

**RICE, REFUGEES, AND
ROOF TOPS**

AIR AMERICA, INC.

BOOK SEVEN

1966

BUDDHIST ERA 2509

YEAR OF THE HORSE

Harry Richard Casterlin

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INTRODUCTION

Those who have elected to pour through the Author's six previous books, particularly the lengthy 1965 account regarding the Lao War and Air America's paramilitary civilian helicopter pilots' participation, might wonder how any succeeding narrative or items of interest could possibly supersede what had previously occurred in the seemingly never ending Lao conflict. Future books leading toward the war's conclusion in 1974--actually 1975--will confirm that hostility and conflict only continued to increase to levels matching, and then exceeding, those in South Vietnam.

Although flowing into and mixing in the bubbling caldron of military action over a twelve-year period, each succeeding year was unique, providing its own special brand of challenge and excitement. Nineteen-sixty-six was no exception. The hard-fought gains in Houa Phan Province (more commonly called Sam Neua Province) were negated by Na Khang's early loss, and later efforts to retake the site that resulted in the death of one of our helicopter pilots, and nearly resulted in the Author's demise.

The job's elevated risk factor was always present during any operation. However, this incident occurred so soon after our first son's birth, it caused me to once again reevaluate my mortality, status with the Company, and lent an air of increased conservatism to my future flying.

Since I had accrued three months of home leave, my growing family and I looked forward to an opportunity for an extended and much needed vacation with my folks and friends in New Jersey. Although I did not participate in any operations during the leave period, they are described by the accounts of others,

INTRODUCTION

especially from individuals present and participating in Theater activity.

HRC

While I was still tying up loose ends in preparation for return to Thailand from my short leave at home, friendly efforts to gather intelligence within Lao kingdom military regions (MR) and adjacent countries accelerated. With the opium trade paramount to all else in their struggle for existence, Chinese KMT operatives in Burma and along the Lao border had long before become virtually useless to the Agency for current and reliable information. Therefore, in early 1966 eighteen experienced and reliable Yao tribesmen were selected at Nam Yu (LS-118A) in northwestern MT-1 for the Team Fox unit in preparation to penetrate deep into China's Yunnan Province. The men were trained in wiretapping techniques and long-range radio work. ¹

Tom Hoppe worked for Tony Poe from Lima Site-118 Alternate during the first four days of January. Contrasting with the seething kettle of death and destruction in upper Military Region Two, he found the area consisted of low intensity conflict with no incidents. Unlike my observations, Tom claimed no problems with magnetic anomalies while flying east toward the Nam Tha (River). ² Tom occasionally delivered troops and supplies to the Burmese and Chinese border areas to support infiltrating teams. Sometimes Tony would enter the cockpit for northern reconnaissance flights and direct Tom toward the border. He was obviously looking for something, but never indicated what.

¹ Kenneth Conboy-James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 1995) 166-167.

² Problems sometimes occurred while I flew from Chiang Khong northeast toward the river. The magnetic wet compass swung wildly thirty degrees left and right of the lubber centerline, indicating a magnetic anomaly and considerable amount of iron buried in the earth.

After leaving Long Tieng, Tony seemed to find his niche at Nam Yu. He knew a little Thai and Lao, but not a lot. Tom observed him in his cups being loud, bragging, and screaming, "I want ears." There was another Case Officer there who helped keep Tony somewhat under control, and added some sanity to the situation.

Unless one carried his own canned goods, when the boss man was on site one generally ate on Tony's porch, and later in the Thai PARU and Lao/Yao officers mess, after the Friendship Mess Hall was built. If you brought your own food, you could dip the cans in containers of boiling water used for either showers or washing dishes and utensils. At Tony's instructions, John Fonburg usually brought cases of beer and bottles of Mekong whiskey when assigned to work the site.

One-time Tom watched the young houseboys play with a rat on a string. They coaxed the animal onto a newspaper, and then lighted the paper. After singeing the hair off and cooking it slightly, they rolled the rodent in the charred paper and ate it like corn-on-the-cob. Tom considered this an odd diet.

Tom found Ban Houei Sai to be a far more interesting spot to RON because of its old colonial flavor. He referred to Nam Yu as "mosquito valley." It appeared that more malarial type insects congregated there than at any other site. For this reason, he always applied mosquito lotion to his body and deployed a mosquito net at night.

One day when Tom was about to land, Poe stood in the middle of the airstrip shooting wildly into the air like a drunken cowboy exiting a tavern in Dodge City. He was also firing flares. Thinking that the man had decided to drink early, or was acting out some misplaced aggression, Tom circled the strip until Tony worked it all out of his system.

After being apprised of a replacement PIC for him, and while repositioning Hotel-21 to an area to meet his replacement pilot, Tom heard a C-7 Caribou pilot radio a distress signal announcing a rough running engine. Near Sayaboury town, the aircraft was loaded with lumber and equipment for Nam Yu. Still at altitude, the PIC talked to Vientiane through the VHF repeater located on the 20-Alternate Skyline Ridge. The pilot announced, *"We are going to feather the engine."*

As is often the case with diverse languages, the Chinese radio operator misinterpreted the call saying, *"Roger, your engine is getting better."*

"No. No. Our engine is still bad. I am descending."

Tom was close enough to see the stricken aircraft, and observed kickers pushing cargo out the rear of the now single-engine plane. With the plane substantially lighter, the pilot was able to land safely at Luang Prabang. ³

ROAD WATCH

Since USG ⁴ had added ground troops to the equation in South Vietnam, the fundamental purpose of utilizing Laos as a buffer state between North Vietnam and free countries had continuously morphed into not only keeping most of the country and the Lao government viable, it also envisioned steps to ameliorate USG military efforts in the main Theater. In contrast, to deliver substantial numbers of men and supplies to their Viet Cong brothers in South Vietnam, the North continued to develop and maintain the vaunted Ho Chi Minh Trail road system through the eastern Lao Panhandle.

³Thomas Hoppe 1996 winter/summer letter, and 07/08/96 Interview.

⁴ USG: United States Government.

As the air war escalated along the Trail system, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC), and 2nd Air Division leaders in Saigon demanded additional and improved information regarding enemy movement from North Vietnam to South Vietnam through Laos. Within the eastern MR-3 Panhandle area, where a majority of the Ho Chi Minh Trail infiltration system leading to South Vietnam was located, problems persisted in continued obtaining reliable and valid intelligence information from road watch teams (RWT). With the Route-8 and Route-12 road systems increasingly critical to North Vietnamese leaders for supply routes to their Viet Cong serfs, by 1965 draconian measures had been in use by the North Vietnamese to remove villagers friendly to intelligence teams and deny easy access to many of these areas. Therefore, areas that had previously afforded road watch teams good information, and food and housing from local relatives and friends, in 1964 had largely dried up by 1966. Consequently, with the teams unable to move close enough to observe enemy movement, sustain operations, and achieve mission objectives, Agency Case Officers had to contend with often-protracted time delays coupled with increasingly creative and a plethora of erroneous road watch team information.

By early 1966, eight CIA-sponsored road watch teams were forwarding tactical information on enemy movements between Mugia Pass and Route-9. As had been the modus operandi from the beginning of road watch work, the handful of indigenous intelligence gathering teams were still hiking substantial distances to assigned observation points. Therefore, to enhance and implement better reporting, proposals were forwarded to interested parties to infiltrate teams in the near future using three CH-3 helicopters based at the Nakhon Phanom (NKP) base. State granted this provision during the fourth week in January.

Toward the end of the month information provided by road watch teams was disseminated by the Agency:

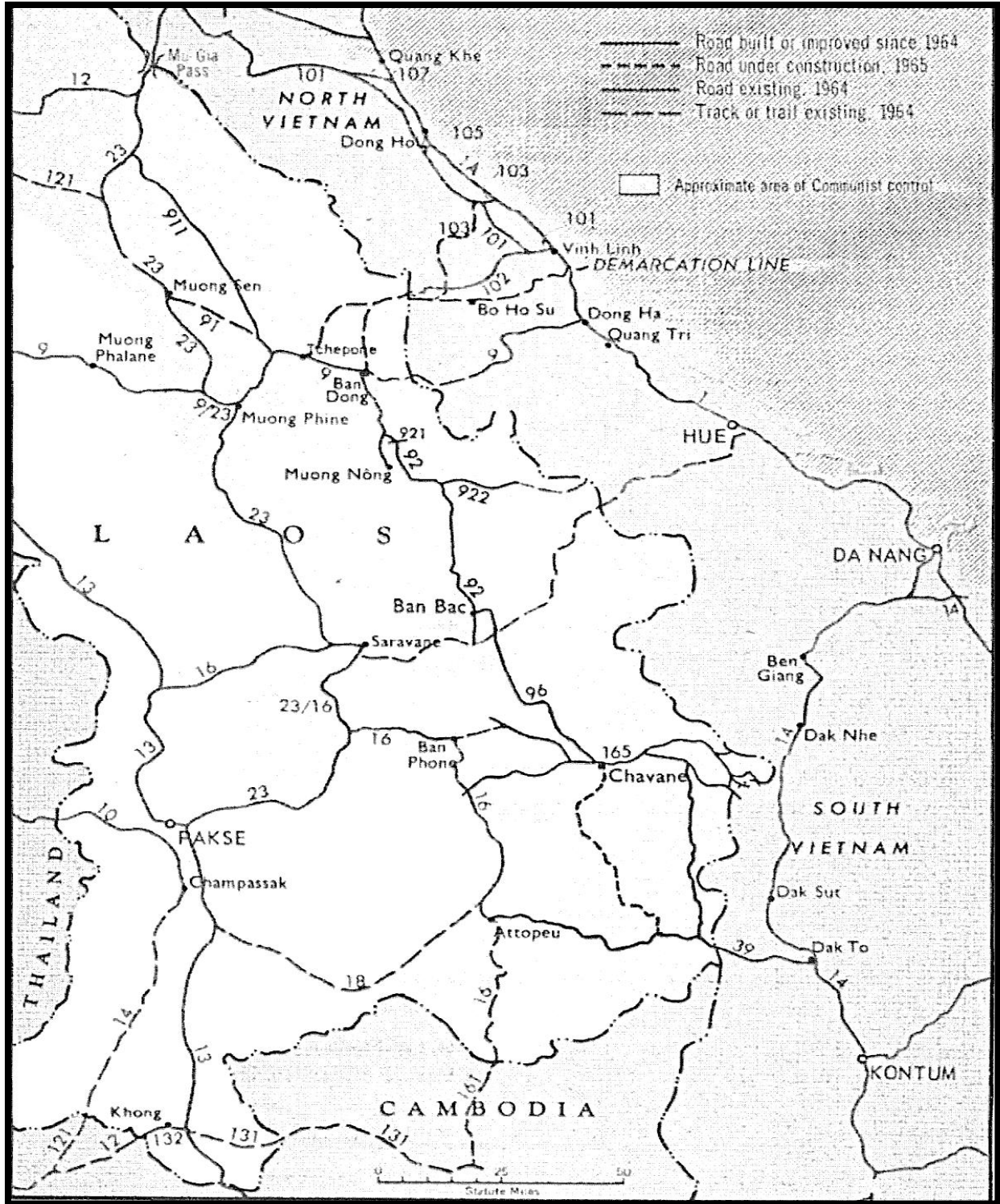
"Increased enemy activity in an area southeast of Mahaxay, reportedly involving substantial numbers of North Vietnamese troops, may signal increased pressure against government positions around Thakhet. Some of the activity may be troop redeployments necessitated by stepped-up government air strikes. Reports of substantial truck movements on Route-12 over the past two weeks and continuing reports of enemy efforts to build access roads to advanced positions suggest that some build-up is underway.

Farther south, there are indications of an enemy build-up between Saravane and Pakse to the southwest. No significant attacks have been launched thus far, but government positions in this area have been subject to increasing harassment in recent weeks.

These ground movements are coincident with a spate of recent Pathet Lao exhortations calling for vigorous 'countermeasures to aggression.' Communist statements continue to allege that the U.S. is planning to invade the Laotian corridor." ⁵

As techniques and support improved, friendly troops spent several weeks in the field, after which they were extracted by helicopter. However, merely counting trucks was no longer acceptable. Timely information, followed by an immediate air strike, was deemed the only method to slow or eliminate enemy vehicular traffic. Therefore, as would become standard procedure in upper MR-2, a native English speaker equipped with a RS-1 or

⁵ CIA Daily Bulletin, 01/28/66. Laos: New communist probes in the Laotian panhandle may be in the offing.



Southeastern Laos (Military Regions 3 and 4) depicting the extensive Trail system flowing out of North Vietnam to areas adjacent to South Vietnam and Cambodia. Supplies and troops fed the mechanism of war in Laos and South Vietnam.

CIA Map, 01/19/66.

hand held HT-1 radio, long employed by USAID and other Customer types, was employed for direct communication with airborne strike pilots in Sam Neua, the AC-47 commo plane in the Panhandle, or by American FACs trolling the trail system. Forward Air Controllers then directed fighter bombers onto targets. In the Panhandle, this technique became known as the Cricket Program. After implementing the new procedure, over time a modicum of success was achieved.

CRICKET

As opposed to "fast movers," pilots flying single engine O-1 Bird Dog aircraft had previously demonstrated a superior ability to spot targets in the Tiger Hound area. RLAFF observers onboard assisted the American FAC in verifying targets and authorizing air strikes.

To duplicate Tiger Hound's success, the Cricket program was formed to hopefully coordinate with road watch teams to ensure timely strike missions. ⁶ With this policy in mind, a detachment of five O-1 Bird Dog planes, pilots, and support personnel were assigned to NKP.

Covering Nape and Mugia Passes, Routes-8, 12, 23, and 911 to Tchepone, Panhandle logistic routes were located about 200 miles from the Nakhon Phanom Air Force base. Besides trolling for enemy traffic, a secondary mission included support of FAR troops in contact with the enemy.

The first mission began on 18 January. However, optimism for overall success soon proved premature. Much road watch team (RWT) reporting was untimely. RWT reports were shunted over other radio frequencies to AIRA Vientiane or Udorn 2nd Air Division-13th Air Force headquarters. After time-consuming

⁶ Cricket: A special air-ground program employed in central Laos with targets selected by tribal and road watch teams.

analysis, the info was forwarded to FAC aircraft. The process was involved and often resulted in many hours delay. Launching a RF-101 for photo recon further added to delays. Nevertheless, the program expanded in early February with the addition of five O-1s and personnel at NKP.

In addition to native Kha (Lao Theung) road watch guerrilla teams operating in enemy territory to gather intelligence, Royal Thai Army Special Forces units, code named STAR, were dispatched to the Mugia Pass area from both the clandestine Whiskey-3 base outside Savannakhet and Nakhon Phanom. Jim Sheldon had been rotated from Nam Yu to implement and administer the program. Attesting to the importance assigned to ground gathering intelligence, by spring the number of road watch teams ready for the field increased to twenty. However, allowing for training and leave, not all were deployed in the field at the same time.⁷

While conducting a fact-finding mission, Senator Stuart Symington attended a fourth meeting in Udorn with Ambassador Sullivan. With a bombing halt still in effect in North Vietnam and, theoretically, in Laos, State did not want Sullivan to divulge information regarding American air interdiction in Laos. Without mentioning Tiger Hound, the border operation in extreme southeastern Laos charged with the mission of destroying the Ho Chi Minh Trails and stopping vehicle traffic prior to entering South Vietnam, he did review some recent air activity. The

⁷ Memorandum from the Central Intelligence Agency to the 303 Committee, Status Report on CIA Counterinsurgency Operations in Laos, FRUS, #248, 09/08/66.

Thomas Ahern, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* (Washington: Center for the Study of Intelligence CIA, 2006) 249, 251-254.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 144.

Jacob Van Staaveren, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: Interdiction in Southern Laos 1960-1968* (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1993) 107-108, 110, Glossary 337.

efforts so far had achieved little else than harassment. However, storage depots had been redistributed and reduced to smaller sizes of five to ten tons, and troop concentrations were diminished to a few hundred men, mostly dispersed under trees. Not much activity was noted on the logistic trails. Destroyed fuel storage sites would reemerge in the form of fifty-gallon drums positioned under trees and in caves. ⁸

A procession of VIPs continued to cycle through Vientiane. During the previous two weeks of LBJ's bombing halt, Ambassador-at-Large Avril Harriman had visited Poland, Yugoslavia, India, Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, Japan, and Australia, attempting to drum up support to end the Vietnam War. On 12 January, he arrived for talks with Lao Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, for his thoughts on the subject.

Souvanna concurred with continuing pressure on Vietnamese leaders to negotiate an end to the conflict. However, he added that Chinese influence in the North was strong, and the Chinese leaders were considered adamant about thwarting any political settlement with the West. Souvanna had talked to Polish representatives, indicating that if the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) seriously desired an end to hostilities, then enemy forces should cease sending soldiers and supplies down the trails to South Vietnam and withdraw from Laos. ⁹

Exacerbating tensions with the U.S., both Polish and Russian hierarchy firmly believed USG was preparing an offensive against the DRV from Thailand across Lao territory. Perhaps the

⁸ Telegrams from Ambassador William Sullivan to State, 01/03/66, 01/05/66, 216-217.

⁹ There was a distinct problem involved with this philosophy, as during the entire war Hanoi leaders never admitted that any Vietnamese troops were present in Laos.

possibility was actually floated to keep the enemy off balance, but the Prime Minister displayed concern regarding media speculation that Thai troops were encroaching on Laos and insisted that the rumors be squelched. ¹⁰

Harriman reported to his Washington bosses that Phouma's intent was to maintain support of the Soviets, and, he feared, both China and North Vietnam. He was not concerned about the Panhandle bombing so long as USG did not confirm such action. ¹¹

EARLY AIR AMERICA PARTICIPATION IN ROAD WATCH MISSIONS

Until Air Force CH-3 "Pony Express" helicopters became available to the Customer for transportation in February, Air America's few UH-34Ds and crews had previously provided the only means to stage road watch teams to secure points, where walking to a target area was considered a safer and more feasible option. The NKP base was used as an isolated and secure base to launch many early road watch missions. However, Customer-requested helicopter assets were not always forthcoming or timely. Savannakhet and Thakhet had a lower priority for aircraft within their own system than at Long Tieng and Military

¹⁰ There was a modicum of truth to a possible U.S. invasion, and had been for some time. As with all phases during a conflict, contingency plans for various situations were cobbled together, periodically assessed, and refined in the Pentagon and other interested agencies. Stemming from the Kennedy period, in this particular case it was determined that too many troop divisions were required for such a gigantic undertaking. Therefore, such planning continued to be rejected. In any event, in the Author's estimation, a waterborne assault on the North Vietnamese coast by U.S. Marines near the DMZ would have been more fruitful in the overall tactical scheme, and perhaps contributed to an earlier conclusion of the war with fewer casualties.

¹¹ Telegram William Sullivan to State, FRUS, #219, 01/13/66.

Region Two. The Alternate always received the number of H-34s requested before any other region.

In addition to the clandestine nature and security accorded at the Air Force base, fuel, food and lodging were available to the crews. However, Nakhon Phanom had changed measurably from the days when we worked with the Seabee unit which was building the complex. Little by little, with each succeeding commanding officer and enhanced mission requirements, base security was continually tightened. Now, instead of having to search for people to service aircraft and grant other requirements, helicopter crews were met by Jeep loads of military police and additional security individuals. Even though the Air Force leaders had to know we were coming, SOPs dictating this procedure were followed, and we were closely monitored.

As he had the previous day, on the first, Captain Mike Jarina and his crew of Captain Tony Byrne and Flight Mechanic Strahan darted across the Mekong River from the air base at Nakhon Phanom (NKP) in Hotel Foxtrot to Thakhet. From the remote strip, they shuttled men and supplies into the karsts and valley thirty miles north of Lima-40. Another mission took them south-southeast just west of Route-13. ¹²

After completing the work, courtesy of the USAF, the Air America crew billeted for another night at the multi-purpose NKP base. ¹³

¹² Although considered sufficiently hazardous to warrant a double pilot crew, unlike the American T-28 Alpha pilots, there was no extra hazardous pay for conducting early helicopter road watch missions. Long a bone of contention with crews, the issue remained unresolved until 1967.

¹³ Mike Jarina Interviews.
EW Knight Email, 07/31/00.

MILITARY REGION TWO

Over the years, the low-key ground war assumed an established and seasonal pattern. Increasingly, Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops seized land during the dry season, while mixed government forces (mostly Meo) in Military Region Two reclaimed territory during the wet season. The latter was generally accomplished by tough guerrilla warriors, expert in walking long distances over muddy terrain and in inclement conditions, or ferried to forward positions by H-34 helicopter pilots. However, friendly losses by the end of 1965 pointed to a very problematic beginning to 1966, one that was hopefully reversible. It was generally acknowledged by military and civilian leaders that the communists could capture any position in the country if they so chose. Moreover, the increasing number of troops being introduced from North Vietnam tended to reinforce this theory. Indeed, from the fall of 1965 to early 1966, a major enemy build-up occurred in the north, and successful offensives occurred in the northeast portions of Laos. These included the introduction of an estimated twelve infantry and ten engineer battalions to combine with fifteen Pathet Lao battalions with Vietnamese advisors in Military Region Two and Military Region One.

The following day, Mike and crew departed Nakhon Phanom to work for Tha Thom's (LS-11) demoralized troops, and around the heights of Ban Peung (LS-95). In December, Site-11 had experienced intermittent enemy mortar and artillery fire, requiring additional friendly air support.

The 1965-1966 winter season was quite cold in the mountains of MR-2. Indeed, by early morning a thin layer of ice often glazed over chuck holes outside the Sam Tong hostel. Not dressed for such conditions, Jarina was very cold, so he asked Blaine



USAID worker Blaine W. Jensen observing a troop muster in front of the Sam Tong warehouse.

Frank Stergar Collection.



Looking north toward the Na Khang Valley, Cloud layers hang low over the mountains in upper Xieng Khouang Province.

Mike Jarina Collection.

Jensen if it would be possible to "lend" him a green U.S. Army jacket from the warehouse. Blaine checked supplies and returned with an ancient white World War Two ski troop coat. It was far from a fashion statement, but Mike found it very warm.

Following a calm, restful night at Sam Tong, the trio flew "around the horn" (west of the Plain of Jars) to Bouam Long (LS-88), sixteen miles north northeast to Na Khang (LS-36), and then to Houei Thom (LS-27), a site eight miles to the east of, and flanking Site-36. Under pressure from probes by superior enemy numbers, marking the third time in 1965 the site changed hands, Vang Pao's troops had abandoned Houa Moung (LS-58) on 21 December, releasing North Vietnamese Army forces to slowly pick and choose future movement on Site-36. Consequently, a number of daily air sorties were reserved for the bastion's defense. Realistically, the transparency of enemy intentions was well understood by U.S. and RLG planners. Mainly, both sites were already threatened by an enemy resolved to push government forces back from Sam Neua's logistic arteries along Routes-6 and 61. Therefore, consistent with Military Region Two Commander General Vang Pao's philosophy, preparations for a new fallback site were already underway at Bouam Long.

Despite the inherent danger associated with Na Khang RONS, evidenced by one aborted attack in the fall of 1965, helicopter crews were still obligated to remain overnight at the base to provide an escape mechanism for Customers. Usually not all present at the same time, Agency personnel Mike Lynch, Jerry Daniels, Pop Buell's USAID refugee representative Don Sjostrom, and rotating USAF forward air controllers were assigned to the site.

Despite the President's bombing halt in North Vietnam, reconnaissance missions were still being flown over the North. Furthermore, U.S. air strikes were still ongoing in Houa Phan

Province, and there was also the matter of USAF Jolly Green helicopters and crews staging there and at other sites during the daytime to cover potential SAR missions. The same problems with food, poor accommodations, and rats prevailed at the site. However, sharing the pain, Air America crews rarely RON more than one night during an upcountry period.

During a full day's missions, and prior to returning to Udorn (RTB), Jarina worked at Na Khang, Houei Sa An (LS-127) twelve miles south of Na Khang and nine miles northeast of Bouam Long. He also conducted missions at Phu Pha Thi (LS-85), Ban Song (LS-29) twenty-one miles southeast of Site-36, and Ban Vieng (LS-89), four miles southeast of Site-29. ¹⁴ ¹⁵

Chief Pilot Wayne Knight was busy upcountry from five to seven January conducting Route Checks with fairly new upgrade Captains Bill Wilmot, Tony Byrne, and Ron Dubinsky. The men worked out of Sam Tong supporting the FAR at Tha Thom and

¹⁴ In late 1965, because of Taiwanese government objections and restrictions relating to extra territorial messaging, Air America's Treasurer Controller's Office in Taipei for flight records was reorganized. Steps were taken to eliminate the abacus and enter the punch-card computer age in Hong Kong. With the advent of this new system, a new format was devised. Reports no longer displayed some items, mainly extra crew members. In addition, flight routes were greatly abbreviated and eventually reduced to two entries for an entire day. For this reason, some pilots maintained fairly good records of where they worked during the course of a day. Mike Jarina was one of these individuals. Fortunately, Mike's recorded flights have enabled the Author to reconstruct some aspects of what was occurring at the time.

¹⁵ Memorandum CIA to 303 Committee, 09/08/66, 248.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

Victor Anthony and Richard Sexton, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The War in Northern Laos 1954-1973* (Washington: Center for Air Force History, 1993) 186-187.

surrounding Meo forces. Wayne devoted the rest of the month to local training and test flights. ¹⁶

South of Phong Saly Province in Military Region One, aggressive enemy assaults succeeded in rolling up government units. This allowed the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese forces free access to move from sites both east and west of the Nam Ou toward Luang Prabang. Recalling the Royal Lao Government's (RLG) 1964 successful Triangle operation in recapturing areas south and west of Mounng Soui, Lao Army (FAR) leadership in Vientiane and U.S. Embassy staff harbored visions of achieving a similar result in the Luang Prabang area. The overall objective would be the Ban Nam Bac area to the north. There was always a core tribal presence in the hills who detested the communists, but nothing was seriously coordinated to push the enemy back north away from the royal capital. However, joint Agency-FAR efforts to maintain and expand forces still in place were conducted by Case Officers and assets of Air America and Continental Air Services (CAS). Despite this effort, superior enemy units continued to clear many of the hills and low ground in the Nam Ou Valley area and began increasing logistic routes from Dien Bien Phu downstream on the Ou River north of Luang Prabang. ¹⁷

MCCASLAND

Beginning on the sixth, Lou McCasland worked seven consecutive days upcountry. Flying Hotel-Foxtrot, he began the week supporting Phou Tong Tou, fifteen miles northwest of Luang Prabang. Then, continuing to tighten the tribal noose around enemy-held Nam Bac (LS-203), he serviced the hill position at

¹⁶EWKnight Email, 07/27/00, 07/29/00.

