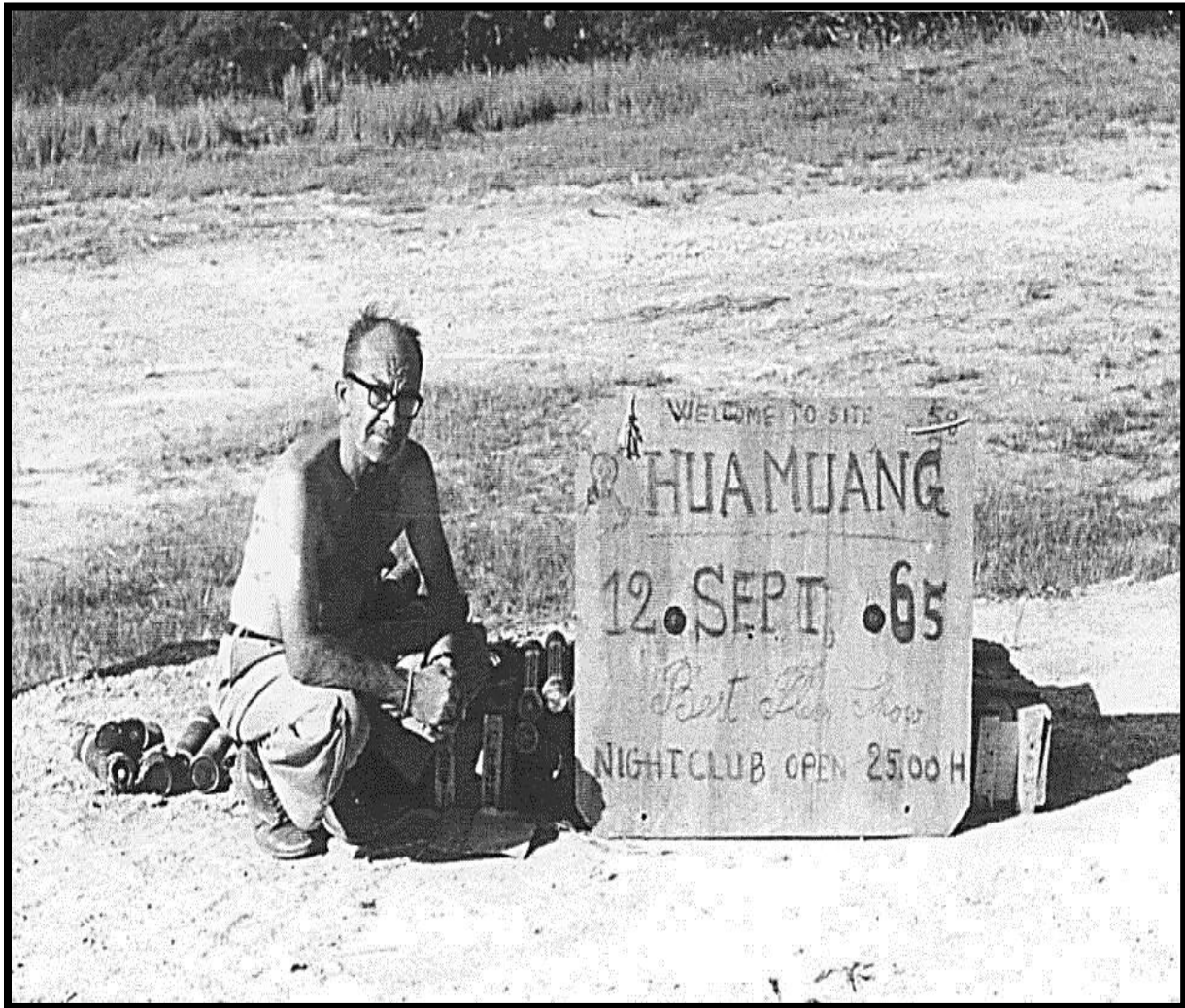
troops. As friendly troops pounded the enemy, Tony optimistically proclaimed that they were ready to seize the objective. However, the attempt failed and they quickly retreated,

On 17 August, FAR troops attacked a maze of trenches and tunnels, cleverly and meticulously constructed over the previous seven months. Eight days later, the mountain was in government hands and shelling of Hua Mung commenced.

Emory Swank, Ambassador Sullivan's deputy, later visited the area and commented:

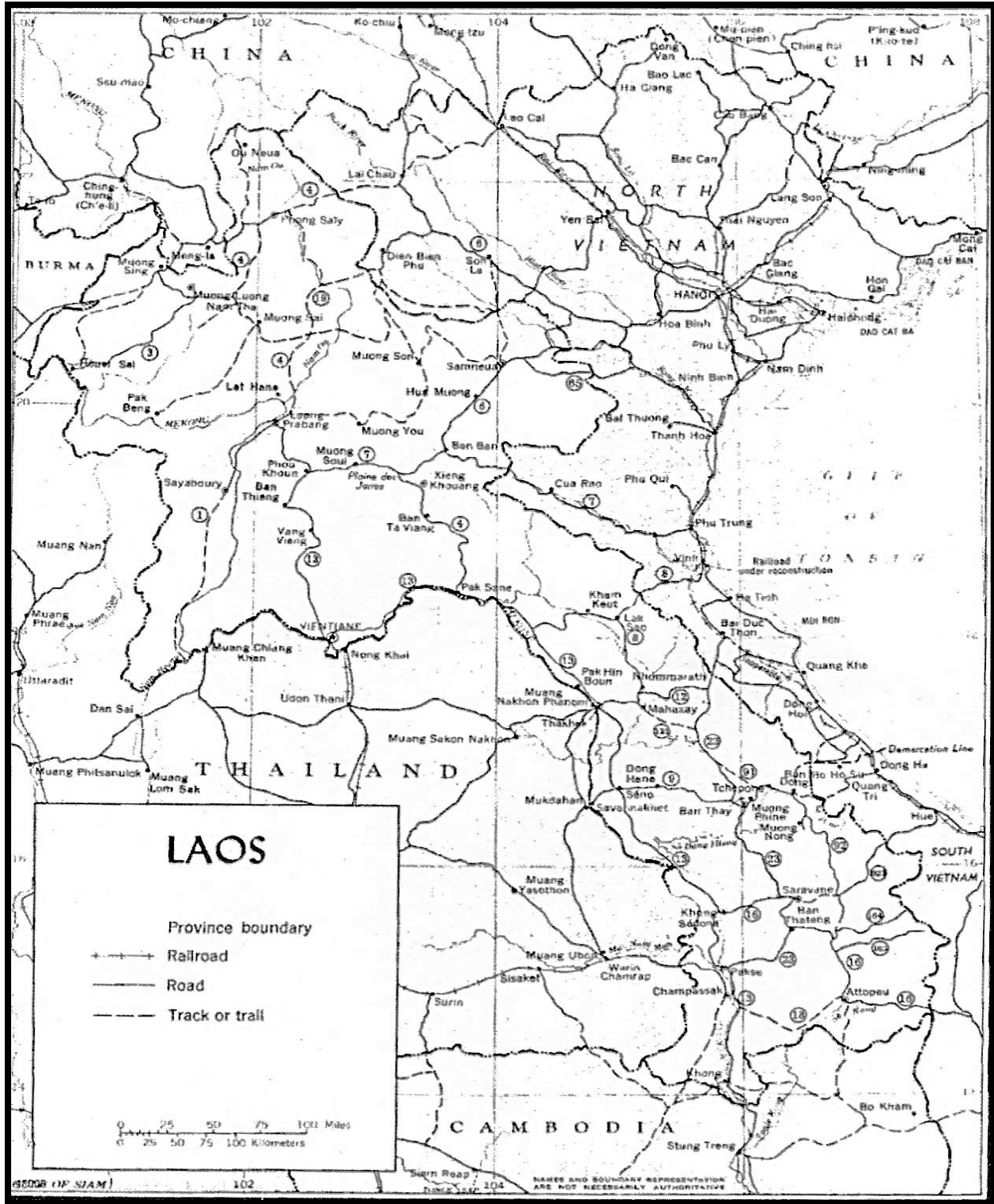
"Extensive tunnels led to all machinegun and mortar positions and underground supply depots and command posts with elaborate trench work had been built. The North Vietnamese doubtlessly regarded these positions as impregnable, but had not reckoned with air power. Evidence of the telling effect of friendly air bombardment is visible everywhere, especially in the craters fifteen to twenty feet deep and probably twice as wide which covered the mountain tops. The enemy had been literally blasted from his earthworks in a striking affirmation of the role air power can play in close support of ground forces."

By month's end, both east and west flanks of Hua Mung were occupied by government forces. Then, except for intermittent helicopter support, ten days of foul weather prevented abundant air activity and a final push on Site-58. Strikes resumed on the eleventh, but by then most of the enemy's three companies had already withdrawn to new defensive positions on prominent northeastern mountain tops. Air power had already cratered Route-6 at several choke points, and largely destroyed critical forward supply depots. What air could not accomplish, weather and VP's artillery did to discourage serious enemy road movement



A shirtless and hatless, but well-tanned Edgar "Pop" Buell squatting beside mortar ammunition, and a hastily prepared humorous sign at Hua Mounng Laos just after the reoccupation of LS-58 in northern Military Region Two on 09/12/65.

LaDue Collection.



Mid-center. Houa Moug sits astride Route-6 about halfway between the towns of Sam Neua and Ban Ban.

CIA Bulletin, 09/22/65.

to resupply their beleaguered forces. Now, with enemy resistance at or around the site considered negligible, the first Air America helicopter pilot tentatively landed on the east-west runway at Hua Moung on the 16th.

Since occupied higher ground overlooked Hua Moung, enemy presence had to be totally eliminated to safely return to Site-58. Crew-served weapons, ammo, and PARU specialists were again brought forward to help support action and reduce the last enemy remnants. During the ensuing conflict, FAR troops captured two of the positions three times, and were rejected each time by strong resistance. Finally, after an attack from the northwest, a weak point was discovered on the south side of Hong Oy Neua. Subsequent helicopter troop lifts provided the manpower necessary to seize this position. Air strikes, vertical envelopment, and a great deal of persistence eventually succeeded in capturing all remaining sites within the next five days.

ERNIE

IVS-AID and former Peace Corps worker in Thailand, Ernest Kuhn, arrived at Sam Tong just prior to Hua Moung's capture. Typical of Pop's fun and games testing technique of new employees in field situations, without benefit of a briefing, Kuhn was sent to Hua Moung in a Helio Courier filled with old clothing. Immediately getting his feet wet, Ernie was in the first plane to land at Site 58. While he waited for Pop to arrive and wondered what to do next, T-28 pilots bombed the southern ridgeline close to the runway. Such action caused Ernie to speculate as to the necessity of his presence in a forward battle area.

Two other planes landed with clothing. Hours later, with no one senior to him arriving, Ernie organized refugees and began distributing the clothing.

Later that afternoon, Pop arrived and ostensibly professed to be unhappy that his new employee had taken the initiative in handing out the clothing. At the time Ernie, like Joe Flipse and others, had no idea of Pop's modus operandi leaving newbies at remote sites to fend for themselves and discover if they were capable of coping with the situation.

Apparently, Pop was satisfied with Kuhn's effort, but did not indicate this as they dined on locally grown cucumbers. Since Pop did not want Ernie to overnight at Hua Moung, he dispatched him to Na Khang.

The following day, Pop suffered a severe case of food poisoning he attributed to tainted, and likely communist, cucumbers. The ailment placed him on the upcountry inactive list for several days.

Don Sjostrom, who also worked with the Peace Corps in Thailand, arrived in Laos at about the same time as Ernie Kuhn. For a time, both men worked in Sam Neua Province. Later, Don was assigned sole refugee AID responsibilities in upper Military Region Two, and was rumored to eventually assume the ailing Pop Buell's job at Sam Tong. Ernie worked in Luang Prabang and southern Phong Saly, where friendly sites proliferated west from the Dien Bien Phu area, and south toward Luang Prabang. In early 1967, when Sjostrom met an untimely death at Na Khang, Ernie moved back to upper Military Region Two. From that time, showing a lot of fortitude, he performed refugee work in most of Sam Neua Province. In areas where he was unable to fly, he walked, sometimes spending a week in the field sleeping in a different

village at night. After Sam Neua was lost, Kuhn was assigned many jobs until he left in 1975. ³⁵

SUCCESS

Following two months of grueling battle conditions, General Vang Pao's determined, but tired troops eventually won the day and entered Site-58 on 12 September. However, by 22 September, fighting continued to the east. ³⁶

One can only surmise how the men's victory over the dreaded Vietnamese bolstered their morale. Their achievement was tactically significant. The mixed FAR forces not only saved Na Khang, and returned an important portion of Sam Neua Province to the RLG, but the operation temporarily blocked enemy advances south toward Ban Ban, the Plain of Jars, and points south. Of course, fighter-bomber, cargo air drop, and helicopter air support provided the major backbone for the success. RLAF T-28 pilots flew 788 sorties and Bango-Whiplash jets 288. There are no hard statistics regarding total Air America missions flown, but given a conservative fifteen mission day per helicopter, multiplied by the number participating in the operation, a two-month period would easily have generated thousands of sorties.

³⁵ Frank Stergar Email, 01/25/96. Some information derived from a Blaine Jensen letter to Stergar regarding the close friendship between Kuhn and Sjostrom, and that Ernie kept in touch with Don's parents after his demise at Na Khang.

Jensen still has a warm feeling for Air America pilots: "*...you guys were always great!...You guys were always so kind, thoughtful, and willing to do whatever was asked of you. We all appreciated that more than any of you will ever know. Without your assistance and dedication, we would never have been able to accomplish what was expected of us!*"

³⁶ CIA Bulletin, 09/22/65. Laos: Military activity is rising as the rainy season ends.

And, the figures do not include fixed wing deliveries of ammo and supplies to Na Khang for redistribution to the front lines.

After resting and refitting, elements of Vang Pao's and Phan's units, along with One and Two SGU battalions, commenced movements south from Na Khang to clear enemy units on Route-6, with eventual plans to enter the Ban Ban Valley. The goal to retake Houei Sa An was achieved by 20 October. However, further movement to the fringes of Ban Ban was thwarted by Pathet Lao and PAVN units stiffened by reinforcements.

Perhaps intelligence gleaned from enemy deserters in mid-October, which revealed that five new Vietnamese battalions were camped near Ban Ban, discouraged further FAR penetration south. If the report was valid, new estimates of enemy forces in upper Military Region Two had to number almost 10,000 souls.

Despite the government victory, road watch teams observed considerable construction work on Route-7, portending an early resumption of truck resupply operations on Route-7. Movement along the entire length of the road to the Plain of Jars was blocked by high water, but road watch teams reported some traffic in the Ban Ban area. ³⁷ Moreover, enemy nightly air drops in Sam Neua and the PDJ increased. All the early activity failed to bode well for FAR in Military Region Two during the upcoming

³⁷ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 09/22/65.

dry season. ³⁸

THE COFFEE MAN

During a lull in the action, "Coffee Man" ran down the hill to my ship. I recognized him immediately, but had not seen him since Hua Moung fell in February. I noticed one thing different about him: he now wore only two grenades on his web belt. I wondered if he had put the others to good use before departing Site-58 at crunch time. I assumed that he was still an officers' gopher, when he climbed up the left side to request that I fly him to Moung Heim, located a few miles southwest, where he could purchase a few cartons of cigarettes at the local market. I disliked supporting non-war-related activities, but since there was no immediate work and the man had always been nice to me, I felt obligated and agreed. When we arrived at Lima Site-48, I told him to hustle with the chore. He transacted his business, and within a short time we departed for the short trip east to Na Khang.

By then, bulldozers had nearly completed strip construction. The red clay and laterite surface that gleamed when wet was fairly wide and over 2,200 feet long to accommodate larger STOL aircraft. Adjacent to the east side of the strip,

³⁸ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 129-130.
Victor Anthony, 169-179, 184.
Tom Hoppe Letter.
Mike Jarina Interviews.
Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos* (Vermont: Steerforth Press, 1996) 168.
Ernest Kuhn, 03/25/95 Interview with Arthur J. Dommen, 7-8, 13.
Kuhn Email.
Joe Flipse Email, 09/14/97.
Mike LaDue Email, 03/06/10.



A typical Lao or Lao Theung village bamboo stilt house located in the Mounng Heim valley area. Maximum use of palm and other trees provided some shade and respite from the fiercely hot year-round sun.

Mike Jarina Collection.

the POL and parking area had been enlarged to service additional helicopters, including the recent addition of USAF Jolly Green Ch-3s for SAR work in North Vietnam. A mix of red and white drummed Helio Courier, H-34 gasoline for reciprocating engine aircraft, and kerosene jet fuel for the Air Force's turbine engine machines, were tightly packed and sat upright adjoining the parking area.

After we exchanged pleasantries and said our goodbyes, I watched as "Coffee Man" unstrapped, turned, bent over at the waist, and backed out the cockpit window. Then I noticed one grenade was not properly secured to his web belt. This instantly generated an unpleasant vision of an exploding helicopter, and other what ifs. As "Coffee Man" struggled to find his footing in the fuselage recesses provided to climb up or down the side of the helicopter, the spoon of the grenade began working up and out the top of his belt. Alarmed, I screamed at him, *"Watch out for the gr..."* I never completed my sentence, for the dark green, Mark-Two, "pineapple" type fragmentation grenade was gone--dropped eight feet to the ground. Thinking that we were going to be blown apart within seconds, I panicked and immediately grabbed a handful of throttle and collective, hoping to depart before the device exploded. Highly concerned, and more than a little angry, I circled above the grenade's calculated burst radius.

"Coffee Man" disappeared. Nothing was in sight, save a lone grenade that sat like a deadly orphan in the middle of the runway. The longer I orbited and thought about the incident, the angrier I became. Feeding on my aggravation and frustration, I was keyed sufficiently to commit terminal mayhem. At that moment, I wanted to bounce a main gear off the man's head with extreme malice. While harboring these appalling thoughts, a

soldier, convinced that sufficient time had elapsed and the grenade was not going to explode, materialized and ran out to retrieve it. In the process, he looked up and motioned me to land. I circled once more before landing while looking for the perpetrator who had caused all this trouble. After touching down, I was surprised to observe "Coffee Man" dashing off at high port and scrambling uphill. By then a few of his buddies materialized and were holding their sides, laughing and pointing fingers at him. I finally understood what happened. When the grenade dropped, I leaped into the air so rapidly that he had insufficient time to reach the ground and clear the aircraft. I am not sure whether he clung to the hand holds or main gear strut, but he managed to survive, while I circled overhead conjuring bad things to do to him. Perhaps given another place and time frame, the incident might have been highly amusing. However, during a tortuous year fraught with death, adversity, and doom it was anything but funny to me.

I was not assigned to work at Na Khang until October and never again encountered the "Coffee Man". I later wondered if he had been terminated under the Meo tribal code for causing a helicopter pilot trouble. More likely, he had lost sufficient face that he chose to avoid me.

Fighting the enemy was always a primary goal in upper Military Region Two. Consequently, there was very little tolerance for breaches of discipline in the hills. Penalties ranged from brutal kicking that I observed U Va Lee ³⁹ administer to a subordinate for some infraction, to a summary execution, which thankfully I never witnessed.

³⁹ U Va Lee: A man we called the Indian because of his craggy features and red, flushed face.

Another stir crazy soldier shot at Captain Charlie Weitz from his hilltop post close to Na Khang. Charlie reported the incident, and for the infraction the luckless man was shot.

Enjoying a respite from the front lines, I worked RO or USAID out of Sam Tong and 713 from Long Tieng for the next three days.

After six days and sixty-four hours in the air, I headed south. While still in the mountains I passed near a thunderstorm. A lightning bolt flashing in front of the aircraft appeared to strike the rotor blades. It marked a first. Although I was considerably shaken by the momentary event, there was no noticeable damage, vibration, or change to flight characteristics.

To stem the normal boredom of a ferry flight, I enjoyed listening to one of the several UHF strike and SAR frequencies. At times, the drama was often intense over the airwaves, as a panicked jet jockey with his plane low on fuel searched for and screamed for a tanker. Other times it could be amusing. On another occasion while returning to Udorn, I heard someone in a control ship inquire in the clear if anyone heard music. Thinking a second, I piped up, *"How high are you?"*

"Thirty thousand feet."

I immediately replied, *"Does the music sound anything like harps?"* Guffaws could be heard from several pilots.

SAMS

On the 24th, the same day I made my way south, I overheard jet and Crown pilots conversing about sobering news relating to an event that we all eventually expected. An F-105 bomber formation over a munitions factory near Kangchi, fifty-five miles northwest of Hanoi, was attacked by SAM-2 surface-to-air

missiles for the first time. One SAM penetrated a cloud layer and burst in proximity to a division of MiGCAP F-4C Phantom 2s from the Ubon air base. The explosion destroyed one plane (serial number 63-7599) and severely damaged three others. Captain Richard Keirn, a former World War Two prisoner, successfully ejected, attaining the dubious honor of being captured and incarcerated for a second time in two very diverse wars. Captain Roscoe Fobair was killed. ⁴⁰

At the time the Rolling Thunder campaign had commenced, and the Vietnamese military, in conjunction with Soviet technicians, was already developing a state-of-the-art air defense system, centered around the SA-2 Guideline missile. The circular shaped missile battery contained from four to six launchers, with a radar and communications van staged in the center. Incorporated into the targeting system was an early warning radar, named Spoon Rest and a Fan Song (NATO terminology) radar that guided the well-proven first-generation Soviet SA-2 SAM missiles to their targets.

The booster rocket was equipped to deliver a 349-pound high-explosive warhead to a slant range of thirty miles, and a maximum ceiling of 60,000 feet at a speed of more than Mach-3. The missile proved highly accurate, and was often difficult to avoid. The business end could be fused for contact, command detonation, or a proximity explosion, which was effective within three hundred feet, and deadly at two hundred feet.

What became known as a thirty-five-foot flying telegraph pole was easily spotted in good weather by pilots observing an initial launch, then the distinguishing fire and smoke trail

⁴⁰ John Bowman, 122.
John Smith, *Rolling Thunder*, 68-69.

emitted by the device in flight. Therefore, it was incumbent on a pilot to spot the launch early, and then attempt evasion by performing high "G" maneuvers that would break the targeting lock. If successful in this endeavor, the missile would continue on to its maximum altitude and explode.

Many aviators initially discovered the hard way that the enemy possessed an "ace in the hole." With a slight delay between launches, they often hurled two missiles at an airborne target. If a pilot managed to evade the first missile, the second normally performed its intended task.

In April, when SAM sites were first photographed, members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff called for the weapons' elimination. As late as 3 July strikes on the sites were recommended by knowledgeable people in Washington. Four days later, photo recce revealed that at least three sites were nearly active. Pros and cons were discussed regarding their destruction. Unfortunately, reminiscent of the stop sign or red light not installed at intersections until someone is killed, Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, the intelligence community, and General Westmoreland dissented, mainly because the missiles had not yet threatened the Rolling Thunder program.⁴¹

On the recreational playing fields of my youth, and especially at Marine Corps Basic School, I was taught the best defense was always a good offense. Couched in simpler terms, during times of conflict, one does not wait for his enemy to strike, but must take the initiative and attack first. Since the

⁴¹ Jacob Van Staaveren, *Operations*, 41-42.
Edward Marolda, 62-63.

John Nichols and Barrett Tillman, *On Yankee Station: The Naval Air War over Vietnam* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1987) 56, 58.

Korean "War," this was a principal our civilian leaders in Washington never seemed to fathom. What was really disappointing to me concerning the first jet downing, was the fact that civilian "leaders" were fully aware of the missile site construction three months before it became active, and were aware of the improved Soviet weapon's capability. Exactly like the failure to provide adequate military SAR coverage in Laos at the inception of the reconnaissance phase, our leaders were in denial, failing to realize or deal with a known situation long before planes and crews were lost. Fearing deaths of Soviet technicians supervising the AAA construction sites, or doubting their actual use, gross procrastination and erroneous pragmatism led to the loss of expensive machines and irreplaceable men. As an eyewitness in the Theater, it was easy for me to become bitter, angry, depressed, and disgusted, especially when highly fatigued. It was nothing new. From the commencement of the air war, the Johnson Administration's tentative policies of commission and omission in regard to SAR work and preemptive strikes on enemy airfields and missile sites tended to follow a dismal pattern that increasingly chewed up good airmen. Since we possessed the knowledge and assets to effectively perform the job, to a former Marine, Washington's concept of prosecuting the Second Indochina War failed to make sense to me then, and still does not.

UDORN

I enjoyed a few days off the schedule to rest and contemplate on what had occurred upcountry--but mostly to forget the unpleasant aspects of the job until the next round of challenges.

Many projects were in various stages of construction and confusion at the Air America facility. It never seemed to end. Ground breaking for a new operations-administration building located between the Club and the Madriver drainage area was finally underway. However, space for offices was not firmed yet, as Dick Ford discovered when he contacted former General Dick Fisher soliciting a FIC facility in the building. Progress was being made on the relocation of the indigenous snack bar, the clean-up for a new parking ramp, and the preparation for a hard surfacing of the taxiway. Plans were in the mill for new shops and improvements to the Club.

All previous SAR operations reports prepared in FIC, which included Air America participation, were copied and sent to the DFOD. Future reports on the subject were to be forwarded by only safe hand to VPFO Boyd.

During the month, fifteen activity reports were recorded. Three related to ground fire battle damage. These did not include aircraft damage encountered during SAR missions that were delineated in separate reports.

No security clearance for FIC personnel had yet been received to attend the daily Air Support Operations Center briefings. Without contractual clearance, FIC was denied face-to-face exchange of information between the Air Force and Air America that had previously provided early weather forecasts covering the area of operations. In lieu of a physical presence at the meetings, arrangements were made to have the forecast delivered by USAF courier mail. A copy was also requested for

Vientiane FIC. ⁴²

UPCOUNTRY

H-34 First Officers continued upcountry training and area familiarization. This would satisfy the Company push to qualify additional pilots and minimize our future flight hours. Mike Jarina went upcountry to Sam Tong on a five-day RON with Charlie Weitz. It rained the entire period, thwarting serious work. However, the RON provided an eye-opening experience for Mike, and insight into how senior pilots operated in bad weather. En route to Sam Tong, with clouds hanging low on the hills lining the Nam Ngum, Charlie flew up and down a wall of clouds. Clouds were above them and rocks visible to the front. Charlie circled several times, causing Mike to wonder what he was doing. Then, observing a light spot in the clouds, Charlie punched through a hole into sunshine and entered the Site-20 Valley. Amazed, Mike asked his Captain how he knew the site was located there. Charlie looked strangely at his cockpit mate as if to say, *"Well, doesn't everyone?"*

They managed to descend into the Long Tieng Valley, where workers were spreading laterite dirt and building up the sides in anticipation of creating a new strip. It was excessively muddy and socked in. Unable to ground taxi, they were forced to air taxi from place to place while carrying lumber from the south of the valley to the north in the rain. During the day, Mike heard former Air Commando Bill McShane call on the 118.1-megahertz common area frequency while landing nearby. He had

⁴² Ben Moore July 1965 Udorn Monthly Report.
Dick Ford/Rock FIC/UTH, Monthly Report to Operations Manager,
07/31/65.

gotten stuck on a hillside in his Helio Courier and began sliding uncontrollably. Later, Mike met Tony alongside the runway. At that time, he lived in a small shack on the west side of the strip where a temple was later erected. He had a pot stove to heat water and stave off the cold evening air. The next time he would see Tony was at Nam Yu in northwestern Laos.

Another day, they wandered around in bad weather while working at Bouam Long, where a new runway was being built in the security of a bowl to the east of the existing ridgeline strip. Upon completion, the Bouam Long name remained the same, but the Lima Site listing was changed from LS-88 to LS-32. The work afforded Mike a look at Na Khang and Phu Pha Thi.

Late one afternoon the crew was dispatched to Luang Prabang with some Americans from Sam Tong, and landed in a soccer field southeast of town. Although probably a valid parking area, there was no visible security present. (I cannot recall parking there.) As a newbie, Mike took for granted that it was a standard parking area. A black Mercedes Benz was waiting for them, and a government representative requested that they accompany him to the governor's palace for dinner. A large party was underway with school teachers and province officials attending. A long table was laden with abundant and varied kinds of food. Following the festivities, they were invited to spend the night. Jarina was overwhelmed, as he had never previously been treated with such courtesy and deference.

The following day, the unfamiliar Lao food took its toll on Mike's gastro-intestinal system, and he developed a severe case of diarrhea. They launched for Na Khang. Not long after arriving, Charlie was relieved on site by big John Fonburg. Because of his bout with the "Code of the East," Mike was not able to join John immediately in the cockpit. After evacuating

his bowels frequently over a two-hour period, although weak, he felt well enough to resume his First Officer duties. ⁴³

HOPPE

Despite stops and starts, bouts of the "Code of the East," and Bob Hitchman's bad-mouthing of him to the chief pilot, Tom Hoppe received the "Golden Handshake," and was upgraded to Captain. An initial RON was conducted at Pakse, where a relatively quiet military situation prevailed. Landing zone elevations were relatively low and not particularly demanding. En route, Tom dead reckoned Hotel-21 through rain all the way south. On future flights to Lima-11, he sometimes stopped at the Ubon Air Force base to obtain fuel.

Tom stayed overnight in Pakse town and found his own accommodations, which included the USAID hostel. Emulating an old French colonial influence, he breakfasted on coffee au lait and bread.

During a seven-day period, he and Rudy Serafico worked at Ban Saphat (LS-175) on the joint USAID-Agency-FAR WAPI project. However, a majority of missions were directed to the Bolovens Plateau where, consistent with expansion in other parts of the country, a series of government Pakse Sites (PS) were reactivated, or were in the process of development. Some of these sites included Ban Nam Tieng (LS-165), Phou Kham Phouk (LS-166), and Long Keo (LS-172). All these locations were close to the southeast rim on hilly and rough terrain. Some flights involved flying supplies to Attopeu (L-10), the isolated

⁴³ Mike Jarina Interviews.
EW Knight Email, 01/20/01.

outpost, and last government presence at the southeast foot of the plateau. Following Route-23 from Pakse, Tom flew to Paksong (L-05). He deemed the entire area beautiful, but deceiving, with high grass masking rolling terrain from the air. Years later, while reviewing his past experiences in Laos, Tom reflected that we were young then, possessed nerve, and did not object to flying over heavily jungled terrain and high trees in a single engine helicopter. Trips to roads end at Houei Khong (L-56) afforded him the opportunity to meet and visit the John Davis missionary family. While there, he learned that when tribal women were about to have children, they were banished from the main house and required to stay in the chicken coop. ⁴⁴

The Pakse area remained a relatively low intensity conflict in 1965. Occasionally, T-28 pilots dropped bombs. Hoppe avoided these areas, and was never fired on. Tom never carried a weapon other than his CO2 pistol.

Tom was very careful flying the H-34 after being upgraded. Conservative loading and carrying supplies always took precedence. Throughout his tour, he remained naïve regarding the working parts of the H-34 and associated maintenance. He normally just opened the clam shell doors, and looked at the engine, without actually being aware of what he was looking for. With increased experience, he discovered more obvious faults like clamps detached from magneto covers or loose nuts on the carburetor throttle attachments.

⁴⁴ This description relating to birthing women was much like cultural taboos of the Arapesh tribe and the female menstrual huts that Author Margret Mead described in her books regarding tribal customs and mores in New Guinea.

After upgrading, Tom had more money to spend, and his friends took him to two bars in town for entertainment. One had a tree growing in the middle of the establishment. Tom noted that bands played music most of the time without the frequent breaks U.S. bands enjoyed. Air America types were catered to initially by the bar employees, because they possessed all the money and were few in number. Wayne Knight informed Tom in passing that additional Air Force personnel would continue to arrive that year. Later, when bar owners realized a great many more Americans were arriving, they stopped treating their Air America clientele so well. ⁴⁵

MILITARY AND STATE

Previous disagreements between U.S. Air Force and U.S. Army leaders regarding various types of flying equipment arose again during a July SEACoord meeting in Bangkok. To justify its existence and maintain Congressional funding, the USAF always preferred modern jet engine aircraft in lieu of reciprocating engine planes for most missions. ⁴⁶

However, MACV Commander General Westmoreland, stressing the difficulty of valid and reliable reconnaissance coverage over dense jungle by fast movers, again called for the introduction of slower, more effective propeller planes. He was going to request the employment of five slower O-1E Bird Dog aircraft. However, this idea was initially rejected by RLAF General Thao Ma, who believed his T-28 pilots were better equipped to perform

⁴⁵ Tom Hoppe Interview.

⁴⁶ This related to the old military service mentality of use them or lose them.

the job and avoid bombing errors. Therefore, the O-1 program was delayed until December.

There was heightened demand for additional Panhandle intelligence about enemy strength and infiltration. Information was deemed necessary to generate more targets for U.S. and RLAF strikes. Some representatives proposed using U.S. and Thai ground assets for the task. However, Ambassador Sullivan, aware that FAR generals in southern Laos did not favor a Thai presence, dissented. Instead, he desired to expand the local road watch team program to conduct operations closer to enemy LOCs. Despite the degree of difficulty involved, more road watch mobility was recommended, rather than the present static surveillance locations.⁴⁷

In mulling over requests for additional Lao road watch teams and other critical items, Washington's CIA headquarters Director McCone outlined plans to augment the Agency effort in Southeast Asia. He was convinced that the program had to take into consideration the whole scenario, rather than specific and limited items. Therefore, he recommended formation of a national planning task group to conduct an integrated planning effort.

Ambassador Sullivan's message reiterated that Lao operations were conducted as part of Southeast Asia's total problem through SEACORD meetings, and by an equitable intelligence exchange. Laos was only a holding operation, depending entirely on the war's outcome in South Vietnam. Overt USG adherence to the Geneva Accords required the majority of American operations in Laos to be covertly conducted. Therefore,

⁴⁷ Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 80, 85, 88.

agendas and operations in the two countries had to be separately managed.

Echoing Admiral Sharp's concerns, Agency honcho Des Fitzgerald mentioned alleged intelligence gaps regarding enemy movements in Southern Laos. In response, Sullivan indicated that he was considering utilizing overt U.S. or South Vietnamese forces westward along Route-9 from the border. However, he discouraged the use of Thai Rangers as too well known and impractical. ⁴⁸

The CIA's highly successful Meo program must have had considerable impact on North Vietnamese leaders' planning and timetable. Acknowledging their effectiveness, during an unusual broadcast, Pathet Lao Radio mentioned the group as fighting on the RLG side.

"Meo bandits are under the direct command of U.S. officers who have trained them with weapons. The U.S. imperialists have used these Meo bandits to carry out destructive acts against the Lao nation...the U.S. imperialists are now separating the Meo people, who have lived in Laos for generations, from the Lao people."

Enemy propaganda continued over the airways with a dissertation regarding the Pathet Lao movement's different philosophy from the communist political structure in other countries. Because the population of Laos was half tribal, Pathet Lao leaders failed to encourage the formation of minority autonomous zones like existed in Son Tay Province, North Vietnam. Instead, they recognized a requirement to cultivate tribal and minority populations by providing economic

⁴⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, Colby-Sullivan, 07/23/65.

development and political posts in a central political structure. They denounced U.S. efforts to install a separate Lao Meo political unit, which separated the Meo people from the Lao.⁴⁹

RETALIATION

After the first American plane and crew was lost to a SAM missile, CIA intelligence personnel believed the Soviets would continue to provide SAMs to North Vietnam for the protection of industrial sites around Hanoi and Haiphong, regardless of what action the U.S. pursued. Furthermore, there was sufficient evidence that the Vietnamese military would resist even more vigorously with the addition of MiG fighters and Il-28 bombers positioned at their airfields. Based on this information, President Johnson authorized a massive strike on SAMs located in the no-fly zone around Hanoi.

July 27 marked the initial USAF response against the SAM site that had downed an F-4C on the 24th. Along with command-and-control centers, another site was targeted forty miles northwest of Hanoi. Employing 2.75-inch rockets and twenty-millimeter Gatlin chain gun cannons, forty-six F-105 "Thuds" from Korat and Takhli participated in the raids. Dozens of other aircraft also supported the mission. It was a particularly bad day for Air Force pilots. Although one missile launcher was destroyed and another damaged, several U.S. planes were hit or lost to AAA fire. Captain Walter Kosko, Major Jack Graham Farr, and Captain William J. Barthelmas were killed.

⁴⁹ Kunstadter, *Southeast Asian Tribes*, (Princeton, 1967), 25, 245.

To prevent confusion and congestion in the target areas, flights of four aircraft entered the zones, performed their work, and departed. After refueling from a tanker, the flight of four F-105s, including Captain Frank Tullo, flew toward the target area near Thanh Son to attack any positions still standing. He noted that while flying close to the deck at 700 mph, ground fire protecting the SAM sites was very heavy.

With his ship (62-4407) hit and on fire, Tullo elected to head for the mountains west of Hanoi. Losing control, hearing explosions in the aft section, he punched out at low altitude and landed in saw grass on a grassy hillside twenty-five miles west of the city. After making contact with F-105 and Navy A-1H assets, Frank headed for higher ground to wait and anticipate rescue. From his vantage spot, he heard shots and voices of troops looking for him.

George Martin, PIC of a CH-3C, was en route from Nakhon Phanom to a forward refueling site, when he received a message to proceed immediately to Na Khang, and prepare for a rescue attempt of an F-105 pilot near Hanoi. After landing at Site-36 to offload cargo and an additional crew, an engine-over-temperature warning light illuminated. Instead of grounding the helicopter, the pilot elected to shut down, refuel, and then ascertain if the engine was acceptable during restart.

Late in the day, having little idea of where the pilot was located, and following a general heading, the Jolly Green crew was fifty miles from target before two A-1H planes from the Fleet joined on the CH-3. They led Martin to Tullo. ⁵⁰

⁵⁰ One of the pilots was Ed Greathouse, a U.S. Navy A-1 Sandy pilot, who participated in the MiG shoot down on 20 June, the day my crew and I returned to Laos from Son La with major battle damage.

It was close to dark when the CH-3 arrived overhead and the horse collar lowered. Tullo entered the device, and the hoist process began. With the pilot partially off the ground the hoist jammed. As the helicopter drifted, Tullo was dragged through foliage. In the cockpit, the engine high temperature light flashed on again. While two crewman and copilot Orville Keese struggled to manually pull Frank into the cabin, Martin discovered an open area where he lowered Tullo to the ground. After the man exited the sling, he landed.

Despite the low fuel state, probable engine problems, darkness, and contentious weather at altitude, the crew made its way back to Na Khang where pre-positioned flare pots and landing lights of H-34s marked the landing strip.

During a period marking many firsts, Tullo's successful rescue was the farthest penetration north into North Vietnam by a military crew. In addition, it was the first rescue by a Jolly Green crew in Southeast Asia. Of the Air Force pilots surviving death that day, Tullo was the only downed aviator rescued. The others enjoyed seven years in captivity. ⁵¹ ⁵²

NIE

A timely National Intelligence Estimate regarding Laos served to update the current situation. With Lao elections completed and the RLG government displaying signs of increasing stability, American intelligence experts were confident that the

⁵¹ The Captain Curtis Briggs rescue represented the first civilian SAR conducted inside the DVR.

⁵² John Bowman, 122.
Robert Hanson, *Tullo and the Giant*, Article *Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Air & Space Magazine*, 12/06/00, (www.airspacemag.com/ASM/Mag/Index/1997/JJ/tatg.htm).

communists would not commence any major offensives over the next several months. However, it was preordained that the Vietnamese would react to any FAR offensive seriously threatening supply lines to the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, or movement into sensitive areas bordering North Vietnam or China. Even considering gains achieved strengthening RLA forces over the past year, it was believed that any major offensive into those areas would be repelled with huge government losses, which would foster devastating morale problems.

Royal Lao Government military forces numbered 54,000, including 1,000 Air Force and 450 river flotilla troops. General Ma's air force counted forty-five T-28s in his arsenal. His pilots displayed skill and courage conducting close air support missions, harassing enemy supply lines. This was particularly the case during the previous summer's Operation Triangle clearing action, and in the defense of Dong Hene. ⁵³

Absence of an enemy offensive before the 1965 monsoon season and FAR's increased infantry attack capability combined to provide confidence and high morale. RLA fighting capabilities were generally considered the best in its history, but the army was still considered the world's worst, with little incentive to seriously challenge any formidable opposition. In addition, Kong Le's 8,000 dysfunctional Neutralist force were largely demoralized and, except for merely occupying territory, provided little to the FAR effort in military capability.

⁵³ In awarding kudos, there was no mention that many T-28 pilots working in Military Region Two were Thai.

Tribal unconventional warfare irregulars represented the preeminent fighting element in the RLA.⁵⁴ They not only defended home areas, but provided effective harassment of enemy LOCs.

Communist forces, particularly the Peoples' Army of Viet Nam (PAVN) were measurably more adept at conducting war than RLG assets. They always possessed the capability to easily capture the river towns of Thakhet or Luang Prabang. Interior towns of Saravane or Attopeu in Military Region Four were considered especially vulnerable to communist attack and could be seized by relatively small forces. However, assaulting and capturing Vientiane, Pakse, or Savannakhet would require substantially greater PAVN forces. The enemy could no longer overrun FAR-controlled territory as easily as in the past. Improvement in FAR capability and air strikes on supply lines would preclude this and make it decidedly more expensive.

Hanoi's leaders showed no inclination to foment additional military adventures in Laos. They already controlled considerable portions of Laos considered essential to their war effort. The last time they captured an important town from the FAR was 1962. In early 1965, they successfully pursued clearing actions along Route-6 supply lines against irregular forces in Military Region Two's Sam Neua Province, and were currently increasing pressure on anti-communist forces in Military Region One at the junction of Nam Tha, Luang Prabang, and Phong Saly Provinces. Their efforts resulted in moderate security of supply lines, but much of the mountainous terrain outside strong points and roads remained in control of tribal irregulars. Unsuccessful past and present assaults convinced the enemy that it was

⁵⁴This category not only consisted of Meo, but Lao Theung as well.

extremely difficult and costly to overpower determined guerrilla forces.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ NIE, Military Situation, 08/05/65.

On 30 July, Larry Wilderom, Joe Gaculais, and I launched north to fulfill a five-day Customer assignment in Military Region One. Although Lou McCasland and other pilots had flown Hotel-33, I had not touched the ship since the Son La episode. It was not a planned move on management's part, just luck of the draw. If, however, I had been an overly superstitious person, the ship might have elicited bad memories, but actually it was only a revered machine, and I was mentally stable by then. Superstition, white magic, odds calculation, and wearing talismans would surface later when the war and pucker factors increased to greater proportions.

We stopped at Wattay Airport to board passengers for Sayaboury Town (L-23). After completing a roughly ninety-mile trip northwest of Vientiane, we were directed to an unnamed mountain site twenty-four miles northeast on the east bank of the Mekong. Then we continued north to Luang Prabang where we completed a few local missions. From Lima-54, we were sent upriver to Chiang Kong (T-516) for the night.

I had not been in the area or overnighted at Young's Bungalow since late March, and that was only in conjunction with a maintenance ferry flight. Because of navigation difficulty, my lack of familiarity in the region, and the absence of adequate briefings, I still did not feel particularly comfortable working there. Even though Military Region Two was a hundred percent more active, I knew most hostile areas and how to avoid trouble (except during SARs). Since Bill Young's sudden departure the previous year, I seldom worked the region and had lost valuable Customer rapport. However, now with an extra hand in the cockpit

to help fly and navigate, some of my concerns were lessened. Not pertinent to the current RON, Bill was reputed to be retuning soon to the area.

Following a leisurely Sunday breakfast, we were directed to work at Xieng Lom. It marked my first time at the site since the unsuccessful May Brace SAR. Except for a few additional buildings, not much had changed. If I considered Chiang Kong briefings abbreviated, those at Site-69 Alpha were immeasurably worse--absolutely none. Still, the area of operations was not large and, with the situation apparently calm, I conducted work without incident. Toward late afternoon, I ferried officers and a Customer to LP, where I refueled and recovered late at Chiang Khong.

During the 1964 initial expansion period, some radio equipment and Thai operators had been relocated from Chiang Kong to the refugee site at Nam Thouei. After further deliberation, the Udorn AB-1 crowd decided that the site could never provide adequate security, sufficiently filter covert activity from prying eyes, or supply AID requirements for the multitude of diverse ethnic refugee groups. Therefore, Nam Yu, located only a few kilometers west, and previously reconnoitered from ground and air, was blessed as the new Agency in-country site. ¹

Following the completion of runway and some support buildings, the site was opened for business toward the end of 1964. However, like the early days at Long Tieng, because of the secrecy attached to the operations, only selected pilots RON there. Lou McCasland RON for five days as recently as the third

¹ Before Bill Young departed Southeast Asia, he and I had conducted an extensive reconnaissance of the selected area.

week in July. Other than conducting shuttles to outlying outposts and new sites, I heard rumors whispered much later that teams operating along the border and in Yunnan Province were initially trained and supplied from Nam Yu. Also, a fixed wing kicker's brother was reputed to be located in southern China conducting a listening watch operation and recruiting troops.

The next day we flew over ten hours, shuttling ammunition and supplies between Tango-516 and Nam Yu (LS-118A). Some missions took us to the east, where sites were being reactivated or in the first stages of operation.

That night we RON in the long, narrow valley, pinched by protective ridgelines. We bunked in the PARU "hooch," ate their weeds and rice, and listened to them joke. It was my first time overnighiting there. Although satisfactory, it lacked the perceived "luxury" of our Sam Tong hostel.

Located in the center of enemy LOCs leading to the strategic Plain of Jars and toward Vientiane, Military Region Two operations had always taken precedence in H-34 assignment and utilization. Recently, the introduction of additional helicopters and pilots over the past year had afforded Customers in other military regions the luxury of versatile helicopter assets. Cheaper to operate and maintain, STOL Helio Courier and Porter aircraft were deemed excellent machines for air dropping ammunition and supplies to local landing zones, and landing on remote strips, but, despite their attributes, they were not able to land on tiny pads recently hacked out of the wilderness during the Houa Kong expansion. When ethnic American Indian and former prize fighter Louis O'Jibway (Ojibway) enjoyed a rare two H-34 contingent in his area, usually one ship RON at Chiang Khong to work Xieng Lom, and the other remained at Nam Yu. Otherwise, with only one ship on site, depending on Customer

requirements, the H-34 and crew alternated between the two areas.

Except to commute during the construction phase, Jib preferred to remain on the Thai side of the river, and never RON at 118-Alternate. However, one younger, heavy set assistant Jim Sheldon, effecting Aussie style "Jungle Jim" clothes and sporting a moustache, handled paramilitary affairs. Another Case Officer, stocky, burly, chestnut-haired, Gary Erb, conducted intelligence gathering. After a Nam Yu tour, Erb returned to Chiang Mai. Both men rotated into and out of the site and the presence of an H-34 and crew there was probably intended for their nighttime security.

Many ADC ethnic cadre units were long established in the region, but were relatively quiescent after relocating south from northern regions under enemy duress. While preparing for an eventual return to their traditional homes, the basis for additional recruitment to increase their numbers was already underway by Bill Young before his abrupt and politically motivated departure. In the spring of 1965, the Case Officers were directed to commence offensive operations. Therefore, Sheldon concentrated on increasing military assets among the four ethnic groups. The largest group, the Yao (Mein), was headed by hereditary chief, Chao Mai Srisongfa. The Kha (Khmu) group was commanded by Khamsene Keodara, while the Lu, by Khamphai Vilayphanh. Lastly, Moua Su, son of Bouam Long chieftain Gia Pao Moua, headed the Meo contingent.

After the diverse groups were formed into substantial numbers approaching battalion strength, and since facilities at Nam Yu were inadequate to train the large force, the men were flown to Hua Hin, Thailand, to receive proper military instruction. This was not considered a precedent, for, in

addition to the Hua Hin facility, such training had begun years ago throughout Thailand for Lao and tribal ethnics at Lopburi, Korat, and "Pitts Camp" near Phitsanulok.

Joe Flipse considered transition to joint FAR-SGU consolidation not as smooth as others believed. One fundamental problem occurred when Chao Mai was appointed captain, and Moua Su a major in the RLA. This was a serious political mistake. Ranging from Yunnan Province to the North Vietnam area, the Yao had been the leading regional tribe for hundreds of years. Quite advanced for tribals, the Yao possessed the ability to read and write, and taught Chinese in their villages. The Lao king had appointed Chao Mai's grandfather to act as his representative in government matters over all other ethnics in the Nam Tha region. French administrators later continued the policy. At the time of the rank elevation, Chao Mai was a Naikong, a position considered greater than a military captain.

In those early days, Moua Su never accomplished anything tangible except to politic with Vang Pao at Long Tieng. In doing so, while directing Houa Khong operations, he caused Bill Young a lot of trouble before Bill left Southeast Asia. In addition, the Meo site at Ban Na Woua (LS-109), three hours walk north of Nam Thouei in Chao Mai's area, was responsible to Moua Su. ²

Then when the SGU program commenced at Nam Yu, and Chao Mai was obligated to move there, he lost some control over the refugees at Nam Thouei. He considered this, plus the rank

² In rebuttal, MacAllen Thompson stated that Moua Su later earned respect when he was promoted to lieutenant colonel and transferred back to Bouam Long to work with his father. He was present at the site during enemy heavy artillery bombardments.

controversy, and Lao treachery during an earlier Ban Pong operation, a personal insult.³

While fulfilling missions out of Nam Yu, after working at Vang Vieng the previous day for Kong Le, Mike Jarina and Scratch Kanach arrived at T-516 on the second to supplement our presence. Mike enjoyed flying with Scratch because of his professionalism and knowledge during a maintenance problem. For example, during his checkout period, while Mike was flying around the hills north of Sam Tong, he felt a series of thumps through the controls. Scratch immediately assumed control, whipped the helicopter around, and plunked it on a hill. Investigation revealed a damper or control rod had separated when a bolt worked loose. They left the H-34 on the hill, while another H-34 pilot recovered them.

Except for a familiarization trip to Pakse, it was Mike's next-to-last checkout area. The crew stayed with us at the Chiang Khong Bungalow, and it was Mike's first introduction to the barrel-chested, pug-nosed O'Jibway. He did not meet Bill Young until later.

Jarina had been spoiled by recent RONS at the Sam Tong hostel. However, he considered the rooms containing a desk, easy chair, bed, light, and dresser a little unnecessary, when one lived out of a suitcase for a limited number of nights. That evening, Mike asked Jib's batman where the sheets for the bed were located. They were provided at Sam Tong and Mike assumed that they were available at every RON location. The guy looked

³ Ken Conboy, 136.
Joe Flipse Emails, 05/05/97, 05/06/97, 06/05/97, 01/24/99.
Mac Thompson Email.

at Mike strangely as if to say, *"What the hell are you talking about, buddy?"*

Scratch conducted flying similar to Weitz's style while operating in cloudy conditions. It was a VFR technique adapted by helicopter pilots to complete assigned missions during the rainy season. In contrast, Jarina had been an instrument pilot who had always flown IFR in bad weather. Therefore, "Seat-of-the-pants" flying, and remaining in contact with the ground most of the time, was relatively new to him. On one occasion when they were flying on top of an overcast, Mike looked around to judge where they could go. Then a small hole developed that one could see through. All Mike could see underneath were trees. Kanach commenced a tight spiral through the small opening into the Ban Pong Valley south of Site-118. They broke out with 700 feet clearance underneath the clouds. Amazed, Mike asked Scratch how he knew where he was when he began penetration. His Captain indicated, *"Why, that was where the valley was located."* Mike, flying later as a Captain, found himself doing the same thing.

As most of us "old timers" were already aware, Jarina considered the entire Houa Khong Province very wild country, where one could easily become disoriented because of magnetic anomalies and a lack of prominent terrain features to use for navigation. Mike's education continued when they were far to the east of Nam Yu looking for landmarks to find an assigned LZ. At one point he asked Scratch, *"How the hell do you know where you are?"*

"See that ridgeline?"

"Yes, but there are many ridgelines and they all have trees on them. How do you recognize them?"

"The one you are looking for is different. You will find it. Then you will know."

Another time, while far to the east, Mike was looking around for landmarks. He failed to see any except southeast of Nam Yu, where he spied a small conical hill. Looking much like a miniature Japanese Mount Fuji, it provided a fairly good orientation point.

During one of the last flights during this RON, they were flying at low level. It was cloudy, so Scratch climbed on top, and then spiraled down through the clouds. Mike was impressed. Scratch transferred the controls to his protégé and asked if he knew their location. With tongue in cheek Mike smiled and said, *"See that ridgeline? See those trees over there? They are different."*⁴

Our last day upcountry was occupied working Nam Yu sites with a stop at Xieng Lom on the way to Udorn.

FLIPSE

Following a lengthy vacation and training at Berkeley University in California and Washington, Joe Flipse returned to Southeast Asia in the spring as a bona fide USAID employee.

Before moving back to western Military Region One, Joe visited his boss, Phil Gullion, in a Bangkok hospital where he was recuperating from the Don Marsh crash at Sam Tong. Mike Lynch, whom he knew from earlier Bill Young days, was also recovering from a bout of hepatitis.

After replacing Flipse during his absence, DVM Bill Taylor was completing the last months of his tour at Ban Nam Thouei.

⁴Mike's dry humor never wavered. Later, while flying on the Plain of Jars with a new First Officer, Mike directed the man to fly him home. The man asked Mike the same question regarding their position. When pointing out a ridgeline with a tree on it for reference, Mike indicated that it was different.

Originally residing at Houei Sai, after incurring some unpleasant dealings with other AID types in Houei Sai, Taylor moved to Site-118 and had a bamboo house erected. Therefore, Joe was obligated to live and work out of Ban Houei Sai until the fall when Bill planned to depart Southeast Asia and establish a medical practice in America. While there, since the AID bureaucracy in Vientiane refused to provide sufficient materials, Flipse attempted to build a rice warehouse out of purloined material.

With completion of the warehouse, a firm AID rice contract and delivery was established for Houa Khong refugee relief. The rice quota became virtually unlimited, and something that Vientiane was not able to easily start and stop. Therefore, guaranteed the staple's continuing supply, Joe's people at Ban Houei Sai again began employing the Twin Pioneer (this had ceased in 1963) to air drop the commodity to outlying sites.

Although slow, the lumbering beast was relatively inexpensive to operate (150 dollars per hour), and with the introduction of larger and more modern transport planes available for resupply, few Customers wanted to use the ugly duckling. Besides, of the three originally purchased, only one was still airworthy. The Pioneer was perfect for the Ban Houei Sai operation, and everyone involved loved the machine.

Eldon Walker exclusively flew the machine. When enough rice was accumulated in the warehouse, Eldon flew up from Vientiane to RON and work until the distribution job was finished. With assistance from locals, Eldon's Thai kicker, John, supervised night loading and bag stacking in the sizeable cargo compartment. With no established rules, personnel involved learned and developed valuable skills that would pay handsome benefits in air delivery over the years. At first, hand loading

was the norm. It was considered faster and safer than other methods, and there was no danger from forklifts carrying palletized rice running into the plane or becoming stuck in the mud.

Sam and Thai youngster, Piak, who was just starting as a loader-dispatcher, provided Eldon a comprehensive drop schedule for the next day. Weather permitting, he would depart before dawn. Enjoying maximum flexibility, and armed with a list of numerous refugee sites to service, he was then afforded the option of dropping at whatever positions were open. When finished, he returned for fuel and additional rice. A portable fuel tanker was available at the strip, so lengthy and laborious bucket fueling was no longer necessary, and faster turnarounds possible.

During the first month, Eldon, who was not overweight, lost ten pounds. With minimum risk, without resorting to landings at marginal downdraft crosswind strips, he earned an excellent paycheck flying only air drops in relatively secure areas. In addition, he flew a record number of hours--over 200. AID officials were flabbergasted and shut the operation down for two weeks.

In the interim, superiors informed Joe that he was scheduled to understudy and assist Pop Buell at Sam Tong. Pop was experiencing health problems and Doc Weldon wanted him to reduce his hectic workload. Bill Taylor encouraged Joe to take advantage of the offer. He counseled him that the Sam Tong operation formed the heart of AID program. If he wanted to remain in the AID business and flourish that was where he should work. Joe considered this excellent advice, since he did not believe the Ban Houei Sai and Nam Thouei project was going anywhere. Field Director Lauren Haffner indicated that he would

transfer Sam Adams from Xieng Lom to replace Taylor when he left.

One morning, Doctor Jiggs Weldon arrived at the Ban Houei Sai strip in a Helio Courier to inform Flipse that he would not be moving to Sam Tong as previously planned. Instead, he would remain in Military Region One to administer Nam Thouei. ⁵

Joe never asked Doc what happened to his transfer request because he did not believe he would have told him. Weldon seldom wasted words and Joe respected him sufficiently that he never questioned any of his decisions. It was a curious situation in which the Public Health Department was influencing and directing the Rural Development Department (RDD)-Refugee Office. These backdoor methods always confused people in Vientiane, for upcountry staffing charts, pay, grade, rank, and the entire clap-trap meant virtually nothing.

At the time Taylor worked in Chiang Rai, so Joe took the initiative and moved to Site-118. ⁶

⁵ In retrospect, Flipse realized that a move to Sam Tong would not have worked, and within two weeks he would have had a serious run in with Pop.

⁶ Joe Flipse Emails, 05/03/97, 05/05/97, 05/08/97, 05/26/97, 06/28/97.

Four August, Marius Burke, Johnny Sibal and I crewed Hotel-15 north to Vientiane. At Wattay Airport we picked up a load and were assigned to Vang Vieng where we flew missions supplying local sites. We worked late and did not recover to Tango-08 until well past sunset. The day mission also fulfilled a periodic route check and upcountry proficiency check requirement.

I did not often work at the Lima-16 Neutralist site, but flanking Moung Soui to the south, Vang Pao's troops to the east, and lying on the northern portion of Route-13, the "Twin Peaks" valley was continuing to assume an increasingly important role in a previously held Pathet Lao area. Attesting to the government's regional expansion, we supplied a remote outpost thirty-five miles south of Vang Vieng and fifteen miles west of Route-13. Years earlier, in 1962, I had supplied a site further south with Captain George "Pinky" Eaton along the river, so this FAN position was more than likely a wilderness listening post located on a traditional enemy route of advance.

MIKE

Just before upgrading to Captain, Mike Jarina flew with Roy Hickman for Kong Le's men at Vang Vieng. Hickman was a loudmouth, belligerent individual, upgraded only a month previous to Jarina's arrival in July.

Former U.S. Army pilots Wayne Webb and Roy Hickman arrived in Udorn at same time during March. I was sitting in the Club movie room attending an all-pilot's-meeting when the two tall men entered. They were laughing and glad-handing in very loud voices with people they recognized in the crowd. It was

something not previously seen from new hires. To us more conventional and staid pilots, even more so that day because of an APM, they did not conduct themselves humbly like we considered new pilot employees should, and they established a negative impression in our minds. Wayne Knight recalled the duo as definitely not "shining lights" when it came to getting involved in upcountry operations. Hickman did not remain with the Company long and Webb appeared terrified most of the time. However, Wayne was recognized as a skilled instructor pilot, and when the chance arose, he found a niche and later assumed a training job in Bangkok, and conducted periodic helicopter proficiency check rides. ¹

When Roy and Mike arrived at L-16, they were assigned work on the edge of the Plain of Jars. Without benefit of a guide, sometimes they did not know which pad was correct. Indeed, the landing zones were packed so close together around Moung Soui that it was extremely difficult to distinguish the right one. Later, a Filipino Flight Mechanic told Mike that his pilot landed close to a "friendly pad" and a man appeared wearing the wrong uniform. The mechanic looked at the troop, quickly unloaded the rice, and told the Captain over that ICS to get the hell out of there ASAP.

Upset because of landing zone identification problems, Roy treated Kong Le badly. He exhibited the same attitude to all the indigenous troops—in his mind they were all idiots. In Kong Le's case, he dissented when the little general wanted him to perform an unfamiliar mission. Instead, he told Kong Le off, saying that he did not have to do this or that. Mike was shocked, believing

¹EW Knight Email, 07/12/00.

Hickman should have been more tactful and careful in his approach to the general, for he was subject to being shot.

There was an IVS or AID hostel operated by a man and woman at Vang Vieng for overnight travelers or aircraft crews. The crew RON there and were cared for by the couple, who bedded and fed them. ²

Mike thought the house had good potential for crew overnights, but it was not properly utilized. The building possessed large rooms, that if properly subdivided into bedrooms, was capable of accommodating four crews, two to a room. Instead, all the furniture had been removed, the place stripped down, and bunks installed like a Marine squad bay. Unlike Sam Tong, there was no table to complete daily paperwork, only a light. Apparently, you were supposed to go directly to bed after dinner. Therefore, Mike, representing a new breed of Air America helicopter pilot who never enjoyed the early benefits of thatched "hooches" and rat-infested lifestyles, was a little upset regarding the housing arrangement. He said to the couple, *"People think just because you are going to remain at a place for a couple of nights, you are not supposed to have any comfort."* ³

JOHN GRASSI

During his first break from intensive training since arriving in Udorn, Jarina took advantage of a Bangkok STO. Toward the end of the time off, he walked to the Air America office on Pat Pong Road to request and purchase an overnight

² This was probably the only prepared RON spot in Laos I never stayed overnight.

³ Mike Jarina Interviews.

train ticket to Udorn. While there, he met a new hire John Grassi, who was also present to obtain an overnight train ticket north. Mike asked John if he wanted to share a private sleeping compartment. That night the men boarded the designated car coupled to the end of the train. Entering the small compartment, they agreed it appeared like satisfactory accommodations for the fourteen-hour ride north. Before the train departed the European style terminal, two Thai men arrived in the hallway indicating the Americans occupied their compartment. Mike countered that he had paid for a compartment. Confusion arose, but examination of the tickets revealed that Mike and John were assigned to the adjoining sleeping car in less expensive bunks, six and eleven.

The Thai man was courteous saying, *"Sorry, you do not have a compartment, but a bunk."* Mike attempted to obtain another compartment from the porter, but discovered they were limited and all full. As a consequence, they were obligated to use the bunk car and spent a miserable and uncomfortable ride to Udorn.⁴

The next time Mike was at the Air America facility, he related the train story to Abadie, speculating that he had purchased a bogus ticket. A little upset, he said, *"When I first arrived with the Company, you sent me to Udorn in a compartment. Are you people saving money now by employing second class sleepers?"*

"No."

⁴ First class train compartment beds were positioned perpendicular to the narrow gage tracks, as opposed to beds aligned parallel with the tracks in the lower-class sleeping car. I used both and the configurations elicited different sensations and rolling motions. In addition, only semi-private by way of a sliding curtain, the sleeping car was also subject to noises and people wandering along the aisle to the toilet.

"Then something phony must be going on in the Bangkok office."

Always a doubter in matters of pilot claims and Company business, Ab replied, *"No, that cannot be the case."*

"I think you had better investigate the problem."

Ab did. The COO eventually discovered that the Thai clerk in the office in charge of train ticket purchases was dishonest. When a new employee requested a ticket to Udorn, the clerk purchased a common sleeper, and charged the Company the full price of a private compartment. Then, believing the new man would not know the difference, he pocketed the difference. His error was in considering Jarina a new employee. The larcenous clerk was justly fired.

John Grassi, a Navy career man, in a manner similar to World War Two U.S. Army flying sergeants, or Marine warrant officers, was one of the last of the Naval flying chiefs. As a credit to his ability, he had risen to the rank of lieutenant commander during or shortly after the war, but later accepted a reduced rank of chief petty officer in order to continue flying.

John, a "hail fellow, well met," type was well accepted in our group from the beginning, especially by Steve Stevens and Charlie Weitz. Extremely popular with the bar crowd group, he came on very strong, perhaps hoping to ingratiate himself with us, and quickly become one of the boys. Some other hires attempted a similar technique, calculated as a form of catch up to be more readily accepted among our rather cynical and critical pilot group, who were well seasoned in Southeast Asia war games. The method failed to work for all and often backfired on an individual.

After retiring from the U.S. Navy, John was reputed to have been a "hot-shot" test pilot at the Sikorsky factory. Therefore,

many of his claims and verbiage relating to flying and the H-34 were never questioned. Besides he was a large man, quite argumentative, and exuded an aura of potential violence. Although his aggressive type-A personality displayed many overbearing facets, dullness was never one.

While growing up in multi-ethnic New Jersey, during school and sports activities, I had come in contact with several Grassi types. When dealing with them, one never knew where bombast ceased and Bovine Scatology began. I found the majority of this type of individual were bluffers who required similar bluffing or a strong fist. In John's case, I was never certain if he was an actor, immature, or merely certifiable. Perhaps he possessed a little of each category.

I never flew with or around John, so cannot attest to his willingness and ability to accomplish flying missions. Since the Lao playing field leveled and humbled all of us sooner than later, I assumed that he enjoyed the same growing pains we all experienced. Wayne indicated that John was a capable pilot, but quick and rough on the controls, a tendency the CPH found common to those of his age group. Overall, he considered Grassi's talents average to below average, and failed to be intimidated by much of his bluster.

After flying by himself for a time, toward fall, John bragged in the bar that using a glide technique, he had autorotated from the elevated heights of Phou Kate (PS-21, benchmark 5,210 feet) six miles to the Saravane strip. Well aware of the H-34s extremely poor glide ratio, and its proclivity to descend like a rock in unpowered flight, I failed to believe John's claim and, like most of what he said, I took his statement with a grain of salt. Of course, I did not challenge him at the time. However, curious about the alleged

maneuver, the next time I had the opportunity, while working out of Saravane, I attempted to duplicate the feat. While hovering on the edge of the mountain heading northwest, I launched, established sixty knot climb speed and split the needles. Then, reducing RPM and setting the appropriate attitude to attain the best published glide ratio, I managed to terminate just beyond the base of the mountain. Just as I thought would happen, unless starting the maneuver from an unachievable 100,000 feet, such an autorotative glide to Lima-44 was impossible. After that, I could only deduce that the guy enjoyed fabricating stories and indulging in gross hyperbole.

John, along with Charlie Weitz, enjoyed visiting Steve Steven's spacious house in the Godnoma compound. Steve was an avid joke and storyteller and also a very good host. As an added attraction, his wife was also quite a desirable female.

One time, John entered the compound while I was outside my bungalow tending to some chore. Because of a proliferation of germs in Thailand, rate of sickness, and pronounced lack of adequate medical care, I was somewhat of a hypochondriac, and quite health conscious in those days. Someone, likely Stevens, probably told John this, for so primed, he sidled up to me and without preliminary dialogue inquired if I was aware that Thai watermelons contained cholera bacteria. Then he waited for my reaction. Well, if he expected to get a rise out of me, he must have been quite disappointed, for I considered the statement fallacious and let the matter drop. I considered other things he said to me on occasion, like Prapapon was too skinny insensitive and not calculated to endear me to him. Subjects like that were definitely none of his business, and I was surprised that he was crass enough to verbalize it.

John was often not particular about who he chose to harass. Jarina was in the jammed Club bar one evening, standing around for want of something better to do. Wearing a "T" shirt that he had swapped with Tony Poe, he had not consumed much drink when Grassi silently appeared behind him. Suddenly, the unpredictable man unceremoniously ripped the shirt from his body. Mike was angry, but decided the bar was not the place for a scrap. Seeing Mike's irritation, Grassi interjected, *"You can take a joke, can't you?"* Mike thought about pouring a can of beer on John, but rejected this.

Even Jack Forney, a man who could be quite abrasive in his own right, suffered come-uppance at Grassi's hands one day. A UH-34D pilot had a major accident and the members of the investigating board needed one more pilot representative in order to convene. Forney, in the role of a witness or technical advisor, as he often did unsolicited, began making a case for pilot error. John, taking offense to Jack's accusation inquired, *"Who are you?"* Forney, who had never been challenged or addressed in that tone of voice before, was shocked, but replied that he was from the Air America Maintenance Department.

"You are not a member of this board, are you?"

"No."

"Well, when we want to know something, we will ask you."

The board ultimately did not rule pilot error, for the problem was found to be mechanical.

Not long before Grassi departed the Company in 1966, I walked to Ed Reid's house in the Chet compound to seek companionship, or to inquire about something relatively insignificant. Intending to discourage quemoys, Ed had Khun Chet build his house in the center of a pond with a long connecting elevated walkway. Ed's hospitality was renowned and he enjoyed



Right to left: John Grassi, Michico Stevens, Charlie Weitz, Bobby Nunez, and far left, Bob Davis at movie room during Club party.
Nichols Collection.

company. Even though it was early, Ed, J.J. McCauley, and Grassi were already sitting around a coffee table enjoying Olympia beer. Having little else to do, I joined the group. During the course of conversation, the subject of our past military service surfaced. I offered that I was happy to have learned a viable occupation. However, recalling the galling problems and seemingly insurmountable roadblocks I encountered arriving in Pensacola, I professed no overwhelming love for the Corps. I had served my time with distinction, was happy to be out, and owed it nothing. A career military man, John took exception to my remark. Suddenly flying into a feigned or actual rage, the volatile man shouted, screamed, and violently slammed the side of his large fist onto Ed's glass topped coffee table. The force of the dramatic blow shattered the glass into many pieces. Surprised and shocked, we all looked sheepishly at each other in embarrassed silence. To maintain the peace and preserve my life, I soon took leave of the group.

Shortly after terminating his Air America employment and returning to his family, we received the sad word that, only in his middle forties, Grassi had succumbed to lung cancer. ⁵

THAILAND INSURGENCY

Intelligence revealed that the recent northeast insurgency was directed at the behest of the pro-Peking Communist Party of Thailand, although ideological and strategic guidance and materiel support emanated from China. Also, in January, the Chinese Prime Minister, Chou En Lai, had stated to the world

⁵ Mike Jarina Interviews.
Charlie Davis Book, 111.
EW Knight Email, 07/27/00.

that Thailand would be the next target of a war of national liberation, and guerrilla war would be launched there by year's end.

The Johnson Administration's decision to increase American air and ground forces to thwart enemy success in South Vietnam in early 1965 upset the communist schedule for achieving a quick victory.

In February, Bangkok leaders, recognizing that a free South Vietnam was the key to Thai security, opened military bases to USG. As the air war progressed into North Vietnam, these bases were greatly expanded and deemed essential to Theater success.

By the fall of 1965, communist propaganda and western intelligence sources divulged a policy change toward Thailand that stressed terrorism and other overt insurgency. Chinese leaders (and North Vietnamese leaders) actively engaged in reviving an armed struggle policy in Thailand, largely suppressed in the early fifties.

In early October, the *People's Daily* newspaper contained an article quoting Mao's public warning to Thailand that closer U.S.-Thai military cooperation would foster intensification of the CPT patriotic struggle in that country. Three days later, a Thai base cell of the CPT was alerted that the communist party had decided to shift from defensive to offensive tactics.

Jungled mountains and communications deficiency in north Thailand offered externally-based communists an environment similar to Cuba, South Vietnam, and the Philippines. Providing a safe harbor for guerrillas, tribal people living in those areas were deemed perfect subjects for insurgency. Members of Yao and Meo hill tribes employing slash and burn agriculture methods had been restricted for years by the RTG because of erosion's damaging effects. In addition, greedy lowlanders often cheated

tribals in trade matters. Living in self-sufficient clan societies, they had developed no national identity with Thailand nor any desire to do so.

Against this scenario, communists began dispatching propaganda teams to the north in 1963. The groups consisted of tribal people trained in Laos and Vietnam. Speaking local languages and dressed in local hill tribe attire, they gained tribal acceptance and offered the people status. There was an old legend among Meo people regarding the arrival of a Meo king who would establish a kingdom for his people. Believing a new era imminent, many people followed the recruiters into Laos with hopes of the new millennium. Some tribals discovered communist lies early and returned to their villages, while others continued on to North Vietnam, where they were indoctrinated in communist ideology, and trained for guerrilla warfare.

Direct Chinese communist participation involved training Thai cadres and financing political and military operations. A spring letter intercepted from a Thai student trained in Peking indicated that he had received instruction on accelerating the process of world revolution and that an army capable of carrying out the revolutionary struggle had been formed in Thailand. Another Thai student received instruction, including a route back to Thailand either through Laos, or Hong Kong and Macao. A Sino-Thai, after receiving training for a month, reported that building a people's army in Thailand was a primary subject. Another stressed the strategy and tactics of Chairman Mao's guerrilla warfare doctrine.

Other Thai communists who had previously left Thailand for China were reported back in country by 1965, actively organizing youth front groups and building communist infrastructure. However, scuttlebutt circulated that some Thai cadres resented

the Peking-oriented leadership on the basis of national reasons, and, as devout Buddhists, they did not agree with Maoist emphasis on the principal of armed struggle.

Other reports indicated that Chinese, Vietnamese, and Pathet Lao had infiltrated northeast Thailand from Laos to assist and train Thai insurgents.

The communist insurgency plans intended to establish bases in major mountain ranges which separated the country into three sections; to establish training centers, one near Laos close to the route connecting Mounng Sing with Yunnan Province; to gain control of remote villages before the RTG could respond with strategic hamlets; and finally to expand into urban areas using troops recruited from the people.

The greatest insurgency target focused on the Thai-Lao border area of Sakon Nakhon (Tango-38) and Nakhon Phanom (Tango-50) provinces. ⁶

In Thailand's northeast region--the most economically depressed and politically neglected region in the country--anti-government armed insurgency by the communist Party Thailand (CPT) overtly erupted on a small scale in August 1965. However, political unrest and lawlessness had occurred much earlier, causing the RTG to provide resources to improve the population's living conditions and thwart the spread of communist doctrine.

Many of the underlying causes of the population's dissatisfaction have been discussed in earlier books, but the main dilemma facing Isan stemmed from the archaic system of agriculture that provided only a subsistence for eighty-five

⁶ The latter included the strategic joint U.S.-Thai airbase at Nakhon Phanom (NKP, T-55).

percent of the people. Factors contributing to this state were many: soil was poor, made worse by an arid climate. Rural infrastructure in Isan, although somewhat improved, was still inadequate, and completed projects were not wholly utilized. Additional problems ranged from a lack of irrigation facilities, to periodic rice shortages, inflationary price increases, a disparity between rural and urban incomes, and a rapid depletion of underdeveloped land resources. Furthermore, there was high seasonal unemployment during the rainy season, and diminishing farming interest among youth who tended to opt for easier urban living.

A lack of lasting solutions for these problems did not bode well for the future. A government assessment conceded that social upheaval and dislocation, rising crime, and a feeling of hopelessness resulting from existing conditions were likely to continue on a moderate scale or even accelerate.

By August, violent terrorist incidents erupted at several points across northeast Isan. Armed attacks by communist terrorists on government security forces began in the Na Khi district of Nakhon Phanom Province. Afterward a group of police officers was ambushed and killed in a district of Ubon Province on the road from Mukdahan Province. Assassinations of villagers loyal to the government and village chiefs also commenced.

USG assessment of the situation concluded that communist goals were tailored to create sufficient pressure on the RTG to reevaluate its policy of a close alliance with the U.S., to cause doubt in USG regarding the stability of its Thai ally, to develop a base and capability to strike at U.S. military installations in Thailand, and to protect the western flank of their LOCs through Laos, and provide an alternate route through Thailand if so needed. Not well understood by the American

intelligence community in 1965 was the fact that the communists considered the northeast border area not only in terms of their Thai objectives, but vital to South Vietnam's objectives.

By the end of 1965, insurgency became serious enough in the northeast that the RTG recognized the problem was no longer solely a police affair. Therefore, the government established the Communist Suppression Operations Command (CSOC) at Sakon Nakhon in an attempt to coordinate civic action programs with military operations. The command functioned jointly with civil, police and military personnel. ⁷

UDORN

I had a couple of days off the flight schedule and field standby. This allowed me to complete wallpapering the bedroom with pre-pasted Sears and Roebuck white and green ivy leaf design paper that had arrived in good shape through the APO mail system. For some reason, Tom Moher had not papered the entire room, or with the shrinkage of the boards, it had substantially deteriorated. Furthermore, I had tired of looking at stark wood and bare boards that exhibited cracks and allowed insects to infiltrate the room at night. After completing the improvement, I considered the house more or less the way I wanted "for the duration," which I roughly estimated was another year.

⁷Thai-Chinese Communist Relations 04/09/68, 5-7, (foia.ucia.gov/scripts/cgise).
Article *People's Daily Newspaper*, 10/07/65.
Royal Security Manual.
Kurdpol, *Counterinsurgency*.
Pickering, *Evolution of Communist Strategy in Thailand*, 344, 04/26/67.
Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era*, 176, 183.

I discovered my Omega watch by accident in the bathroom medicine cabinet drawer. I could not recall placing it there, but must have done so when I saw the Godnoma boy in the house the night I returned smashed from consuming gallons of beer. However, I still considered the possibility that someone in the Godnoma family replaced it while we were vacationing in Pattaya. At any rate, I was happy to have my watch back. Now, if someone could find my Olympia typewriter..

Tuie and I began shopping downtown for another refrigerator. Much wiser this time, we searched for one with a motor manufactured for tropical use--one equipped to sustain a wide voltage range to compensate for the fluctuating power experienced in our neighborhood. Tuie had sold the other fridge to Thieng Chai, a personable individual with a reputation of being honest. The owner ran an electrical appliance store located on the second circle where a majority of Americans had purchased equipment since the first arrivals in Udorn. Tuie even made a small profit on the sale. We were interested in a smaller, low amperage 3.2 cubic foot Toshiba unit. Because of a hundred percent duty on electrical equipment, the cost was 150.00 dollars. It seemed like a lot of money for such a small item, so I opted to look around for a better deal.

Since the work load had dramatically increased, Lou McCasland and I had very little time to engage in our preferred exercise: therapeutic tennis games at the Royal Thai Army base adjacent to the Air America compound. The lack of exercise, an increased food and beer intake, and increasing weight gain caused me a little concern. I missed the challenge the vigorous exercise afforded, and considered myself fairly proficient in the game. Later, Frank Stergar and I played downtown across from the park on courts used by Thai businessmen. During one game, I

was having considerable success acing Frank during serves, when he bitterly accused me of foot faulting. The accusation shocked me, for I was always careful to hit the ball while my right foot was in the air. Furthermore, I did not believe that he could accurately observe any infraction from his side of the court. I was so miffed that I terminated the game and any future tennis matches.

Largely because of a waning trust in Jim Coble, investor apathy, and disinterest in financial reports, Wayne and I planned a fact-finding trip to Kuala Lumpur later in the month. Since my passport was expiring soon, I completed the required paperwork and submitted it to the U.S. Consul's office next to the park for Gordon Murchie to issue a new one. There was adequate time available for the trip since, as predicted, the influx of new pilots and their steady upgrading to Captain was already reducing our flight time. I was nearing the magic 1,000 hours for the year. For reasons known only to Taipei management, possibly regarding fatigue, safety, and an attempt to adhere to FAA rules relating to pilot time, the Company did not want us to exceed that number. Therefore, I was not sure how much longer I would be allowed to fly, or whether I would be grounded during the remaining months of the year, or even forced to take home leave. Like the aged race horse, I was already being farmed out to areas where high daily flight time was not considered obtainable. I assumed this policy would be continued in my case. This was considered an answer to the problem and generally served the purpose. It also had a dual effect of keeping me out of the Military Region Two shot pattern for SAR missions and the Hua Mung operation. Apparently, newly upgraded Captains would assume the major portion of this activity. However, the policy did not work immediately, for during the last six days at Houa

Kong, I averaged nine hours per day. Furthermore, with the war still escalating, and with most military regions expanding operations, and Customer requirements continuing at a high level, it seemed unlikely that our flight time would be reduced anytime soon. However, all things were possible, and if the Air Force actually took over more of the SAR work and Air America continued hiring, then perhaps the 1,000-hour policy might work.

Taipei management was very serious about limiting our high flight time, and for CPH Wayne Knight, the first-time-ever requirement to control the number of hours presented a "terrible mess" and huge headache in scheduling. In the beginning, with very little thought, it became clear to him by the 15th of each month that, given contractual agreements, flight time required, and the number of pilots available, extensions beyond the hundred hours per month/1,000 hours per year would be necessary. Bill Leonard, the person in charge of Vientiane pilot scheduling, usually pushed Wayne to obtain early extensions. Taipei and President Grundy, who had to personally approve any extension, generally refused. Therefore, each month Operations was forced to ensure that almost every pilot was on the verge of exceeding hundred hours before Grundy would even consider granting an extension. Consequently, toward month's end there was a rush to send pilots upcountry for additional time, sometimes only ten hours, to approach the one-hundred-hour limit. It was kind of a game upper management played, for Wayne knew that an extension would be granted, but only for a maximum of twenty hours. This exercise was in lieu of grounding all pilots and ships, breaching the contract, and alienating the Customers. As a result of the new rules, massive juggling

occurred in scheduling and a great disruption in pilot scheduled time off occurred, especially those taking STO at month's end. ⁸

DOWN SOUTH

Joe Siaotong and I briefly tested Hotel-15 on the seventh, after which McCasland flew a proficiency hop in the machine followed by night training session.

Early the following day, a Sunday, Joe and I crewed Hotel-15 to Pakse. That early in the morning, I did not have to contend with monsoon showers, which normally cropped up toward mid-afternoon. After establishing a general heading, the lengthy and boring two-and-a-half-hour trip over endless flat land was punctuated only by occasional calls to USAF ground control intercept (GCI) units as I was passed from Brigham Control at Udorn, to Invert Control at Nakhon Phanom, and to Lion Control at Ubon. Flying at a moderate altitude, at best, radio range to these units was limited and contact not always possible.

When new H-34s entered our inventory, they were generally still equipped with line-of-sight TACAN and Distance Measuring Equipment (DME) receivers. These navigational aids were considerably more helpful than the largely ineffective Automatic Direction Finding (ADF) equipment which relied on high wattage output from a Non-Directional Beacon (NDB) station to be useful. Normally, high wattage output NDBs were scarce in our area, and those available were limited to about five miles coverage at normal helicopter cruise altitude. We actually discovered that some river town radio broadcast stations provided more reliable distance and bearing information. When our ships were equipped

⁸ EW Knight Emails, 07/15/00, 05/16/01.

with the advanced gear, I used heading and distance information from TACAN-equipped stations to good advantage. Until the sets malfunctioned and were decommissioned by Maintenance Department shop personnel unable to repair them, we could employ them to help navigate over great distances like that to Pakse. This feature was especially helpful in the smoky season, but still required flying at adequate altitudes to receive and hold a signal over great distances. However, since positive radar control, which included flight separation information, was not available at all times, there was considerable danger of incurring a midair collision with a fast mover at altitude. Therefore, I normally elected to fly at a somewhat lower altitude and accept a reduced twenty to thirty-mile TACAN coverage, which I considered useful in establishing a correct course.

Sunday was normally a light flying day at Lima-11. With this in mind, plus the new Company policy calculated to restrain our yearly flight hours to 1,000, probably was the reason I was assigned four days in the South. Recalling a phrase from John Steinbeck's 1937 novella, "*The best laid plans of mice and men,*" the management plan, if there actually was an official plan it failed, for I averaged over nine hours per day.

Directed to Saravane, I was surprised by the considerable FAR expansion both north and east. I would soon discover that even the Bolovens Plateau seemed more active. Around the Site-44 area, a fresh series of Pakse Sites (PS), previously little more than rudimentary SGU forward listening posts for long-existing road watch teams, were being hacked out of jungled mountain tops

and developed within an eleven-mile radius north and northeast of Saravane town. ⁹

Other sites located far up the Toumlan Valley were in the process of being re-occupied by FAR troops. Moving into these areas involved a calculated risk, for enemy LOCs were located a few miles north and east. However, enemy personnel, dedicated to its maintenance and protection, generally had their hands full keeping the routes open in the wet season while avoiding American air strikes.

One forward staging area calculated to keep the enemy off balance was located at Ban Nong Boua (LS-124), ten miles east of Saravane at the junction of Routes-162 and 163. Like most Lao passages, the "routes" were little more than footpaths or narrow trails. The latter ran south up onto the rough northeastern portion of the Bolovens. Further east of Nong Boua the sizeable Se Kong flowed south. Beyond that, unimproved trail systems wound along high ground into Cambodia and South Vietnam. Both water and land conduits were developed and used to advantage over time to transport enemy supplies. These would later be generically called "The Sihanouk Trail" after King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia. Using nothing but my ratty 1:500,000 graphic map as a reference, I shuttled supplies to Nong Boua from Saravane and Pakse. From there, I ranged north to Phou Pha (PS-10), a recently established site.

During one shuttle between Saravane and Ban Nong Boua, a crewmember in an overhead USAF control ship assigned to patrol southern Laos radioed a blanket inquiry "in the blind" regarding

⁹ These early sites, Phou Thaddeus and Ban Yon, were respectively numbered 8 & 9. As the area developed, one site was numbered PS-39.

a crashed airplane. Since I was the only aircraft working in the province that day, after a couple of calls, I assumed the person in the aircraft had identified and was addressing me. I knew of no downed ship in my immediate area, but recalled a broken Dornier lodged in the recesses of the Bolovens Plateau's rocky southeast corner. Located about forty miles from my position, it had been sitting there a very long time. I relayed this information to my friends aloft. After they rechecked their charts, the plane was confirmed to be the wreck I mentioned. Granted, the Air Force plane was probably very high, but the crew should have been able to pinpoint such a location with more accuracy.

This chance episode, plus the Lynn SAR during June 1964, reinforced the evolving Casterlin "forty-mile thumb rule" as it applied to U.S. Air Force map reading. The "rule" related to proffered USAF coordinates that were almost invariably plotted forty miles from an authentic position. It was then that I decided most Air Force navigators were deficient and beyond reasonable help in map reading. In the future, to prevent mishaps, I would certainly continue to expect gross errors from them, and would seriously challenge any coordinates high flying Air Force crews passed to me. Despite the advent of improved Air Force electronic equipment, my thumb rule continued to be valid and reliable. For the rest of the war these occasional navigational errors continued, at times placing me, my crew,

ship, and other participants in dire peril. ¹⁰

Completing a last-minute trip, I departed for Pakse at twilight, aware that I would not recover until well after dark. While dodging towering thunderstorms, I climbed to a respectful altitude to avoid nervous trigger fingers from wandering enemy bands in the Sedone Valley, and to hopefully intercept the 400 watt non directional beacon (NDB) located at the northwest portion of the Lima-11 airfield that transmitted Papa Sierra (PS) Morse Code letters and broadcast twenty-four hours on 240 kilocycles. One had to be cautious relying on radio navigation aids in this region. Like a bogus NDB allegedly located on the PDJ broadcasting Delta's frequency and call sign, a beacon operating on the same frequency as Pakse's, but with a much greater output, had long been reported just inside Cambodia. In the worst possible scenario, we theorized the device was calculated to confuse and suck us into enemy territory so we might run out of fuel and crash. In actuality, the beacon might have been utilized as a navigation aid for Indonesian planes supplying Pathet Lao and Vietnamese efforts in the area. Despite our acute awareness of the beacon, the signal was strong and there was always room for error in the confusing inky black of night and foul weather associated with the monsoon season. I did encounter southeastern needle swings toward the Bolovens Plateau

¹⁰ In all fairness, even nominal map reading is not an easy task for most individuals. It takes considerable education, practice, experience, and perseverance to master the ability. In fact, while undergoing map instruction in USMC Officer Basic School at Quantico, my entire class flunked the final examination. As a result, our company commander required us to spend a cherished weekend in class relearning the course. The penalty was well conceived, and we passed the next exam. Subsequently, map reading basics were valuable while navigating in Laos.

that night, but was not able to confirm if the source emanated from electrical discharges in thunder bumpers, or an actual enemy beacon. Nevertheless, one had to be extremely careful and constantly vigilant in the curious "Land of Elephants."

I parked and secured the helicopter on the laterite ramp, then walked a short distance to the radio shack, where I closed out for the day and provided the Chinese radio operator my flight time to forward to Udorn over the high frequency net. The courteous man also informed me of a Customer mission scheduled the following day.

Prematurely gray-haired Agency Case Officer Mike Deuel, who had left the Thakhet area in the capacity of Military Region Three's road watch team expert (code named Operation Hardnose) about two years earlier, had been working in Pakse under the cover of USAID forming and monitoring road watch teams in the Saravane region. He had also formed teams on the Bolovens and at Kong Mi south of Attopeu.¹¹ Mike left word to meet him at the airfield about eight thirty in the morning for more of the same work around Lima-44.

I had the Jeep driver take us to the Chinese hotel, as it seemed one of the better places to sleep and was in walking distance of good Chinese food.

Joe Siaotong left early for the airfield to inspect and preflight Hotel-15. Aware that I was not scheduled to fly until later, before leaving the hotel Joe told me about a small food shop where I could obtain an inexpensive and delicious Asian

¹¹ Ian Baird, Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin-Madison, *The U.S Central Intelligence Agency and the Brao: The Story of Kong My, a non-Communist Space in Attopeu Province, Southern Laos*, 33, (Article sent in the form of Email by Dan Gamelin and redirected by Dwayne Keele.)

breakfast. Only a few paces from the hotel, it was located on a triangular slice of wooded land at the intersection of two side roads. Because of its unique location, two sides were open to allow refreshing breezes to bathe patrons. Flies were not a problem, for no respectable insect would be up and about at that early hour. Also helping to shade and cool the tropical environment, large trees lined the streets. It seemed like the French colonialists, despite their reluctance to create an enduring infrastructure in Laos, had done something right in Pakse by establishing wide boulevards and planting sturdy trees that over the decades had grown to huge proportions. In fact, they were so imposing to errant or intoxicated drivers that wide white stripes had been painted around the trunks.

The establishment was operated by a Vietnamese couple who specialized in creating particularly spicy, tasty sour noodle chicken curry soup. Like other Southeast Asian eateries, this one appeared equally dark and dingy if not entirely squalid. However, I discovered from experience that such an initial impression in no way foretold or diminished the quality of a restaurant's fare. I sat at a standard green Formica-topped steel table near a charcoal stove on which a large aluminum pot bubbled merrily. This was the highly touted Vietnamese curry which I had heard mentioned, but had never previously tasted. Peering into the vessel, I recognized a liquid soup mixture of chicken parts, yams, onions, and red chili peppers floating on top of a bright red and yellow curry colored solution of coconut milk. From its appearance, I knew that this concoction had to be spicy. It just looked hot, but smelled wonderful, and I salivated in anticipation of the tasting. After indicating what I wanted to eat through understandable pointee-talkie sign language, Mama placed two clumps of sour rice noodles into a

large flower-embossed ceramic bowl of the kind preferred in Asian restaurants. Then she ladled a generous portion of her fiery soup over the noodles. After providing me with chopsticks and the obligatory porcelain spoon, I went to work. I was not disappointed. Emulating the aroma, the taste was equally wonderful and the heat factor not at all that objectionable. I finished one bowl and enjoyed it so much that I smacked my lips and ordered another.

While I ate, small children entered the shop. They were the couple's two boys about to depart for school. The older boy spoke passable English and, observing me, placed a western record on the phonograph. Certain that I had obtained my money's worth, I departed the neighborhood diner, sated and happy. Furthermore, I had no hunger pangs or desire to eat until supper.

CROSS-BORDER WORK

The MACV Studies and Observations Group, formed in January 1964, was charged with unconventional warfare under OPLAN-34A plans against the North. Plans included operations inside the Lao border. The measure incorporated harassment, diversion, political pressure, capture of prisoners, physical destruction, acquisition of intelligence, generation of propaganda, and diversion of resources. Long before General Westmoreland assigned the Saigon MACV-SOG unit responsibility for a mixed personnel cross-border operation in the early spring, South Vietnamese soldiers were stationed at Savannakhet and used as liaison teams. Most of the work entailed collating radio intercepts, much like PARU team members performed at Long Tieng, Phu Pha Thi, and other sites in upper Military Region Two. By

May 1965, South Vietnam officers were assigned to the provincial towns of Pakse, Saravane, and Attopeu. ¹² ¹³

By early August, the Joint Chiefs of Staff reinstated approval requests for South Vietnam cross border operations from the Secretary of Defense. The controversial subject had been discussed for some time, most recently on 18 June with Ambassador Sullivan, who submitted an unenthusiastic reply on 23 July.

The JCS plan included targeting missions generated by cross border teams. Strikes would be conducted by Bango alert aircraft from Thai bases. To create maximum efficiency and expedite time sensitive missions, requests previously directed to the Air Support Operations Center in Saigon were funneled to ASOC Udorn and then to AIRA Vientiane (read embassy) for approval. If sanctioned, Phantom jets were launched from Ubon with a T-28 coordinator from Udorn. Should Ubon's assets prove insufficient for the job, F-105 Whiplash planes staged at Korat and Takhli would be used.

William Sullivan weighed in on the subject with opinions regarding Lao corridor objectives relating to interdiction, harassment, and intelligence. Most were already well known to high level principals. He did not believe there were adequate

¹² Former Air America Captain Mike Marshall recalled South Vietnamese officers stationed in the south. Although I might have carried South Vietnamese soldiers on some missions, of course, because of a similarity in appearance, the nature of their work and need for cover, I was never aware of their nationality or purpose. In addition, to my knowledge we never interfaced with SOG cross-border team operations. Although I was never aware of a firm line separating allied border activity, our Agency-generated forays did not impinge on those from South Vietnam.

¹³ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 143, 148, fn-10, 149-fn #12.

resources available for interdiction against the formidable enemy, who was determined to maintain a viable logistic system through Laos. Although he recognized that it was not feasible to interdict trails by solely employing airstrikes, he realized that serious ground action would require several divisions of ground troops. Such flagrant action would reveal an overt U.S. presence and violate the 1962 Lao Geneva Accords for the entire world to see.

Varying degrees of harassment were currently conducted against the enemy corridor through Laos by RLA, Steel Tiger, Bango/Whiplash, and clandestine Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) ground operations. All facets were constantly improved, and would be further enhanced by specific technological progress. There was also a potential of improved FAR participation in the Panhandle corridor and around Saravane and Attapeu provinces. More aggressive and bright FAR officers were believed working to assist at improved forward bases for intelligence gathering and harassment.

On the subject relating to a cross-border program, modest operations were ready to commence under the current rules. From September through October, small teams consisting of Bru, Cham, generic Montagnard, and Khmer ethnics, led by three U.S. Army Special Forces personnel, penetrated border areas to a depth of fifteen to twenty-five kilometers. Reconnaissance missions were conducted to ascertain enemy intentions and activity levels along the border region. In addition, the capability to communicate and coordinate air strikes contributed to some real time damage to enemy forces.

Later, the cross-border program, code named Shining Brass, allowed a small number of mixed American and South Vietnamese ground teams to penetrate the eastern border in two areas for a

limited number of miles. Air extraction was authorized based on emergency requirements, but no normal aerial deliveries were allowed.

Sullivan was especially concerned about using existing intelligence gathering road watch teams for harassing action. Such offenses had failed in the past, after which special guerrilla units were eliminated from road sections by massive enemy counteractions. Therefore, individual objectives had to be considered highly worthwhile to justify the certain enemy reaction and resulting losses in friendly assets. ¹⁴

Air America assets were not yet overly utilized in the evolving trail watch program. Most penetrations were generally shallow to maintain secrecy. Inserted teams walked long distances to their destinations. However, because of Department of Defense pressure and requirements for increased intelligence regarding enemy logistical progress and air strike targeting in southern Laos, we were used in a limited capacity to supply forward positions from which teams fanned out to gather and provide this valuable information. With enemy mobility restricted on many impassable Ho Chi Minh Trail systems during the muddy rainy season, it was still possible for us and teams to operate from place to place with a modicum of success.

Mike Deuel, a prematurely gray former Marine officer, desired to observe and talk to his road watch people located on hilltop landing zones north of Saravane. In addition, because of gross corruption and blatant skimming of troop payrolls by a greedy Saravane area senior ADC Lao Theung officer, to ensure

¹⁴Memorandum JCS to McNamara, 08/07/65.
Telegram William Sullivan to State, 08/09/65.
Ted Shackley, 180.

the troops received full pay, Mike elected to serve as the once-a-month paymaster.¹⁵

FAR officers were also interested in their forward elements' progress. Therefore, while servicing both American and Lao personnel, I spent much of the day landing at Pakse Sites (PS) and other locations in the 560-foot above sea level Toumlan Valley, where Route-23 wound south to Saravane. At the upper end of the valley, twenty miles northeast of Site-44 and close to the trail, lay Ban Don Boun (LS-64). From the low Lima Site number, I assumed it was an original and formerly active site, perhaps during the French era. Other sites visited were Ban Padou, fifteen miles north of the provincial capital, and LS-171, Ban Khok Mai, located only five miles northeast.

On the Plateau, Agency and SOG attempts to resurrect Colonel Simons' 1962 Kha marquis operation had not yet come to fruition, but some special guerrilla unit training for road watch at Pho Kham Phouk (LS-166), located on the southeast side of the Plateau, had been underway. The site was remote, and ground movement over the largely inaccessible terrain difficult. The runway was later improved to accommodate future unobserved "Sneaky Pete" work. To allow my passengers access to information, I shut down at the 4,000-foot site. Next, we flew north to Nong Boua and at the end of the day, I delivered the people to Saravane and returned to Pakse.

On the 10th, most of the day was spent shuttling to Saravane and Site-166. We were then directed to Savannakhet for the night.

¹⁵ Ken Conboy, 142.

The final day of my RON included ferrying dignitaries to Dong Hene (LS54), located on Route-9 west of Seno, and the site of an original FAR officer school. A northern offensive was about to get underway. This was followed by a trip to Thakhet to work, and a return to Savannakhet. I recovered at the Air America facility about dark.

The same day, Mike Jarina went to Nakon Phanom with Tom Pitkin to stand by for a three-day operation across the river. During down time, Mike believed that Pitkin, like Hitchman, milked the system by conducting hour-long test flights. ¹⁶

MISSILES

The night I arrived in Udorn, the first Naval aircraft, an A-4 Skyhawk, was downed by a SA-2 surface to air missile sixty miles south of Hanoi. Lieutenant JG Donald H. Brown was killed. Another A-4D was damaged, but managed to recover to the USS *Midway*. Over the next two days, out for blood and payback, 124 Navy aircraft were catapulted from the *Coral Sea* and *Midway* carriers, tasked with missions to discover and destroy any and all enemy SAM sites. Several missile sites were already in place and mobile launchers constantly shuttled between them to avoid detection and destruction. Without specific electronic equipment installed on planes to locate command radar vans, or visual sightings, no active sites were discovered. In retrospect, the strikes proved unwise, as the toll on American planes and pilots was substantial. Flying relatively low-level sorties below 3,000 feet to avoid SAMs, seven planes were damaged and six others shot down by numerous and formidable AAA guns. The combination

¹⁶ Mike Jarina Interviews.

of AAA and SAM missiles was effective, and by August, the Seventh Fleet was averaging eight aircraft losses per month. ¹⁷

At the time of the A-4 downing, electronic technology to identify Fan Song radar emissions, the guidance system used to direct the SAM-2 missiles to target, had already been developed, but not yet installed and deployed. Called RHAW for Radar Homing and Warning, the system could detect the S and L radar bands and indicate the direction of radar signals. However, deployment of the first Wild Weasel aircraft--SAM hunter-killer teams--to Korat and Southeast Asia would have to wait three months for modification, installation and field testing.

By October, with electronic counter-measure equipment, Shrike missiles, and new evasion maneuvers developed, hunter-killer teams discovered and destroyed a SAM-2. ^{18 19}

KUALA LUMPUR

With time off and STO to look forward to, Wayne and I flew to Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur on Sunday the 15th. I had not considered everything required for entry, and diligent airport officials in Malaysia noted that my Cholera vaccination was out of date. Therefore, I was stabbed in the left arm, placed on a loose quarantine status, and allowed to venture into the city to Coble's spacious and costly residence.

¹⁷ 1,500 37mm and 57mm guns fired by sight were considered accurate below 18,000 feet; Soviet-manufactured radar-controlled 85mm to 100mm guns were accurate to 45,000 feet. By the end of 1965 an unbelievable 5,000 AAA weapons had been installed throughout North Vietnam.

¹⁸ In 1972, RHAW equipment would be installed on our S-58T aircraft for Special Project night missions near the trails.

¹⁹ John Smith, 69-70, 278-279.
Edward Marolda, 62, 65.

We stayed in Kuala Lumpur three and a half days, a major portion spent at the factory site. The good news was that the concrete block plant had been producing for three weeks and the product delivered to work sites; the bad news was more ominous. Finding and training competent personnel for the job was slow, and deemed a major problem. Also diminishing production, blocks had to be manually offloaded from the line and air dried, as the baking unit was not finished.

All in all, the project looked promising, for the Malaysian government planned to increase infrastructure spending to five billion dollars on municipal projects over the next five years. If the country remained stable politically, Jim projected Concrete Masonry would succeed financially.

Coble and his cohorts in the AMCOR managing company were so confident of success that they were enthused to open a new plant in Johore Province next to Singapore. Apparently, a two-and-a-half-year government housing project was about to commence there, and over the period, Concrete Masonry would supply millions of blocks. The idea for a new plant stemmed from excessive transportation costs involved in shipping the blocks by train or truck. A Besser machine and factory could be assembled and staged at a temporary location provided by the government at the building site. Later, the unit could be dismantled and moved to a permanent site in the same area or in Kuala Lumpur.

The New Era Oil waste re-refining factory was not on line, but Ted Bailey-Reynolds, one of the two AMCOR employees, informed me it would be producing within the next six weeks. As the operation was located 180 miles north of Kuala Lumpur at Taipieng, I did not get a chance to see the plant during this trip.

Positive information came fast and furious, and certainly made our heads swim. It was almost too good to be true, and infused Wayne and me with anticipation of near-term success and profit. As I was seriously considering settling down, the possibility of profit and future employment with Asian American was most appealing. In fact, Wayne was so enthused that he added additional funds to the business. Unsure as to the yet-unfilled goals and promises, after so many delays, I elected to be more cautious and assume a wait and see stance. ²⁰

THE MIGHTY MEKONG EXACTS A PRICE

While I was still in Bangkok preparing for my return to Udorn, my neighbor Bobby Nunez crashed in the Mekong River. The devastating accident resulted in several untimely deaths.

Working out of Nam Yu provided a full day for Bobby, and it was already late when he prepared to leave for Udorn. While refueling he received a message to retrieve George Calhoun at the Nam Bu strip (LS-125), where Calhoun had earlier crashed a Helio Courier with Nam Thouei (LS-118) AID Customer Bill Taylor onboard. ²¹

With the mission complete, Bobby dropped Taylor off at Ban Houei Ma, then returned to 118-Alternate to load Case Officer Louis O'Jibway, intelligence officer Colonel Tiao Syborravong, Royal Thai Army liaison officer Captain Ruang Ramrut, and Agency communications specialist Edward Johnson, who was attached TDY

²⁰ EW Knight Email, 07/01/00, 04/23/01.

²¹ According to Joe Flipse, while attempting to recover the Helio Courier several days later, a H-34 pilot dropped the plane in the surrounding jungle ten minutes out of LS-125 when the load began to oscillate badly. The plane was never recovered.

to the Udorn AB-1 headquarters. Calhoun climbed into the left cockpit seat to keep Nunez company, provide moral support, and help navigate.

Because of the small window of opportunity remaining prior to darkness, after passing Luang Prabang, Nunez took a short cut between Mounng Met and Vang Vieng. Not instrument rated, and highly fatigued, he flew marginal VFR around or through several rainstorms without the aid of ASE or operational windscreen wipers. Then near dark, disoriented from the circumnavigation, he turned south to re-intercept the Mekong for a visual reference point to Vientiane. Upriver from the capital, with the landing light illuminated and attempting to remain VFR, he darted in and out of low clouds and light rain at reduced airspeed and a very low altitude.

After several attempts, Nunez managed to contact Udorn over the scratchy HF radio and talked to ACPH Marius Burke, standing in for the still-vacationing Knight. He indicated that the weather was poor and he was following a river, but he was confused and unsure of its identity. Then all radio contact was suddenly lost.

At dark, during his 13th flight hour, while silver shafts of light from a very bright moon poured intermittently through holes in thin clouds, and distractingly reflected off the water, at 1930 hours, while in a right bank Bobby flew Hotel-23 into the raging Mekong. The ship rolled to the right, effectively blocking the cabin exit door. After the rotor blades stopped turning, Calhoun and Nunez managed to exit through the left cockpit window.

Those below were not so fortunate. As muddy river water surged into and flooded the cabin section, like rag dolls, Flight Mechanic Steve Nichols and the passengers were washed aft

toward the nylon electronics barrier that blocked the tail cone's entrance. While dragged along by rushing water, Steve's fingers glided over metal stringers lining the inside of the fuselage. Then he encountered one of the eighteen inch square emergency pop-out plastic windows. The aperture was blocked by an aluminum bucket seat bar that snapped into recesses. Full access to the emergency exit required the bar's removal. To assist egress, windows were equipped with yellow handles on each side. Nichols employed these to first stabilize himself, kick out the window, and then pull himself from the watery coffin, where he met a new challenge.

After completing a successful escape, in the darkness, Steve noted Hotel-23 was turning upside down and slowly sinking into the wild floodwaters. Gliding with the current, he arrived at the front of the ship, where he spied Nunez and Calhoun's bobbing heads. Except for glints of intermittent moonlight outlining objects, the area was cloaked in inky blackness as the trio independently struck out for opposite riverbanks--Nunez and Calhoun toward the Thai side and Nichols to the Lao bank.

During the rainy season's August peak, the Mekong flowed rapidly south, inhibiting cross current progress to anyone caught in the river. Nichols, who enjoyed the benefit of youth, vigor, and prior swimming experience, required two and a half hours exhaustive effort to reach the Lao shore. During the period, he nearly drowned several times. ²²

²² Steve Nichols was the sole survivor of five individuals in the cabin section. For a recent hire and young man, he had experienced more than his share of fun and games while crewing a UH-34D. Not long after the incident, he replaced John Aspinwall as Chief of Helicopter Maintenance Udorn.

Calhoun, a gray haired, older individual and champion swimmer in his younger days, had little trouble drifting and crossing the river. Ironically, it was the second time he had crashed in an aircraft that day.

Bobby Nunez, a non-swimmer, was unable to escape the center of the river. Plunging twice under the water, he somehow struggled back to the surface. Exhausted, choking, spitting, and gasping for air, demoralized he resigned himself to his fate during a third dunking. Consequently, he floundered about waiting for the inevitable and final "deep six." Then, at the last minute, a miracle occurred. During the wet season, the current flowed more rapidly in the center of the Mekong. Flotsam and jetsam provided from upstream tributaries and riverbanks coursed down what effectively amounted to a swift river channel within a river. As Bobby began slowly slipping under for the last time, a branch struck him in the arm. With revived hope, he instinctively seized the wood and commenced a desperate process of survival. Collecting additional floating items and tucking them under an armpit, he eventually acquired a sizeable flotation bundle. Clinging to this effective buoyancy package, Nunez drifted downstream an estimated eighty miles. During the early morning hours, he was sighted by a nocturnal Thai fisherman below Nong Khai, and was plucked from the river.

The following morning word reached Operations that Nunez had been rescued from the Mekong. Then, cognizant of the correct waterway, Marius launched northwest and headed upriver with a crew, including FIC's Dick Ford, to search for additional survivors. Burke flew almost sixty miles before members of his crew spotted Calhoun frantically waving from the Thai bank at 0730 hours. Then just before 0800 hours they discovered Nichols a few miles further upstream. Steve estimated that he was less

than a mile downriver from the point where Hotel-23 hit the water.

During the next few days, several recovery specialists arrived from Bangkok and southern Thailand to participate in the search for the missing aircraft and occupants. There was an additional, and likely a more important, mission. Because Johnson carried crypto information considered critical to American interests, an Australian Commander on loan to the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) led the team's search effort. ²³ Accompanying the Commander were Royal Thai Navy scuba divers, comparable to U.S. Navy SEALs. Those who witnessed their performance considered them tough as nails.

The Aussie closely guarded a black suitcase containing a new device for detecting underwater anomalies (much like a metal detecting magnetometer). To effect this function, the commanding officer asked Tom Penniman to compute the amount of ferrous material in an H-34. Tom found this a difficult task.

The search continued for ten days with Burke and Knight alternating in the delivery of Dick Ford, the dive team, and occasionally Tom Penniman to Ban Khok Huai (T-407), fifty-eight nautical miles northwest of Udorn. Wayne noted that riverbanks were steep at the site, especially on the north side, and wondered at the difficulty the fatigued survivors must have had negotiating them in the dark. Over the period, Ford managed to incur nasty sunburn on his unprotected bald head.

Located close to the Mekong, the small town of Khok Huai was considered a convenient staging location for the search.

²³ ARPA: An agency within the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), ARPA had many functions almost all classified. The organization initiated the Internet, which linked all educational research facilities in the USA with the Pentagon.

Also, supplies and boats for hire were available there for search purposes. Since the rented boats contained metal that corrupted the sensitive detection gear, the commanding officer opted to ride in a wooden rowboat, towed by a long rope behind a larger craft. When a viable signal was received over the commander's headphones, a weight was dropped and the divers went to work. With the water at flood stage, thick as soup, and murky with suspended mud and all manner of debris, the job proved difficult and extremely hazardous. Estimates of a ninety-foot river bottom at the point Hotel-23 was believed to have sunk proved fallacious. An actual bottom was never determined. In addition, working solely by feel, the scuba team never found the helicopter, or bodies, in the near zero visibility conditions. This led to assumptions that the very strong current near the river bottom had caused the machine to tumble over and over, eventually filling with mud and likely forever entombing the passengers. Others hypothesized that the helicopter might eventually surface on a sand bar during the dry season.

Bill Young noted that Case Officer Louis O'Jibway's death left a huge void in the Houa Khong operation, for Jib was approaching a good rapport with the indigenous people. On paper, Site-118A was responsible to FAR and Agency leaders at Luang Prabang. Therefore, in the interim before Tony Poe was selected as a permanent replacement, Nam Yu operations were monitored and coordinated by Howard Freeman, who journeyed there from Luang Prabang several times a week.

After returning from Bangkok, I talked to Bobby regarding his nocturnal swim in the Mekong. Without prodding, he was completely frank and, holding nothing back, related the entire story. He said that during his medical examination, the Air Force doctor was certain his body was corrupted from swallowing

a large amount of the filthy river water and being immersed for so long. He expected Bob's skin to erupt with numerous staphylococcus boils. Fortunately, the good doctor was wrong.

For several days following the incident, Bobby still appeared depressed. Normally a quiet person who kept his counsel, it was difficult to judge his mental state. Overtly, he did not seem too remorseful, but if you looked hard enough you could easily recognize that he was a troubled man. He was an individual who easily fit the Air America mold. A heavy, placid man, he was an avid gum chewer in the bar while chain smoking and drinking beer. He was a difficult person to rile, as I discovered while sometimes abrasively taking him through his paces upcountry when performing mountain landings while he was still a First Officer. He had advanced a long way from a relatively benign Air Force career and placid round trips with New York Airways from Manhattan Island to the Newark airport. His courage was undisputed. He had earned his bones rescuing Customer Tony Poe earlier in the year, and then USAF pilot Curt Briggs with me in June. The accident, one that could have happened to any of us given similar circumstances, came at just the wrong time in his career. Therefore, to help take Bobby's mind off the tragedy and establish confidence that he still had friends to rely on, Marius, Tuie, and I offered to escort him downtown to a nightclub for some much-needed diversion. I rarely went to such places, and for naive Tuie, a longtime resident and student at Bangkok's Saint Joseph cloistered boarding school, it marked her first appearance in such an establishment. As we consumed our cold Singha beer, I think she was a bit shocked at our demeanor and loud entreaties to commence the girlie floor show. Oddly enough, that night she met the owner of the band and discovered that both had attended the Assumption College in

Bangkok. I think Nunez appreciated our gesture, and I would like to believe that our feeble attempt to cheer him up attained positive dividends.

Nunez' personality and conduct did not seem to appreciably alter after the accident, although there were other signs of change. He went on a buying spree in Bangkok, purchasing expensive Thai Celadon lamps, an enormous tiger skin for his wall, and other items that I would never have considered obtaining since they constituted items thieves might covet. He was always generous, and shared his monthly *Forbes* magazine with me. He loved to cook, and purchased expensive cutlery. One day he came to the house and showed me how to sauté mushrooms.

Regardless of the compound guard's presence at night, Bobby eventually did take precautions against potential quemoy incursions. Specifically, he purchased a large, heavy safe to house his newly acquired collection of pricey new-issue mint stamps. Pilot interest waxed and waned regarding investments. It was a time when some of the more naive pilots were interested in collecting items like coins and stamps for future appreciation. It continued to be a period of learning until they realized that the only true winners of marked up "investments" were the people selling them. One day I heard a piercing scream from Bobby's normally quiet bungalow. Thinking he was sick or in serious trouble, I rushed over to offer assistance. Bobby was sitting in front of his open safe, terribly despondent and almost crying. He showed me a stack of ruined sheets of stamps glued together from the safe's humid interior. Had he consulted me beforehand, I would have advised him to insert wax paper between the sheets as my Father had taught me.

The year had been very difficult for all of us thus far. Because of the nature of our work, we rarely talked about our

experiences. For normally mouthy pilots, this was quite odd. Perhaps we should have conversed with each other more regarding our work or to someone in management, for suppression led to pent-up emotions that surfaced in strange ways from individual to individual. Instead of leaving the organization and Theater, most pilots attempted to vent inner demons in the accepted manner: booze and broads. However, these questionable attempts just masked underlying problems, for as a psychology major at Duke University, I realized that realistic therapy commenced after talking through a troubling subject. That is one reason I obtained some catharsis in my brief letters home about my work. Regardless of the limited detail, just thinking about and writing a portion of the event cycled me through the entire spectrum of a traumatic event. In addition, it was the unwritten read-between-the-lines inferences that really helped purge my mind of unhealthy thoughts.

Although he departed the helicopter program the following year, Nunez remained with Air America several more years. However, despite our brain's proclivity to mask bad events and deliver them to the recesses of our minds, I do not think he ever wholly suppressed the Mekong River incident. Jib was a local hero, enormously popular with many Agency people. No punitive action was ever taken against Bobby, but long after the fact, he told me that "spook" types never forgave him for O'Jibway's death. Tony in particular was disgruntled, as he and Jib were considered very close friends. Later, when Tom Penniman went to work in Taipei, he mentioned to System Chief Pilot Don Teeters that Nunez was one of the braver Air America pilots.

Teeters, who knew Jib from Western Enterprises, snapped at him and scoffed, "Well, he killed my good friend O'Jibway." ²⁴

As per Company policy, especially in light of personnel losses, Nunez was grounded for a time pending a thorough accident investigation. A myriad of contributing factors for the accident emerged, including Nunez's comment that he might have experienced a hydraulic malfunction while flying through a low-flying rain shower. Because no tangible evidence existed, it was impossible to determine if a mechanical malfunction had caused the accident. However, from principal's statements this was ruled out. Most people believed that Nunez was extremely tired after a long stressful day in the cockpit, and this factor combined with all the other negative ones, resulted in Nunez's disorientation. ²⁵ The investigation board consisting of Chairman Ben Moore, E.S. "Tex" Dew, T.H. Penniman, E.W. Knight, and J.C. Aspinwall agreed with circumstantial evidence, and the members' final judgment as the probably primary cause for the accident was pilot error and misjudgment of altitude.

About two weeks after the accident, the Thai colonel's body was discovered floating on the Lao side of the river. Operations Manager Penniman was assigned to accompany the parachute-wrapped body to Udorn in a Porter flown by Joe Potter. The body was reduced to such a decomposed state that it was revolting to be

²⁴ Western Industries was an Agency front organization established in the late forties on Taiwan to conceal "black" operations. After the cover was blown, it was re-named ATG-Army Technical Group.

²⁵ Beside fatigue, one possible cause for the accident was, either sunshine or moonlight shining through a rotating four rotor blade system onto muddy water. This often produces a phenomenon known as rotor flicker. The serious condition in the hands of non-instrument qualified and inexperienced pilot staring ahead at the dark could cause serious problems leading to spatial orientation.

near. Consequently, Tom leaned into the cockpit the entire trip, with his face nearly buried in the stick trim control, pleading for Potter to blow cigar smoke in his direction to mask the offensive odor.

Johnson's body was also later recovered. In Washington, the former Marine's funeral was attended by Agency personnel, including William Colby, Chief of the Far East Division.

Jib, from Redondo Beach, California, was retained on Agency rolls for a year until he was officially declared dead. This allowed his heirs to collect his salary and death benefits. Johnson's estate only received the death benefits.

Two anonymous gold recognition stars were added to those embedded in the white Langley foyer wall outside Washington, D.C. to honor fallen CIA heroes. One star represented Louis O'Jibway, and the other Edward Johnson. Today, the *Book of Honor* rests in a secure glass case beneath the stars, but is not readily available to the public to identify the stars. The two men, both representing minorities, provided the Agency bragging rights to evidence that the organization was an equal opportunity employer.

As pilots were in extremely short supply, Calhoun and Nunez soon returned to the line. Nichols was not so fortunate. Jack Forney, executing a tough post-accident policy, denied Steve upcountry work for a month. However, he did fly to T-407 with Knight several times as a crewmember during the first week after the crash to help pinpoint the site, and locally on test flights. Unhappy over losing hazardous pay and earning only a paltry 600 hundred dollars a month, he requested a return to

flight status. ²⁶

After my trip south to Kuala Lumpur and excitement over Nunez's adventure in the dark, muddy Mekong water, I began flying again on the 24th. I was barely into overtime and believed my time on the schedule would be limited during the final days of the month. However, as it turned out, those who opted for STO early in the month and were available later, benefited when Operations scrambled for someone to fly at month's end. Regardless of a pilot's flight time, there was no other choice: Customer requirements had to be fulfilled.

The flight was a combination training and test exercise in Hotel-33 for Tony Byrne, who had not been in Udorn long. A Thai Flight Mechanic, Suribongse, completed the crew. Like Champanil, he had been hired in January under a quota agreement with the Royal Thai Government that stipulated Air America would hire Thai nationals who were found to be qualified. The process had been slow, but was changing, probably because of host nation pressure. Both men former RTAF personnel, became positive additions to our crew force. They spoke English better than the older Filipinos, and were solid and enthusiastic workers..

²⁶ Segment sources:

Ken Conboy, 136.

Joe Flipse Emails, 05/04/97, 03/19/00.

Steve Nichols Phone Calls.

EW Knight, Emails, 07/14/00, 07/15/00, 07/26/00, 07/27/00, 04/19/01, 04/22/01, 04/23/01, 08/23/00.

Marius Burke Interview.

Tom Penniman Emails, 02/25/00, 03/03/00, 03/04/00, 03/09/00, 04/05/00.

Blaine Jensen Letter.

Bill Young Interview, 10/19/95.

Bill Leary 1965 Notes.

TONY BYRNE

A.R. Byrne arrived in Udorn about mid-month, and because of the ongoing recovery operation requiring participation of management pilots, this was probably Byrne's first flight. During a two-hour local area familiarization, I discovered that Tony, a former Marine pilot, had been a stockbroker with a leading security firm in Philadelphia. That pleased me. In my quest to become financially independent, I was becoming even more interested in the stock market, and impatient to make my fortune so that I could exit my present line of work. To accomplish this, I needed to pick the brains of those I considered well equipped to help me, like Poe, Fonburg, and now Byrne.

Looking at Tony, no one would have ever suspected he had been a Marine Corps helicopter pilot. Not fitting a typical mold, he was a pear-shaped fairly heavy person, but not approaching Fonburg's physical proportions. Most troubling of all about the man was that he had a speaking voice that might repel even the most liberal individual. Difficult to describe, predominantly female sounding, his articulation bordered somewhat between a slightly nasal tone and a high-pitched whine. The voice was unusual for "hairy chested" men, and the inflection increasingly reminded me of my Aunt Ruth Casterlin. Tom Hoppe and Tom Penniman later related that when Tony was inbound in Hotel-22 and made a radio call during a SAR, a downed Air Force pilot remarked he did not know that Air America hired queers. Byrne initially endured a lot of flak for his unusual speech pattern, but the intelligent man soon became one of the boys and assumed a cool and seemingly unflappable character in his own right.

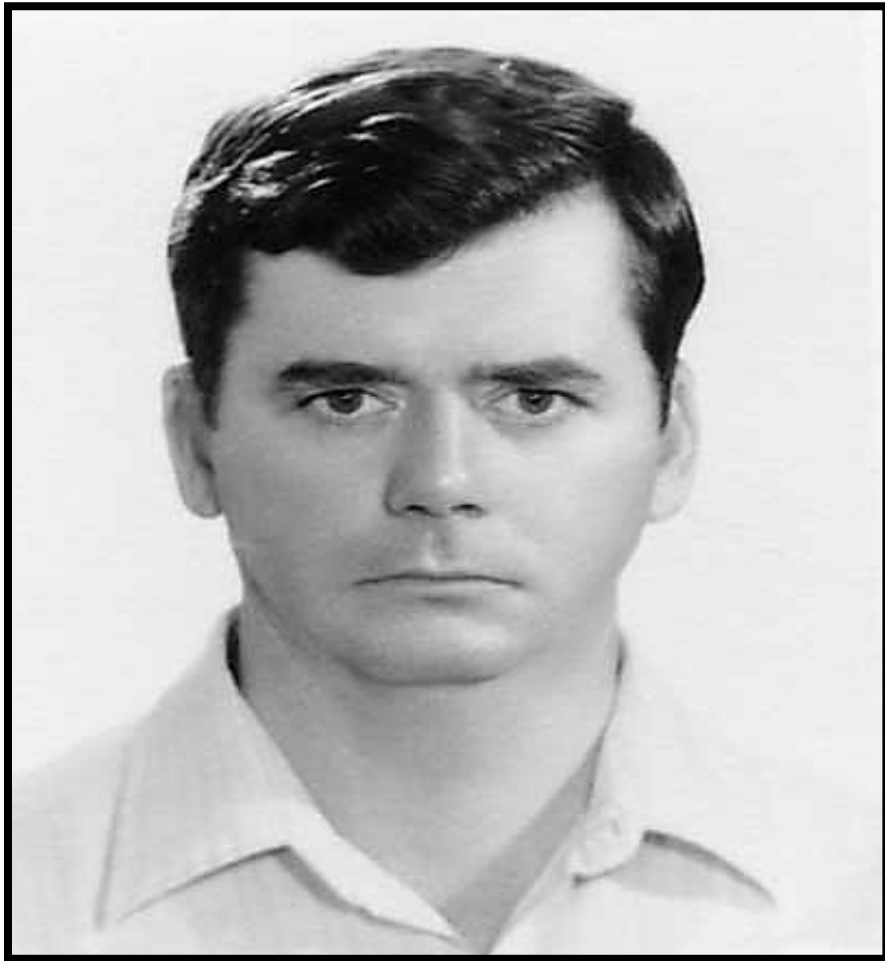


Photo taken in Taipei, Taiwan at the time of Anthony Byrne's hiring.

Bart Brigida Collection.