¹⁷Memorandum CIA to the 303 Committee, 09/08/66.

Mok Lok (LS-131), six miles south of the orange-growing flat lands in the hills between Route-4 and the Nam Ou.

After working one more day out of Luang Prabang, Lou was reassigned to Na Khang. Not aware of the fuel status at the site, he loaded several drums of 115/145 octane gasoline and launched to the northeast. He arrived at Site-36 about dusk and secured the aircraft in the fuel pit. With the security of the site tenuous since late December, and USAF helicopters relocated to Long Tieng, Lou represented the sole helicopter at the site. He noted that the natives were edgy and ready to move out at a moment's notice.

Before departing for the crew "hooch", Lou talked to his Flight Mechanic about having the ship topped off and ready to launch immediately should the site be attacked that night. Even if the weather was instrument conditions IFR, unconcerned about enemy disposition, using dead reckoning and whatever navigation aids were available, he planned to climb to altitude and depart south for Udorn. For additional flexibility, the Flight Mechanic elected to sleep in the helicopter.

Lou was then led to a thatched roof hut where, under subdued light, he consumed his meager rations of Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup and a small can of chocolate milk. His bed consisted of a cluster of sticks two inches in diameter secured to a wall. The rustic device was six inches higher on the wall side and inclined to the foot of the bed. On top of this "bed," he rolled out his western style bed roll tailored to carry across a saddle: two blankets and a sheet rolled up and tied with a rope for ease of carrying.

It was not a pleasant night. Many eight-inch-long rats, some with tails exceeding their body length, scurried over the ceiling joists. Until morning, he vacillated between worrying

about being attacked by enemy sappers, or bitten by hungry vermin.

With the advent of morning Lou worked the area for a full day, recovering at Sam Tong for the night. Hostilities in the Na Khang area were such at the time that the normal five minutes per leg was no longer deleted from logged flight time. This was also the case at Nam Yu, another area in contention, and considered a high-risk threat to crews.

The remainder of his upcountry tour was spent working out of LS-20. On the 12th, he swapped Hotel-Foxtrot at Na Khang for Hotel-33. After working locally, and southeast at Houei Sa An (LS-23), Lou was recalled to Udorn. ¹⁸

NAM YU

Customer Tony Poe had arrived at Nam Yu in the fall of 1965. Shortly afterward, with the advent of the site's increased capability and importance in training and conducting Yao team forays into Yunnan Province, and expansion to eastern and northern quadrants in the Nam Tha area, LS-118A was rarely without the services of at least one H-34 and crew. No longer was the extended ferry time from Udorn a consideration, for, unless there was a maintenance problem, the machines generally remained upcountry until scheduled for the required hundred-hour maintenance inspection. Only crews rotated.

While McCasland was grappling with missions in the upper Military Region Two area, Mike Jarina departed the Udorn airfield on 8 January in Hotel-12 for northwestern Military Region One. First Officer Mick Prulhiere was onboard to attain the last stages of his familiarization process and checkout for

¹⁸ Lou McCasland January 1966 Flight Time Report.
McCasland Email, 05/19/09.

Captain. Flight Mechanic, Frankie Claveria, formed the third member of the crew. Logging fifteen landings that day, Mike began working at Xieng Lom (LS-69A) then continued to Ban Houei Sai (L-25), and then to Nam Yu (LS-118A). At Nam Yu the air operations man directed him west to the Yao and mixed ethnic site at Moung Mounge (LS-93). After returning to Site-118A, a trip took him forty-five miles north to a listening post and cross-border team jump-off site at Ban Bo Mei (later numbered LS-194), located in the hills south of the Mekong and Burma border. Shuttles from Ban Houei Sai to Nam Yu completed the day, with a RON at Poe's site.

The second day Mike supported teams thirty-eight miles to the east along the Nam Tha, a watery demarcation line, separating Houa Kong and Luang Prabang Provinces. Hilly and forested trails wound along both sides of the river. Like the situation north of Luang Prabang, enemy forces had been concentrating on moving south and clearing the area of friendlies. However, Nam Yu-trained teams staged along the river were considered tenacious fighters. Team members were reputed to eat their enemy's livers. Another trip to Moung Mounge and local flights consumed the remaining portion of the day.

An eight-hour day on the 10th produced twenty-one landings.¹⁹ One of the flights took Jarina to Ban Nam Kueung (LS-150), a site on the Mekong north of Ban Houei Sai. This was Yao chieftain Chao La's area, the younger brother of Chao Mai. Unlike Chao Mai, his people did very little to aid the war effort, but produced a great deal of opium peddling. Later, Mike

¹⁹ Landings noted to provide the reader with the number of landings and takeoffs helicopter pilots conducted in a day. With short runs supplying outposts, on occasion, this number could escalate to nearly one hundred. Compare that enormous workload to the paltry number of landings made by big bird fixed wing pilots during the course of a day.

returned to the same team site he had supplied the previous day along the Nam Tha.

Following a final night at Nam Yu the crew returned to Udorn.

Consistent with an H-34s required presence at Nam Yu, toward month's end, Captain Lou McCasland worked the area piloting Hotel-33. He was relieved by Captain Tom Hoppe, who completed the month and the first three days in February there. On the 3rd, the engine chip detector light illuminated. The Flight Mechanic drained engine oil and inspected the chip detector device and carburetor strainers. Not discovering fuzzi or metal chunks, new oil was added, and the engine operated for a time without another chip light. Therefore, believing the problem might relate to a short circuit in the system, Tom ferried the machine to Udorn for further examination. ²⁰

THE KID RETURNS TO THE FOLD

After a harrowing year, my stateside leave had been restful and fruitful in renewing contact with close relatives and friends I had not seen for three to four years. It also restored my equilibrium and desire to return to Southeast Asia for more upcountry work. I was content knowing that the parents appeared to be satisfied with my marriage to a lovely girl of my choice. As a humorous side note, at one time my Mother actually confided that she believed I would never marry, and harbored thoughts that I might possess queer tendencies. I took this as joshing, but I suppose that during this era, an unmarried man at age

²⁰Mike Jarina Interviews.
Lou McCasland January 1966 Flight Time Report.
Tom Hoppe Letter.
Memorandum from CIA to 303, 09/08/66, #248.

thirty, might have been somewhat suspect as to his sexual orientation.

The return trip to Southeast Asia began on a low note. Below minimum VFR (visual flight rules) ceilings prevented New York Helicopters shuttles from Newark to JFK airport. ²¹ Because of the weather, the helicopter service provided a limousine to the New York airport at no extra cost. The drive required about an hour and provided enough time to connect with the westbound overseas flight.

Like all cramped and smoky 707 flights of the day, this trip was equally long and tedious. We made landfall in Bangkok on the eighth and I returned to Udorn the following day, still suffering from jet lag. Tuie, who had previously been unable to eat well because of morning sickness before I left, looked much better. She had gained weight, tipping the scales at eighty-seven pounds. Her sojourn to the family house in Thonburi and Pattani in South Thailand, plus being able to eat properly and retain the pre-natal pills, helped enormously. Uncle Cha even sent me a black Moslem hat he had purchased in Penang.

During my absence, Tuie had acquired rabbits from somewhere. They were inside the house and despite my objections that they would be messy and smell, she kept them there.

Although life was considerably different in Thailand without the creature comforts enjoyed in the States, I was home in my chosen environment with my mate, and was quite anxious to get back to work. In addition, I did not like to lose proficiency in the H-34, and contact with the current Lao situation. The FIC crew and other pilots were helpful in bringing me up to date, but this was selective and subjective. I

²¹ Bob Nunez had flown these same machines prior to joining Air America, and I might have flown as a passenger in an aircraft piloted by him in 1964.

would have to actually fly upcountry to attain a proper perspective.

I began flying on the eleventh. It felt good to be back in the saddle again. While satisfying a maintenance test flight, Wayne and I flew Hotel-33 around the field on a combination warm up, training, and a proficiency check required by management after a month off the line. Hotel-33 was the same UH-34D in which Frank Stergar, Steve Nichols, and I had nearly lost our freedom or lives during a one-sided SAR "OK Corral" type shoot-out the previous June in the Na Son/Son La Valley of North Vietnam, while attempting a rescue of USAF pilot, Captain Curt Briggs. ²²

The one hour and forty-seven minutes logged required a couple of flights and several start-ups and shut-downs. I suppose Wayne was satisfied with my performance, as I was released for upcountry work.

Night training followed the next evening in Hotel-12 with a pilot named Nelson who had joined us the previous October. I believe he left Air America soon afterward. ²³

UPCOUNTRY

I returned to Laos on the 14th in Hotel-15. The Company was still hiring H-34 pilots, and I was assigned to fly with one recent arrival. I would have preferred to fly solo, but new pilot Alex D. Nadalini joined me in the cockpit for training and area familiarization. (John D. Burkeholder and Bob

²² For a detailed account of this historic event in the Author's life, refer to Book Six, 1965.

²³ Flight Mechanics were no longer listed on the monthly flying record and I rarely included them in my personal log. Therefore, unless an out of the ordinary incident occurred and I recalled the Flight Mechanic's name, they will no longer be mentioned as a crewmember during my 1966 flights.

D. Davis were also hired in January.) Alex, a thin, dark-haired, affable individual, speaking concisely with a distinct British dialect represented a second helicopter pilot of mixed English-American parentage. However, unlike Captain Phil Goddard the pilot's mother was English. During the course of friendly conversation, I learned that Alex was from New Brunswick, New Jersey, only eleven miles from my hometown, and the site of Rutgers University, where I had been accepted as a freshman if I so chose, and where I had attended N.J. Boys State while in high school. I turned the offer down, as the university was too close to a girlfriend with whom I was quite involved. Moreover, according to my excellent female high school advisor, Duke University provided a more comprehensive pre-medicine program.

In the four days that we flew together, Alex received a generous exposure to several Military Regions. We first headed for Savannakhet (L-39) in Military Region Three to work. Later we flew north to the Thakhet strip (L-40) for a Customer briefing regarding a road watch mission the following day. Before retiring at Nakhon Phanom, I introduced Alex to the USAF Officer's Afterburner Club, and the pitfall of the "flaming hooker."²⁴

Following an early road watch team (RWT) mission, we moved further north to Paksane (L-35) in Military Region Two to fly a few missions. We completed the day working out of Sam Tong.

Like so many times since the summer of 1964, Neutralist troops from Moung Soui (LS-108) were again preparing to assault and capture the hills of Phou Khout from stubborn Pathet Lao units. In the spirit of questionable cooperation between FAR and FAN government forces, General Vang Pao took steps to secure the mountainous western flanks. Consistent with this policy, a late

²⁴ Flaming Hooker: A lighted shot glass of whiskey that had to be consumed to join the club.

trip found us approaching a Meo pad in the mountains between the FAN camp at Mounng Soui and the Nam Khan, a river flowing from the eastern reaches of upper Military Region Two that dumped its contents into the Mekong at Luang Prabang. The river also defined a government provincial border between Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang, and could be used as a year-round conduit by enemy units to infiltrate Lima-108 from the west. Among others, I had worked elevated Meo sites at Phou Fa (LS-16 Agony), Phou So (LS-57), Phou Fa Noi (LS-102), and various other unmarked landing zones in past years, but was unacquainted with this one. Therefore, I assumed that the site was fairly new, for there was no visible settlement or airstrip present. The landing zone was located on a high, flat shelf bordering a sheer cliff that plunged hundreds of feet to lower ground.

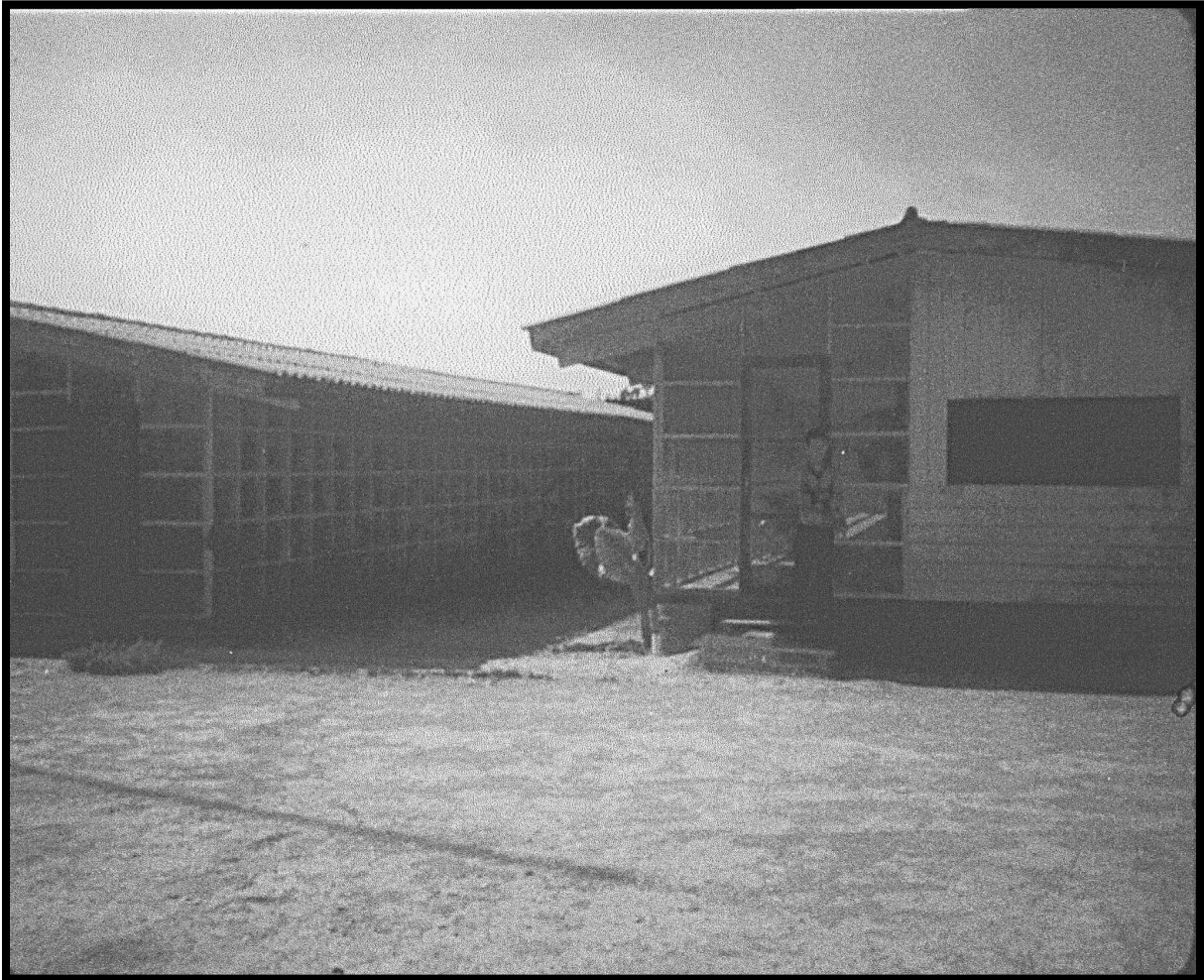
Attempting to teach mountain technique while preserving my backside, and prejudging the degree of difficulty of the pad, I elected to perform the approach and landing. Since there was no visible indication of a wind direction, during the approach, I informed Alex that unknown wind currents might result in a hairy landing. I was right. Even though planning a shallow, powered on approach, on short final, just prior to loss of transitional lift, a severe downdraft or heavy turbulence forced us down below the lip of the shelf. At the last moment, I was obligated to turn away to the right and dive to regain flying speed. It was a close call, and there was no salvaging that approach, but I had experienced plenty of these in the past. With every approach to a high pad unique, this one offered a perfect teaching lesson to a person who had not previously flown in these treacherous hills. Alex did not say much. Perhaps he wondered about my ability, or was simply too petrified to comment.

Fortunately, I learned a hard lesson from my mistake. During the next attempt, I maintained a slightly higher angle of approach to avoid the adverse conditions. This resulted in a perfect approach and successful landing. I thought I had seen the leader before, perhaps at Phou So (LS-57). This may or may not have been the case, for many Meo leaders were awarded positions through family and clan ties, and the more prosperous individuals tended to be heavy with puffy faces and porcine-like noses.

Except for a few new faces, apparently not much had changed at Sam Tong. Dale Means was gone, but in contrast to the old days, food and lodging were outstanding. Furthermore, we "Old-Timers" who recalled the bad old days in Pop's filthy, rat-infested warehouse, appreciated every second spent in the Air America hostel. Despite the step up in accommodations, a few of the new hire helicopter pilots like Chuck Eckerle, a furloughed commercial airline pilot, complained about the living conditions. It was difficult to convince him that the conditions we currently enjoyed were considered "hog heaven" in contrast to the primitive ones in the past.

Seemingly a disgruntled person, Chuck was also vocal about Air America's compensation and benefits. His ruminations regarding the necessity of a union to bring us up to industry standards fell on deaf ears. Aware that such talk was bound to eventually filter back to management, I wondered how long he would remain with the Company. ²⁵ I cannot recall Alex's response to our accommodations during his first overnight there but, as a former Marine he was used to roughing it.

²⁵ Chuck Eckerle was gone by the fall.



The Air America hostel opened during 1965 at Sam Tong, Laos.
Frank Stergar Collection.

SAM TONG AND THE REFUGEE RELIEF PROGRAM

By 1966, unique to all Laos, Sam Tong was a well-established refugee relief center and military camp, equipped with a local Nai Khong and a Lao military leader, both directly responsible to Vang Pao. ²⁶ The Lao government's overriding plan attempted to create a provincial capital at the site to replace the one lost at Xieng Khouang Ville. Three other Nai Kongs appointed by Vang Pao and assigned to monitor specific outlying areas along with other coordinators, were also located at Site-20. Most had substantial farmer interests or were important people before the war began in earnest. One, Bla Vo, had served in the French army on the Plain of Jars. These Nai Kongs' responsibility was to discover what was required in assigned area villages. Coordinating with the village Nai Khong, they gathered pertinent information regarding population levels, rice drops and distribution, and other villager needs. There was always something to be done, and the U.S. International Development (USAID) refugee relief program at Sam Tong continued unabated twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

A recent census tabulated 300,000 refugees living in the Sam Tong area. During times of crises and resettlement, a leader from Sam Tong would lead the people to a high area pre-selected for suitable defense, available water, and adequate land for growing rice. Insisting that it was safe, he would coax them to stop there and start a new life. It was difficult relocating, but the people were hardy and well-motivated. For example, some had moved six times in the previous five years to avoid being subjected to communist domination.

Since no roads led into selected areas, one of the first priorities was to hack out an airstrip for Air America and CASI

²⁶ Nai Khong: Village chief.



Airborne view of Sam Tong from the north, displaying considerable development. Refugee villages of different ethnic groups proliferated in the foreground and throughout the valley. The hospital is at the lower end of the angled offshoot from the runway. An AID warehouse adjoins the aircraft loading area. To the right the Air America hostel stands close to the distinctive forested karst. Designated the administrative center for Xieng Khouang Province, to the south are government buildings and military barracks. The dirt road to Long Tieng winds uphill southeast toward Skyline Drive, the high ridgeline dividing Site-20 and Long Tieng.

Author Collection.

Helio Courier Pilatus Porter, and H-34 air support. Cleared areas to receive air drops by C-46 and C-47 planes were created. During the first year, until land could be cleared and rice grown to support the population, the people were supplied with basic living essentials: rice, blankets, pots, pans, and utensils. The airstrip was centralized to the complex. Disparate tribes lived in separate villages. Meo clans erected houses on the high side, Lao Theung on the low portion, and Tai Deng between. There was no intermarriage between diverse tribes. Each community selected individual leaders. When problems arose, the people conducted unscheduled meetings in the school to resolve pertinent issues. In this manner, there was generally good cooperation, but only among separate entities.

Sixty percent of the resettled tribal people were Meo. The remainder consisted of Yao, Tai Deng, Tai Dam, and Lao Theung (a generic term for clans living at lower elevations). Sixty percent of Meo spoke Lao. With no written Meo language, an estimated forty percent could read and write Lao. The United States Information Service (USIS) provided funds for a Meo radio station, newspapers, and radios.

Every male refugee possessed a gun, and many soldiers doubled as rice farmers. Some small children of only ten carried an M-1 rifle as tall as they were. Soldiers wore their hair long, an ancient custom calculated to ward off bullets, according to USAID representative Paul White.²⁷

Over the years, particularly when the enemy achieved major advances to clear out pockets of Meo guerrilla and resistance areas threatening their LOCs, refugee re-locations that included

²⁷ USAID representative Paul White, Debrief of a Refugee Relief Officer Xieng Khouang Province, Laos 1966 (Honolulu, Hawaii: Asia Training Center) 1-4, 6.

other ethnics beside the Meo were conducted on a large scale. Consequently, many new sites, like the ones Paul White mentioned, sprang up in the hills and valleys south and east of Sam Tong.

One such village, reported in a *New York Times* article, was Thong Kheung (LS-191). Established in 1965, it was located five miles southwest of Mounng Cha (LS-113).²⁸ The community consisted of 2,000 Lao, Tai Dam, and Lao Theung. Supplied by Helio Couriers and Pilatus Porters, under the auspices of USAID, Air America pilots delivered nails, rice, cornmeal, medical supplies, and iron bars for the village blacksmith to forge tools. They carried blankets, knives, cooking utensils, leaflets, photos of the king, and black boards for the 290 school children to the tiny airstrips. The large area was liberally populated by Meo refugees, who claimed land for themselves. But with little other choice, the settlement and people were resolved to remain.²⁹

After flying one fuel load out of Site-20, we were directed to Luang Prabang. Consistent with the government push in Military Region One, we were loaded with troops for delivery to Ban Pha Thong (LS-169), fifty-five miles north of Luang Prabang. Located fifteen miles north of Nam Bac, the site was quite close to enemy-controlled Route-19. The bombing halt had allowed the Vietnamese to supply and enhance their forces in the Dien Bien Phu area, and there was some pressure on the Nam Ou Valley leading to the royal capitol. Therefore, in addition to

²⁸ Mounng Cha: A site also referred to as VP's Farm, or the Golf Course, because of the valley's broad expanse of grassy, rolling hills. It was also located seven miles east of Ban Nam Moh (LS-207, or Pearson's pad).

²⁹ Tom Wicker, *Laos: Little Planes Carry a Big Effort* (*New York Times*, 02/14/66).

supporting a critical area, the mission could have easily represented a form of road watch team monitoring mission, unheralded and undocumented, like those we conducted in Military Region Two, but unlike those later specified in Military Region Three. At any rate, unless deemed out of the ordinary, or encountering problems, we did not make note of these missions and conducted them without fanfare.

I had worked the area infrequently, and was not all that familiar with the territory north of Luang Prabang. Moreover, I found briefings at Lima-54 were just that: brief or nonexistent. Except for a few scattered Meo high ground positions, the low valley areas and much of the population between LP and the site, were largely controlled by, or patrolled by, enemy units. Using boats, enemy from Dien Bien Phu also enjoyed free access to the eastern areas along the upper reaches of the Nam Ou. Therefore, the threat of medium level AAA, such as the efficient 12.7mm weapon having a maximum range of 5,000 feet, was always present. This influenced my decision to fly round trips at altitude. When able, I struggled to climb to heights at least 3,000 feet above ground level (AGL) and preferably higher. This was a policy I continued to follow during all future work in the Luang Prabang area, and I never received any ground fire that I was aware of.

Working Luang Prabang's northern reaches could be very dangerous, and not all our pilots and crews transited the area unscathed. This was evident on 7 August 1965 when Berl King and a Case Officer were impacted by twenty-six small arm rounds in Porter N285L while trolling for an overdue team northwest of Lao Ta (LS-121). Despite bad weather that included low ceilings, Berl returned to the area the following day. This time he received twenty-four hits, with one round penetrating his left



Looking north from a plane at Wat Phu Si (center) and the royal capital of Luang Prabang, Laos. Part of the Nam Khan is visible to the right of the hilltop temple. The Mekong River flows south, dividing Luang Prabang Province from Sayaboury Province.

Thompson Collection.

wrist.³⁰ Later, more serious incidents in the Luang Prabang area would judge this incident relatively tame in comparison.

Berl was very quiet, well liked, and a Customer favorite. After returning to line duty, he went to work for Jim Rhyne performing various Special Missions.³¹

With the uneventful mission completed, we returned to Sam Tong for the night.

Continuing the Agency pattern of supplying and beefing up areas around Nam Bac, flying Hotel-34 and working out of Luang Prabang, from the 20th through the 24th Tom Hoppe supported Ban Pha Tong and Mok Lok (LS-131), and other sites in the vicinity of LS-203.³²

On Monday we worked out of Sam Tong and then were assigned to Na Khang for the remainder of the day. The base headquarters and fortress at the upper left side of the hill was laced with stout bunkers to withstand most light indirect and small arms fire. Using readily available resources, thick walls were composed of and reinforced with fifty-five-gallon fuel drums filled with dirt and rocks. Overhead roofs of pierced steel planking (PSP) were covered with a thick layer of logs and soil.³³ Trenches connected fighting holes, strong points, and interlocking fire for crew-served weapons, providing good fields of deadly fire that could sweep the strip, the rice paddies below, and the tree line to the southeast. A single 105mm

³⁰ Berl King showed the Author his scar one day at the airfield.

³¹ Professor William Leary 1966 Notes.
Joe Leeker, The Aircraft of Air America-Porters.

³² Tom Hoppe Letter.

³³ PSP: First developed before World War Two, Marston matting PSP was used in harsh environments to construct airfields quickly during and after the war.

howitzer provided mostly moral support for defenders of the bastion.

Site-36 was a hubbub of activity, with helicopters and fixed wing aircraft constantly hauling bullets, beans, and bandages in to and out of the strip. Efforts were underway to strengthen perimeter outposts and forward sites to ward off the enemy onslaught everyone predicted was imminent. Dedicated fighter bomber sorties continued to pound suspected enemy concentrations in and around friendly sites. Because reconnaissance missions were still ongoing in North Vietnam, Jolly Green helicopters and crews were deployed for rescue work, with refueling facilities available at the site. I even logged one-hour search and rescue (SAR) for the Department of Defense (DOD) that day in support of an area wide search for the first USAF pilot loss in 1966 over Laos. Nothing had changed in the area, and we were still subject to all the stresses and strains associated with the anxiety of a SAR mission in enemy territory.

MR-2 SAR

While LBJ's bombing halt in North Vietnam was in effect, Laos was largely exempt. Consequently, U.S. military aircraft were employed to pound enemy positions in Military Region Two. During mid-afternoon of 16 January, five jet pilots from the 354th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS) launched in their F-105s from Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB). Their mission was programmed to destroy radar-controlled 37mm guns located in the Phou Khout area preceding Kong Le's Neutralist troops' assault on enemy controlled hills, generically called Phou Khout (Kout), and located east of Moung Soui.

Flying a RF-105D (59-1719) designated Olds Five, Captain Don Charles Wood was tasked to film post-strike damage (BDA). At the time, Wood had been stationed at Takhli for two months.

After the flight delivered bombs, rockets, and conducted three strafing passes in which AAA fire was received over the target, contact could not be established with Wood. Thought to have crashed in the immediate vicinity, the four Olds flight pilots searched an area up to thirty miles north and east until dark when, reaching minimum fuel (bingo) state, they were obligated to recover at Udorn. Ground and air searches continued at various levels for three months without achieving tangible results.

Although conflicting reports of Wood's capture and possible demise continued to surface, he was never seen by returning U.S. POWs. Thus Captain Wood became another statistic on the lengthening list of almost 600 Americans lost in Laos. ³⁴ ³⁵

USAF SAR CAPABILITY COMES OF AGE

By the end of 1965, long-needed USAF equipment and SAR ability measurably improved. HH-3C Jolly Green helicopters were retrofitted with more powerful General Electric T-58-5 engines and increased armament to ward off enemy fire. The new model became the HH-3E. Deliveries to Southeast Asia began in November 1965. By December six were located at Udorn RTAFB with Detachment 5, 38th Air Rescue Squadron (ARS). Also improving the SAR program, the first two HC-130H control planes arrived in Udorn to replace the HC-54s.

³⁴ In the Author's estimation and from experience in the Southeast Asian Theater, because of the enmity created by U.S. bombing in Laos, in the absence of North Vietnamese (NVA) soldiers whose leaders realized the political capital an American prisoner would engender, unless of great value, most pilots were believed murdered by Pathet Lao captors. Also, if a pilot survived an ejection and landing, but if wounded or severely injured, the enemy had a tendency to terminate him.

³⁵Internet Biography of Don Charles Wood,
(<http://www.pownetwork.org/bios/w/wo44.html>).

To remain abreast of the ever-increasing air war in Southeast Asia, and to increase efficiency, in early January, rescue units were reorganized. Air Rescue Service became the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service. The Joint Search and Rescue Center was incorporated into the 3rd Aerospace Recovery Group at Ton Son Nhut, South Vietnam. Rescue control centers located at Da Nang and Udorn became Detachments One and Two. At the same time, the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron was activated at Da Nang. One detachment was located at Udorn. The primary mission of this unit was air crew recovery in North Vietnam and Laos. The 38th's mission was centered on the Theater's air base rescue and recovery in South Vietnam. ³⁶

We returned to (RTB) Sam Tong that evening, where Alex was recalled to Udorn. I never flew with him again.

Following a full day working out of Sam Tong and a restful night in the hostel, I was again sent from Long Tieng to Na Khang, where emphasis revolved around support of the site and positions to the east. We often had to cross the two primary enemy arteries twice when shuttling to remote Meo villages and bases east of Na Khang. Returning to Site-36 from these eastern sites late in the day in fading light could produce anxious moments. There were not a lot of definitive checkpoints available, forced landing areas were limited, and flight always required trips over enemy-controlled territory or no-man's-land.

That afternoon, while proceeding west at altitude, I was attempting to determine where roads or trails were located. However, with daylight quickly diminishing and heavy jungle merging endlessly to my front, pinpointing such a "needle in a

³⁶ Earl Tilford, *The United States Air Force: Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia 1961-1975* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1980) 75-76.

haystack" proved virtually impossible. Then, while looking north toward the Sam Neua area, multiple airbursts caught my eye, revealing the location of the main road. The explosions were in the distance, and no aircraft were visible, so I deduced that enemy gunners were preparing their 37mm weapons to greet another round of nightly air attacks. I did not often observe AAA of such large caliber, and, exciting in its own right, such a sight was sobering to a pilot flying a slow, lumbering target. It was not the last time I observed the fire of large caliber weapons.

After spending a restless and uncomfortable night at Site-36 dreaming about enemy sappers and the ever-present rats, I again worked the area. With the north and east defense perimeters slowly contracting toward the main base from enemy probes and tactical withdrawals, there was almost a frenzy to move additional supplies to the front lines. There never seemed to be enough time to accomplish all the loaders demanded. As usual, flight time was excellent, but the anxiety of enemy attack at night, and funky living conditions, contributed to a fatigue that did not make flying enjoyable.

By late afternoon on the twentieth, with time upcountry complete, I made my way to Udorn.

UDORN

Returning to the house, I discovered that Tuie had moved the rabbits outside to a pen someone built for her. This made me happy and, despite our cultural differences, evoked the point that we could amicably arrive at a common agreement on most items. Besides, I was an older and "wiser" person--wink, wink. We discovered that both animals were males, so a neighbor lent us a female. Much fun was had by all, but after a couple of days, the person retrieved them.

Luern, Tuie's fifteen-year-old personal maid who had been with her for many years, and had served as our house servant for months was gone. Sometime before, her boyfriend had visited us, so I presumed that they had eloped. I was not happy. I liked the little girl, and despite the fact that she was probably reporting my overall treatment of Tuie to the family, she was always upbeat, referred to me as Captain, and generally cheered our lives.

Mrs. Nisagorungsee, referred to in the customary respectful term Khun Yai, ³⁷ replaced Luern with a dark Asian Indian looking girl by the name of Kack. Kack was married to a samlor driver. Both had worked for the Nisagorungsee family, and again I realized that her presence was also likely related to family intelligence gathering regarding our relationship. Kack worked days only. In the evening her husband whisked her off somewhere in his machine. When she first came to work for us I had to put my foot down when I observed her crawling on her knees in obsequious fashion, while delivering water to my wife. That may have been the custom in the royal courts of the old aristocracy, but not in my house.

During her tenure with us, Kack managed to destroy my only personal transportation, the girl's bicycle Howard Estes had bought for Patti in Vientiane and sold to me before ending his employment and leaving for the States. That was the end of my on road machinery, and for a time, I relied on local and Air America busses, samlors, and the kindness of others for transportation.

With fatter paychecks, the compulsive spending begun in 1965 persisted, as employees continued to purchase automobiles.

³⁷ Khun Yai: A Thai term of polite respect for an older person. Khun Yai's actual given name was Cham.

Most individuals who joined Air America arrived in Udorn thousands of dollars in debt. It was the unusual person who did not. Sadly, my friend Howard Estes left the Company with virtually nothing to show for almost three years of difficult and stressful work. Some of my peers were coaxing me to buy a vehicle, but I could not understand paying one hundred percent import duty for a means of transportation I really did not require. Granted, we were earning fairly good money and many pilots did not understand my point of view. My overriding goal had not changed. It was still to save all the money I could for an eventual move back to America that I knew would be necessary sooner or later.

With the advent of additional vehicles in town, Udorn began to move into the twentieth century, and the first traffic stop light was installed. People were amazed, and stood transfixed watching the light cycle through color changes. A policeman was present to advise them on the device's merits and explain what to do. Long enjoyed in Bangkok, northeast television broadcasts were beginning. TV sets were displayed in store windows for promotion. Much like the USA in the forties, town folk gathered at night to watch the black and white images. ³⁸

The Air America facility continued to expand. The new operations-administration building, slated for completion 27 November 1965, was still not occupied. Other construction projects were moving ahead. The new shops building was nearly completed. Plans for two additional hangars and supply buildings were in the mill, but not started.

³⁸ Tom Hoppe Mail.

Town housing was in short supply, and prices were rising along with commodity prices. ³⁹

MAINTENANCE CONCERNS

Jumping the gun, a memorandum was circulated regarding hot season precautions to inform new crewmembers of potential H-34 engine problems before the fact.

"Heat, dust, and prolonged use of high RPM are major factors in reducing R-1820 reciprocating engine life. This is exacerbated during the hot season. Over the years, a significant increase in the premature engine removal rate because of a generally deteriorated condition, high oil consumption, the rate of in-flight power malfunctions, or outright engine failure had risen to alarming levels each year during the March through June period. For example, in 1964 average time since overhaul (TSO) dropped to 300 as compared to 570 hours during the following wet season [the nominal replacement period was 600 hours]."

In-flight power plant deficiencies and-or failures with consequent peril of life as well as serious aircraft damage are matters of deep concern. Helicopters are ingenious machines which can frequently be autorotated to safe landing following an engine failure if suitable terrain exists and nothing else goes wrong. Engine failures or malfunctions occurring at any other time, especially during takeoff or climb out over mountainous areas, jungle or heavily woods areas are extremely hazardous.

Engines fail for the same general reasons during the hot season as any other time; they just fail more frequently and less predictably. Also during the hot season, maintenance and flight crews are more prone to err, are more likely to miss

³⁹ Air America Base Manager Ben Moore January 1966 Monthly Report to the head office in Taipei, Taiwan.

potentially important discrepancies, and are less critical of those they do find during inspection.

Records can prove that more aircraft are damaged and lost per flying hour during the hot season than at any other time of year. Some precautions to observe:

Air-fuel induction system: Reciprocating engines are especially sensitive to dust ingestion which can increase cylinder and valve wear and oil consumption. Dust may clog the various carburetor air metering system passages which effects fuel flow and engine operation at altitude. Induction system leaks can cause trouble. They may admit hot air into the system which increases the fuel air temperature along with the attending danger of pre-ignition or detonation. Therefore, inspections should include air screens, which should be cleaned at intervals; air leaks to the induction system, and the intake pipes.

Engine cooling system: The cooling system provides for air flow cooling of cylinders and oil in order to keep residual operating temperatures within acceptable limits. High residual operating heat detracts from efficiency and power output and may contribute to other power plant problems. Hot spots can be a major problem in damaging engines.

Items to inspect: Ducts, seals, and blast tubes for missing, distorted or misaligned baffles; oil cooler air passages for clogging. In addition, the engine nose section." ⁴⁰

RESUMPTION OF ROLLING THUNDER

By the 25th, President Johnson intimated to members of the National Security Council and Congressional leaders that he was

⁴⁰ Many of the Hot Season Precautions Were Extracted from the *Helicopter Fight Mechanics Handbook*.

going to order resumption of bombing in North Vietnam. During the month, every avenue was pursued to find a way to begin negotiations with Vietnamese leaders to stop the war. It was fruitless. Instead, intelligence sources revealed that the enemy had used the bombing halt to increase items of war along the trails, shuttling additional troops into South Vietnam, and had repaired infrastructure previously damaged by U.S. bombing.

A week later, the president informed the American public that bombing of the North would commence again.

The thirty-seven-day cessation of bombing North Vietnam had resulted in additional strike sorties in Laos. Compared to those flown in December, they increased by 150 percent in January; a majority was concentrated against targets in Military Region Three and Military Region Four. ⁴¹

TACAN

From the commencement of U.S. bombing in Laos, unfortunate errors, called "short rounds" in inter office message traffic, impacted both Lao civilians and friendly troops. Despite stringent rules-of-engagement (ROE) employed to alleviate the problem, off target errors continued to seriously plague the Theater. It appeared that relying on line-of-sight tactical air navigation systems (TACAN) located in South Vietnam (Da Nang), Thailand (NKP), on a Navy destroyer in the Tonkin Gulf, and on an airborne plane flying at low altitudes over the Tonkin Gulf, were far from perfect, and the stations were incorrectly positioned to provide adequate coverage over harsh mountainous terrain. More needed to be done to continue the support of the RLG and military forces.

⁴¹ John Bowman, General Editor, *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War* (New York: Bison Books, 1985)
Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*.

In addition, the current TACAN system being employed had other definite limitations in that effective radar range was only about ninety miles. Therefore, coverage was minimal in northwestern North Vietnam, and pilots had to trust their radar and the airborne platforms for MiG alerts. ⁴²

To improve overall navigation and the bombing system, in the fall of 1965, USG had sought permission from the RLG to position TACAN units at strategic locations in Lao military regions considered critical to the war effort. The basic unit was composed of a beacon transponder connected to an all-band antenna that could accommodate up to a hundred aircraft. Included were a sideband transmitter-receiver radio and three generators. Various sites were surveyed in 1965, but personnel selection, training considerations, and political constraints appreciably slowed the implementation process.

From a humanitarian and realistic perspective, U.S. Mission and Royal Lao Government personnel were highly concerned about "short rounds." How could any government win friendly civilians' hearts and minds, and ask RLA soldiers to fight, when you were killing them instead of the enemy? Therefore, despite serious political risks involved, USG, backed by the Souvanna Phouma government, elected to install navigational aids in two areas deemed politically and realistically "safe" and most advantageous for direct accurate strike delivery. However, because of bureaucratic red tape, personnel equipment training required, and shifting security concerns in both the selected areas in Military Region Two and Military Region Four, the first unit was not installed until 1966. It would not be too soon, for

⁴² During my USMC tour, while flying HUS-1 cross-country flights over flat terrain out of the New River Marine Corps Air Facility, I found the TACAN signals and distance measuring equipment (DME) only accurate to about eighty miles at moderate altitudes.

the latest errant bombing had just occurred in the Saravane and Attoupeu areas.

Following a high-level meeting between U.S. civilian and military leaders on 6 January in Udorn, the green light for TACAN installation in Laos was flashed. Subsequently, three days later, a U.S. Army CH-47 crew lifted several thousand pounds of TACAN equipment from Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base to Phou Kate, the highest terrain in Military Region Four that overlooked much of Saravane Province. A team of "sheep dipped" members of the First Mobile Communication Group followed to assemble and test the equipment. By the 13th, Channel-72, with a 200 nautical mile line-of-sight range was operating on a minor scale.

Initial surveys in northern Military Region Two included proposed TACAN locations at Na Khang and Phou Pha Thi. Because of the sizable enemy threat, the previously selected site at Na Khang for TACAN installation was no longer considered adequately secure to emplace the equipment. Therefore, hasty surveys concluded that a high point on Skyline Ridge overlooking the Long Tieng Valley could provide northern coverage and substitute as an alternative for the preferred Site-36. Channel 79 was in partial operation, but not completely installed until February.

Because of overwhelming political concerns of the royal Lao government (RLG), TACAN (Channel 97) and radio equipment at Site-85 was not installed until August, and would not commence full operation until September to aid bombing missions conducted over North Vietnam.

Despite the installation of TACAN equipment closer to areas of operation in Laos, tactical bombing errors continued to occur.

Navigation problems on bombing missions were compounded by other factors such as weather, the short time on station, pilot

inexperience, and an increased enemy air capability. Even though U.S. fighter-bombers vastly outnumbered Soviet MiG aircraft, the addition of about a dozen MiG-21 jets tended to even the odds a bit. Unlike over a hundred MiG-15 and 17s in the North Vietnamese Air Force inventory, the Fishbed jet was comparable in speed, ceiling, combat radius, and attack capabilities of the F-4 and F-8U aircraft. ⁴³

Pilots flying the MiG-21s were trained in the Soviet Union and displayed an increasing aggressiveness following resumption of the Rolling Thunder campaign. For example, in a highly unusual move, one MiG pilot pursued an American jet well into Laos. It was believed that the nine in-country North Vietnamese radar sites, increased pilot proficiency, and ground controllers fostered this new belligerence. ⁴⁴

TIGER HOUND

The combined services program established in early December to annihilate enemy forces infiltrating South Vietnam and destroy road infrastructure south of Steel Tiger continued to expand in January. Throughout Military Regions Three and Four, enemy workers feverishly struggled to maintain and repair the entire system of trails. However, most of their activity focused

⁴³ Fishbed: A NATO designation, the MiG-15 mounted two cannon and two Atoll infrared homing missiles.

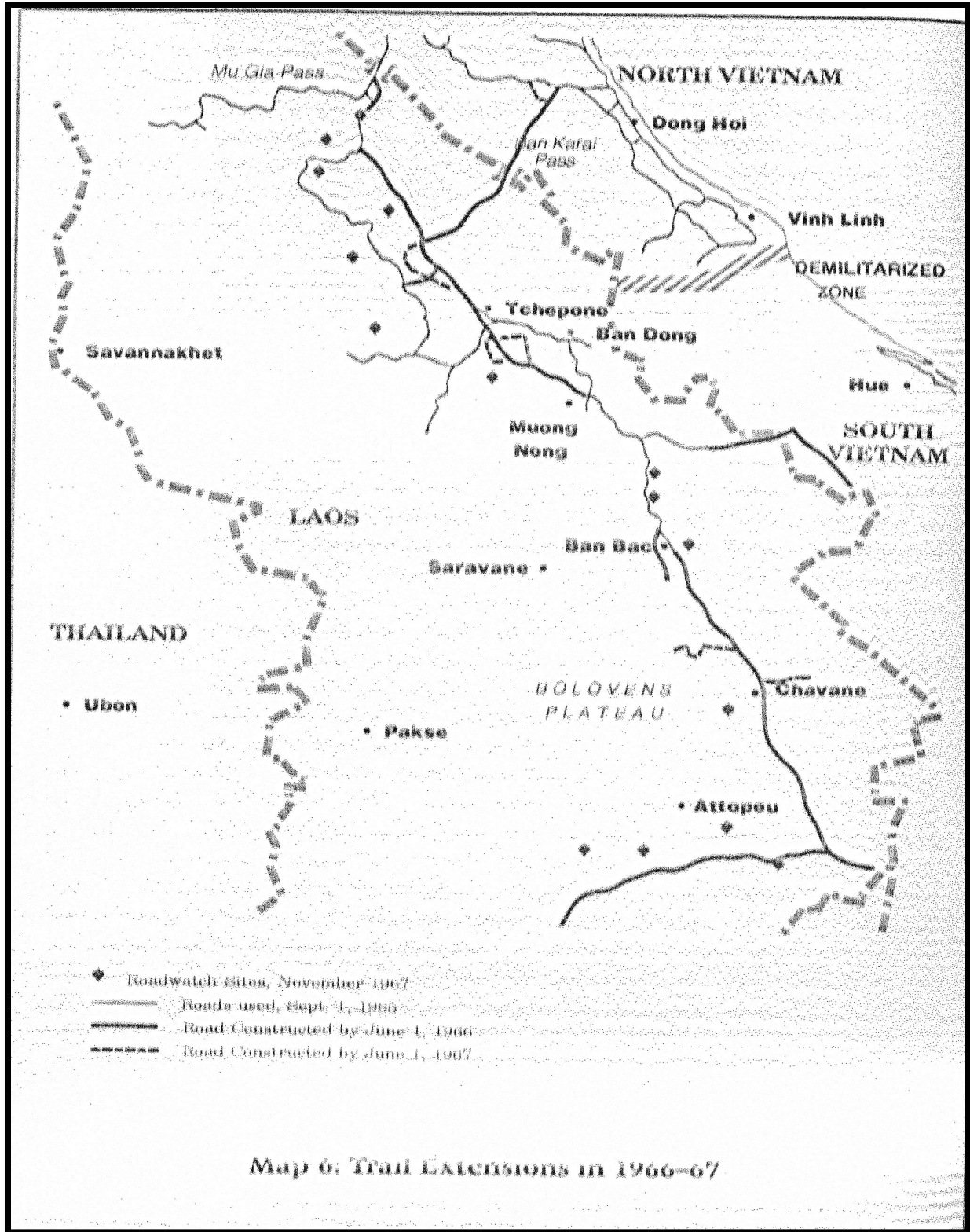
⁴⁴ Victor Anthony, 183-184.
Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 129.
Timothy Castle, *One Day too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 25-26, 282n12.
Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, *Intelligence Memorandum, North Vietnamese Air Capabilities Increasing*, 02/09/66.
John Smith, *Rolling Thunder: The American Strategic Bombing Campaign Against North Vietnam 1964-1968* (Saint Paul: Phalanx Publishing, 1995) 90, 312.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 188.

around and along Route-9, from Tchepone south to the junction of Route-92, along Route-92 to Route-96, and south on Route-96 past route-165 and Chavane (map). In these areas major emphasis on interdiction was conducted, a majority of vehicle destruction recorded, and a majority of aircraft lost to enemy fire.

Heavy construction equipment was noted in some areas, and large numbers of repair crews were busily working along these southern routes. Photo intelligence depicted bypass roads constructed around destroyed bridges, landslides, and road craters.

By the end of January more than a hundred sorties per day were flown against fixed targets and to develop reconnaissance missions in the Tiger Hound area. Some of these included O-1 observer and spotter aircraft with U.S. FACs. In addition, there was a C-130 command and control ship with RLAFF officers onboard. With missions conducted around the clock, there were bound to be increased losses from an enemy determined to keep LOCs open. Consequently, during the month, ten aircraft were hit and five downed. On the 31st, a Navy pilot in a battle-damaged A-1H crash landed at the Saravane airstrip in Military Region Four. Concerned with media attention, reporting, and its effect on the Geneva protocols, the fact of a U.S. warplane on Lao soil caused a substantial stir within the Vientiane U.S. Mission. Unexpended ordnance and sections of the plane were subsequently ferried out of the country. ⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Jacob Van Staaveren, 114-116.
Melvin Porter, Project *CHECO Tiger Hound 6 September 66* (reprinted by Dalley Book Service Christiansburg, VA) 20, 27.
Telegram From the Embassy in Laos (Sullivan) to the Department of State, Foreign Relations 1964-1968, Volume 28, Laos, #216.



The expanding enemy road network in eastern and southern Military Region Three and Four. Route-96 passes south of Chavane and "T's" into the east-west Route-110 that extended west and south into Cambodia.

MOUNG SOUI

Largely because of the FAN (Neutralist military) leadership change, and previous heavy losses to a relatively small number of determined enemy troops ordered by superiors to defend and die on Phou Khout, Neutralist plans to assault the hills east of LS-108 were scrapped. Since it was believed that American air power would flatten the area, new tactics were devised to bypass Phou Khout, attack other more easily assailable enemy positions, and establish a north-south defense line ten miles east along the Nam Pen. This policy would tend to choke off resupply and reinforcement of enemy units, who would either be bombed out of existence or starve.

By 25 January, eight Neutralist battalions were established in forward positions to commence the operation. Supported by AIRA-requested increased air support, Sunday the 30th was selected to commence the route march. However, following the end to the USG administration's Christmas bombing halt, new North Vietnamese targets were assigned, and this diverted most U.S. air from completing the job to reduce Phou Khout.

Despite LBJ's decision to resume Rolling Thunder in the North, inclement weather in the target areas prevented much activity. The northeast monsoon out of China introduced low clouds, poor visibility, and heavy rain.⁴⁶ In addition, haze and clouds obscured target areas up to 14,000 feet. Because of this foul weather, there were many diverts to Military Region Two. However, instead of supporting the Neutralist push east, bombs were dropped on enemy LOCs.

With little U.S. military air available, over a period of a week, Thai-piloted T-28s flew mostly in support of the offensive

⁴⁶ Monsoon seasons were reversed on the eastern side of the Lao/Vietnamese border Annamite Mountains.

to protect the Neutralists' rear. Except for Kong Le's better-trained and better-led 2nd Paratroop Battalion troops, other FAN battalions did not advance far, and the movement stalled. The tentative nature of progress was entirely predictable, for previous operations over the years revealed Neutralist soldiers' gross lack of aggressiveness, or desire to achieve assigned objectives.

A fresh assault was planned for 20 February, but sorties for the defense and ultimate loss of Na Khang diverted air and precluded these plans. Consequently, enemy defensive bunkers were continually developed and deepened.⁴⁷

At the end of January, flying Hotel-15 with Frankie Claveria and working out of Moung Soui, Mike Jarina supported the Phou Khout operation. With the site largely stripped of fighting men, like I had previously done with Alex Nadalini, he worked to ensure that southern and western flanks were covered, and there was no backdoor interference from PL units. With seventeen landings recorded, some of the day's missions included shuttles to Phou Soung (LS-156), twenty-four miles west of LS-108 and five miles east of the Route-7 Sala Phou Khoun road junction; and another blocking position along Route-7, twelve miles west. Enlisting Vang Pao's forces, he landed at Meo sites in the vicinity of Vang Vieng. Later missions took him north of Moung Soui to the Phou So (LS-57) hills and a new site eight miles north northeast at Phou Chomhe. Following this, Mike retired to Sam Tong for the night.⁴⁸

On the 31st, I departed for five days in Military Region Two. Flying Hotel-31, I worked the entire day out of Tha Thom

⁴⁷ Tom Ahern, 188.
Victor Anthony, 190.

⁴⁸ Mike Jarina Interview.

(LS-11). Since I had last flown in the area, it appeared that we had lost a few sites to the north and one west at Ta Vieng. I wondered how many more positions would go down the tubes, and if it was merely the beginning of the enemy's dry season push, or reluctance of our troops to exhibit strong resistance. Indeed, the embassy had correctly predicted an ample opportunity for enemy exploitation because of the previous year's coup, leading to weakness and demoralization of the Tha Thom defenders. Many loyal troops remained from General Phoumi's units. With General Kham Kong betrayed and under house arrest, the troops bitterly exhibited little incentive to fight under General Kouprasith. Therefore, they were in the process of being relocated and replaced by new units deemed loyal to the current regime. ⁴⁹

Although the area situation was tense, fuel was still available and the actual valley site was considered safe enough to shut down.

That night, I RON at the Sam Tong hostel.

⁴⁹ Telegram William Sullivan to Philippine Embassy (Harriman), FRUS, #221, 02/20/66.

On 1 February, I was assigned missions in the local Long Tieng, Sam Tong areas. Following a long day of flying over nine hours, I recovered at Site-20 for the night. Mike Jarina arrived about the same time, relating a bizarre tale regarding General Vang Pao and his bodyguards.

That morning Mike landed at Long Tieng where the general and his entourage boarded his aircraft. By then, Mike knew Vang Pao quite well and was familiar and comfortable working in the area.

Mike flew the group to Padong (LS-05), Moung Cha (LS-113), and another village where, after conducting a brief parlay, a leader from each site was added to the party. After picking up a third and final man, Vang Pao directed Mike to neutral ground at the ridgeline strip of Pha Phai (LS-65). They disembarked and walked to a small hut located at the eastern end of the runway. Before Vang Pao left the cockpit, he informed Mike there would be some shooting, but that he should not panic and depart. Aware that Tha Vieng (LS-13) had fallen again, ¹ Mike assumed local troops were going to fire rounds from 75mm artillery pieces or recoilless rifles at the enemy on the low ground to the east, and asked if he could watch. Vang Pao assented.