Tony was the only helicopter pilot who smoked a pipe in the bar. He coined the phrase "two beer Casterlin," derived from my own admission plus observation of my drinking activities. Sometime after the mandatory probationary period, his wife Rosemary and family arrived in Udorn. Whenever she entered the Club, he was heard to exclaim, "*Oh my God, it is Godzilla.*"

In 1967, after viewing Paul Newman in the entertaining movie, *Cool Hand Luke*, there was lively conversation among employees regarding the egg eating contest and speculation of someone duplicating the prodigious feat. One night Wayne Knight entered the Couth bar (as opposed to the Animal bar) and discovered Tony drinking by himself. Wayne discussed the movie with Byrne and inquired if he would help play a trick on Phil Payton (DOH 02/08/66). Tony would claim that he had emulated the Newman movie version of consuming fifty hardboiled eggs. Payton was normally a difficult individual to fool, but Tony agreed to go along with the ruse. The Thai bar staff was apprised of the hoax and agreed to swear that Byrne had performed the feat.

Payton and several other men later arrived in the bar and Wayne told Phil the story about Tony repeating Newman's movie feat. Naturally, Payton was skeptical. He asked the bar staff, and they all confirmed the accomplishment. He then went to Tony and challenged him to an egg eating contest.

With a straight face, Byrne replied with a stream of swear words that seemed incongruous given his feminine accent. He had damned well done as Wayne stated, and if Payton was interested in a wager, then he should place his money where his mouth was. Phil might have harbored reservations, but a \$50 bet was made and the contest sanctioned. Fifty boiled chicken eggs were ordered from the dining room. Word of the challenge quickly spread throughout the area and a crowd soon gathered to view

what was considered a most spectacular event. Payton sat down and commenced cracking shells and eating. After consuming only eight eggs, he stopped and quit the contest. Booed by the spectators, Payton claimed a foul and said he could not believe Tony actually ate all fifty eggs. There is some doubt if the bet was ever paid; however, no one confessed that Tony never ate the eggs as claimed. All in all, it was a humorous event and helped to enliven a slow period. Byrne was magnificent; Payton, who was rarely "fish hooked," bamboozled. ²⁷

BILL WILMOT

Pilots continued to arrive during the year to flesh out the helicopter group. One of the most unusual was Bill Wilmot. Bill had served as an Air America H-34 Flight Mechanic in the earlier days when the Madriver contract employed Temporary crews and initial permanent civilian hires. During May-June 1962, while I was still serving in the Marine Corps as an active participant in the 3rd MEU operation, I observed Bill standing by the cabin door of a ship on the taxi-parking ramp. I was particularly interested in the tall young man because he prominently wore cowboy attire and displayed an enormous holstered hand gun on his hip. Bill was still a Company employee when I was hired in September of the same year. However, he became caught up in the Company-Customer-American flight and ground mechanic downsizing purge, calculated to eliminate malcontents (called dead wood), and to save money, and in early 1963 he departed Southeast Asia.

²⁷ EW Knight Email, 07/18/00.
Tom Penniman Email, 03/05/00.

When pilots consistently flew high time days in 1961 and early 1962, they often encouraged and provided a few predisposed American Flight Mechanics cockpit instruction and "stick time" against a point in time in which they might become incapacitated by gunshot wounds, or another emergency, and require immediate cockpit assistance. Such "coaching" was performed on a steady basis, mainly during en route or ferry flights. ²⁸ Logging this mostly "bootleg" time, Wilmot obtained a commercial helicopter license and gained flying experience working in the bush for the Okanagan Helicopter Company in Canada and Alaska. Then, upon learning of the 1965 hiring surge, he applied to Air America as an UH-34D pilot. His timing was exceptionally good.

People arrived daily at our facility. We line pilots outside the management loop rarely knew the identities of individuals in the helicopter pipeline. In October, I arrived at the compound to check my mail and spied Wilmot casually sitting on the wooden steps of the operations building engaged in a conversation with CJ Abadie. Although I had never flown with Bill, thinking he was rehired as a Flight Mechanic and pleased to see a familiar face with prior experience, I shook his hand and welcomed him back. Ab was quick to correct me and point out that Bill had been hired as an H-34 pilot.

Naturally, I was initially shocked, silent, and nonplussed that the Company would actually hire a non-military-trained helicopter pilot. It marked a first, and I wondered if we were actually that hard up for rotary wing aviators. Aware of Bill's

²⁸ I rarely allowed this. Although not a popular decision among the American Flight Mechanics, I believed that the man belonged below in the cabin section, where his talents during an emergency might be required.

history as a mechanic, I departed the facility baffled, speculating whether he would ever manage to achieve the level of a "real pilot." Furthermore, because of continuing SAR requirements and the possibility of relying on someone to retrieve me after a forced landing or during a particularly hairy circumstance, I had reservations about Bill.

To my surprise and wonder, Wilmot did very well, as substantiated by those who subsequently flew with him. That was fine with me, but without the excellent ground and flight training we Marines received in Pensacola, and overall air sense obtained through many hours of experience and various tough assignments, I still maintained lingering doubts regarding his ability to solve the myriad of problems constantly impacting us during the course of a day.

CPH Knight also harbored reservations about Wilmot's return to Udorn as an H-34 pilot. One included his lack of military training. However, when they began flying together, Wayne was pleasantly surprised to discover that Bill was one of the most naturally talented new people in basic aircraft handling that he ever knew. Another of his concerns was the total number of H-34 hours Wilmot had entered in his logbook. When queried regarding the claimed 600 hours in model and type, Bill frankly admitted most were merely cabin section hours recorded when he performed crewmember duties and were signed off by the PIC. Because of Bill's superior performance during local flights, Knight did not belabor the issue. After adequately demonstrating his ability, Wilmot was the first pilot Wayne allowed to perform night touchdown autorotations.

Bill flew upcountry with various pilots for some time. During his familiarization phase, he had a trip to Thakhet on eight to nine November with Tom Hoppe. Afterward, they then

moved up to Military Region Two, working Sites-36 and 85 from 10 to 13 November. Tom had to be careful not to carry too much into the pads around Din Den, for they were small, downwind, and always windy.

On the night they RON at Na Khang, a Customer was conversing with a counterpart at Long Tieng on the single side band radio (SSB) nervously saying, "*Oh, this place is going to go.*" Afterward he heard Americans in the hut making plans to depart the site. Tom went to bed thinking about that.

During the night he was awakened by a loud explosion. Part of the ammunition dump had exploded and white phosphorous ("Willy Pete") splattered the area. Tom ducked down behind the shed. Bodies littered rice paddies to the east, but he was unable to determine if they were good or bad guys.

Wilmot asked, "*What are we going to do? Are we going down to the fuel pit to crank up Hotel-22 and head south?*"

Na Khang increasingly became a sensitive site. It was a likely target for enemy attack, and the subject of the correct action to take at night when a potential for incoming artillery or site overrun was great had already been debated among Udorn management and the pilot group. The discussion revolved around whether to remain close to aircraft considered a prime target, or to prepare for an alternative bug-out route on the ground. At this point in the war, to minimize losses, during an attack the enemy normally left an open escape route for government troops. Later, when the Vietnamese became more involved in the Lao war and largely replaced the Pathet Lao as frontline troops, this was no longer possible. Therefore, depending on the situation, the consensus gravitated to the latter option and the AB-1 Customer was apprised of the pilots' intention to depart the site on foot.

Tom, aware that crossing the open runway to the helicopter would be a foolish and dangerous move in an unknown situation, had already made up his mind on a plan of action. He told Bill, *"When I see the troops move out, I am going to follow them because they know the way out of here. I am going to walk and learn how to hike with these guys."*

Fortunately, the situation stabilized and the difficult decision did not have to be exercised. ²⁹ ³⁰

ASSIGNMENT PAKSE

On the 28th, Mike Jarina, Suribongse, and I crewed Hotel-14 to Pakse. In addition to providing me a cockpit mate, it looked like the Operations Department was continuing to provide me with a welcome break from front line work. More than likely, the assignment was probably calculated to keep me out of the high time areas where I could fly ten or more hours a day.

I learned that Jarina, a retired U.S. Navy commander, was born in December 1919. By the time he reached our organization he was considered a dinosaur by our generation's standards. Despite our other "old dogs" either passing or departing to fly less taxing fixed wing planes in Tachikawa, Japan, although slowing appreciably, apparently the Company was not finished hiring "senior citizens" for the helicopter program. The desiccated employment situation resulted in a relative lack of younger military pilots available for hire--especially experienced throttle-twisters. Like Frank Stergar, Jarina cared

²⁹ EW Knight Emails, 07/17/00, 07/18/00.
Tom Hoppe Interview, Letter Summer 96.

³⁰ Sadly, we lost Wilmot only a few months later. The incident will be covered in the 1966 book. In the Author's mind, Bill would have been better served to have remained at home in the USA.

about and maintained his health and appearance. Well-muscled, taller than Frank, Mike had a stoic look to him, and acted as if he could hack the program and take care of himself in any situation. I was not wrong, and Mike did not disappoint us. He possessed an even temperament, accepting my criticism when I reminded him of RPM vigilance while crossing the Plateau. Overall, Jarina performed a great job, remaining with us until nearly the end of our war.

Since this was Mike's last familiarization area, he was fortunate in that over the course of three days, we conducted many missions and he received a good overview of Military Region Four, while covering many of the Pakse-Attopeu-Saravane sites.³¹

The first day we worked the joint CIA-USAID WAPI rural development project in Wapikhamtong Province north of Pakse. This paramilitary and civic-action operation was one of MR-4 FAR Commanding Officer General Phasouk's favorite programs and most successful activity since 1963. The area produced abundant rice and was liberally populated by Lao Theung, who had been traditionally unfriendly to the RLG. This was especially the case around Lao Ngam (PS-11), where a large laterite strip had been built to service the area. Because of a ground fire threat in late 1962, I had over flown this area at altitude with Nick Burke while still a First Officer. Although quiet now, I still felt a little anxious low leveling over and landing at the site.

At the end of the day, Suribongse independently elected to remain at the airfield and work on the machine. Indicating that he would find his own accommodations, perhaps in the Sikorsky

³¹ Similar to a newborn, Mike Jarina's mind was blank, a relative sponge in regard to the area. Hence, he produced excellent recall years later when I interviewed him concerning the RON.

Hotel or at the Company radio shack, as we left he scurried about, eagerly crawling over Hotel-14, inspecting everything and carefully greasing each zerk fitting. I was quite pleased and impressed with the man, as I had not seen the same attention and devotion to duty in some time.

That night I discovered that there was a business convention in town and the Chinese hotel was full of visitors from Japan, Nationalist China, and the Philippines, and the hotel receptionist was unaware of any other available accommodations. The small AID hostel was also full. Finally, on the advice of a kind soul, we went to the dilapidated "French" Hotel. I had never heard of any crew staying overnight at this place, so there was probably a good reason. It was a new experience for me, one I never repeated. The building was located well back from the main road, surrounded by a stand of large shade trees planted years before. The inside was dark and dingy and, if foretelling something, did not seem to be well patronized. The room was very large, so to save money we doubled up. The huge shower stall nozzles produced only frigid water that tended to shrivel one's genitals.

What was called the "French" restaurant was not far from the hotel, but I advised against eating there. Along with Herb Baker, I had previously taken dinner on the open air second deck of the establishment and found the steak and fries edible. The first floor sported a nightclub cum girls and a procurement operation. Curious as to kitchen hygiene, before leaving the establishment, I had investigated and discovered the dishwashing area appallingly filthy. Therefore, as an alternate to such a place, we hired a Samlor driver, returned to town, and ate at the corner Chinese restaurant across from Henri's drink shop. After ordering a beer, I discovered that Mike did not drink,

which I had to respect, but considered unusual behavior for an aviator. As dogs ran through the dining area looking for tidbits to snatch, and flies flitted around, I introduced Jarina to Bam Mi Nam, the delicious Chinese egg noodle soup I so dearly loved. I first took proper precautions by demanding that our bowls and utensils were properly rinsed and "sterilized" to my specifications in the boiling hot broth. Despite the owner's curious glances at the meddling foreign devil, I considered that given a normal immune system and by using my prevention methods, we would be reasonably safe from developing the "Code of the East." Served piping hot, the soup not only tasted good, but was quite nutritious. Mike, an exceptionally good sport, allowed that the soup was very similar to some Japanese food he had eaten. He got a large kick out of my zeal in touting the soup, and over the years, we often laughed about our Bam Mi Nam experience.

We departed the "French" Hotel early the next morning with no regrets. On the way to the airport, I had the duty Jeep driver stop at the Vietnamese bakery for a quick repast of canned citrus juice and Ovaltine. We also purchased mini-loaves of French bread and a few bananas for later consumption. At lunch, I taught Mike how to fashion a sandwich with potted meat, liverwurst, or sardines that I normally carried in my RON bag. While preparing my sandwich, I picked dark, suspicious items buried in the bread halves. When Mike saw this, he quipped, *"What is the matter? Don't you like caraway seeds?"*

During the course of flying on the Bolovens Plateau, Jarina was impressed by the mini-extinct volcano on the road to Paksong and the numerous waterfalls cascading off the sides of the interesting topographic wonder. While shuttling between Pakse and Plateau sites, we stopped at Houei Khong (L-56), and I

introduced Mike to the John Davis missionary family. Adhering to pilot-missionary tradition developed from earlier years, we carried a box of bread for the family. Anything, especially reading material, was always appreciated by the couple and their growing family. Living close to nature, John and Eleanor still lived simply, but by this time they owned a kerosene operated refrigerator, probably provided by their religious order. Curiously, the only piece of linoleum in the spartanly appointed thatched house lay directly beneath the fridge. Being the excellent hostess that she was, Eleanor served us cake. Mike thought her gesture unusual. We brought them a cake equivalent, and they gave us cake. However, she explained that she only had the makings for cake.

There was not a lot of time to visit and talk, but we learned that a couple of French Catholics had been machine gunned while driving on the Paksong road a month or two before Mike arrived in Udorn. At times, it seemed very dangerous to traverse this route for round-eyes. I recalled John telling me some time before that a Pathet Lao patrol, probably collecting taxes, had set up a roadblock on one of the roads and stopped an Australian missionary. The man managed to talk his way out of a very dicey situation and left uninjured. Thus far, under the protection of their Kha charges, the Davises had not been bothered.

ATTOPEU

One of our trips was conducted to the provincial city of Attopeu (L-10), where the FAR maintained a tenuous end-of-line presence in the South. Because of Pathet Lao influence and negative attitudes toward anything smacking of the Vientiane government, flying from scattered hostile villagers living south

of the Plateau, I generally preferred to maintain altitude and descend directly overhead the 4,400-foot strip. Since the remote site was considered relatively unimportant compared to river market towns, the laterite strip was never paved like a few other major airfields.

Attopeu, like other government sites maintained in the country such as FAN controlled Moung Heim, was unique in that an unwritten accommodation with the enemy was the only means of maintaining the enclave.³² According to the tacit agreement, FAR patrols limited forays to the immediate surrounding area, rarely if ever venturing into the countryside. Indeed, such patrols had not been conducted since the White Star days. Unlike the Luang Prabang multi-faction trading post, Attopeu existed as a government outpost only at the will of the enemy, who could assume control at any time of their choosing. Thus far, a steady flow of goods and weapons that underpaid FAR soldiers sold to the enemy presented a lure to keeping the site viable. All the economic and political subterfuge was not appealing to us pilots, for as Charlie Davis unhappily discovered shortly after being upgraded, we never knew which good guy or bad guy policy was in effect on any given day.

There were interludes calculated to remind Attopeu's inhabitants of enemy proximity and lethal capability, or perhaps they were just having fun. A 75mm artillery piece was perched on a relatively low hill guarding Lima-10's northeastern flank. Showing the flag, a Pathet Lao patrol had easily chased the

³² Located in upland Military Region Two east of Na Khang, Moung Heim was a generic term we used for the entire valley area that led north toward the North Vietnam border. The actual name of LS-48 was Chong Ha.

intrepid FAR warriors out of the position the previous night and expended all the ammunition on the airfield and city. The primary reason we went there with FAR officers from Pakse was to assess damage from the action and bolster morale. Curious, Mike logically inquired why we were going there if the enemy had captured the position. I offered that the enemy was likely no longer there, and such engagements happened all the time; all it took was a slight threat and the FAR ran off. Mike then asked why the PL did not spike the gun.

"Because they want us to resupply the position, then they will come back at a time of their choosing and once again shoot up the town."

True to form, after depositing the inspection-public relations team, we began shuttling shells to the arty site. Even though a retired military man, Mike was still naive as to Lao machinations and he thought the entire scenario constituted a bizarre way for both sides to fight a war. He had a difficult time resolving the issue, but later became a staunch adherent in the right way, the wrong way, and the Lao way.

A GRIM NIGHT

The convention was still in session. To make matters worse, the electricity was off in Pakse. Because of the power outage, the Chinese restaurant was not serving that night, so we discovered another noodle shop across the street and ate our Bam Mi Nam by candlelight.

Rooms at the Chinese hotel were still not available. Therefore, not desiring a repeat performance at the "French" Hotel, with little other choice except the discomfort of Sikorsky Hotel-14, we rented rooms at the corner hotel-flop house across from Henri's cold drink shop. We were soon to

discover that, although a convenient place to purchase a decent meal, overnighting there was another matter. I had reservations regarding our selection, as I had heard rumors from knowledgeable pilots like Dick Elder that the upstairs was a short-time establishment catering to patrons' carnal pursuits. We really had little choice that night, but might have weighed second thoughts if we had known what lay in store for us.

We ascended the narrow stairway along the wall to the second floor, while a guy and his girl were descending. They probably thought we were queer, for in passing, they looked directly at us foreigners and laughed. By then, the power was back on and the few florescent lights cast enough light to reveal a narrow, dingy hallway containing unpainted wooden doors and walls. To promote a modicum of airflow, walls terminated several feet from the ceiling. The tight "rooms" were little more than cribs, erected for only one purpose: prostitution. The small, filthy enclosures contained only one hard mattress bed. A common unisex bathroom was located down the hall. The day had been very hot, so after a quick clean up and complete change of underwear, I retired.

I had not been asleep long when I was rudely awakened by a laughing, giggling couple stomping along the hall. The Lao man, obviously drunk, was especially boisterous. After they slammed the door to their room, I thought I might return to slumber. However, it was very warm in the cramped room, and through the thin walls and open enclosures, the pair's lovemaking noises pervaded the second floor. I prayed for hasty climax and quiet, but this was only wishful thinking, for equally noisy couples continued arriving and departing. The drill continued most of the night. Disgruntled, I thought seriously about leaving, but with no transportation or another place to go, I was trapped.

By morning, having obtained little sleep, I was more than "primed to the pissed-off position." As Mike and I tromped down the hall toward the stairway, all I could think of was vengeance against those who had denied me rest. Therefore, while shouting and screaming epithets, I pounded on or kicked each door I passed. My action aroused the attention of several occupants, who elicited their own brand of insult, but they were still groggy from sleep and the effects of drink, and none were bold enough to engage me in battle. Had they done so, I am afraid there would have been substantial blood on the floor.

Friday, on the final day of the RON, we supported an effort to continue development of the FAR radio site on Phu Batiene, six miles east of the airport. Like a sentinel guarding the area between Pakse and the Plateau steps, the sprawling mountain, with a maximum elevation of about 3,000 feet above the ground, lay on the north side of Route-23, an artery sometimes erroneously called the Saigon Road. We landed on a temporary saddleback landing zone, while troops were cutting a new position. This would be soon numbered Pakse Site-17 (PS-17).

Later, we shuttled supplies and people from Pakse to Saravane, Ban Nong Boua, and numerous PS Sites in that area. Naturally, I informed Mike of my forty-mile theory regarding the USAF and their coordinates. However, he was too inexperienced in-country to completely understand my logic.

Toward late afternoon, while radioing an obligatory operations normal report through the Pakse radio operator, I was told to RTB Udorn. The month was over for me. I would have to be satisfied with the slightly more than a hundred hours accumulated. It was a fair amount, but considerably less than previous months. We recovered at the facility well after dark.

SAIGON BELLS

During August, Air America was awarded a U.S. Embassy Saigon contract to fly personnel in Bell helicopter turbine aircraft in South Vietnam. It was the first helicopter contract awarded by AID to Air America in South Vietnam, so pilots and management personnel had to be hired ASAP to fly the five November (N) registered Bell 204 models. ³³

In order to kick start helicopter operation, Regional Chief Pilot Fred Walker requested that CPH Knight recommend an in-house chief pilot for the Saigon operation. Although recognizing a choice opportunity of ridding the Udorn organization of Bob Hitchman, who he was sure would jump at any management billet offer, Wayne was first obligated to query more senior or qualified management people if they were interested in the job.

Tapping a short list of candidates, and making genuine offers to deserving people, he first asked Scratch Kanach. Scratch, always more interested in flying the line to earn money, laughed and said Wayne must be kidding. Marius Burke, recently married and in the process of completing a new house in the Godnoma compound, also refused the offer. Wayne was not surprised. He had already shrewdly pre-supposed the people he asked would refuse the management offer. He was also spot on in his assessment that Hitch would leap at a chance to attain a management position, whenever, and wherever such an opportunity arose. Therefore, the junior ranked Hitchman (upon rehire, Bob

³³ There had been discussion of a contract for two H-34s and crews in South Vietnam toward the end of 1962. Asked by Abadie if I was interested, with little other hope of upgrading to Captain, I seriously considered relocating, but disagreements between principals over project pay and likely other matters scuttled further dialogue regarding the issue.

was afforded a date of hire of 01/10/65) was awarded the Saigon job by default. In retrospect, Wayne believes he might not have afforded future Saigon rotary wing crews any favors by the selection, but his conscience never bothered him--and that, my friends, is another story.

In preparation for his CPH position, Captain Hitchman attended ground and flight training at the Hurst, Texas, Bell Helicopter factory. As qualified pilots became available by end of military tours or retirement, former U.S. Army "Huey" pilots who were already acquainted with the country were hired directly from their South Vietnam units. A few included:

Bill Mouser (DOH 15/08/65), Pat Colgan (16/08/65), and Jim Campbell were hired in August; Chauncey Collard (07/09/65) and French Smith (07/09/65) in September; Claude James (26/10/65), John Greenway (02/12/65) toward the end of the year. ³⁴

The first five Kawasaki factory civilian 204B helicopters manufactured under license to Bell Helicopter USA arrived in Saigon by ship. Called the X-Ray series, they were sequentially numbered N-13003X, 04X, 05X, 06X, 07X. They were slightly modified from the normal 204 in that an extended tail boom was incorporated to accommodate a forty-eight-foot rotor system. The tail boom housed a small compartment on the right side where small amounts of luggage could be stored. One drawback to these models was the small fuel tanks installed, allowing only one hour and forty-five minutes endurance. While Hitchman watched and supervised the first ship being offloaded at the Saigon

³⁴My apologies to those not included on the list.
EW Knight Email, 05/07/00.
Marius Burke Interview at Author's House, 05/30/98.
Marius Burke Email, 06/22/99, 06/29/99.
Jack Knotts Interview at Author's House, 05/26-27/99.
Brian Johnson Email to Leigh Coleman, 05/12/00.

wharf, a helicopter crate was dropped from the crane and became Air America's first Bell casualty of the war.

These Bells were followed in February the following year by normal civilian Foxtrot models issued directly off the Bell Helicopter assembly line in Texas: N-8511F, 12F, 13F, 14F, and 35F.

Early in September, Chief Pilot Knight journeyed to Air America corporate headquarters in Taipei, Taiwan, for a meeting with President Hugh Grundy and others regarding the issue of pilot maximum yearly flight time that many of us were fast approaching. Without an extension, the Madriver operation would be in jeopardy, for even with the many new pilots hired throughout the year there would not be enough available to satisfy all Customer requirements through 1965. While there, he was indoctrinated into the dark inner sanctum of spook machinations.

WITTING

"knowing, aware, conscious"

World Book Dictionary

Although the "witting" derivation is still obscure and debated, it was a time-honored Agency term used for Air America employees, mostly management, who had been formally apprised of the symbiotic Central Intelligence Agency relationship between the two organizations. ¹

The need-to-know issue of who owned Air America arose only when employees were going to be, or were already exposed to secret or top-secret details involving Southeast Asia

¹ Former Air America Manager, Dave Hickler, refers to witting in his memoirs that are presently housed in the Air America Archives at the University of Texas at Richardson, Texas.

Agency intellectuals had a proclivity to use obscure words in describing situations or scenarios. The Author recalls one CIA officer often using the word façade.

operations. An employee became witting after receiving briefings from Air America officials and a CIA Case Officer assigned to him. Briefings varied in depth, content, and extent to match information to which the employee was going to be exposed. Agency business was not carelessly divulged even to witting individuals, and need-to-know measures and compartmentalization of highly classified operations still always applied.

At the time, the only management types in the Udorn helicopter program witting were Ben Moore and Clarence Abadie. When Abadie's Chief Pilot billet became increasingly complex, and he occasionally substituted when Moore was called away on business or vacation, upper echelon individuals decided that he required a need-to-know clearance relating to the basic relationship between the Company and CIA. Among many items, the Taipei briefing apprised him that President Grundy was not mandating final Company decisions. Even exalted Chief Executive Officer George Doole deferred to his Langley superiors. The exercise confirmed to Ab that within USG structure, there was always an individual higher in the chain of command.

Witting did not alter how C.J. conducted himself in the course of his duties. From the beginning, he always maintained a healthy respect for Company rules and regulations. When receiving an order from authorized superiors, largely because of his Marine Corps training and discipline, he performed an assigned task to the best of his ability. Furthermore, he never felt a desire to divulge Air America business with anyone,

unless the person was specifically and directly involved in an operation. Then he shared details with him. ²

For Wayne, the process of becoming witting involved several days of briefings, agreements, and an extensive and basically unpleasant polygraph test. Following witting formalities, in addition to Company structure, Wayne became more aware of clandestine operation activities, like the ones at Takhli and the "black flights." In the future, he never heard any Agency people use the term witting, only from Air America individuals mostly based in Taipei. Abadie, however, did occasionally use the word. In addition, he never again had to sign a security form.

Udorn fixed-wing Chief Pilot Jim Rhyne was also officially visiting Taipei at the same time as Knight. However, neither was aware of what the other was doing until one night, while eating dinner at the Officer's Club, they simultaneously greeted the polygraph operator entering the room. At that exact moment, both realized that they were in Taipei for identical reasons, but they never discussed anything related to the visit's purpose.

Prior to leaving for Thailand, Jim and Wayne met a former Navy type officially working as a staff worker in one of the Company offices. Seconded by the Agency, he served as intermediary passing information between Admiral Radburn and George Doole. The man talked the two pilots into taking him to the renowned Peito pleasure palaces in the hills overlooking Taipei.

² CJ Abadie's admission goes a long way toward explaining his methodology in dealing with subordinates. It also tends to explain the close-mouth attitude he and other management persons effected.

When visitors debarked from the taxi, entertainers were summoned to the establishment and soon arrived on Honda motorbikes. A line-up and selection process followed. Hot Sulphur baths were the norm and a strong hydrogen sulfide stench emanated from the water. Swinging baskets, as described by Ed Reid after a visit, were not evident.

The undercover Agency man obviously suffered conflicting mental problems and was later determined to be unbalanced. Highly paranoid, fearing that someone was out to get him, he fled the area during the night without revealing his intentions to his companions. The same individual later visited the Udorn facility with a high-ranking delegation. After Admiral Radburn passed, the man remained with the Agency but, lacking an elevated sponsor, was relegated to field duties. His true problems surfaced during the 1968 Tet uprising in South Vietnam when he went mad, firing an automatic weapon from a Saigon balcony. For this infraction, he was summarily shipped to the States. ³

JARINA'S INPUT

Mike Jarina flew with John Fonburg and Frankie Claveria from two through seven September before being upgraded to Captain. With almost a daily change of station, they covered a lot of territory. During the period, adverse weather consisting of low clouds and fog impacted the work areas.

³ CJ Abadie Interview,
Abadie Emails, 05/30/98, 07/11/01, 07/12/01, 07/29/01.
EW Knight Emails, 06/10/00, 06/11/00, 06/22/00, 07/05/01, 07/17/01,
07/21/01, 07/24/01 (2).

Friday, the second, included a day flight to Paksane in Hotel-15. After swapping aircraft the following day for a maintenance problem, the men ranged far and wide in Hotel-35. This included working at Vang Vieng and Moung Kassy areas. They RON in Luang Prabang to be in position for a mission to then FAR-controlled Boum Lao (LS-174), where Ernie Brace was captured in May. From there they returned to The Alternate area to work east at the Tha Vieng and Tha Thom sites. After RON at Mike's favorite spot, the hostel at Sam Tong, they went to Na Khang to shuttle bullets, beans, and bandages to forward positions supporting final actions in and around Hua Moung. That night they enjoyed the amenities at Na Khang. The final two days were spent working Na Khang and Moung Heim areas.

When the RON was complete, Jarina considered new Captain Fonburg to be exceptionally cautious, and not yet entirely sure of himself. As one example, after departing one landing zone, Mike had to tell John which direction to fly. He was confused, since he knew the work area only slightly better than John.

This was not an isolated case. Mike had previously discovered after flying with new Captains Roy Hickman and Wayne Webb that they too were highly tentative while he was learning the areas. The flying experience with them was akin to the blind leading the blind. He wondered if there was a deficiency pattern associated with the checkout procedure, and if their Captain upgrading had been too hasty.

Discounting some of the new pilots' problems, Jarina considered himself extremely fortunate to have flown with and

been tutored by a number of more accomplished senior pilots. ⁴

One of Mike's last flights prior to upgrading was a night training flight scheduled with Dick Elder. They conducted the required number of night landings followed by ground-controlled approaches (GCAs). Directed by trained Air Force personnel, Mike was impressed with the ground control service at the remote base. After the flight, Elder informed Jarina it was the obligation of the First Officer to buy the Captain a drink at the Club. Mike, who abstained from alcohol consumption, refused, saying he never heard of that tradition before and saw no reason to comply. Failing to comply with Elder's attempted con job, he thought he had made an enemy, but Dick became one of his best friends.

Wayne Knight returned from Taipei and discussions with President Grundy relating to the possibility of extending helicopter pilot flight time to 1,200 hours. ⁵

A final decision was still in limbo regarding extensions, and I still did not know if I would be allowed fly any more during the year. I might be grounded, and it was quite likely that I would have to take some leave. I had discussed the new time restrictions with Jarina while at Pakse. Since Mike was

⁴Although John Fonburg had gained prior H-34 flying experience in Laos as a Temporary in 1961, his experience was largely regional out of Luang Prabang in the Military Region One area. As there was pressure for additional Captains in the field and the CPH had flown with him in the U.S. Marine Corps and Air America, his check-out might have been somewhat abbreviated. During the last months of his tour, John had worked almost solely out of Luang Prabang. In the years since he had departed Southeast Asia the Lao operation had expanded, the number of sites increased, and the overall situation had changed appreciably.

⁵Calculating it would take one about twenty-four hours to fly from Bangkok to New York, that much time would relate to fifty one-way trips, or fifty days in the air.

well over a hundred hours, he asked Wayne if he was violating the new regulations. The CPH replied that since training time with an instructor did not count against his monthly or yearly total time, he was not affected.

On the eighth, Mike flew with the CPH during one of Wayne's thirty-seven test flights that month. Often employed in conjunction with training, the hop also served as Jarina's Captaincy upgrading. Satisfying Knight's expectations, Mike then flew a route check to a Thai border police camp with Marius Burke and Steve Nichols, who had returned to crewing. After the upgrading chore was complete, Jarina was assigned an upriver mission to Ban Khok Huai (T-407), where the recovery process for missing occupants of Hotel-23 was in the last stages. While taxiing toward the runway, he was flagged down by Jack Forney. Charlie Weitz had already warned Mike about Jack's methods and what a hard-ass individual he could be in maintenance matters. Forney climbed up the right side of Hotel-12 and began reaming him out for taxiing at too high an RPM and churning up excessive dust. Mike shouted back over the roaring engine and transmission whine that he was taxiing in accordance with (IAW) NATOPS operating manual procedures-2200 to 2500 RPM. Jack still insisted that Mike taxi at a lower RPM. The new Captain countered that if the Maintenance Department issued a directive memorandum specifying exactly what he stated, then Mike would be happy to comply. Until that time, he was going to adhere to book recommendation.

It was not Jarina's last ground taxi incident in Udorn. Later, Mike also got into a little trouble with Pop Buell at Sam Tong. Arriving with a load of WIAs, he rolled downhill to the hospital at flat pitch. After offloading the wounded and reversing direction, he began taxiing uphill toward the fuel

pit. In order to move the aircraft, he had to substantially increase RPM and raise the pitch lever, which in turn caused dust to billow up throughout the area. Apparently, this was more than normal, and Pop angrily called him on the radio. Mike apologized and said he would not do it again. Pop still mentioned the incident to the CPH, but this failed to sour future relations between the two men.

THE ENGINE OIL CAPER

Sometime earlier, Mike Jarina entered the CPH office while Wayne was talking to an individual from maintenance. The subject revolved around a recent dispatch from Tainan, Taiwan, maintenance base directed to Jack Forney. It included a U.S. Navy directive about switching from MIL-L-6082, 1100 weight R-1820 engine oil to MIL-L-22851, 1120 weight dispersant oil. Barrels of the new oil had also been forwarded to the Udorn facility and the Maintenance Department was not sure what to do with it. Unlike detergent oil, the dispersant oil was designed and recommended to be added directly to existing oil. However, the changeover, semantics, and method of utilization caused confusion.

Discussion between departments ensued, for there was initial concern that the new oil might promote engine carbon deposits to slough off from internal parts, float around clogging oil ports, and creating other internal problems in older engines. The USAF had already established a detergent oil program (using kerosene). However, detergent oil could not be used in a carbonized engine without draining, flushing out the old oil, and thoroughly cleaning the engine. Otherwise, the detergent properties would release carbon chunks into the engine system and cause worse problems. Then the process had to be

repeated--the oil drained and engine cleaned again. Once detergent oil was employed in the system, regular oil could not be used again. There were worries that not following similar procedures with the current dispersant oil would result in carbon problems.

Overhearing the conversation, and curious as to the reluctance to use the new oil pending clarifying information, Jarina interjected that he had knowledge regarding the new oil and asked to examine the dispatch. After reading it, he informed Wayne that it was not necessary to drain and flush the engine prior to using the dispersant oil; it could be added directly to the existing oil.

While stationed at Pensacola, Mike had served as the R-1820 engine representative on the training command staff. During the period, the Navy switched from using detergent oil to dispersant oil. Therefore, Mike inherited the new oil project. The specifications revealed the new oil could be mixed with old oil during the changeover. A Shell Oil representative visited the facility to acquaint Jarina with facts concerning the oil. Before and after photos of internal engine parts were displayed touting the new oil vs. old. Since pictures could be altered, Mike was not totally convinced of the oil's attributes. To substantiate Shell claims, the Flight Training Command began testing the new oil on carrier T-28s whose engines endured the most wear during those critical high-power operations. During the investigation, individuals in charge of the tests found dispersant oil dissolved the carbon bonds into positive and negative ions which floated in solution. Engine usage failed to produce the normal carbon particles that could cause engine problems. Furthermore, the new oil maintained the particles in

suspension rather than depositing them in grooves and clogging smaller orifices.

The upshot of the program was that T-28s involved in the tests were not experiencing engine failures, but were consuming oil much faster than normal. Investigations revealed that when most oils produce sludge, the oil becomes thicker. The new oil did not form sludge. Instead, it dispersed and surrounded the sludge molecules. The process resulted in less viscous oil that decreased from the original 1100 weight to 1050 or 1080 grade. To solve the problem 1120 grade was introduced. Then, as the oil thinned it met the specifications of 1100 oil.

Word rapidly spread within the Training Command regarding the oil's positive aspects. However, many considered the new oil analogous to a discovery of a cure for a disease and the FDA's reluctance to release it for public use because it had not been proven viable over a long time period. This was not the case in other Navy units. The Atlantic Fleet was experiencing serious problems with AD-4 engine oil lines clogging. Unwilling to wait for the Training Command's testing and final decision, Fleet commanders immediately switched to the new high dispersant oil without Bureau approval.

The cheeky move prompted Jarina to query his superiors if the Fleet action was not good enough cause for the Training Command to emulate. However, there was still one hurdle to overcome. The Shell Oil Company unilaterally held the dispersant oil patent. In order to consider bids for the product, Navy lawyers informed Shell Oil that they could not solely hold the patent, and it had to be collectively shared with other oil manufacturers before they could begin considering bids. Since profit was envisioned, the patent was abrogated to allow other companies access to the formula. The new oil was deemed so

excellent that the Training Command eventually used it on all carrier planes and T-28 engines.

Despite Jarina's insightful input, and insistence that the new oil might indeed save someone's life, there was still hesitation, confusion, and discussion about using the product. After all, Mike was only a relatively new employee with no authority, and the managers could not accept his word regarding the oil's purported superior qualities. Therefore, Knight, Forney, and others at the facility, unwilling to take a chance, claimed they lacked sufficient information to act and would have to obtain further clarification regarding the oil change procedure. Forney, ever a hard-headed "doubting Thomas" in maintenance matters, still considered an oil change necessary during a changeover. The subject was tabled for a time, pending Washington office's advice and approval. Eventually Udorn received a more detailed explanation of the product and clearance to utilize the new oil.

In the end, Forney obtained what he wanted. The final changeover procedure required draining 1100 oil before introducing the dispersant oil. Since the oil was designed to contain carbon and other microscopic debris in suspension between oil changes, unless the engine was new or recently overhauled, it was expected that new oil would pick up a lot of accumulated debris. Therefore, until proven different, the oil change period was initially shortened to reflect this.

Over time, Jack considered the dispersant oil good for lubrication purposes in Air America's application, but no better than normal 1100 oil. He believed the oil was designed and better suited for engines with greater TBO's than the UH-34D R-1820. From prior experience, he was aware that carbon and sludge buildup presented a real problem in fixed wing engines. This was

particularly the case in subzero conditions at either ground level or high altitude, as the engine oil system was often used for propeller control and other accessory applications. An accumulation of sludge would coat the internal engine and propeller dome case up to a half inch. Like a blood clot breaking loose and blocking an artery in the human body, these deposits could manifest in slow operation and pose a risk, as some sludge particles would separate to plug up internal screens and ports. Other potential problems induced by sludge included poor lubrication because of reduced rate of flow, reduced cooling through coated case walls, and contamination of accessories using the same oil for other purposes. ⁶

Word of the oil retrofit and the management controversy caused a stir among us line pilots. With all the earlier maintenance problems, we had been through quite a lot during the year, and it seemed like another intangible to worry about was being added to the caldron.

Hoping to dispel concern among the pilot group, the CPH distributed a memorandum regarding the new oil:

"It has been decided the engine oil be converted from MiL-L-6082 to MiL-L-22851..

MiL-L-22851 engine oil has an improved property to hold sludge and varnish forming particles in suspension and to reduce foaming tendencies. This property will prevent a build-up of sludge and deposit in oil system passage...the periodic oil cooler flushing requirement is to be canceled after this conversion."

⁶ Although Mike Jarina contended that the R-1820 engine became one of the most reliable engines in the Air America inventory, Knight does not recall any particular improvements effected by the introduction of the new oil.

After the dispersant oil change was implemented and no ill effects were recorded, we accepted that at least for once apparently someone had done something right.⁷

PAKSE

It was fitting that Mike Jarina's first RON as Captain was scheduled at the town serving the finest Bam Mi Nam in Laos-Pakse. He was accompanied by Steve Nichols crewing his first flight upcountry since the Nunez episode in the river.

Over a seven-day period, Mike worked many identical areas we had covered during our recent RON: Houei Kong, Long Keo (LS-172) on the southern portion of the Bolovens Plateau, and Attapeu. At Long Keo, Flynn Perry was teaching the FAR parachuting techniques on the 3,100 ASL strip. Jarina shuttled parachute packs to Site-172 and delivered expended chutes to Pakse for repacking. During one round robin, he was assigned to fly a USAID representative. Instead of landing at designated sites, the individual made notes and dropped them to people while Mike circled. This prompted Mike to inquire why they did not just land. The man indicated there was not enough time, as he only had Hotel-33 for a short period. He explained that the various organizations had a mutual understanding regarding the sharing of helicopter assets: i.e., you can have the aircraft when I am not using it. Jarina believed that there was a far more efficient way of sharing scarce assets. Mainly, if the person wanted to ride with Mike, he could have done his work on

⁷Mike Jarina Interviews.

EW Knight Email, 07/17/00.

EW Knight Memorandum to All Helicopter Pilots, UH34-D Precautionary Maintenance: Sludge Control in Engine, 10/21/65.

Jack Forney Email, 02/10/99.

the many shuttles. The guy said it was better not to fret about it, just be happy with what you received.

In addition to Saravane, the new Captain serviced the Sedone Valley WAPI project. Shutdowns were made at Ban Saphat twelve miles northeast of Khone Sedone (LS-175), on feeder Route-160 by the Se Don, La Khong Pheng (LS159), on Route-13, 21 miles northwest of Khone Sedone, and Lao Ngam.

During the period, he overnighted at Savannakhet to conduct a trip near Ban Houaymun (later LS-310), eighteen miles east of Route-13.

When Mike was apprised of an impending Houei Kong trip or working the Plateau, he always made a point to deliver bread to the Davis family. Although this had been a pilot practice for several years, he later spread the word among other new pilots that the gesture was appreciated by the family. The Customer must have learned of this policy and became concerned over the deviations from regular missions and losing precious flight time, for shortly afterward, a memorandum was circulated at the Udorn facility stating that helicopter pilots were not to stop and shutdown at Houei Kong unless specifically scheduled.

Over time, Mike became good friends with John and Eleanor Davis. This resulted in interesting exchanges regarding religion and philosophy. During conversations about the Lao people and their culture, Mike learned why the Lao did not execute all the agricultural projects AID proposed to raise more rice, plant avocados, and the like. Davis indicated, "*Why should they? They have everything they want.*" During the course of the discussion, Mike inquired about other country improvements like road infrastructure. Responding to this question, Davis answered that the Lao were a simple people, and as Buddhists, believed that **He** would provide all their daily requirements. As to altering Lao

behavior, John indicated the only way this would occur would be by abrogating their religion.

To this idea Mike interjected, *"Whoa boy. You cannot. It is not their religion you have to change, but their philosophy of life."*

Smiling, the missionary retorted, *"Is that not exactly what religion professes?"* Mike was delighted with this answer.

Another time John related problems he had to endure on the Plateau. These were not from the Pathet Lao or outcast lepers who would drink from mud puddles on the street, but with FAR officers. AID people had worked in the area attempting to stimulate the natives to raise a new strain of rice. After the project was completed, they thoughtfully presented their Jeep to Davis. He had the vehicle a week when a Lao colonel arrived at Houei Kong inquiring what he was doing with the Jeep. Then the man indicated that the vehicle belonged to him and confiscated it. John stated that was only one example of what he had to tolerate from the Lao military.

Further expanding his knowledge of Laos and the people, Mike met and talked to an aged monk regarding the world, communism, and the relationship to the Lao philosophy (indeed, Asian philosophy) of "bending with the wind." Applied to a non-aggressive people, it was a policy that boded well for survival and continuance of a tropical life style. During the conversation, the old man related:

"A long time ago the French came to Laos, erected schools and built some roads. They also planted various items. However, they took a lot away, but the people were not using it anyway. Then the Japanese arrived on the scene. They were not as nice as the French, but constructed roads and a steel bridge at Pakse with forced labor. They pressed the people into work gangs,

which was highly unpopular. When the war was over in 1945, French military and civil servants returned. Then the Americans arrived. They are building us houses, bridges, and roads. If the PL or Vietnamese follow after the Americans leave, perhaps they will build us some schools and roads too."

Years later, after the Pathet Lao captured much of the Plateau, the Davis family moved to safety in Pakse. One day Mike saw Eleanor riding an Italian Vespa motor scooter down a street. Remembering his past kindness to her family, she stopped, asked Mike where he was going and if he wanted a ride. Jarina had never been on a scooter before and had reservations. However, since he was a long way from the Air America hostel, he got on the vehicle and a wild ride ensued.

The word circulated that the Davises were going home for Christmas. Someone decided it would be a nice gesture if the pilots presented them with a gift. A notice was posted on the Udorn bulletin board soliciting donations. People were very generous and a substantial amount was collected. Later, Eleanor sent a letter to the Udorn facility that was posted. It began, "Dear Captain Air America..." The letter was beautifully written, indicating how the crewmembers' contributions had helped them.

While flying alone in the cockpit during his first upcountry trips, Mike was not especially proficient at VFR flying, especially in marginal weather. He was more accustomed to IFR operations in C-47 and C-45 aircraft, and for a time, found contact flying considerably more demanding. While assigned to Pensacola, he had served on the training facility's instrument board. Attempting to maintain helicopter currency, he conducted instrument check rides in the H-34. As assistant operations officer, he possessed a green card for the R4D. However, his direct superior, the operations officer, had a

coveted helicopter 5,000-hour green card--the first ever issued in the Navy.

Later, after becoming more comfortable flying upcountry, Jarina purchased a Petrie camera (akin to the 35mm half-frame Minolta-Minox spy cameras). When not flying with a First Officer, Co-Captain, or Customer, Mike carried the camera and his survival pack on the left seat. The pack contained a razor, morphine, C-rations, toilet paper, and other assorted items. One day, he left Long Tieng carrying several individuals to Vientiane on the way to Udorn. After a request from an employee to occupy the left seat, Mike handed his survival kit down to the Filipino Flight Mechanic, who indicated that he would care for the pack. It was quite late when Jarina landed at Wattay Airport, offloaded the passengers, and continued to Udorn. After securing the ship, Mike discovered that someone had "inadvertently" departed with his survival kit. ⁸ ⁹

UDORN

During early September, monsoon rains viciously whiplashed the Udorn area. To take advantage of additional rainfall, the 75,000-gallon Air America pool was drained for inspection and cleaning. Almost like a curse, this activity was followed by a severe drought.

Progress was being made in the facility. Construction on the new Operations-Administration building was proceeding almost

⁸ I never lost a RON bag stored under the cabin seats, but only because one day I looked out my open window and spotted a passenger trying to unload it with other luggage.

⁹ Mike Jarina Interviews.

on schedule. The dusty laterite taxiway was being covered with black top, and creation of a new aircraft parking ramp was projected to commence soon. Other improvements included the pool patio being covered by multi-colored, corrugated plastic material. This feature gave rise to humorous quips, referring to it as alliterative Ben Moore's Marriot Hotel.¹⁰

Because of the new restrictive Company flight time policy and additional Captains available for field work, I was tacitly grounded for an extended period. Except for the time at the beach following the Son La episode, it was longer than any other time in previous months. Pending Taipei management's determination to extend the requested total time for the year, it looked like enforced leisure would be the norm for high-timers like me.

The layoff afforded me an opportunity to partake of my favorite pastimes, that of reading and sleeping. Health wise, the respite was particularly beneficial in that the pain in the base of my neck had completely disappeared, reinforcing my suspicions it had been caused by high flight time and excessive aircraft vibrations. Until the maid trashed the bicycle, when not pedaling the machine downtown to haunt the USIS library, read the *Wall Street Journal*, and converse with the Thai and American personnel working there, Bob Nunez provided me with his current *Forbes* magazines and other reading material. Supplementing these monthly magazines, even though they often arrived late through the APO mail system, I also continued subscribing to the weekly *U.S. News and World Report* to keep

¹⁰ Ben Moore September 1965 Monthly Report.

abreast of current events. ¹¹ I examined the periodicals while lying on the rattan couch purchased from Tom Moher. To preserve the cushions from the ravages of time and keep dust off, the cushions were enclosed and covered in heavy plastic. However, plastic, Bermuda shorts, and bare skin did not mix well in the tropics. Hence, this activity was limited to the cooler portions of the day when my perspiration was not flowing copiously.

Envisioning extended time off and with more time to read, I wrote home soliciting the latest bestselling books like le Carre's, *The Looking Glass War*, Moore's, *The Green Berets*, Michener's, *The Source*, White's, *The Making of the President 1964*, and Collins and Laprene's, *Is Paris Burning?* I also requested any other literary material Mom deemed worthy.

Barring occasional trips to Air America for repast or to view a movie, which required catching an Air America bus or thumbing a ride, another activity I found interesting was home cooking. Tuie, sheltered and cloistered for most of her life, was a total novice in food preparation, and was only recently learning culinary techniques at a local school. Her first attempt at cooking resulted in a dish of beef stroganoff. It was edible, but I wondered how much she actually prepared. Therefore, with the advice of neighbor master chef Nunez and the recommended Dan Beard's paperback cookbook, I began producing tolerable and tasty dishes like spaghetti and soups. The spices I steadily acquired made all the difference in taste.

To better account for money expended and provide funds for daily living, I established a checking account at the Siam City

¹¹Decades later, until the publishers discontinued subscription in favor of using the Internet, I still read the informative and relatively unbiased magazine.

Bank. While talking with the manager, I discovered that a savings account paid seven percent per annum. Even with baht-dollar conversions, I would net six and a half percent. Thinking this an excellent return and back-up for emergencies, I whipped out my checkbook to write a sizeable sum. However, because of the time lag for a personal check to clear, the manager required a stateside cashier's check from my bank. Therefore, I placed the transaction on hold.

During the process, I discovered the assistant bank manager was a woman. This was consistent with the number of Thai business women in management positions. In lieu of serious work, Thai men liked to play, leaving their women to conduct family and business matters. Many times, the female inherited a business after her male prematurely succumbed from a lifetime of self-generated excess. From my perspective I found them exceptionally skillful in business transactions.

When my small dollar check cleared, I purchased a 4.6 cubic foot Japanese manufactured Toshiba refrigerator for the house. The new model had just arrived at the Song Serm electric shop on Posri Road located on the corner next to the USIS building. It was a little larger than the one we previously considered buying. I considered the 240-dollar price outrageous and was not convinced the motor would endure nightly power fluctuations. However, the company wisely sold the unit with a five-year warranty that included the motor. Much to my surprise, it was well built and provided us good service until we sold it in 1974.

I had previously mentioned Tuie to the folks and they were curious. By then, our relationship was becoming more involved and I was seriously thinking about settling down for the duration. Extolling her attributes, I fondly wrote that she was

the nicest girl I had ever met, and that she possessed the best disposition of any female I ever knew. Aware that they were gun shy from the last "serious" relationship that went bust, I did not go any further with any grandiose pronouncements.

THE PANHANDLE

During September and October, enlightening Department of Army Intelligence (DIA) and PACOM and CIA intelligence reports regarding the Military Region Three Panhandle and areas further south were collated from Lao road watch teams and 101 Voodoo tactical flights from the Fifteenth Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron at Udorn and Tan Son Nhut. U-2 photo flights were also conducted as part of the intelligence mix. Analysis concluded that the enemy appeared to be establishing a major base area in mountainous regions straddling the border between southeast Laos and northern South Vietnam. Anticipating cessation of the rainy season when high water and muddy thoroughfares would no longer be a factor along portions of Route-23, the information also revealed additional enemy road and trail construction activity. Photo analysis indicated that despite the rains, there had been progress linking Vietnam in the border areas by using a network of new and improved roads. Estimates judged road repair and new construction would substantially increase troop and supply throughput throughout the trail system. However, even without vehicular passage on the main supply route from North Vietnam through Mugia Pass to Moung Phine-Tchepone, since the onset of May rains, and in spite of the sloppy weather and road conditions, 5,000 fresh troops were estimated to have walked into Laos. This total, as opposed to previous years, skewed the number of Pathet Lao and Vietnamese soldiers located south of Route-12 to new levels.

Road construction of Route-911, an alternate track for Route-23 leading from the Mugia Pass area to Tchepone, was considered one of the most important projects during the year. Projected to reduce travel time from Mugia to Tchepone by a third, the new artery also introduced additional interdiction problems. Intersecting Route-23 twenty miles south of Mugia, 911 wound south through the hills toward the Tchepone Valley. The fact that Route-911 terminated at Tchepone suggested that inception of the dry season would usher increased traffic to the eastern border areas rather than west along Route-9 to supply PL units east of the Mounq Phalane area.

By the middle of October, only fifteen miles remained to complete the system. Photos and road watch reports derived a few days earlier provided tangible evidence that trucks had successfully transited the Mugia Pass choke point in anticipation of traffic moving further west and south earlier than late 1964.

Along Route-92 near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), new bridges linked Routes-102, 103 in North Vietnam. South of Tchepone, road building activity progressed in the southeast border areas. South of Ban Dong, in the eastern reaches of Military Region Four, Route-92 was useable in the dry season below Ban Bac northeast of Saravane. Route-922, 923 spurs leading from Route-92 to the South Vietnamese border were in various stages of improvement and construction that would create ox cart and jeep trails available to traffic. This work would eventually allow heavier traffic from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, or as supply conduits to Pathet Lao units occupying mountainous positions where six-month photo reconnaissance showed fortifications, AAA emplacements, training, storage, and staging areas.

Other indications pointed to Route-92 being extended south to Route-165, an old French road servicing the Chavane area east of the Se Kong Valley. There was some recent evidence of vehicle traffic in eastern Attapeu Province.

Current evidence presented to Saigon commanders regarding road construction activity in Laos reinforced realization of Vietnamese leaders' high priority to control the supply corridor and continue a high level of support to Viet Cong units in the South Vietnamese highland areas. American air power alone was not capable of preventing enemy infiltration and supplies from moving into the South. Therefore, Saigon brass wanted to establish a military troop barrier interdicting enemy supply lines in the Lao Panhandle. The concept was not new or particularly original. It would require employment of at least three reinforced divisions to seize and hold terrain along Route-9 stretching from the Mekong on the west to inside the South Vietnamese border on the east.

With so many negative factors to consider, the plan was not popular with State or Ambassador Sullivan. A Special National Intelligence Estimate, attempting to prognosticate as to the interdiction plan, indicated that international reaction would be negative, particularly if the action was unannounced and unilateral. Souvanna Phouma, who was largely disinterested in eastern border areas, would not be amenable to having Laos become a major battleground. The Vietnamese army most certainly would retaliate in other parts of the country and the Chinese communists occupy Northern provinces. ¹²

¹² The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) board failed to realize, recognize, or admit that Phong Saly Province in Military Region One was already a de facto province of China.

Thai government leaders, heeding the populations' sensitivities to large, long-term foreign troop presence within their country, would not agree to such a disrupting force. Instead, their main concern would center on potential Chinese attacks against Thailand. Most of all, there was danger that the U.S. military would be required to provide substantial forces in Thailand and Laos in addition to the three divisions essential to success of the interdiction plan.

Relying on a superb spy network, the North Vietnamese government would learn of major U.S. operations well beforehand, and would complain that protocols of the Geneva Accord were being violated. While a U.S. buildup proceeded in Thailand, the Pathet Lao and People's Army of Vietnam (PL-PAVN) might be tasked to conduct limited offenses toward the Mekong and Thai border. With a Route-9 operation underway, the enemy might engage U.S. troops at points where they enjoyed a local advantage. Also, the communists would consider that they could maintain a high level of insurrection in South Vietnam even if U.S. ground interdiction reduced infiltration. Even if the U.S. military occupied the entire span of Route-9, the Vietnamese would continue efforts to move some units through the Lao corridor. In addition, direct sea routes or through Cambodia would substantially increase.

Despite the Eastern Bloc's anticipation of U.S. intervention in the Panhandle, it was estimated that the Chinese government would not introduce a large force into Laos. This would be the case as long as the U.S. focused solely on the Route-9 area. However, China might increase the number of specialized personnel to support the Pathet Lao.

Soviet reaction and policy would be mostly political. The leaders would avoid a direct military commitment, but could provide additional logistical and material support. Certainly, U.S.-Soviet tensions would increase.

As Co-Chairman to the Geneva Accords on Laos, Britain would be embarrassed by U.S. actions. France, our wayward ally, would condemn USG action as yet another extension of a flawed policy.¹³

In lieu of a massive "boots on the ground" campaign, to enhance intelligence gathering for air targeting and future trail interdiction, General Westmoreland kept badgering Ambassador Sullivan to implement his plan for small unit ground penetration in the corridor from both Thailand and South Vietnam. These were named Golden Eagle and Shining Brass. (Golden Eagle never came to fruition.) To be successful, the operations would require coordination and support from the USAF and U.S. Army.

Because of Sullivan's and LBJ Administration officials' objections to any operation that would greatly expand, likely perpetuate itself, and pose exposure should American soldiers be captured and wreck the tenuous Geneva Accord structure, Shining Brass had long been discussed and tabled.

By 20 September, after being slowly vetted by the voluminous bureaucratic system a democratic society fosters,

¹³ Except for small unit SOG limited duration and penetration forays, major direct U.S. involvement to introduce large numbers of American ground troops in the Lao infiltration corridor never came to fruition. A last-ditch effort by the U.S.-sponsored ARVN in later years proved far too little, too late. The aborted operation resulted in heavy loss of equipment and personnel, and produced virtually few results to permanently thwart enemy flow or supply lines. Indeed, it caused severe morale problems for our ally, skepticism about their ability to keep the Vietnamese at bay, and hastened the end of the war.

Sullivan, pressured by his cohorts to obtain additional trail information, finally agreed to support limited cross-border, resupply, and evacuation missions, while utilizing Bango F4C assets for air strike support. In turn, the Joint Chiefs of Staff informed Westmoreland that Phase One was a go. With ground rules and authorization in place, allowing for training and weather delays, by the third week of October, Shining Brass was underway. Mixed U.S.-South Vietnamese Special Forces personnel were delivered by Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) H-34 helicopter pilots. Discoveries by the team led to subsequent destruction of enemy food caches, bivouac areas, buildings, personnel, and trails. Results were deemed good. ¹⁴

THE FIELD

After fifteen days, I returned to the flight schedule. Following a test flight and repairs, Verne Clarkson, Frankie Claveria, and I launched east for the 116-mile trip to Thakhet. Clarkson was another aviator from a previous generation who had been hired during the current influx of new H-34 pilots. A reserve U.S. Marine Lieutenant Colonel, commanding officer of a local reserve squadron, the soft-spoken man had taught school in Seattle, Washington. At a time of considerable civil unrest within the American school system (and the country in general), total lack of discipline and authorization to maintain it, Verne became disgusted with his primary vocation. Therefore, hearing through military scuttlebutt of the need for H-34 pilots in

¹⁴Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 79, 87, 89, 92.
Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), 09/10/65.
CIA Intelligence Memorandum, Communist Activity in the Lao Panhandle, 10/15/65.
CHECO, Air Force Intelligence Report. 10/26/65.

Southeast Asia, he decided on a career change and applied to Air America. Maintaining some H-34 proficiency in his reserve squadron, and possessing considerable throttle twisting experience, despite his age and appearance, Verne was a choice candidate for the Washington Personnel Office's "Red" Dawson and crew to fill the hiring pipeline. Although a relatively new hire, Frankie represented another old timer Filipino Flight Mechanic who had a difficult time understanding me talk over ICS. With the advent of the younger generation Filipino, I thought the *"Wot's that Cap"* reply was a thing of the past, but I was sadly mistaken.

RONing at Nakhon Phanom, we worked in the Site-40 area moving troops and supplies to forward areas to create listening posts or fulfill road watch commitments. During the work period, I found Verne an attentive and very pleasant companion.

In the meantime, the CPH office received welcome news from headquarters Taipei that our total time for the year would be extended to 1,200 hours. At least this was better than nothing, but would limit us to about seventy hours a month with the entire month of December off. From a pay aspect, the year would not be as lucrative as expected, but I could use a good rest. We old timers were really flying too much, and when mixed with SARs at inopportune times, one really became fatigued.

MR-1

I was off until the 21st when I was assigned Hotel-32 for a RON to Luang Prabang. Based on the new Company policy, depending on my flight time, it would likely be my final trip upcountry that month. Not surprisingly, the ship did not meet my requirements so, after testing Hotel-37, I launched with First Officer John Tarn and Flight Mechanic Guhet. I had never flown

with either man before. Blond-headed Tarn was yet another former Navy pilot with little or no mountain experience. First impression was that he was a personable, very confident individual.

After all the testing and ferry flight, we arrived at the Luang Prabang airport fairly late, but in time to service some local pads. This included Ban Lat Hane, a government-controlled site located twelve miles north of Luang Prabang on the bank of the Mekong River that had been lost to the enemy earlier in the month. Learning of FAR's proposed aggressive movements toward the Nam Ou Valley, Pathet Lao units had preemptively launched a counter movement against Lat Hane to discourage government operations there, and to foment concern over the security of the Royal capital. Because of normal river traffic disruption, GM-1 was flown into Luang Prabang for disposition to the beleaguered site. On the 19th, Lat Hane was once again under government control and elements of the paratroop regiment were moving into the north and northwestern hills as well as other units achieving some success in limited offensives.^{15 16}

Following our night at the "French" Hotel and a casual breakfast, the duty driver arrived to take us to the airfield. After more delay, finally loaded with supplies we started upriver for Lat Hane. Because of a sketchy briefing, a situation that was obviously fluid, and working with FAR units notorious for leaving the field under little pressure, I was quite apprehensive and uncomfortable regarding our mission. My uncomfortable gut feeling was particularly strong that morning, especially since clouds hung low over the river, preventing me

¹⁵ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 09/22/65.

¹⁶ Ken Conboy, 133.

from achieving a respectable altitude that might afford a modicum of safety from small arms fire. Furthermore, if the enemy could capture a river town so close to Luang Prabang with relative impunity, it was logical that they could easily move anywhere along the riverbank. Therefore, to take advantage of my limited options, I flew in the center of the river. Shortly after turning west at the river bend, I suddenly heard a report in the cockpit that sounded much like a gunshot. Still nervous from an abundance of hostile activity that year, I increased power and accelerated rapidly, while simultaneously diving toward the river to present a less conspicuous target for a shooter. At the same time, I advised my crew to scan the area for additional fire.