During the early dry season months there had also been activity along the seven-mile ridgeline of Khang Kho (LS-204). Located across the valley from Padong, the old site overlooked a fringe of the southern PDJ. The strategic mountain, along with others on the PDJ perimeter had always provided a bottleneck to sustained enemy movement to the south and west. It was also used

¹The site had changed hands four times in the few years I had been flying in Laos.

to stage troops for forays onto the Plain of Jars for intelligence gathering, or to raise havoc with the enemy. Supported by our aircraft flying supplies into the 270-foot strip, the 200 troops defending outposts strung out along the area had so far managed to ward off enemy probes. ²

Mike waited at Hotel-15 with Frankie. After a time, curious when the artillery guns would commence firing, he walked into the hut. All hands were sitting around a table conversing and drinking from water glasses. Mike, equally curious about the drinks, asked what it was.

Vang Pao said, "*Lao-Lao. It is our liquor that we make out of corn.*" The general asked if Mike wanted a taste.

Not a drinker, the Captain immediately replied "No way." He then asked when the shooting would start. Vang Pao indicated soon.

"Ok, I will be at the helicopter."

Mike was talking to Claveria when he suddenly heard automatic rifle fire. Shocked, Frankie jumped up excitedly shouting, "*They shot Vang Pao!*"

"No they cannot."

Then bodyguards spilled out the door, kicking and shooting people. One guard pushed a man over with his toe to see if he was dead. ³

The incident was so unprecedented, unexpected, and occurred so quickly that there was no time to crank up the H-34 and depart. Following the carnage, the party left the bodies scattered around the hut and casually sauntered to the helicopter.

²Wicker, *New York Times*, 02/14/66.

³ All Vang Pao's bodyguards were incorruptible relatives. I suspect "Plug," the man who had been mauled by a bear and kept a chew of tobacco in the hole next to his nose, was involved.

Mike asked Vang Pao what happened. His face flushed with drink and excitement from blood sport, the general said in his deep, guttural voice: *"They very bad people. I have to have some discipline with the troops. I placed the men in charge to protect the people. Instead, they appropriated villagers' food and women. Consequently, I had to set an example."* With little other recourse, Mike accepted this explanation for the murders.

USAID representative, Blaine Jensen later indicated Vang Pao's reason for the executions was merely an excuse. The men involved had been stirring up the people, saying to all who would listen that Vang Pao had appointed himself the leader, but had no legitimate authority. The Meo should immediately take action to eliminate him before it was too late. After hearing such talk from those friendly to him, Vang Pao elected to preempt any possible movement against him. Such was Vang Pao's harsh and swift tribal mountain justice. Hoping to create an object lesson, he arbitrarily made arrests, conducted a trial, and ordered an execution. At least the "kindly" warlord allowed his targets a final drink.

Because of extreme criticism engendered by the episode, the general never repeated such extreme measures. However, the example was noted and there was considerable speculation among some Meo clans that he just might perform it again. Despite broad controversy engendered by the summary executions, hoping to keep the people in line, Vang Pao took a chance and accomplished his purpose. ⁴

Despite the shock of what happened at Site-65, Mike completed the day working at Pa Ka (LS-51), eight miles west southwest of Sam Tong and Tham Sorm (LS-74), three miles southeast of Long Pot.

⁴ Blaine Jensen Letter.

Until much later I never observed Vang Pao at his worst, but I had heard most of the bloody stories and was quite aware that the general could be violent when his temper was elevated and the situation warranted. Therefore, I was not at all surprised by Mike's story. I never heard the tale repeated, so assumed that it stopped with us.

On Wednesday, I worked three fuel loads out of Sam Tong.

Mike was assigned to Luang Prabang to work for Howard Freeman. His first flight was assigned to Ban Pha Thong (LS-169, thirteen miles north of Nam Bac. It would mark his longest flight in the area. There was a solid overcast north of Luang Prabang and many other clouds in the area. A relatively new guy, anxious not to displease the Customer, Mike flew over the Luang Prabang non-directional beacon (NDB) and tracked outbound to the site. After landing on the hill, he noted primitive hill country and large drums in the village. When he returned to Luang Prabang he was asked why he had not made the required hourly operations normal reports.

Before RON, another trip took him to Xieng Lom and then Ban Bo west of Luang Prabang on the Mekong River, just short of the "S" turn. With no rice available at 69A to take to Ban Bo, instead he shuttled corn meal. ⁵

AN UNCOMFORTABLE NIGHT AT NA KHANG

Assigned to work the 713 contract, on the third, I popped across Skyline Drive to Long Tieng and taxied into the large parking-loading area between the karsts at the northern end of the valley. ⁶ "Snoopy," was present on the ramp. "Snoopy" was our

⁵Mike Jarina Interviews

⁶713: A generic term used over the air for Agency Long Tieng work as opposed to USAID Sam Tong, or Requirements Office (RO) Moun Soui. It was also used for billing purposes.

comic-strip name for the indigenous air operations person chosen for the job when he was very young because he was a Vang Pao relative. The youth had some English language background, and was able to scrawl coordinates on paper for a pilot to plot. By then, unless at a new place, I knew most of the local villages' names where we worked. Therefore, when he handed me a paper, I would quickly scan my map and, if it looked like a landing zone where I had been before, I asked "Snoopy" if it was such and such a village. I think he appreciated my candor and this certainly did not discourage our rapport.

This particular morning, he sent me to Na Khang. I did not mind day work there, but an RON was another matter, for things were unwinding fast in the area, and even the natives were afraid. Fear is a highly infectious condition and spreads easily. Consequently, continuing what had already begun the previous month, many soldiers and their families were departing for more secure areas to the south and west. The overriding question remained, would a sufficient number of troops remain at the site, be able to contain a concerted enemy attack, and hold the ground?

I worked the entire day supplying local outposts. To the east, the normal perimeter around Houei Thom (LS-27) looked like it was contracting, but I received no ground fire while distributing the means for defense. As the day drew toward a close, as expected, I was advised to RON at Site-36. With the tension I felt mounting during the day, that was not something I looked forward to. Since USAF Jolly Green crews were no longer allowed to remain overnight, H-34 crews were the only game in town for Customer evacuation, should the situation require such

action. There were also a couple of Air America radio operators and Thai PARU who normally RON there.

Before retiring, Bobby Nunez, PIC of a second UH-34D assigned to work the site that day, and I walked uphill to the headquarters bunker to discuss our options and seek advice about what to do should there be trouble. After obtaining the latest intelligence brief from Mike Lynch and Jerry Daniels, I deduced that nobody really knew exactly what to expect from day to day. To stem the enemy's further advance south, Vang Pao's overall strategy appeared to remain in place and hold the site as long as possible, but just in case, a western escape route toward the Mung Heim Valley had been plotted by the troops.

Considering the H-34s in the parking ramp prime targets for enemy gunners, I had already decided to walk out if necessary, but speculated as to how I would perform as a ground pounder, for hiking through the jungle constituted an unfamiliar and hostile environment to an aviator. Also, because of a lack of exercise, I was not in the best of physical condition. I was a few pounds heavier, and it had been a long time since I had humped over the fabled hill trails and harsh terrain at the Quantico Marine Corps training base. Against this scenario and to remain "light on the skids," I slept close to the door with my clothes and boots on. In contrast, Nunez, who probably considered that he was doing the right thing, elected to spend the night strapped in the cockpit of his machine. I believed this action extremely foolhardy, for the high-profile H-34s would most certainly draw enemy attention, and constitute an initial target for sappers.

Before the night was over, intermittent gunfire rang out from the tree line, 1,000 yards east across the rice paddies. The shooting did not last long. I never discovered if an actual encounter with an enemy patrol had occurred. Perhaps spooked

friendly troops, like Don Quixote tilting with windmills, were merely shooting at shadows to bolster their morale. Regardless of what was going on just to the east, the incident effectively terminated any possibility of valuable sleep. Therefore, for the rest of the early morning, I kept one eye open. At dawn, I arose groggy, but attempted to function. It was not easy, since I felt like warmed over sierra.

Fortunately, fog and low clouds kept us on the ground, while the Customers attempted to learn and distill what had occurred the previous night. Apparently, there actually had been a minor enemy probe calculated to test the site's defenses. Nunez either elected not to launch, or slept through the brief encounter.

After the weather lifted sufficiently so we could service outposts within the field perimeter, I flew a little more than half a fuel load before my relief pilot arrived on B-853. As it was the only way home, and I chose not to be on the ground at the site any longer than absolutely necessary, I hopped on the Caribou for a one hour and forty-eight-minute trip to Udorn.

OOPS

Despite strict military rules of engagement (ROE) and improvement in navigational aids, bombing errors continued in Laos. Thinking they were striking moving vehicles on a LOC, the day after I departed Na Khang, USAF F-4C pilots in a flight of two, diverting from a Barrel Roll mission, bombed Moung Heim. Twelve Neutralist soldiers and civilians were killed and thirty-seven wounded. Later investigation blamed the flight leader for not possessing the latest targeting information and obtaining confirmation for the strike.

Following each such incident, Ambassador Sullivan had to tactfully explain what had happened to Souvanna Phouma. Beside

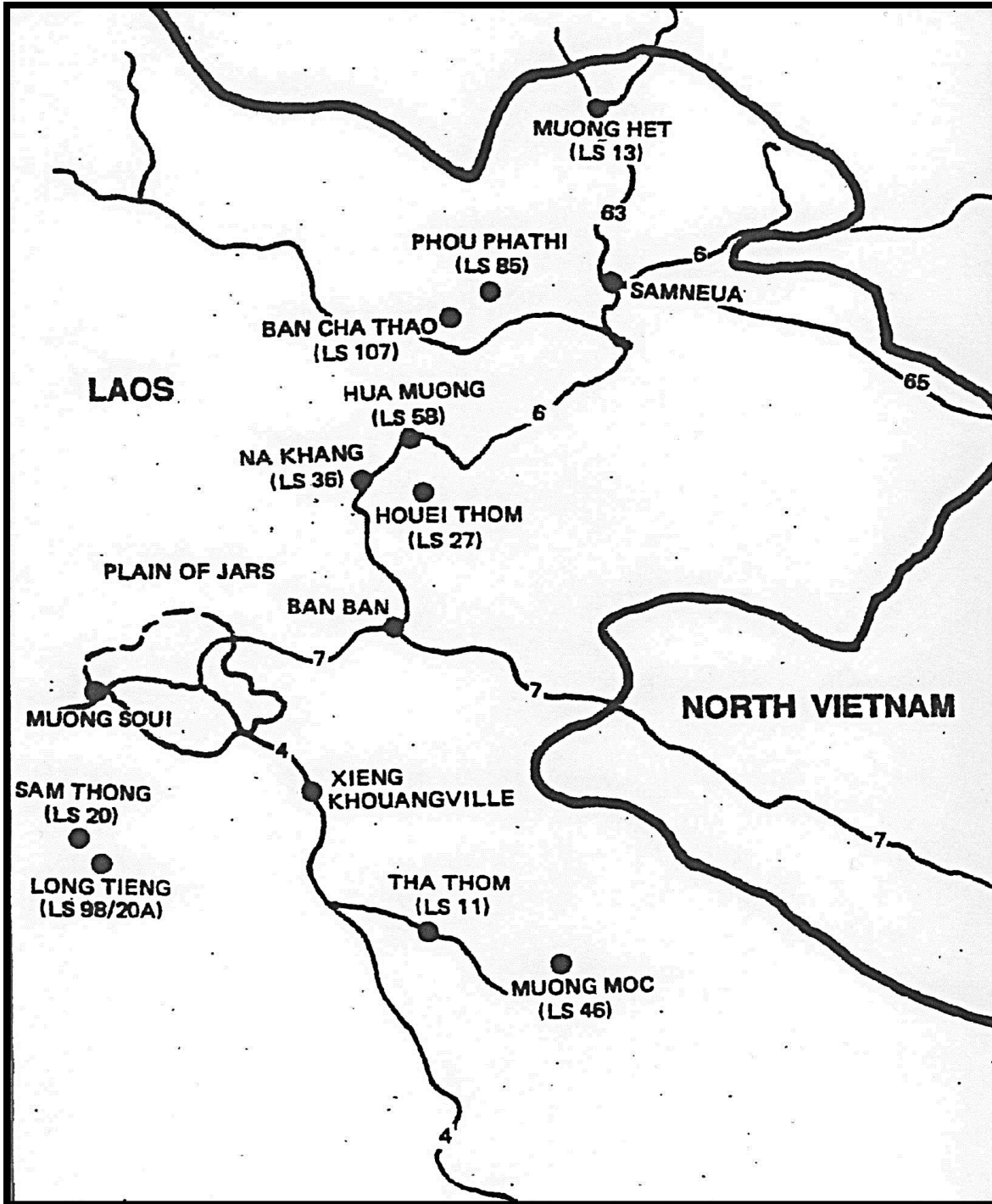
the loss of life and property, USG had to consider the problem of Lao military units' and villagers' morale and continued loyalty to the Prime Minister. ⁷

HOU EI THOM KAPUT

What everyone in the Na Khang area had expected occurred. During the wee hours of 6 February, Vietnamese units attacked the Houei Thom perimeter. Supported by one 105mm howitzer, Major Douanghta's well trained BV-27 warriors offered stiff resistance, exacting a heavy toll on enemy assets. Unfortunately, the suddenness and ferocity of the attacks precluded timely air support that had saved the site the previous year. Defense of the main site was short lived. Following multiple enemy assaults, collapsing outer perimeter outposts, and with virtually no ammunition remaining, within two and a half hours of the initial attack, only a few dozen government soldiers remained. These men eventually withdrew southwest toward Na Khang. The defeat cost us the strongest position east of Route-6 protecting Na Khang's eastern flank. Consequently, the prime approach route to Lima Site-36 was wide open-it was just a matter of time...

The following morning, BV survivors were discovered halfway to Site-36. The exhausted and wounded soldiers were airlifted the rest of the way to "safety" at Na Khang by a helicopter pilot. There they received medical assistance, and rest, after which they were positioned to help defend the base against the ultimate enemy push. That day a few reinforcements were ferried

⁷Jacob Van Staaveren, 129-130.
Letter from the Deputy Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Johnson) to the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Cyrus Vance), 03/08/66.



Some prominent site locations in Military Region Two's Xieng Khouang and Houa Phan Provinces. After rolling up eastern and northern government sites, with LOCs open from Sam Neua and Ban Ban, during January 1966 enemy forces began movement toward Houei Thom and Na Khang.

Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 176.

into the site. However, Vang Pao's further requests to the General Staff for additional troops were ignored. ⁸

Further tightening the noose around the Na Khang defenders, on the eighth, Vietnamese soldiers from the Ban Ban Valley attacked a special guerrilla unit battalion located at the village of Tham La, located four miles south between the Nam Vang and Route-6. ⁹

Rightly concerned about their safety and role in the current situation, radio operators, P. Ratanasuan and S. Chaikun forwarded a letter to Vientiane advising their boss as to their tenuous status and requesting advice. Stating that Na Khang was not secure enough for Air America employees to either RON or work, the men indicated that fighting was occurring only four to five kilometers east and southeast. Moreover, they could observe the enemy from the hilltop fortress.

Each day at 1500 hours they solicited information from the Customer regarding the enemy situation. This was really redundant, for everyone knew the state of affairs was very bad and constantly becoming worse. It seemed like everyone was just waiting for an attack. In the evening, when weather and aircraft availability permitted, they caught a ride on an aircraft going to Sam Tong and returned to Site-36 in the morning. However, when there was no ride, they RON. Since there was no dedicated radio shack, they were obligated to bunk with the Thai PARU

⁸ Although Vang Pao was a regular FAR general officer, his elevated rank was mostly the result of Agency pressure on the General Staff. Agency support for his operations in upper Military Region Two was resented by many in the FAR Army. And, as he had been a personal friend and adherent of the discredited General Kham Khong, there were those in the General Staff who envied his power and did not trust him.

⁹ Ken Conboy 151-152.

team. They also lost face sleeping in PARU beds and eating their meager food.

The men claimed that they were not soldiers or hired to fight. They were not afraid, but were concerned about their families' welfare should they be killed. If attacked at night, they had considered escaping, but with the site surrounded did not know which way to leave.

In closing, they requested their boss, Y. Chen, visit Na Khang to judge its safety and inspect their miserable living conditions. Then, in a gentle, but pointed statement they reminded him that he had previously indicated that he would stay with them if anything happened. ¹⁰

While I was enjoying Na Khang work, Mike Jarina performed fifteen landings, flying out of Luang Prabang to sites he had serviced the previous day. A new government site was located to the west, six miles east of Bouam Lao in the Phu Dong Nong hills adjacent to the Beng Valley. Another trip was assigned twenty miles north-northeast of Lima-54 near Route-4, where the trail turned east to intersect the Nam Ou waterway. Following a flight to Xieng Lom and some work there, he returned to Sam Tong for the night.

Experiencing the same weather problems as I was, Mike only flew one mission ten miles south of Site-20. Then he had to abort after experiencing a maintenance problem. Following a temporary fix and test flight to determine airworthiness, he RTB Udorn.

On Sunday, Mike was scheduled for local night training with Tom Moher and Flight Mechanic Dave McDonald in Hotel-36. Tom, still flying for Jansky and Bailey out of Bangkok, arrived in

¹⁰ Radio Operator LS-36 Message to CS L08, Mister Y. Chen, Radio Operators Condition and Situation, 02/09/66.

Udorn specifically for the night requirement. Standard procedure dictated that pilots remain local around the field in an established pattern or perform a NDB or a ground controlled approach (GCA) while accomplishing the three required landings. However, Tom had his own special way of doing things. Since Tom was at the top of the seniority list, Mike did not argue with his methods.

At sunset, while still twilight and a legally acceptable time to log night, he told Mike, "*I will fly the first leg.*" Then he requested multiple takeoffs and landings from the air force tower operator. Receiving clearance, he proceeded down the runway landing and taking off in three quick successions. Using that method, he completed all his night qualifications prior to dark.

As an aside, Mike got along well with Tom, but believed he had the wrong attitude. He was funny and entertaining, but possessed a short fuse and was capable of instantly losing his temper. He absorbed a lot of ribbing from peers and did not require accolades—just money. ¹¹

BANGKOK

On the seventh, Tuie and I purchased a ticket on the night train to Bangkok for a six-day STO (scheduled time off). It was planned for mostly medical visits. She required a monthly prenatal examination, and I had not been feeling well for some time. Considering my situation not serious and something that would soon resolve itself, I did not complain to my parents while on home leave. The symptoms appeared strikingly similar to those of the amoeba infestation I had suffered the previous

¹¹Mike Jarina Interviews.



Udorn train station.
Author Collection.

year. Influencing my decision not to seek medical help while home, I was reasonably sure New Jersey medical personnel were unfamiliar with tropical diseases. Therefore, I elected to await return to Southeast Asia for an examination and diagnosis.

After billeting at the reasonably priced zero-star Suriwongse Hotel and cashing a Company countersigned check for a hundred dollars at the Central Trading Company, we taxied across town to the antiquated Seventh Day Adventist Hospital for an appointment with Doctor Springle, who we privately called "Spring-Roll." Revealing that Tuie was no longer anemic, with only a few months left before the birth, the tall, spindly individual was hesitant to speculate as to the exact time of birth or type of delivery required.

Soon afterward, I walked down Patpong Road past all the seedy bars and dining establishments to the Bangkok Christian Hospital. After explaining my ailments to crusty Doctor Wells and his cursory examination, he ordered a series of blood work and the messy amoeba test. A couple days later I returned to the hospital to learn the prognosis. Tests revealed my liver was fine, but I was again full of the one-celled amoebas. After discovering them the previous year, I thought I had been ultra-careful about my eating habits and was perplexed as to where I might have acquired the beasties. Wells reminded me that although the amoeba was fairly easy to eliminate from the intestine, tough cysts, lodged deep in the intestinal lining, were difficult to eradicate and could often re-infest the host. He indicated that from his experience, administration of pharmaceutical drugs was often necessary several times. Finding that news depressing, I departed armed with sufficient medicine for thirty days. With only one RON and half my allotted flight time flown for the month, I elected to wait until after another RON before commencing the "cure."

My parents were anxious to meet Tuie and I wanted to acquaint her with my part of America. Some Thai girls who returned to CONUS with an American husband were unable to adjust to either the food or culture, and within a relatively short period returned alone to Thailand. Because of her wonderful personality, elevated educational level, willingness to learn, and many years spent at the western oriented Saint Joseph Catholic boarding school in Bangkok, I did not think this would pose a great problem for my wife. However, without her actual exposure to stateside culture, I would never know until conducting a visit.

In addition, except for the more than a year SAR period when our services were in high demand and I felt fairly secure about my status, I did not know how long the job with Air America would last. This year, we were losing considerable territory on many fronts. If the enemy decided to conduct a concerted push toward major Mekong River towns, despite the neutral bent of the Geneva Accords, USG would have little other option than to introduce U.S. troops to stem the communist tide and we would be out of a job. Like always, it was anyone's guess what would happen. For this reason, I did not want to lose contact with people in the States, particularly those associated with the fledgling Steamboat Springs, Colorado land project in which I had recently invested. Another reason for taking vacation, as more pilots were upgraded and released for line duty, monthly flight time steadily decreased.

At any rate, we were going to wait until after the baby was born. Then I planned to apply for and take advantage of the three months home leave accrued over the past three years. Combined with residual annual leave, beginning in August total time would approach four months away from Southeast Asia. That would be sufficient to accomplish all the items I had planned,

provide an excellent rest, and help clear my head of unpleasant episodes that had occurred in the past.

One item I required for the vacation was a car. Dad's vehicle was an old green Dodge he loved and did not lend me easily. It was adequate for him, but not for the educational trips I planned for up and down the Atlantic Coast. The previous year, I had talked to Jim Brown about the early model Ford Mustang he had owned. After talking with a French representative of Cars International in Bangkok, I became interested in purchasing a 1966 Mustang in August to take advantage of discounts offered just prior to the arrival of the 1967 models. Total cost quoted for a model that included disk brakes, power steering, tinted windows, upgraded engine, radio, and air conditioning was about 2,600 dollars. The car would be delivered FOB New Jersey. Hedging, I asked Dad to check with a local Ford dealer if a better price could be negotiated.

He answered with a quote from Day Motors located in downtown Plainfield, that was only a hundred dollars more than Cars International's service charge and shipping costs. With the ability to register the vehicle locally and take delivery, it seemed logical to make the purchase in New Jersey. Therefore, we proceeded on that premise and Dad continued the footwork.

NAM YU

While I was enjoying time off the flight schedule, Mike Jarina, flying Hotel-36 with Flight Mechanic Murphy, conducted thirty-five landings, most in the Moung Soui area supporting the Neutralist push east. After an RON at Sam Tong, he was directed to Luang Prabang for work assignments. Gaining more familiarity with the northern area, among other missions, he retraced previous flights to Ban Pha Thong (LS-169) and Mok Lok (LS-131).

The following day he worked the Pakbeng area, where he took photos. He picked up Customer Howard Freeman at Xieng Lom and went to Ban Bo, where cornmeal sacks he had left on the third were still stacked. Discovering that the people would not eat corn meal they considered fit only for hogs,¹² Howie walked around the village pressing the flesh and apologizing to the natives. Then they returned to Luang Prabang, where Mike was loaded for a mission to a point in the Beng Valley just south of Bouam Lao (LS-174) where the momentous Ernie Brace SAR had unfolded the previous year.

After RON for a second night in Luang Prabang's main hotel, on the 14th, Jarina worked the area, and returned to T-08 via Sam Tong and Vientiane.

Following Mike to Luang Prabang, from 18 to 22 February, Tom Hoppe revisited familiar sites north of the royal capital around Nam Bac. They included Ban Pha Thong (LS-169), Ban "Y" (LS-187), and Mok Lok (LS-131).¹³

POE

The same day Hoppe worked at Luang Prabang, I deadheaded to Lima Site-118A on CASI Porter Papa Charlie Alpha (PCA). Arriving late in the morning, I assumed command of Hotel-21. Flying until after sunset, I managed to eke out six hours.

Since moving to Nam Yu from Long Tieng, Tony continued his previous policy from Long Tieng of keeping helicopter pilots busy. This procedure was even more prevalent and necessary at the site because a helicopter dispatched to work there from Udorn was not always a given, or an everyday occurrence. Tony

¹² Like the Bulgar wheat episode at Sam Tong.

¹³ Mike Jarina Interviews.
Tom Hoppe Letter.

was good to his flight crews, and this was one reason he enjoyed popularity with a majority of the pilots.

Tony occupied a small two-bedroom wooden structure located on a hilly rise overlooking the northeast quadrant of the valley. A large porch facing the runway afforded a commanding view of the area and, except for the absence of a river, the entire structure reminded me of Bill Young's bungalow on the Mekong. Thatched crew quarters were located a short distance behind Tony's residence. The Administration-radio-dining complex was located on low ground at the foot of the hill.

True to the legend, a full plastic bag of ears hung from a bamboo support at the "hooch's" entrance. The practice of lopping off enemy ears for a few kip was initially started at Long Tieng to confirm enemy KIA claims. The process worked well at first, initially motivating and encouraging troop fierceness against the foe. However, human greed being what it is, payment for body parts had to be discontinued when it was discovered soldiers were severing their children's and pigs' ears as a substitute for those of the bad guy.

Before the Friendship Mess Hall opened below, we paid a nominal sum for evening meals (mostly rice and weeds) and a couple of warm beers. Sort of like a fraternity gathering after a long day of flying, it was an enjoyable time sitting on Tony's porch savoring the evening breeze, eating, and bulling about inconsequential items.

Over time, Tony attempted to pick and cull those who worked for him at Nam Yu. Having favorites, he loved pilots who would carry huge loads to outlying positions. Fonburg was one of those he preferred at Nam Yu. John would haul 2,000 pounds or more to marginal sites with a full fuel load. This did not make much sense to me, for should an engine fail while taking off or landing in such a vastly overloaded condition, chances of a

successful autorotation were greatly diminished. Unless working with reduced fuel, I would not do this, but attempting to do the best I could for the boss man, carried what I believed was a respectable payload.

However, the love-hate relationship Tony had with Fonburg finally came to a head when John began consuming excessive amounts of food and drinking up to a case of beer at a sitting. John was an authentic mammon type individual and Tony later indicated he simply could not afford to have John at his place any longer. It was not wise to get on Poe's bad side. Another pilot excluded from Site-118A was Tony Byrne. Tony was a collector of native artifacts for profit. Mainly, he enjoyed purchasing triple frog bronze drums that had been in some families for many years. Apparently, the unusual drums were very popular with collectors and there was a market for these items in the States. After the natives complained, Tony took offense at this attempt to achieve profit on the backs of the people, and barred Byrne from his site.