Hearing no more "fire" and believing that I had the situation under control, I looked across the cockpit to see Tarn's response. Oddly, he was grinning broadly like the proverbial Cheshire cat. Then I noticed that his window was shut and instantly realized what had occurred. Chilled by the morning air, John elected to close the window. Possibly stuck, John rapidly slid the window along the frame rail, forcefully slamming it into the jam. This resulted in a very loud report and my heart-stopping concern. He acknowledged that this was exactly what had happened. *Damn newbies*. Despite considerable embarrassment over my evasive maneuver, I was quite angry over his "gotcha" stunt, and cautioned him to let me know first before he planned another stunt like that.

After the spate of excitement, we flew many miles, working government sites all the way up the river to Houei Khong. The process enabled John to see much of the current work area. Never having viewed much of the area north of the Mekong River myself, I was surprised over the current FAR expansion. It was probably

a plus from our standpoint, for the support requirement would necessitate almost daily helicopter service. One GM-21 site was located on the west side of the Phou Phananta hills overlooking the Houay Pana tributary and protecting the northern approaches to Ban Lat Hane.

Another mission directed us west into the Beng Valley, three miles southwest of Boum Lao (LS-174), where Ernie Brace had been captured in May, and the massive SAR effort was conducted. As far as I knew, Ernie was still considered missing in action (MIA). Apparently, despite periodic enemy pressure and animosity of local villagers caused by the indiscriminate Alpha bombing during the SAR and PL-NVN doctrine, attempts were being made to establish and continue some government presence in the Beng. Of course, this was not a new policy. It had been the case over the years, but lacking properly led assets and a proclivity for the troops to cut and run at the slightest enemy pressure, efforts had proved generally hopeless.

We moved on to Chiang Khong to take on fuel and pick up Meo commander Moua Su and other people for the next mission. The site was located about thirty miles southeast in Meo controlled hills overlooking the eastern fringe of the remote, but large Ban Langkay Valley. ¹⁷

I had never ventured so far east and north of the Mekong in that particular area and was quite surprised that such areas were in our camp. ¹⁸

¹⁷ Later designated LS-259 or Jennifer's strip after someone's wife or girlfriend.

¹⁸ CPH Knight recalled that he always had issues with Tarn. There was never a problem with his flying skills, but Wayne suspected that he was flying scared and was not completely honest about it. EW Knight Email, 7/15/00.

PERSONNEL CHANGES IN MR-1

Bill Young returned to Southeast Asia after about eight months of Stateside Agency training at the "Farm." He was schooled in various aspects of clandestine intelligence gathering, including indigenous cross border operations. Vitoon Yasawat, or "General THEP", had been located in Udorn since commencement of the Madriver Project. He was working out of Headquarters 333 in Udorn when Young began processing back into the system. Through his spy network, Vitoon learned that Bill was back in Thailand and bitterly complained to AB-1. Despite Young's extended absence in the States, there was still a lot of animosity between the two men. Therefore, while Young chatted in the joint Air America-Continental Air supply warehouse office across the parking ramp from the Air America facility, he was handed a message advising him to immediately board a plane for Vientiane or, if one was not available to find another means of crossing the river.

After safely achieving this exodus, Bill remained in Laos, moving up to Ban Houei Sai, where he resided at the local hotel with his trusted batman, Noi. During a sufficient cooling off period, Bill Lair attempted to placate General THEP regarding Young. However, convinced that Vitoon would soon attempt to have surrogates murder him, Bill steadily gathered and surrounded himself with dozens of his trusted cross-border Shan, Lahu, and La tribals from Burma. The tough, raw-boned guys were always around him. He had such an immense influence with the men that merely pointing immediately elicited action. With Lair firmly in

his camp, the boiling enmity between the two strong-willed men eventually tapered off to a simmer.

During this period, Young concentrated on building a wooden house similar to the one at Chiang Khong, with a large deck overlooking the river. After Bill departed Laos and the Agency, the house reverted to a hill tribe school.

Under the direction of Mister Whitaker, Agency cross-border representative in Vientiane, Young also located and began establishing an intelligence training camp in a remote upriver area. Divorced from Nam Yu's control, the project was tailored to concentrate on cross-border operations and actual clandestine operations. First located in the vicinity of Ban Nam Kueng (Kueung-LS-150), for additional secrecy the small camp was eventually situated in heavy bamboo jungle a few miles up a minor tributary that a small boat could negotiate, and then one could walk in to the hidden camp.

At first, with no one to observe the operation, helicopters flew missions from an open area; later a strip was created. A problem arose when it was discovered that the area was a terminus for an opium route with a refinery established nearby. The presence of Bill's camp in the middle of their operation bothered the Chinese smugglers. In turn, Young was concerned that boat and mule caravan movement would compromise his base security. Therefore, the camp was eventually moved across the river into Thailand and established in a remote, uninhabited mountainous area known as "The Tango Pad."

For various reasons, Young was not happy with his lot. After he left Agency employment in 1967 to assist his father in Chiang Mai (or was actually forced out), Tony Poe inherited the Whitacre project and the northern Military Region One jump-off cross-border sites.

USAID worker Joe Flipse did not see Young more than four times between 1965 and 1967. Bill was generally upriver and Joe had moved to Ban Nam Thouei in the fall of 1965 when Bill Taylor departed. Joe was very busy while attempting to perform work at both Site-118 and Ban Houei Sai. However, he did note that Young lost substantial face with Lao leaders when he first returned to Ban Houei Sai. Before at Chiang Khong in the role of "Colonel Tip," he had been recognized and respected as the area boss. Now he merely resided at the hotel without troops, a vehicle, money, or other visible resources. Joe learned through Laphol, the Lao Social Welfare Chief, that town people began inquiring about Young's status. It did not make sense to them that Bill appeared to be doing nothing when he had been so highly exalted before. Then, over time, when they learned he had no assets, they lost all interest in him.

Flipse was a little philosophical regarding Young's departure from the scene, indicating he was likely a sacrificial lamb, and when it came to basics, he could not pull the rabbit out of a hat better than anyone else. As a matter of fact, he was likely handicapped by his knowledge and understanding of the situation.

Given the dissimilar thinking and various objectives of major participants at Ban Houei Sai-USG-Thai-Lao, it was a wonder there were not additional conflicts. The strange mix would have created major problems even in peacetime. During particularly difficult times, the American participants became so disengaged that it helped to think about the entirety as a convoluted board game--just roll the dice and attempt a different response the next day. If one lumped all other components involved together including "allies," Vietnamese, tribals, war, and so forth, then a board game manufacturer had

precious material for interesting entertainment. At one time, over a jug, Nam Yu operatives held a serious discussion about actually developing a commercial guerrilla war board game and marketing it in the States. It could have been called Southeast Asian War games. Variables envisioned were fantastic, not someone's creative imagination, but merely everyday mundane operating problems.

The confusing situation in Houa Kong Province continued for years. As seen through Flipse's cynical eyes, there never appeared to be any coordinated effort at embassy level to control events in upper Military Region One. On paper, a Country Team composed of various alphabetized agency representatives was expected to be chaired and directed by the ambassador. However, in actuality the embassy did not control project funds and the different agencies operated semi-autonomously according to their agendas and perception of the situation. It was quite a mess. People departed; new ones arrived; and there were new directives issued from Washington. There were many different agendas and opinions from "strap hangers" and dead-end career types. Fresh Agency people would arrive from Washington indicating, "If we are getting behind, we are getting ahead." ¹⁹ ²⁰

¹⁹ During our lengthy Email dialogues and while doing research, Joe despaired of my ever discovering the truth regarding the chaos and confusion in the Ban Houei Sai area.

²⁰ Joe Flipse Emails, 05/06/97, 05/10/97, 05/12/97, 05/16/97, 05/21/97, 05/30/97, 06/10/97.
Bill Young Interview, 10/19/95.
McCoy, Alford, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (New York, 1972).

TONY LEAVES

Without fanfare, Tony Poe quietly departed Long Tieng and Military Region Two. After completion of the Hua Moung operation and helping to secure Houei Kah Moun (LS-111), Tony worked with and trained PARU in Udorn while awaiting further disposition and a possible future assignment by Bill Lair and Pat Landry. O'Jibway's death had left an opening in northwest Military Region One. Poe arrived at Chiang Kong in the fall. Instead of remaining on the relatively comfortable Thai side of the river, always preferring the field, he opted to remain closer to the action in the Nam Yu region.

There are no definitive answers available for his removal from Long Tieng, where he had worked for years--only recollections and supposition from principals. Of course, depending on the source, over time various theories surfaced relating to his departure. Perhaps it was some combination of these.

One alluded to the fact that many times Case Officers were not able to persuade Vang Pao to do what they wanted. The stubborn general was entirely his own man and only AID representative, Pop Buell, possessed sufficient influence over him in matters of advice and consent.

It was common knowledge that the inability to impose his will on Vang Pao frustrated the aggressive Poe. As a result, when Tony did not consider the war going well or according to plan, he and the general would argue constantly about current and future operations. With Vint Lawrence no longer present at Long Tieng to mediate between the two antagonists and moderate the strained atmosphere, animosity spun out of control, and the men's dislike for each other increased proportionally.

There were varying opinions. Bill Young believed that Vang Pao soured on Tony because of his constant drunken screaming and brashness. Attuned to Asian sensibilities, Bill knew that such rude and errant behavior was definitely not well tolerated in the Orient, especially with the exalted commanding major general of Military Region Two. ²¹

AB-1's Bill Lair, Poe's superior, alleged that Tony never fully understood Meo mentality. In many cases, while interfacing with them he became overly discouraged, failing to realize that the Meo people were dedicated to abide by their own decisions and they performed tasks at their own pace. Lair and others in the AB-1-Agency chain recognized these factors during an early period. They were cognizant that Meo forces generally represented the only viable available assets in Military Region Two able to hold a critical line forward of the river towns and Thailand. Moreover, tribal foibles did not appreciably affect any critical long-range plans for northeast Laos. Instead, by utilizing patience, logic, and understanding, Agency personnel merely skirted major problems.

From the beginning of USG participation in Laos, planners had considered employing other ethnic tribes to stave off in-country communists. However, it was discovered that such a plan would have to occur solely within tribal home areas. Introducing

²¹ Although I recall Tony ranting about Vang Pao at times, we old-timers missed most of the worst period. When we moved to the Sam Tong hostel, previous close Customer rapport we had enjoyed at Long Tieng diminished appreciably. Intelligence and tactical information to which we had been privy was no longer forthcoming. Also, with the advent of FAR countrywide expansion, we were working in all parts of Laos, particularly since flight time restrictions were in place.

other tribals as outsiders would not have worked well in the clannish northeast region. ²²

Blaine Jensen introduced a fresh and radically different perspective regarding Tony's Long Tieng departure. He concluded that the decision to remove Tony from Military Region Two was indeed Agency generated, but only partially at Vang Pao's request. However, Poe's established drinking patterns and argumentative discussions were not the sole reason. Although Vang Pao did not condone such behavior as Poe exhibited, in the interest of mutual benefits, the general tolerated it.

By 1965 Long Tieng was on the way to becoming a major population center and regional market town. With increasing numbers of troops located at the training base, earning steady incomes and nowhere to expend their funds, a mechanism was devised for them to purchase items. All-purpose stores had always existed in the village on the south side of the runway in some form. A small market also gradually evolved and expanded near the large karst behind the CAS-PARU Administration-Operations "Hooch," where we originally dined and RON. Realizing an opportunity to profit, and at the same time fulfill a pressing need, clan leaders organized a closely held trading company. They obtained permission to have consumables and hard goods flown into the valley from Vientiane on a space available basis. All manner of items became available to the residents. This even included imported ladies of the night intent on obtaining the soldiers' money through the time-honored technique. Supported by a C-47, dedicated specifically to Long

²² Although his recommendations to AB-1 fell on deaf ears, Bill Young was a strong proponent of this idea in the early days.

Tieng needs that we called Vang Pao Airways, the economic sponge evolved and blossomed over the years. The market-based program became so successful that peddlers and traders purchased wares from the trading company and transported the articles to distant villages on small mountain ponies.

Tony and his wife Sang owned a large cattle herd in the Moung Cha (LS-113) area, which he purchased when Vang Pao presented them land there at the time of their 1964 marriage. As the herd's size increased, Sang, a talented businesswoman, who had considerable influence utilizing aircraft, monopolized the beef supply to the Long Tieng market. This dominance was tolerated by trading company participants as long as only beef was concerned. However, a problem arose at Long Tieng when Sang decided to vastly expand her business into other areas. She eventually garnered control over the supply, delivery, control, and kick-back of virtually every commodity that was supplied to all the small shops at various sites. Consequently, with trading company profits plunging drastically, Meo clan leaders, upon whose political base the entire program depended, placed so much pressure on both Vang Pao and Americans based at Long Tieng that they collectively had little choice but to remove Tony and Sang from the area. Sang subsequently departed for Udorn to live. She never returned to Long Tieng, and Lair eventually reassigned Tony to the far northern theater.

Poe never fully acknowledged the extent to which his wife was purportedly involved in Military Region Two's area commerce, and the huge problem it caused. Rationalizing, he insisted Vang Pao and all the other influential Meo were involved in similar pursuits, so what was the problem with his wife seeking an identical vocation to garner part of the pie? Always a hardheaded individual, he could never accept or appreciate that

a USG employee utilizing American air resources for profit in an indigenous environment created a serious conflict of interest with local interests, and that under U.S. law a federal employee was not allowed to engage in such activities. In his provincial mind, he explained that Sang alone engaged in the market commerce, and as one of the tribals, she had every right to the activity.

Blaine Jensen related that Tony and Vang Pao never lost respect for each other as warriors. After Jensen relocated to Ban Houei Sai in late 1966, Tony and he made a number of trips to Long Tieng on regional business or to attend parties. They were always invited to overnight at Vang Pao's house and Tony was treated very well by the general and his extended family. However, except for Case Officer Jerry Daniels, he was generally shunned by Agency personnel. Jerry alone recognized Tony's superior ability as a leader and outstanding warrior, and he retained a great deal of respect for him.

Later, for various reasons, Bill Young was also less than enamored with fellow worker Poe. He mainly faulted Tony for not establishing good rapport with the local people, like O'Jibway, who was on the cusp of achieving this just prior to his death. Instead, he viewed Tony like a bull, stampeding his way through all situations. Granted, that was the way he preferred to operate, but this method tended to leave a bad taste in everyone's mouth. However, Bill had to admit that in combat situations, Poe was outstanding--a sparkplug charge, and raise-the-flag type individual. Bill believed a Case Officer's overall success should have been measured more by common sense and the foresight and planning a person might have employed to win a situation with people he was supposed to be leading.

Bill obviously disliked Tony and sometimes clashed with him, especially when he was drinking and seemingly out of control. When in Ban Houei Sai, Bill frequented the old French fort where the Dooley Foundation clinic was located and was staffed with airline stewardesses on leaves of absence. To pass the time and relieve boredom, everyone partied hard at night.²³ At one such event, a drunken Poe crawled up to a woman. Making a nuisance and fool of himself, he bordered on being lewd and disgusting. Like Jack Shirley's behavior at Padong in 1961 when the site was under siege (refer to Book One), Bill considered Tony's drinking a handicap that constantly impaired his judgment.

CPH Wayne Knight noted that Tony always appeared to be disagreeing with Vang Pao but, like Jensen, believed his sudden departure from the valley was strictly an Agency affair. Because Poe's notoriety preceded him, Wayne considered the move intended to lower his visibility. Over time, Poe became a decided embarrassment to many high officials, especially those in Washington who actually experienced the man's inane actions when he was on leave.²⁴ At times, Tony also uttered many unflattering remarks regarding Pat Landry, who he worked with in Indonesia, and also his Vientiane Agency masters.

As confused and unsure as other interested parties about an exact reason for Poe's Long Tieng removal, Joe Flipse speculated that several factors were probably involved. He believed that there may have been at least a couple of basic problems. Both

²³We referred to the girls as "Dooley Dollies."

²⁴Tony Poe told me that when on leave in Washington, he attended an Agency party. Always a man who enjoyed shock effect, after swinging from a chandelier, he was politely invited to return to Southeast Asia ASAP.

Poe and Vang Pao possessed especially strong personalities and constantly butted heads over issues. Vang Pao had a very short temper, and during a particularly troublesome encounter, it is entirely possible that he could have ordered Poe to leave his town. Tony never would have admitted to such an ultimatum. ²⁵

Tony constantly railed over Vang Pao's opulent lifestyle while the general was present in Vientiane. This included such luxuries as opium, cars, and palaces. However, the primary reason for his discontent seemed to hinge on the rampant waste and operational incompetence evolving in the developing Meo program. As part of his Marine Corps psyche, the conservative Poe harbored definite opinions and objections regarding squandering of money, munitions, air support, and other features. In his mind, the Lao war and everything associated with it was defined in either black or white terms. He considered wasting equipment and other resources a cardinal sin. In fact, just after moving to Nam Yu, believing he could control area supply dispersal, he wore the only key to the warehouse padlock around his neck, and would personally issue even small amounts of gear. He did the best he could to manage a virtually uncontrollable situation, but in military parlance, he was gradually overcome by events (OBE).

Despite Tony's almost daily trips to Nam Thouei from Nam Yu, Joe did not get to know Poe well for a time, but immediately noted that he expended a lot of energy and effort to move the Nam Yu program forward again. To instill rapport with the hereditary leader, he built Chao Mai a new wooden house and

²⁵ Joe Flipse only visited Vang Pao one time, but was well aware of his ego and reputation. Therefore, he suspected the general was a manic-depressive type.

began other projects to benefit the Yao. Measures like this continued until, like the rest of the Americans there, he became tired, disillusioned, and disgusted with the political backbiting and double dealing in the region.

Very early during his Nam Yu tenure, hoping to stimulate a renewal of area projects and resolve overriding issues of conflict between ethnic types, Poe invited Vang Pao to Site-118A. Top ethnic leaders and commanders from Long Tieng, Nam Thoui, and Nam Yu, as well as Americans, attended the conclave. Pop Buell was there and explained to Vang Pao that Joe Flipse was not going to Sam Tong, but would remain at Site-118. Vang Pao was not particularly interested, but that technique was part of Pop's political acumen in dealing with him. In planning the shindig, no expense was spared. Even a new bunkhouse, complete with beds and sheets was erected to accommodate the visitors. ²⁶

The meeting and festivities were deemed a resounding success, but failed to result in any lasting results, for after the guests departed, the warm, fuzzy feeling faded and the situation remained the same. Also, introducing Vang Pao to Nam Yu did little to enhance Chao Mai's ego or confidence, for the Yao tribes had always maintained influence over everyone in the region, even before the French arrival.

After formation of the Nam Yu SGU program, when Colonel Chow Vana Seng was nominally placed in charge of the Armee Clandestine, Lao leaders continued to covet and chaff over the Yao control exhibited there. Instead, they wanted power to control and manipulate everything connected with the program: warehouses, payrolls, the lot. Over time, they eventually did.

²⁶ After satisfying the meeting's requirement, this structure eventually became the crewmembers' quarters.

In addition, after eliminating Yao middlemen, they even consolidated the lucrative opium market. As a result, Chao Mai, who had been kingpin in this enterprise, lost his market and influence with the natives. Then, when the Lao successfully diverted funds and power from the Yao forces, the indigenous leaders essentially lost control of their troops.

Despite Poe's checkered reputation in regard to his questionable methods of proving enemy kills (taking ears), and insistence on initial control of military supplies, Flipse noted that the man had another more humane and realistic side to him. For instance, Tony generally cooperated with Joe and comingled resources in an attempt to promote a comprehensive and workable Houa Kong program. Believing there were no boundaries involved where the overall war and people to people programs were concerned, he often provided Agency funds for AID projects. When deemed worthy, and when AID failed to allocate sufficient funds to Joe, Tony was forthcoming. Relations between the two were such that there was never any bureaucratic hassling--no markers issued or payback required. Available money was generally pooled and sensibly employed to achieve the best possible results.

Good works proliferated. Tony had a generator installed at the Dooley hospital to allow usage of donated fluoroscope equipment. When Ban Houei Sai was threatened and Joe's team of carpenters erecting the Nam Thouei hospital left to care for their families, Poe sent his building crew from Nam Yu to complete the job. Then he provided a two-cylinder diesel generator to run the equipment. The efficient machine, manufactured with exposed push rods, was easy to rebuild. Tony's crew also supervised and built the Operation Brotherhood (OB) hospital at Ban Houei Sai.

After the 1966 flood, his crew rebuilt the rice warehouse, with Joe's AID funds paying for materials. Tony paid Sam, Piak, Soumboun, the driver, and the kicker's salaries. Joe took care of the rice crew.

Not always in accord, the two men often disagreed over the rice quota and other supply issues. Tony's litany indicated that there was entirely too much stealing occurring in the program. Joe countered, "*I am feeding your payroll. Cut the payroll and I will cut the rice deliveries.*" After a time, both wearied discussing rice and payroll, so they stopped the dialogue.

They jointly developed and funded a successful Naiban-Tasseng training program at Ban Houei Sai, later supervised by Tony Cattaruci (known as Tony-2). However, AID and RDD received credit for a program they would not originate or fund.

One-time Poe presented Flipse with half a bag of kip, containing 175,000 kip intended for him to dole out as needed to erect student barracks. As he never had trouble with the governor's honesty and trusted him, thinking he would use the money wisely, Joe took the parcel up the hill to the man's house and threw it under his bed. Then, when Poe asked for an accounting, it was not forthcoming. Since Tony had believed Joe would place the money in the AID safe to use with utmost discretion over a period of time to fund the project, when he heard what had transpired, he was not happy.

An investigative meeting was convened with Tony, Joe, the governor, Colonel Khamphai, and the Lao TP (traveau public) road department representative, to whom the governor had given the money for safekeeping. The TP claimed no knowledge of the money's disposition, only that he did not have it. The portly governor, from Luang Prabang royalty, began to swell, and TP, a

small person, started to shrink under interrogation, uttering replies like no sir Prince and yes sir Prince.

After leaving the meeting, Poe informed Joe that he had fouled up and the money was gone. Joe indicated that might be true, but if TP did not return the money within a few days, then they would be invited to a funeral. He contended that this was only an isolated case and cited previous experience in such matters. Since the amount involved was large and all cash, which involved no receipts, Joe had discovered that if he assigned money to a high enough level involving a lot of face, and the principals understood the consequences, there would be no problem with a mysterious disappearance. The governor had been educated in France and understood this system very well.

The following day, ground clearing began for the building. The project was completed with no further problems.

Flipse never gained much understanding regarding Tony and Bill Young's relationship, but suspects that it was never particularly good, for during the rare times when he mentioned

Bill's name in Tony's presence, Poe would become agitated. ²⁷ ²⁸

On the 23rd, we were assigned to work at Xieng Lom. Site-69 Alpha was considered part of the region's FAR success story. Before Young left Southeast Asia, Pathet Lao units controlled two very large areas around Xieng Lom along with Phou Song and

²⁷ From disparate views the Author was able to uncover, it is quite obvious that the reason for Tony's enforced departure from Long Tieng was a combination of factors. There might have been additional reasons involved aside from those discussed here, the most obvious being that following O'Jibway's death, the Nam Yu operation required a permanent, seasoned Case Officer. Other reasons might never surface.

While visiting Nisagonrungsee family members in Udorn several times with my wife in later years, long before the idea of writing about the era evolved, the Author conversed with Tony Poe and attempted to determine the actual reason for his leaving Long Tieng. After all the elapsed years since we had left the battlefield, despite Jensen's observations, when Vang Pao's name was mentioned in my presence he would rant and rave. It was obvious that his love for the man was not excessive. In the end, I could only infer, distill, interpolate, and speculate about the issue, for Tony never confided to me the whys and wherefores of his leaving Military Region Two.

Long Tieng was never the same for me without Tony's stabilizing presence, counsel, and influence. I never considered any Customer subsequently assigned there to be his equal in bonding with pilots while providing situational information or exhibiting genuine concern regarding pilot welfare. {Case Officer Chuck Campbell came close in later years during the 1969 Plain of Jars operation.} With his untimely departure, we old-timers and future H-34 participants forever lost rapport, and the mutual special trust and confidence engendered between men at war. Some might argue that these bonding attributes were merely transferred to the Nam Yu region. This might have been the case for a few individuals, but Lima Site-118 Alternate, far removed from the real MR-2 action, was a minor sideshow in the overall Theater drama, and never an established work area for most of us.

²⁸ Blaine Jensen Letters.

Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era* (New York: The Free Press, 1977) 152.

Ken Conboy, 151.

Joe Flipse Email, 05/05/97, 05/25/97, 05/30/97, 06/27/97.

Bill Young Interview.

EW Knight Email, 07/17/00.

Bill Lair Interview.

Phou Long along the Mekong's west bank. To recover high ground, Bill dispatched Meo, Liu, Lao Theung, and other teams from around Xieng Lom to these areas. They appealed to their relatives to quit the fighting and were largely successful. Terry Burke and other case officers continued working to clean up the area until it was relatively free of immediate conflict.²⁹

Even though I was never subjected to enemy ground fire in the area, I was not fond of working at Xieng Lom. There were a couple of good reasons. Early morning fog often obscured the valley. This necessitated orbiting, landing on unfamiliar exposed high ground to wait for the fog to dissipate, or return to my original point of departure. Also, Customers working at 69-A were largely strangers, or frequently not present, leaving me to deal with local FAR officers. Even if an American worked the strip, adequate briefings were not generally forthcoming regarding enemy dispositions. It was as if the pilot was supposed to know or inhale everything by a process of osmosis. Moreover, during later years, hostilities measurably increased and the area became an extremely deadly and dangerous hotbed to work.

On Tuesday morning we worked for Neutralist forces around Moung Kassy north of Kong Le's FAN headquarters at Vang Vieng. Completing our upcountry period at Luang Prabang that afternoon, we headed home.

Mike Jarina replaced us in upper Military Region One. Flying Hotel-30, working out of Chiang Khong, he and Dangoy flew to Ban Boyuak, a PARU camp located in the mountainous border area thirty-two miles west of Sayaboury. From there he went to

²⁹ Bill Young Interview.

Xieng Lom and Ban Houei Sai. Working out of Nam Yu, he was directed to a landing zone sixty-five miles east and ten miles west of Moung Sai to support an intelligence listening post. He was then directed to Yao Commander Chow La's stomping grounds at Ban Nam Kueung (LS-150) on the Mekong above Houei Sai to support Bill Young's fledgling cross border training operation. The crew RON at Nam Yu that night and again for the next five nights.

HIGGINS

The day after Jarina went north, I was back in the air with Lloyd Higgins (DOH-09/05/65), a new arrival and another former Navy pilot. We left Udorn on a day flight in Hotel-14 and flew direct to Xieng Lom in Military Region One. Old Frankie Claveria occupied the cabin section.

With plenty of time to converse and get acquainted, I learned that Lloyd had recently retired from a long career in the U.S. Navy. In contrast to the relatively younger, handsome Tarn, Higgins was weather beaten and looked older than ancient mummy dust. He admitted to not acquiring any mountain experience during his military career. Instead, he had amassed a great deal of S-61 overwater hovering time, while serving in an anti-submarine warfare squadron, dipping sonar buoys in the Tonkin Gulf. He also indicated that the crew often carried nuclear weapons on those flights.

During the course of the day, we worked at recently developed FAR landing zones on the low hills facing the Mekong north of Hong Sa (LS-62). Treating Lloyd's mountain inexperience as a teaching opportunity, I explained and showed him how I conducted slow, flat, power-on mountain approaches. Later, when I thought that I had imparted all that I could without actual hands-on training, I encouraged him to attempt a landing with a

fairly light load obtained from the loader at the Luang Prabang airport. The hilltop pad was reasonably low and easily accessible, with no visible obstacles or any other deterrents to impede a landing. Winds also appeared favorable. Because the exercise was tailored as a learning experience, I let Lloyd proceed until it became abundantly clear that the approach would be too slow, too low, and well short of the landing zone. If I let him continue, his effort would likely result in a day-spoiling crash against the side of the mountain. Still, anticipating that he would recognize his error and effect last minute corrections, I nearly waited too long before assuming control. Finally, we approached translational lift speed and a 180-degree turn was no longer an option. Therefore, I had to apply full power, and a good amount of pilot technique in order to air taxi up the side of the hill to the pad. Fortunately, terrain elevation, density altitude, and payload were all low enough to conduct a successful maneuver. I never had anyone execute such a poor approach before and, with the exception of Mike Jarina's high proficiency, realized just how deficient some former Navy pilots were in conducting mountain operations. After my heart returned to its normal rhythm, I critiqued Lloyd's approach and we continued work out of Xieng Lom until it was time to RTB.

Lloyd remained with the Company for many years flying H-34s and later S-58Ts. During that time, he certainly learned how to conduct proper mountain approaches. I never mentioned the exciting approach to anyone again until we were both in the Agency-sponsored Special Project in 1972 and we had a chance to joke about it.

In 1965, one always had to be extra diligent when flying with the raft of inexperienced mountain pilots entering the

helicopter system. For instance, ACP Marius Burke was conducting a check ride with former U.S. Army warrant officer "Pogo" Hunter. While approaching a landing zone Marius was aware Hunter was much too slow, but was unconcerned, for there was a large open space in front of the pad. Since it was a check ride, and wanting "Pogo" to benefit from his mistakes, Marius let him proceed. Then Hunter lost RPM and the H-34 plunked down well short of the pad, but without incurring damage. It was not a major problem, but frightened the normally excitable man, who likely had to change his skivvies. Marius doubted that "Pogo" ever did that again.³⁰

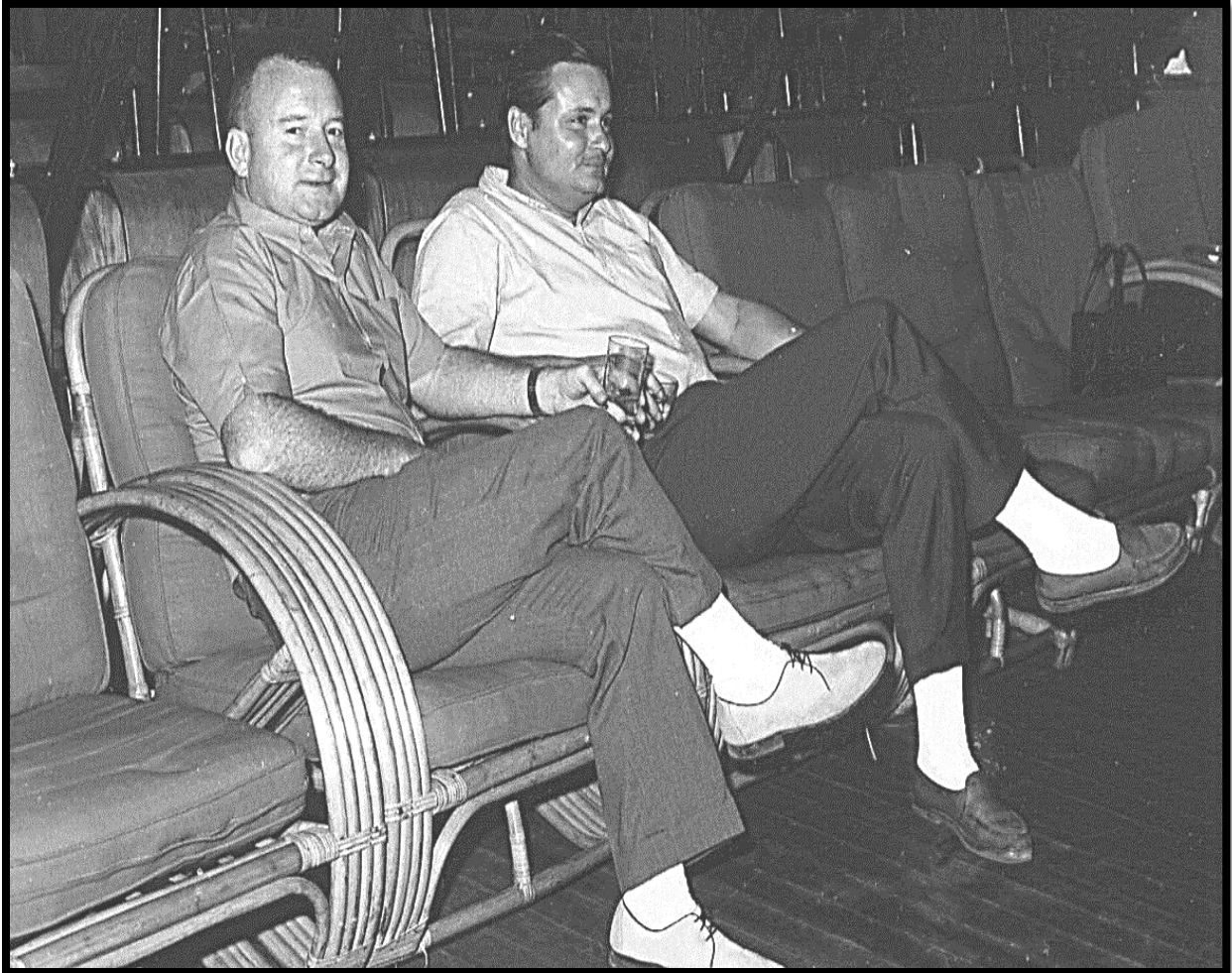
The mixed tribal Yao, Khmu, Meo, and Lu One SGU Battalion returned to Nam Yu from Hua Hin training. To test their mettle, they were almost immediately directed northeast with the goal of seizing and holding the Lao Theung village of Vien Pou Kha (LS-152) in the hills along Route-3, the road leading southwest from the Nam Tha Valley to Ban Houei Sai on the Mekong. In order to support such a large undertaking, mules were purchased from opium smugglers. En route to the target, while Jarina was boring holes in the sky, the battalion eventually captured the site.^{31 32}

Although he was working in the area, I never saw Jarina that day, while he shuttled between Chiang Kong and Nam Yu. He later made a run to Boum Lao, then back to Nam Kueung, perhaps

³⁰ Marius Burke Interview.

³¹ Ken Conboy, 136.

³² Frequently changing hands, Site-152 was another of many musical chair sites in Laos. The enemy captured Vien Pou Kha on 25 May and began road clearing operations to the southwest. By early June our guerrilla forces were regrouping for a counterattack. CIA Bulletin, 06/03/65.



Pogo Hunter and Bobby Nunez in the Club movie room.
Nichols photo.

for principals to complete negotiations to purchase mules with which to support the One SGU Site-152 operation. A final trip was to a point forty miles east of Site-118A and seven miles east of Phou Pang Sang (LS-142). He had received a good area overview with Scratch during his familiarization phase, so despite a lack of definitive landmarks, most of the trips were not too difficult.

On the 27th, Billy Pearson jumped off a Helio Courier to spend two days in the cockpit with Mike. Billy P had recently returned from three months home leave. Because of a long spate of non-flying while Club Rendezvous Manager, he required several warm-up flights, area familiarizations, and evaluation prior to his release as a Captain. Also, since he ceased flying, much had changed in all areas of Laos. Covering a wide swath of territory, Mike returned to Nam Kueung twice during the day. One trip took the men south-southeast thirty-eight nautical miles to a position just west of the Nam Tha River. The river formed a generalized demarcation line between Houa Kong and Luang Prabang Provinces and friendly movement to recover territory proceeded in that direction from Nam Yu. The outpost later became designated Team-32. Longer trips were conducted to a site ten miles north-northeast of Xieng Lom and four miles south of the Mekong. Another commencing from Ban Houei Sai went to a hilly point two miles north of the Ban Langkay Valley.

During the final three days of his RON, Jarina went to Nam Kueung at the upriver bend above Ban Houei Sai several times to support Chao La's Yao and Bill Young. He also worked a mountainous area east of the Beng Valley, a few miles north of the Mekong. Other assigned trips took him a couple dozen miles northeast of Nam Yu to the Nam Pha, overlooking MOUNG LONG Valley; another to Nam Bu (LS-125, later designated Team-7).

With expansion progressing toward the border, and Nam Tha and the Tha River clearly an objective, other trips kept him busy supplying northeast sites.

During the month of September 1965, Mike Jarina logged more than 162 hours, almost three times more than the Author.

HOPPE

Tom Hoppe had been working MOUNG SOUI (L-108) and upper Military Region Two at MOUNG HEIM (LS-48), HOUEI MA (LS-107), and NHOT PHAT (LS-179) through 24 September. He was flying shuttles out of Na Khang when the Flight Mechanic discovered a cracked main rotor system transmission. Udorn wanted him to ferry the machine to the base, but after stopping at Sam Tong for a final inspection before proceeding south, the crack appeared larger. Based on the worsening condition, he elected not to chance further flight to Udorn. Pat McCarthy and others scrounged left over wood from the hostel building project to erect a stout "A" frame, which they employed to change and reinstall a new transmission. Once again, field expediency was utilized to good advantage by talented mechanics.

Udorn Maintenance Department was in high gear using old parts or rebuilding previous wrecks, some dating from 1961. Tom's wounded helicopter was replaced with Hotel-37, a recent addition to the helicopter inventory. Accompanying the aircraft were mechanics with instructions for Tom to assist them salvaging useable parts from recently identified H-34 wrecks abandoned long ago. The Maintenance Department was mainly interested in recovering difficult-to-obtain tubs, or the forward section of the H-34 housing the cockpit, clutch and engine compartments. Aircraft data plates were also a highly



Using discarded wood at Sam Tong for an "A" frame, Pat McCarthy and another mechanic perform a main transmission change on Tom Hoppe's UH-34D.

Nichols Collection.



Air America mechanics Orvil Mock, Reco (top), and Rudy Serafico posing in the weathered cockpit of Hotel Delta, a UH-34D crashed by Clarence Abadie at Khang Kho in January 1961.

Nichols Collection.

prized item. On the 26th, after offloading a couple of mechanics, the recovery team began a survey and parts salvage from Hotel Hotel that Dick Crafts had crashed on 27 July 1961 because of suspected fuel contamination. The next day, using a three-man team with Orvil Mock in charge, the same drill was conducted at a ridge below Khang Kho (LS-204), where Clarence Abadie had lost turns and crashed Hotel Delta on 22 January 1961 with Customer Bill Lair. After many years in the bush, the metal was highly corroded, in addition to being stripped by acquisitive natives. As parts or larger components like a tail cone became available from remote sites, Hoppe either slung or ferried the various pieces internally to Long Tieng for final disposition to Udorn ³³ ³⁴

KUALA LUMPUR

Jim Coble forwarded a newspaper clipping from Kuala Lumpur to Wayne regarding Concrete Masonry. An informative article about the business, it appeared to be an inexpensive form of advertising. The piece also mentioned that civilian pilots owned the company. Included was a picture of cheap prefabrication type model houses recently erected in front of our property. They were erected to catch the government's eye as possible low-cost housing for the less advantaged classes. In a cover letter, Jim

³³ The Author can find no reference that recovered helicopters were ever completely rebuilt at the Udorn repair facility. More likely, if employed at all, parts were utilized as training aids or used in rebuilding other ships.

³⁴ Tom Hoppe Letter, Late Summer 1996.
Tom Hoppe Letter, 11/05/96.

reported that the day after the article, he received numerous calls inquiring about the product.

Since Malaysian government specifications included only Besser made blocks for the Johor project, Jim reiterated that he wanted to establish another factory in that area before some other company seized the contract from us. Coble stated that he had financial details worked out, and we could obtain another machine and temporarily place it on the site for a couple of years. After discussing this, we were collectively leery about starting another project immediately. Capital in the Asian American treasury contained no more than 6,000 dollars, and this was before acquiring an additional eleven percent of Concrete Masonry. Because of startup problems and initial blunders in KL, we wanted to wait six months and then reevaluate the situation. We were really concerned about no return on our capital after such a long time. We posited that if the company did not over expand and the shaky political situation did not force us out of Malaysia, we could reap good rewards from the enterprise.

The oil refining project was another matter. The factory was still not producing. The long delay in starting the first run opened my eyes to the realities of starting a new business. All the planning in the world was fine, but failed to allow for the problems and delays incurred thus far.

We also heard from Billy Zeitler, who was on vacation with Molly in Florida. Extolling opportunities in that state, he thought the idea of expanding Asian American there would be

feasible.³⁵

I received a letter from Howard Estes & family. Approaching the end of earned home leave, he had made a family-influenced decision not to return to Southeast Asia. Doctors had diagnosed him with a nervous stomach, and he was still experiencing nightmares over his many exciting incidents in Laos. Instead, he planned to work at Fort Rucker, Alabama Army base as a Ross contract helicopter flight instructor for the U.S. military. While Howard and Deanie were in the Rucker coffee shop, they met Bill Cook who was already employed at the training facility. Bill indicated, that in retrospect, both he and Mike Marshall realized just how good a job they had left. Ruing that decision, they would like to return to Air America. Ironically, long before either man left Air America Howard had talked to Bill and Mike about terminating. At that time, they had both opined that he would be crazy to depart the Company and such a well-paying job.

³⁵ I passed this information on to Dad who after some investigation, countered that General Development Corporation and Macklin, some of the largest building corporations in America, were already established there.

On 1 October, Billy P, Joe Siaotong and I were assigned Hotel-34 for the purpose of fulfilling the Company periodic night flying requirement. Bill had not been back from home leave long, but had recently spent a couple of days at Nam Yu with Mike Jarina. All went well until Pearson rolled out of an ADF procedure turn on final approach to Runway-12. As we approached the end of the strip, he descended lower and lower until the sight picture and rate of closure to a spot on the runway revealed that he was far too low and slow. It was obvious to me that continued flight would place us in the trees short of the runway. I had had enough of these errors of omission and commission lately with Higgins. When I was certain that Pearson did not recognize the problem and was not going to initiate proper corrections, I added a little pitch to get his attention, slow his descent, and enable him to make the runway. Granted, lacking moonlight, it was very dark, and since ADF approaches and landings were conducted from the northwest, the runway was not well lighted from our position. However, this was really no excuse to wreck an aircraft. Furthermore, ever since he dinged a helicopter belly on the only stump in proximity to the pad at the refugee village at Ban Nam Mo south of Long Tieng, I suspected that Pearson's depth perception was poor to non-existent. ¹ Now I also questioned his night vision ability. Fortunately, that ADF approach was the

¹ Bill Pearson claimed that his new yellow tinted glasses purchased in Hong Kong contributed to the stump incident. Regardless of his assertions, the landing zone became known as "Pearson's Pad."

final maneuver we were required to complete that night, so we taxied back to the barn and a much-needed drink.

DICK LIEBERTH

Two days later I was assigned to fly with first Officer Dick Lieberth and Flight Mechanic Franklin D. Smith. Both men were relatively new employees. Like many First Officers in line to be upgraded to Captain, Dick was paired with me for extra time in the machine, a final upcountry evaluation, and perhaps because I often let First Officers fly. I first met Dick at the Club watering hole, and after several sessions there, considered him a friendly, personable sort. Moreover, like others of us, he enjoyed his sauce.

The heavy-set man formerly worked for Ross Aviation at Fort Rucker as a contract civilian instructor. Like Barnheisel and Bob Mitchell, Dick emanated from a new generation of Army turbine engine pilots recently hired by the Washington office because of a dearth of qualified H-34 pilots. Because of substantial differences between Bell and Sikorsky helicopter equipment, this type of individual generally required additional cockpit time in order to acquire the necessary proficiency and gain experience in the reciprocating engine H-34. Indeed, some, such as Barnheisel, were never upgraded. Dick himself had been flying for a few months with various Captains and was long past the area familiarization phase and time frame normally allowed for those transitioning to the H-34.

Dick had been in Udorn long enough to relocate his wife, and they had rented a two-story house on Benjarn Road. One day some of the pilots in the Club dining room complained bitterly to Dick about potentially disrupting the local Udorn economy by grossly over paying his maid. Unschoolled in different cultures,

Dick's naïve, and perhaps a little dense, wife failed to understand how people could hire a person for so little money. She considered the standard going rate of thirty dollars per month inadequate pay for the work involved.

Throughout the transition period, from PIC reports and personal observation during progress rides, Chief Pilot Wayne Knight deemed Lieberth one of the weakest helicopter trainees to cycle through the helicopter system to date. He judged Dick unqualified for Captain upgrading then, after flunking him on a scheduled check ride, Wayne turned him over to other office IPs for additional training and upcountry field time.

ACPH Marius Burke clashed with Lieberth early, noting that "*He was a high time pilot and a loudmouth who believed he knew it all.*" Marius flew with Dick for a week upcountry prior to Captain upgrading. Because of numerous mistakes, he had given him a down. When the word got around what Marius had done, he incurred some heat from some line pilots who intimated that there was a personality conflict involved with the well-liked Lieberth.

Other pilots flew with Dick for a time, eventually indicating that he was ready for check out. Marius flew with him again during the middle of September. At the time, Dick performed to acceptable standards and there was no apparent

basis for another rejection. ²

Flight Mechanic Smith, a tall, wiry fellow from the backwoods town of Deliverance, Georgia in the Appalachia hills, had gained his helicopter maintenance experience in the U.S. Army.

After rejecting Hotel-30, we headed north for Long Tieng in H-33. Descending into the bowl, I overflowed empty fuel barrels set up across the construction portion of the new runway and landed in the upper parking area. We shut down for a briefing, took on a load, and then were redirected east to work sites on Phou Sao's high ground overlooking Route-4.

Under considerable pressure from enemy units during May 1964, Major Chong Shoua Yang, his ADC troops, and their families had made their way from Phou Nong (LS-71) to MOUNG MOC (LS-46). A few months after the refugees were safely evacuated to MOUNG CHA (LS-113) and resettled, his unit moved further south toward Tha Thom, and then west into high ground along Route-4. Operating with H-34 support, the unit remained there for a year. Recalled to Long Tieng, for past efforts he was awarded command of a newly formed SGU battalion comprised of Meo, Lao Theung from the Luang Prabang region, and his original ADC troops.

² Years later, while conducting research for my project in Hurst, Texas, a contrite Mike Marshall informed me that Dick Lieberth, basically a fixed wing pilot, had logged little H-34, or any other helicopter time while in the Army. At Fort Rucker, he flew mostly fixed wing aircraft. Most of his substantial logged hours were in the capacity of a fixed wing instructor. Desiring a job with Air America, at a time when the Company badly needed pilots, he pleaded with Mike to tell him all he knew about Air America and help him obtain employment. Lieberth persisted in his quest and more than likely fabricated sufficient H-34 helicopter flight time required for the job by employing the creative writing process.

Another Meo SGU was created in 1965. In October, with two new battalions available, Vang Pao was ready to recover Ban Peung (LS-95), a site located at 4,000 feet on the west side of Phou Sao (the area where Billy Zeitler was shot down), not only to monitor Route-42 traffic south from Xieng Khouang Ville, but to relieve pressure on FAR troops in the Tha Tho Valley. ³

DEATH STALKS THE LONG TIENG RUNWAY

That Sunday, while we worked around the area, C-123B, N5003X, crashed and was destroyed at Long Tieng. Consistent with runway upgrading throughout Laos, for a few weeks a new runway had been under construction at The Alternate. It was designed to be re-oriented more toward the northwest to take advantage of the terrain, widen, lengthen the strip, and avoid some of the subterranean river system that had plagued some fixed wing pilots during past rainy seasons.

At the commencement of the project, NOTAMS (notices to airmen) had been posted on both Udorn and Vientiane bulletin boards, alerting crews to ongoing work status at Long Tieng. Empty fuel barrel barricades were established and utilized to block the runway portion where work was underway. Pilots were advised to circle the valley in order to alert flagmen stationed at the approach end of the runway and near an established barricade that they were going to land. These men in turn warned the bulldozer operator that an aircraft planned to land. The PIC would then touch down on the still useable approach end. Other than overflying the work at an angle, this was no problem for helicopter pilots, for we could land well up strip, or fly

³ Ken Conboy, 131.

directly into the large new loading area in between major karsts at the upper end of the valley.

On this particular weekend, in order to take advantage of and expedite work during a low traffic period, more of the approach end was temporarily blocked with empty fuel barrels where the dozer operator worked. A message had been forwarded to Vientiane that the Alternate strip would be closed to fixed wing traffic for the weekend after Friday COB (close of business). Curiously, the message had not been disseminated to operations managers and interested parties.

That morning C123B pilot Al White, working under USAID contract 439-342, was scheduled to deliver forty drums of aviation fuel to Site-20A. ⁴ Frank Muscal, a new hire and retired USAF Lieutenant Colonel, shared the cockpit with White.

After a routine morning briefing, with no mention of the Long Tieng strip being closed that day, they launched north. Arriving over Long Tieng, White encountered low stratus clouds, a normal September scenario. Through breaks in the undercast, Al briefly observed the strip. Turning toward the southeast gap, he dropped down beneath the clouds, and lowered his flaps to sixty degrees preparing to land, on an apparently clear strip within the designated area. Prior to touchdown, the bulldozer operator, who had just refueled his machine, failed to observe the flagmen signaling and suddenly appeared on the runway in front of the C-123. Muscal radioed on ICS, "*There are barrels blocking the runway.*" With the aircraft in a dirty configuration, ⁵ no time to

⁴ C-123 crews carried smaller loads to compensate for the shorter landing space.

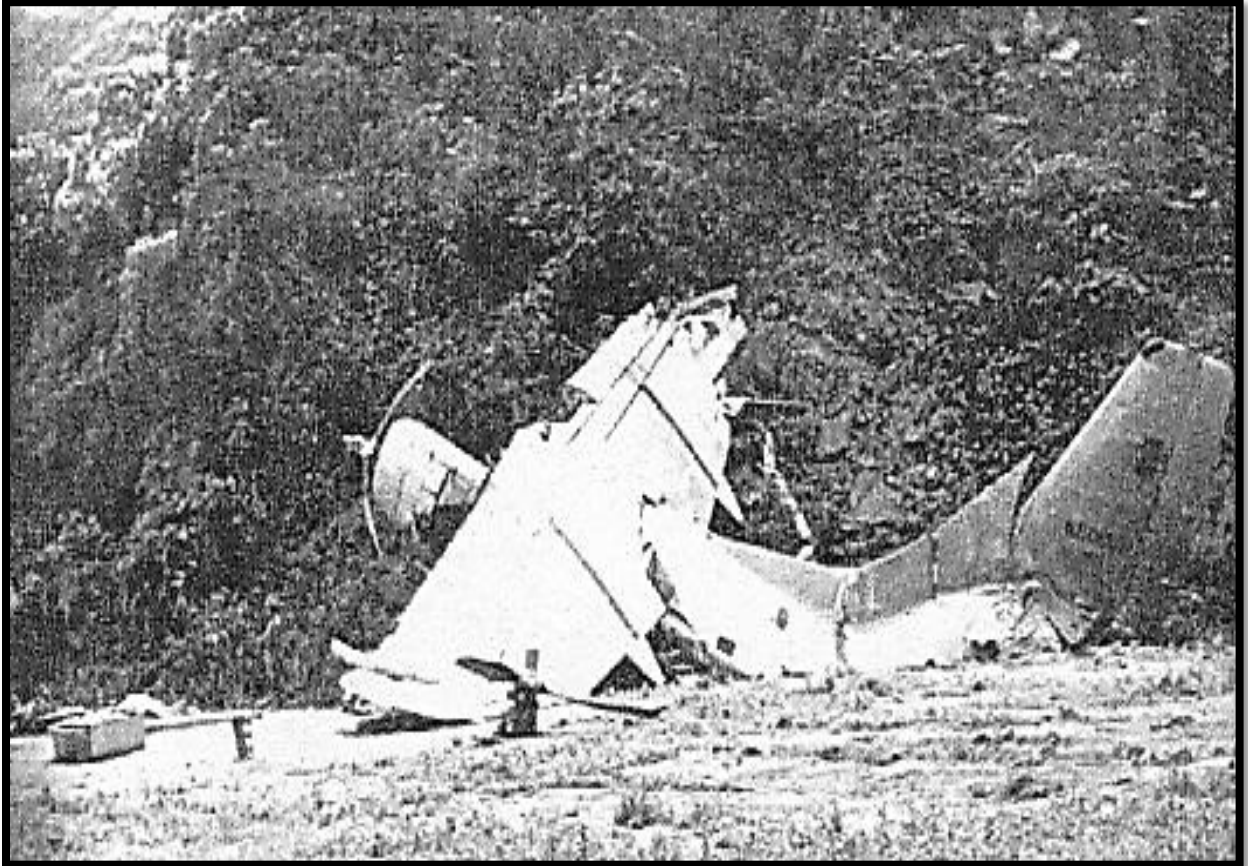
⁵ Dirty: Gear and flaps down resulted in increased drag and reduced ground speed.

clean the machine up, or sufficient speed to recover and attempt a go-around, White had few options available. With only nanoseconds to effect a decision, he could continue the approach and slam into the dozer, possibly killing everyone in the immediate area, or he could apply maximum power to hop over and avoid the machine and barrels, then attempt to stop the plane on the remaining runway before smashing into a tall karst at the end of the projected new runway. ⁶ Skirting the dozer and barrels could also pose a problem if, in the process, he swerved to the right and ran through the air operations shack.

Choosing the latter option, he added emergency power, jerked the yoke back, barely clearing the dozer. However, during his attempt to avoid the obstacles, the further reduction in already-diminished groundspeed at the point of touchdown, the angle of attack was exceeded, causing lift to dissipate and the airfoils to stall. Loss of control ensued. The aircraft dropped off on the right wing and contacted the ground. Cart wheeling tail end first, the plane rammed into the base of another karst on the right side of the strip that guarded the new parking-loading area. Because of the configuration of the limestone hill, the right section of 03-Xray's cockpit incurred the brunt of the crash.

The left cockpit portion, where PIC White sat, survived the extreme bashing that the right side incurred. However, the collision's energy, gyrations, and ultimate sudden stoppage rendered White unconscious at the moment of impact. He awoke hanging upside down in his seat belt-harness. Quickly assessing his injuries, and discovering only a few scratches and bruises,

⁶ Following accidents, the karst later achieved notoriety among fixed wingers as "the vertical speed brake."



Results of the C-123 03X crash at Long Tieng 10/03/65.
Jim Parker, Battle for Skyline Ridge, 104.

he unfastened the restraint. Hearing the ominous sound of dripping fluid, he then activated both fire extinguisher switches before securing the electrical system.

Ironically, Frank Muscal had amassed 10,000 accident-free hours during his Air Force career. Now he lay prone among a jumble of tangled metal. In serious physical condition, with a massive gash in his skull through which gray brain matter slowly oozed, he moaned pitifully. Fearing fire, Al pushed open a crack in the cockpit fuselage and dragged Muscal outside. By then, people were running to the wreck, and White heard an American voice utter, *"My God, someone is still alive."*

AFS Tom Greiner had been sitting in the cockpit jump seat observing the final approach. Aware of an impending crash, and aware that the safest place was on the cargo deck in front of the plane, he climbed below and dove into the nose wheel well before the plane hit the karst. Thrown through the opening, and suffering multiple contusions and abrasions, Tom was hurt more than Captain White, but survived because of his quick thinking.

An H-34 pilot ferried the crew to Sam Tong hospital, where Doctor McNulty, a Waterpump Air Commando temporarily working there in the black, ⁷ administered first aid to the injured. Greiner was not in good shape, but stable, so the doctor attempted to save Muscal.

Mike LaDue was visiting Pop at Sam Tong at the time of the crash. After returning to Sam Tong in June, because of the leg brace that considerably limited his walking ability, he found it too difficult to perform arduous field work and had left Site-20. He was gimping around the area with the aid of a metal brace

⁷ In the Black: Without a U.S. passport or Lao government authorization.

when the injured C-123 crew arrived. Having obtained considerable medical training in the service, he offered to help. As Muscal deteriorated, McNulty asked Mike to go to the foot of the operating table and elevate the man's legs to promote increased blood flow to his upper body and help prevent shock. LaDue lifted each of the dying co-pilot's booted feet onto his shoulders until he expired.

After Muscal died, all attention was directed to Greiner. When he was cleaned up a bit, he was loaded on a Caribou and flown directly to the U.S. Army 31st Field Hospital at Korat, Thailand. Since Mike knew the staff well at the Korat hospital, he volunteered to accompany White and Greiner to the military hospital. Father "B" also accompanied the men and comforted Greiner with spiritual help.

At the hospital LaDue was surprised to see Harvey Gulick in the same room that he had previously occupied. Harvey still experienced problems with an arm infection and indicated more of the arm would probably have to be amputated.

While later motoring to Bangkok on an R&R trip in Bob Daken's Volkswagen, Mike and Bob stopped at the Korat Hospital to visit Greiner. Tom was in the same open ward where Mike had spent time, and was healing properly. After his release, believing his luck might have run out, he did not remain long with Air America.

Muscal's body was being flown to Udorn, where Tom Penniman attempted to organize a Thai crew to handle the corpse. However, because Thai employees were reluctant to deal with the dead, Tom phoned Chief of Supply M.F. "Sandy" Santos for help. He requested that a standard Conex box be loaded with ice, and for "Sandy" to provide a couple of Filipinos to aid in moving the remains. The PIC arrived and taxied to the AB-1 rice warehouse,

where Air America employees were waiting to offload the deceased. Muscal's parachute-wrapped body was placed face down in the rear truck bed. Since the tailgate was down, Penniman, who closely followed the truck in a Volkswagen bus, noted that Muscal's pink feet were exposed as the vehicles bounced over the newly laid tarmac. ⁸

Blaine Jensen had the opportunity to independently talk to several principals regarding the accident: Lao, Thai, and Meo people who worked for Tom Cole, the chief of projects in Laos. All stories relating to the accident were similar in nature.

Ironically, after the accident, Tom Cole was granted immediate clearance by AB-1 for foreign workers to supervise the runway work at Long Tieng. A previous request for this had been denied by the Agency on the basis of high-level security. At the time, Tom countered this precaution by indicating that he would not guarantee aircraft safety without foreign supervision.

For months afterward, White sifted through his memory of that tragic day, searching to see if he had missed something, and if there could have been another way to have handled the situation. He eventually took solace in the fact that there was only one casualty and not more if he had ended up either in the village, or the Agency headquarters and office complex.

The bulldozer driver was exonerated. ⁹

⁸ Tom Penniman later lobbied for a proper morgue, but he found everyone in denial. Therefore, the Conex container sufficed house the dead while he remained in Udorn. He speculated that the managers believed a permanent morgue would elicit feelings of bad luck and demoralize flight crews.

⁹ In an unsubstantiated rumor, White heard that the operator had later been executed.

The Air America investigation board was not impressed with White's performance. He was criticized for allowing himself to encounter a situation in which he could not go-around, and he was demoted to co-pilot.¹⁰

By the time Dick and I returned from the east, Long Tieng was closed to all traffic. At Sam Tong, survivors of the crash had already been ferried to Korat, and our help in the accident was not required.

I had heard snippets of information from other pilots regarding Lieberth's helicopter inexperience and lack of H-34 proficiency, but reserved my judgment for observance during actual on-the-job-training (OJT). Working out of Site-20 the remaining day, I gradually discovered that assessment of the man's flying ability was largely correct. He was indeed deficient. Still, it was my job to help him if possible.

The following two days, we worked out of Na Khang. We supported consolidation of territory recovered during the recently concluded Hua Mung operation, the push south toward Houei Sa An (LS-127), Phu Pha Thi (LS-85), and Houei Kha Moun (LS-111). Except for early morning fog, with improved weather patterns in upper MR-2, and air power diverted from Steel Tiger area to Barrel Roll (called diverts), the standby CH-3 crew was active the first day, and we recorded two hours back-up SAR time for theoretical pay purposes. RONS at Na Khang were still a

¹⁰ Bill Leary, October 1965 Notes.
Blaine Jensen, Letters, 07/25/97, 08/13//96, 08/20/97.
Joe Leeker, C-123B Information.
Tom Penniman, Email, 03/03/00.
Mike LaDue, Story.
Mike LaDue Emails, 03/06/10, 03/13/10.

rough experience on crews. The filthy conditions and abundant rats never made life there any easier.

Because of the large amount of turbine fuel required to fill the CH-3s 450-gallon internal fiberglass fuel tank, the ship was parked in the fuel pit when not active on SAR missions. To immediately launch when word came from King, the controlling aircraft aloft during strike missions, the helicopter crews remained a presence in or around their assigned ships. For their own reasons, the crews were not always friendly, and normally in a hurry to get back in the air after refueling. Consequently, I conducted little discourse with them. However, during one refueling stop a friendly para-jumper (called a PJ) ambled over to Hotel-33. Berkley E Naugle, a former crewmember on HH-43s, was slated to soon rotate back to CONUS. For this reason, the burly sergeant was interested in obtaining Meo artifacts, preferably a coveted Meo flintlock rifle. He offered to exchange difficult-to-obtain Air Force survival gear for one. I told him that I did not currently possess a rifle, but would attempt to acquire one for him. ¹¹ Thinking that was probably the last time we would meet, I departed on another mission. ¹²

U.S. military losses continued heavy. A USAF F-105D was shot down the following day northeast of Hanoi (actually six planes were lost, with others badly damaged). Additionally, a

¹¹ I had previously sent one rifle home, obtained in the upper Moungh Heim Valley during a refugee exodus from the North Vietnamese-Lao border region.

¹² Within a relatively short time Air Force survival gear was delivered to the house. I was not home to accept the items, but among several signaling devices and other objects, the package included a combination hatchet, saw, chisel, and hammer. Dick Elder described the man who brought the gear to the Air America facility. It had to be the same sergeant I had talked to at Na Khang. After the delivery, I did not see the PJ for some time.

Udorn-based RF-101C was hit thirty miles northeast of Hanoi. Turning toward the Tonkin Gulf, the pilot managed to control his aircraft and land at Da Nang. ¹³ Concerned that we might be sucked into the fray, I nervously watched the CH-3 PIC attempt to hover and struggle off the strip overloaded with crew, weapons, armor, and a full internal fuel tank. Given that maximum gross load, I wondered how any SAR could be performed successfully, especially at any altitude.

Sam Tong provided a welcome respite from rigorous frontline work, and the relatively innocuous missions allowed me to let Lieberth fly and attempt to coach him in basic H-34 pilot technique and mountain work. Despite efforts to help him, acceptable performance for an H-34 pilot was not forthcoming. Mainly, his RPM control was horrible. Like a novice student in primary flight training, he was constantly and dangerously behind the aircraft during most critical maneuvers. He appeared incapable of dividing his attention between the cockpit and outside the aircraft. At times he acted like he had never piloted an H-34 helicopter before. He could not plan or adequately control an approach, and actually failed to respond to the instruction I proffered. As a result, fearful that we would crash, at times I had to assume aircraft control. Eventually, it was simply easier and safer for both of us to not allow him access to the controls. He seemed content with this.

It was presupposed, at least in past years, that all new helicopter pilots hired possessed some H-34 experience prior to arriving in Udorn. Lately, from the caliber of some hires, this

¹³ McConnel.
Edward Greenhalgh, *RF-101, Voodoo*, 88-89.

supposition proved a utopian dream. Of course, it was easy for anyone to concoct flight time in a personal logbook by employing creative writing techniques. I would be the first to admit that I was not a trained instructor with the honed skills of a schooled IP, and my normal upcountry tasks did not include training a new pilot as if he was a basic novice. Still, I understood right and wrong flight procedures, and whether a person had prior experience or could hack the program. I had certainly gained sufficient experience since flying with Air America to yield what I considered wise decisions, conduct decent mountain work under highly demanding conditions, and judge others' performance compared to my own standards. Paramount to the entire scenario, beset with deficiencies of the latest round of Company-hired First Officers, my patience was wearing extremely thin, particularly since the recent Higgins incident. In addition, I wondered if some former Army warrant officers had skated through their entire service flying careers acting as officers' copilots, rarely performing duties as an aircraft commander (HAC), or actually handling the controls.

The crowning blow during our time upcountry occurred when Lieberth unceremoniously overboosted the engine while taxiing uphill at Sam Tong. ¹⁴ I was surprised and appalled, for I had never seen anyone commit such a glaring error. It was obvious that either Lieberth was not cognizant of engine parameters, or had learned little during our days in the field. His actions were not just the result of sloppy technique. Totally unaware of overboost limitations until I pointed them out to him, the man

¹⁴ Engine Overboost: A detrimental condition combining low RPM and high manifold pressure.

simply had no concept relating to necessary RPM settings verses manifold power applications. This was entirely consistent with his inability to coordinate necessary throttle and collective manipulations.

I was unaware then that there might have been a logical reason for Lieberth's erratic behavior. While piloting turbine engine helicopters, a pilot simply adjusted the throttle to ninety to one hundred percent RPM, and then with minor RPM tweaking, manipulated the collective up or down to demand or reduce power. In Dick's case, it appeared that he had never read an Army UH-34D manual regarding standard operating procedures. Suspecting there was something else seriously wrong with the man that I was not aware of, I concluded that at this stage he was a serious liability to himself, our program, and anyone else in the helicopter business. I did not relish continuing to fly with him, but was obliged to complete the RON since it was part of my job. Unlike Porter Hough's Caribou PICs, I never told a cockpit mate to sit on his hands, but I did have the option to ignore him in matters of handling aircraft controls during the critical phases of operation.

We were directed to Luang Prabang where, after some local work, we moved a Customer to Chiang Kong.¹⁵ The ferry time during the round trip enabled me to relax a little and let Lieberth conduct straight and level stick time, which he executed with little effort. Of course, this was not indicative of his true H-34 ability, and, with ASE engaged, a task even a young child could perform.

¹⁵ Tony Poe had not transferred yet and Luang Prabang officials were still monitoring the Houa Kong area.

After a night at the government hotel, we worked west in the Boum Lao (LS-174) area and southeast at Neutralist-controlled Moung Kassy (LS-153). Carrying a load slated for a low ridge on the border of Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang Provinces, in a weak moment I allowed Lieberth one additional opportunity to redeem himself. It was a very bad move on my part. The man had learned nothing by observing my approaches and this, combined with his inherently poor RPM control, almost resulted in a crash and left me with a wildly palpitating heart.

We were relieved, and recalled to Udorn that evening. Probably still under considerable pressure to produce line Captains, and anxious to release Lieberth to the field, both Abadie and Wayne anxiously solicited information regarding his performance during our six days upcountry. I do not know what they expected, but they did not look pleased, and said little as I patiently attempted to explain the man's glaring deficiencies, particularly his poor RPM control and the overboost incident while taxiing. Hoping they would read between the lines, I neglected to indicate that he was the worst H-34 pilot I had ever flown with, definitely not ready to turn loose on his own. I strongly recommended that he be allocated additional training time, stressing careful attention to throttle manipulation and cross checking the power and RPM instruments. Then I went home. I did not even stop in the bar for a beer. The more than fifty hours flown represented a decent RON, but the added stress of flying with someone so incompetent had worn me out.

I do not know what eventually transpired between the CPH, COO, and Lieberth, except that within the space of three days, during which he received additional flight time, and check rides by Abadie, Knight, and lastly Burke. The ACPH, believing that he had performed to standard, would be acceptable to upgrade to

Captain, signed him off. He then saw Dick off to Pakse on the morning of the 12th saying, "*Whatever you do, don't screw up.*" It was a very poor decision, but unfortunately, the die was cast. ¹⁶

On the 9th, First Officer Nelson, neighbor Gaza Eiler, and I deadheaded to Vientiane on Hotel-35 for the purpose of ferrying CIC-5 to Udorn for scheduled maintenance. Taking advantage of a rare trip to the Embassy commissary, I cashed a check for a hundred dollars and purchased consumables difficult to obtain in Udorn.

PERSONALS

My parents reported in a letter that they had attended the World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, New York. Despite Dad's gimpy leg, they conducted a grand tour, even viewing an elaborate Thai temple display. Dad was surprised to learn that Thailand had a twenty-nine million population, which had doubled over the previous fifteen years. Other facts gathered were that the country exported 130 million dollars in rice and stick lac from an insect used in the manufacture of shellac and varnish. Also exported: castor bean seeds, peanuts, sesame, soy, cotton, and kapok used to make oils. It sounded like the old folks had an enjoyable, but strenuous time.

With the majority of new pilots being upgraded on a regular basis, and assuming the brunt of flying upcountry, it appeared that the Company plan to restrict us "Old Timers" to 1,200 hours was actually going to work. After some figuring, I calculated

¹⁶Marius Burke Email, 02/16/09.
Bill Leary 1965 Notes.

that that number of hours would net me in the range of 30,000 dollars for the year, a substantial sum of money in 1965. Thirty thousand dollars was an especially impressive sum when compared to stateside commercial pilots' salaries and those of small corporation presidents. However, the effort required to earn this was a bit sobering when considering the sweat, tears, mental consequences, and overall toll exacted. Thoughts of exactly what dollar value to place on one's life tended to diminish the importance of money. Still, it would seem that I had finally succeeded in my goal to earn the "big money," at the same time understanding that 1966 would certainly not be as lucrative.

I had previously planned a home leave with my wife in the February-April 1966 period, but because of management's projected enforced month off in December, and changing plans on the home front, I decided to journey to the States on the German carrier Lufthansa to spend Christmas with the folks. Since I had no cold weather clothes with me in Thailand, I wondered at the state of my suits at home and if my increased weight would allow me to wear them.

During my time off, we had previously spruced up the outside of the bungalow with white, yellow, red, and orange multi-colored roses Tuie purchased inexpensively from a town nursery. Because of the hard laterite ground, we maintained them in the original pots and they managed to flourish and bloom. Now, with buds forming again, I queried Mom as to how to prune them for maximum production. She answered with exactly the same procedure that Tuie employed.

NAM YU

Mike Jarina continued working part of his scheduled time upcountry in western Military Region One flying Hotel-30. RONing at Nam Yu, he and "Champy" Champanil serviced Xieng Lom, Ban Houei Sai, Nam Thouei, Phou Pang Sang (LS-142), and Teams 8, 22, and 23 to the north of Site-118A. Although established for a long time, it was the first reference made to the far ranging, intelligence gathering sites.

The first time Jarina had a serious conversation with Tony Poe he attempted to determine Poe's nationality. Then Tony divulged his actual last name, Poshepny. Because of a common ancestral Slovak background, they established a good rapport. They had no conflicts and Mike developed a good appreciation of how and why Tony functioned in the field, and the frustration he experienced at Nam Yu while attempting to conduct a smooth operation and correct some of the things wrong with the war's conduct. For example: one day Mike took Tony into the field to pay the troops. After having them muster and form a line, he paid each individual separately. Thinking it would be easier to give the funds to the officers and have them pay the troops, Mike naively inquired why Tony acted as a paymaster. Tony indicated he did not trust the officers. If he handed the money directly to them, the men would either not be paid or the officers would take a substantial cut.

Tony had a small cabin built with a large open-air porch on a low hill to the southeast of the strip. Initially, only one helicopter crew RON at 118A unless there was a crew overlap. Patterned on the same plans as Young's bungalow on the Mekong, accommodations existed for two crews. The first time Mike RON at Nam Yu, there was a mattress lying on the bare floor of one room. Like he had done earlier at Chiang Khong, Mike inquired if

there was a sheet available. Curious, Tony wanted to know why Mike had to have a sheet. Tony found some green sheets, but they were torn and soiled, as the pet cat had just produced a litter on them.

Attempting to defray the cost of food and labor, Tony charged crews a small sum for meals. This was not done at Chiang Khong when Young and O'Jibway ran the show, but we had previously participated in an all-hands Long Tieng food fund. Therefore, no one objected to paying a pittance to eat a decent meal in lieu of reverting to our canned supplies. Sometimes a pilot would deliver a case of beer or Mekong whiskey to the host. Regardless of this, to wash down the daily diet of rice and weeds and relax at night, Tony always provided his crew members free beer.

Mike considered "Champy" a savvy Flight Mechanic, but thought him deficient in communicating with the PIC over ICS. (I cannot recall ever flying with him.) One time, while "Champ" worked with another pilot at Nam Yu during the year, an overheated lead acid battery exploded. Champanil was blown out the helicopter door and slightly injured. Such an incident was not that common, but just enough to deter several Customers from riding on the H-34. However, the hydrochloric acid electrolyte in overheated batteries did frequently boil over, particularly if the voltage regulator was not properly adjusted for the season. An overheated condition was distinguishable to me by a very acrid odor. Later, lead-acid batteries were phased out of the system in favor of heavier, more expensive, but efficient nickel-cadmium (NiCad) batteries. They rarely caused problems, except to completely fail at the end of their service life.

Joe Flipse, for one, did not believe H-34 maintenance was particularly good, and only rode on the ships when absolutely

necessary. He noted that in the early days it was rare to have one assigned to upper Military Region One and complete a full tour without breaking down. Deposited at a site by an H-34 pilot, left in the field for two days, and spending another day walking back to camp, confirmed his decision to ride in the machine as little as possible. That is how he became used to walking to destinations at the beginning of the project. Walking was slow, but he never was weathered in on the trail.

Joe complained to superiors numerous times regarding H-34 batteries being overcharged. On some hot days, as the battery was getting its daily cooking, a distinctive odor of acrid fumes entered the cabin from behind the bulkhead leading to the clutch compartment.

Another time when Jarina was assigned to work at Luang Prabang, "Champy" was reluctant to crew an aircraft that he knew had previously been grounded for an impeller oil leak. Despite an inspection that failed to reveal an excess of fluid, in his opinion the leak had steadily worsened. They had deadheaded a long way to fly the machine, so Mike, wanting to fly the helicopter until the leak positively exceeded specifications (measured in estimated cubic centimeters), asked his Flight Mechanic what damage it could do other than leaking and causing a mess. "Champy" indicated that as a Thai Air Force mechanic he worked on a plane with a similar engine leak and the aircraft had subsequently crashed. Therefore, he did not want to take a chance and fly this one. After considering the Flight Mechanic's logic, perhaps laced with superstition, Jarina said they would ferry the machine to Udorn.

When they arrived at the base, Abadie, with hands on his hips, demanded to know the reason for the return. When Mike told

him why "Champy" did not want to fly the H-34, Ab said, "We expect our pilots to know a little about maintenance."

Mike countered that with his considerable experience, he likely exceeded an average pilot's knowledge regarding maintenance. Furthermore, he respected a Flight Mechanic's opinion as the determining factor in final maintenance decisions. "What would happen if he overruled the mechanic and the engine quit? He would have been at fault if he survived the crash, and the Flight Mechanic did not." Also, had he not acceded to Champanil's wishes, he would have made the man look bad in the eyes of his superiors.

In a rare agreement with a line pilot regarding such a situation, Abadie conceded, "You are right." ¹⁷

LIEBERTH UPGRADED

On Tuesday, 12 October 1965, newly upgraded Captain Richard H. Lieberth was released by Udorn management for field work and sent to Pakse as PIC of Hotel-32. Rounding out the crew, comprising the same people I had flown with a few days earlier was Flight Mechanic Franklin D. "Jesse" Smith. Since the Military Region Four area was generally flat and area hostilities existed at a relatively low ebb, it was assumed by those in the CPH's office that an RON there would engender confidence and provide Dick with valuable field experience, while flying by himself under conditions of relative safety. Then later he could be introduced into the rougher areas that demanded more proficiency in upper Laos. The trip marked

¹⁷Mike Jarina Interviews.
Joe Flipse, Emails, 05/02/97 (3).

Lieberth's first as a solo Captain, and the final day of his short life. It was our program's only helicopter pilot loss since Charlie Jones "bought the farm" in March.

Agency Case Officer Mike Deuel, approaching the end of his Lao tour, boarded Hotel-32 with Mike Maloney, his paramilitary replacement. The mission that day included familiarizing Maloney with Pakse sites (called PS) around Saravane and involved troop salary payment. Consistent with the policy of keeping personnel in the "family," fathers of both young men were career CIA officers. As often seemed the norm during disasters, Deuel's wife, also an Agency employee, was pregnant at the time.

When the helicopter failed to return to Pakse after a reasonable time, people at Lima-11 became concerned. Standard SOP Company radio call searches conducted over VHF and HF frequencies produced no response or indication of the overdue helicopter's location.

At 1745 hours, without revealing his source, the L-11 Customer radioed Tango-08 that Hotel-32 was down in the vicinity of coordinates XC-5157. The location initially radioed to Udorn was plotted a couple of miles north of PS-08, twelve miles north of Saravane. ¹⁸ Aggravating the situation, no helicopters or planes were available in the immediate area to commence a visual search. With no further word regarding status of the helicopter, crew, passengers, or the nature of the problem, by nightfall prognosis for a favorable outcome appeared grim. Consequently, the pilot of Helio Courier XW-PBX, who repositioned to Pakse late that evening, was dispatched to commence a night search.

¹⁸ Often the case with first reports directly following accidents or incidents, these initial coordinates proved erroneous.

His efforts failed to achieve a sighting. The pilot launched early the next morning and searched, once again without results.

On the evening of 12 October, preparations were underway in Udorn to dispatch Hotel-15, piloted by Herb Baker and an investigation team to Pakse in the morning. The team consisted of ACPH Marius Burke, FIC's Dick Ford, John Aspinwall from the Maintenance Department, and two indigenous Customers. Forming a member of designated Air America crash investigation teams, Udorn Operations Manager Tom Penniman, normally investigated fatal accidents, but after participating in and observing the consequences of the Charlie Jones accident, he was a little reluctant to participate. Therefore, he backed off the duty when Dick Ford, having little else to do at the time, volunteered to replace him, obtain pictures, and attend to other necessary details. When Tom later observed the gory photos, he was happy that he had not accompanied the investigation team.

On Wednesday at 0545 hours Baker et. al. launched for Lima-11 in Hotel-15. After arrival at Pakse about 0900 hours, since the facts of why Hotel-32 was missing were lacking, Baker and Burke were advised to hold on the ground until T-28 cover arrived and Ambassador Sullivan approved the search. In addition, the team was asked to wait for the Customer to return from his flight in CASI Beech Baron N1349Z. When 49 Zip failed to RTB after a proposed ETA, a radio search commenced. An aircraft flying in the area reported seeing the plane on the deck at Saravane.

Hotel-15 and the accompanying helicopter, Hotel-28, arrived at Lima-44 after 1100 hours. Fifteen minutes later, following a cursory briefing from the Customer, the H-34 pilots launched to the north and east to investigate PS sites and perhaps learn of the aircraft's last known landing spot. Although targeting

general areas to search, difficult terrain and a dark green helicopter within a sea of dense green jungled ridges negated an immediate sighting of Hotel-32.

By then, additional planes had joined in the search--a mix of thirteen aircraft participated. These included Helio Courier 869, CASI Dorniers, N9181X, N9182, and Boun Oum DO-28 XW-PCG. The PIC of C-123 N5005X coordinated the gaggle. Three T-28s and pilots remained on standby to provide support if required.

Eventually narrowing the search area to PS-10 as the most likely landing zone Lieberth last departed, but observing no evidence of a crash, Baker and Burke returned to Saravane to top off and requested the Customer order thirty ground troops from two separate PS-10 sites to depart, comb and clear the local area, and provide security.

At 1625 hours, the PIC of Hotel-15 reported sighting Hotel-32 at XC 675465 in a ravine above a steam bed. Lying on its side, the machine was partially concealed in rough terrain among trees in the vicinity of PS-10, seven miles north of the Ban Nong Boua (LS-134) ADC camp. Because an identified individual was lying on the fuselage, there was anticipation of survivors.

SPECIAL UNIT AND CONTINUING EFFORTS

In 1964, a small elite Thai commando unit code named "The Special Battalion" was created by Agency personnel (including Miles Johnson) at Pitts Camp, in western Thailand for the express purpose of conducting difficult rescue missions in Laos. Although alerted for the lengthy Ernie Brace SAR, until this accident, the group had never been used.

Eight members of the Air Rescue Strike Force para-rescue team embarked on Caribou 853 and headed for the Saravane area.

Late in the day, at 1725 hours, the Caribou PIC orbited the crash site. Within fifteen minutes, the jump was complete.

Earlier, State Department Doctor, Burton Ammundsen, who had been standing by at Saravane along with a Customer representative, boarded Hotel-15 to provide medical help should any be required. He had just arrived from the USA, and aside from suffering jet lag, dressed in a short-sleeved shirt, was ill prepared for a night in the weeds, or prospects of the grim task ahead.

Just prior to the Caribou crew's arrival, as darkness was imminent, the men were hoisted down beside the stream bed to await the paratroopers. Personnel on Victor Control, and for a short time, the Hotel-15 crew, attempted to assist the various ground elements joining forces. However, because of communications problems, darkness, and impossible terrain, the parties did not link up until 2100 hours. For the next three and a half hours, the team searched the lower portion of the ravine and creek with negative results.

After landing at L-44 at 1825 hours, the crew of Hotel-15 secured for the night, effectively terminating airborne efforts that day. A USIS representative arranged for billeting and dinner for the crews of both helicopters at the Operation Brotherhood Hospital.

The following morning, both helicopter crews departed for PS-10 area at 0600 hours. From overhead, search party personnel were observed stretched along the stream bed. As they had not yet reached the crash site, another Customer representative was hoisted to the ground. Within a short time, he made contact with a few members of the ground party. Together, with the aid of ground to air VHF radio contact and Hotel-15 PIC's direction, rescue personnel arrived at and secured the helicopter wreck. It

did not take long to ascertain that all four Americans onboard Hotel-32 had expired.

It appeared that the ship had plunged into the ravine at high speed later estimated at ninety knots, and had impacted the ground with a tremendous G force. Deuel, Maloney, and Franklin were found inside the cabin section. Other than being slightly bloated from a couple of days in the hot, humid jungle, they did not appear to have sustained external injuries, but the tremendous deceleration and sudden collision with the ground had pulverized their internal organs.

The severe crash caused the instrument console to fold into the cockpit, severely lacerating and crushing Lieberth's legs. Somehow through superhuman effort, sheer brute force, and a determination to survive, he had managed to crawl from the cockpit onto the side of the fuselage where he subsequently bled out. ¹⁹

With no one to rescue, and with recovery the sole object, Dick Ford was hoisted to the stream bed to commence the required investigation. After hiking to the crash scene, he secured a machete to begin clearing brush around the aircraft in order to take initial pictures.

However, early in the day, and with the location buried deep in the ravine and dense jungle, the dark environment made the quality of Ford's pictures questionable. Therefore, in a

¹⁹ When I visited CPH Knight in the office not long after the crash, Wayne opened his center desk drawer and retrieved a packet of graphic and grotesque black and white pictures of the wreck. One overhead photo taken before the investigators disturbed the crash scene displayed Lieberth's body in extremis lying on the right fuselage. Looking like an effort to solicit assistance from above, his arms and legs were drawn up by the effects of rigor mortis. It was a difficult sight to view.

joint effort, Customers, troops from PS-10, and the Thai parachute team laboriously cleared and cut a helicopter pad from the jungle to allow in more light and better access to the wreck. Restricted to only hovering at first, after more work, the H-34 pilots were eventually able to land, and deliver people, and supplies.

With the photo shoot complete and landing zone construction underway, after much cajoling, bodies were gathered, bagged, and tagged by local troops who remained at the location as long as required.

John Aspinwall arrived at 1415 hours to commence his initial inspection of Hotel-32, while H-34 pilots shuttled bodies out. John and Marius could find no other cause for the accident than a loose mixture control linkage. Customer personnel departed after the last body was gone. Area clearing continued and John remained at the site until operations were secured for the day. At that time, Hotel-15 and Hotel-28 Captains retrieved Ford, Aspinwall, and others, and the aircraft secured at Pakse at 1805.

On 15 October, the PIC of Hotel-15 ferried Burke and Ford to Saravane, where extra gear was offloaded to afford easier access to the crash site. Arriving at 0955 hours to continue their investigation, they discovered that local troops had continued clearing foliage to expose Hotel-32 and a few parts that had separated from the helicopter during the impact. With additional light and the full aircraft visible, Ford took more photographs.

Mechanics arrived and began dismantling salvageable parts. Over a period of days, many components and sections of the ship were either carried internally, or slung externally out for shipment to the Udorn facility.

Because of the nature of destruction, Hotel-32 was considered a strike (a complete loss). However, within a few days, with the data plate and much of the aircraft recovered, albeit requiring many new components and a complete overhaul, employees in our talented Maintenance Department began work. Eventually Hotel-32 was rebuilt and returned to service during April 1966.

Initially, mostly speculation prevailed regarding the accident's cause. Hotel-32 had been acquired earlier in the year from Marine Corps stocks. I had flown the machine a few times and considered it a good aircraft. However, a UH-34D was only a delicate machine constructed with thousands of moving parts, any of which could fail at any moment and lead to an emergency situation. In this case, was the disaster a result of engine failure, pilot error, a series of events, or a combination thereof? Because the ship came to rest near the bottom of a narrow ravine leading south from PS-10, and smashed into the ground at an estimate ninety knots, people naturally wondered why Lieberth had failed to autorotate, or at least attempted to fully decelerate at the bottom of the approach to lessen the effects of a sudden impact. ²⁰ While working the site in August, I recalled that there was little distance between the top of the pad to the ravine below, but assuming an engine failure, in the seconds allowed, some effort to counter the emergency should have been made--unless shock and a lack of H-34 experience caused Dick to freeze on the controls.

All evidence pointed to a causal problem other than ordinary engine failure. Detailed investigation of the engine on

²⁰An old pilot adage aptly states that airspeed kills.

site by trained mechanics revealed a badly worn serrated nut on the side of the carburetor connecting a flex line cable to the mixture control lever leading to the cockpit. Although the cockpit mixture control lever was found in the normal position during the initial investigation, the carburetor setting was noted at idle cutoff. It was considered unlikely anything so egregious could have occurred in the system during the impact. Therefore, such a great disparity between settings in the cockpit and engine compartment pointed directly to a maintenance malfunction.

From the days of our serious carburetor troubles when management and maintenance both grasped at straws for an immediate solution, a full rich mixture setting was encouraged during all ground operations and climb to altitude.²¹ In order to conserve fuel and extend endurance between fuel loads, most of us leaned the mixture in a ground idle situation while offloading, loading, and obtaining information regarding the next mission. Ultimately, in Dick's case, it was theorized that he had advanced the mixture control lever to the rich setting (full forward position) before takeoff. Although the cable was still connected to the carburetor, the worn and ineffective serrated nut rotated allowing the actual mixture setting at the carb to remain in the normal position. Then, soon after takeoff,

²¹ This was considered merely procedural, for the difference between a normal and rich mixture setting at sea level was only about thirteen percent more fuel introduced to the carburetor. Therefore, at a relatively low elevation, takeoff in normal position would not be unrealistic.

when Lieberth retarded the mixture lever from the full rich setting to what he believed was a normal position, the movement instead caused idle cut-off at the carburetor. This condition resulted in almost instant fuel starvation and complete engine shutdown.

Marius Burke introduced a similar, but slightly different theory. The serrated plate (nut) on the carburetor appeared to have been slipping, creating a leaner mixture. While still at high power after takeoff, Dick had retarded the mixture lever. When the engine began to sputter because of the excessively lean setting that could not sustain the power requirement, he slammed the lever forward, slipping over more serrations. With no place to land except open fields a mile or more to the south, he attempted to "milk" the RPM to gain additional distance. In doing this, the RPM deteriorated to the point where the rotor system coned, lift was lost, and the airfoil blades stalled. This caused the uncontrollable aircraft to descend vertically into the trees.

Whatever the cause, it was a travesty that such an event had occurred to one so green and new to our program. Naturally, what ifs and gross speculation abounded. ²² Had Dick waited until reaching 500 feet or a higher altitude before moving the mixture lever aft, he might have been afforded more opportunity to process the information and correctly reacted to the alarming situation. Had he slapped the lever forward the instant the engine quit, perhaps the engine might have sputtered back to life and provided some much-needed power. Finally, the

²² The Author assumes that there was considerable CYA involved by management for their part in upgrading and releasing an individual whom peers considered to be incompetent.

overriding issue of his inexperience and lack of proficiency was common knowledge to us, and considered a primary factor in the equation. However, a similar malfunction could have occurred to anyone, perhaps with identical results.

During the obligatory hearing involving fatalities, the Air America investigation board consensus placed blame for the accident on a worn castellated nut that slipped in the mixture control system. However, as expected, this determination was hotly contested by the Manager of Technical Services, Jack L. Forney, who generally preferred to assert pilot error in most accident cases, and rarely admitted to Maintenance Department deficiencies.

All carburetor mixture nuts on ships in the H-34 inventory were thoroughly examined for wear and slippage. A memorandum was also generated to flight crew personnel regarding the component's frequent checking upcountry. I took this caution a step further, requiring my Flight Mechanics to inspect the nut during each shutdown. There was no objection. Because the green olive-drab H-34 was so difficult to spot from the air, consideration was given to an improved paint scheme to distinguish the machine from the verdant jungle. However, to deter enemy ground observers, a distinctive color had to be visible from the top only, not readily seen from the ground. Therefore, management discussed various color schemes of white, yellow, orange, and red. A yellow turtleback covering the aft portion of the transmission section was finally selected.²³

²³ Our turtlebacks were painted with bright colors in the Marine Corps for visibility and to differentiate squadrons. Echo Mike H-34 turtlebacks in HMM-261 were painted yellow.

Violent deaths strongly affect small communities, where people closely interface and are well known to each other. This is particularly so among those involved in aviation. In our case, the tragedy did not conclude with the crew and Customer deaths, but extended to and reverberated among dependents and their extended families.

Originating from a remote, mountainous area in the eastern United States, Flight Mechanic Smith's wife was largely unschooled in the ways of the world, and did not read well. Consequently, she had considerable difficulty understanding, coping with, and finalizing required Company paperwork. For those assisting her, it was considered a sad affair helping her, the children, and household items packed and on the way home. Further distracting and hampering her diminished mental abilities, two of the Smiths' three children were born Mongoloid, a condition now identified as Down's syndrome.

Reverend Cash conducted a well-attended memorial service at the Club for Captain Lieberth. I was not present, for I hated funerals (also hospitals). I commiserated with the grieving process, but after Charlie Jones died, I vowed to immediately purge crew deaths from my mind. It was the only way that I could continue the hazardous work.

Although Lieberth embraced the Catholic faith, his wife opted for cremation.²⁴ Consequently, the bodies were forwarded to Bangkok where the Agency maintained a comfortable relationship with an undertaker. Sandy Pitkin and Ed Hall, Dick's Army friend and self-appointed companion to his wife,

²⁴ This was the accepted Thai method of disposing of a body. Moreover, no embalming process was available in the country at the time.

accompanied the widow to the cremation. Herb Baker, in Bangkok for one of his medical conditions, also attended with his wife Charlotte. Herb passed the details to Wayne Knight. According to Herb, it was a very warm and humid day. With little air circulating within the wat, the attendees were perspiring freely. In typical Thai fashion, everything was behind schedule. After a considerable length of time, the body arrived in the rear of a small truck. Thai laborers carried the uncovered wooden casket into a small alcove, where they began nailing on the lid. Then the coffin was deposited on a stack of wood and ignited. While others attempted to calm the widow, she kept insisting the coffin was much too small to accommodate Dick, a large man weighing well over 200 pounds. Herb later related to Knight that the funeral-cremation was the most insensitive one he ever witnessed.

Unconvinced that the cremated body was that of her husband, the widow insisted on visiting the local morgue to view the other bodies. She was absolutely correct. There had been a gross mix-up at some point in the chain of events. Therefore, she arranged another cremation for Dick. During the period, a great deal of booze flowed among the attendees as comfort to the situation.

The cremated Customer also subscribed to the Catholic religion. Since cremation was not condoned by the Church, his remains were earmarked to be shipped home intact. The incident caused a considerable flap among local AB-1 Customers, and later, when discovered by the deceased's relatives. Not widely publicized, Wayne heard of the body exchange through a story circulated by an AB-1 employee. There was some blame accorded to Dick Ford for possibly mislabeling the body bags. However, there was no actual proof of such an error and Dick was not a regular

accident investigator. The entire incident was considered so bizarre and unsavory that Udorn management quickly attempted to forget it and move on to more pleasant items. Burke hurriedly requested STO and left town for a time.

Mike Deuel was eventually interred at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, DC.²⁵ Two additional gold stars marking those killed in Laos appeared on Langley's alabaster foyer wall.

Following the funeral, the bizarre episode achieved even stranger proportions when Dick's "wife" failed to behave like a bereaved widow to heed Ben Moore's recommendations that she return to the States ASAP.²⁶ Squired around town by Dick's buddy, Ed Hall, she went shopping, partied long and hard, and appeared to be enjoying the time of her life. The CPH recalled her at a Club party romancing new arrival, "Pogo" Hunter. Beside the "wife" issue, there was gossip regarding a true husband-wife relationship and speculation that she might be suffering from post-traumatic stress, which stimulated her drinking and carousing antics.

It was considered essential to every ones' interest that dependents of the deceased quickly depart Southeast Asia. We had to proceed with the business of living, and a grieving family's presence might demoralize the rest of the American community. However, Base Manager Moore did not have a firm policy to ease the bereaved family member out of the country. Thus far, in rare cases involving death, surviving family members were normally eager to return to the solace of their relatives. Therefore, with no indication that Dick's "wife" would ever leave Udorn without prodding, Abadie solicited the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok

²⁵ The Author does not know Mike Maloney's disposition.

²⁶ There was some conjecture if they were actually married.

to intervene. Lacking a host country sponsor, they managed to ease her out of the country. ²⁷

DOUG DREIFUS

The Air America safety function was a billet attached to the Taipei Operations Department in 1964. It was directed by Warren Lassiter, who worked under Vice President of Operations (VPFO) Talmage Boyd, who assumed the helm after Bob Rousselot departed. Prior to joining Air America, Lassiter worked as an airline pilot, and was relatively unschooled in the many facets of the organizational safety business. Tasked with several other operation jobs, he was unable to devote full time to safety matters.

By 1965, with Air America's growth accelerating throughout Southeast Asia, and the corresponding increase in accidents, it became obvious to Taipei management that an autonomous safety division was required to cope with Company expansion and evolving wars.

Recognizing a void in the system, the Company hired Doug Dreifus. A former Marine aviator, with experience flying transports and fighter planes, Doug had served in the South

²⁷ Segment Sources:

Joe Leeker, *Air America in Laos: Humanitarian Work*, 42-44, 08/11/08.
Tom Penniman Emails, 02/26/00, 03/03/00, 03/04/00.
EW Knight Emails, 07/15/00, 07/17/00, 07/18/00, 07/20/00, 06/01/02, 07/30/02, 07/31/02, 08/01/02.
Dick Ford Email, 06/03/02.
Mike Jarina Interviews.
Marius Burke Email, 02/16/09.
Ted Gup, from the Internet, *The Two Mikes*, Cornell Magazine on line, Nov-Dec 00, Volume 103, #3.
Arlington National Cemetery Website, Michael McPherson Deuel Captain United States Marine Corps, Central Intelligence Agency Operative, (www.arlingtoncemetery.com/mmdeuel.htm).

Pacific, El Toro, and other Marine and Navy bases throughout the USA. He was stationed at Glenview, Illinois, for a number of years as a pilot for General Schult and his staff. Over the course of his career, his squadron collateral duties normally involved that of Safety Officer. After retiring from the Corps in 1963, Dreifus assumed a position with the Civil Aviation Board (CAB).

In 1965, the Air America Washington office offered Doug a position at the Taipei headquarters. After arriving in Taiwan and talking to VPFO Boyd, he discovered that the safety function was imbedded in the Operations Department. He initially worked for Lassiter, and soon realized that the safety operation was not correctly addressed or managed. Safety personnel were investigating the people for whom they worked. Since it was difficult to investigate a principal, Dreifus eventually convinced Boyd that safety could not function satisfactorily under an Operations Department umbrella. To correct this inconsistency, VPFO Boyd and President Grundy created a separate Safety Division under Hugh Grundy in Taiwan and George Dole in Washington. Dreifus was elevated to Director of Safety, and Lassiter was assigned another position in the Operations Department.

From the time he joined Air America, it was apparent to Doug Dreifus that many standard safety functions followed by the U.S. military, the CAB, and the FAA were absent in Air America's system. Therefore, with complete control to form the new entity as he chose, he wrote a comprehensive safety manual predicated on the established use of normal flight and ground safety procedures relating to mishaps for Air America (AAM), Civil Air Transport (CAT), Southern Air Transport-Pacific Division (SAT), and all the operating bases throughout Southeast Asia. He

tailored the manual to reflect the current and best standardized procedures of the military, CAB, NTSB, FAA, and ICAO. These procedures were approved by the Washington and Taipei offices, and system Base Managers.

Largely because of his efforts, and personnel cooperation at outlying bases, the system-wide safety program became highly successful. This was evidenced when aviation accidents and deaths diminished to a very low level.

Over the years, Doug hired investigative personnel from various military services and federal aviation agencies.

By 1970, the Safety Division was enlarged and composed of five flight safety investigators, one ground safety investigator, and secretaries. By 1971, Dreifus, George Keller (Assistant Safety Director), Dee Huffer, Ross Noah, Phil O'Brien, and Yale Naliboff (ground safety at Udorn) were stationed at each major base: Taipei, Saigon, Vientiane, and Udorn. Doug was quite busy working on accidents somewhere in the system, so only home a few days a month. He was frequently in Udorn, but never based full time there. ²⁸

The Safety Department had nothing to do with any personnel action involving crew members or ground employees. That was relegated to Taipei and local field base managers. Safety representatives merely investigated and reported findings with the assistance of various flight and ground section personnel from the location where the aircraft had been based. The procedure involved investigating all mishaps, then writing a comprehensive report and forwarding it to the headquarters review board in Taipei, then on to George Dole in the Washington

²⁸ I talked with Doug many times. He was an affable and knowledgeable individual, someone who seemed entirely trustworthy.

office. Copies were maintained in Taipei and in D.C. Each base had the option of filing individual copies. In the case of November (N)-registered aircraft, a copy was forwarded to FAA headquarters and CAB/TSB in Washington. Findings were then secured in the CAB's Investigative Section's safe.

Dreifus enjoyed the challenge involved in the job and working for Air America. However, when the future and continued operations of Air America, Air Asia, and Southern Air Transport appeared grim, he accepted a position with the newly-designated Transportation Safety Board (TSB) and departed Southeast Asia.²⁹

BOB MITCHELL

Like Dick Lieberth, other former Army pilots, with little actual H-34 time, liberally padded their flight time to obtain the job. However, most, with some natural flying talent, made the grade and generally contributed to the organization's success. Bob Mitchell, arriving about the same time as Dick Lieberth was one of these individuals. Highly intelligent, Bob had studied a UH-34D flight manual before arriving in Udorn, but Wayne was suspicious about the new man before the standard acceptance flight. Having a good sense for newly hired aviators, by then he had pre-judged the man deficient in something, and not quite right. This opinion was reinforced when Mitchell, while attempting to climb the right side of the helicopter to enter the cockpit, was initially unable to follow the normal sequence and step into the correct foot holes. It was something a novice, but not an experienced H-34 pilot, would do. Wayne looked at Mitchell oddly, suspecting that he had already flunked

²⁹ Doug Dreifus Emails, 04/07/99, 04/14/99, 04/15/99.

the obligatory ride. Still, Wayne was obligated to continue, for the program urgently needed pilots. During the evaluation, Wayne discovered Bob to be a fast learner and very sharp individual. Therefore, he was accorded all the upcountry training needed, and was upgraded long before Lieberth.

CPH Knight harbored doubts about Mitchell that ran hot and cold over the years, but he eventually gained a grudging like for the man. Just when the CPH was about to give up on him, Bob would do something positive to change Wayne's mind. Bob never gave ground on a subject or conformed to any established pattern. He was definitely not a brown nose type. Abadie did not trust him, and he upset the COO more than once with his abrupt non-respectful responses. His motto seemed to be take-me-as-I am. He always performed to medium standards on periodic check rides, but there was something about the man that bothered Wayne. ³⁰ ³¹

Mike Jarina assessed Mitchell as a very quiet person. Definitely a thinker, he was mathematically inclined, talking about odds when rolling dice during Liars Dice games. Jarina had become an accomplished scuba diver during his Pensacola days, and Bob was one of the first persons to go to Pattaya with Mike to dive in the Gulf. Since he always stayed at the Nipa Hut Hotel, he was generally accorded a room. On this trip, Bob and Mike shared a room on the second floor. While they were

³⁰ From observing Bob Mitchell in the Club bar, the Author believes that if there actually was any problem, it might have been a resentment and innate distain that he harbored for superiors.

³¹ EW Knight Emails, 07/17/00, 01/22/01.

unpacking, a maid he knew entered the room accompanied by a training maid. Knowing that he frequented the hotel, inquiring in broken English, she wanted to know why he was not staying on the first floor. Then she pointed to Bob asking, *"Who is he?"*

"This is my friend."

"Oh."

Later, leaving Mike in the room reading a book, Bob went down to the bar. After knocking, the same maid entered with extra towels inquiring, *"Where is My Friend."*

Puzzled, thinking she was talking about the trainee, Mike answered, *"Isn't she with you?"*

"No."

"You don't know your friend's location?"

"No. Where is My Friend?"

Mike was highly amused, for the conversation almost exactly duplicated a movie classic Bud Abbot and Lou Costello comedy sequence.

Ever restless, Mitchell left Air America to pursue other interests. While in the States, he instructed at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. One night, while inebriated, he wrecked his automobile. From the hospital bed, he overheard doctors giving up hope that he would survive. Not ready to give up, using sheer willpower, he struggled to his feet and went to another hospital, where he recovered. After he was thoroughly healed, he re-applied for a job with Air America and was rehired. ³² ³³

³² Mike Jarina Interview.

³³ Years later, when the Author was Chief Pilot of a small 135 helicopter operation at Moisant Airport, Kenner, Louisiana, Mitchell called seeking a job. None was available at the time.

New pilots kept arriving in Udorn to fill slots in our program. On the 14th, when I was finished flying upcountry, I was assigned a local test and training flight with Al Rose and old Frankie Claveria, using Hotel-30. Such flights normally required the greater part of a day, standing by at the field, waiting for the machine to come out of maintenance, researching previous logbook squawks, and actually performing the flights. Al was a quiet person and took all this in stride.

Four days later, we were scheduled again. By then, along with new hire Nelson, Al Rose had observed another test flight with Mike Jarina in H-34. ³⁴ We began the day flying Hotel-30 again for a minimum time. Blond haired, proud Irish born Pat McCarthy crewed from the cabin section. Pat had come to us from Ireland where his mother still resided. He was very personable and quickly became a popular fixture in the Club bar. After lunch, we ferried Hotel-31 to Long Tieng for a swap with Hotel-22, that either had a maintenance problem or was due for inspection. Although only a trash flight, it enabled Rose to obtain a taste of the mountainous terrain and constantly changing weather. In my case, a couple more hours of flight and project pay added to my scarce time for that month. ³⁵

Jarina flew another test flight with Rose on 20 October. Al did not remain with us very long, and just before he left Air America, I saw him in Bangkok going into the less expensive Rose Hotel adjacent to the elite Montien Hotel on 54 Suriwongse Road.

For five days toward the end of October, Tom Hoppe flew front line shuttles with Nelson in the Site-36 area. After

³⁴ I do not have Nelson's first name.

³⁵ Although more time than the previous month, I ended with less than sixty hours.

upgrading to Captain, Tom had worked a considerable amount of time in upper Military Region Two, particularly during the push on Hua Mung. During his tenure, Hoppe took a few hits to his aircraft. All the battle damage he incurred was in upper MR-2 around Pha Thi, and east of Hua Mung, and Na Khang. During a three-month period, while flying with Rudy Serafico, a bullet glanced off the magneto housing. From below, Rudy radioed, "*Oh, it is like popcorn. I am hearing popcorn.*"

From a nearby hill, the enemy patiently watched Hoppe while he was eating lunch at a site. Later, when he returned to the site, they blasted him with six rounds.

Yet another time, while carrying a load of monks to Hua Mung, bullets soared through the belly, fuel tanks, and into the overhead almost hitting the tail rudder cables. Fortunately, no one was injured, which Hoppe attributed to the religious people onboard. However, all but the forward self-sealing fuel tank leaked. When he contacted Udorn on the HF radio to inform them of the battle damage, the individual he was talking to recommended that for the rest of the day, to only fill the forward tank. ³⁶

JARINA

Mike spent six days upcountry flying Hotel-29. He billeted the first three nights at Luang Prabang with Rudy Serafico, whom he called "Senor." They worked many of the same sites I previously had with Tarn and Higgins: the mountains eighteen miles north of L-54 on the south side of the Nam Nga; the Beng Valley between Mung Houn and Boum Lao; Ban Houei Sai, north of

³⁶ Tom Hoppe, Interview.



Captain Mike Jarina on the front porch of the Luang Prabang "Bungalow," the only viable hotel in the royal capital for Air America crews to RON.

Jarina Collection.

Ban Langkay; and Black Tai sites twenty miles southeast of Luang Prabang. Along with new Flight Mechanic Dennis Griffith, on the third day they worked Xieng Lom and Hong Sa. Before the day was over, Mike assumed command of Hotel-30.

The following day, Mike was directed to Long Tieng where, loaded with passengers, he relocated to Na Khang. Like so many pilots experienced not long after upgrading, it developed into an especially interesting period that enhanced his learning curve in the area. En route weather included rainy conditions with low ceilings, and the mountain tops were not visible.

Closing on the site, most of the area was clobbered, but he could still see the prominent red slash of earth leading from the fort to the runway. While soaring over the fort, someone inquired where he was going. Looking around for the speaker, Mike observed two CH-3 aircraft circling. Discovering that he intended to land at Na Khang, they wanted to know exactly where it was located. Jarina asked if they could see a red slash. Receiving an affirmative, he directed them to make a right turn prior to the marker and they would have Site-36 in sight. The CH-3 pilots landed before Mike.

After landing and discharging his passengers, because the weather was still too iffy to work, he was sent south to Bouam Long (LS-88), where a small operation was underway to shuttle Special Guerrilla Unit One personnel from the recently liberated Houei Sa An (LS-127) area back to Bouam Long for relocation south. Earlier, the push south from Na Khang on Route-6 toward Ban Ban had commenced after the recapture of Hua Moun, and General Vang Pao wanted to rotate the troops to rest and refit for future operations. The troop withdrawal proved premature. Enemy reinforcements prevented the FAR from moving further south

to the northern rim of the Ban Ban Valley, and it resulted in consolidation of reclaimed territory.

Mike was cruising just below the base of a 1,500-foot cloud layer toward the Site-127 area when a voice boomed over the airwaves, *"H-34 headed east, I would fly a little higher if I were you."*

Mike scanned the area and responded, *"I cannot go any higher. I would be in the clouds. Who is this anyway?"*

"This is Father "B." Mike had heard stories associated with the "Walking Padre," but he was unaware that Luke possessed a radio or that he worked in the area.

Luke continued, *"If you come back to the area, would you land and pick me up?"*

Mike retrieved Father Bouchard later, and discovered that he had provided mass to the local people. He wore his little white Panama hat and black clothes. ³⁷ Over the years, rotor wash from Mike's aircraft blew the cover off the Padre's head many times, and he watched him scramble to retrieve it.

Like he did with all of us at Sam Tong, Father "B" supplied Jarina with more important survival information than anyone else. As part of his flight equipment complement, Mike brought smooth soled Navy boots when he joined Air America. Finding them impractical in the slippery, sloppy mountain conditions, he obtained a pair of cleated military jungle boots. While conversing with Luke about them at Sam Tong, "B" advised, *"I would not wear those if I were you."*

"Why not? My other ones are much too slippery while walking in the mud."

³⁷ Tom Hoppe referred to the cover as a Bing Crosby hat.

Luke lifted his sneakers and showed them to Mike. Impressed, Jarina asked where he had obtained them. The Father said, *"They are Pathet Lao sneakers. You go down in those military boots, PL trackers will easily spot the difference and capture you within the first two hours. You should obtain footwear with less of an imprint. Get a pair of these."*³⁸

That same day, an enlightening incident occurred that tended to help educate Jarina as to some of the problems and vagaries involved in working for many different Customers. During the course of the day, after being called to Na Khang for a one-shot mission, Jarina topped off with fuel at Bouam Long. Sam Jordon had previously dropped off a radio intercept man at the Alpha Pad on the high mountain south of Site-36. Still in the process of learning the area, Jarina had never been to the site. While plotting the landing zone's coordinates on his map, the air ops man instructed his helpers to load 1,500 pounds of rice. After learning the site's location and determining it was at the 6,000-foot elevation, he was already loaded. Rather than remove some of the load, Customer Mike Lynch authorized an air drop.

While Griffith stacked and dropped the sacks on command, Mike observed a man waving for him to land. However, after delivering the rice, he discovered Hotel-30 was still too heavy to land and takeoff safely. Therefore, electing to burn off additional gasoline, he returned to Na Khang. Lynch, indicating that it was imperative the man be retrieved that day was extremely unhappy he was not onboard. Mike, attempting to

³⁸ Father Luke was reputed to wear out a pair of sneakers every month while walking long distances to minister to his native parishioners.

appease the Customer, said that he would return when lighter. When he again approached Alpha, a large thunderstorm covered the mountain. Mike later learned that Jordan had burned down fuel to 500 pounds before inserting the man on the pad.

Jarina RON at the Sam Tong hostel. Weather precluded flight on Monday. With the flight scheduling department anticipating his return to Udorn the next day, he stood a SAR standby at Delta, and then remained around the local area working for USAID. Before heading south, while loading for one trip, Thongsar wanted to ride in the cockpit to a village. In the realm of Asian mentality, this afforded him considerable prestige, especially when natives observed him exiting the big bird. Not aware of who the flamboyant, two pearl-handled toting, Lao cowboy was at first, Mike initially refused his request. Rebuffed, Thongsar was considerably upset. Later Jarina discovered that the man was Pop's fair-haired boy, and in the future, they established a close working relationship.

Mike likely was not aware that there were considerable hard feelings among pilots because the enterprising Thongsar made so much money from Meo artifacts he obtained for them. He bought the items for the equivalent of a few U.S. dollars and sold them to pilots for fifty. Jensen and his American cohorts could have arranged the same items for cost.

With no additional RONS projected, Mike and recent arrival, Bill Wilmot, tested and then ferried CIC-4 to Wattay Airport.

The last day in October, Mike, Lloyd Higgins, and Champanil took Hotel-36 to Sam Tong for the day. Jarina had known Higgins casually in the training command when he was a helicopter pilot based at "Mainside" Pensacola NAS. After they arrived, the Vientiane Operations Manager directed them to Delta for a short SAR standby. While on the ground, Lloyd, believing he was the

oldest helicopter pilot in the helicopter group called Mike "son" while talking to him. Annoyed, Mike informed his cockpit mate that he was the older pilot. When Lloyd refused to believe him they compared military identification cards, and Lloyd was chagrined to learn that Jarina was indeed the senior man by two years.

A Lao T-28 had previously crashed on a ridgeline east of Sam Tong, between the Ban Na (LS-15, Delta) and Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72) valleys. After the standby, a Customer wanted to examine the wreck for electronic parts or anything else worthy of salvage. Since the elevation was at the 6,000 feet level, Mike learning from recent experience, had to burn off substantial fuel before attempting a landing. Because of forested terrain, and a possible requirement to create a landing zone large enough to accommodate an H-34, the Customer carried a chain saw. After a low recon revealed no viable place to land, Jarina elected to hover and place the right main gear against the ridge to allow the Customer and passengers to climb out. This was a first, for he had no prior military experience in performing a one-wheeled pinnacle landing. Before departing, he spotted a tree six feet from the helicopter and asked his Thai Flight Mechanic to direct team members to eliminate the tree at his three o'clock position. Because of the difficulty of hovering on one wheel, after they departed, Higgins interjected, *"I never would have done that."*

Mike countered, *"Yes you will, and a lot more."*

They worked Phou Da Pho (LS-103) on a ridge located in the foothills along the long mountain range south of Xieng Dat, then Neutralist headquarters at Vang Vieng (L-16), and on to the Meo base at Phou Fa (LS-16, Agony). By then, GM-21 had moved down from the Luang Prabang area to help clear the area of enemy

stragglers. After a brief stop at Ban Na they returned to the T-28 crash site. The people were waiting patiently, but the tree was still erect. While refueling at Long Tieng, he asked "Champy" what he had said to the passengers earlier. It was then he discovered that, because of a language barrier, the Flight Mechanic had only informed the passengers that the H-34 would return at three o'clock.

Marius Burke also experienced language problems with Champanil while talking over the inter-communication system (ICS). Marius liked "Champy," but when the Thai man became excited, he jabbered, talking so fast that it was impossible to understand him. Therefore, Burke continuously reminded the man that when something important was occurring, he had to speak slowly to be understood.

At a time when both Na Khang and LS-88 areas were being pressured, Marius and "Champy" flew north-northeast of Bouam Long to look for a landing zone with a team and a pre-arranged signal. Burke never had been to the site and the entire locale was questionable as to security. Once in the area, he began circling, looking, and descending. When Champanil began talking. Burke could not understand him, so he began ad-libbing, "*Oh, you see the signal?*"

"Champ" came back with low key unintelligible chatter that Burke interpreted as the direction of the pad.

"*Oh, it is over there to the right?*" Marius circled down. He was not used to his Flight Mechanic being that calm, so he did not suspect a problem. Suddenly there was the whap-whap-whap staccato sound of gunfire. Then he realized that "Champ" was calmly informing him that a machine gun had opened up at them from the right side.

After leaving the area, Marius informed his mechanic, "The next time "Champ," you can be just a little more excited and let me know something is happening."

More than a year previously, he had experienced the identical problem with the Tagalog-induced English inflection over ICS that sounded like tick-a-tick. After six months, Burke generally became used to the dialect. That is, until something out of the ordinary occurred and they became excited. ³⁹

POLITICS

Lao Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma flew to the United States in October to present an analysis of the current situation to members of the Johnson Administration, and solicit additional tools of war. He began by stating he was pleased that all U.S. aid to FAR was now cycling through his government. He requested that assistance to other tribal groups in various parts of Laos also filter through the RLG [instead of the Agency].

As officials expected from dignitaries who arrived with their hats in their hands, Souvanna presented a generally upbeat scenario regarding the Lao situation. He stressed that although Laos was largely affected by developments in South Vietnam, during the previous ten months the military and political situation had measurably improved. Within the government structure, FAR military officers possessed a greater appreciation of their roles. Political leaders understood the

³⁹ Mike Jarina Interviews.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 130, 133.
Blaine Jensen Letter, 06/08/96.
Marius Burke Interview.

situation and leadership was more cohesive and recognized the necessity of solidarity.

During the last half year, the military situation had measurably improved. Army discipline had improved and the armed forces were reorganized. FAR expansion was evident in all military regions. Many areas had been seized or retaken from the enemy although it would require several months to consolidate some recaptured areas. He stressed the need for increased U.S. economic and military aid, including automatic weapons and ten helicopters. He said the RLAF only had two helicopters (received from Air America stocks), one was used in the north and one in the south. When Hua Mung was retaken, only one Lao H-34 was available to transport an infantry company and artillery.⁴⁰

Souvanna stressed the year's sizable Pathet Lao defections. Following three to six months of training and indoctrination, a full infantry company of former Pathet Lao soldiers had been sent into combat. There were four companies of defectors still in training.

He stressed that there were serious difficulties in North Vietnam as a result of the U.S. bombing campaign. USAF, Lao air, and successful FAR offenses had substantially slowed resupply to the Pathet Lao from the North, so much that the enemy had been unable to mount their usual monsoon offensive. He had also received information that the North Vietnamese could not hold out much longer, and that Hanoi leaders might be willing to consider proposals for negotiations in a few months. Furthermore, the Pathet Lao establishment was a prisoner of

⁴⁰ Of course, Souvanna was attempting to make a point, but he could not be so naive as to omit Air America's major participation in the operation.

Hanoi in the same manner that North Vietnamese leaders were prisoners of Peiping. Peiping would continue to fight until the last Vietnamese was standing.

Over the preceding four months, the Royal Lao Government had attempted to relocate tribal populations from areas where the RLAF was bombing Vietnamese infiltration routes and facilities. It constituted part of a program to transform the area into a desert where the enemy was active, so they could not rely on local people to provide food and transportation. In addition, Lao guerrilla teams were operating behind enemy lines to interdict southern logistical movements.

In regard to political strains in the kingdom, Souvanna indicated that relations with General Vang Pao were excellent. However, former FAR commander General Phoumi, even in exile, continued to be active against both Thai and Lao interests. He had informed Prime Minister Thanom that he should do everything in his power to curb those elements in Thailand sympathizing with Phoumi's agenda.

As Souvanna usually reiterated during U.S. visits, he allowed that there had never been good faith displayed on the part of Hanoi or Peiping leaders during or after the Geneva Conference. Only a few technicians had been withdrawn from the country at the conclusions of the 1962 agreements, and North Vietnamese Army cadres remained in the country over the years. ICC members were well aware of illegal Vietnamese troops' presence, but would not acknowledge this violation. Striving to discover a solution to this problem and the war, Souvanna had journeyed to Peiping in early 1964. Chinese leaders told him to talk to DVR leaders. In Hanoi he was frankly advised that as

long as reunification problems were not settled in South Vietnam, the Vietnamese would not leave Laos. ⁴¹

ICC

On Monday, 18 October, while Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma was still lobbying in Washington, a Boeing 307 ICC (International Commission for Supervision and Control) "Stratoliner," F-BELV disappeared. The plane was in the process of a twice-weekly round-robin between Saigon, Phnom Penh, Vientiane, and Hanoi. The plane departed Wattay Airport at 1505 hours, with thirteen passengers and crew, for Gia Lam Airport. Within radio range of the field, the pilot had advised Gia Lam tower that the flight would penetrate the North Vietnamese border at Moung Sen at 1555 hours. Estimated time of arrival (ETA) at the Hanoi airport was programmed for 1658 hours and clearance was confirmed.

When further contact was not received, confusion reigned. Hanoi authorities believed the aircraft had returned to Vientiane, and ICSC officials thought the plane was on the ground at Gia Lam.

It was not until noon on Tuesday that interested parties realized F-BELV was missing, and the U.S. Embassy requested a search to commence in Laos utilizing T-28s, Air America, and CASI assets.

Various aircraft initially searched five miles either side of the ICC's projected centerline track to Moung Sen. This was later expanded to ten miles, south toward Paksane, and north to

⁴¹ Memorandum of Conversation-Humphrey, Souvanna Phouma's visit to Washington, 10/18/65.

Memorandum of Conversation-Rusk, Souvanna Phouma Meeting, 10/18/65.

the Plain of Jars. USAF planes sighted wreckage in the vicinity of Phu Phu Lom, eight miles north-northeast of LS-01 on the 21st. Conjecture led to speculation that the plane had struck a mountain because of pilot error, and was not downed by AAA fire. With another theory assuming that the plane was shot down by U.S. aircraft, the embassy recommended Barrel Roll missions be curtailed until more information was obtained and a plan of action conceived.

French crews left Vientiane in H-34s at first light the next day. There was skepticism that they would be able to land at the extreme elevation, but fly-bys might confirm or deny the F-BELV's presence.

By the 24th, an ICC helicopter crew flew close to the wreckage to reaffirm that it represented old debris from a C-47 crash and not the ICC plane. A second flight to the area was projected to confirm the French helicopter pilots' opinion. Since ICSC aircraft were not allowed to fly over the F-BELV track in North Vietnam, and search operations were limited over PL territory in Laos, it was assumed that the plane was shot down by DVR weapons and the North Vietnamese had buried the wreckage to conceal that fact.

After ten days, ICSC aircraft were allowed to resume Hanoi flights. The search for F-BELV continued until 16 November, after which the crew and passengers were officially declared

dead. ⁴² ⁴³

TIME OFF TO TIE THE KNOT

Despite the revenue loss, diminished flight time had plusses for those of us high timers bumping up against the Company's yearly flight time limitation. Specifically, it allowed us old timers more consecutive time off with few restrictions on where we went. Therefore, Tuie and I left Udorn on the night train to spend several days in Bangkok, including a few at the beach. The ten-day trip was well timed, for the Udorn Club dining room was undergoing refurbishing to include new wall paneling, ceiling Celotex, lighting, drapes, and other items. Since this interior decorating would be messy and cause distress among the patrons, a few days away from the facility would not be unwarranted. In addition, among several other projects (the fourth since the beginning of facility expansion), a new Administration-Operations building, and re-topping of the parking-taxiway continued a work in progress and were nearing completion. When the Administration building was completed and occupied, the original termite-infested Administration building would be razed and converted into a supermarket and additional bedrooms. A shops building and aircraft parking ramp were half completed. ⁴⁴

⁴² Although there were several dated sightings of a crash west of Mounng Sen, North Vietnam in October 1965, no verification or confirmation of the ICC plane's remains had been determined by 1996.

⁴³ Pardy and Bryne, Eight Canadian MIAs (www.geocities.com/southbeach/Marina/9680/MIA.html). U.S. Embassy communication 19, 21, 22, 24, 29 October 1965 regarding the disappearance of ICC aircraft F-BELV.

⁴⁴ Ben Moore October 1965 Monthly Report.

With Tuie's assistance, I hired a taxi for the trip to Pattaya. Soon after arrival we arranged with caretaker, Louie, to rent the same inexpensive duplex that we had enjoyed before. Since Louie's relative was employed to care for the Air America employee boat, I inquired if the vessel would be available for fishing and diving during the few days we planned to stay in Pattaya. The dark-skinned Thai boy indicated that the craft was used a lot now for all night fishing and he doubted if I would be able to use it. He was right. I never saw the boat or the man responsible for its care and upkeep. I wondered what reaction the owners would have when they arrived in town and discovered that no boat was available for their water activities.

Before the boat was illegally sold, Mike Jarina, the only scuba diver in the group, frequently used it for this pastime. Later divers were Abadie, Knight, Elder, Reid, and Nunez. Nunez had travelled to Hong Kong to purchase scuba gear for all the participants. The potential divers never obtained formal diving instruction, and were not sure how to use the gear at first. Still, they were determined to dive and Mike did all he could to teach them.

Bobby Nunez was a chain smoker. During his first attempt to use the new diving gear, he went over the side of the boat, swallowed a mouthful of salt water, and surfaced. Choking uncontrollably, he indicated that he could not breathe. One of the fellow "divers" laughed and said, *"Of course, you have the wrong combination of air in your tanks. You will have to fill them with nicotine laced cigarette smoke."*

Since no one occupied the other side of the duplex, we were alone. That was fitting, for it afforded the quiet and peaceful

atmosphere I liked, with no demands for conviviality with others. Our days were occupied with swimming, water skiing, walking the almost unoccupied beach, or riding small ponies through the hills of the King's reserve to the south. Late some afternoons, we baht bussed to Barbos Restaurant at road's end to dine on rock lobster, a term for the local crab. In the evening, I particularly enjoyed relaxing on the large flagstone patio, drinking Singha beer, and listening to therapeutic and mesmerizing tunes generated by gentle Gulf water lapping at the seawall. Other days, we either sent the maid to the town market, or I rode the baht-bus to purchase sacks of crab and kilos of large shrimp for nominal sums. After the maid prepared the seafood, I gorged on so much food that flatulence prevailed throughout my gastro-intestinal system, and my stomach began bothering me. I was unsure if the gastric distress resulted from physiological or psychological problems derived from lingering SAR memories. The beach period afforded a great lifestyle, one I left with considerable regret.