Continuing his ritual and legend, Tony was still drinking heavily. However, in the evening, after eating and chugging a pint bottle of the kerosene-tasting Mekong whiskey, he immediately hit the sack. Amazingly, he was always the first person to arise in the morning, cheerily waking everyone else. The man was amazing. He put us lesser mortals to shame. Reminding me of Charlie Weitz, he had an unusually robust constitution, never evidenced a hangover, and drinking did not appear to affect his work ethic. In my mind, Poe displayed a lot of role playing. He was always fishing for reactions and fooled a lot of people, particularly younger, more impressionable Case Officers.

Joe Flipse was never overly concerned about Tony's drinking, considering it self-medicating. In Joe's estimation,

many times he merely pretended to be drunk for effect. Poe always responded positively when there was work to be accomplished, and nothing was ever fouled up because he was drunk. Using drinking for an excuse, if he was having difficulties with a tribal individual, he would often pretend to be drunk until the man gave up and walked away.

Tony was still considered our Wall Street security issues Guru. Always interested in obtaining new material, talking about the stock market was my favorite subject while staying at Nam Yu. Although claiming to have a good broker in the States, and maintaining a subscription to the Wall Street Journal, he did a lot of work himself, and possessed a seemingly uncanny knack for picking winners. Over the past two and a half years he had recommended Fairchild Hiller. During the previous year, he touted Continental Airlines and Colt Industries. Because of Continental's rise, there were those who believed he obtained inside information through Agency contacts regarding the mid-year takeover of Bird and Son's assets. Whenever asked, he was always delighted to talk about the financial market and was forthcoming with investment information. Lately claiming it was a sleeper, which would boom in the near future, he recommended Walt Disney. I made a mental note to check statistics on the issue.

At the time of my four day stay at Nam Yu, we were supporting Yao and other indigenous teams who formed an arc that swung from the northwest Burmese and Chinese borders to the eastern hills overlooking the Nam Tha (River). This was during a period of continuing enemy efforts to expand south, attempting to clear the Nam Tha and Beng River Valleys, obtain rice producing areas, and consolidate captured territory.

Teams located to the east were established and deployed as a means to usefully employ troops and move them out from under

local ethnic control. Joe Flipse spent many hours discussing the problem with Colonel Chao Vana Seng, the Lao representative purportedly in charge of the Nam Yu Armie Clandestine program.

From the beginning of Poe's tenure at Nam Yu, Lao hierarchy was upset because Tony closely guarded supply assets. Difficult to deceive, he was quite concerned about overt FAR corruption, and he could hardly contain himself because of phantom troops listed on the rolls. For this reason, he often journeyed into the field to pay the troops. Sticky fingered Lao leaders wanted to control all aspects of the program-warehouses, payrolls, and so forth. Eventually they did. In addition, they forced the Yao out, consolidating the growing and lucrative opium market by 1967. As a consequence, Chao Mai, the Yao leader, lost his market, his power, and essentially control of his troops.

Friendly troops were more efficient and motivated earlier in the expansion when there were only four companies. The movement out of Nam Yu into the field was gradual, occurring over time. The troops achieved a gain, and then a loss during wet and dry season pushes. Unfortunately, Pathet Lao forces were always able to shove government troops around anywhere in Houa Kong Province. And, the longer the conflict lasted the worse it became. ¹⁴

George Smith, a former smoke jumper who had worked at Long Tieng as an air operations coordinator, followed Tony to Nam Yu because of lung problems created by excessive dust churned up by our taxiing aircraft in the new loading area. I enjoyed working with George and had good rapport with him. It was always nice to have a familiar person available who I could talk to, trust, ask

¹⁴Memorandum CIA to 303 Committee, 09/08/66.
Joe Flipse Emails, 06/07/97, 06/08/97.
Mike Jarina Interview.

questions, and generally find out pertinent items relating to a mission than I could normally glean from a local. Unfortunately, George's respiratory problems persisted and he did not remain long at Nam Yu. Consequently, a job was created for him at the Udorn AB-1 rice warehouse across the parking ramp from the Air America facility.

In overseeing the rice shack, he signed all operations orders, "The Admiral." Later, one of these operations orders was included in an accident report that crossed the VPFO's desk in Taipei. A copy also was forwarded to the Washington office, which generated an inquiry as to the admiral's name. Perhaps there was a rogue Navy man loose in the system? Since he had previously worked in Udorn, Tom Penniman was queried and asked to explain. Tom knew George and his penchant to sign operations orders with a fictitious name. After divulging what he knew, the humor and irony was noted by all hands. ¹⁵

ENEMY LZ?

One day, while Tony was absent and no other American was present on the flight line, Soumboun assigned me a flight east to the Nam Tha with a load of boxed ammunition for one of our new teams. The terrain there looked basically identical, and with few checkpoints available, navigation was never easy flying sixty miles east. ¹⁶ Other factors were equally involved and constituted a problem. These included unfamiliarity with the area, a lack of guides, poor briefings, and sectional maps that I deemed unreliable, even though I had plotted radials from Nam Yu to most teams. Moreover, from the early days, I had noted

¹⁵ Tom Penniman Email, 03/04/00.

¹⁶ A one-degree inaccuracy because of any factor in navigation or wind drift could result in a one mile off course error.

magnetic disturbances that sometimes caused the wet compass to swing erratically thirty to forty degrees either side of my course heading. All this contributed to a guessing game, while attempting to find and supply sites. It was no problem dead reckoning, for that method would take me to the river. Then, if the Landing zone was not in sight, I would commence a search for it. This method had worked well in the past, and even on a bad day, I was rarely more than a mile or so off course.

During this particular mission, I had considerable difficulty finding the site in the tangle of jungle adjoining the river. The indigenous loadmaster had indicated that the signal of the day was a standard white "T."¹⁷ While circling from altitude, heavy trees and foliage generally obscured the ground and no signal of any kind was evident. Assuming this was a new or temporary position, and because of a fluid situation always present in the area, I was reluctant to descend below small arms range until making positive identification. On normal days, cockpit communications to forward sites was generally nonexistent, as it was to Nam Yu. Unfortunately, radio range was restricted by terrain and line of sight. Moreover, we did not speak the same language, and possessed no capability to talk to the teams over any radio frequency.

After a time, I wondered if the team might have failed to arrive, or moved out of the area. Finally, I spotted a white "T" lying on a hilly east bank in the vicinity of that designated. I could only deduce the delay was caused by the men positioning to the landing site.

I descended to have a better look. Although large enough to accommodate an H-34, the site did not appear like one that was well established or ever used. Other than that, nothing looked

¹⁷ The white "T" signal was easy for our troops to display. It was also easy for the enemy.

particularly suspicious. Before landing, I ascertained that the troops wore green uniforms common to Lao government soldiers, and carried carbines or other U.S. weapons. Still uncertain as to the landing zone viability, I continued circling to observe if anyone made a threatening gesture at the helicopter. Finally satisfied with the situation, I landed. The few troops around the pad smiled, genuinely looked happy to receive the supplies, and even helped my Filipino Flight Mechanic offload the goodies.

When I arrived back at the Nam Yu runway, a young American Case Officer met my aircraft. Giving me a ration of sierra, he angrily informed me that I had just delivered supplies to enemy troops. That was a real shock and a blow to my ego, particularly since I thought that I had performed a good job. Apparently, the authentic team observed me from a nearby hill. They radioed this to the base, while I was en route to Nam Yu. Although the Customer continued to be adamant about my errant choice of landing zones, I was skeptical, not actually believing that was the case. Relating what I had seen prior to and after landing, I insisted all had appeared correct at the landing zone. If the troops on the ground were actually enemy, then why did they let me go? Alive or dead, the Flight Mechanic, a "round-eye pilot, and a huge, green H-34 would certainly have provided more political clout and fodder for acclaim than a few measly boxes of ammunition. The issue, a first for me, was both equally confusing and embarrassing. Fortunately, everyone let the matter drop and I went back to work. It was the first and last time I was knowingly accused of landing at an enemy position. To this day, I am still unaware if the team where I dropped supplies was enemy.

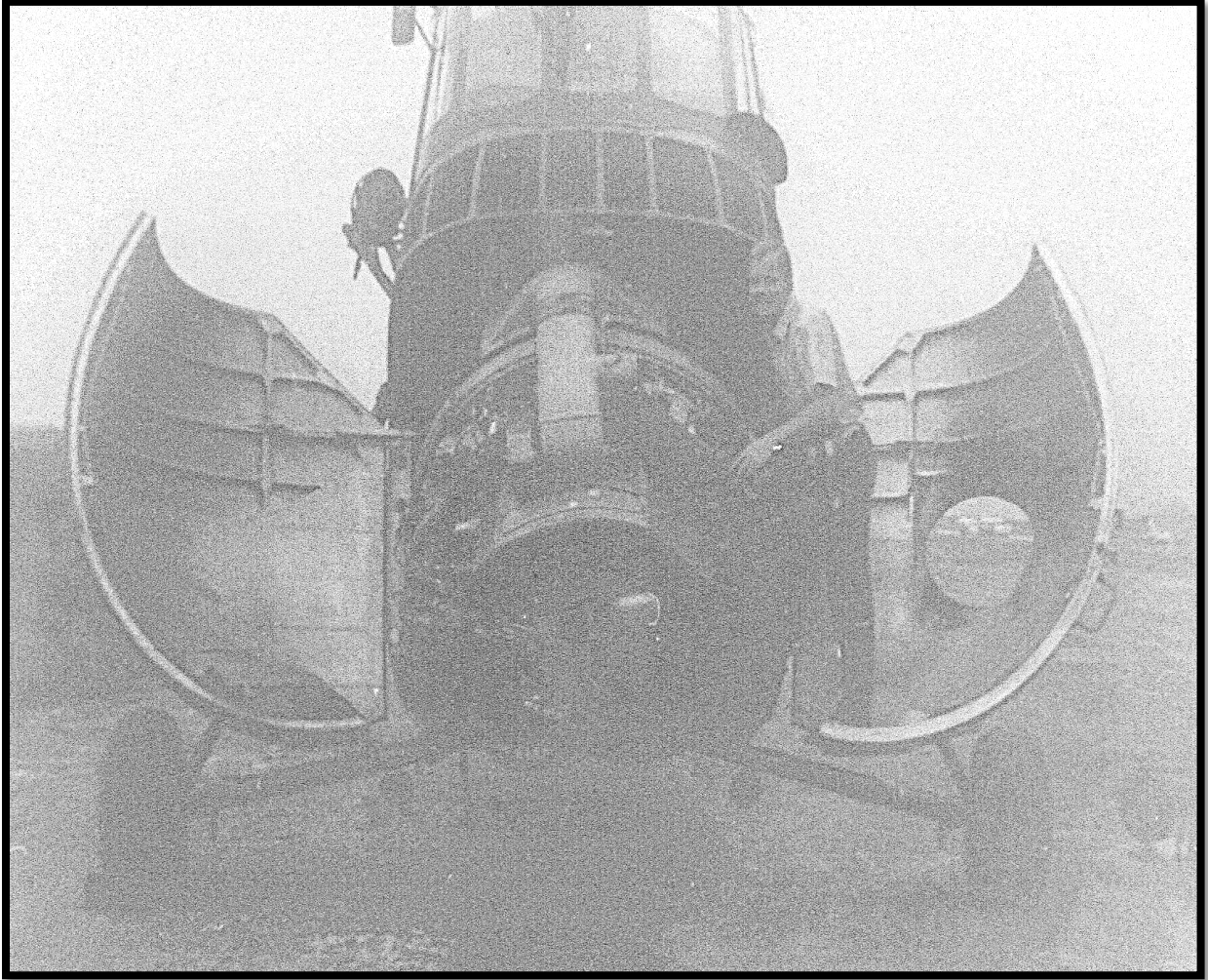
NEW FLIGHT MECHANICS

In order to balance a fifty-percent ratio between Filipino and American civilian helicopter flight mechanics, American mechanics began arriving in Udorn. In February, Gary Gentz, the youngest Flight Mechanic in the program until 1970, was one of these hired. Frank DeVito, Jim Agnew, and Hal Augustine trickled in soon after Gentz.

As per Jack Forney's SOP regarding new mechanics' training, Gary worked in the hangar for two months prior to being released for upcountry duty.

For a time, after being released for aircrew duties the learning process continued and errors were made. Dropping rice bags, which sounded like napalm exploding at ground contact, was one example. Gentz discovered this one day while flying with Tony Byrne. He had stacked four 220-pound (hundred kilo) rice bags at the lip of the cabin door for air drop. This was a common technique for pads deemed too small, high, or windy to land. While Byrne approached at sixty knots, Gary leaned against the bags waiting for the drop word. When over the landing zone, Tony turned in a steep bank. Lurching forward without benefit of a restraining life-saving gunners belt, Gentz left his feet and began to fall out the door opening with the load. Fortunately, he managed to catch the door frame and pulled himself back into the ship.

Another incident, but with considerably less life-threatening consequences, occurred while flying with Lloyd Higgins. On this occasion, eight smaller rice sacks were stacked for drop at a high pad. Lloyd briefed his Flight Mechanic to drop the bags when he heard him key the ICS button. Gary generally found it difficult to judge the aircraft closure rate by looking out the door. Instead, he learned from experience



Standing on the clam-shell door, Flight Mechanic Frank DeVito performing work in the field on the "Big Buddha," the UH-34D Wright 1820 engine.

Jarina Collection.

that when close to a landing zone, most pilots normally increased engine rpm and the aircraft vibrated a little. However, on this particular day his theory failed to work. While he anticipated an increase in engine noise, for some reason, Higgins prematurely keyed the mike. Gentz dropped the load, but they were a half a mile from the pad. Higgins, a gruff old guy, was not happy. ¹⁸

THE BATTLE FOR NA KHANG

Since late 1965 in Houa Phan Province, despite incurring heavy losses, enemy forces had captured several long standing Meo positions. The latest and largest of these friendly site losses had been east of Na Khang at Houei Thom (LS-27). The anticipated final phase of enemy offensives to eliminate Na Khang began late on the night of the sixteenth when an outpost one mile south of Site-36 was overrun by forward Vietnamese elements of the vaunted 316th Division. Laboriously crawling to less than half a mile from the strip under the cover and concealment of darkness, camouflaged enemy troops began mortaring the site in preparation for a coordinated assault on the main base. Prepared for days, friendly troops on the fortified hill immediately responded with 105mm and 75mm artillery fire, ending the enemy initial attack phase.

Previously alerted to the attack on the southern outpost, around midnight Customer Mike Lynch requested immediate air support over the single side band USAID radio. His appeal was then forwarded by Deputy Commander, Second Air Division/13th Air Force Udorn to Saigon headquarters. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, two AC-47 planes, converted to gunships and used to good advantage in Nam, were hastily dispatched to Udorn. It

¹⁸ Gary Gentz Interviews.

marked the first time "Spooky" aircraft were used in Laos. The ships mounted three 7.62mm mini-guns rated at 6,000 rounds per minute and carried 16,500 rounds per gun. ¹⁹

While determined North Vietnamese troops prepared for another assault, a "Spooky" aircraft appeared over Na Khang. After communications with the ground forces failed, the crew began dropping flares and commenced devastating fire on the suspected area of enemy concentration. The technique must have discouraged the enemy, for by first light, only one outpost had fallen.

In what was mainly a Vietnamese show, at 0800 hours, the Fifth Battalion, 168th Regiment culled from the 316 Division, after recently arriving in the Ban Ban Valley and a forced march up Route-6, linked up with other Vietnamese companies and began a fresh attack.

That morning, the on scene forward air controller (FAC) assigned to Na Khang, Captain Ramon Horinek, departed Site-36 with an Air America Porter pilot to direct and control air strikes to the east. Consistent with enemy proximity, the plane received small arms fire shortly after takeoff. Upon return, the men discovered that the strip was under mortar attack and there were no communications with the base. With smoke marking enemy positions, Horinek directed fast movers to strike targets near the runway. After landing and assuming forward air guide (FAG) duties, he coordinated with a Thai T-28 pilot-FAC directing T-28 and U.S. Bango-Whiplash strikes. Along with defenders' artillery fire, the enemy attack stalled.

After working most of the day at Nam Yu, I was recalled to Udorn. While passing Luang Prabang at altitude, I heard broken

¹⁹The gunship was originally called "Puff the Magic Dragon" after a popular children's song of the day.

and excited chatter over both VHF and FM radios. It was soon obvious that this was coming from the Na Khang area and that the base was under attack. After so much anticipation, the balloon had finally gone up. Given the action during previous days, this was not unexpected. I had spent so much time working there that initially I was envious not to be participating in the end game "fun". Not learning my lesson from the almost disastrous ultra-hazardous Na Son/Son La experience the previous year, I was still gung-ho and thirsted for combat. This attitude prevailed until the birth of my son and another frightening incident that occurred shortly thereafter.

Under the leadership abilities of Colonel Phan and Major Douangtha, aided by American advisors, PARU, and timely air strikes, Na Khang held that day. However, with serious doubt about maintaining the status of the site that night, H-34 crews moved radios, other critical equipment, and a 105mm howitzer to the "safety" of Moung Heim. Then Ambassador Sullivan ordered Mike Lynch, Jerry Daniels, Don Sjostrom, and Ray Horinek to evacuate west to Moung Heim. One man remained to direct C-47 gunships onto targets.

Despite a company sized enemy thrust that breached the outer perimeter and penetrated to the command post, with benefit from the 75mm pack howitzer and gunships, the defenders showed great resolve. They repulsed the attack, and saved the site that night.

The enemy resumed the attack at dawn, but before the main force reached the air strip, air strikes and gunships once again swept the area, countering the assault. Reinvigorated by the combined support, Meo and PARU defenders surged downhill from the fortress and cleared the immediate area. Shortly afterward, American Customers returned to Site-36 to salvage what they could.

VP TAKES ONE FOR THE CAUSE

Later, during a pause in the battle, after circling and observing no one, H-34 Captain John Fonburg landed on the uphill side of the site close to the fortified hill. Onboard was General Vang Pao, who desired a firsthand look and version of the current situation. After discovering some people and loading them in the cabin along with his bodyguards, VP and Mike Lynch went to the right side of the helicopter near the main gear. Then Lynch climbed on the right tire to apprise John of what he knew of the current enemy situation and what Vang Pao wanted to do next. Just as Mike indicated everything appeared stable, a burst of gunfire was heard from the tree line east of the rice paddies. Lynch immediately leaped off the wheel and the general fell to the ground clutching his shoulder.

With rounds impacting the helicopter, Fonburg, aware that his sole chance of survival was to depart immediately or not at all, grabbed a handful of throttle. However, with so many people onboard the H-34, after attempting to hover, he discovered that there was insufficient power available to conduct a takeoff.²⁰ Instead, with no one moving to assist Vang Pao, and heavy fire continuing, he taxied toward the runway to commence a rolling takeoff. Lynch, unaware that Vang Pao was hit, and believing the fire had occurred from the friendly side, screamed at him over the radio to stop. Noting a hole in the windscreen on his side of the cockpit, John was undeterred in his quest to escape the ground fire. Therefore, in the overloaded condition, he began rolling. Violently bouncing side to side down the runway, with

²⁰ John's proclivity for carrying enormous loads almost backfired on him that day.

gunfire tracking him, he eventually staggered airborne and immediately turned toward the Moung Heim Valley. ²¹

We all liked the large H-34 because it could withstand substantial battle damage without falling out of the sky. For example, prior to this incident other Air America aircraft had received battle damage in the area, but none severe enough to prevent continued work.

While the passengers debarked at Site-48, making a quick assessment, the Flight Mechanic discovered other battle damage in addition to the cockpit damage. Critical areas just missed were the engine, transmission, and the tail rotor gearbox. Jerry Daniels had remained at Site-48 that morning to coordinate rallying and regrouping operations of troops straggling in from Site-36, and other areas. After informing him that Vang Pao was either dead or injured, Jerry instructed Fonburg to return and retrieve him. Consequently, John landed on a protected alternate landing zone to which the general had been moved. After arriving at Moung Heim, the general was loaded on a Caribou and flown directly to Korat U.S. Army hospital, where it was determined that he was not seriously wounded. Fortunately, the round entering his right arm and chest was either expended, or had ricocheted prior to hitting him. It travelled subcutaneously along its path, exited and nicked his throat. Yes, he was bloody and in pain, but unbowed. He was tough and would survive to fight another day.

You Va Ly, a stocky, craggy, red-faced individual with a prominent nose, who we called the "Indian," was Vang Pao's second in command. There was no disputing the man's courage, but

²¹ Years later Vang Pao informed me that while attempting to hover, the right landing gear of Fonburg's ship struck one of his men in the head, killing him.

he was an unschooled rough and tumble sort, who lacked Vang Pao's intellectual ability and charisma. Taking a page from Colonel Tong, he led by harsh methods, as I witnessed one day at Na Khang, when he viciously kicked a subordinate several times for some minor infraction. As with Tong's loss, Vang Pao's absence created a void in operations and tangible results.

Not long after the shooting incident, Pathet Lao radio reported that Vang Pao had been killed during the attack. To counter this accusation and thwart portly Touby Lyfong, a Meo politician who was constantly attempting to usurp Vang Pao's authority and gain power over the Meo people, the Agency had Vang Pao tape a message to reassure the people he was still alive. The recording was broadcast over the Long Tieng radio station. However, some individuals were still not convinced that he was alive and capable of continuing the struggle against the enemy. American advisors and AID personnel residing upcountry realized that Vang Pao's loss as head of the Meo program foretold the end of Bill Lair's entire operation. Without his commanding presence and charisma, the situation would have quickly deteriorated into chaos. Therefore, an important group of Meo leaders were flown to Korat hospital to observe Vang Pao and verify that he was actually alive and would recover.

NAPE

Stretching over two years, the controversy regarding napalm usage in Laos arose again during the final dark days of Na Khang's defense. Under Washington's aegis, Ambassador William Sullivan had previously mandated that napalm could only be employed during extreme cases to forestall the capture of a major RLG base. This appeared to be an appropriate time. With the fate of Na Khang in jeopardy, and concentrations of Vietnamese troops massed in tree lines adjacent to the strip,

the time was ripe to employ the devastating jelly bomb. Consequently, during the clearing action, F-105s from Takhli delivered sixteen canisters of BLU-1B into trees 200 yards from the strip. The napalm strike was effective, but the disciplined enemy still kept coming. Fire crept northwest toward the friendly positions, torching the POL area and hospital. With little left to defend, troops began evacuating northwest. Horinek remained to direct American air strikes.

Late in the day, the ambassador ordered the Americans out of the site at dark. While walking on a trail toward Mounng Heim, they were retrieved by an H-34 pilot and flown to Udorn. Since Colonel Phan would require support in the event of a renewed enemy attack, Bill Lair met the aircraft and drove Lynch and Sjostrom to an AC-47 pilot gunship briefing. They not only pinpointed last known enemy locations and probable routes of advance, but offered to accompany the pilots on the missions. However, after launch, Lynch's plane incurred maintenance problems and the PIC was required to return to Udorn. Not an Agency employee, and knowing he would be terminated by his USAID bosses if word got out what he was doing, Sjostrom accompanied the Air Force crew. He displayed his Lao language expertise, providing information from ground personnel to the "Spooky" crew as to enemy locations. With minigun fire splattering the enemy around the friendly garrison, the position held firm into the next day.

Following the site's loss, Pop Buell took Don Sjostrom to Chiang Mai for a well-deserved rest. En route, they stopped at Ban Houei Sai and chatted with Joe Flipse. Having worked for the Peace Corps in Thailand for two years, and in Laos for several

months, in March Sjostrom took a three-month home leave in the States. ²²

The remaining Meo defenders were removed on the 19th. They moved to Moug Heim to rest and regroup. As they had during previous months after losses, other Meo units moved to areas north and west of the enemy line of advance to maintain a presence calculated to pressure enemy flanks.

At Na Khang, F-105 Whiplash pilots subsequently delivered napalm and destroyed remaining assets. The fires leveled virtually everything, achieving one beneficial effect by eliminating the rat population that had long disturbed our sleep during RONS.

Although unsuccessful in preventing Na Khang's loss to the determined enemy, close air support provided by F-105s, F-4s, AC-47 gunships (which afforded enormous value and were subsequently stationed in Udorn), and Thai T-28 pilots allowed an orderly troop withdrawal and denial of our remaining bullets, beans, and bandages to the enemy. In fact, although achieving the objective, it was actually no major victory for the Vietnamese to crow about. The attackers suffered heavy losses. While cleaning up numerous dead and wounded and awaiting reinforcements, the enemy failed to occupy the site for several days. ²³

The operation tended to reiterate General Giap's bloody military philosophy that the means justify the end, aptly displayed in the 1950s during French era battles at Na San and Dien Bien Phu of accepting enormous casualties to achieve a

²² Joe Flipse Email.

²³ No hard figures of enemy casualties were ever tallied, but eyewitness reports from area natives indicated they reached well into the hundreds. Moreover, following the initial napalm strike, the local FAC counted seventy bodies in a rice paddy.

goal. Although effective to attain a victory given sufficient numbers, Giap's policy smacked of President Abraham Lincoln's inept Civil War Union generals ordering huge frontal assaults into massed Confederate artillery pieces.

The loss of Na Khang generated speculation within embassy and General Staff camps as to where the enemy would appear next on the military chessboard. A logical assumption was that they would converge on and capture the Moung Heim Valley, leaving the northern door open to the northwest Plain of Jars and Moung Soui. No one cared to speculate on what would happen after that was accomplished.

A day after the last friendly trooper departed Site-36, Ambassador Sullivan forwarded a message to Avril Harriman. Less sanguine than others regarding the current situation, he indicated that in general, enemy activity continued about normal for the dry season. February through April was traditionally a period of major enemy offenses, which always ceased before the rains began and the roads became impassable. French-inspired rumors that the enemy would drive into the Mekong Valley were downplayed by the embassy, for there were no indications of such intentions.

The Vietnamese action at Na Khang was interpreted by Sullivan's staff of advisors as mainly a politically inspired operation, one that contested Vang Pao's despised Meo fighters. As an object lesson, they chose an important area objective with multiple RLG and USG purposes: a forward SAR launching pad for USAF helicopters covering the Rolling Thunder operation, a lynchpin for FAC and FAG air strike management in Sam Neua Province, and a base for launching interdiction teams on Route-6.

He postured that the force used during the attack appeared inadequate to capture and hold the site against a concerted FAR

counterattack. Unless North Vietnamese leaders were prepared to inject additional assets, his staff expected the enemy to withdraw under the pressure of government forces introduced into the area.

In a final analysis of the Site-36 engagement, Sullivan's Country Team interpreted the attack as a reaction to Kong Le's publicized attempt to capture the Phou Khout hills following two years of failures.