However, we had a more important life-long mission planned during this trip: marriage. We had previously contemplated wedlock and considered the time auspicious. The joining of East and West would not be unique in the Air America community. Abadie, Knight, Burke, Jordan, and a few Flight Mechanics had married Thai ladies. In my case, I was slightly over thirty, and more than ready to settle down and start a family.

Along with an older female relative by marriage, who professed to know the shop owner of a local jewelry shop, we spent time searching for a wedding ring. After going in the back room, the proprietor returned with a nice looking one carat diamond ring set in white gold at what might have been considered a reasonable price. From experience in the Okinawa

post exchange, I had learned a little about diamonds. Viewed under a ten-power magnifying glass, I discovered a slight carbon flaw. However, Tuie favored the diamond, and the internal defect failed to diminish the stone's beauty when viewed with the naked eye. The owner was a nice individual, but would not accept a check written on a States-side bank. I wanted to purchase it that day, but lacked sufficient cash. Further complicating the transaction, we were miles from the Air America office, which would soon be closed for the day. Therefore, it was much too late to have a check countersigned by Finance Manager Jim Walker, to satisfy the money changer's requirement.

While in Bangkok most Air America employees usually gravitated to the Suriwongse Road area, staying at the Suriwongse or Plaza Hotels (later this included the more expensive Montien). There were logical reasons for this, reflecting both business and pleasure. The location was tucked well away from the normal tourist areas that we so despised, and the Patpong Road area was conveniently within walking distance. Both the Air America office and Civil Air Transport ticketing agency were located on Patpong Road, close to Suriwongse Road. In addition, the money changer was available almost directly across the street from the Company office to accommodate stateside check cashing. Also, the Bangkok Christian Hospital, where we had our health plans, was located on the far corner adjacent to Silom Road. Appealing to most employees, there were many sources of entertainment, watering holes, and dining establishments situated on the long block.

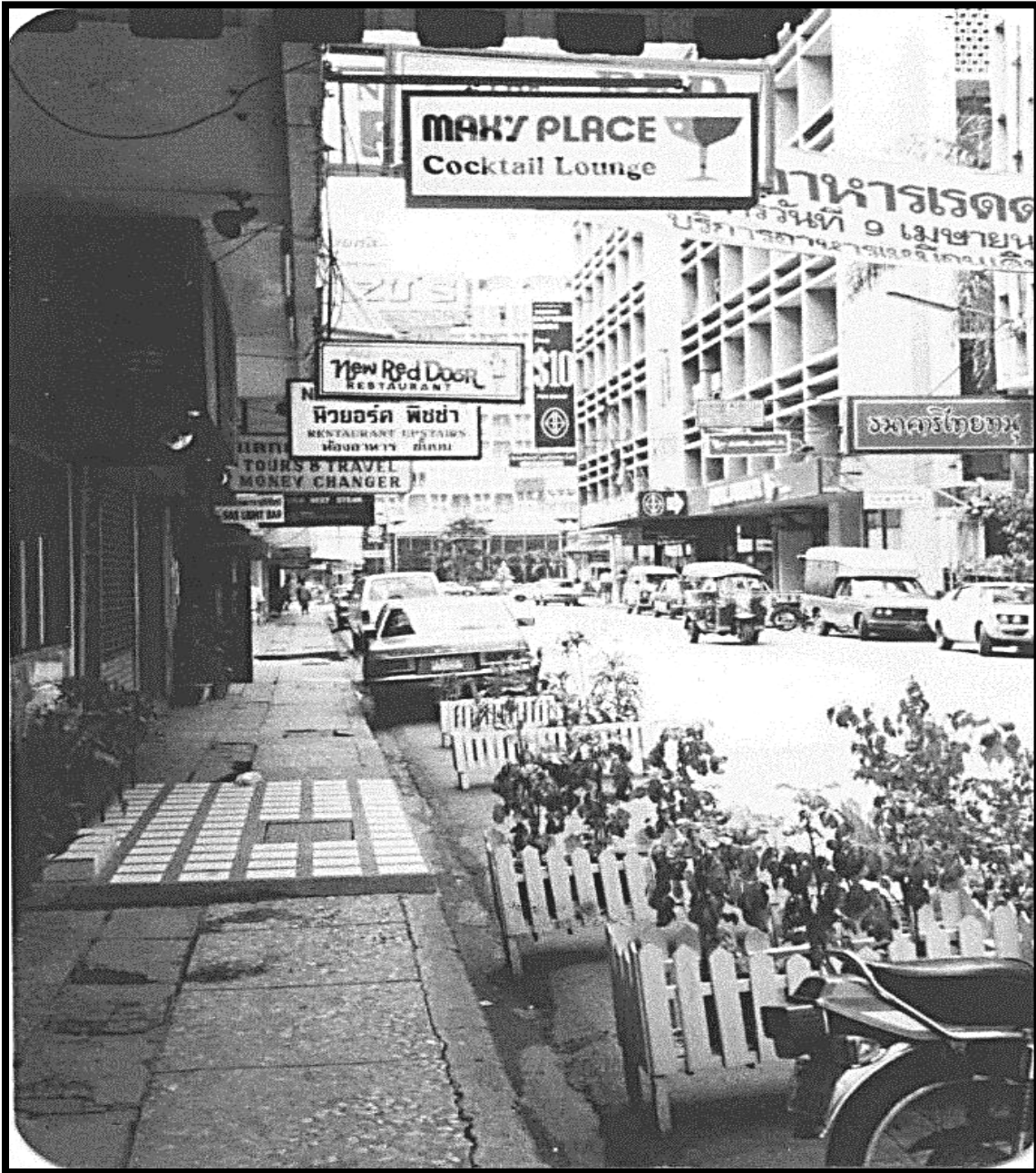
One of the favorite places Air America pilots and crewmen enjoyed gathering for bonding, rumor, conversation, sucking the suds, and women was Max's Bar, located on the south side of Patpong Road. Activities occurred in no special sequence. Since

few "civilians" understood or could tolerate extended aviation talk or the pilot psyche, and certainly not comprehend what transpired in Laos, it provided a relatively cloistered place to unwind among friends.

The establishment was started by the friendly, mustachioed Max and fixed wing pilot Ed Eckholdt in the early days.⁴⁵ In addition to drinks, ladies were available for small talk or carnal pleasure. The Keynote Restaurant, a place that provided decent steaks and live entertainment was almost directly across the street. A Thai lady owned The Red Door, a small bar close to Max's, where men could quietly drink a beer without being hustled by a working girl. Like most Thai shop-house owners, she lived above her bar. One evening while preparing to close, she prepared herself a bowl of noodles. Salivating over the enticing odor, a lingering patron inquired as to what the bowl contained. Rather than explain the contents, she served him a bowl. He considered the noodle soup so delicious that he persuaded her to begin selling the tasty food to the public. There were only a couple of tables in the establishment, but when the word circulated regarding the scrumptious noodles, the place became popular. By the early sixties, the Red Door evolved into a highly successful noodle shop. Patrons unwilling to leave their bar stool at Max's for fear of losing their pecking order location, often had noodles delivered late at night from the Red Door.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Max's facial appearance was not predominately Thai, but displayed something more of a mixed heritage.

⁴⁶ Ed Eckholdt Story of Max's Bar.
Mike Jarina, Interview-Red Door.



A portion of Patpong Road in Bangkok showing Max's, the Red Door, and the money changer that Air America personnel used to convert American dollars to Thai baht. The Montien Hotel is located at the end of the block across Suriwongse road.

LaDue Collection.

As suspected, I found Charlie Weitz sitting on his favorite stool in Max's. "Good time Charlie" was a very generous person, sometimes to the point of absurdity, when partying. Therefore, I knew he normally carried large sums of dollars and baht to pay for his and his sycophants' excesses. After explaining my problem obtaining money, without the slightest hesitation, he lent me 300 dollars saying to pay him back when able. Considering the funds a bridge loan, I indicated that I would repay him the following day.

I purchased the ring, and during an uncomplicated civil procedure, we married at Thonburi City Hall on 28 October. Afterward we went to Tuie's relative's house to celebrate and enjoy food and drink. ⁴⁷

GROSS DECEIT

Upon return to Udorn, we discovered that all the large banana trees that provided afternoon shade to our screened living room were gone. They had been cut down to allow construction of a dusty, red-laterite road alongside the house. Marius, with the help of his father was in the process of building an American style concrete house at the far end of the compound. For better overall access to the new house, he had requested the existing road be relocated from the west side of the Godnoma house to its present location. We had previously discussed this change, and as I was totally against the move, I thought we had come to an accommodation to continue to use the

⁴⁷ Years later we renewed our vows at the Metairie, Louisiana, house attended by my mother and relatives. Even though our first civil marriage was official, and accepted by the U.S State Department, someone in the family was heard to say, "Thank God they are now legal."

old road. Before leaving on STO, I also discussed the proposed road project with the landlady, who agreed not to move ahead with the change. I should have known better.

I liked Longmoun's husband enormously, but the man was a complete weakling in domestic affairs. Furthermore, he was frequently away from home at the Ubon military school preparing for promotion to major in the RTA. Therefore, he deferred to his more aggressive wife in all matters of business, which she often conducted without consulting him. In addition, she was not altogether faithful. In his absence, she was rumored to have cohabited with a young Filipino mechanic, who had rented a spare bedroom in the house. Among compound wives, she was known to refer to the man as the "Coke Bottle."

When I complained bitterly about the new road and the loss of my treasured shade trees, the landlady offered to replace them. Of course, she never did. I was very upset over the behind-the-back chicanery, especially while we were out of town. In my mind, it constituted the lowest form of deceit. However, the deed was accomplished, and the bottom line was that I had no recourse other than moving out of the compound. Perhaps that is exactly what the woman wanted: us to leave so she could increase the rent. While contemplating the situation during the cold light of day, I decided that I was not yet prepared to seek new housing. Mainly, I was not one to run off during a fight. Furthermore, I was not sure how much longer I would remain with Air America. The thirty-five dollars per month rent was still very appealing, more so since the influx of new Air America and USAF personnel had substantially driven up rents. Current inflation was a typical example of too many people with too much money chasing too few products. A case in point was my wife's proclivity to pay a Samlor driver five baht for a ride that

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previously cost me two to three baht. Not a former resident of Udorn, she was not aware of the standard fare, and merely paid what the driver asked. When I discovered this, I attempted to explain the inflationary effects of overpaying for a service, and implored her to use discretion when conducting business in the local market place. Then I heard that some USAF personnel were paying the drivers twenty baht for a ride. Once again, Americans had managed to ruin the economy for those of us who were longtime residents.

It appeared that I had been consciously or unconsciously stiffed by Marius, and grossly lied to by the wily Godnoma. This was not wholly unexpected from her sort; she was the typical greedy landlady who would cheat, lie, steal, or do anything possible to achieve her goals. Not at all consistent in mood and demeanor, sometimes she attempted to be nice to us, other times she teetered on what I would call borderline insanity. Disgusted, I did not believe anyone could really understand the Thai psyche, even themselves. I felt different about Marius. From his arrival in Udorn we had been friends, and I believed that friends did not do such things to each other. Of course, he now had a family to consider and support. There had previously been some animosity between his wife and Tuie over some seemingly trivial item--minor things that males would never understand or concern themselves. Perhaps the hostility had something to do with the fact that she was Vietnamese and, like the Chinese population, a non-homogenous type in a country where the Thai considered everyone but themselves an underclass. People were reluctant to admit that a class status existed in Thailand, but it was definitely present. For example, only a person possessing a Thai name could attend prestigious universities or hold civil service jobs. Shops and many

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businesses were owned or run by Chinese and Vietnamese people. However, upward social mobility and assimilation into the culture was achieved by marrying a Thai or bribing the "right" officials to effect a name change. This was relatively easy for Chinese, but not for Vietnamese at the time.

Another factor causing antagonism could have been associated with assumed pecking order rights among wives. Marius was the assistant chief pilot (ACPH), and Tuie failed to show her the proper respect that she believed herself entitled as the wife of a manager. Whatever problems existed between the two women, it seriously strained our former relationship. Consequently, to continue the march and conduct good working relations, for years we men overlooked the females' problems, but we rarely associated socially again.

The fun was not over in the Godnoma compound, and individuals increasingly lined up in divide and conquer tactics. Stevens had bought a new Volkswagen station wagon. The green vehicle was his pride and joy. Under normal circumstances this would have been fine except for one fact: our bungalow was now bracketed on two sides. Soi Mahamit on one side, the new road on the other, and both were increasingly incurring more vehicular traffic. When Steve turned right into the compound during the dry season, his tires churned up dust clouds that filtered through the screens and covered everything in our house. I pointed this out to him and requested that he drive slowly to his house. My entreaty failed to achieve results, so I began sprinkling water on the road during peak traffic periods. This method helped somewhat, but intense heat dried the water so quickly, and required constant watering that I soon tired of the chore. Finally, I obtained waste engine oil at the field from Abe Rivero, and spread the viscous substance on both roads. It

took some time to obtain a sufficient amount to cover all the affected areas. The process actually worked in bonding and reducing the dust, but the practice did not make me popular with Stevens, who disliked oil splashing on his tires and new automobile.

On Halloween, I posted a letter home by Army post office mail restating my intention to leave Thailand on annual home leave on 10 December. I related the latest information regarding the Kuala Lumpur project Coble had sent us in the form of an upbeat article in *Jacks*, a regional trade journal. The publicity was free and delineated Concrete Masonry's growth and prospects. Coble also listed a formidable number of block orders from various businesses. To demonstrate the attributes of the product, a model home was built in the front portion of the property and Jim reviewed twenty inquiries a day regarding the business.

On the first, Ambassador Sullivan forwarded a memorandum to State commenting on accumulated and most recent evidence relating to a fundamental Soviet modification in Southeast Asia policy. Sullivan considered the change unusual:

*"In respect to Laos, the situation can explain the line the Soviets have taken on such issues as finances, ICC, article 19 referencing continuation of the ICC, and general educational and cultural role. At the same time it explains the certain interest in Lao Journalists in the Soviet Union, augmentation of cultural and political staff in the Soviet Embassy, and conspicuous support of Souvanna Phouma. [The policy] also explains the willingness to accept a great deal of action which results in a great deal of punishment to the Vietminh and Pathet Lao without a whiff of protest directed toward Souvanna Phouma and his government. In analyzing what all this means for Laos alone, we can conclude the Soviets reversed Khrushchev's previous policy of cut and run. That they intend to stay extremely loose in their operations here and thereby avoid prior commitments."*¹

PAKSE

Crewing Hotel-30, Mike Jarina and Joe Gaculais spent a week working out of Pakse. Many hours were devoted to parachute training jumps over Site-165's large camp at Ban Nam Tieng, located on the eastern Bolovens Plateau. As previously assigned at Site-172, he shuttled parachutes from Pakse, jumped the

¹William Sullivan to State, 11/01/65.

troops, and ferried their expended chutes back to Lima-11 for inspection and repacking. Planning for minimum air exposure over hostile territory to conduct intelligence and harassing trail work, the handlers had the airborne troops jump from 500 to 1,000 feet. One individual took exception to the low altitude leap from the H-34, so the jumpmaster pushed the terrified soldier out. On the way out the cabin door, thinking he was going to die, the man frantically reached for, grasped, and clung to the right main gear strut. While Mike circled the drop zone, the sergeant struggled to pry the man's hands loose. After this was accomplished, the guy grabbed another trooper's legs with a death grip. It required five orbits before the man became airborne.

Following two days supporting parachute jumps, Mike attended the graduation ceremony in which the troops received parachute wings.

On the morning of the fifth, Jarina spent time servicing listening and road watch outposts in the Saravane area. These missions took him to Ban Padou (later LS-419), thirteen miles north of Site-44; Ban Don Boun, LS-64, nineteen miles northwest near Route-23 in the Toumlan Valley; and other Hardnose sites in the area. ²

THE TRAIL

As a 5 November Sullivan telegram to General Westmoreland attested, the forward listening posts in the Panhandle area proved increasingly valuable as intelligence gathering entities in assessing enemy capability in the region. Sullivan agreed that hard evidence suggested the Vietnamese were increasing

² Mike Jarina Interviews.

their infiltration into South Vietnam through the Lao Panhandle. He concurred with the necessity of interdicting seven main logistic routes, and recommended that after proper liaison with interested parties, there should be an increased program of attacks instituted on the infiltration routes.

Hoping to implement this interdiction, and reverse previous air restrictions issued by the RLAF after a September short round incident, the ambassador and AIRA Colonel Pettigrew met with General Ma to discuss Panhandle operations and interdiction. The talks included armed night reconnaissance, sharing daytime reconnaissance, sharing low-level eyeball recce, and FAC functions with the RLAF in O-1 single engine Bird Dog planes. Ma stated that he would welcome ten O-1s for his air force, and the capability to employ Bango mission aircraft when warranted. On 20 November, MACV ordered the transfer of five Bird Dog observation planes to Det-6 in Udorn. Air Commandos would train Lao pilots to fly visual reconnaissance (VR) and function as forward air controllers (FAC). After achieving proficiency, General Ma's people would be allotted several O-1E planes.

Ma's aviators conducted forty-five T-28 sorties from Paksane against Route-92 on the sixth. After action bomb damage assessment (BDA) estimated 200 killed in action (KIA). Citing increased efficiency and double the normal sortie number, he expressed a desire to locate his operational T-28 and staging base closer to the trail complex at the Saravane airfield. However, this would require additional improvements to the airfield other than the work in progress. The embassy people assured Ma that PACAF would assist in enlarging the airfield.

The general offered assistance with air infiltration of native agents into territory along Route-92, but he required

additional supplies and communication support. Sullivan offered to work with the Agency regarding this aspect of the renewed Panhandle operations. ³

ATTOPEU

Late Friday, Jarina crossed the Plateau and loaded paratroopers at the Site-165 strip to conduct a minor raid or patrol, calculated to test the new graduates' mettle. He flew to a predetermined area four miles east of Attopeu on the Se Kaman (river) and prepared for a drop. The exercise was wasted, for in typical fashion, not one man would jump. Therefore, as partial punishment for noncompliance, the jumpmaster had Mike offload them at Attopeu.

The next morning dawned clear and bright. Jarina headed out of Pakse to Attopeu with a Lao colonel wanting to talk to the troops Mike had offloaded there. Despite being secure the previous evening, he was aware that the isolated site was always at risk. Unwritten accommodations garrison commanders made with area Pathet Lao leaders guaranteed de facto concessions; in turn, the enemy normally left the garrison alone. Therefore, under a tacit agreement FAR periodically abandoned a position, allowed the enemy to take whatever they wanted, and then requested additional supplies from the FAR-U.S. logistic system. For the sake of retaining some government influence in the region, at the cost of only a few supplies, the Vientiane General Staff tolerated the shenanigans.

³William Sullivan Telegram to General Westmoreland, 11/08/65. Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 93-95.

Flying between 3,000 and 4,000 feet AGL for most of the trip, Jarina considered descending to a lower altitude while approaching Lima-10. It was such a beautiful day that he elected to remain at altitude and enjoy the scenery. Once overhead the strip, he began a rapid descent. Then he noticed occupied foxholes and people in a small fort near the strip which was usually abandoned. This was highly unusual. Further stoking his curiosity and suspicion, not one man looked up. All were keeping their heads down. Therefore, while maintaining altitude, he made a high-speed pass over the village of Moug May, located just west of the strip at the junction of the Se Kong and Se Kaman. Disconcertingly, there was no normal activity--no villagers, kids, chickens, or pigs running around.

He returned to the strip area where a permanent signal he considered worthless was painted on rocks. At the same time, a man wearing a dark green uniform walked onto the field and gestured at the signal. Surprised, Mike had never seen anyone do that before. Mike called Joe and requested him to have the FAR colonel look at the people in the holes and assess the situation. Before long, he advised Mike not to land.

After returning to Pakse, the colonel informed Mike that sometimes the enemy entered the area, took what they wanted, and left. He indicated that he would check with his intelligence office for information regarding the latest situation in the Attopeu area, and they would probably return there the next day.

On Saturday, Jarina conducted several trips out of Saravane, landing at PS-21 on the high mountain of Phou Ka Te eight miles northeast. Like Phu Pha Thi in upper Military Region Two, representing the most elevated mountain in the area, and the site was used as a radio intercept location to monitor enemy

transmissions throughout the region. After working most of a fuel load, he returned to L-11.

The FAR colonel from the previous day was waiting. After refueling they launched up the Plateau Road for LS-165. There they embarked combat-loaded troops and headed southwest at altitude for Attopeu. When Mike began descending to observe what would occur, a parade of people filed out of the village and lined up on the road in perfect formation alongside the strip.⁴ This was suspicious. From experience, he knew that bona fide villagers usually gathered in mob fashion on the airfield where he would land, preparing to rush the helicopter. These people wore normal black peasant clothes, but their military precision, discipline, and bearing tended to give them away. Not fooled, Mike relayed below, *"They don't have it right yet."*

The colonel agreed and cautioned, *"Do not land."*

At this time, they observed a smoke signal on Hill-502 three miles northeast. After investigating and determining villagers located there, Mike first deposited his load of troops seven miles south of Attopeu and then returned to the hill. Then he landed, retrieved a few people for interrogation, and returned to Pakse.

After another day at Saravane servicing LS-134, Phou Ka Te, Ban Padou, and the FAR radio relay site at Phou Batiene-Radio Hill outside Pakse, Mike and Joe prepared Hotel-30 to leave for Udorn. Before launching, Mike inquired if Joe would like to ride in the left seat. After establishing a cruise altitude and trimming the aircraft, Jarina asked if Joe would like to fly. The Flight Mechanic refused. Mike said, *"Flying is easy Joe, all*

⁴ At the junction of Routes 16 and 18, located northwest of the airstrip.

you have to do is lean one way or the other to make the helicopter turn. Then you straighten up and the ship returns to neutral. If you lean this way you can turn." Unaware that Mike had engaged the ASE and used the yaw trim to turn the aircraft, Joe was intrigued at the demonstration. Having fun, Jarina confessed to Gaculais what he had been doing so that he would not appear naive while talking to his friends.

After landing at the Udorn facility, a concerned Jarina cited the Attopeu incident as a prime example of current information not being relayed to FIC until a pilot returned to base. Usually when such an account was passed, rather than disseminating the information to interested pilots, the intelligence was not considered timely and merely recorded as part of history.

In general, FIC briefings received in Udorn were largely dated by the time a pilot arrived upcountry. On site Customer briefs were often not any more current. Without adequate briefing, the air operations representative normally said, *"Take these troops and deposit them over there."* This behavior displayed the Customer reluctance to inform us much about a situation. Therefore, as in the past, the Club bar continued to constitute the best location in obtaining current upcountry information and firsthand knowledge from returning pilots regarding an area or situation. ⁵

After withdrawing a hundred dollars from the Siam City Bank for rent and everyday expenses, I was scheduled to fly Hotel-22 on a day mission Wednesday 3 November. Aware that November would most likely be my last one flying that year, I programmed myself

⁵Mike Jarina Interviews.

to accept whatever scheduling had in store for me. The day was not too productive, for only half the flight time was logged as project.⁶

MR-2

On the fifth, I was assigned to crew with "Big" Ed Rudolfs (DOH 11/13/65), a recently hired former Marine pilot. It appeared that the pipeline was still open for experienced H-34 pilots, and new people continued to flood our program. I wondered when it would stop. The only difference in conducting upcountry First Officer training was a new requirement for the PIC to complete an evaluation form issued by Operations at the end of a RON period. I could only surmise that Dick Lieberth's untimely death had stimulated a management requirement for documentation and a closer look at newbie progress. In a recent memorandum, AMF/UTH Marius Burke indicated that there was considerable pressure for more formalized evaluation of Senior First Officers during training, particularly after flying upcountry. In a sarcastic dig at those who were not proficient in writing, he said, *"Every effort has been made to keep this report as simple as possible with a minimum of writing required for those who have difficulty with same."* The form was tailored to follow SFOs' progress and ascertain scheduling requirements

⁶ A name appeared at the bottom of the sheet stating that it was prepared by, checked by, and certified by the person in charge. Joseph Chen assumed K.K.'s task and into 1966 detail that normally appeared for logged legs and landing points was combined to reflect only gross information. For this reason, information regarding specific landing sites is no longer available to the Author, and I have had to rely on skimpy notations in my rough logs, and memory. Although I logged pilot crewmembers, I generally did not record Flight Mechanic names.

or suitability of pilots for upgrading. The forms would be provided by Operations upon return from upcountry.

Another form to fill out was generally not welcomed by Captains, particularly at the end of a RON, when one was fatigued and anxious to head for the Club dining room, the bar, or to go home. However, with so many new pilots entering the system, many not proficient in the H-34, the form, if honest, and instead of a verbal statement, provided a hard copy medium for management to track a man's performance and progress. I, for one, did not like to judge another person. Instead, I always considered that I had a full-time job taking care of myself. For this reason, I had little inclination to become an instructor pilot

Hotel-33 failed to meet the criteria for upcountry work, so we were reassigned Hotel Foxtrot, the final line helicopter still in the inventory from the 1961 Temporary crewmember period. Overhauled and often rebuilt, the ship seemed to possess a charmed life to survive all those difficult years.

We did not arrive at Sam Tong very early, but managed to achieve a reasonable day's work before retiring to the hostel for the evening. ⁷

USAF SAR CAPABILITY

As there was a pressing requirement for a long-range military helicopter able to fly into all parts of North Vietnam, USAF SAR assets and rescue capability continued to improve and evolve. On 3 November, the first two HH-3E Jolly Green Giants were rushed by air transport to Bien Hoa, South Vietnam. The new

⁷ Memorandum AMF/UDN (RW), SFO Evaluation Forms, 11/04/65.

model constituted an updated, modified version of the CH-3 helicopter. Far superior to the CH-3, specifications included two 1250 shaft horsepower (SHP) turbine engines, a top speed of 164 miles per hour (mph), maximum ceiling of 12,000 feet, 1000 pounds of half inch titanium armor, a shatterproof acrylic glass canopy, self-sealing fuel tanks, and a 240-foot hoist cable with a jungle penetrator. Equipped with external fuel tanks, the helicopter's range was extended to 640 miles at 10,000 feet and a hundred mph.

These ships were crewed by Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service (ARRS) para rescue specialists (called PJs). Culled from the finest Air Force personnel--medics, paratroopers, frogman, and rangers--they were prepared for any eventuality regarding downed U.S. military aviators.

After completing assembly, testing, and crew coordination exercises in South Vietnam, the upgraded ships arrived in Udorn on 10 November. At year's end, six HH-3E aircraft operated from Udorn with Detachment-5 of the 38th Air Rescue Squadron. Despite introduction of the improved ships and well-trained crews, losses to enemy defenses rose faster than the growth of aircrew recovery capability. Usually escorted by four A-1 Skyraiders, during the following year the Air Force helicopters participated in a majority of rescue missions in the DVR. Constituting an enormous improvement over previous SAR assets, USAF leaders pursued a ship with even more superior mission endurance, and calculated to loiter while fixed wing aircraft suppressed enemy gunfire and neutralized a zone. This aircraft evolved as the CH-53 Super Jolly Green, and was introduced to the combat theater in 1967.

The introduction of new and improved rescue helicopters proved too late to prevent the loss of a CH-3 and crew during a

Rolling Thunder SAR mission in North Vietnam. Late on the fifth, an F-105, call sign Oak 01, was returning from a mission near Hanoi when the pilot flew into a cloud layer and disappeared. No SAR operation was mounted until the following morning.

At dawn, U.S. Navy A-1 pilots, Sandy 11 and 12, flew to the area where the plane was last seen to scout for a survivor. While trolling, AAA fire downed Sandy 12. Sandy 11 orbited and searched, eventually sighting his wingman near "Thud Ridge", a 5,000-foot limestone karst promontory in hills stretching for twenty-five miles northwest of Phuc Yen, Hanoi. ⁸

Of late, two CH-3C Jolly Greens and crews had been spending the night at Na Khang. Despite Geneva Protocol violation and a slight possibility of media exposure, the U.S. Embassy finally sanctioned Site-36 overnights. The decision eliminated the long ferry flight from Thailand, weather delays, and provided a closer launch site for improved Rolling Thunder SAR response.

ORDEAL IN UPPER NAM

Late on the fifth, helicopter crews were alerted over their discrete radio frequency to a potential launch into North Vietnam the following day. This was predicated on a positive sighting of the F-105 pilot.

Jolly crews were up at 0500 hours preparing the usual breakfast of tinned ham, powdered eggs and hot water for instant coffee. Then, a Mayday-Mayday call screeched over the UHF radio net. The sanitized crewmembers, wearing civilian clothes similar

⁸ Thud Ridge: Thud was a nickname used for the F-105. The prominent ridge was used as a low altitude penetration shield from North Vietnamese radar and also as an orientation landmark by pilots and photo interpreters for targeting.

to Air America personnel, and without identification except for a Geneva Convention card, scrambled to the helicopters and donned flack vests, survival vests, parachutes, and ballistic helmets.

Painted dark green with no military insignia, with minimum armor plating, and a fiberglass fuel tank strapped to the deck inside the cargo area, the rescue ships had already been utilized for a few months. A principal in the incident, CH-3C 63-09685, call sign Jolly Green-85, contained four crewmembers: the two pilots were PIC Captain Warren E. Lilly and Copilot, First Lieutenant Jerry Singleton; Flight Engineer and PJ, Sergeant Berkley E. Naugle; and para rescue expert, Staff Sergeant Arthur Cormier.⁹

Both CH-3 helicopter pilots launched for the target, an area where no U.S. military helicopter had previously ventured. Shortly after liftoff, the second Jolly reported engine problems, after which the PIC stated that he could not continue at altitude on a single engine. Normally such a problem would have terminated the mission, for USAF SAR SOPs specified a requirement for two helicopters, one to provide backup and cover for the other. However, pressure was intense to continue the mission, for a Sandy pilot had already relayed that he had his wingman in sight on the ground. Any abort would have fostered hours of delay waiting for other helicopters to arrive from South Vietnam or Thailand. Despite word relayed from Crown that the Saigon rescue center discouraged continuing alone because of

⁹ The following is BE Naugle's account of the SAR and his first and last mission into North Vietnam.

a heavy concentration of AAA batteries and ground fire reported in the area, Captain Lilly elected to proceed.

Jolly-85 was joined by two A-1E escorts from Udorn. One Skyraider pilot went ahead to look for the survivor and assess the hostile threat. He soon discovered that the enemy meant business. The aircraft was flamed and the pilot bailed.

The SAR unit had been following vectors to the target area radioed from a Navy radar ship in the Tonkin Gulf. However, the ship was slightly off course, placing the CH-3 crew further north of where they should have been, thirty-five miles southwest of Hanoi. Nearing the alleged area of the Sandy 12 pilot, Lilly began a descent. Naugle attached his "Gunner's Belt" safety harness, so that in the event he was wounded he would not drop out the open door.

While passing through 7,000 feet (only 3,000 feet AGL), machinegun fire and flak enveloped the large helicopter. From below, tracer bullets and armor piercing shells ripped through the decking into the engines. Next, fuel and oil leaking into the cabin section caught fire. After climbing to a more reasonable bail-out altitude, Captain Lilly activated the autopilot and announced over ICS for everyone to abandon the ship. Never having jumped from an aircraft, Naugle hesitated momentarily at the door, while observing other parachutes floating below through puffy clouds toward what looked like enemy entrenchments.

Suddenly the internal fuel tank exploded. Naugle, sprayed with burning kerosene, was blown out the door. Restricted by the attached "Gunner's Belt," the seemingly hapless crewmember dangled momentarily under the helicopter while gravity induced a rapid plunge toward the ground. Aware that he only had microseconds to act before the end, he frantically searched for

the quick release mechanism. Finding it buried deep under the survival and flack vests, he managed to detach himself and activate the parachute. Observing two canopies settling into cloud banks, he realized that his minor delay in departing the helicopter had separated and carried him farther away from the other crewmembers, the populated area, and enemy forces. He did not know it at the time, but this unusual occurrence and his urge for survival saved him from an unpleasant fate.

He landed in ten-foot-high saw grass only 300 feet from the burning CH-3. A cluster of rice paddies lay adjacent to a sizeable village. On a paved road running along the ville, regular army soldiers were already disembarking from five troop carriers. Jungle lay on the far side of the paddies leading to large forested hills. With adrenalin surging through his system, he charged at high port through grass and brush toward the jungle. Panting, except for a shirt, pants, boots, and survival vest, he tore off everything considered unnecessary. The enemy must have observed his progress, for they began shooting and running in his direction. Redoubling his effort, drawing on reserves involving superhuman energy, Naugle outdistanced his adversaries, but he could still hear men shouting and hacking at the undergrowth.

Eventually reaching the base of a 1,500-foot hill, he elected to scale the steep slope to enhance his escape, evasion, and rescue chances. However, after reaching the hill's apex, he realized that he was cornered. A sheer cliff on the other side precluded any viable escape route. Exhausted, and fearful that he was going to be momentarily captured or killed, he furtively slipped into a tiny crevice between two large rocks. Finally, with a moment to take stock in his situation, he assessed his injuries and took inventory of his meager assets. He realized

that so far, he had been very fortunate to survive the ordeal. Youth and his enormous strength probably saved him. His right leg ached and was stiffening. In addition to minor grass cuts, he had incurred annoying flash burns to his arms, to the right side of his face, and to skin area not protected by his short sleeve shirt and helmet. In addition, a muscular sphincter had failed, causing him to urinate in his pants. He discovered that the survival kit contained no water, food, or medical supplies. In addition, his sheath knife was missing, but he still had a revolver. A URC-4 radio transceiver was secure in a pocket of his survival vest. Cigarettes and a Zippo lighter rounded out a list of the few articles available to him.

In the air above him, he observed planes receiving heavy ground fire. Then it appeared that another Skyraider was shot down. He could still hear the enemy shouting below, and suspected that they might be using him as bait to lure additional rescue aircraft. Finally, all planes departed the area.

The sun began setting and as the air turned colder, he dozed fitfully. Awakened by a distant siren, he sighted two Navy jets flying toward the coast and frantically began calling on his survival radio. One aircraft answered and asked for his recognition code words.¹⁰ After authentication, he was advised that help was on the way. Since it would soon be dark, he did not expect any rescue attempt until morning, for he knew that flights in North Vietnam were not authorized after dark.

¹⁰Recognition codes: These were recorded at the parent squadron and amounted to easily recalled words like a mother's name. We also participated in this identification process in the event one of us went down in enemy territory. My ID was my Mother's given name: Marietta.

Augmenting the Air Force SAR effort following the CH-3 downing, a Navy Sikorsky SH-3 launched from the USS *Independence* carrier deck. Sandy 13 and 14 rendezvoused with the Sea Knight, Nimble 62, and escorted the crew toward the target area. Sandy 14 was hit by 37 mm fire and disappeared into clouds. After a search revealed no sign of the pilot or airplane, and approaching bingo fuel state, the SH-3 returned to the ship and the Sandy pilot wheeled south toward the Udorn RTAFB.

With refueling complete, escorted by Navy A-1 pilots, Nimble 62 and another helicopter returned to the last known sighting of Sandy 14. After they had searched for an hour without receiving contact or a sighting, they moved on toward the wreckage of Jolly Green 85.

Night arrived. Since he had lost his watch during bailout, Naugle was unaware of the exact time. He dozed again until hearing a sound of distant helicopters. Previously leaving his signal beacon on 243.0 kilocycle emergency frequency, he switched to the transmit-receive (T/R) mode and established contact with a Sea King. The Navy pilot indicated that they were currently homing on his position, and fighter support was on the way to create a diversion. Then the lead helicopter pilot descended to tree top level and moved toward the target, but he was unable to establish a visual sighting in the pitch-black dark. Approaching low fuel state, the designated rescue helicopter pilot requested an immediate signal. Naugle activated the only signaling device available to him: A Zippo lighter. The Sea Knight's copilot spotted the tiny flicker. After establishing a steady hover over Naugle, a jungle penetrator was lowered. Naugle was hoisted onboard without incident, but stumbled and nearly fell through an opening in the cabin floor where sonar equipment had been located.

The USS *Independence* was steaming away from its original station so, lacking enough fuel to arrive safely on the deck, Nimble-62's PIC requested fuel from a nearby destroyer cruising close to the coastline. Establishing a steady hover over the ship, the hose was hoisted into the cabin. Taking on sufficient fuel, the SH-3 recovered on the carrier. Naugle's burns and contusions were treated in sick bay, and he was debriefed for hours. While on shipboard, military police constantly escorted him and discouraged contact with any persons without a need to know. Later he was allowed to eat, and then flown by a S2F crew to Tan Son Nhut for additional debriefings. The following day, he was ferried to Udorn on a C-130. After a couple of days of R&R, he was reassigned to a new flight crew for the remainder of his tour.

Except for the incident's unpleasant memory, the excitement was over for Naugle, but the SAR was not. The drama continued to unfold on 7 November, as Nimble 62 and Sandy escorts again launched toward Jolly 85. Because of numerous MiG alerts, and to avoid radar, the armada flew into North Vietnam just above the waves and at treetop level. Before reaching the target area, the SH-3 was badly damaged by ground fire, which rendered further flight untenable. While A-1 pilots attacked and engaged enemy forces converging on the Sea Knight's crew, another SH-3 departed the *Independence* and a CH-3 departed Na Khang in Laos. During the process of rescuing the crew, two Skyraiders were also heavily damaged, and were obliged to land gear-up at Da Nang.

Because so many military crewmembers were already down and missing in enemy territory, despite continuing losses, SAR agencies throughout the Theater sanctioned the launch of additional rescue units into North Vietnam. A late afternoon

beeper signal further encouraged commanders to anticipate and plan for yet another day of SAR work. Consequently, A-1, CH-3, SH-3, F-100, and F-8U mechanics readied their various ships for an early morning launch.

The next day, while attempting to determine the exact location of the still-broadcasting emergency beeper signal, two more A-1s were whacked by concentrated enemy fire. They managed to recover at Udorn. However, that action finally terminated further SAR efforts. Senior controllers in all offices collectively agreed that the rule of diminishing returns had been reached, even exceeded. Enough aircraft and crews had been lost, and further SAR efforts were not warranted.

Of all the military crewmembers downed during the three-day ordeal, Naugle was the only individual rescued.¹¹

An epilogue to the story: sometime later, Sergeant Naugle knocked on my bungalow door and briefly related a portion of his part in the ill-fated SAR mission. Pale and significantly slimmer than I recalled him, he indicated that he was returning home soon and wanted to know if I had managed to obtain the Meo artifact promised him. I had not seen him since our upcountry talk in early October. I had not forgotten our agreement regarding the procurement of a flintlock rifle, but since my time on the flight schedule was restricted, and I worked mostly in other areas than Military Region Two, I had not been able to inquire or negotiate any deal for such an artifact. Regretful concerning my part of the bargain, and briefly considering

¹¹ Berkley Naugle's Story.
Earl Tilford, 71-73, 74.
John Bowman, *Almanac*, 420.
William Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars: World War Two, Korea, Vietnam*, 1978, 143.

returning the survival items to him, I recalled a Meo ax in the closet obtained from Sam Tong. After explaining the upcountry facts of life to Naugle, he accepted the item and departed, seemingly satisfied.

During November SAR work an S-61 pilot from the Fleet engaged in a rescue operation in North Vietnam. Running low on fuel, he attempted to fly to Na Khang. Unable to reach the site, he landed on a ridgeline well east. The Navy crew was recovered and the ship abandoned. A-1E pilots tried to destroy the machine, but failed.

Always requesting multi-engine helicopters for our inventory, we seriously wanted the S-61. Therefore, Wayne and Scratch devoted a lot of effort drawing up a plan for recovering the ship. However, politics intervened and the U.S. military refused Air America to acquire the asset. ¹²

BIG ED

Rudolf and I were assigned work at Na Khang. On the way "around the horn" to avoid Plain of Jars perils, I explained the strategic benefit of the site to provide a quasi-secure forward launching base for Air Force SAR helicopters and crews covering military strikes in North Vietnam. I also interjected my feelings and suspicions that we were still subject to being called into the fray when various rescue control centers deemed it necessary. Ed did not comment after my brief monologue regarding the Na San-Son La adventure, but I suspected he had heard a bastardized version from others.

¹² EW Knight Email, 07/24/00.

When Ed and I arrived at Site-36 with our brown bags containing two ham and cheese sandwiches, one CH-3 was parked in the fuel pit with an engine cowling open. Except for curiosity as to the absence of a normally present second Jolly, we were not initially informed about the drama unfolding to the northeast. During the day, while working locally and in the Pha Thi area, unusual UHF radio traffic caused me to presuppose something large was occurring.

I had not worked the area for a few weeks, but attempted to explain to my cockpit mate the current regional situation as I knew it, and about Hua Mung's recapture. For pertinent information, I had to rely on local loaders and briefings over fox mike from those pilots in range, and ones who I considered knowledgeable. Neither source was particularly reliable in conveying information. Many of the newly elevated Captains were either unaware of the area's history, or had failed to acquire a substantial amount of experience in the region. Because of the pervading language barrier, communicating with locals was generally a lost cause and hardly worth the effort. ¹³ Tony Poe, for years our mentor, was no longer available, and younger Customers like Mike Lynch, preferring to remain perched on the fortified hill, rarely bothered to appear in the loading-fueling areas. Since Tong's death and the initial despondency, I seemed to notice a renewed vigor and interest in reclaiming lost territory. Certainly, the successful Hua Mung operation had a lot to do with this attitude. It appeared that we were established in a very good position not only to hold ground, but to recruit additional partisans. There was even speculation about recapturing Sam Neua town in the near future, after arms

¹³Most of the dialogue revolved around, "*Where the bad guy?*"

were distributed and training completed with people recently joining the government side. But the advent of the dry season portended a return of the dark forces to Sam Neua from the northwestern DVR.

I also stressed to Ed that much of the low-lying territory between Na Khang and Pha Thi was a no man's land. Our units were spread thin on selected mountain tops, so judicious cruise altitudes and strict navigational routes were necessary to ensure crew and machine safety. Within reason, the radar altimeter could be particularly useful in this pursuit. Since it was Ed's initial introduction to the area, I did not expect him to immediately retain all I had told or shown him.

Except for the en route flight phase, during which I pointed out major checkpoints, to acquaint Big Ed with landing zones and mountain techniques, I conducted most of the payload flying in and around Site-85. This included difficult pads in the Phou Den Din area on the eastern semi-circular hills pointing toward Sam Neua. To provide increased security for CH-3 fuel staging and refueling capability, many troops had already been shifted from Ban Den Din pads to reinforce the Houei Ma (LS-107) area at the foot of Pha Thi. Due to elevations, only a few men could be moved at a time, but the shuttles were short. ¹⁴

There were no Air Force helicopters in the parking area when we recovered at Na Khang to refuel and retrieve individuals, who invariably wanted transportation south to visit relatives at Sam Tong, or to procure consumables for resale.

The next day we returned to Site-36. We learned a little more regarding the ongoing SAR near Hanoi. Because of numerous

¹⁴ Ken Conboy, 138 FN 37.

problems and lack of military assets, I fully expected to be called upon to assist. This bothered me. Recalling the traumatic June event and my vow to never return to North Vietnam, I might have been forced to render a difficult personal decision that would have affected my status with Air America and standing with my peers. Fortunately, this did not happen, but the thought bothered me. Instead, we conducted shuttles to Site-85.

Big Ed, an easy going, likeable person, had a little trouble learning the area. I was not sure if he was anxious, conservative, or just plain slow. I could appreciate the latter, for I was somewhat like that. During return trips to Site-36 from Pa Thi, I employed a pair of definitive mountain tops to mark my visual navigation gouge. I had been over this route numerous times and it had always served me well. Although never a hundred percent safe in a constantly changing fluid situation, it was my preferred track to avoid getting lost, potential enemy fire, and to provide maximum forced landing areas.

Over two days, I continued showing and coaching Ed Rudolfs on the exact course I preferred him to fly. However, when I turned the flight controls over to him, he was unable to visualize or follow the same line of sight, the checkpoints clearly provided, and he invariably wandered to the right of my favored flight track. Ed's more southwestern track would have taken us over higher terrain that was unknown to me, questionable as to enemy presence, and never controlled by our forces. Of course, he did not know that. His inability to adhere to my established corridor annoyed me considerably. This aggravation, coupled with the added stress of possibly being called into a SAR into the dreaded DVR, kept me on edge. Nevertheless, I attempted to correct him and said little else.



From altitude, a portion of harsh terrain in Sam Neua Province with which we had to contend. High mountains, ravines, and streambeds supported hearty Meo, Lao Theung, and other ethnic types who practiced slash and burn agriculture, but level forced landing areas were in short supply for the helicopter pilot.

Author Collection.

To fulfill ongoing SAR requirements and a potential Customer escape valve in case of probes or major attack, we spent the night at Na Khang. The place was even filthier than I previously recalled, exacerbated by the mess boys burying garbage in shallow trenches directly behind the crew quarters. (One mess boy had tuberculosis.) Other people simply tossed empty cans and food scraps out rear windows, where they piled up. Then they wondered why the place was infested with vermin. Of course, the human-generated waste drew scavengers—rats--which in turn attracted hungry snakes. Pointing out reasons for rat infestation and complaining to the Customer was fruitless. It was obvious that troop training at the site did not involve proper hygiene. The war took precedence and proper housekeeping was at the low end of the totem pole. ¹⁵

Minimum toilet facilities were available. A slit trench latrine was dug with sticks, and seat packs surrounded it for privacy. Lye was generally in short supply, so the human waste and garbage was sterilized with aviation gasoline. One time an ignorant trooper dropped his pants and lighted a cigarette..

There was a fair share of lack of common sense evidenced by individuals at the site. Sometimes this interrupted restful crew sleep. One night when Mike Jarina shared the accommodations with First Officer Tony Byrne, loud reports rocked the area as the warehouse near the parking lot exploded. With sparks shooting everywhere, a perplexed Customer arrived panting at the crew

¹⁵ Rats: Despite later introduction of dogs and cats the Na Khang rat population tended to increase. This continued unabated until the enemy attacked the base on two separate occasions, each time burning the complex to the ground. Only then did the rats vacate.

quarters. He inquired if Mike was going to move his helicopter. Mike indicated no. The Customer wanted to know why.

Mike logically stated, *"There are a lot of helicopters, but only one me."*

The following morning crews discovered the parked H-34s undamaged. Investigation revealed that the explosion was not enemy sapper related. For some time, the locals had discovered the merits of using POL as an aid to start their cooking fires. Stealing the precious commodity had reached such proportions that guards were assigned to watch the fueling area. However, this step did not totally prevent the practice, especially during the cold season. An old man, attempting to stay warm, had started a fire using the volatile gasoline. Fortunately, incidents such as this were infrequent, for they contributed to a lack of proper rest and led to pilot lethargy in the morning.

Despite later enemy probes of the base, Jarina was never at Na Khang when it was under attack. One time he did observe an explosion in a wet rice paddy that he thought was an incoming round. It was only a trooper fishing with a hand grenade, but one never knew when such an incident might be the real thing.

On another occasion, Mike was conversing with young Mike Lynch regarding operations at Na Khang. After discussing a favorite topic, the rat problem, the subject abruptly turned to crew weapons. Lynch insisted that Air America employees should not carry them onboard the helicopters to suppress enemy fire because we did not know how to properly employ them.

Taking exception to the Customer's statement, Jarina countered, *"I do not know where you obtained your experience or what you previously did before coming to Laos. However, I estimate that ninety percent of the American crews working for Air America have served at least one four-year hitch in the*

military and some have participated in actual combat. These people are probably more adequately prepared than you in conducting themselves during war conditions and living in a jungle." There was no rebuttal from Lynch. ¹⁶

In the morning, I was advised by the Vientiane Operations Manager that the crew of Hotel Foxtrot was to stand down until further notice, and back up military assets participating in the North Vietnam search and rescue operation. Many times previously we had been allowed to conduct a local "working standby." However, on that day we did not have the luxury of such an option. The exercise proved academic, for the weather was not decent enough to launch from Na Khang. When fog and then the low overcast lifted sufficiently to attempt marginal VFR flight, the CH-3 pilots departed. They barely reached the field perimeter when "the powers that be" scrubbed the mission, and further SAR participation for us that day. Because of management's request, I logged a sterile one-hour SAR and managed to eke out about two and a half hours local flight time before proceeding on a one-hour flight to Sam Tong. I was more than happy to be leaving the shot pattern, where I could exercise little control over my destiny. We arrived at Site-20 in time to conduct an aircraft swap with the PIC of Hotel-15. ¹⁷

Since SAR mission operations in Sam Neua Province were considered a high-level priority, and only secondary to Vang Pao and Colonel Phan's area reorganization and re-manning process,

¹⁶ Mike Jarina Interviews.

¹⁷ For health and morale reasons and to spread the risk, the Udorn scheduling office still mercifully only assigned crews to one night at Site-36.

we returned to Na Khang. Under pressure from the Vientiane General Staff, Vang Pao was obligated to relieve and rotate two FAR infantry battalions provided earlier in the year to stiffen upper Military Region Two. In order to partially fill voids created by these displacements, BV-23 would be relocated from hilltop positions along Route-4 south of Xieng Khouang Ville to Hua Moung. Intending to further stiffen defensive positions before the enemy annual dry season offensive began in earnest, the general also drew down ADC units west and southwest of the PDJ to serve several month tours in and around Hua Moung.

Hoping to provide additional strength to the screening defenses around Hua Moung and Na Khang, forward ADC units in three new zones were planned, or were already being utilized for current operations. One included stationing guerrillas north of Sam Neua Town in tribal areas to conduct intelligence gathering and road watch missions in the town vicinity and other strategic locations near the border. A second zone centered in the upper Moung Heim Valley in the hills around the Moung Son site. It was created as a rallying and launch point for intelligence gathering teams moving north toward the border or into the DVR. A team had already conducted one mission toward Son La during October. Finally, in the area immediately southeast of Sam Neua, specially trained Meo guerrilla teams were established and tasked to provide a USAF pilot retrieval capability. ¹⁸

¹⁸ This unit was similar to the action team I had inserted in February to recover pilot remains and collect sensitive items from the crashed jet.

For the rest of the year, ambitious recruiting was envisioned within the province, with training conducted in Thailand and in the Moung Cha valley. ¹⁹

MOUNG SOUI

With so much work pending in all regional quadrants, we were kept quite busy and returned late to Sam Tong. When I called in our daily flight time, Vientiane informed me that our assigned work on the 10th would be for Requirements Office (RO) Moung Soui. ²⁰

I was conflicted as to the scheduled assignment. As a positive feature, a Lima-108 interlude would provide a welcome break from potential SAR duties and hazards associated with working in northern Military Region Two. On the down side, working RO was a task few of us relished for several reasons. I personally was leery of the Neutralist troops who I believed were overly coddled by a U.S. State Department that hoped to keep them out of the communist camp. Unless forced, their attitudes were negative about participating constructively in the war effort. In past years, they had chosen the wrong side to back. Furthermore, Fred Riley and his copilot had been shot down and killed by Neutralist gunners at Xieng Khouang Airport in 1962. On occasion, in past years, I had been shot at by individuals who I believed to be Neutralists. Lately, officers had brandished weapons at some pilots, because a PIC wanted to conduct a mission his way, and not as the officer supervising

¹⁹ Ken Conboy, 131, 138-fn 38, 39.

²⁰ RO: This acronym pertained to the U.S. Army personnel organization imbedded in the U.S. Embassy providing advice, assistance, and logistics to the Neutralist Army at L-108.

the loading specified. After learning this, but not privy to the actual reasons for the confrontations, I reverted to wearing my holstered Ruger, or placing it on the copilot's seat whenever working there. With the firearm prominently displayed, I never had trouble with anyone at that site or any surrounding landing zones. Of course, I always attempted to satisfy the mission requirement. Still, the Moung Soui situation reached such dire proportions that many pilots bitterly complained to the CPH. Some were quite passionate regarding the Neutralist problem.

Despite harboring reservations about working at Moung Soui, I had no alternative other than to fulfill the assignment. Grin and bear it was the motto.

Captain Tom Hoppe was puzzled why no one had ever shot at him when assigned Requirements Office missions at Moung Soui, particularly when he flew a mission a considerable distance onto the western reaches of the Plain of Jars. The only logical answer to him seemed to be a trading arrangement between Moung Soui troops and the Pathet Lao. Tom recalled journeying to nearby pads he considered within easy walking distance of the troops with blankets, radios, and other items. Particularly galling to him--actually to all of us--was the FAN reluctance to assist the Flight Mechanic in staging and pumping gas. ²¹

A few changes had occurred since I had last worked at Moung Soui. Old Soviet artillery weapons had been replaced by newer U.S. 4.2mm mortars and 105mm howitzers. Utilizing U.S. aid funds, the dirt airstrip had been extended and improved to accommodate C-130E aircraft in the process of being seconded to

²¹ Tom Hoppe Letter.
EW Knight Email, 07/02/00.

CASI with the intention of augmenting the smaller Air America C-123s and C-46 planes.

It was not the C-130s first appearance in Laos. During the spring of 1961, 130As from Kadena Air Force Base, Okinawa, conducted an emergency military supply lift to the country. Later in 1961, what were called "E" flights shuttled supplies to Takhli RTAFB for distribution in Laos by Air America drop planes.

Previously, the larger planes had been temporarily ceded to select Air America pilots for specific "black" missions, which included clandestine forays into mainland China. Shortly after the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet during March 1959, the Eisenhower Administration expanded its covert activities. Under CIA auspices, C-130s were flown from Takhli, dropping arms, ammo, and U.S.-trained Tibetan guerrillas into the Khampa resistance areas.

As the war expanded throughout all Lao military regions, by mid-1965 the U.S. Embassy Country Team recommended a few "E" flight planes be routed into Laos to deliver greater supply amounts to larger airfields than smaller transport planes could provide. Two were in place by late December. ²² ²³

Before supplying local landing zones around Lima-108, largely for Rudolfs' benefit and to introduce him to the Customer, I talked to the affable U.S. Army representative about

²² The Author recalls Air America's "Golden Boy," Ed Eckholdt, flying one of these planes in Laos.

²³ Ken Conboy, 130, 138fn.
Mac Thompson Email, 04/14/99.
Melinda Liu's *When Heaven Shed Blood*, *Newsweek* International Edition, 04/16/99.

the current area situation and the general Neutralist effort.²⁴ I learned that, pushed by Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Sing Chanthakouman and RO advisors, the troops were gearing up for yet another late year movement east toward the Plain of Jars to assault and clear the hills at Phou Kout. This had been an ongoing, albeit intermittent, offensive since the completion of Operation Triangle during the summer of 1964, and there was no more chance of success now than before. Still, air preparation was slated to commence on the 11th.

FAN troops had actually already been moving a short distance toward the objective, but we were aware their overall contribution to the war effort was considered minuscule compared to the FAR and Vang Pao's Meo. In addition, Neutralist Commanding General Kong Le had spent October touring the States and being feted on military bases.²⁵

When I brought up the subject of previous refueling problems at the site, the captain threw up his hands in frustration, admitting that he had tried to rectify the situation, but could be of no assistance in that category. Therefore, I indicated that I would probably return to Sam Tong for fuel. The captain concurred that such a course of action would not be a problem.

After several trips to outposts, I had just about exhausted my fuel load and elected to make the fifteen-minute trip to Sam Tong, where a mobile refueling unit could quickly provide juice. Even factoring in a bowl of soup and a sandwich at the hostel, we would not lose as much time as rolling barrels to the ship,

²⁴We rarely had time to learn Customer names.

²⁵Victor Anthony, 184.

and hand pumping fuel ourselves would take at Moung Soui. A red beret trooper in green fatigues who helped with the morning's supply distribution was onboard. ²⁶

We were halfway to Site-20 when my Filipino mechanic called to inform me that the man was agitated. He did not want to go to Sam Tong, but return to Moung Soui. Already low on fuel and anticipating a good meal, I relayed below that the man should relax, for we would not remain long at the site.

After landing and parking in the designated area near the hostel, I looked in the cargo compartment door to inquire if the man wanted a sandwich. He was nowhere in sight. The Flight Mechanic indicated that he was hiding in the electronics compartment. I thought this odd, for I had previously taken Moung Soui types to Sam Tong without problems. I advised the Flight Mechanic to convince the man that he was in no danger from the locals. Then Ed and I tromped up the slight incline toward the hostel. While eating, we briefly discussed the Neuts, and I admitted to never having experienced such odd behavior.

When we returned to our ship to commence the afternoon session at Moung Soui, the man was gone and a red beret sat prominently on the plywood floor. Apparently, he had fled into the surrounding hills and jungle. It was now obvious that the boy was in some kind of trouble, perhaps a vendetta, and he feared for his life. Regretting bringing him to Site-20, I started Hotel-15, hoping that if he was still nearby, after hearing the engine crank, he would jump onboard when I was ready to depart. Hoping to facilitate his escape, I remained on the

²⁶ Red Beret: The cover was usually worn by officers, particularly Vang Pao's men I had seen at Long Tieng. PARU assigned to the Alternate were distinguished by black berets.

ground for a few minutes. When he failed to appear, I went looking for him in the area and surrounding hills overlooking the bowl. Lacking a sighting, I returned to the airstrip and informed some of the regulars in the area about the odd situation. There was interest and an immediate search commenced.

I returned to Moung Soui with trepidation and more than a little concern over the incident, for I did not know how the man's disappearance would be accepted by the local Neutralists.

Fortunately, there were no recriminations from anyone. After checking with leaders, the American RO officer indicated that the soldier was a Meo, who for some reason had deserted Vang Pao's forces in the past and joined the Neutralist Army. Hearing this, I was not surprised at the chap's fear, for if caught, Vang Pao certainly would have summarily thrown him in the hole at Long Tieng and then killed him. Had I known the story, I never would have placed him in harm's way.

At day's end, I returned to Sam Tong and informed the AID people on what I had learned. At that moment, they estimated that half the area's population was out looking for the man. By the time I refueled and departed for Udorn, there was still no word from the searchers regarding the man's disposition. I assumed that my next trip would reveal something. However, given my yearly high time, operations scheduling problems, and impending leave, I knew full well that I might not return for several weeks. The entire event displayed a hint of tragic humor. William Shakespeare might have called it irony.

I did not learn "the rest of the story" until years after the fact, while conducting research and exchanging letters with Blaine Jensen for this book. Blaine was at Sam Tong during the incident:

"While there were Meo people sympathetic to Touby Le Fong and others anti-VP, there were no actual Neutralist Meo. The Lieutenant and his men had deserted the field during an earlier battle in the Phou So area (LS-57). VP believed the men were dead. When he discovered they were not, he was furious (probably displaying a characteristic beet red face) and demanded the Neutralists return them. He put pressure on the resident RO representative, but to no avail."

It was common knowledge that Vang Pao's penalty for desertion was necessarily severe. After two weeks in the three-tiered hole without food, water, or sunlight, if still alive, the offender was brought out and shot by a firing squad.

"Because he was aware VP's men were looking for him, the Red Beret lieutenant was intelligent enough to avoid Meo villages during his western journey to Moung Soui. Therefore, by obtaining food, drink, and lodging from friendly Lao Theung villagers, the man eventually arrived at Site-108 on foot. Blaine saw the lieutenant several times afterward at Moung Soui. His men were used as domestic aids to the Neutralist officers-cooking, cleaning, washing laundry, and conducting other menial duties."

Jensen has no recollection of what eventually happened to the Meo. ²⁷

Lately, without explanation or caution to airmen, USAF engineers had erected a huge microwave dish close to the right side of the northeast runway's approach end. Naturally, since we knew little about microwaves or their effect on the human body,

²⁷ Ken Conboy, 133.
Blaine Jensen Letter 09/05/96.

there was some concern among the pilot force as to the device's negative aspects. While quaffing beer in the Club bar, we discussed and speculated as to the output, range, potential effects, and danger involved in receiving microwave bursts from the unit. With no adequate explanation, by word of mouth, management advised that logic dictated we not fly close to the unit. That would require a wide left approach or a straight in off the left centerline. I do not know if Ed was one of those ten-percent individuals in every organization who never received the word, but he commenced a right-hand approach very close to the dish. Prior to this, I had been very relaxed, but taking exception to Ed's maneuver, I abruptly ripped the controls from his hands and assumed command of the helicopter. Without proper explanation, my action was not especially correct, but at the time I was less than impressed with Rudolfs' common sense. There was nothing said between us, but my silence was sufficient. ²⁸

PHOU KOUT

We left Laos before the fun began at Phou Kout. Despite 37mm and automatic weapons fire, U.S. air struck enemy positions in and around Phou Kout through the fourteenth. Sing's men scrambled up the slopes of Phou Kout's north face on the 16th, but were soon repulsed by the enemy. Another ground assault was planned for the twentieth, but three dozen jet sorties requested for the 19th and 20th were not forthcoming because of other Military Region Three commitments around Thakhet, south of

²⁸ Big Ed worked many years for Air America. Chief Pilot Knight concurred with my assessment of Ed being a very slow learner, but he never experienced any serious problems with him, and Ed always performed his job. However, he did note that Ed was only second to John Fonburg in being the butt of peer jokes.

Route-9, and Souvanna Phouma's desire for a massive strike against an enemy vehicle depot outside Khang Khai.

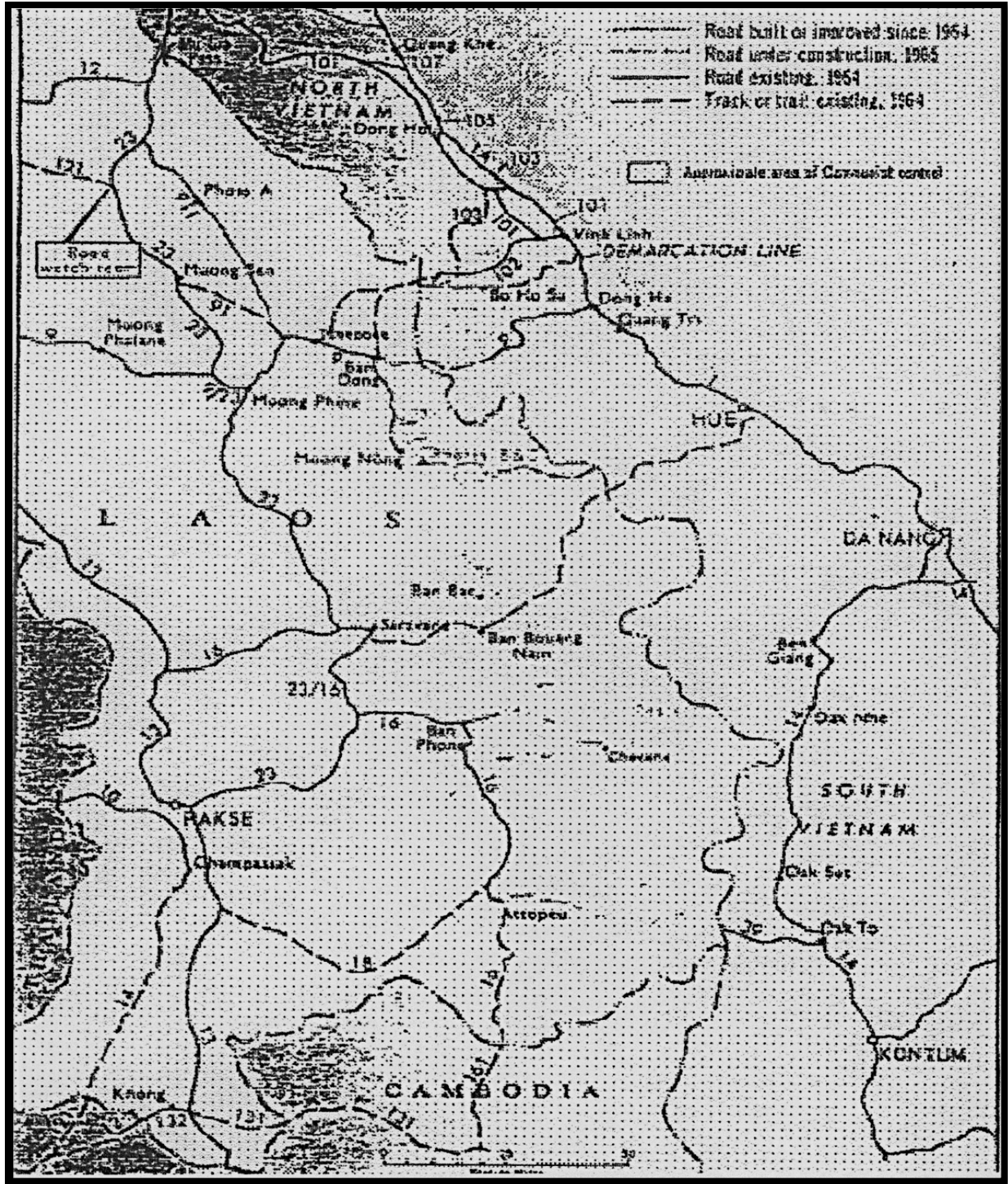
Since air support was scheduled days in advance of operations, and planners were not that flexible, the Phou Kout operation failed to receive strike aircraft until two through four December. Sixteen fighter-bombers participated in the attack, also strafing westward bound enemy reinforcements on Route-7. Despite receiving substantial air support, Neutralist troops refused to move. After a promise of three additional days of strikes, nine December became the new offensive date. Adverse weather stymied most sorties, so the ground attack phase was rescheduled for 21 December.

However, events around Na Khang demanded most Barrel Roll sorties, and superseded the farcical and expensive Moung Soui operation. President Johnson's Christmas ceasefire initially curtailed air operations in Laos. Then enemy activity waned in Military Region Two. As a consequence, Phou Kout air support was placed on hold and Neutralist offensive operations were deferred until the following year. ²⁹

PANHANDLE

In November, aerial photo reconnaissance revealed additional road construction and improvements in the eastern trail structure of southern Laos. An alternate route, designated Route-911 (in the Western camp) was detected under construction east of Route-23, south of Route-12, and north of Tchepone. Photos displayed heavy foliage and cleverly camouflaged overlapping trellises along portions of the road.

²⁹ Victor Anthony, 185-186.



Upper graphic displays the enemy road system in the eastern Panhandle of Military Region Three paralleling the border and leading into South Vietnam.

On 18 November soldiers and vehicles were observed on Route-911 near the Route-23 junction.³⁰

Ambassador Sullivan, consulting with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma about General Ma's requests to move T-28s into Saravane, presented evidence of increased enemy activity in the region. In addition to approving Ma's request, Souvanna sanctioned increased air activity and a first-time use of chemical spray defoliants on major enemy LOCs in Laos. In response to the door swinging wide open on expanded operations, restrictions on Steel Tiger operations were lifted, and unrestricted air attacks were approved regardless of the time. Assisting pilots to better identify routes and target areas, MACV divided Barrel Roll into A, B, C sectors and Steel Tiger into D, E, and F component parts. Additionally, MACV requested a first time B-52 strike on the border area of Laos where enemy forces were believed abundant.

Messages emanating from the field revealed a sudden and unexpected increase in enemy activity in several military regions. During the month, perhaps hoping to divert FAR attention away from the Ho Chi Minh Trails, the enemy focused on Military Region Three, pushing toward Thakhet town from the karst areas. Other analysts speculated that the enemy was engaged in rice gathering or a desire to stimulate troop morale.

To stem the activity, believing white phosphorous to be highly efficient in saturating the numerous cave complexes in the karsts behind Thakhet, Ambassador Sullivan sanctioned the

³⁰ CIA Daily Bulletin, 11/26/65. Laos: The communists are attempting to camouflage a newly constructed infiltration route in the Laotian panhandle.

weapon's use in countering and flushing out Pathet Lao and Vietnamese sanctuaries.

Souvanna Phouma, reacting strongly to the current Thakhet activity, pressured the ambassador to escalate air power and allow both the U.S. and RLAF to deliver the jellied gasoline bomb-napalm. Despite his AIRA personnel and pilots supporting the Prime Minister's request, Sullivan was reluctant to comply with the request. He was concerned about an unwarranted escalation and probable exposure to international political criticism. Thus far, USG had managed to avoid excessive publicity, especially in the Soviet camp, by prudently selecting operations and implementing them with discretion. With increasing pressure building, Sullivan deferred to Washington, requesting counsel and advice regarding napalm's use.

The question of the resurrected issue of napalm fostered debate in Washington and among embassy staff in Thailand. Controversy about napalm first arose in June 1964 during Neutralist attempts to capture the hills at Phou Kout. Approval granted for the weapon's use by "RLAF T-28s" on military targets at the time was never implemented by Souvanna Phouma or Ambassador Unger. Maintained as a back-burner matter, napalm's deployment was generally prohibited except in a military situation that the ambassador considered an emergency or during a defensive action, where an important position was in danger of failing.

Sullivan was concerned about the recently approved escalation of air operations. He considered that authorization to use defoliants and napalm would sour world opinion against Laos. Furthermore, with "Willy Pete" meeting current tactical requirements in Thakhet, it was not deemed wise to use the flammable asset in situations not considered absolutely

critical. He also evidenced concern about mistaken strikes and the horrible consequences napalm would produce. ³¹

On the 24th, Sullivan received a message from State informing him that the established guidance on the use of napalm in Laos would continue as stipulated. The weapon could only be used by the RLAFF against military targets with Washington's endorsement, or in a case that Sullivan considered an immediate emergency.

FAR troops, displaying improved capability and confidence, likely stimulated and aided by air support, defeated the enemy. Somewhat muting the success young enemy troops recently introduced from training were not yet battle tested. Having blunted the enemy advance, the FAR turned to defensive measures.

Despite the success near Lima-40, in December, Pathet Lao units were still noted moving at will southwest of Thakhet, with minor activity in the Savannakhet-Seno areas. Concerned about an enemy attempt to capture Seno, the FAR General Staff requested that Souvanna seek more aggressive action in southern Laos. ³²

RONing at Thakhet (L-40) on the 20th, while supporting FAR operations to thwart enemy movement toward the town, Mike Jarina

³¹ Author Note: Apparently fearing world condemnation, USG still attempted to prosecute a war to contain the enemy with one hand literally tied behind its back.

³² Segment Sources:
State Department Message, 11/13/65.
Jacob Van Staaveren, 94, 95.
Action Memorandum, Bundy to Acting Secretary of State Ball, U.S. Air Operations in Laos, 11/18/65.
Ambassador Sullivan to State, 11/23/65 (2).
Memorandum Barbis to Ambassador Unger, Use of Napalm, 11/23/65.
State Telegram to Sullivan, 11/24/65.
CHECO.
Memorandum Deputy Director Office of Southeast Asia Affairs-Ewing to Director-Trueheart, 12/16/65.

and Thai Flight Mechanic Veera Champanil, operating Hotel-36, deposited troops and reconnaissance teams thirty-five miles northwest near Ban Thana (VE4383) and west of the extensive karst area, where the men walked to their objective. Working with the Customer out of the low visibility strip to the east of the town, (L-40A), he moved men twenty-five miles northeast in a valley surrounded by mountains (VE6674).

The following morning, Mike returned to a location eight miles north of previous day drop-offs to reinforce, supply, and receive intelligence information. From Thakhet, he flew to Savannakhet (L-39). RONing there the next two days, he serviced Nongboulao, forty-three miles east of Lima-39, ten miles south of Mounng Phalane.

On Monday he retraced his steps to a point two miles north of Nongboulao (WD5627). Another trip took him to Ban Dong Thankou, ten miles south of the parachute battalion training center at Seno and four miles east of Route-13. After another trip to the Nongboulao area, he supplied FAR thirty-eight miles southeast of Savannakhet on Route-11.

On the final day of his upcountry trip, Jarina worked a few of the same sites as the previous day, and then returned to Thakhet East. This time he journeyed to a point thirty-seven miles north-northeast and eight miles north of Boneng (VE5198). The last trip before returning to Tango-08 was to LS-141A, the area of the Grove Jones Two tin mine (VE2794).³³

ERRANT BOMBING

Aircraft short rounds continued to plague Lao operations. The Prime Minister requested jets to strike an armored vehicle

³³ Mike Jarina Interviews.

depot outside Khang Khai. The attack would constitute a reprisal for the communist movement toward Thakhet. On 20 November, because of a broken cloud layer disrupting a Plain of Jars target, pilots in two flights totaling eight F-105 planes released bombs close to the Pathet Lao headquarters at the off limits Khang Khai (L-08) facility. The following day, Radio Peking broadcast that U.S. aircraft had hit the town. USAF reports denied damage, but pending photo recce, further operations were curtailed in the Barrel. Unseasonable weather prevented this until the 24th. Ambassador Sullivan, while reviewing photos and BDA of the area, ascertained that only six to eight bombs had landed on the assigned target. He noted that the majority of ordnance fell on Khang Khai, causing considerable damage. In complaining to Generals Moore and Westmoreland, he questioned how the planes could hit the wrong target that displayed a white ICC trailer, a large lake (later called Arrowhead Lake), and an extensive road network identifying the Ville.

A no comment statement was issued for public consumption.

During succeeding days, other collateral damage by USAF and Navy planes was noted near Attopeu and at Pak Bong in the Panhandle. ³⁴

FINAL 1965 RON

My final upcountry (actually down country) RON of the year began on 24 November. I was again scheduled with a First Officer: Jim Hastings. A former U.S. Army pilot, Jim was fairly

³⁴ Jacob Van Staaveren, 97.
Ambassador William Sullivan, 11/22/65.
Victor Anthony, 186.

tall and wiry, with dark hair and wearing glasses that gave him an intellectual look. Assigned Hotel-34, we were delayed by maintenance test flights. When eventually released, we launched on the 123-mile trip to Savannakhet. Handed off from radar GCI units Brigham Control and Invert, I made sure to steer well clear of the extensive Phou Phan Mountain range, a current hot bed of communist activity, that Thai authorities lately had restricted from all over flights.

We did not arrive early at L-39, but, true to form, there was not all that much work planned. From my point of view, over time, it appeared to me that both the Lima-39 Customer and FAR leaders were content to sit on their hands, not be too aggressive in the region, and wait for the enemy to act. Working primarily in Vang Pao's more active area tended to spoil me, and I expected all military region air operations people to have their sierra together while coordinating and scheduling missions. Helicopters were too precious a commodity to waste.

AGENCY ROAD WATCH TRAINING CAMPS

Within a year and a half, Pandora's Box popped open wide. My wish for additional work and action in Military Region Three was fulfilled, and even exceeded, but that is covered in a future book, when Ho Chi Minh Trail road watch missions commenced in earnest. An isolated road watch training site was already under development three quarters of the way to Seno off Route-9 in the Dong Natat area. For security purposes, like other sensitive sites, it was never assigned a Lima Site number, but merely called Whiskey-Three. ³⁵ Sponsored by the Agency, the

³⁵ Whiskey (W) was the first letter in the region's Whiskey Delta UMT map coordinates.

site was staffed partially with CIA Case Officers, and the rest by Thai Special Forces personnel. Some training was provided to existing indigenous road watch teams. However, the site's principal function was to launch Thai teams (code named Star) toward Ho Chi Minh LOCs near Mugia Pass. ³⁶

The following day Hastings and I flew south to Pakse where, except for a return to Savannakhet for one additional night, we worked six days in Military Region Four and RON at the USAID hostel. Since we normally worked for AID at least one day during a RON, if no dignitaries were visiting town, the hostel was available to Air America crews. The price was nominal and food was tolerable.

As was the case in the Savannakhet area, in addition to intelligence efforts north of the Saravane area, Agency goals were underway to enhance road watch operation teams in the eastern and southern reaches of the Bolovens Plateau. Soon after the untimely deaths of Dick Lieberth, Smith, Mike Deuel, and Mike Maloney in the PS-10 area, a training camp, designated PS-22, was opened thirteen miles east of Ban Houei Kong (L-56). ³⁷ For security and secrecy purposes and proximity to enemy LOCs, the site was located close to the Plateau rim, where terrain dropped precipitously thousands of feet along the weathered rock and sheer cliffs to the Se Kong Valley floor. Representing a logical revival and extension of Colonel Bull Simons 1961-62 disbanded White Star Kha training program in 1962, the camp was tailored to train indigenous tribals and Lao Theung in the arts

³⁶ Ken Conboy, 144.

³⁷ PS-22, or Ban La Tee was numbered LS-190. However, no helicopter pilot ever used any other term than PS-22.

of trail watching and intelligence gathering. The program began small, but rapidly expanded. Within a couple of years, largely at our expense, it evolved into often ill conceived, aggressive, and highly dangerous search and destroy missions.

The initial training cadre was comprised of Thai Special Forces personnel (Team 999) and sole Case Officer Don Stephens. Although I do not recall meeting him then, Stephens, a former U.S. Army Special Forces type, had previously worked in the Military Region One Xieng Lom area. Envisioning expansion, a green wooden structure with a large screened porch served as the living, dining, and operations area. Whenever working there, I rarely observed Don without a can of beer stuffed in his hand. Located on a relatively flat, bare area at an elevation of 2,800 feet, even during the cool season, most of the days at PS-22 were very warm. Discounting or failing to consider the dehydrating effects of alcohol, Stephens claimed that water from the stream was not fit to drink, hence, his consumption of brew was considerable over the course of a day. Despite this constant imbibing, he always appeared sober.

Jim Hastings' introduction to the newly opened and undeveloped site also became my baptism. We spent a lot of time shuttling the bullets, beans, and bandages necessary for personnel training, and to support outlying areas. We also serviced local defensive outposts and other relatively new PS listening sites on or below the edge of the Plateau's eastern rim.

There was another clandestine Agency site under construction twenty miles upriver from Pakse. Located along the Mekong River in the foothills of an extensive mountainous area, PS-18 was conceived to initially serve as a regional training area for Lao Theung WAPI Project Wapikhantong, Sedone Valley

ADC, and village ADO defenders living between Saravane and Pakse. ³⁸ Within a year, the remote camp was used to helicopter Pitts Camp-trained Thai teams to sites near southern Panhandle LOCs. With Thai soldiers lacking the necessary intestinal fortitude to walk to the Trails and complete the mission, the program was soon scrapped. ³⁹

A SUPREME EMBARRASSMENT

It was not uncommon for the only Pakse-assigned UH-34D to be shared with Savannakhet. Therefore, as previously mentioned, on Sunday afternoon 28 November, the Customer directed us to Lima-39 to work and RON. After establishing a direct course of 045 degrees, and disregarding the fact that Jim had no prior knowledge of the lay of the land, I turned the controls over to him and advised him to remain in or close to the Lao border. Then, taking advantage of an anticipated hour and a half trip, I reverted to a relaxed daydreaming mode. ⁴⁰

Halfway through what should have been an innocuous flight, I was abruptly jolted back to reality. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a Thai-marked T-28 suddenly pass. The pilot flashed past my nose and circled my vulnerable six o'clock position. Dumb-dumb. I knew that because of increased infiltration, an active insurgency, rumor, and reported sightings of unknown aircraft penetrating Thai airspace, the

³⁸ The Phu Lat Sua site was later numbered LS-418. The WAPI program was jointly supported by CIA, AID, RO, and Deputy Chief JUSMAG Thailand.

³⁹ Ken Conboy, 143-145.

⁴⁰ The reader should note that I did not indicate I was asleep, something I never did in the cockpit-except once.

RTAF required positive identification and positive control of all aircraft entering the country. However, when departing L-11, believing that we would closely parallel the Mekong River to L-39, or remain inside Laos, I had neglected to contact Lion Control. Besides constituting a pain, establishing contact was often difficult, and the coverage generally minimal at lower elevations. Personnel in the GCI unit had probably been tracking us ever since we departed Pakse, and because I never contacted Lion, decided to provide the bored T-28 pilots some practice in intercepting a bogey. My laziness and neglect had developed into a real threat to our continued existence.

As he should have been, Hastings was astonished. So new to our organization, he was unaware of the ground rules, and did not yet have a good grasp of the border topography. Therefore, while I was enjoying my time in la-la land, he had flown a direct route across land where the river bulged and curved well to the east, and had possibly strayed even farther into Thai territory. Thinking that the two pilots to our rear were likely playing with us, I assumed control of H-34 and waited for their next move and the situation to unfold. Now that the Tango pilots had a good look at our distinctive American helicopter, and certainly must have known who we were, I assumed that they would break off their shenanigans and return to Ubon. Wrong. They stuck to me like super glue, pulling alongside, gesturing for me to reverse course, wagging their wings, dropping their landing gear, and flying across my bow--all international maneuvers understood by all aviators. They obviously wanted me to turn 180 degrees, fly to Ubon, and land. In denial, embarrassed, choosing to disregard their obvious signals, I waved at them and continued flying straight and level while attempting to raise

Lion Control or the pilots on prescribed UHF frequencies. No joy.⁴¹

It was easy to predict their next course of action. I briefly considered diving for the deck to evade them, but having flown T-28s in the training command, I knew the planes were considerably faster than my H-34 and much more maneuverable. Therefore, I rejected this option, aware that such action would be virtually useless. Abeam and parallel to Hotel-34, the pilots began cranking off short .50 caliber bursts from their wing-mounted machine guns. That was enough for me. Fun and games were over. Now that the pilots had displayed a final more serious side and hostile intentions, if I did not comply, the next step would certainly be unpleasant.

I turned and established an approximate course for Ubon, while continuing an attempt to call Lion Control. Within a few minutes, I raised an American operator, identified myself and organization, explained where I was going, and requested the dogs of war be called off. Almost immediately, the T-28 pilots broke off and, leaving us to our designs, accelerated for home plate. I quickly resumed a course to Savannakhet. Somewhat relieved, but shaken and feeling more than a little humiliated and stupid, I realized that I had no one else to blame for the intercept but myself, I also made a mental note to discuss the incident with Wayne and FIC so no one else would be subjected to such an indignity.

After performing duties around L-39, we returned to Pakse, this time careful to not to stray into Thailand. Two days later,

⁴¹ No joy: A U.S. Navy-Marine Corps aviation term for no contact, sighting, or an inability to accomplish a task.

after conducting more trips in and around the Plateau, on 1 December we departed for Udorn. This completed my flying for the year.

STATS

Somehow Scratch Kanach obtained access to Company flight time statistics. He later informed me that I concluded the year with the second highest flight time in the entire Company system. Excluding training time, proficiency checks, and night training, which did not amount to much, during eleven months on the line, my total yearly time amounted to 1,209.4 hours. In monetary terms, this equated to over 30,000 dollars. Where else could I have earned such a kingly sum? Since my time through June amounted to 746.5 hours, I could only imagine what the total might have been had management allowed me to fly without restriction. Still, the exclusion of two to three hundred extra hours was probably a godsend, for obtaining this time would have certainly placed me in the middle of the Na Khang shot pattern, and caused additional mental anguish. I certainly had experienced sufficient excitement and hairy incidents during the year to last me a long time.

On the same day that we departed Paksane, Mike Jarina, former Marine pilot Ron Dubinsky, and Joe Gaculais replaced us in Hotel-28 for six days work at Lima-11. Mike ferried the cowboy-attired and authoritative Flynn Perry to PS-22 for consultation with Don Stephens about a purported enemy attack on an eastern outpost overlooking the Kong River Valley. Often inflating minor incidents and KIA numbers, the Lao indicated that they had been attacked and had killed many "bad guy." However, after further investigation, except for two, no other bodies were evident. When asked if they had tossed the rest of the dead off the cliff, an officer remarked the enemy spirited them away. Such was the sad state of after-action reporting in Laos.

By then a fixed site, Mike estimated that a company of Lao troops was located at PS-22, or at positions in the immediate vicinity. The trio supplied southeastern and northern outposts protecting the main base. One trip took them south to Attopeu, which was still totally controlled by FAR.

The second day, working for AID, et. al. the crew serviced the WAPI project around Khong Sedone (LS-289), Ban Saphat (LS-175), and other village areas participating in the experiment.

Because Pakse missions included support of the WAPI village security project, helicopter crews were allowed to RON at the USAID hostel. Although filling, AID hostel food served at dinner was not always outstanding. By inquiring from the cook, the evening fare could be determined prior to leaving for work in the morning. Therefore, not enthused by the evening menu, one afternoon after work, Mike had the duty Jeep driver take him to the local market, where he purchased a kilogram (2.2 pounds) of

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giant sea prawns. He returned to the hostel and persuaded the cook, an older man with thin, graying hair, to prepare the sea food. Jarina savored the shrimp, placing the large heads to the side of his plate. Before he finished his meal, Joe Gaculais arrived and asked what Mike and Ron were eating.

"Shrimp."

"Boy, that looks good."

Mike asked if he had eaten. Joe replied that he had not. Thinking that Joe would take supper with other Filipinos as usual, Mike had not considered him when purchasing the seafood. Therefore, he contritely offered Joe a remaining prawn.

Gaculais said, *"That is all right. I will just take the heads."* He consumed every one, indicating they were delicious.

Jarina then continued to eat shrimp heads. As a result of his Pakse experience, he had learned to consume two items: Bam Mi Nam noodle soup and shrimp heads.

The following day, work was scattered throughout the Saravane and Bolovens areas. After a trip to Radio Hill, located on the south side of Phu Batiene just east of Pakse, on the left side of the Plateau road, Mike was assigned to Attopeu. From there he was redirected to a Stone Age tribal area at Ban Kong Mi (PS-7, later listed as LS-407). The site was lodged in an open area deep in the hills, nineteen miles south of Lima-10. Located between what would soon become Route-110 to the north and Cambodia to the south, after assessment and development, the remote site evolved into an important launching point for intelligence gathering road watch and interdiction teams. Returning to Attopeu at altitude, Mike then climbed back onto the Plateau and landed at a new outpost on the southeast rim.

From there, the crew returned to Lima-11 for fuel and a late assignment to Saravane Province. Then they flew to Ban Khok

Mai (LS-171), a short grass strip four miles northeast of L-44. Moving east of Site-44 to Ban Nong Boua (LS-134), they picked up a team to deposit on a northern hilltop.

In contrast to previous weekends when work was often scanty at L-11, they returned to Saravane the following morning to service local area outposts. After fulfilling this task, at Pakse they were redirected to the Plateau, where they worked the Long Keo (LS-172) area.

Sunday was spent on the Bolovens Plateau at Ban Nam Tieng (LS-165), PS sites three and four, and Attopeu.

The final day of the RON, before returning to Udorn, Mike renewed his pleasant relationship with the Davis family at Houei Kong (L-56). He also supplied area outposts out of the grassy Houei Kong airstrip. One trip took him to New Paksong (LS-180), near the junction where paved Route-23 turned north toward old Paksong and Tha Teng. ¹

TIGER HOUND

Photo reconnaissance, road watch intelligence, and other accumulated data were not encouraging in respect to expanding communist supply routes and their increased ability to deliver goods and men through Laos to South Vietnam. Over four years or more, roads, rivers, trails, supply dumps, and base areas in the Lao Panhandle provided the enemy with sufficient LOCs to prosecute and intensify the North's war effort in South Vietnam. During 1965, there had been high priority construction efforts to expand and improve military supply through the Lao Panhandle to the South Vietnamese border. Introducing earthmoving

¹Mike Jarina Interviews.

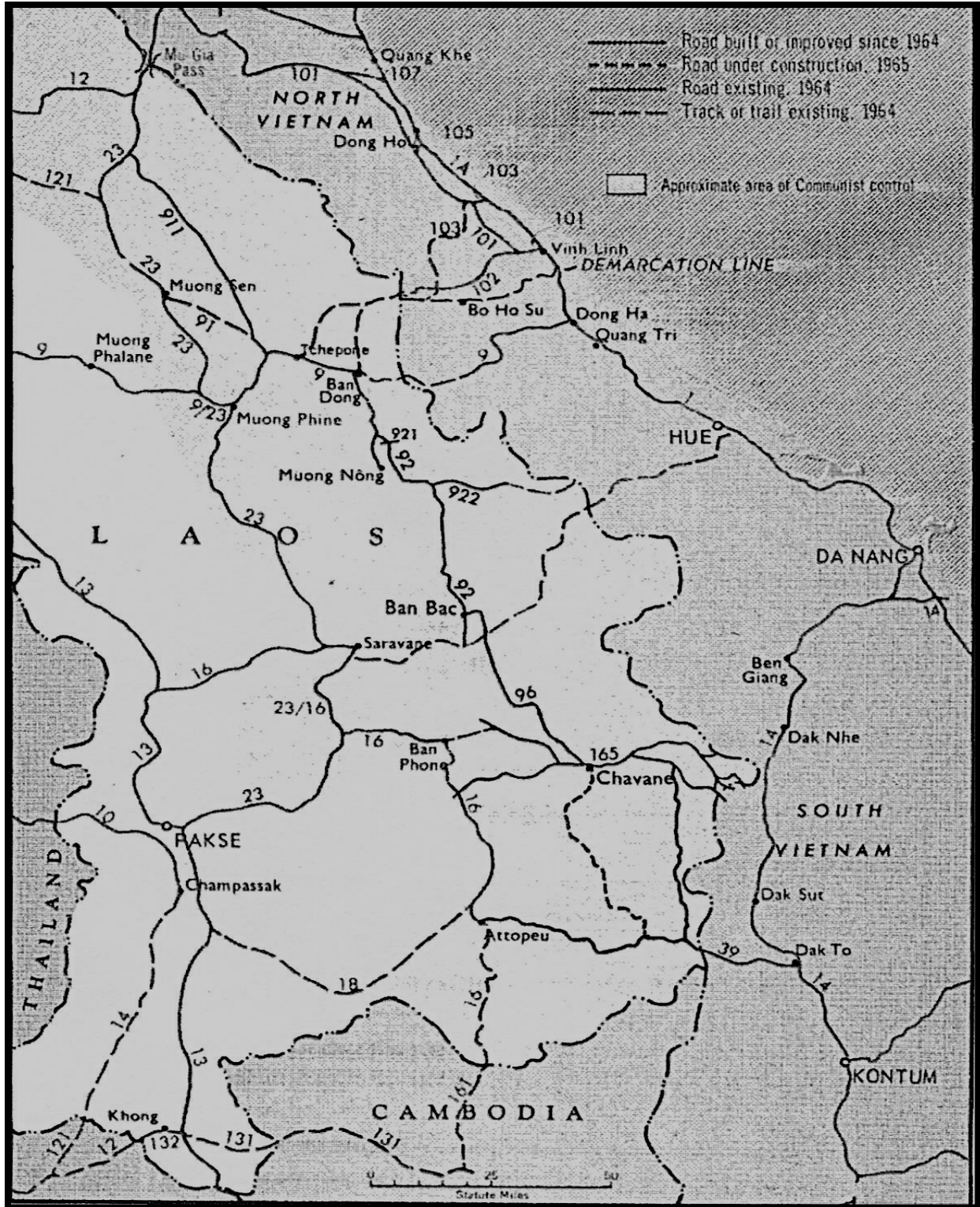
equipment to build alternate roads and bypasses during the demanding rainy season, had greatly reduced exposure to American air interdiction of convoys, a majority of which currently moved at night. The endeavor increased the North's capability to support a higher level of fighting in South Vietnam. It also portended an increase of military activity in Laos.

Ongoing aerial reconnaissance depicted upgraded old roads and new ones under construction. There were newly discovered woven bamboo coverings and extensive camouflage on new Route-911 and porters, and a river ford on Route-92. Extensive foot trails, motor trails, barracks, and fox holes proliferated along the Ho Chi Minh Trail system.

In November, a full month earlier than in 1964, government road watch teams scattered throughout the region reported that southbound truck convoys were already moving. One team located on a stretch of Route-23 reported the number of moving vehicles comparable to the previous year. For the first time, fuel tankers were utilized. Consistent with the new capability, it was estimated that 300 tons of supplies per day could potentially be moved during the upcoming six-month dry season.

The implications were disturbing, particularly when ten to fifteen trucks carrying rice, ammunition, and men were reported moving south nightly along the new Route-96 in mid-December.

... "it took the trucks 3 to 5 days to negotiate the 45 miles between Ban Bac and Chavane because of precautions taken to evade air attack... small labor crews were placed strategically along the road to repair damage caused by air strikes."



Southeastern Laos depicting the major Trail system complex between North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

CIA Map, 01/19/66.

...the movement represented a substantial increase over the one or two daily southbound trucks moving on Route-62 the previous dry season. ²

An estimated eight thousand Pathet Lao and Vietnamese troops were positioned along the road network; soldiers who could probe or launch attacks on FAR positions with impunity if so disposed. More likely, they were appropriately staged in areas to discourage FAR units from advancing eastward to thwart Vietnamese troop and supply movement toward South Vietnam.

Among President Johnson's administration's pragmatists there was consternation in regard to this intelligence, the heightened military activity in South Vietnam, and evidence of seven Peoples' Army of Vietnam (PAVN) regiments presence there, all of which at some time had passed through Lao LOCs. U.S. efforts over several months to substantially interdict the flow of supplies and manpower had only marginally been realized. Therefore, continued escalation seemed the only near-term solution to the problem.

Reconnaissance, intelligence, and interdiction programs such as Yankee Team (the sole covert phase), Steel Tiger, Shining Brass, Hard Nose, and Kha intelligence gathering operations in the Panhandle, had steadily increased, with the prospect of additional expansion. With the advent of the Whiskey-3, PS-22, and PS-18 training bases in Military Region Three and Four, there was anticipation that Hard Nose and Kha operations would soon progress into a trail harassment phase.

² CIA Daily Bulletin, 01/19/66. Laos: The communists evidently are moving considerably more trucks in the southern section of the Laotian panhandle during the current dry season than they did a year ago.

Ambassador Sullivan's 1 December meeting with Souvanna Phouma involved the Prime Minister and his military staff's current assessment of the southern Lao military situation. Souvanna admitted he was not aware of DVR leaders' intentions, but believed that he had to prepare for the worst possible scenario. Souvanna's mindset was considered positive by Sullivan, for it tended to affirm a realistic attitude about the situation, and perhaps allow and prompt more rapid USG movement toward a viable resolution.

Consequently, the infiltration problem in the Panhandle resurrected U.S. military plans to re-evaluate instituting an iron cordon across Route-9. Even though introduction of foreign troops would grossly violate Geneva Accords protocols, it was deemed that such overt military action might substantially relieve military pressure in South Vietnam. However, in playing the wild card, China could feel more threatened, and might respond in kind. An alternative would be moving troops into southern North Vietnam to the 20th parallel, or Nape Pass, to sever infiltration. This plan could also trigger Chinese intervention.

There was some agreement that USG military and intelligence programs in Laos should increase in direct proportion to the infiltration problem. But they should remain covert, except where Souvanna Phouma deemed it necessary to divulge the operations.

With the advent of the dry season, enemy infiltration into South Vietnam along the Lao LOCs was sure to escalate and constitute a problem. Therefore, to complement Steel Tiger operations an ambitious multi-service plan, conceived by MACV, and endorsed by Secretary McNamara in late November, was set in motion. The concept encompassed most facets of U.S. tactical air

capability and aerial techniques developed since commencement of the air campaign. The plan incorporated the ninety-mile southeastern border portion of Laos from Tchepone to Cambodia. In addition to the normal complement of strike planes required for the undertaking, other assets would include: O-1 Bird dog aircraft (Hound Dog) with FAC pilots and Lao observers onboard to control the strikes; UC-123 Ranch Hand planes equipped to defoliate the heavy, triple canopy jungle along the trails; and OV-1 Mohawks crammed with the latest sophisticated electronic equipment to search for night targets. ³ Armed daylight reconnaissance was conducted by A-1E pilots and C-47 crews fitted with guns and tailored with flare dropping capability for night recce.

The vaunted and formerly sacrosanct Rules of Engagement (ROE) continued to be relaxed. To enhance operations, pilots were allowed unlimited armed recce along roads and trails in the zone. However, they were still forbidden from arbitrarily striking villages or built-up areas, regardless of military value, without the extended process required to obtain target validation. Calculated to accelerate the wasteful procedure, marking its initial debut in Laos, a C-130 was assigned to the Theater. Military parlance designated the mission the Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC) platform tasked to control and coordinate air strikes in conjunction with radar units at Nakhon Phanom's Invert, Peacock, and Panama in South Vietnam. To preclude bombing errors and assist timely strikes, two RLAFF officers from the Savannakhet Air Operations Center (AOC) were onboard ABCC or O-1E planes as observers. The men

³ OV-1: Many of the thirteen twin engine, brown "Snoopy" reconnaissance planes were parked on the Udorn cross taxiway.

could also approve strikes on targets without enduring the time-consuming process.

In another 1 December meeting, Ambassador Sullivan was briefed at the Udorn base facility by Generals Westmoreland and Moore about details of the Tiger Hound program. Sullivan did not fully accept the new concept. He believed the procedures were not responsive and timely enough, and good targets would be left unscathed. In addition, since November emphasis on Steel Tiger targeting to the detriment of Barrel Roll operations had caused some concern in the embassy and Prime Minister's office. Leaders in Vientiane believed destruction of enemy assets in Military Region Two greatly contributed to the enemy problem of maintaining and supporting an adequate force in Laos, which in turn had a negative effect on their ability to support the Viet Cong.

TACAN

Also discussed at the meeting was the previously considered introduction of additional and efficient navigation aids to help prevent ongoing bombing mishaps. Installation of mobile TACAN van units near Saravane in Military Region Four and Na Khang in Military Region appeared logical locations to help solve or lessen the problem, and presented the most viable areas for deployment.

From the beginning of the air war in Laos, "short rounds" (munitions not landing on prescribed targets) that inflicted collateral damage on civilians had constituted a serious problem. Because of the many negative variables presented to airmen throughout the year during strikes, it did not seem there would be a viable solution achieved, unless adequate navigational aids were installed at strategic locations in the

950

country. As a result of Sullivan and USAF leaders' concern, all agreed to emplace a TACAN station in Sam Neua Province. The system would be useful to U.S. military jet and T-28 pilots after equipment modification.

Members of the USAF 1st Mobile Communications Group were dispatched to the field to investigate several areas for security and gear installation. They initially selected Houei Thom, with Na Khang as a backup location.

Concerned about the lag time involved to implement the first TACAN installation, the new bombing programs, and the continuing targeting mishaps, by late October Ambassador Sullivan requested that the program be accelerated.

Because of bureaucratic red tape and concern regarding yet more U.S. military ground personnel entering the neutral country and violating the Geneva protocols, TACAN installation was not finally approved until the end of November. Selection of sites in Houa Phan Province reverted from Houei Thom to Na Khang.

Sullivan met with Souvanna Phouma to apprise him of the latest plans to counter communist infiltration. The Prime Minister agreed that it was imperative to execute all that was possible with current assets. As always, as Laos was still considered a neutral country, the Prime Minister insisted on utmost discretion and complete silence regarding the new operations. He agreed that because of recent bombing errors in the Panhandle Steel Tiger area, improved navigational aids were essential for correct target alignment. Therefore, he also approved the installation of TACAN systems in designated areas. To implement this, a team from the embassy was programmed to proceed to Saravane and search for "secure" TACAN sites, and assess improvements and facilities required to allow the RLAF to conduct T-28 strikes from the Lima-44 airstrip. As the highest

and what was deemed the most "secure" point in Saravane Province, General Ma had previously recommended Phou Kate for TACAN location.

Ma wanted two American "round eyes", and not Thai technicians, to man the facility. Because of their ability to easily blend into the culture and not trigger curiosity white men would engender, Washington leaders were partial to using Thai. In addition, more than two dozen were already in the pipeline being trained under the auspices of the JUSMAGTHAI air division to man Thai TACAN sites, but many months of training were still required for them to attain an acceptable level of proficiency. Regardless of who performed the job, thorough sheep-dipping would be required. They would be Americans, either USAF or civilian, using the Air America cover or Thai introduced as Lao civil aviation personnel.

Discussions regarding feasible TACAN locations and suitable personnel continued throughout December. Pressure from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to act stimulated a decision to initially use Americans, and then revert to Thai within a month and a half of installation. Before units could be moved into position, enemy movement in Sam Neua rendered Na Khang security questionable. Because of the fluid situation, Jolly Green crews and equipment were advised to RON at Long Tieng. At the same time, Na Khang came under a cloud, and Phu Kate security was also deemed problematic. To alleviate concern, General Ma requested a FAR battalion be located close to the mountain. This was done by early January.

Because of the mentioned problems and red tape within COMUSMACV and 2nd Air Division, TACAN installation failed to materialize in 1965. However, issues were eventually resolved and one navigation unit was lifted by U.S. Army CH-54

helicopters to Phou Kate in Military Region Four by early January 1966.

Starting small, first Tiger Hound jet plane strikes began on 5 December, with additional elements of the new program's being fed into the mix as they became available. Ranch Hand UC-C-123 defoliation along a narrow strip of border LOCs commenced on the 6th. Supported by KC-135 fuel tankers, twenty-four B-52s, generically code-named Arc Light, but called initially Duck Flight, from Anderson Air Force Base, Guam, dropped both hard and cluster bombs (CBU) on suspected infiltration routes along the South Vietnamese border.

Almost immediately, U.S. media began feeding and enlarging on other newspaper disclosures relating to the air war in Indochina. An article appeared in the *New York Times* stating that U.S. air attacks had failed to destabilize North Vietnam's economy, or significantly diminish North Vietnamese Army capability to infiltrate South Vietnam. Indicating possible intelligence leaks, the paper's observations were suspiciously comparable to a recently issued Defense Intelligence Agency analysis, which concluded that destroying Vietnamese industry, or threatening to do so, would persuade North Vietnamese leaders to cease hostilities against the South, and peace negotiations seemed unlikely.

The publicity problem escalated well out of proportion. Other American papers commented on USG's expanded Lao air operations. Either too large an operation to maintain complete silence, or leaked by unscrupulous U.S. and Lao sources, Tiger Hound operations were revealed in a 13 December article of the *New York Daily News*. The paper divulged that U.S. planes were defoliating Lao jungles for the first time and other mission details. Then the *Washington Post* printed a disclosure of the

first B-52 strike in Laos. Despite Washington agencies' refusal to comment on the publications' story lines and Souvanna Phouma's outright denial--you never confirm anything--the American public was now cognizant that our supposedly innocuous armed reconnaissance program was largely a façade.

While Ambassador Sullivan spent a few well-deserved days vacationing, he contemplated and worried about U.S. attempts to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail system. Despite believing the new air program would vastly increase harassment of enemy movement, total interdiction would fail. With the increase of perfected LOCs, he expected enemy forces, perhaps reaching divisional proportions, to soon move down the trails.

Late in December, Tiger Hound sorties averaged a hundred per day, but overall results were judged unimpressive. Despite two Shining Brass reconnaissance team missions penetrating the border area from South Vietnam, without adequate ground intelligence teams walking through bombed areas, there was little substantive or hard evidence of Tiger Hound results against vehicle traffic. Except for twelve "confirmed" truck kills, aerial observed secondary explosions formed most of the BDA observations. In addition, only twenty-six storage and bivouac hard points were actually destroyed or damaged. Also, making interdiction and assessment of strikes difficult, the enemy reverted to almost total nighttime movement. To counter this change of policy, fighters were equipped with flares, but results were limited. In addition, by year's end there was no tangible evidence that the air interdiction program had reduced enemy movement into South Vietnam. To the contrary, infiltration was deemed increasing.

The latest coordinated bombing effort became academic when President Johnson pre-announced and then halted all but critical

bombing in the Southeast Asian Theater. This commenced late on the afternoon of 24 December for thirty hours to encourage Vietnamese leaders to begin peace negotiations. However, the bombing cessation caused such fervor among principals in Laos that four days later LBJ lifted the ban for Laos. ^{4 5}

HOME LEAVE

On the tenth, after obtaining roundtrip tickets at the Company Civil Air Transport office on the corner of Patpong and Suriwongse roads, I left Don Muang Airport on the German airline Lufthansa for New York's JFK International Airport. I had

⁴ Author Note: The reader might be curious why the Author dwells on U.S. military air operations, seemingly an activity divorced from the Air America operation and tasks. There are two cogent reasons: First, the extent of our substantial SAR involvement has already been described. Second, except for prior minor incursions, future participation in multi-mission long range Ho Chi Minh Trail infiltration and exfiltration road watch operations was close at hand. This element will be discussed in future books.

⁵ Segment Sources:
 Ambassador William Sullivan to the State Department, 12/03/65.
 Victor Anthony, 182-183.
 Information Memorandum, Bundy to Rusk, Escalation of U.S. Activities in Laos, 12/03/65.
 CIA-Office of the Deputy Director for Intelligence, Memorandum for McGeorge Bundy-Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Communist Road Development in Laos, 12/08/65.
 Memorandum Deputy Director of Intelligence CIA-Cline to Bundy, Communist Road Development in Laos, 12/10/65.
 Jacob Van Staaveren, 96-104.
 Melvin Porter, *Project CHECO, Tiger Hound* (HQ PACAF Directorate, Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division, 09/06/66) 10-11, 15, 17-18.
 Telegram Embassy Laos (Swank) to State, 12/04/65.
 John Bowman-*Almanac*, 131.
 William Sullivan to State, 12/15/65.
 Memorandum Deputy Director Office of Southeast Asian Affairs-Ewing to the Director-Trueheart, 12/16/65.

originally planned to journey home on Pan American, but CAT no longer enjoyed a discount fare on the carrier.

The trip was a bit difficult at first. Used to Asian ladies' petite features and delightful figures, at first the tall (perceived even taller by their conical blue hats), Teutonic stewardesses aboard the Boeing 707 tended to cow me. I was duly impressed by their comparatively long noses. Like all things in life, after sufficient exposure, I became accustomed to the new breed.

Passengers offloaded at Frankfurt terminal during the refueling process. I had studied the Germanic language for two years at Duke while pursuing the pre-med curriculum, but was never fluent. Moreover, I felt uncomfortable and intimidated in the presence of so many German citizens. It was a difficult bias to resolve, which most likely lingered from my wartime childhood days. Curiously, I never encountered the same feeling while living on Okinawa or visiting Japan. Even though the Pacific War was equally as nasty as the European Theater, I received only good vibrations there, and considered myself accepted. Such were the differences in Eastern and Western cultures.

My main goal during annual leave was to inform my aging parents of my current marital status. I believed, and Tuie agreed, that I should reveal this life change gently before introducing her to them and America. My second intention was to recharge my batteries, and enjoy a month off in a restful home environment, one where I might forget combat flying and the myriad of bad experiences encountered during the year. Both goals were achieved without problem, and I was able to continue to march.

TOM PITKIN

The same day that I departed Bangkok, Lou McCasland assisted Tom Pitkin in obtaining medical evacuation to the Bangkok Christian Hospital. In order to dispel some of the boredom of living in Udorn, for some time Air America employees, mostly management types, had purchased and owned tubular, open cockpit Go-Karts. Abadie had one of the first machines, equipped with a power-enhanced engine manufactured in Germany, which Tom Penniman had brought from Hong Kong. After the engine was installed, only fixed wing Captain Bob Hunt was able to adequately control the Go-Kart. Before the large USAF buildup began at the airport, the men generally raced their machines the entire length of the runway. One morning, a C-54 landed at the Udorn airport carrying Air Force brass and parked on the taxiway near the Air America parking ramp. Much to the officers' displeasure, a few individuals drove under the wings of the taxing C-54. Following that incident, access to the runway was discontinued. Only the concrete taxiway was used until the races were moved to the laterite taxiway and then to the horse racing track in town.

On the day of the big race and accident, Lou was upcountry. Upon return he learned that while racing around the oval and cornering at high speed, Pitkin began skidding uncontrollably toward the crowd. While attempting to stop the slide, Tom placed his foot outside the machine. Wearing only shower shoes, his foot became entangled and folded under the Go-Cart. This resulted in deep cuts and serious abrasions to the top of his right foot.

He was taken to the Air America clinic, where Doctor Ma cut the lacerated flesh off the affected foot with his pocket knife,

cleansed the wounds, fashioned a walking cast on the foot, and sent Pitkin home to Benjarn Road.

It was not the only incident that day. Ground Maintenance Supervisor Pete Doris borrowed and drove Wayne Knight's Go-Kart. During the race, he nearly destroyed the vehicle. The machine's coup de grace (sounds like coup de gras) occurred later. While Doris cleaned the cart with volatile fluid in a facility hanger, the machine caught fire, ending Wayne's racing career.

Mike Jarina also heard the story and observed Pitkin wearing the cast. Like most of us, Mike believed Tom had failed to display good common sense or judgment by placing his job at risk. (I had heard the story before leaving for CONUS.) Attempting to be humorous, Mike asked Tom if he wanted to sell his Go-Kart. Sandy, Tom's wife, took exception to Mike's attempt at levity, and not showing proper sympathy. ⁶

Before long the foot began troubling Tom, so he returned to the clinic. ⁷ Following a sniff test, Doctor Ma removed the cast after which he discovered the wound festering and becoming gangrenous. Not equipped to handle a medical problem so potentially life-threatening, somewhat alarmed for a Chinese, he recommended that Pitkin immediately depart for Bangkok to obtain proper help. McCasland, learning of Tom's plight visited him and found him suffering extreme pain. Therefore, Lou took Tom to the airport terminal to purchase a ticket on Thai Airways. During the ride, Tom continued to moan and cry from the pain.

⁶ Most Air America wives failed to understand or appreciate our jaded gallows humor.

⁷ If not seriously ill, the clinic was judged only a good place to visit for vaccinations and minor ailments.

Unfortunately, there was no commercial flight available, so Lou planned to take him to Bangkok on the train.

While still at the airport terminal building, a small Air Force executive jet arrived to retrieve a group of VIPs. All the seats were filled, but Lou, appealing to their humanitarian nature, asked if they would consider taking Pitkin to Bangkok and allow him to lie in the aisle. They agreed. He also requested that the pilot call ahead and have an ambulance standing by to take Tom to the hospital. This was accomplished.

Three days later Lou went to Bangkok and visited Pitkin at the Bangkok Christian. He was much improved and on the way to recovery. ⁸

Piloting Hotel-37, Mike Jarina flew with former Marine Colonel Voss on the 12th, while a new Flight Mechanic, Stuckey crewed from below. ⁹ The short AID mission took them to an area west of Route-13 and the long ridge at Phou Pha Nang. Mike assessed Voss as harboring a hangover and assumed he was a drunk. Like so many former field grade officers, he had difficulty making the transition to civilian life. He was determined to be the boss and not allow former Marine Corps captains tell him what to do. He did not remain long in our organization.

Knight's assessment of Voss was slightly different. He placed him in the same category as oldsters Zim Radalinski and

⁸ Joan McCasland Diary December 1965.
Lou McCasland Email, 09/10/00.
EW Knight Emails, 07/20/00, 05/16/01.
Mike Jarina Interviews.
Tom Penniman Email, 03/31/00.
CJ Abadie Email.

⁹ The Author met then Major Voss on a GV-1 flight to Iwakuni, Japan.

"Swede" Larson, unable to hack the helicopter program. Flying H-34s in Laos was still considered and always would be a younger man's task. From time to time, the CPH office updated the wish list of pilot qualifications with the Washington office. Preference was stressed for USMC types with at least 1,500 hours throttle twisting experience. After experiences with the early "grey" trainees, a maximum age for hiring helicopter pilots was also established. ¹⁰

NORTHWESTERN MR-1-OSCAR

While Joe Flipse was still in the States undergoing language school and USAID training, Bill Taylor hired a Lao named Oscar for fifty dollars a month to prepare meals for him at Ban Nam Thouei (LS-118). After Joe returned to Southeast Asia and was assigned to 118, he inherited Oscar.

When Joe originally encountered Oscar, he operated a makeshift cake shop at Chiang Khong. As one approached the immigration office at the top of a path leading from the boat landing there was a wat, behind which there was an empty lot adjacent to the river. Oscar's "hooch" was located beneath a large tree. The structure was cleverly fashioned from panels of leaves held flat by small bamboo strips spaced on a five by eight-inch grid. Grass thatch formed the roof, and the building dimensions were only four by six feet. Oscar, about to embark to Ban Houei Sai and peddle cakes to people at the Dooley Hospital, motioned Joe to approach him. He was proud to show his oven,

¹⁰ Mike Jarina Interview.
EW Knight Emails, 05/10/00, 07/18/00.

bricks stacked fourteen inches high with a two by three-foot steel sheet on top.

If one could believe what he said, Oscar purported to have quite a colorful history. A Lao, he offered many unsubstantiated claims, some bordering on sheer hyperbole. One alleged that he was half American, the son of a missionary woman. That he had served in the American Navy during the Yangtzi River operation and had spent time in San Francisco. He also claimed to have been "Vinegar Joe" Stillwell's cook. Attesting to part of Oscar's veracity, Stillwell's grandson visited Ban Houei Sai at one time and confirmed to Flipse that his grandfather had mentioned Oscar.

After Joe relocated to Nam Thouei with his new wife Suzie and her ten-year-old son, Stan Monnie, a multi-talented Air Commando was loaned to "Jiggs" Weldon, and then assigned to Site-118 to assist with the medic training program. Originally a FAC, this was the same individual who, along with Captain John Teague, helped run the Na Khang bombing program during the early Hua Mounng operation.

The USAF later concocted a plan to clandestinely shoot down one of General Ouan's C-47s departing Ban Houei Sai and ostensibly carrying a load of opium. A code and other secret details were closely held by those involved. A fast mover would be diverted from another area to accomplish the job. The plotters assumed a Lao plane crash deep in remote jungle would never be found and its disappearance forever remain a mystery. The scheme was never executed. Planners failed to understand the time element in harvesting the opium crop. The plan was terminated after local observers tired of watching the Lima-25 airport.



Cake aficionado Oscar in front of his restaurant at Ban Houei Sai.
Flipse Collection.

VIPs from the States were expected to partake of Thanksgiving dinner at Nam Thouei. Intending to make an impression on the dignitaries, Monnie journeyed to the Vientiane Embassy commissary and purchased a large turkey with all the trimmings. At the appointed date and time, Congressman Olin Teague and another representative from New Hampshire, Monnie, Joe and his wife sat down to dinner. Oscar served the turkey. However, possessing no idea how to cook a turkey U.S. style, he had sliced the bird and fried individual pieces. Monnie, looking forward to the ceremonial carving and the points he hoped to accrue, was livid about Oscar ruining his day in the sun. Despite the unintended blunder, as usual, Oscar's food was delicious.

Oscar loved to bake cakes and sell them for profit to sweet-toothed locals. Requiring extra eggs and flour for the confections, he padded the Nam Thouei food bill (this amounted to 150 eggs for one week). Finally, Joe had enough of Oscar's double dealing and informed Tony Poe that now his wife was cooking for him, and a good cook was available to hire. The con worked. Poe who did not know Oscar or his "idiotsyncrasies," hired him. Oscar lasted only three months at Nam Yu.

While employed at Site-118A, Oscar cohabited with an Aka tribal woman who was mentally deficient, but young. He was financially burdened by her opium-addicted mother, and obligated to produce more income. Consequently, his cake business led to a requirement to purchase an enormous amount of eggs to produce more cakes. When the bill padding was discovered, he was dismissed.

Joe, his wife, and son moved back to Ban Houei Sai. Disliking the cooking chore, Stan Monnie rehired Oscar. Monnie

was at Site-118 through the winter until replaced by another individual.

After Stan left, Oscar returned to Ban Houei Sai, opened a shop, and later worked at the Air America hostel.

Although never receiving credit for the prosperous cake caper largely but indirectly supported by AID funds, Flipse jokingly considered Oscar his most successful American aid project. ¹¹

H-34 crews dispatched from Udorn always RON at Chiang Kong or Nam Yu. Unlike Long Tieng or Na Khang, the region was normally allotted one helicopter. Therefore, knowing that if the machine was not properly utilized to justify its presence, they would lose it, the two principal Customers at the sister sites agreed to share the H-34's cost. From the time Jib was responsible for 118A, Joe (AID) paid for half the helicopter time, but rarely used one. When he did, it was usually to pay medics or conduct emergency medical evacuations. Instead, he preferred to trade Tony H-34 time for his Porter while moving rice to villages. Air support people from both Sky (CIA) and AID frequently visited Ban Houei Sai checking on the area's fixed wing and rotorcraft requirements. They could never comprehend the workers' methods of throwing air assets into the pot and sharing. However, the technique virtually guaranteed a fully loaded aircraft on both legs of a trip. It also established fast turnarounds, a good day's work for pilots, and troop support.

During his military career, Monnie attended several special schools dealing with aerial delivery, parachute rigging, and

¹¹ Monnie left the Air Force and later worked as a medic for Doc Weldon. LS-118 was later downgraded in importance, and no additional Air Force personnel were assigned there.

similar items. Joe was having air support problems paying outlying medics. Since Nam Yu was hogging the H-34, but underutilizing the Helio Courier, Stan suggested that they attempt air drops. They decided to give the plan a try. Drop pouches were sewn from excess wool and jacket material RO had provided for uniforms, but rejected by the troops in the tropical environment. To retrieve ground items, Monnie had illustrated instructions printed and reproduced in Vientiane showing how to erect a goal post structure with a rope strung between. A hook to snatch the item was fashioned from two bucket balls wired together with a rock at the intersection of the handles to provide sufficient weight to hang twenty feet below the Helio. The system was efficient and payroll money was successfully dropped in pouches. Following a drop, the plane loitered and circled back to snatch the receipt, medicine requests, and mail. The worst part in the operation was the retriever hanging out the side of the plane in the winter.

With the pay problem delivery solved, medicine still had to be delivered in good shape. Some pills were enclosed in plastic containers, but most were housed in glass. Therefore, Monnie showed Joe how to make low level delivery Cross Chutes. These worked well, and to further minimize breakage, pilots attempted to drop the mini chutes into brush to break the fall. To solve the liquid breakage problem, ground personnel later used sawdust to good advantage, cushioning the impact.

In late 1965, Pathet Lao units controlled areas around Muang Long, Mounng Sing, Nam Tha, and much of the region east of the Nam Tha River. FAR operations launched later into the Nam Tha region did not concern the enemy, for they controlled the people. Moreover, whenever it was deemed necessary, they would

eject the government troops. However, they never bothered Mua Su's Meo guerrillas.

OPERATIONS

Aggressive Tony Poe was not an individual content to sit on his hands when a war was in need of waging. After transferring to Nam Yu, during initial attempts to stimulate friendly troop movement in western Military Region One in an area twenty-three miles northeast of LS-118A, eight miles north northwest of Nam Bu (LS-125), a multi-day limited operation was launched to capture the Nam Ma, Muang Long-Ban Thang Valley. With Lu pitted against Lu, it presented Commanding Officer Major Phai a golden opportunity to spend time in the field and demonstrate his mettle. However, the operation never amounted to anything except additional refugees relocating to Moug Mounge (LS-93).

Captain Phil Goddard, who frequently worked at Nam Yu, ferried Tony, Joe, Stan, Little Joe, and some officers to the forward nose of a ridge overlooking Route-322 and the Nam Ma Valley. From this vantage point, Flipse observed a five-acre plot of upland rice across the valley.

A 4.2mm mortar would have provided an ideal weapon to support the operation, but never trained in fire direction control (FDC) procedures, unlike General Vang Pao's expertise with the weapon, the Lao generally were not able to deploy and fire one. Instead, the troops used smaller mortars, but firing was all done by line-of-sight. In addition, their battle tactics were questionable. Government troops would normally sit in a fortified position without overhead cover. Then, when Pathet Lao mortar crews fired a few rounds at them, the friendlies evacuated the area. Sometimes, when surrounded and left with no other option, they would fight.

To take up the slack, Tony planned to support the Lu troops in the valley using rocket firing techniques previously employed from the heights of Phu Khe (LS-19) against enemy in the Xieng Khouang Ville (Lima-03) Valley. Upgraded from the days of using wooden launchers, he employed a "V"-shaped angle iron mounted to a 57mm tripod. This was fitted with a graduated Vernier to aid in adjusting fire. Shells continued to be five-inch rockets with a five to twelve-mile range. The friendly launch position was selected near the edge of the ridge. The objective was close, but because of a substantial vertical drop to the valley floor, an enemy frontal attack on the launch site was not considered likely. Therefore, most rounds were fired or dropped directly into the valley. Trees in front of the slope tended to mask the impact zone.

During rocket launches, FAR Lieutenant Sai acted as an artillery officer. Fluent in Lao, Joe overheard the amusing radio traffic with the unit in the attack mode below. During one exchange, Sai asked the radio operator on the valley floor, *"Did you see that one?"*

"No, it was a dud."

"OK. Here comes another one."

"OK. I saw that one. It hit way off."

"How far?"

"Well, not too far. Move it a little and try another one."

"Which way?"

"I don't know."

To supplement friendly fire and obtain a little recreation, Goddard flew Flipse and Monnie into the valley to stir up the wasps. Joe carried Garry Erb's BAR. However, the trigger spring had been installed upside down and when he attempted to switch

from slow fire to fully automatic, he broke the selector mechanism. Erb never forgave him for that.

Instead of where he should have been, in the valley with his attacking troops, Major Phai stood on the hill watching the show. His radio communications were also hilarious. Flipse considered the entire operation a farce. If Sky personnel had understood Lao, they would have immediately terminated the action. Tony was afforded an opportunity to assess the results of the entire operation after it was over, and he correctly concluded that nothing worthwhile had been accomplished.

While the operation was still underway, a T-28 arrived from Udorn via Luang Prabang loaded for bear. ¹² It marked the first time the Nam Yu crowd utilized a Thai-piloted plane for air strikes. Little Joe was the designated FAC in a Helio. He screamed Eagle Eagle into his microphone, as the T-28 pilot ignored his calls, overflew the position, and headed north toward China. Expecting the worst, the observers stood on the ridgeline watching with sinking hearts and feeling helpless. When the Thai pilot eventually switched to the correct radio frequency, he was well across the border. FAC Joe provided him directions and he reversed course to complete his mission.

Flipse had never seen a fighter bomber in action. When the T-28 pilot began another pass, Joe asked Stan about the rumbling noise. Monnie said it was only strafing fire. Joe was amazed, *"What, from 3,000 feet?"*

"Yeah, that is the way they do it."

Joe believed that was the last time Thai Fireflies were used in the area.

¹² If one could consider a weaponized T-28 heavily loaded.

When Lao T-28 pilots first began working the Nam Tha area, their accuracy and enthusiasm to strike the enemy was not much better. In the beginning, the planes were refueled and rearmed at Lima-25 by the rice crew. Tony was always there to observe. At first, he rode in the back seat of an aircraft attempting to obtain a day's work out of the pilots. After seeing little progress, he gave up and was heard to say whenever the planes appeared, *"It's more buffalo wallows today."*¹³

JARINA

On the 13th, Mike Jarina, Dick Conrad, and transitioning Flight Mechanic "Pete" Peterson went upcountry in Hotel-35 for a week. After a stop in Vientiane, they proceeded to Xieng Lom, Ban Houei Sai, and Nam Yu, where they finished the day shuttling bullets, beans, and bandages.

The following day, at Tony's behest Mike assumed the role of a "Nam Tha Angel." This duty entailed performing SAR coverage for Lao T-28 pilot strikes flying out of Luang Prabang. It appeared as if the pilots were bombing the outskirts of the Nam Tha Valley close to the grass runway. The target was not much larger than an outhouse. Afterward, H-34 flights were conducted to Nam Bu and Ban Nam Thouei.