In other military regions, rumors of sizeable enemy units moving toward the Bolovens Plateau could not be substantiated. General Prasouk's troops conducting search and clear operations in one area had encountered only light resistance. However, because of government and Agency activity, something was expected to erupt in the area.

The message concluded saying that any sizeable enemy movement toward government targets would present lucrative troop concentrations and be subject to devastating air attack. And, the ambassador was optimistic that current air assets were sufficient for this task.

During a two-month period, RLG would probably lose additional terrain to the enemy. However, during the monsoon period these areas would be returned to the government fold, and the division of Laos would remain roughly the same as in past

years. ²⁴

UDORN

Directly following my last flight, and after coordinating with the CPH, armed with dozens of pills, I began another amoeba cure. I would not touch an H-34's controls for about a month. I thought I could fly the final ten days of the medication, but after the doctor checked his medical manual, Kao discovered one compound contained arsenic that required continued grounding. In contrast to last year's "cure," throughout the entire course of medication, I felt good with a great deal more energy than I had in some time. Of course, having more time off without the stress of combat might have contributed to this.

I had just about decided to remain with Air America for at least another year, and to continue to live in the same bungalow to save money. However, since the new road was built alongside the house, the entire Godnoma compound had been opened up to all forms of riff raff, and we were first in the line of houses. Indeed, our existence had taken on a classic chaotic nature. I had done what I could by complaining to the landlady. She always said yes, but the smiling witch did precious little to make life

²⁴Segment Information: Conboy, 152.
 Victor Anthony, 188-190, 197.
 Thomas Ahern, 240-242.
 William Leary, February 1966 Notes to Author, 1966 Notes in possession of UTD.
The News Press, Dumas, Texas 06/21/91 Sent to the Author by John Fonburg.
 Blaine Jensen Letter.
 Captain Melvin Porter, *Project CHECO Report Second Defense of Lima Site 36* (Headquarters PACAF: Directorate Tactical Evaluation, 04/28/67) iv, 1.
 Telegram Ambassador Sullivan to the Philippine Embassy (Harriman) 02/20/66, FRUS, 221-Abridged by the Author, State Foreign Relations 1964-1968 Laos, Volume. 28 #221.
 Memorandum CIA to 303 Committee, 09/08/66.

easier for us. In fact, she was constantly devising new ways to coax additional money from us to support her gambling habit. Still angry about being misled in regard to the new road, I even took the initiative and spread waste oil on the dirt road to keep dust from vehicles to a minimum.

Hoping to further contain undesirables, we had a dislocated Vietnamese chap, Ded, who the Nisagonrungsee family allowed to live in their large compound erect a low wooden picket fence around our bungalow. At the time, hard-working Vietnamese were looked down on and considered by many Thai to occupy the bottom rung of society. Because of political issues, mainly their relocation as refugees from North Vietnam during and after the First Indochina War, they were closely watched by the Royal Thai Government. In the Asian way of performing favors for favors, the family protected Ded and his growing family in return for his expertise as a carpenter and samlor driver. As I later discovered, his wife was also a great cook, especially delicious dry noodles (Bam Mi Hang), and I suppose her wares also found their way into the Nisagonrungsee household.

For five hundred baht, Ded erected a fifty by fifty-foot enclosure calculated to create a buffer zone to keep chickens, ducks, dogs, and local rug-rats away from the house. I helped a little, but mainly observed him jury rig the project. I was not happy that Thai law passed whatever improvements the renter made to the property along to the landlord, but there was nothing I could do about it. When the fence was finished, I planted trees and bushes inside the yard. After watering and a couple of good rains, called mango rains, things started growing and improved the area's looks and my disposition.

LOCAL COLOR

One day, a Jeep pulled alongside the house bearing Tuie's "sister," Bung Orn.²⁵ The driver was Charlie Carlson. Charlie, a civilian Philco-Ford employee who was employed at the rapidly growing U.S. Air Force base tending the power plant. The purpose of the visit was to inform us that they were immediately getting married. After seeing Carlson, I thought that Bung Orn, a very attractive lady, was really scraping the bottom of the barrel, for the short, rotund man displayed a puffy face and bad teeth. He was neither easy to look at, nor a particularly inspiring catch. Then noticing that Orn's lower abdomen was beginning to show signs of something other than rice consummation, I began to comprehend the decision.

Over time, Charlie did his best to ingratiate himself to me, and he appeared to be a genuinely good person. He indicated that he had served in the Navy during the Iwo Jima campaign, was one of the elite team holding the flag on Mount Suribachi, and was the recipient of the prestigious Medal of Honor. That information was difficult to swallow, but who was I to challenge him or question what he claimed? Still, I wondered about his veracity.²⁶

One thing in particular bothered me about Carlson. He always carried large wads of Thai baht, which he spread generously about, never allowing another person to pay a bill.

²⁵ Bung Orn was actually a cousin. We did not learn this until years later.

²⁶ I quickly realized that Charlie Carlson was a congenital liar. Since Charlie was a year younger than the Author, his claim to such notoriety was impossible, for no army in the world, save Vang Pao's guerrilla military, would induct a pre-teenager in any capacity. Because of his outward appearance and obvious dissipation, it was impossible to determine Carlson's age, and I would not discover his actual birth date for many years.

It troubled me that he appeared to purchase people's acceptance of him.

The marriage ceremony was held at the family house, located in the front of their sizeable compound that included several rental houses and wooden shops along upper Adulyadet Road. The procedure was conducted in the Buddhist manner, with chanting monks and many relatives present. Although I had observed the family from afar years ago during my bachelor days, and had met the younger "brother" the day he slammed into our bungalow, it was the first time I had actually been inside the family abode. That day, the ice was broken and we were treated very well afterward. With a definite resemblance to my wife, Uncle Cha Tha Musablert, a dentist and beloved resident of Pattani town located close to the Gulf of Siam on the lower southwestern Thai peninsula, knelt in the Thai fashion next to Tuie on the wooden floor. Convention required us to recline in the leg cramping Thai style during the long, hot ritual. Uncle Cha did not conceal the fact that he loved Tuie very much. ²⁷

²⁷ Later, by logical deduction, my mother and I suspected that Tuie could not be the natural child of the Nisagonrungsee family. Another child, Noi, was the same age and they were certainly anything but twins. However, when queried time and again over the years, no one in the immediate family would ever admit to her not being their biological child. When my Mother first viewed a picture of Cha Tha (the purported uncle) and my wife kneeling together at Bung Orn and Charlie Carlson's wedding, she made the statement that he was Tuie's father. She was exactly right, but we did not believe it then. Years later, contemplating posterity, I suggested that my wife attempt to solicit information regarding her actual heritage. Therefore, on one of her trips to Thailand to visit family and friends, she contacted retired Supreme Court Judge Prasat Sukunthamun, who was never sworn to secrecy regarding the family conspiracy. On his deathbed, he revealed to Prapapon that Doctor Cha Tha, not Khun Tha-Plang. (Khun Tha being a respectful term) was her actual father. Involving Thai hierarchy at the highest levels, in the simple statement that truth is stranger than fiction, the entire story was quite interesting, but extremely convoluted.

Later that evening a reception was held under a tent fly in front of the Carlson residence. As always, the food was excellent and I met several of Charlie's Air Force acquaintances. A reformed alcoholic, Charlie did not drink. I noticed this, for I was still in the process of the amoeba cure, and also abstained. Despite reservations as to the couple's lasting relationship, it appeared a good match--at least initially.

With excess time off, to supplement my reading of Forbes magazine, other publications, and musing over financial investments in general and writing letters home, I prepared meals using a paperback edition of the James Beard cookbook. Tuie had briefly attended a cooking school in town. However, the only meal emanating from that abbreviated learning experience I ever tasted was a form of beef stroganoff. My young lady had lived such a sheltered life in which others provided for her that she had never learned how to cook the tasty Thai cuisine or for that matter any other household chores.

Spaghetti dishes were my finest achievement. Purchasing carrots, onions, tomatoes, garlic, herbs and ox meat, fresh from the morning market, I started from scratch. Pasta noodles were obtained from the Kangaroo Market in town or the Air America supermarket. However, consistent with the continuing building program, the latter was currently in limbo, torn down to make way for a new supply warehouse. All the items were finely diced by the maid on a round wood chopping board. Even neighbor Bobby Nunez, something of a culinary expert, agreed that I had done a good job. As one of my better attempts to emulate famous chef, James Beard, the spaghetti was in demand. In fact, Uncle Cha Ta, on his way back to Bangkok and Pattani, visited the house with a friend for a sample just before catching the night train



Charlie Carlson and Bungorn Nisagonrungsee's wedding reception.
Author, Tuie, Embassy consul, senior USAF officers, and other guests.
Author Collection.

south. In a hurry, they gobbled down the fare and hurried off without issuing a comment.

At the Air America facility, the Reverend Cash and his wife were holding Sunday school in the Club bar. This first occurred when the school door was discovered locked and an alternate location required. Thirsty early bar customers, highly confused and conflicted regarding the usurpation of their home away from home gathered in chairs around the pool to wait for the Christians to vacate their hallowed digs.

Operations and Administration Department employees continued to relocate into offices in the newly completed two story building. However, an adequate communications system was not yet viable.

Jet high-pitched whines from the end of the 030 runway, where a warm-up ramp and PSP jet exhaust baffle was located to dissipate hot gasses, were so distracting that Ben Moore was prompted to mention it in his well-read Taipei Monthly Report. Launches continued all day and night, especially following resumption of the Rolling Thunder campaign. ²⁸

EVENTS ON THE UDORN FLIGHT LINE

USAF Second Class Airman Morris Williams arrived at Udorn RTAFB in February for a one-year tour. He was assigned to the flight line fire department for close to a month until the person he was replacing in the 6232 Civil Engineering Squadron transferred.

Concrete runway, overruns, taxiways, parking, and warm up ramps were still under construction, and the strip was eventually lengthened to 10,000 feet. However, it could not

²⁸Ben Moore February 1966 Monthly Report.

accommodate B-52 aircraft. A restraining cable, like that used on U.S. Navy carriers, was positioned at the end of the runway for emergency use only. Unless there was a problem, Phantom jets popped a parachute to decelerate after landing. One evening while repairing a cable, two runway cable personnel were decapitated when a plane landed unexpectedly and they stood up at the wrong time.

Williams' work was anything but boring. During the first week on the flight line, it was very noisy while numerous fully combat loaded A-1Es launched shortly before daybreak and returned at varied times. In addition, as Udorn was the closest emergency landing strip from the action in North Vietnam, there were five crashes of planes attempting to recover during his first week on the job: Phantoms and other jets either shot up or near fuel exhaustion.

Morris's unit was alerted by the tower that a damaged F-105 Starfighter pilot was arriving, unable to manipulate the throttle. Consequently, the pilot was obliged to close the throttle after turning onto final approach. Assuming the role of a glider, he landed hard resulting, in the disintegration of the plane's front end. After the jet ceased rolling, the rescue crew found the pilot slumped over the open cockpit with nothing but space in front of him. He survived, but suffered a broken back.

When a Phantom pilot arrived low on fuel, the engine flamed out just as he was landing. During the resulting crash, the aircraft did not burn and the pilot lived.

Another jet took off fully loaded and experienced a flame-out just after reaching the runway end. The pilot ejected with sufficient altitude for a successful landing.

One afternoon Williams was riding in that rear of the fire department pick-up truck en route to the fire station. Suddenly, an emergency alert crackled over the radio, stating that a

Phantom was inbound with a hung bomb and battle damage. The fire crew positioned quickly as the F-4 pilot landed. However, compounding the problem, an F-105 pilot already on approach attempted to land beside the Phantom on the 125-foot-wide strip. The Phantom pilot swerved, the right landing gear went off the runway, and the crippled plane headed toward Williams, with a damaged nose cone and 500-pound bomb flapping in the slip stream. Flinging himself flat on the runway, he thought, "*This is it.*" The aircraft missed him.

There was an old wooden Japanese or Thai control tower located to the right of the water tower. After transitioning to the Civil Engineering Squadron, Williams stood on the water tower to watch the action as aircraft took off and landed. He was thrilled to observe the Phantoms land and the Starfighter jets make an abrupt turn to final and listen to the engine whine.

His outfit was apprised of all emergencies. One of the most humorous emergencies occurred when a Thai pilot was performing his first solo flight in a training aircraft. Preparing for landing, he was unable to cycle the landing gear to the down position. He circled until the fuel was nearly exhausted and then commenced a gear up landing on the long dirt-laterite parking ramp. He made a perfect belly landing amid clouds of dust. Then suddenly, the small man tore out of the billowing dust cloud. Later, a sergeant entered the cockpit, the plane was lifted by a crane, and the landing gear dropped to the normal configuration. Consensus in his group concluded that the landing's impact had caused the gear to fall.

Williams was in the Airman's Club having a sandwich at six o'clock one evening when two USAF A-1E pilots entered with a wild tale about shooting down a MiG-17. They had caught the jet recovering from a dive, and shot one of their last rockets into

the fuselage. Apparently, everyone had heard the story. They were very convincing, excited, and wanted to share their experience.

They sat at William's table and purchased beer for all hands. Williams was normally not a drinker, but the men continued buying beer. He woke up the following morning on the barracks steps. ²⁹ ³⁰

SAIGON

The U.S. Embassy in Saigon using Air America Bell helicopters had been operating fairly smoothly since 1965. Likely contributing to this, in contrast to the high-altitude work required in Laos, flying in South Vietnam entailed mostly strip-to-strip landings in mostly secure areas. Based on the success of the first in-country Bells, USAID ordered five Bell 204 helicopters the previous year to complement the government program. Built by the Japanese Kawasaki Manufacturing Company under license to Bell USA, the models were equipped with small fuel tanks. In late February the Bells were packed in crates in preparation for delivery by ship to Saigon. Upon arrival, the five new helicopters would expand the Air America fleet of Bells to ten.

The addition of five aircraft required additional Bell pilots to supplement those men already hired and flying the line in 1965. ³¹ U.S. Army pilots were still preferred because they were generally experienced, proficient in the machine, and usually familiar with the country. Therefore, Phil Payton

²⁹ Although this incident might have occurred, the Author never heard the story. It also could have been a hoax, or simply an erroneously reported kill.

³⁰ Morris Williams Emails.

³¹ See Book Six-Saigon.

(08/02/66) and Bill Hutchison (02/27/66) arrived in Saigon during February to help crew the growing number of aircraft. As new Bells entered the Saigon inventory, more pilots were hired. Some of the new men employed were Jack Knotts (DOH 05/15/66), Bob Mehaffey (05/21/66), Brian Johnson (05/31/66), B.J. Halsworth (06/15/66), "Winnie" Wingrove (06/15/66), Carl Winston (06/15/66), Hank Edwards (07/19/66), and L.G. Stadulis (07/27/66). Others departed. Therefore, hiring continued over a long period.

Bob Hitchman was Chief Pilot Helicopters (CPH) in Saigon when Jack Knotts arrived. He initially got along with Hitch, but this later changed. Jim Campbell was Hitchman's assistant. Jim was considered a superior helicopter pilot and a fine individual. He had been employed as a test pilot with Boeing Vertol when the company was developing the Chinook and knew fellow employee Jim Brown. Jim Campbell and a later Saigon Bell pilot hire, Bill Frazer, were married to sisters.

While the Bells were being assembled and tested, there was little else for the new pilots to do except become oriented with their surroundings. With so much time off, Jack Knotts and his peers discovered Saigon city a very wild place during the military buildup.

One day when Jack was familiarizing himself with the Saigon scene, out of curiosity, he entered the Tax Building on Main Street. Inside, he met a friendly Japanese man engaged in the Nissan and Toyota import business. When Jack discovered he had had one Nissan Bluebird and a Toyota left in his inventory, he purchased the Bluebird. Later, in passing, he mentioned the other vehicle to Hitchman. Unbelievably, Hitchman wanted Jack to purchase the Toyota for him. It was embarrassing, but not having the money available, he refused his boss's unreasonable request. That was the end of their good relationship.

Army pilot Hank Edwards had spent one year flying in Nam. He was familiar with the Delta, and had flown as far north as Nha Trang. He was later assigned to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, with the 3rd Transportation Company. The company possessed twenty-five Piasecki UH-21 helicopters in support of Pentagon and other work. One contingency plan involved evacuation of the White House and Pentagon to the blast-hardened underground bunkers, should it become necessary in the event of a nuclear war threat to Washington, D.C.

A pilot from the H-21 outfit had flown with Air America for about a year and suggested that Hank might be interested in working for the Company when he left the Army. Not particularly interested at the time, Edwards filed the information away for several months and continued to march. When his service time was almost completed, and job searches revealed no good helicopter jobs available for low time pilots in the civilian world, he recalled Air America. He found the Company listing at 815 Connecticut Avenue in the Washington telephone directory. Following an interview, he was hired by "Red" Dawson to satisfy pilot requirements for the expanding Bell program in Saigon.

Hank left the States in July and spent a week in Taipei checking in. Then he travelled to Bangkok to attend a week of Bell 204 ground school. There he met Ted Cash (DOH 07/13/66), who was attending UH-34D ground school prior to his departure for Udorn. This was the first time Hank Edwards had heard Udorn mentioned. He flew out of Saigon for three years, eventually transferring to Udorn when there was an opening.

Beside home plate Saigon, there were three outlying bases where Bell pilots worked. At Can Tho, in the Delta, pilots could expect to RON for a week to ten days, at Na Trang in the center of the country, and at Da Nang.

A one-week Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) course was scheduled in Vientiane during the fall of 1966.³² Consistent with the Company plan that all pilots would obtain this rating, Bob Hitchman, Dave Kendall, Brian Johnson, and Jack Knotts attended from Saigon. While billeted at a riverside hotel, Hitchman informed his pilots about a gold shop on Arab Street that sold heavy twenty-four karat gold name bracelets, so popular with Air America pilots. Brian and Dave ordered the personalized items. Jack did not.

After taking the ATP test, the two retrieved their bracelets. Hitchman, aware of everyone's plans, returned to Saigon. Johnson, who was on leave and going to Africa on a safari, asked Knotts to take his purchase back to South Vietnam. Realizing Brian could not take such expensive jewelry on his trip, Jack nodded in the affirmative. With time to kill before returning to Bangkok and Saigon, Knotts and Kendall journeyed to Udorn to meet some of the pilots and patronize the bar. There they met old friends Harvey Potter and his wife Jean.

Arriving in Saigon, the two men found the terminal experiencing its normal chaotic activity. Jack and Dave were standing side by side at the customs counter with their bags open for inspection. A Vietnamese man in the crowd made eye contact with Jack. Then, as if rehearsed, he approached the customs counter, picked up Knotts' shaving kit, and expertly removed Johnson's gold bracelet. He held up the bracelet for all to see and yelled, "*Oh, a gold smuggler!*" Seeing this, Kendall secured his suitcase and quietly exited the scene. Embarrassed, Jack looked around and thought he saw two Americans lurking behind a pillar.

³²No equivalent helicopter rating was available at this time.

Next, he was ushered into a customs office. The bracelet was locked in a safe, his passport confiscated, and formal smuggling charges were lodged against him. This took most of the day. Everyone in the office signed the charge sheet that was almost as large as a newspaper page. That evening, he was informed that he could not have the bracelet back unless he took it outside of South Vietnam. Additionally, there would be a large fine involved, which everyone who signed the charge would share.

A month transpired and Jack arranged a scheduled time off (STO) trip to Bangkok, and at the same time to retrieve Johnson's bracelet as per customs specifications. He paid the heavy fine and boarded the Cathy Pacific plane. Before the plane departed, a customs agent delivered the bracelet to him, making a large fuss to impress the passengers.

Jack and Bobby Barrow arrived at Don Muang at 1100 hours and hired a taxi driver to deliver them to Max's Bar on Patpong Road. The only customers there at that time of the morning were BJ Singleton and wife Jean. BJ was there to pick up a Helio Courier and ferry it to Saigon. Learning this, Jack saw a perfect opportunity to return Brian's bracelet relatively risk free. Therefore, taking advantage of a situation not likely to be repeated, Knotts related the bracelet fiasco and inquired if BJ would take the item with him the following day. BJ assented. Brian got his jewelry back and reimbursed Jack for the fine.

In a sequel to the story, American customs agents, advisors to the South Vietnamese were based in offices across from the Air America compound in a building people called "Pentagon East." Hitch was in tight with the group, obtaining pornographic magazines like Hustler, Playboy, and others the Americans and South Vietnamese confiscated from visitors' luggage. In fact, he had an entire drawer full of girly magazines in his office.

Knotts eventually discovered through other pilots that Hitchman had sequestered these magazines. Consequently, two and two equated to bingo and Hitchman's perfidy. Evidently, still angry over the ill feeling generated during the car incident, as a method of payback, Hitch had informed on his pilot to customs agents. The rest was easy. Privy to all the information required as to Knotts' arrival, and the fact that he was carrying Johnson's gold bracelet, a perfect sting operation had been established to apprehend Jack.

Although highly agitated, Knotts never confronted Hitchman over the episode. None of us in Udorn who knew him would have been surprised at Hitchman's action. It did, however, tend to reveal more of his questionable character to his Saigon subordinates.

Animosity between the two men continued. Later in 1966, during a periodic check ride, Jack and Hitch were working at Tay Ninh where a short PSP strip in the center of town terminated at a graveyard. Jack normally set RPM two to three percent below a hundred percent while in cruise. Then, on final approach, he would beep RPM to one hundred percent. On this particular day, Jack observed Bob's finger on the collective beeper switch. After landing, Hitch chided him for not maintaining one hundred percent. Jack succinctly asked his check pilot how he possibly could achieve that number when he was beeping up and Bob was beeping down. Eventually people became wise to Hitchman's tricks. There was more of his foolishness to come, which prompted many of the original Saigon Bell pilots to gravitate to Udorn, just to get away from the Saigon CPH. Knotts transferred around Christmas of 1969 to become the 16th Bell pilot in the Udorn program.

Bob Hitchman charmed upper management, and he had a unique way of skating through incidents. One day he went to the flight

line to test fly a machine out of maintenance. The aircraft were bunched up, and when he started the engine and rotor blades, other ships were damaged. The incident was covered up and nothing was ever said.

Many Saigon based pilots, who engaged in the money conversion game in the early days, did quite well financially. To help quell inflation, military payment certificates (MPC), or "funny money", was issued as standard exchange as it had in other theaters. At one time, a person could buy MPC on the "black market" in town at a two for one rate. One could open an account at the overseas Chase Manhattan Bank and deposit either dollars or MPC and credit the sum to a stateside bank. Since the MPC was credited in dollars, an entrepreneurial and slightly larcenous soul could easily double his money in a single transaction. ³³

Later, the scam was recognized and stopped. Individuals were no longer allowed to open or maintain the MPC dollar exchange bank accounts. When the new rules went into effect, the only method of taking money out of South Vietnam was if you were departing the country. Then one could exchange 1,200 dollars of MPC for "green" at the bank. The new system was not perfect. A loophole existed in that it did not matter if the person was only leaving for a short time and returning to South Vietnam.

Naturally, Hitchman, like many others, took full advantage of the system. He controlled pilot STO, so those who were accommodating to Bob received the most time off the flight schedule. Many opted to vacation in Thailand. Aware of their plans, he would ask them for a favor. *"My wife is in Bangkok and I need to send her some money."* When they assented, he would

³³ Those of us working in Thailand had no such equivalent. Tied to the dollar, the Thai baht was very stable, rarely fluctuating much.

give them 1,200 dollars "black market" MPC, which they would exchange for dollars and deliver to June.

This continued for a time until Bob later received comeuppance. Cliff Hendryx had planned a STO in Bangkok. Like all other times, Bob gave Cliff 1,200 dollars in MPC for June. Cliff indicated that he would be happy to take her the money. After arriving in Bangkok, he presented her with the same 1,200 dollars in MPC. Cliff transferred to the Udorn H-34 program.

From time to time we heard bits and pieces of the shenanigans occurring in the Saigon Bell program, but we had no real knowledge, until later years when pilots began transferring to Udorn to avoid Hitchman's peculiar kind of twisted management-by-intimidation technique. ³⁴

³⁴ Jack Knotts Interview, Author's House, 05/26-27/99.
Hank Edwards Email.
Marius Burke Interview Author's House.
Air America Cockpit Crew Seniority List, 09/15/73.

While I "enjoyed" Doctor Wells lengthy and frustrating amoeba "cure," incidents continued to accumulate throughout the Lao military regions. Depending on enemy intentions, prosecuting wars in both countries, offensives differed in intensity. In the past, the bottom line of their coordinated offensives was that enemy forces could easily intimidate and roll up any Lao FAR or FAN units. However, as lately demonstrated at Na Khang, even if a government site was eventually abandoned, American air power could exact a heavy toll in enemy casualties. In the case described below, timely air saved the day.

SOUTHERN TRAILS

During the 1965-1966 dry season from September to March, Binh Tram labor force units from the Vietnamese People's Army (VPA) constructed sixty miles of new crushed stone roads per month. A new logistic route was opened through the Ban Karai Pass south of Mugia.

In late March and early April, to expedite passage of men and materials, the Vietnamese pressured or cleared Lao Theung road watch teams from the area. During the period before the rainy season commenced, four spotting units were either attacked or forcibly ejected from their positions along the Route-23 bypass area, three miles south of Lima-53 and east of Ban Senphan; twenty miles south of L-53, two west of Route-911 in the foothills of Pha Xambon; and one mile east across the road. Aggressive enemy patrolling units employed tracker dogs to achieve their aims. Efforts to garner intelligence on Vietnamese movement were attempted by Vietnamese Army (ARVN) troops from the South Vietnamese side, but were not highly successful.

About the same time, reports began filtering into American intelligence centers indicating that large enemy convoys were moving south along the new Route-23 bypass and Route-911. Many enemy troops were reported at the Ban Phon Mot airfield seven miles south of Mugia Pass, just below the Route 12/23 junction.

Other vehicle capable roads were under construction, eventually connecting what became generically named the Sihanouk Trail after Cambodia's leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. ¹ An extension of Route-96's Ho Chi Minh Trail north and east of the Bolovens Plateau, numbered Route-110, was also located across the Se Kong Valley. The relatively new road complex plunged southeast of Attopeu, adjacent to Moung May, and thrust sixty miles toward the Lao-South Vietnam-Cambodian borders. The pathway ended near Dak To and Ban Het, South Vietnam, later connecting to Cambodian roads. ²

In 1965, enemy engineers and road builders secretly began construction of this segment in Attopeu Province. Despite distant explosions echoing within hearing range of Attopeu, Commanding Officer Colonel Khong Vongnarath, except for cursory, clandestine forays, ignored the explosions and failed to investigate. His decision conformed to tacit agreements with communist leaders not to stir the pot in the region. The relative inaction allowed the garrison to survive and function, and for Kong's senior individuals to reap financial rewards from local businesses with Pathet Lao middlemen.

Earlier, a USAF FAC pilot had clandestinely flown over an eastbound two-lane road in Cambodia that wound through an area

¹ RLAFF Brigadier General Thao Ma was generally recognized by Colonel Vongnarath as coining this term.

² For ease of identification and targeting, U.S. intelligence offices designated highway numbers for identification. Enemy road designations were different.

devoid of habitation and was designated Highway-19. Although apparently well used, nothing was seen moving on the road, and it terminated five miles from the South Vietnamese border. At the time, it was not known that since the early 1960s, North Vietnamese representatives had purchased rice stocks in Cambodia, which were then transferred over logistic trails to support Viet Cong operations in South Vietnam. Also, Port Sihanoukville at Kampong Some had been used as a conduit to funnel hard supplies to Viet Cong bases on the border. ³ To preclude discovery of these measures by covert CIA agents imbedded in the Phnom Penh U.S. Embassy, Sihanouk shuttered the doors during the spring of 1965. By 1966, Highway-19 was linked to Routes-110 and 96, allowing easier access into South Vietnam.

It was not until late March of 1966 that Brigadier General Oudone Sananikone, FAR Chief of Staff, informed USG officials about the new infiltration artery. However, with many other target areas taking precedence, interdiction response was slow at first, with only General Ma's T-28 pilots flying relatively few missions in the area. In addition, caution had to be exercised because Cambodia was still considered a neutral country. ⁴

By April, USAF electronic surveillance revealed evidence of road activity west of Tiger Hound's southernmost border. FAC pilot visual reconnaissance uncovered vehicular traffic of up to forty trucks per day rolling through Cambodia and along Route-110 to South Vietnam. Although outside Tiger Hound's limits, it impacted the southern enemy LOCs. Consequently, permission was

³ There were actually two Sihanouk Trails: Route-110 in Laos and another one thrusting from Port Sihanoukville through Cambodia to the South Vietnamese border. Baird, 27, fn4.

⁴ This, although the communist Liberation Front had been using the country as a logistical conduit and storage area for four years.

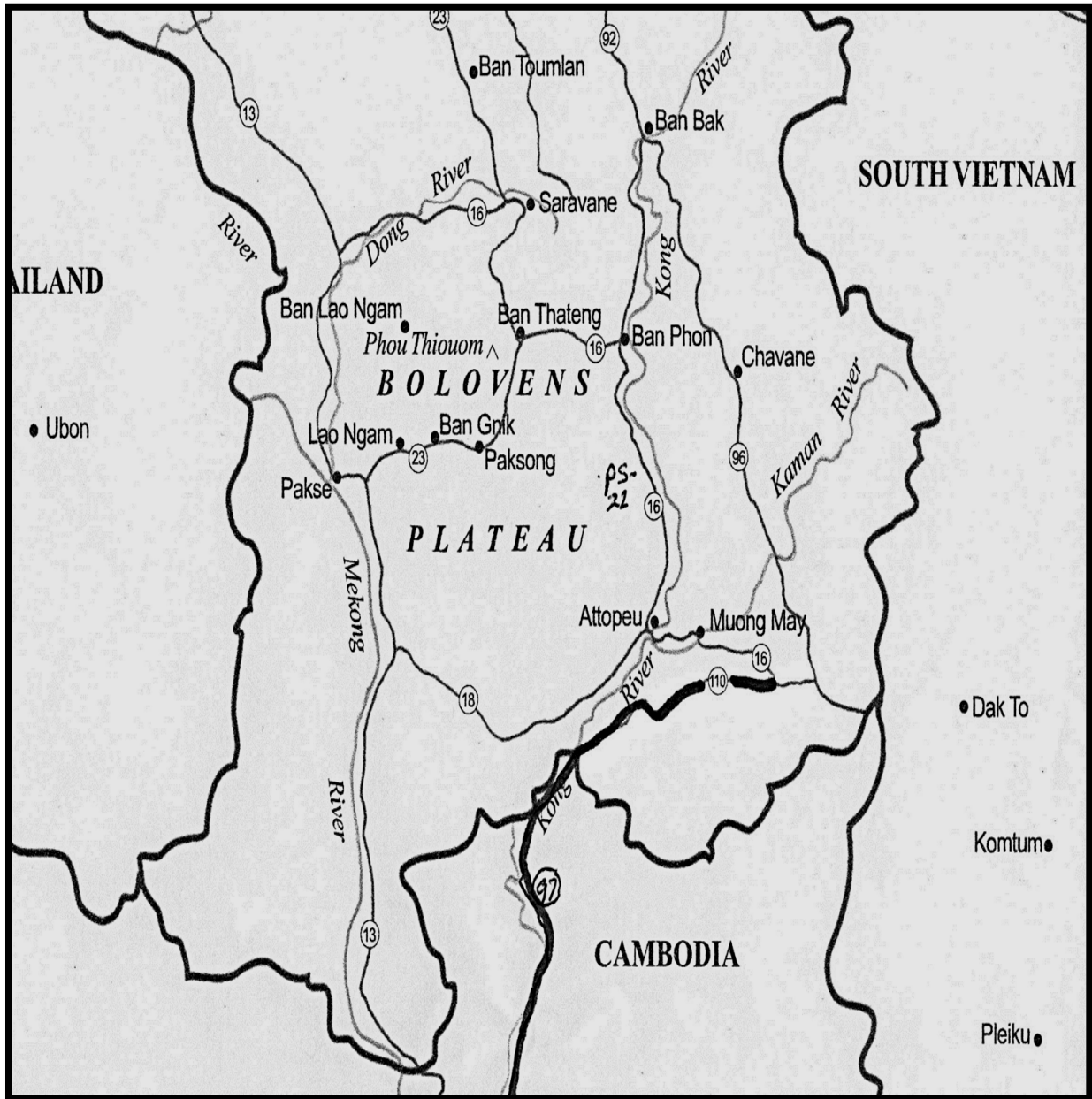
approved for continued FAC surveillance and jungle defoliation by Ranch Hand C-123 crews. ⁵

ATTOPEU

Attopeu (L-10), the southernmost town in Laos containing any sizeable population, was located on lowland below the southeastern portion of the Bolovens Plateau. Tucked into a niche in the junction of the Kong and Kaman rivers and National Route-16, the market town and its environs were considered by the enemy as encroaching on the logistic trail system leading into South Vietnam. In fact, with additional government Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) sites constantly being developed on the Plateau's fringes and at the Saravane base tailored to probe and threaten their LOCs, there was awareness within the Vietnamese leadership that all these sites would eventually have to be eliminated and come under their control.

Since 1962, action in and around the immediate area surrounding Attopeu had been generally limited to small unit skirmishes, although, with rudimentary roads far too dangerous to travel, enemy activity had totally isolated the provincial capital. Consequently, all supply and personnel movement into and out of Lima-10 was restricted to fixed wing and helicopter traffic. Even then, cautious pilots were careful to overhead the

⁵Brigadier General Soutchay Vongsavanh, 14, 16.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 173.
Agency Information Cable, 04/16/66.
Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 124.
John L. Plaster, *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam* (New York, N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1997) 95-96.
Melvin Porter *CHECO: Tiger Hound*, 47.



Military Region Four showing principal towns, roads and rivers. Lower portion depicts Attopeu's proximity to enemy LOCs Route-96 and 110 (dark line) that plunged into and linked with a logistic system in Cambodia.

position at altitude and descend by circling within the confines of the runway.

Garrisoned by FAR troops, the town had survived thus far because of the aforementioned tacit agreement between opposing parties. In exchange for Pathet Lao sanction to "trade" for critical items, and FAR units restricting forays to the immediate area, Attoupeu and its inhabitants were generally left alone. This did not set a precedent. Similar accommodations had been established at Chong Ha (LS-48, also called Moungh Heim) in upper Military Region Two and other parts of the kingdom. Since such flexibility existed at enemy whim, it appeared the time was ripe for a change.

Previously, enemy units mauled by air in South Vietnam, entered the Attoupeu area to refit, train, recruit, and gather strength in a reasonably innocuous environment. A secondary mission was assigned enemy units to secure and protect alternate lines of communication (LOCs) under development in Cambodia. Despite intermittent daytime strikes by friendly air, the enemy persevered and controlled the partially destroyed cross road towns of Moungh Cau and Fangdeng, located on flat land eight miles east of Attoupeu along the Se Kaman and Route-16. However, the cursory air strikes failed to discourage six battalions of battle-hardened enemy units. Royal Lao government defenders were listed at three battalion strength. During a recent engagement toward the end of February, Group Mobile-16 reputedly incurred 200 KIAs and one hundred WIAs, eliminating the better part of two companies. It appeared nothing could stop further enemy

movement toward the provincial capital. ⁶

RLAF General Thao Ma and Military Region Four Commanding General Phasouk Somly requested American air strikes on the enemy through the chain of command-AIRA to 2nd Air Division deputy commander Udorn. Always in the loop, General Westmoreland requested permission from Ambassador Sullivan to employ Tiger Hound aircraft. However, for his own reasons, probably because of increasing requirements in the Panhandle vs. Barrel Roll, Ambassador Sullivan tabled the request, refusing to ask the proper FAR individuals in Vientiane.

Increasingly concerned about an imminent move on Attopeu, on 3 March, the generals again requested USAF support. This time Sullivan agreed to minor support. Since night support had worked to a fair degree during the Na Khang offensive, the USAF responded with C-47 gunships, equipped to deter the enemy at night. Commanded by Major Jensen, the crew of Spooky-41 departed Udorn for Savannakhet during the afternoon of the fourth. Beside 7.62mm mini-guns, the plane carried flares and a light-intensifying four-power device called a "Starlight Scope," normally used in South Vietnam by ground units during night operations. For familiarity, Jensen's crew had previously used the scope on a road recon around Nakhon Phanom, although this would mark the first time such electronic technology would be used on an American gunship during actual combat conditions.

After a briefing by General Ma, Major Jensen launched for Attopeu with two Lao officers to observe and coordinate the mission, as standard operating procedures (SOPs) dictated. Upon

⁶ The high casualty count sounds excessive by Lao standards. Lao soldiers normally broke from their battle lines and ran during enemy advances. Attesting to this, FACs spotted field packs littering the roads leading back to Attopeu. However, "Lao" troops in this area were of mixed ethnicity, which included tribal types who often displayed more fortitude under fire than actual Lao troops.

arrival, the PIC discovered communications with ground personnel to be poor. Therefore, before proceeding with the mission, with the aid of flares and Jeep lights, he elected to land at the strip in the dark to obtain an accurate picture of the immediate situation. A FAC and other Americans met the crew and took them to the command post (CP) at the south end of the strip for the latest tactical information. Workable radio frequencies were exchanged, strike areas delineated, and airborne tactics explained.

The Spooky crew returned to the air shortly after 2000 hours and headed for the target area. During the next two hours, using the high tech "Starlight Scope," the crew hosed five potential enemy targets. Enemy spotted moving in the direction of Attopeu were engaged, and maximum casualties were inflicted on actual sighted enemy troops in the open. However, frequent gun malfunctions precluded expending all rounds (about half the 26,000 bullets). Jensen's crew was replaced by those in Spooky-43 (without a scope). This ship remained the rest of the night dropping flares and placing fire on targets of opportunity.

The following morning, a USAF O-1E forward air controller, while flying in the area without drawing ground fire, discovered half a hundred bodies scattered in rice paddies and ditches, with evidence of many more spirited away. Based on the FAC's findings, aware that the enemy usually immediately hauled their dead and wounded off the battlefield, headquarters estimated probable casualties ranging into the hundreds. Even discounting an air force tendency to overestimate and inflate battle damage after engagements, the immediate enemy threat to Attopeu was stymied. Still, flagging morale was restored to GM-16 troops, who reoccupied their previous positions at Fangdeng and Moung Cao by 10 March. It appeared the ancient C-47, in its new role

as a night gunship, was again established for the Lao war. ⁷

MOUNG HEIM

Far to the north in Military Region Two, Lima-48 bordered the Nam Kham in a well-watered upland valley twenty-five miles north of the Plain of Jars extreme periphery. Also listed as Chong Ha, nine miles northwest of Na Khang, the valley became a very active rally and regrouping area for withdrawing Meo and FAR troops when Site-36 was abandoned in February.

The valley and region possessed some historical significance during the modern Lao era, for trails and footpaths along rivers and through mountains were employed as a conduit south from North Vietnam to the PDJ by Viet Minh troops during the First Indochina War. As a young man Vang Pao was well acquainted with the site. While guiding French and Meo troops north, the site was attacked by Viet Minh units. Under pressure, Vang Pao subsequently led the troops out of harm's way south down the Nam Khan to the lowland village at Sop Khao. ^{8 9}

Now the area's only claim to fame was a grassy Caribou strip and the presence of a shiftless Neutralist battalion. Similar to accommodations at Attopeu, the FAN managed to exist at the remote site by assuming a nonaggressive stance in regard

⁷Jacob Van Staaveren, 125-128.
Captain Melvin Porter, *Project CHECO: The Defense of Attopeu* 1-12, Reprinted by Dalley Book Service, Christiansburg, VA.
Brigadier General Soutchay Vongsavanh, *Indochina Monographs, CHECO: Royal Lao Government Military Operations and Activities in the Laotian Panhandle* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History) 54.

⁸Keith Quincy.

⁹ Located seven miles east of Phu Cum (LS-50), and used for navigation during VFR weather, pilots called the well-defined Sop Khao checkpoint "four rivers."



Government troops transferring supplies from a H-34 to an Air America Caribou at Moungh Heim for air delivery to outlying positions.
Mike Jarina Collection.

to the war. In general, Neutralist leaders were masters of obtaining favorable terms with the Pathet Lao, FAR, Vang Pao, or anyone else, depending on which faction best served their purpose at the time. The Thais might refer to this philosophy as "bamboo bending with the wind." This tendency was especially the case in regard to supplies and guarantees that avoided hostile action or undue combat participation on their part.

Following the Na Khang siege, FAR Colonel Phan temporarily encamped his troops in defensive positions along the Moung Heim runway, where they could easily be supplied, reinforced, and new operations begun. Even before the recent fall of Na Khang, plans had been conceived to select a more viable defensive site to regroup Meo and other friendly ethnic troops from northern positions in Sam Neua Province overrun earlier by enemy units. American advisors and General Vang Pao realized Site-36 was the final remaining base of any consequence along Route-6, and a choice target for a concerted enemy attack. Also, long range planning required an alternative forward northern base to support USAF helicopter SAR missions in North Vietnam. Moung Son, then controlled by a few of the enemy, seemed a logical, if temporary location. Relatively close to the border, Lima-59 was located thirty-two miles north northwest of Na Khang and twenty-nine miles directly north of Moung Heim. The site, formerly developed and used to advantage by French forces during the First Indochina War, was employed as a blocking deterrent to enemy movement from Son La Province into lower Laos. A decaying fort still existed there, with a disused 1970-foot grass runway already carved out of the 2,300-foot valley floor. Future events stimulated probes and later movements to capture Moung Son.

Even then plans were being conceived to return Na Khang to the government fold. However, until Vang Pao's partial recovery

and return to the field, FAR units would have to be content with refitting and conducting clearing operations from Moung Heim.

Despite the fact that FAR and FAN soldiers, both Lao except for Meo and other ethnic types, were all theoretically part of the same government, newcomers to the valley were not readily welcomed. The Neutralist commander of BI-5 realistically feared that their presence would eventually trigger a violent Vietnamese response. There was also mutual distrust present between disparate units, and the Meo people were never liked or accepted by lowlanders. ¹⁰

Air America fixed wing and helicopters supported Phan's efforts at Moung Heim. ROning at Sam Tong, Lou McCasland worked the area for three to four days in Hotel-29 and was relieved onsite in the field on the first. ¹¹

DEATH IN THE MOUNG HEIM VALLEY

Shortly after takeoff, while departing the Moung Heim Valley in Helio Courier B-877 on 6 March, Wayne Ensminger, a former USAF jet pilot, crashed.

A short time before the accident, I recalled Captain Ensminger lounging beside the Club Rendezvous swimming pool wearing very dark sunglasses. In contrast to most small fixed wing aviators, many Helio Courier and Pilatus Porter pilots who worked the "trenches" with us, he was not a particularly

¹⁰ Factional division had been long standing within FAR and FAN armies. The dissension had led to Kong Le's Neutralists merging with Pathet Lao forces in 1961. After FAN swung back to the RLG side under communist pressure in 1963, division and distrust still persisted. To eradicate the problem and form a cohesive military force, the Vientiane General Staff had been lobbying for FAN integration into the RLA.

¹¹ Lou McCasland March 1966 Flight Time Report.

friendly sort. As a former "Air Farce" pilot, I equated his superiority attitude to arrogance that some of those types effected. Usually, if I knew the individual fairly well, as a put-down, I would interject, "*Hey fellow, I can fly fixed wing aircraft, fly instruments, and fly helicopters. Can you?*" I knew the answer to my question and usually there was no viable response. It was too bad he was not with us very long, for I am sure he would eventually have responded to our good will.

Since the fall of Na Khang, Ensminger had been flying Air Force forward air controllers (FAC) around the area to acquire targeting information. On this particular day, Wayne planned to carry Air Force Captain Cy Roberts, a new photograph interpreter, on a familiarization mission around Moung Son for the purpose of targeting and generating air strikes. Also onboard B-877 were USAID representative George Raynor and Captain Deja Adulrat, Thai team leader of his PARU group who had relocated from Na Khang.¹² A long-time participant in the Lao war, Deja was along to interpret information from forward Meo ground forces regarding enemy location and movement.

Captain Ensminger took off from the Chong Ha (generically called Moung Heim) strip to the south southwest around midday. Unlike most airplane pilots, who attained altitude by circling to avoid suspected enemy presence, he immediately commenced a steep downwind left turn to the north. Within a short time, the plane crashed in rough ground slightly east of the strip. Owing to the conditions at the time of the crash, there was no 'Mayday' call heard. Depending on the source, later reports varied as to the cause. Some interested individuals theorized a severed stabilizer cable, a fuel boost pump malfunction leading to an engine failure, or a steep turn stall during the windy,

¹² Our pronunciation sounded more like Dacha or Dachar.

turbulent day in an overloaded condition had provided the means for the crash. As with any flying machine, it could have been one problem or a combination. Whatever the cause, B-877 contacted the deck hard, broke up, and burned. The impact must have been severe, for a Helio Courier rarely burned after a crash.

From his vantage point in the hills to the east, Case Officer Jerry Daniels observed the fire and immediately radioed in the blind requesting H-34 assistance. Captain Tony Byrne, en route to a northern site west of Phou Pha Thi, heard the Customer call and returned to Moung Heim to offer his services. While a Meo patrol was dispatched to help find and secure the crash area, he picked up Customer Mike Lynch and an observer familiar with the area. Before departing to search, an indigenous loader indicated that he had seen three persons board B-877.

The well-defined wreck was located on uneven ground at about the same elevation (2,100 feet) as the valley floor. Tony found the terrain unsuitable for landing. Therefore, while he hovered at twenty feet, his Flight Mechanic lowered Lynch and another man to the ground to investigate and begin the recovery operation. Once at the wreck, they discovered a grim reminder of the results of the deadly crash. The Helio and the two cockpit occupants had been consumed in the fire. Another man was discovered lying on the ground beside the STOL plane's smoldering ashes. The ensuing recovery process was not pleasant or easy. As each charred body was individually hoisted into the cabin, enduring the sweet, nauseous odor of burned flesh, Byrne began shuttling the remains to Site-48. During his first trip, another H-34 pilot working the area to the south called and offered to help with the recovery. Because of seasonal smoke and

haze restricting visibility, and the ever-present danger of a mid-air collision, Tony rejected any help.

After Tony delivered the quick and the dead to Mounng Heim, the former occupants of B-877 were positioned along the west bank of the Nam Khan. Initial identification proved difficult, as the three corpses were beyond a normal layman's recognition, even to the extent of determining ethnic origin. ¹³

After further examination, personal items were discovered, tentatively identifying the men. Known details involving the incident and the suspected victims involved were relayed south to Long Tieng and AB-1 over a secure single sideband radio. Consequently, messages flashed between locations requesting additional information.

Directly following his harrowing SAR work, Byrne was recalled to Udorn. While he was still en route south, complicating a bad situation, a Meo soldier revealed to a Customer that he had observed four individuals board the plane prior to the takeoff. This startling revelation was perplexing, for after a round-eye head count, no westerner in the area was reported missing. After additional investigation, people at Sam Tong revealed that a USAID employee, George Raynor, had flown to the site that morning. However, by the time this was learned, darkness precluded either air or ground search by reluctant warriors. Therefore, a concerted search was deferred until the following morning.

After Tony terminated on the ramp and entered the CPH office for debriefing, a phone call from AB-1 requested information regarding the number of souls onboard (SOB) the ill-

¹³ I had personal experience with a burned crash victim on Mindoro, Philippine Islands, in 1962. Even though I was but three feet from the charred corpse, unable to recognize the remains as human, I had to have the grisly remains pointed out to me.

fated Helio. Apparently, there was considerable confusion and some question as to the actual number of SOBs (souls onboard). Irony surfaced when Byrne learned that the pilot of B-877 was Wayne Ensminger. He, Wayne, and another pilot had arrived at the corporate Company headquarters in Taipei at the same time in 1965. They had processed into the Company and journeyed to Bangkok together. After a few days, they were ferried to Udorn.

During the morning, Tom Hoppe, who had been working the Bouam Long (LS-88), Mounng Heim (LS-48), and San Pa Ka (LS-33) areas the previous day, was asked by a PARU team member to fly into the hills northeast of Site-48 and search for a missing person from the B-877 crash. Consequently, Tom searched north and south in the valley. After several passes, he eventually discovered a relatively uninjured, but dazed George Raynor, perched on the side of a hill, staring into the distance. Because of uneven terrain that restricted landing, Hoppe was forced to place the right wheel of his H-34 on the side of the hill while the Flight Mechanic and additional individuals managed to drag him into the cabin. Tom returned the survivor to Site-48, where Doctor Weldon waited beside a Porter and attended to the USAID man's burns. Then a Caribou crew evacuated him to a hospital in Thailand.

As the human brain is programmed to suppress traumatic events to reduce shock, details of the accident and recovery process were forever wiped from Raynor's memory. Furthermore, he did not recall Byrne's H-34 hovering overhead. Therefore, no one ever discovered if the man was blown out of the craft or managed to exit through a hole in the aft section of the torn plane. Since he was not discovered by the rescue team investigating the crash, it was believed that after gaining consciousness, still in severe shock and a confused state, he must have wandered into the bush. At the time, no one believed Raynor could have

survived such a crash. However, during the previous night, a Meo familiar with the area was enticed with substantial monetary reward by Customers to look for his remains. He left, despite rumors that enemy patrols lurked in the vicinity. Sometime before morning, the two men met on a trail and were on the way back to Site-48 when Hoppe arrived.

In the years since their sanctioned entry into the Lao conflict in 1960, many brave PARU lost their lives either in combat or air crashes. Deja was AB-1's Bill Lair favorite PARU. He was only a young private when Bill first met him in 1951. One of only a handful of Moslem recruits, Bill considered Deja the most courageous warrior of all the PARU he trained.

Because of his talent and bravery, Deja was always at the cutting edge of Agency activity. He worked at many different sites, one being the dreaded Phou Fa (LS-16), or Agony, as both fixed wing and helicopter pilots called the dangerous site because of high winds, downdrafts, and a bad landing strip. It was said that one did not actually fly off the short strip; you simply fell off the 5,400-foot elevation and dove to gain flying speed. Even drop aircraft had problems there with a Bird and Son Lockheed PV-2 Ventura (N-7456C) crashing in October 1961, and a C-46 (N-4877V) on 31 August 1962. While there with Tony Poe in the early days, Deja was renowned for his night forays with a 75mm recoilless rifle to fire on enemy camps.

Lair always attempted to make pilots believe they were key partners in the Agency activity. As a result, Deja was closely associated with many pilots. He took a special interest in assisting pilots when they got into trouble, usually at great personal risk. As evidenced in the May 1965 Ernie Brace SAR at Bouam Lao, in which I participated, Deja was always the first to volunteer to go anywhere to assist pilots and passengers of downed aircraft.

From his final resting place in close proximity to the Helio Courier door, like Raynor, it was assumed, but never determined, whether Deja was blown out of the plane or managed to exit through a torn opening. Owing to his past exploits and relationship with pilots, after seeing that Ensminger and Roberts had failed to exit, it was presumed that Deja had returned to the aircraft to lend assistance just as the plane blew up. Because there were no eyewitnesses, similar to Colonel Tong's legend, the story stuck. In an organization of no medals and little camaraderie, we needed our heroes.

Deja left four small children and a pregnant wife. Therefore, he was posthumously advanced to major to enhance the death benefits, and Bill Lair did all he could to assist the family. A trust fund, administered by Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn, was established for the children's education. During April, Jim Rhyne collected money from the pilots. The sum eventually reached 25,000 dollars. Later, a movie about Deja was produced by King Bhumibol Adulyadej and shown over television for the Thai public's viewing. It seemed like the longer the war continued, we were running out of live heroes. ¹⁴

BAN NA

The same day that Deja "bought the farm," overcome by events, Captain Bob LaTurner crashed Caribou 393 at Site-15. Bob was an experienced short takeoff and landing (STOL) pilot, and chief pilot of the DHC C-7 program. Over the years Bob had conducted many landings at the old site under various

¹⁴ Bill Leary March 1966 Notes.
Tom Ahern, 244-247.
Ken Conboy, 153.
Bill Lair' Bangkok Interview with the Author.
Tom Hoppe Letter Regarding his Participation in the Incident.
Author's Phone Call to Anthony Byrne, 07/02/09.

conditions. Less than 1,200 feet long, the Ban Na strip perched on top of a 4,600-foot promontory not far south of the Plain of Jars (PDJ). Like most mountain strips, Ban Na offered only one landing approach. The lower one third of the runway was somewhat flat and sloped upward to the loading-unloading area. Enabling the Caribou to operate and stop on even the shortest strips, a reversible thrust propeller system was incorporated into the plane's dual throttle system. Activated at touchdown, together with brake application, this additional braking feature minimized roll out.