Wednesday took Mike to Ban Houei Sai, where he was loaded for a site fifteen miles southwest. Then he was assigned coordinates on the west bank of the Nam Tha River, eight miles east of Ban Houei Niete (later numbered LS-351). Separating Luang Prabang from Houa Kong Province, the Nam Tha River served

¹³ Joe Flipse Emails, 04/11/97, 05/05/97, 05/08/97, 05/11/97, 05/25/97, 05/31/97, 06/11/97, 06/28/97, 07/03/97, 07/05/97.

as a demarcation line for FAR and tribal troops intent on establishing a presence in the area. Later, Mike acted as the "Nam Tha Angel", orbiting five miles east of Ban Vieng (LS-135). After a final trip to Ban Houei Sai, the Hotel-35 crew again RON at Nam Yu.

A cold front from Yunnan, China, had moved into the region overnight and the 16th dawned cloudy and rainy. The first trip of the day was scheduled to a new pad forty-six miles north-northeast of 118A in hills six miles southwest of the Moung Sing Valley. Tony indicated that when Mike arrived at the destination, the new pad would appear freshly cut, and a red foxtrot signal would be displayed to establish positive identification.

Mike considered the territory where he was going strange and unfamiliar. In addition, inclement weather only made the trip worse. After arriving overhead the position, an orange kilo panel was laid out on the ground and people were present. It was the wrong signal. Thinking he had made a navigation error, he turned 180 degrees and flew back to a last known checkpoint, where he established another heading. It placed him at the same Landing zone, where the identical orange K was displayed once again. Despite a signal and innocuous ground setting, the identification was incorrect. Therefore, he once again reversed course, but a subsequent trip produced the identical results. Confused and still unsure of the site's security, he returned to Nam Yu.

By the time he landed at 118A, the radio operator had already called, relaying that the helicopter had flown directly over them. Concerned, Tony inquired why Mike had not landed at the site. Mike answered that he could not find the pre-briefed red foxtrot signal, and that another signal had been displayed.

Tony threw his hands in the air shouting, "Same. Same." Mike took issue with Tony: he had guidelines to follow. Poe insisted that the troops did not know how to spell, and that K and F letters were actually close. Fortunately, the panel color differences were not discussed. Tony was particularly unhappy because the abort, and already-scarce flight time per day offered curtailed other missions. The matter was settled equitably and Mike returned the original load to the K site. ¹⁴

PAPA FOXTROT CHARLIE

Joe Flipse was at Nam Thouei on Thursday. About mid-morning he received an emergency call over the high frequency single side band radio from the Ban Houei Sai AID office. BV-18, located at Pak Tha, had been savaged by an enemy attack, and the unit required assistance with medical evacuations. Such work was not really Ban Houei Sai's responsibility, but since Luang Prabang had no helicopter available, Joe agreed to help. The word was passed to Nam Yu. Finally completing his embarrassing mission (s) to the Moung Sing area, Jarina picked up Joe and flew to Lima-25. While Joe obtained the latest information

¹⁴ Mike Jarina, still a relative newbie to the operation, was exactly right following the established SOP requiring a correct signal, and being extra cautious landing at a new or any landing zone. The signal panel system had been developed by the Customer specifically to enhance crew safety. We often experienced problems with correct HLZ ground signals being displayed, and without proper site identification, joint Customer-Company SOPs specified we were not supposed to land. However, since it was a negative reflection on the pilot to return with a load, seasoned pilots often preferred to make a judgment call as to a course of action. It was rarely a rash action or calculated risk, for during such cases, visual cues, the presence of people, chickens, pigs, and animals, and a sixth sense predominated. Because the consequences of being wrong could be disastrous, a helicopter pilot's decision always had to be right.

regarding the Pak Tha situation, Hotel-35 was loaded with rice for an interim stop on a ridgeline located near Ban Langkay at the apex of the "S" turn where the Mekong flowed south toward Sayaboury Province and Xieng Lom. Muang Pak Tha was located a few miles farther downriver, just below the "S" bend at the confluence of the Nam Ta and Mekong Rivers.

Mike launched downstream with Joe in the co-pilot seat. Lingering fog and clouds substantially restricted visibility, necessitating slow, low flight over the river. About 1030 hours, Joe looked up and glimpsed a C-47 overhead with only fifty feet between them and the cloud base. Mike, engrossed in picking his way through fog and rain, failed to see the plane. After depositing the load of rice, they continued downriver and eventually found Pak Tha.

There were no wounded men at the site, only fourteen KIAs. Flipse judged the situation yet another FAR BV-18 disaster. As a former military man, he had never seen such a mess. Looking like miniature Lao houses, the small unit had built ten four by six-foot bamboo "hooches" four feet off the ground. Lacking adequate defensive positions incorporating interlocking fire, like sitting ducks camping out in the open, they were located 50 feet from the Nam Tha riverbank and fifty feet to the east behind the village. Undetected, using darkness to conceal their movement, a PL unit had maneuvered down the river bottom to attack the sleeping troops from the river bank. Joe believed that even if there had been fifty or more FAR troops present the result would have been exactly the same. The entire scenario was typical of the Lao Army, and displayed their general field deficiency. This incident involved no adequate planning, no field leadership, no security, ad nauseum...

Joe, Mike, and the two Flight Mechanics were only on the ground for three minutes, just long enough to ascertain that there were no survivors. They did not retrieve any bodies, and as no officers were present, they departed. Mike dropped Joe at Ban Houei Sai and returned to Nam Yu.

Later that afternoon, Lao police arrived from town and informed Joe that their station at Ban Dan reported people on the river bank had heard what sounded like a loud crash on the Thai side. After checking with Vientiane, he discovered that Lao C-47, Papa Foxtrot Charlie (PFC), had not been heard from for several hours. The weather had significantly improved, so Joe called Tony's radio operator, explained the situation, and requested that Hotel-35 return and pick him up to begin a search.

Since construction of the strip and commencement of operations at Nam Yu, two Lao C-47s flown by experienced Thai pilots, periodically air dropped ammunition from the AB-1 Udorn warehouse. ¹⁵

Their commitment was such that without directional beacons or other navigational aids, the men normally air dropped cargo under almost all conditions regardless of the weather. Flipse recalled a time when he sat on Tony's front porch with the valley completely socked in. No aircraft were visible, but parachutes with pallets of ammo suddenly materialized out of thick fog, clouds, and rain.

A police patrol was just returning from the Thai side of the river when Jarina landed at Ban Dan. The men had been to the crash site. They indicated there were no survivors at the scene, only four bodies. After the officer in charge pointed to the

¹⁵We generically called this operation Boun Oum Airline.

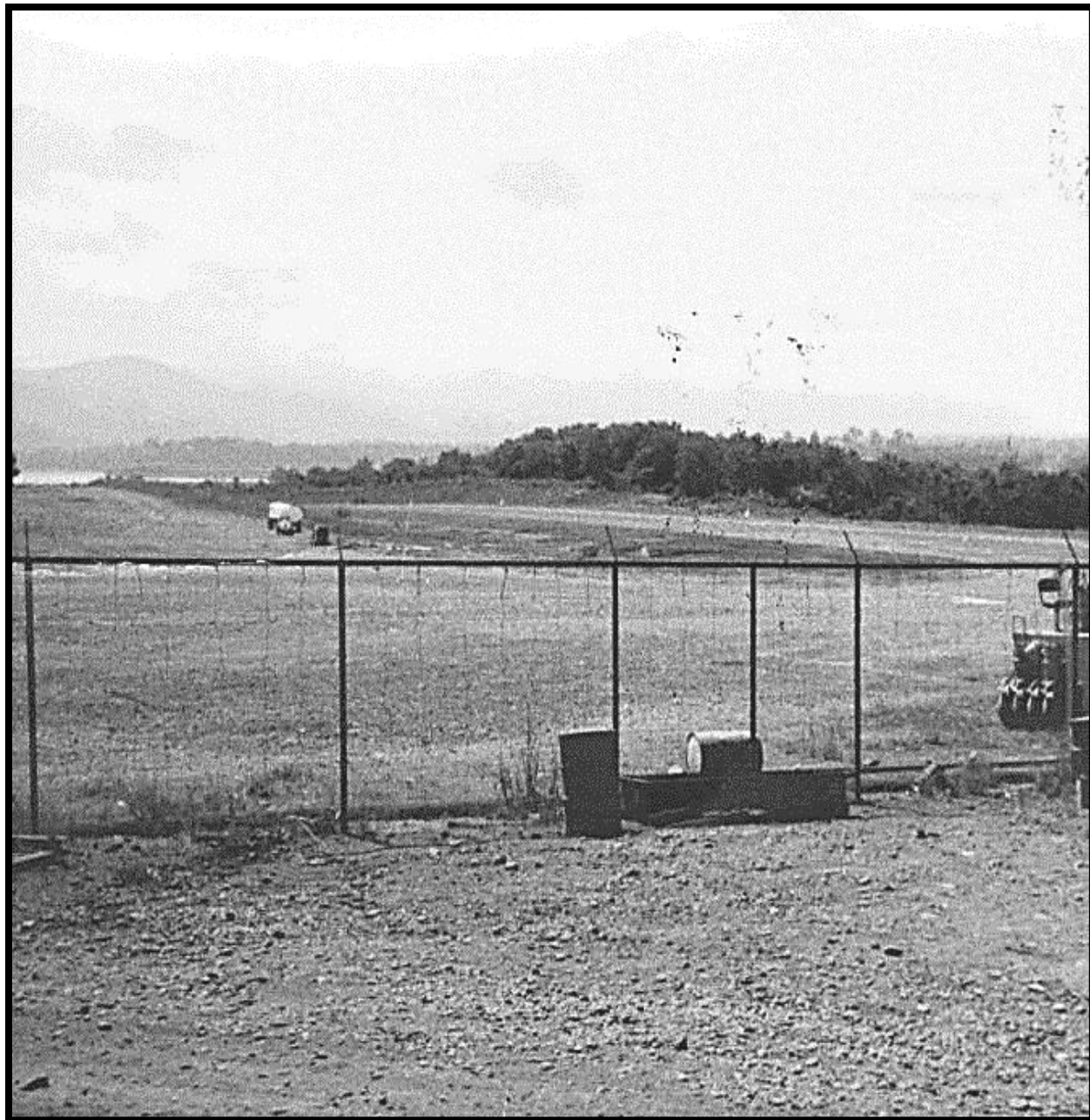
general direction of the wreck, Mike launched. Despite the help, it took a half hour to find the location. It was eventually discovered by still-smoking wreckage. Viewed from the air, it appeared that the plane had sheared apart while entering the tree canopy. Then it burned. Like other airplane crashes where fire was concerned, the tail section was the only intact portion remaining. Jarina speculated that while flying in marginal VFR conditions through the existing scud, the pilot had cleared one of many successive ridges, but failed by only fifty feet on the second. ¹⁶

Discovering a suitable place to land close to the crash site proved challenging for Jarina. The only clearing of consequence was located on the western upstream side of the ridge (PC5729). A former upland rice or opium patch, then overgrown, the opening was restricted and the ground rough. Burned twenty-foot tree stumps, too hefty to remove when the site was first developed by local tribals, dotted the area.

Flipse had never participated in a crash investigation or previously secured a site. Therefore, he asked Jarina what procedure to use. Mike told him to recover valuables and identification, then reaffirm that there were no survivors. Since it was becoming late and Mike required fuel, Joe asked to be dropped off and retrieved the following morning.

Constrained by time, after several unsuccessful attempts to land because of insufficient rotor clearance, to expedite off-loading, Mike hovered and Conrad hoisted Joe ten feet to the ground. The gutsy AID employee climbed over the ridge toward the

¹⁶ Several "almost made it" accidents like this occurred over the years in Laos.



Looking southeast from the Ban Houei Sai airstrip across the Mekong River at the distant Thai mountain ridges.
Flipse Collection.

plane. Before long, he encountered one body and two wooden pallets containing 81mm mortar rounds. He recognized the heavysset pilot, a taller-than-normal Thai with a mouthful of gold teeth. At some time, the man's bladder had evacuated and he was beginning to stiffen. The young man salvaged a wrist watch and then tripped over a mortar shell while moving toward the wreck. This sobered him and he endeavored to be more careful. Parts of PFC were still burning. Concerned that the intense heat might trigger any rounds remaining in the ship to explode, he stopped. More cautious, he backed away, returned to the clearing, and sank down on a log where he contemplated a long, cold, dismal night in the jungle for no logical reason. Analyzing his foolhardiness as darkness approached, he decided to start a fire. Then he thought he heard a helicopter. No, it was not possible, for he had told Jarina to RTB Nam Yu. A few minutes later, the H-34 arrived. Using hand signals to direct Mike overhead, Joe was hoisted into the cabin. Without food, water, bedding, and the prospect of a long night in the weeds, Flipse was quite happy that Jarina had returned for him. On the way back to Ban Houei Sai, Mike revealed that he judged he had sufficient daylight to retrieve Joe, and also, Lima-08 requested more information.

After debarking and returning to the AID shack, Joe called the Lima Oscar Mike on the single side band radio to provide crash particulars. Radio reception was excellent that night. He described it like talking on Ma Bell equipment. Joe inquired if the Operations Manager was aware of the cargo carried. The OM answered in the affirmative. Then Joe explained the wreckage was still smoking when he left and that was the primary reason he could not be more specific about casualty status. Their high frequency radio conversation took place in the clear, and since

they did not need any extra advertising for those listening, he conversed in "upcountry" terms. The operations manager clearly understood Joe's meaning. Before signing off, Joe was apprised that investigators would arrive from Udorn the next day on the remaining C-47.

Before the investigation team arrived later in the morning, Mike conducted a mission to the Mounng Long Valley where a FAR operation was still underway. Then Mike picked up Joe, two investigators, and another individual who carried machetes to clear a landing zone at the crash site. Better prepared this time, Joe had a good ground-air radio Doctor Pat McCreedy provided him to communicate with helicopters. Also, after Suzie learned that Joe had not eaten for an entire day, when he returned the previous night, she insisted he carry food in his rucksack.

While Conrad individually hoisted the men into the clearing, Hotel-35's battery began overheating. With the recovery process still incomplete and people to move, not having the luxury of grounding the H-34, Jarina found a place to land on a river sandbar and waited. The Flight Mechanic disconnected the battery, only reconnecting it to start the engine or establish radio contact with Flipse.¹⁷

Arriving at the crash site, Joe observed numerous people milling about, so many that it looked like a convention site.

¹⁷ Over time, Mike Jarina experienced multiple maintenance problems with H-34s. He only had one engine failure, but vibration levels were a continuing problem. After a triple tachometer failed on another occasion, he called Udorn requesting a replacement. The individual he talked to at the facility told him to fly and observe the copilot's tach needle. A new tachometer arrived the same day and was installed. Ironically, the following day, the other tach failed. Likely cursed, a lot of other problems cropped up with the machine.

Joe's old nemesis, a Thai Border Police captain, was present. He and nineteen other men and nurses were with him. They had arrived by a long tail boat from Chiang Khong and had accomplished the difficult two hour climb to the top of the ridge. Since the accident had occurred on Thai soil, Joe supposed that this constituted a standard Thai emergency procedure operation, complete with all the bells and whistles.

Later in the morning, Captain BP ordered Joe to have Hotel-35's pilot shuttle his people off the hill to the sandbar. Aware of Jarina's battery problems and his desire to restrict flights, Joe refused. Furthermore, he insisted that they go back down the same way they had ascended. He was not going to ask Jarina to undertake additional risks just because they were lazy. Afraid of losing face among subordinates, Captain Thai took exception to Joe's unwillingness to comply with his considerable authority. Indicating that **he** was in charge of recovery operations, the captain threatened to arrest Flipse, impound the helicopter for violating Thai sovereignty, insulting the King, and other totally inane charges. Joe was not particularly impressed or cowed by the man's pronouncements. He knew Captain BP was bluffing as usual. He would never attempt to arrest him, for he was well armed and had his antagonists outgunned. ¹⁸ Joe also had the benefit of the American eagle sitting on his shoulder. Besides, there was no love lost between the men, for the two had engaged in unpleasant words during past matters, and had cycled through the same arresting threat routine once before. After Captain BP Thai finished blowing smoke and

¹⁸ Joe had previously served in the U.S. Army and was probably the only AID representative in Laos at the time that owned, carried, and was not loath to employ a weapon should the situation dictate.

concluding his face-saving spiel regarding King and country, Joe plopped down on a log and proceeded to eat the lunch Suzie had prepared.

In the meantime, the crash investigating team recovered the four bodies and positioned them for retrieval. By then, all the mortar ammunition had disappeared. Vindicated, Joe noted that the Thai had no trouble hauling the shells downhill without aid of a helicopter.

A young district official (Nai Amphur) fresh out of charm school, after rooting around in the wreckage, discovered an intact map that had survived the fire. A flight path from Udorn to Nam Yu was clearly plotted on the chart. The man was excited over the "secret" information he had discovered. Like many Thai, he spoke passable English and proceeded to quiz Joe regarding the "secret" operation in which PFC's crew had been engaged. Assuming the official was pushing for a speedy promotion, Joe directed him to the Border Police captain for an answer. The official had been privy to the recent conversation in which the captain stated this was Thailand and **he** was in charge. With fresh meat to probe, the man tore into Captain BP, but gained no additional information. However, he kept pecking away until Jarina returned to the site.

With sufficient labor, the pad had been sufficiently improved for Mike to place one wheel on the deck. The four bodies were ferried to the Ban Houei Sai strip. When Jarina landed for a second trip to retrieve Joe and the three others, the Thai contingent were making their way downhill toward the Mekong.

Mike remained upcountry two more days. Relying solely on inbound aircraft, it was often difficult to receive H-34 parts at the remote Nam Yu base. Therefore, it was not until Sunday

when a relief H-34 and crew arrived with a fresh battery and Jarina RTB Udorn. ¹⁹

BAN POUNG HEATS UP

Devoid of sloppy rainy season conditions, the early winter marked the regional Pathet Lao's favorite time to stir the pot in lower Houa Khong Province near Ban Houei Sai. Since the enemy controlled much of the area to the east and north of Ban Pong toward the Nam Tha River, they annually threatened the town. ²⁰

FAR commanders never bothered with this area out of a sense of fear, insufficient personnel, lack of interest, and a multitude of other reasons. Government troops did occupy more accessible positions along the river, south to Pak Tha, and a little north. As military support was never forthcoming from Luang Prabang, Joe assisted the troops with medicine, and casualty evacuations when an H-34 was available. They had one truck when operational and a Jeep. Recruits were conscripted from behind a plow and were largely nonexistent. In the final analysis, they were merely regarded as an early warning system.

Joe and Suzie Flipse moved back into Bill Taylor's house at Nam Thoui for a few weeks just prior to Christmas to help build a new hospital and reestablish the medic project.

One day Gus, the missionary, called on the single side band (SSB) informing Joe that panicky town folk were running around Ban Houei Sai indicating that an enemy attack was imminent on the town. Joe asked Gus to remove the radio from the office, and

¹⁹ Joe Flipse Emails, 06/07/97, 09/19/97, 09/21/97 (4), 09/22/97. Mike Jarina Interviews.

²⁰ Team 8-B tribals were staged to the north, but were controlled from Nam Yu, and had little or nothing to do with FAR operations.

then attempted to call the USAID-XO in Vientiane to inform him of the unstable situation at Lima-25. However, there was a delay, as the man was attending a Christmas party. Gus called the following morning with welcome news that the panicky situation had calmed appreciably.

Later that evening, the Ban Houei Sai duty radio operator called Nam Thouei on the SSB with information the tasseng, his wife, and Joe's driver had been ambushed and killed on Route-3. They were en route to L-25 to inform the Royal Lao Government a Pathet Lao unit occupied Ban Pong village, only fifteen air miles north of Ban Houei Sai.

Joe boarded Pat Thurston's Helio Courier the next afternoon. He was "loaded for bear" should the situation warrant. Planned as a recon mission, Doc Becker, the Public Health dentist, and his son also were onboard. Becker insisted on accompanying the flight, as he required current road information. Doc had served in an airborne division in World War Two, so Joe was not particularly concerned about his safety.

They were flying west of Ban Pong near dusk, sky-lighted by the setting sun. As a precaution, Joe removed the left window and he had his AK-47 assault rifle selector switch set on the ready position. When fireflies lit up on the ground, he returned fire. As often occurs in the brief moments during the "fog of war," and Murphy's omnipresence, events quickly spiraled out of control. Perhaps hot brass casings struck Thurston's neck, for the pilot suddenly commenced unbelievable maneuvers. During the gyrations, Joe estimated that he bounced like a yo-yo from floor to ceiling, while his rifle spewed rounds on full automatic. The angle of fire and aircraft tilt caused the left flap to be hit. Movements were so severe that Joe's P-38 shoulder harness strap broke. His pistol belt and attached canteen dragged to his

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knees. This later manifested in welts and a large red splotch on his skin from his waist down. Both Thurston and Becker's cockpit seat backs tore loose from their mounting bolts. Most disconcerting, an enemy round had struck the window frame next to Flipse's head. Another penetrated the left fuel tank a foot outboard from the fuselage. Gasoline poured from the hole, but they were only a few minutes from the Houei Sai strip. Still, that seemed like very long trip. On short final, reducing speed and no longer streaming fuel, the gushing stream and atomized portions came perilously close to the engine exhaust stack. Excited, Joe screamed at Pat to secure the engine and land dead stick. Thurston complied and made a fine landing, after which they immediately bailed from the potential torch.

Examination revealed enemy rounds had hit the Helio in two places. Joe exceeded that. His collateral damage amounted to five holes, and those were much larger. He humorously thought he should have been awarded a marksmanship badge. ²¹

Flipse left for town where, he delineated the enemy location to Lao officials and attempted to dissuade them and the townspeople from evacuating the town. However, there was still panic in the streets and considerable handholding was required until late that night. The following day Flipse realized that the fear had simmered down when one of his employees arrived for work.

Tony Poe had only relocated to northwest Military Region One a few weeks previously, but long enough for the word to spread regarding his methods. He was already stomping around shouting about ears.

²¹ I doubt if the Maintenance Department would have agreed.

"I wanna see ears. You people are not doing anything. Wanna see ears. Ears-ears-ears. Show me the proof!" ²²

Tony was still experiencing problems with post-surgery adhesions from his January wounding at Hong Non (LS-86). The day following Thurston's Ban Pong hosing, he arrived at the strip awaiting transportation to Udorn and then Bangkok for an extensive medical check and a Pattaya beach vacation. Assistant Garry Erb was normally in charge at Nam Yu when Tony was absent. Howie Freeman still occasionally appeared at the site, but if Joe had a special request, he referred it to Garry. After listening to Joe's account and observing the Helio damage, Tony advised Flipse to enlarge the holes and ensure that no brass cartridges had rolled into the floorboard crevices in the rear of the aircraft. He had been caught once acting as a gunner and was severely reprimanded. In the end, there were no repercussions in regard to the incident, for by late 1965, battle damage was an everyday occurrence. Furthermore, most of the shenanigans Joe perpetrated were conveniently ignored, as the U.S. Mission was involved in enough problems without looking for more.

Joe remained at Ban Houei Sai to assist in the crisis. After two days talking and gathering courage, BV-18 leaders agreed to dispatch a patrol north and establish contact with the enemy. Colonel Ceejen was in charge of the unit. Generally considered a floater and a trouble shooter, he was in Luang Prabang attempting to obtain help from that quarter. Although committed to paper, the Military Region One-Agency control

²² Ears: Although grisly evidence, collecting ears were Poe's criteria of a positive kill.

process had not actually been finalized because Poe had serious issues with it.

Bill Young's original second in command, Sam, acted as the airfield dispatcher and honcho. Joe and Sam were at the strip when the BV-18 two-and-a-half-ton truck rumbled in from town loaded with the FAR patrol. The men hopped out, smoked, talked, and finally moved up the road on foot. They returned two hours later refusing to discuss any aspects occurring during the patrol. Instead, the man in charge called town on the land line. When the truck arrived, they disconnected the phone and placed it in the truck. Then everyone, including the airport police, boarded and departed the area, leaving only Joe and Sam at the strip. Joe was stumped. None of his U.S. Army military experience and excellent training had prepared him for the eventuality of troop bug-out.

Joe later discovered that the patrol had marched around a curve in the road just out of sight, and then squatted in the bushes until a villager ambled by. Their tactics amounted to collaring the guy and repeating whatever hysterical rumor the terrified villager related to them. Consequently, the population of Ban Houei Sai thought Ho Chi Minh himself was on the town's outskirts. The episode caused Joe to consider the rational and total inadequacy of the Lao during any actual or perceived military emergency. Preparing for a celebration to make merit, or for a party, the people were the world's best organizers. However, when it came to war...Still, it depended on what was important in one's culture. Joe speculated that if he had been raised in a country overrun as many times as Laos, he also would have been more adept at running than fighting.

FAR's effort to alleviate problems at Ban Pong had been a bust, and the situation was still deemed potentially critical.

Joe was angry because he had risked his life to pinpoint the enemy, and all he heard was that it was someone else's responsibility. There was simply no leadership available--everyone was out of town. Still, seeming the only persons who cared, Joe and Sam could not just sit on their hands doing nothing, but they were not sure how or what action to initiate. They could not count on Nam Yu for help, for Joe was aware that after the treachery and unpleasant past experience working with the FAR at Ban Pong, the tribals would never again provide assistance to the Lao. During the course of conversation, Joe informed Sam that a motivated and aggressive patrol was essential to establish contact with the enemy, and then set up some security between them and the town. Sam, a taciturn person, rarely indicated what he was thinking or talked very much. He never took sides with feuding Americans.

During every day work, Sam employed a Dodge three quarter ton truck to transport supplies and people from the boat landing to the airstrip. Around 1600 hours, the Dodge careened wildly through the area. Joe considered this a highly unusual procedure, as the regular driver normally babied the old truck. Sitting in the truck bed were eight of Bill Young's elite Lahu-Shan people equipped to do battle. The truck never slowed, just passed through the strip in a huge cloud of dust and continued out the Nam Tha road toward the Pathet Lao.

Joe spent half the night attempting to calm fearful town officials. Late the following morning he asked Sam if the patrol had produced any results. Sam merely pointed to a stained burlap rice sack in the corner of the office. Attached to the sack was a cardboard tag torn from the bottom of a corrugated box. The

label was simply addressed "To Yupin," Tony Poe's upcountry code name.²³

The sack was heavy for its size. Curious, Joe asked Sam what it contained.

He learned the patrol had achieved some positive results. The unit established an ambush site the previous night, killing an enemy lieutenant similarly intent on establishing contact. The lieutenant was not having any better luck with his local people than the FAR. Using a villager as guide, he was intercepted a full ten miles in front of his forward lines. The soldier carried the usual diary, photos, and considerable paperwork, typical for this type of enemy soldier. Young's boys, not squeamish about dismembering enemy foes, severed the man's head and deposited it in the sack. Later delivered to Udorn, the trophy sat in the AB-1 office for a week, becoming quite ripe by the time Tony returned from his medical exams and beach vacation. Tony later informed Joe that the sack was stuck to the floor. Unsure of what to do with it, he tossed the grisly item out over the Ritaville Ridge area on the way back to Nam Yu via Site-20A. Poe never discussed the episode again, and his future rhetoric was measurably toned down regarding the taking of enemy ears.

ZIM'S EXPERTISE

The same morning Joe viewed the sack, Lloyd Zimmerman flew his Porter down from 118-Alternate. He was looking for someone to operate what Joe called the "egg crate," a grenade dropping apparatus. Late in 1964, Pop Buell had a tinsmith build the drop

²³ Yupin: The Author never heard or used this name while associated with Poe.

rig for Poe. It consisted of a series of hollow tubes that completely filled the Porter's cargo drop door. There were a series of broom handles fixed to a pallet that matched the tubes. The tubes were filled with hand grenades sans pins (tube sides prevented the spring-loaded fuse spoon from activating). Once over the target, the kicker stomped on the pallet pushing down on the broom sticks to eject the grenades. The upgraded system was supposed to be a vast improvement over the original delivery device, which relied solely on a gravity drop, and often resulted in hung grenades.

Zim was unable to obtain anyone from Nam Yu to help perform the drop, as the junior Case Officers there were reluctant to help him, and were conscientious about following the AB-1 directives regarding non participation in aggressive combat actions.

In the fall of 1964, before expanded Lao-Thai T-28 support was available, Zim had begun his illustrious rock bombing career. Normally, Long Tieng Case Officer Terry Burke rode with him to assist with drops, or to shoot up enemy positions around Khang Kho. With some degree of success, the two employed the powerful Pilatus Porter to drop rocks on southbound enemy convoys along Route-4 from Xieng Khouang Ville. Later, before the tin drop rig was manufactured, he used a crude wooden grenade rack fitted into the drop door. The device delivered a credible target pattern.

It was inevitable that word of such activity would spread throughout the American community. Consequently, the fun did not last. After a couple of months, when Ambassador Unger learned

about the unauthorized bombings, he ordered the illegal activity stopped. ²⁴

Next, Swiss Embassy representatives arrived at Sam Tong to explore rumors that Swiss-manufactured planes were being used for warlike purposes. Since Laos was supposed to be a neutral country, the Swiss were hypersensitive regarding any military use of their products. Because they threatened to curtail further sales of aircraft and particularly replacement parts, it was crucial to convince them otherwise. Therefore, Doctor McCreedy donned her finest lipstick, and she devoted a lot of time to flying the investigators around project areas in the Porter, while explaining all the noble humanitarian works made possible with the machine.

Pop still loved his inexpensive-to-operate Helio Couriers, and that was just fine with other AID-sponsored areas. Pop was not moving a lot of tonnage by STOL aircraft because he was receiving support in the form of cargo plane air drops from Vientiane. Therefore, with the plane available to them, it had not taken Ban Houei Sai workers long to realize just how superior and versatile the Porters were for supply work.

Zim's talented but brief bombing experience could not long be underutilized in areas where air support would still make a big difference. Consequently, when Zim followed Tony to northwestern Military Region One, he brought his experience and the innovative and lethal drop equipment to Nam Yu. Because of the region's remoteness, located far from prying eyes, Poe continued to drop rocks on the enemy. Loading for the semi-

²⁴ It is surprising that no one was terminated. Perhaps Unger was too busy or looked the other way, as was the case when Chris Crisologo and I shot up the "friendly" Nam Pit Ville.

clandestine operation was always done at Lima-25, for Poe was concerned that his junior officers would report him to Udorn superiors. In addition, the large, smooth river rocks were perfectly shaped missiles not available at Nam Yu. Tony broke in a new Porter pilot one day at Team-7 near Nam Bu. While engaging in the questionable activity, a round fired from the ground struck a propeller blade. Looking like a perfectly drilled hole, the shot was clean, no jagged portions on the exit side.

Always interested in combat participation, and anxious to strike back at those who had hosed him two days earlier, Joe acceded to Zim's kicker request. To supplement the bombing run, he carried Gary Erb's Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR). Since the drop door opening was stuffed with a grenade rack, only one small window in the rear cabin section afforded a gun port. To prevent damage to the plastic sill, Zim had whittled a block of wood to fit in the aperture and accommodate the gun barrel.

After loading grenades in the rack, they launched and flew into the hostile area. As Zim conducted the first low pass, using the slow fire selector setting, Joe fired a few rounds.²⁵ Ka-chunk. Ka-chunk. Because of recoil vibration, the wood block slipped overboard on the first pass. During subsequent runs, the BAR gun barrel worked on and damaged the window frame. During all ten passes, in which there was no ground response, they never dropped the load. Either no one was present or, more likely, individual enemy soldiers were reluctant to give away their position. By then, suspense of the non-action was bothering Flipse. Therefore, he yelled to Zim that he was

²⁵ BAR: Firing of this weapon could be compared to the same cyclic speed as an old wringer washer.

extremely anxious over the lack of enemy response and to RTB. Zim also admitted that he was apprehensive.

Joe stopped at Nam Yu later. He endured Erb's displeasure with him, while Gary carefully removed the grenades one at a time from the "egg crate" tubes and replaced the pins.

Pathet Lao units moved four kilometers closer to Ban Houei Sai. A FAR GM eventually moved into position under the command of Khamphai. After two weeks, T-28 pilots out of the Luang Prabang Airport began pounding Pathet Lao positions around Ban Pong. The T-28 pilots performed a credible job, and within a month, the GM eliminated enemy numbers around the village. The enemy suffered fourteen dead, high casualties for tiny Laos and such a minor engagement. However, the action was not completed in the area. Two weeks later, a FAR truck loaded with soldiers was ambushed on the road. Equalizing the score, a dozen government troops were KIA, including a lieutenant sitting in front of the cab. ²⁶

MR-2

During the third week in October, after the successful Hua Moung operation entered a consolidation phase and much of the Phu Pha Thi area in Sam Neua was returned to government hands, Van Pao shifted his attention south to Xieng Khouang Province. With designs on capturing Site-03, Meo-FAR troops moved back to the elevated heights at Ban Peung (LS-95) on the eastern slope of Phu Sao. Rebuffed by strong enemy resistance during northern advances, Vang Pao added forces and a 105mm gun to the base

²⁶ Joe Flipse Emails, 04/10/97, 05/11/97, 05/31/97 (2), 06/26/97, 06/28/97, 06/30/97, 07/01/97, 07/03/97 07/05/97.

camp. After making some headway north, by mid-December, friendly forces were attacked and overrun, losing the howitzer.

FAR was equally harassed in Houa Phan (Sam Neua) Province by three enemy battalions from the 316th Division. Returning to the area from North Vietnam after the lingering late November and December monsoon, in the largest offensive yet launched in the north, enemy units tested government defenses near LOCs at Hua Moung, Ban Song (LS-29), and Houei Sa An (LS-127). Recognizing their inability to replace losses in the area, after fierce resistance, Vang Pao's government troops withdrew to more defensible positions--to survive and fight another day. By year's end the Na Khang perimeter had alarmingly shrunk to ten miles from the center of the facility. ²⁷

During this period, Frank Stergar was experiencing mechanical problems in the form of a rough running engine while working late in the Hua Moung area. He landed at Site-58, shut down, and talked to PARU Customer Lipo, who indicated that it was safe to leave the helicopter there overnight. With no overnight facilities available, they obtained a ride to Na Khang for the night. Although there was no problem leaving the H-34 at Site-58, CPH Knight, thinking the helicopter would be lost and with the ambassador furious, made an issue of it.

With the enemy on the move and rumors of sappers infiltrating the base, Stergar occasionally slept in his helicopter. Parked close to fuel drums, he suffered nerve racking anxiety when drums would make weird noises while expanding and contracting from temperature changes. One time,

²⁷ Tom Ahern, 239.

Chief of Far East Division (Colby) Report to Director of Central Intelligence (Helms), 08/16/66, FRUS, 246.

the Customer came down the hill and said he did not want Frank there. He was responsible for his safety, and security was not all that good in the parking area.

Frank began eating and staying with the Thai PARU in the communications unit enclosure overlooking the airstrip. Enjoying the friendship and security provided, he became particularly fond of Lipo.^{28 29}

BOMBING HALT

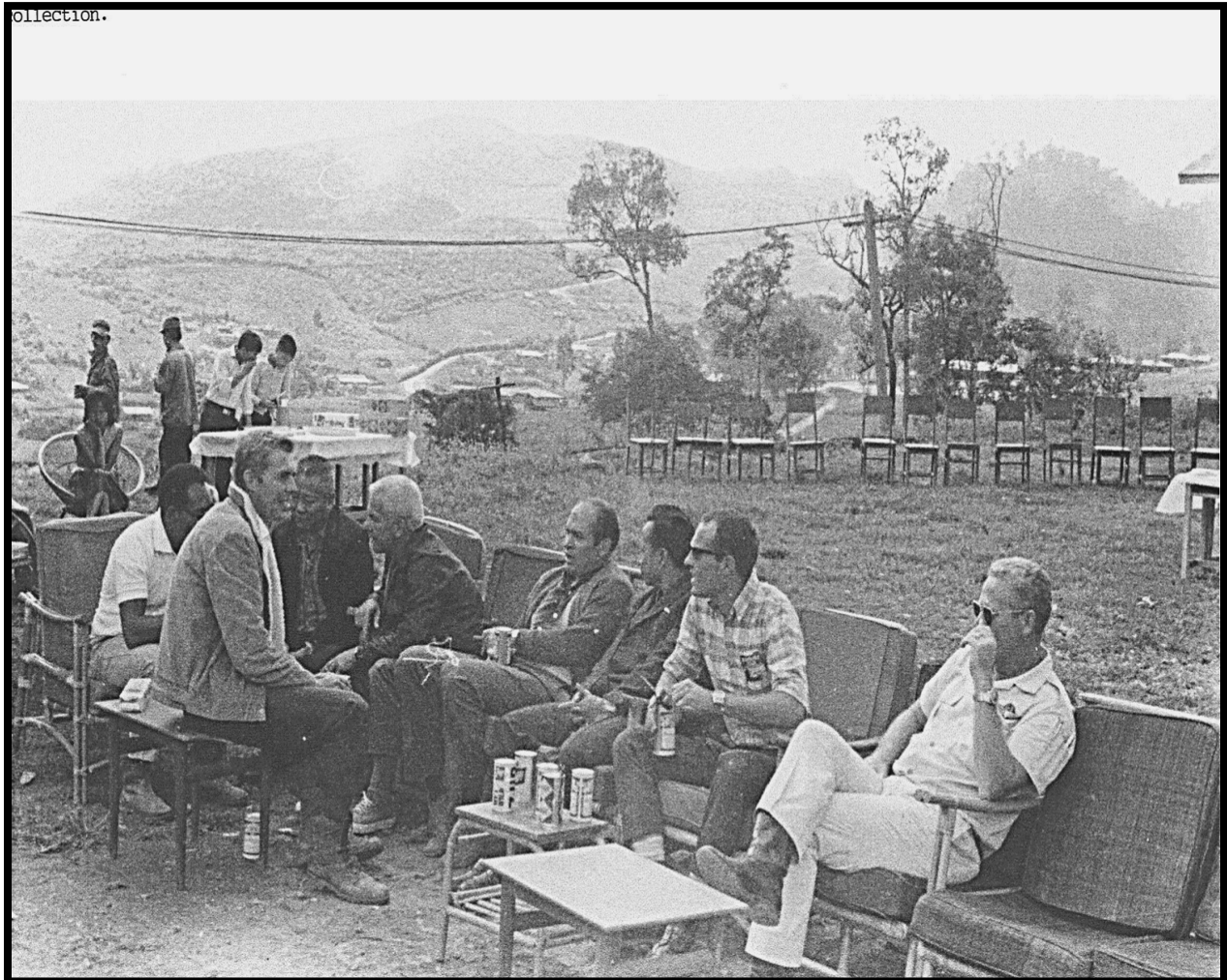
During November, Defense Secretary McNamara and his assistant recommended a Theater wide bombing pause to President Johnson. The cessation was perceived as providing North Vietnamese leaders with a catalyst to slow or cease the war, and to demonstrate that USG was interested in a negotiated peace settlement. Failure of Hanoi's response to the gesture would strengthen USG's hand in not only resuming Rolling Thunder, but expanding and intensifying the program. After considering the plan, Johnson ordered a thirty-hour Christmas bombing halt. The plan was no secret in the diplomatic community.

With the communists renewing and accelerating attacks in MR-2, expertly timed to coincide with the Meo New Year, a concerned Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma conferred with Ambassador Sullivan.³⁰ Since friendly positions forward of Site-58 and the actual strip had recently fallen (actually

²⁸ Over the years, when Lipo was in Udorn, he and Frank Stergar shared experiences over beer, mangos and sweet rice.

²⁹ Frank Stergar Tape.
Stergar Email, 01/09/96.

³⁰ Meo New Year: Generally celebrated during 22-25 December at a time of traditional Meo stand down and inaction.



Likely at a time of the Meo New Year, AID personnel from various venues take a rare opportunity to gather for a party in the hills of Sam Tong behind the runway. The road in the background winds toward Skyline Drive and into the Long Tieng Valley. Clockwise, Joe Flipse, Paul White, unknown indigenous leader, Doctor Charles "Jiggs" Weldon, Jack Williamson, Unknown Lao, Ernie Kuhn, and CASI Baron pilot Bob Hamblin.

MacAlan Thompson Collection.

abandoned), and increased enemy pressure was expected shortly around Na Khang, also that Tha Thom was being shelled by artillery and mortar fire, he wanted to know if USG would respond with sufficient air support.

Sullivan immediately requested from Saigon and promptly received allocation for thirty-six sorties in the affected areas. Unable to resolve how the Lao role entered into the overall bombing halt equation, he accepted bombing suspensions within Barrel Roll-Steel Tiger-Tiger Hound areas. However, he could not agree to any postponement in the alert status Bango-Whiplash operations. The pilots and aircraft were essential support to FAR and Meo units, which he was convinced would continue to be attacked during the Christmas stand down. At any rate, he thought the entire cessation exercise was imprudent and academic. Furthermore, a truce would certainly never be approved or instituted in Laos by Vietnamese leaders, for they never admitted that any troops were present.

Mulling over the projected Rolling Thunder bombing halt, predicated on no discernable enemy action introduced from North Vietnam during the period, the ambassador opined that air assets from Thai bases and the 7th Fleet could easily be utilized in Laos without media detection. Consequently, within three days of the bombing halt, Sullivan obtained LBJ's approval to divert Rolling Thunder assets to Laos and continue the interdiction program.

The heralded cessation of air strikes began on schedule. The Rolling Thunder bombing halt was subsequently extended to thirty-seven days, during which a massive USG undertaking began in Washington. United Nations Ambassador Goldberg, Ambassador-at-Large Harriman, Vice President Humphrey, and Presidential Assistant McGeorge Bundy journeyed to world capitals to explore

possibilities for a negotiated peace settlement with North Vietnam.

The end result proved fruitless. Unimpeded, the period merely afforded communist construction units breathing time to repair bridges, rail lines, and many LOC roads. Moreover, workers dispersed supplies into caves and other hidden storage sites. In addition, supplies and men continued to move unchecked into South Vietnam. Trail air defenses were improved with more SAM, AAA, and radar sites built. ³¹

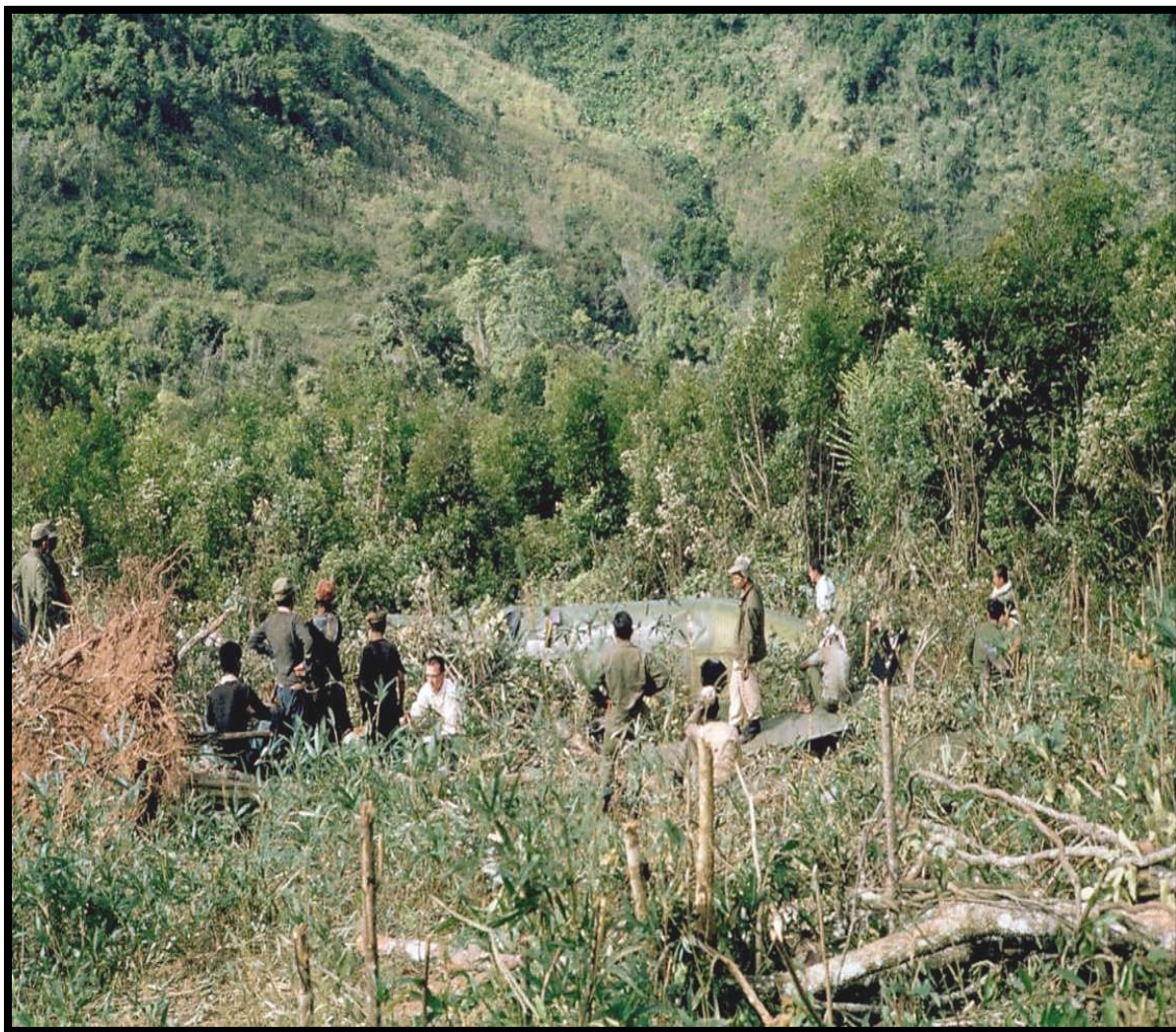
LATE YEAR ACCIDENT

In Military Region One, Meo and Lao Theung ADC units formed in early 1965 near Ban Pha Thong (LS169) and Lao Ta (LS-121), located several miles north and northwest of the enemy center at Nam Bac, came under pressure and were evacuated. At year's end, Nam Houn (LS-243), located near the Chinese border inside Phong Saly Province about 115 miles north of Luang Prabang, still remained in government hands. Lao Ta would be recaptured during January of 1966.

On 29 December, Larry Wilderom and First Officer Alex Nadalini were working Hotel-30 on a high pad well northwest of royal capitol when they crashed. Nadalini was flying at the time.

³¹ Segment Sources:
Ken Conboy, 131-132, 151.
Victor Anthony, 186-187.
Ambassador William Sullivan to State, 12/23//65.
Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 102-103.
John Bowman-Almanac-132.
Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 388.
Edward Marolda, 69.

TWELFTH-MONTH



Site of the Nadalini-Wilderom Hotel-30 crash north of Luang Prabang, Laos 29 December 1965. Most of the aircraft was recovered, repaired, and eventually placed back into service.

Nichols Collection.

TWELFTH-MONTH



Flight Mechanics "Chris" Crisologo and Matt Luca on the transmission deck of Hotel-30 stripping parts. Dick Conrad worked in the cabin section.

Nichols Collection.

TWELFTH-MONTH



Steve Nichols beside Hotel-30's cabin section prior to removal of the transmission and H-34 recovery.
Nichols Collection.

TWELFTH-MONTH



John Fonburg in the process of lifting the Hotel-30 fuselage south to Luang Prabang, where a fixed wing plane could deliver it to Udorn for spare parts or rebuild.

Nichols Collection.

TWELFTH-MONTH



A collection of parts from the Hotel-30 crash sitting at Mak Phout (LS-137) for delivery to Udorn. They include: a tail cone, upper portion of the forward cockpit section, and various smaller parts.
Nichols Collection.

TWELFTH-MONTH



Hotel-21 parked at the Luang Prabang soccer field to participate in Hotel-30's recovery.
Nichols Collection.

TWELFTH-MONTH

The following day Tom Hoppe and Marius Burke flew Hotel-21 to Luang Prabang with a dual intention. In addition to conducting a Route Check, they also investigated the wreck to determine if the ship was recoverable, and what would be required to accomplish the job. After Marius departed for Udorn, and Steve Nichols' recovery team was shuttled to the site, on New Year's Eve, Tom and John Fonburg salvaged parts, including the cabin section. Some components were ferried to Mak Phout (LS-137) for later removal, others to Luang Prabang. Unlike Humpty Dumpty, the aircraft was eventually repaired and returned to our fleet.

At the time of the incident, the Company's policy of PIC responsibility during any accident, regardless of who was flying, was still in effect. If you crashed an aircraft, you were subject to being fired. This had long been a festering problem from the early days when pilots, unrated as instructors, were arbitrarily assigned to fly and train a new pilot upcountry (without compensation). Curious as to his accountability, when Charlie Weitz asked local management who was responsible if there was an accident with a new pilot flying in the right seat, he learned that the PIC would be targeted. The "word" spread rapidly among our group, effectively ending all right seat training for most new hires in 1965.

When Wilderom's job was threatened after the accident, Burke journeyed to Taipei in his behalf. He maintained that Larry was an excellent pilot, and a good employee performing well for the Customer. He reminded management that if PICs were fired for on-the-job upcountry accidents while training new

TWELFTH-MONTH

pilots, then no one would be left to do the job. Taipei
management agreed and Larry was retained. ¹

¹ Ken Conboy, 133-134.
Tom Hoppe, Summer-September 1996 Letter, 11/05/96.
Steve Nichols Phone Conversation, 12/08.
Marius Burke Email

Despite Military Region Two's heightened enemy military activity, contained in a flood of end-of-year assessments regarding Laos, a rural village health programs AID report waxed very positive. It stated that through a chain of 140 AID-supported hospitals and dispensaries in liberated areas, medical assistance was provided to war fostered refugees in northern Laos. The medical program served 150,000 patients each month. Some family members travelled thirty miles to obtain medicine for a sick person. In addition to medical care, many people were taught proper hygiene across party or ethnic lines. This emphasized American influence and assistance extended well into the countryside, far beyond areas considered safe for USAID personnel by the RLG.

During the fiscal year, 268 medics had been trained. This was accomplished by utilizing an American staff of five doctors and technicians. Operation Brotherhood, a Filipino organization supported by AID (and CIA), was also utilized in the training. In tribal areas, most of the medical facilities located in refugee areas were primitive, built from local materials like bamboo and thatch by the local people at very little cost to USG or the Lao government. ¹

Concurrent and in contrast with the humanitarian aspects of the rural village health program, Souvanna Phouma revealed a government plan calculated to move large numbers of southeastern populations away from traditional family homes by force of arms.

¹ Bell to President Johnson, Administration of AID, 12/29/65.

Supporting the plan, during the previous four months in southern Laos, the Royal Lao Air Force pilots had bombed North Vietnamese infiltration activities and facilities. This satisfied a portion of government strategy--to create deserts out of LOC areas and deny the enemy use of local populations to supply them food and transportation.

The Prime Minister also reverted to an often-used standard line that the Pathet Lao were prisoners of Hanoi in the same manner Hanoi was a prisoner of Peking. North Vietnamese leaders could do nothing against Chinese Leader's will, with the result of increased suffering on the Vietnamese people. China would fight to the last Vietnamese, as the Vietnamese would fight to the last PL soldier. Until a final solution to the South Vietnam problem was resolved, DVR leaders would not allow PL representatives to return to the national community in Vientiane, since a return would allow RLG access to Pathet Lao-controlled areas. This would prevent infiltration of supplies and men to south Vietnam. ²

CONGRESSIONAL INPUT

In December, Senator Mike Mansfield forwarded a lengthy report to LBJ's office regarding his month long Southeast Asian trip:

"By November, American troops were directly involved in battle to a much greater degree than at any other time in the history of the Vietnam conflict.

² State Department Memorandum, Secretary Lee Conversation with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, 12/29/65.

Laos already finds itself deeply involved on the fringes of the war in South Vietnam. The fighting within Laos, which continues despite the 1962 Geneva Agreement, is now a closely interwoven part of the North Vietnamese struggle. The connection is most pronounced in the eastern part of Laos which lies within the control of the communist Pathet Lao forces. The Laotian panhandle is a natural infiltration route for men and supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam.

Beginning in June, an estimated 1,500 NVA per month entered South Vietnam through Laos and this number is rapidly increasing. A long border abutting on SVN makes it possible for troops and equipment from Hanoi to reach far south through communist controlled territory in Laos with a minimum of risk before being diverted across the border into South Vietnam by any number of lateral communications routes. New roads have been constructed through this mountainous terrain along which men and supplies can pass, for the most part undetected, protected in some regions by double canopies of jungle foliage. These roads are not easily susceptible to aerial interdiction.

Infiltration of men from North Vietnam through Laos has been occurring for many years. It was confined primarily to political cadres and military leadership until about the end of 1964 when Vietnamese regular army troops began to enter south Vietnam by this route.

The Vietnamese war was brought very close to Thai territory in November 1965. A PL military thrust toward the Lao town of Thakhet on the Mekong, supported by NVA, was driven back by RLG forces. Had it not been turned back, the war would have reached the Thai frontier.

It is too soon to judge the efficacy of the international and Lao Accords which have been introduced into the situation.

U.S. forces have been withdrawn in keeping with the agreement [in 1962]. On the basis of available information, there are neither Soviet nor Chinese forces in Laos in violation of the agreement. However, there is every likelihood that Viet Minh forces are still present among the Pathet Lao.

The ICC has yet to carry out their responsibility because of disagreement among the factions within the provisional government.

Solution to the Lao problem along the lines of international neutralization and national unification would be immensely difficult to achieve in the best of circumstances. Geographic and cultural factors in the situation are such as to encourage internal political fragmentation and the sense of Lao nationality is not widely developed among the populace. The tenuous peace can be jeopardized if there is continued use of the facility which Laos offers for the transshipment of supplies from NVN to the guerrillas in the south.

Until the removal of all foreign forces from Laos is ascertained, the authority of the unified government is generally accepted throughout the country, and the military forces are reduced and unified, the situation is bound to continue to hang in precarious balance and easily upset."

Mike Mansfield went on to comment that Thailand was presently stable, and USG was totally committed to Thailand's defense. Washington was indirectly involved through various aid and other activities in supporting the RTG against internal

subversion. Over time, U.S. MAP had equipped 130,000 men and 30,000 militarized police.^{3 4}

Another fresh and independent report by Willard Hannah, specifically targeting the Thai northeast, centered largely on Udorn Thani. He stated that Udorn was a major Thai-American military complex developing in the region. A modest community development program was underway in which the people were experiencing benefits and expanding on them. The population was cognizant of the bilateral effort and of the interest Thai and American governments were evidencing in their welfare. However, the sudden influx of personnel and money into the backward region was resulting in an artificially imposed boom and there was certainly a price to pay in inflation.

With completion of the well-publicized Friendship Highway winding from Bangkok to Udorn (with plans for eventual completion to Nong Khai) and opening up the northeast, Udorn was expected to be a regional economic hub. Huge military expenditures portended a source of profit for businessmen in the near future. U.S. money and Thai entrepreneurial expectation had drastically changed the face of Udorn in the past two years. A small business district, once only a few rows of long galleried, two-story wooden structures, now consisted of several streets of multi-story masonry buildings. Fires, set by owners intent on collecting insurance and accidents, helped revitalize the old town which dated to the early 1900s.

³ It appeared that Congressmen or their assistants were not above plagiarizing. Although updated, much of the report duplicated information contained in a 1963 Foreign Relations report.

⁴ Foreign Relations: Senator Mike Mansfield Report to LBJ of November-December Trip, 12/19/65.

New suburbs included small residential developments, containing both villas and shacks. Fifty American women, wives of Air America and Continental personnel, and their children contributed to the housing problem. However, there were no American military wives present. Four families were dependents of U.S. Consulate, USIS, and USOM personnel.

In the past year and a half, Udorn had developed into an area catering to U.S. military personnel needs: restaurants, bars, hotels, nightclubs, brothels, and a new bowling alley.

During his time in the area, Hannah stayed at the Udorn Hotel.⁵ The five story, hundred room enterprise cost less than eight dollars for a room with air conditioning, four dollars without. He considered paint color schemes garish. There were seven bungalows in the rear. Apparently unused to upcountry Thai accommodations, he complained about blaring radios, hard beds, and lack of hot water. Bathroom doors were no higher than a man's head (the average Thai man was not tall). Three new nightclubs flourished across the street.

The northeast topography around Udorn and along the Mekong River Valley was flat, rolling and lightly wooded. Much land was under cultivation and passable in the dry season. With the latest census estimated at 32,000 persons, Udorn was considered the northeast center for rail and highway communication, and the site of a new and sizable military installation. The airbase was a new complex, a strip and taxiways still under construction. In addition to jet fighter-bombers present, it would soon accommodate larger aircraft. Located on base, or adjacent to it,

⁵ Udorn Hotel: Formerly the site of a multi-bungalow compound that we called Asian Acres in 1962.

were barracks calculated to house 1,500 American Air Force personnel and 10,000 Thai soldiers of the 13th Thai Regiment. Air America and Continental Air Services facilities were also co-located and growing. The expanding base was one of a number already operating throughout the country.

The American buildup and current enterprise provoked Chinese threats over Radio Peking and Hanoi to liberate the Thai people. Prime Minister Thanom and his RTG seemed determined to prevent this.

Most of the urban Udorn enterprise was produced by Thai-Chinese. However, a considerable portion was Vietnamese-inspired, whose activities were sometimes resented by indigenous Thai.

Vietnamese numbers totaled about 3,000 in Udorn and the province, with an additional 3,000 in Nong Khai town and scattered throughout province. Perhaps 45,000 resided in all the northeast provinces. They were survivors and offspring of the 100,000 refugees who poured across the Mekong River from 1945 to 1955 during and after the First Indochina War. Until 1950, they were welcomed and the Thai government helped them settle. After that year, the RTG became friendlier to French and South Vietnamese leaders, and efforts were initiated to halt further North Vietnamese immigration. Others were rounded up and shipped home. During the late 1950's thousands were repatriated, the majority to North Vietnam. In recent years, North Vietnam has refused to accept them and the refugees were loath to return.

The Vietnamese were normally required to live in restricted areas inside the town or larger villages. They tended to concentrate close to the administration offices where they were required to register as aliens, and from which their activities were scrutinized. As energetic and aggressive workers, most were

able to compete with the Thai and Chinese. Many entered urban business and trades as shopkeepers, restaurateurs, mechanics, electricians, carpenters, barbers, and so forth. Others were farmers. Still others participated in the sale of local produce at the morning market (where I purchased meat for my dog).

The refugees settled in the northeast with every intention of remaining. They never exhibited much interest in becoming Thai citizens, nor had and the Thai government made a transition easy. They learned to speak Thai, but their children did not normally attend Thai schools or any school (underground schools were later detected). Unlike Chinese and Thai unions, there was little intermarriage, or casual social contact with Thai citizens. In the main, they remained isolated and suspect.

Almost all the Vietnamese arrived from North Vietnam and retained family ties with the homeland. The Royal Thai Government assumed that they sympathized with the Ho Chi Minh regime. There were unsubstantiated rumors that they listened to Radio Hanoi propaganda, favored the Viet Cong cause in South Vietnam, and participated in local disturbances.

The RTG was concerned about the danger inherent in an unassimilated Vietnamese minority, but no one appeared concerned enough to propose specific steps to convert the aliens into loyal citizens. ⁶

As the year drew to a close, facility Base Manager Ben Moore waxed eloquent regarding facility projects nearing completion, falling behind, or in the mill. The effects and

⁶ Willard Hanna, Thailand's Strategic Northeast: Defense and Development (American University Southeast Asia Series, Volume 9 #1, Thailand, 01/01/66, obtained by the Author from Chulalakorn University library, Bangkok, Thailand.

growing pains of rapid facility expansion were in direct proportion to war requirements. An influx of personnel, and requirements for additional equipment to meet these needs, often exceeded planned construction. Completion of the new Operation-Administration building was well behind schedule. The delay caused congestion in existing office space, particularly the old Administration building that was in danger of collapsing. Plans were drawn for construction of a third hangar, plus supply and maintenance buildings. The production of sufficient clean potable water to support the base continued to be a problem. Even though a bus system was in place for employees, a lack of adequate parking space had to be addressed to accommodate the vast increase in motor vehicles, mostly motorcycles used by workers.

From the inauguration of Company policy permitting wives and dependents to reside in Udorn, Ben Moore endured problems with idle, bored, and contentious American females. He attempted to calm the angry beast by sponsoring a Club, encouraging construction of a swimming pool, and holding functions tailored to relieve tension. Still, disgruntled and restless female dependents lent local color to weekly Wives Club meetings. In their state of mind, they were always easy prey for rumor, innuendo, and practical jokes, something which a few of our senior people were quite talented and adept at perpetrating. For example, one time an official-looking memorandum was posted on the cork bulletin board outside the entrance to the dining facility informing all interested wives that Air America was going to ferry those willing to Sam Tong to observe what their husbands were actually doing during upcountry RONS. It even listed some individuals by name to arrive at the Air America compound on a specific date and time prepared to stay overnight.

On the appointed day, another notice materialized stating the trip had been cancelled and deferred to another date. After being suckered, some ladies showed up with suitcases for the second phantom trip. One can only imagine the mirth enjoyed by male Club bar patrons over such foolishness.

From time to time, additional false notices appeared, this time targeting pilots. One stated, "*Would the following people in the order of seniority who have applied for X program contact the CPH.*" The memorandum had names of people listed who were absent from Udorn. It purposely left some people omitted according to seniority. ⁷ ©

Ed: 07/25/17, 11/03/19, 03/27/20, 04/17/20, 04/27/20, 01/11/21, 02/21/21, 05/26/21, 07/10/21, 02/09/22, 08/05/22.

⁷ Ben Moore Monthly Report, 12/65.
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