At times area winds created strong crosswinds and downdrafts that challenged even the best pilots. All went well during the approach phase. As per normal cockpit procedure, LaTurner positioned his hands on the overhead throttles waiting for ground contact, when he would activate the braking mode by pushing the throttles up into the reverse prop detent. However, while still a few feet above the ground, unexpected heavy turbulence caused Bob to inadvertently and prematurely activate the reverse function on the right engine. Reacting violently, the aircraft pivoted to the right and off the runway. The torque created by dissimilar prop functions was so intense that 393 ended up nearly 180 degrees from its original flight path. Fortunately, although considerably shaken, no one was badly injured from the ensuing crash. Because of the location and difficulty involved in recovery, 393 sat at Ban Na for all to view--a testament to the numerous challenges aviators faced in Laos.

As Ban Na was under considerable pressure, Air America maintenance had difficulty mustering mechanics and other help to volunteer their services to repair the aircraft sufficiently to



Crashed Caribou 393 at Ban Na, Laos (LS-15) the result of Captain Bob LaTurner's inadvertent input reversing the propeller and the resulting pirouette just prior to touchdown.

Air America Photo in Author's Collection.



Another photo of C-7 393 after Captain Bob Laturner's crash at Ban Na. Parker, *Battle for Skyline Ridge*, 131.

be flown out. As it was, repair crews refused to remain over night at the site, so it took much longer to effect a recovery.¹⁵

LOSS OF SITE-48

For some time, the enemy had been quietly positioning to attack FAR and FAN defenses in the Moung Heim Valley. Pilots who had been working the area were quite fortunate in that enemy gunners held their fire.

First indications of enemy intentions commenced at nightfall on the 8th with a mortar attack. As rounds splashed in the area, FAN soldiers, true to their nature, disappeared. Except for the PARU team, Colonel Phan moved his men southeast to the cover of hills, ravines, and woods in the direction of Site-36.

With the number of able-bodied government fighting men greatly reduced, the area remained quiet as units from two Vietnamese battalions advanced toward the valley. After infiltrating close to Site-48 and bypassing defenses, during the night and morning of 11-12 March, the enemy struck with coordinated precision. The attack was relatively quick and decisive. What remained of BI-5 was decimated. FAN who were not killed or disappeared into the jungle surrendered and defected to the communist cause. Receiving his deserved comeuppance, the neutralist commanding officer, who had previously sought accommodation with the enemy as a means of preserving the peace, was summarily executed.

Early Sunday morning, as remaining PARU were scrambling out of harm's way, Lipo (Captain Boonchan Sirima) became separated

¹⁵ Joe Leeker, The Aircraft of Air America, The DHC-C-7 Caribou. Author's Recall of Bob LaTurner's Description of the Accident. Blaine Jensen letter, 08/04/98. *"I do not think that they cared so much about losing the aircraft. I had the impression that they did not want the evidence there, if the site fell to the enemy."*

from his team. He was subsequently wounded in a mine explosion while attempting to escape. After donning a dead Vietnamese soldier's uniform, and by clever maneuvering techniques, he managed to evade to the southwest.

Lipo had graduated with one of the original pathfinder units at the Hue Hin Narusuan PARU training camp. In addition to other early air drop assignments, he served with distinction at Chiang Khong, working with the Agency's Bill Young and IVS representative Joe Flipse. A very likeable individual, he was highly motivated and deemed an asset to the program. I was particularly fond of Lipo, for he always seemed to have time to talk or explain current situations to me. He also took care of me during RONs at Phu Pha Thi, where his team monitored and intercepted enemy radio transmissions. When carrying particularly odiferous bodies, he counseled me to place a couple of drops of Thai cologne (foo-foo juice) on a handkerchief tied around my mouth and nose.

On the 14th, a Helio Courier pilot received a radio transmission from four PARU, who had evaded west-southwest of the Mounng Heim Valley to a location between San Pha Ka (LS-33) and Phou Cum (LS-50). After relaying this information to Long Tieng, a double-crewed H-34 with Captain George Carroll and Chuck Frady was dispatched to retrieve them. In a backup role, Captain Dick Elder followed in Hotel-31.

As they approached the area ground fire was directed at the helicopters. The men were gathered in a tight ravine, where jungle cover and the degree of difficulty exceeded George's capability to extract them. After attempting a hovering extraction, Carroll's H-34 was badly damaged by contacting stands of heavy bamboo. With several blade pockets shredded and excessive vibrations endangering the crew, Carroll managed a flight to Lima Site-50, where Customer Vint Lawrence awaited

news of the recovery. In his SAR capacity, Dick Elder followed the crippled helicopter to Phu Cum. Witnesses observed pieces of bamboo covering the aircraft. After ensuring Carroll's safe landing, Elder returned to the PARU location and commenced several approaches. Following several unsuccessful attempts to hover safely at an altitude for hoist cable to allow an extraction, Dick aborted the recovery attempt and returned to Site-50. With Carroll's H-34 grounded for parts (AGP), he retrieved the crew and returned to Sam Tong in the dark.

The PARU team ultimately made their way to the safety of a Meo site.

Pop Buell's assistant, Tongsar, was also at the site with refugees during the attack. While evading, he was missing for several days and Pop thought he had been killed.

Still searching for FAN deserters and survivors of the attack, enemy patrols expanded their area of control. Lipo persevered and evaded through the bush longer than his peers. When he was eventually discovered southwest of the original PARU group, Captain Elder was sent to rescue Lipo. While attempting to pinpoint and extract the popular captain, Dick's H-34 again came under light ground fire. Highly motivated to get out of Dodge, after observing several of Elder's aborted rescue attempts, Lipo finally scrambled to the top of a tree. Then, with the aid of his hand-held radio, he directed Elder toward him for a hoist extraction.¹⁶

After defeating the incompetent FAN, Vietnamese troops burned the defensive positions and two small villages at Chong

¹⁶ Lipo continued to serve as one of the most outstanding PARU participating in the Lao war. Surviving the entire war, he remained with the Thai police working as a police chief in a southern province.



Neutralist villages in the Moung Heim Valley destroyed during the
March enemy attack.
Jarina Collection.

Ha. They remained in the vicinity for a time until FAR resumed offensives to retake the area. A new site was eventually erected about three miles north at Moung Heim (LS-48A).¹⁷

MOUNG SOUI

The fate of Moung Soui's strategic location as a final defensive position and blocking cork to the Route-7/13 junction at Sala Phu Khoun and the lower Mekong Valley region leading to Vientiane was still in serious question. This was particularly the case following the loss of Na Khang, and most recently Moung Heim. To show the flag and display their capability, enemy units had already mortared the site on 4 March, and by Saturday had recaptured the northern FAN flank, opening a path to reinforce forward positions at Phou Khout. Subsequent probes and capture of a Vietnamese trooper revealed that an attack on Moung Soui was planned for about the same time Moung Heim fell. Any serious threat to Moung Soui was not politically acceptable to USG or RLG because of Thai artillery units east of the site. Whatever the POW's intention, his prediction proved inaccurate.

Western advisors, Souvanna Phouma, and his military leaders maintained that Moung Soui had to be preserved. Of course, the key to this government policy rested on dislocation of the remaining enemy forces lodged deep in the hills of Phou Khout. Therefore, coordinated with Colonel Sing's approved plans to

¹⁷Ken Conboy, 153.
Victor Anthony, 191 fn-78.
Bill Lair Interview.
Joe Flipse Email.
Dick Elder Interview at Author's Home.
Author Phone Call to Dick Elder 06/29/09.
Elder Phone Call to Author 07/06/66.
Blaine Jensen Letter.

employ U.S. napalm strikes, FAN units would assault the east slope.

The offensive against the long held enemy bastion began on the morning of the 14th, but the recent loss of Moung Heim required air diverts to that area.

Representing a key position, to retain a hold on the western Plain of Jars, North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao leaders could not afford to lose Phou Khout. Consequently, under the penalty of death, despite napalm attacks penetrating deep into their bunkers, enemy forces refused to retreat and continued to maintain defensive positions on the north slope. Subsequent attempts by FAN sapper units failed to clear them out.

Then, on 20 March, FAN units were pushed entirely off the mountain by elements of two reinforcing Pathet Lao battalions. After action reports the following day indicated effective strikes had taken place against enemy forces in the vicinity of the Phou Khout front lines, and supply depots further east. However, this failed to deter enemy advances. Almost simultaneously, Vietnamese units captured Phou Douk, a 4,500-foot mountain commanding ground only six miles southeast of Moung Soui, increased pressure on Phou Song (LS-156) located to the west on Route-7, and began casual shelling of Moung Soui.

In a telegram to Washington the day after withdrawing from Phou Khout, Ambassador Sullivan stressed the state of Neutralist demoralization that could affect the Moung Soui area. FAN was defeated at Phou Khout despite possessing superior troop numbers and holding the high ground. In addition to the military defeats, he equated much of the current problem to Kong Le's usurpation of power and failure to delegate command authority:

"Actions taken to improve morale and effectiveness of FAN included: General Staff awareness of the problem and deployment of additional FAR to the area to implement an improved defense

plan. In addition, Souvanna Phouma approved an overall air operation for the PDJ. He also summoned Kong Le to Vientiane for a pow wow; afterward he dispatched him to Moung Soui with orders to have his men diligently patrol north and south of FAN defensive positions. He requested reconnaissance by O-1E's north of Site-108 to ascertain the veracity of Meo reports that enemy units were infiltrating down the Nam Khan Valley toward the Moung Soui area.

During the Phou Khout operation, the sensitive subject of napalm usage throughout all areas of Laos surfaced again and was realistically sanctioned by State."

Basic guidelines were reissued reminding Sullivan of his authority to use the weapon in emergency situations where FAR offences or defenses would fail without it. With the Prime Minister's concurrence, napalm would be used only under FAC-directed missions against validated targets. There would be no public confirmation of its use.

"Enemy dry season advances against RLG forces since early February in northern MR-2 were expected, but probably not to the extent they achieved through March."

In another telegram to his Washington superiors, William Sullivan and his people were still confident that Vietnamese intentions did not include advances beyond a certain point in the country.

"There was little tangible evidence to support Souvanna Phouma's analysis that Hanoi leaders' current intent displayed by the Vietnamese latest aggressive military action was calculated to draw U.S. forces into the equation. If this was their motive, an easier option would be to capture Thakhet or another Mekong River town."

The enemy offensive in MR-2 was made possible as a result of previous long-range decisions and actions that included

expanding logistical operations. This was concluded from the diversion of supplies, vehicles, and troops into northern Laos.

USG air action during 1964-1965 prevented enemy forces from taking major effective action against government forces in upper MR-2. During this period, Meo and FAR forces advanced and increased their positions in enemy territory. Traditionally concerned regarding extraterritorial encroachment on their border regions, North Vietnamese leaders may have considered the combined ground and air movement north a serious threat to their homeland and to crucial areas in proximity to Sam Neua. With this in mind, communist laborers improved roads, increased supply movement, and resumed offensives against RLG positions during the dry season. Consequently, many friendly positions north of the PDJ held since the summer of 1964 had been lost.

Perhaps Vietnamese leaders desired to illustrate to the Prime Minister that North Vietnamese Army operations were capable of military success whenever they choose. Additionally, PL leaders likely pressured Vietnam to bolster the movement's military and political position. At any rate, further enemy military success could demoralize the FAR and FAN armies.

With the monsoon season approaching and extended logistic requirements looming on the horizon, Sullivan's Country Team [mostly military attaches] did not expect the Vietnamese to expand much beyond the PDJ vicinity or surrounding valleys and arteries. However, there was always the possibility of southern movement down the Nam Ou from the Dien Bien Phu garrison toward Luang Prabang. There was some speculation and hope that if RLG positions and soldiers survived the dry season, monsoon offensives would recover lost ground."

Along with morale, whatever FAN enthusiasm was evidenced at the beginning of the Phou Khout offensive waned with ensuing losses. Despite massive diversionary air strikes on the Ban

Liang military complex and Pathet Lao headquarters east of Khang Khay, which were calculated to disrupt further inroads toward Moung Soui, by 30 March, Infantry Battalion Eight troops near Phou Khout abandoned their forward positions. Displaying resolve to retreat, they walked back to Site-108, and demanded transportation to FAN headquarters at Vang Vieng. Seeing this, another unit also threatened to mutiny. It was evident that General Kong Le continued to lose control over his men and would eventually have to be replaced. Furthermore, the untimely withdrawal from Phou Khout severely affected Moung Soui's defense plans, and effectively disrupted a planned merger of FAN and FAR troops under a unified command, which was discussed in a high-level meeting in Vientiane on 1 April. Weakening his arguments for FAN remaining a separate entity, independent of FAR control, Kong Le admitted that some of his troops were likely communists and possessed little will to fight. This was really an oxymoron, for everyone knew that most FAN troops displayed reluctance to press a fight, and were willing to accept defeat. As to future enemy plans for Moung Soui and points south, only time would tell. ¹⁸

UDORN

Obviously, I missed all the "fun" occurring in Laos while completing the amoeba cure. However, since I planned on staying at least another year, just like the SARs requirements that

¹⁸ Tom Ahern, 190-192.

Telegram Ambassador Sullivan to State, 03/11/66, FRUS, #223.

Telegram 1006 Sullivan to State, 03/21/66.

Telegram State (Secretary Dean Rusk) to Lao Embassy, 03/23/66.

Telegram Sullivan to State, 03/23/66.

Telegram 1039 to State, 03/31/66.

CHECO.

Ken Conboy, 158.

Victor Anthony, 200-201.

peaked in mid-1965, I was certain there were more good times to experience ahead.

With constant watering and two "mango rains" (early precipitation counted on for fruit development) growth had begun in the trees and bushes I had planted in the yard.

Tuie brought a baby owl home from the market to complement our parrot. She had no idea how to care for the bird. I did not either, so I experimented and began feeding the bird bits of meat and tuna fish. It seemed to do well on the diet for six days, and then stopped eating. Apparently, it was probably too soon for this food and tended to constipate the animal and it died.

Through Charlie Carlson's auspices, I took Tuie to the Air Force base doctor for an examination. Although not a gynecologist, and citing the inability to pinpoint conception, he believed that we had miscalculated and the baby's arrival would not be until June. This was fine, but would push back our travel plans to the USA a month or so.

With so much time off, I dwelled on investments. Beside stocks, I was searching for more conservative items like fixed time deposits. ¹⁹ Some in the States reputedly earned over five percent interest. The Bangkok Bank of America offered seven percent per annum.

In addition, a year ago I had learned of an American who lived in Bangkok, Jim Moore, who invested in the newly organized Thai stock market. For large sums of money, which he invested in the Thai market, after a time he returned full principal plus twelve percent yearly interest to the person he dealt with. The arrangement appeared foolproof, for he provided collateral in the form of securities which the law firm of Tilke and Gibbons

¹⁹They were not called certificates of deposit or CDs yet.

located on Suriwongse Road held for the person involved with Moore. I had learned all this previously from "Big" Andy Anderson, a former Air America kicker and now a CASI copilot flying out of Vientiane. Thus far, he seemed completely satisfied and expected to receive his due. While closely watching Jim's operation, I had not previously taken action, as I was not sure that I would stay in Southeast Asia. Now that we planned to remain, I was not going to rush into anything, but planned to talk to Jim in detail about his operation the next time I was in Bangkok.

High earning commercial pilots, lawyers, and doctors, who have little time to study how to preserve and increase wealth, traditionally make poor investment decisions. When I told Dad about this opportunity with Jim Moore, he brought up the subject of Ponzi, a crooked individual who, using the rob Peter to pay Paul principle, rolled over new investors' capital to pay high interest to original investors. There was no actual investment mechanism involved. It was really just a scheme, and after a time, the man fled leaving everyone without either principal or interest. I understood that Dad was trying to protect my hard-earned` money; it was a good example and sound advice from a very conservative person.

Charlie Carlson came by the house to invite us to dinner. Through USAF contacts, he was always looking for opportunities to make money. His latest idea was to start up a bakery business to serve the requirements at the Air Force base. The concept was interesting, but I knew that investing in Thailand was difficult, and was aware of Thai law stipulated no Thai could be denied a job or replaced by foreign interests. Therefore, in my book this became a back-burner issue.

Charlie was also providing much of the fruit and vegetable requirements to the base. To circumvent Thai law, he provided

the money and Khun Yai purchased the items locally. She had people thoroughly clean them at the house in potassium permanganate solution, and then Charlie delivered the commodities. The money was rolling in.

Two directors of Asian American recently returned after a fact-finding trip to Kuala Lumpur. The news was both positive and negative. I learned that I had finally been elected a director in the parent company. Concrete Masonry had been specified as the sole block producer for a new government hospital soon to be erected. It was a three-year project requiring two and a half million blocks. Sales of blocks were slow. However, other contracts were firm, but no work commenced. Consequently, there was a large inventory of blocks in the front yard of the factory site and production had been curtailed to three days a week. No profit had yet been achieved, but with the inventory and projected sales for April, Coble was optimistic.²⁰

The New Era waste refining factory was finally operating after many delays. A contract had been signed with the Malaysian Army to supply waste oil on a reciprocal basis. They provided the oil. New Era refined and returned it. For this arrangement, the army supply unit received a twenty percent discount. Because of the prospects and high operating margins, Asian American had increased its participation in the company to forty-five percent.

Although we wanted the business to succeed, because of the long-time lag from start-up and production, problems occurred. Optimistic responses coming out of Kuala Lumpur caused some of us some of us to remain skeptical regarding Coble's methods and his assumed empire. Therefore, we had several meetings

²⁰ We later learned that many of the original blocks could not be sold because of exterior iron stains created during the manufacturing process.

previously to help iron out problems, particularly the Managing Director's casual approach to business and inadequate financial records. We demanded a change. SOPs were refined and we looked forward to clearer and better accounting procedures.

NEW AIRCRAFT

Largely due to the war in Southeast Asia and military contracts, the Sikorsky factory UH-34D production line was reopened in late 1965. Still bailed from the USMC for accountability, but shipped directly from the Sikorsky factory, by March we began receiving new aircraft. Starting with Bureau of Weapons model number 153125, the first was numbered Hotel-38. The newer helicopters came equipped with a VHF antenna fin mounted on top of the tail pylon.

After aircraft were lifted off the ship, it generally took a small maintenance crew of two to three men a week of preparation before a ship could be ferried. The most difficult part of the operation was stripping the rubberized cocoon preservative covering from the fuselage. None of the ships arrived equipped with TACAN equipment installed. The engines and transmissions were not new, but zero timed, and therefore did not require the break-in of a new component. Furthermore, there were no initial major maintenance problems encountered.

Toward the end of the second week, on the 12th and 13th, Chief Pilot Wayne Knight ferried recent UH-34D arrivals Hotels-38, 39, 40, and 41 from port Klong Toei to Don Muang Airport.

Wayne was usually aware that requests for additional helicopters had been made by deputy chief (DepChief) Bangkok, but he was never certain of a delivery date. Some of the factors leading to the dispatch of these latest helicopters were replacements, a continuing military SAR commitment, and increasing war requirements. Pilot hiring never seemed

coordinated with aircraft deliveries and the Madriver program was always understaffed with helicopter pilots. There may have been an attempt at coordination at some level, but this was never apparent to Udorn management. ²¹

Added projects and a lack of personnel continued to cause the workload at the Air America facility to escalate. In addition, the complex appeared in disarray without a chance of improvement in the future.

Bedrooms were located on the new Operations-Administration building's second floor. However, there were still difficulties with installation of showers and bathroom amenities. Lacking proper supervision, other problems caused by Thai workers were discovered when looking for phone jacks. They had been plastered over. Another problem was revealed when waste water coursed in front of the building. Investigation revealed workers had improperly connected the swimming pool and shower drain lines. ²²

AIR WAR

While I was still grounded, the heaviest American raid since bombing began in North Vietnam. Employing 200 sorties, it took place on an oil storage area sixty miles southeast of Dien Bien Phu, and a military staging area sixty miles northwest of Vinh.

Mid-March was not kind to the USAF, as four ships and some crews were lost in a three-day period. An AC-47 gunship disappeared in the Tiger Hound area at night. Exact locations of

²¹ Joseph E. Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*, UH-34D.
Gary Gentz Interview.
Knight Emails, 07/27/00, 07/29/00, 07/30/00.

²² Ben Moore March 1966 Monthly Report to Air America headquarters Taipei.

the downings were not known, but radar-controlled 37mm and 57mm gun sites were suspected in the Ban Ban and Tchepone areas. The AAA around Tchepone provided the most fire in the Panhandle. Searches provided no sighting of the aircraft. The next to fall was a Marine Corps F-4B southeast of Tchepone. The crew was rescued. Lastly, an O-1 and O-1B were hit by small arms fire in southern Laos. Both crashed without crew recoveries.²³

UPCOUNTRY

Lou McCasland worked at Nam Yu four days until Mike Jarina arrived to complement him on Tuesday the eighth. Flying Hotel-21, Mike was upcountry with Steve Nichols and Alex Nadalini, who was nearing his last area familiarizations before upgrading to Captain.

There were problems north of the Ban Houei Sai area. Helicopters had shuttled FAR troops to distant places, but they left their positions and walked back to the river town. While talking to the Customer regarding the situation, Mike inquired, *"Why don't you place the soldiers out step by step up the valley toward the objective? Why are you dropping them so far north?"*

"If we do that, they just walk back to Lima-25. We have to offload them on the other side of the enemy."

"You are counting on the enemy to hold the friendlies on their pads?"

"That is correct."

Then Jarina asked why female non-combatants were also taken to the site, and learned the government soldiers would not remain there without their women or families. Mike was curious

²³ John Bowman, 136.
Melvin Porter *CHECO*, 30, 32, 34.

about what transpired when enemy pressured the area and learned that at such times, they were returned to Ban Houie Sai.

One of the groups returned. Noticing a trooper without a weapon, the Customer asked about his missing rifle. The man said he had thrown it away to run faster. Mike wondered how we were going to win a war with antics such as this.

There had been a battle at an outlying site the preceding night, so Tony had Mike fly him there to investigate claims of many KIA. Tony was very angry after talking to the people and an officer, who insisted that thirty to forty friendlies had been killed, and the relatives wanted death benefits.

Tony, wise in the methods of corrupt Lao, knew that the officer and his men were not present when the battle occurred, but the man insisted that they were and demanded immediate payment. This episode, like the phantom payroll, helped Mike understand why Tony was so harsh in any negotiations involving money, and was often reviled by leaders.

Completing a full day, they flew missions from Xieng Lom and Ban Houei Sai for USAID. One flight took them to Ban Nou Kha Chok (LS-148), a site ten miles southwest of Ban Nakay and north of the Mekong, where the river turned north toward Pak Tha. Other flights were conducted throughout the Houa Kong area. RON took place at Site-118A.

On Wednesday, after one fuel load of working between Ban Houei Sai and Nam Yu, Nadalini was relieved. Mike then serviced Nam Bu (LS-125) north northeast of Nam Yu. Long trips were completed to the twelve-mile-long Phu Dong Nong mountain area, parallel to and eight miles north of the Mekong. The high ground overlooked the Nam Beng Valley and Bouam Lao to the northwest. Even further afield was Mok Plai, in the hills ten miles northwest of Nam Bac (LS-203).

After landing at Ban Houei Sai, AID personnel sent Mike to Ban Nam Kueung (LS-150) and then to Moung Mounge (LS-93) near the Burma border. Switching back to the meat of the program, he supplied Teams Nine and Five; then Team Eight, nine miles northwest of the Moung Sing Valley. Performing twenty-five landings during the day, he evacuated an entire village in the way of enemy advances. While doing this, he noticed people carrying two unusual looking Yao rifles. He asked if he could buy one and was turned down. That night at Nam Yu, a Case Officer handed a rifle to Mike, explaining that the village chief wanted him to have it and would not take any money for the weapon. Mike had misgivings about this, as he knew the rifle had been confiscated from the owner. ²⁴

One morning a former U.S Air Force pilot, new to both the Helio Courier and Nam Yu was disoriented. Hearing the lost man's entreaty for help, Mike told him to circle. After spotting the aircraft, Jarina directed the pilot to Site-118A. That night they ate in the new Lao mess hall. Stew meat and rice was served. Seeing the fare, the Helio pilot asked, "*What kind of meat is this?*"

Mike's Flight Mechanic replied, "*Don't ask.*"

The pilot wanted a reason, but other than a knowing look, received no answer. After the meal they walked out of the thatched shack. At the same time, three soldiers walked toward them holding a short bamboo stick with several rats hanging underneath. The Flight Mechanic looked at the fixed wing pilot and no more was said.

Because of the nature of the work in Military Region One, Customers shared air assets on the fringe areas of the

²⁴ This was the case when I received my personal weapon in the upper Moung Heim Valley.

provinces, particularly when operations were underway. Therefore, consistent with the operation in the Beng Valley, Mike returned to the Phu Dong Nong area on Thursday. Shuttling from Luang Prabang, he supported friendly guerrillas located in a valley three miles east of Dong Nong and on the western side of the same area closer to Bouam Lao. Then his work shifted to the western border in Sayaboury Province, after which he journeyed eighteen miles northwest of Luang Prabang before RON at the royal capital.

The final day in Military Region One before returning to Udorn was generally spent working at the same sites as on the 11th.

Mike was turned around the next day with ferry flights of Lao H-34 1335 and training in Hotel-27 that involved flights to Nong Khai (T-22). Matt Luca was his Flight Mechanic. The youngster's days were counting down before encountering the experience of a lifetime.

After a meritorious day off, Jarina's work area shifted to Thakhet (L-40) and Savannakhet (L-39) in Military Region Three, to accomplish and supplement USAF road watch team mission work. Flying with Flight Mechanic Dave McDonald in Hotel-15 for two days, they relieved teams with fresh troops and replenished supplies at a base camp nine miles northwest of Mugia Pass. Early resupply missions to this area of interest were performed single pilot and the troops were generally positioned on the high flat mesas abounding the area. The crew RON that night at Lima-39. Customer-directed missions were lengthy and landings minimal. He first relocated to Thakhet, then flew one roundtrip to the team's location, and returned to Savannakhet. Consequently, flight time was not impressive like that logged in MR-1.

The following day Mike deposited a split team forty-eight miles east-northeast on the flatlands, and eight miles north of Moung Phalane (L-61). Then he dropped the remaining men twenty-one miles southwest before returning forty miles to L-39. After a RON, he returned to Udorn late on the 18th.

On the 24th, Jarina was back at Thakhet flying two emergency missions for the group located north of Mugia Pass. He and Flight Mechanic Champanil in Hotel-22 performed two shuttles, resupplying the team and returned the sick, lame, and lazy. Only a scheduled day mission, the crew RTB Udorn well after dark. ²⁵

With Doctor Kao's blessing, I was released to resume line flying. Scheduling honored me with a new 153 model, UH-34D, Hotel-39, and I was sent to Luang Prabang for five days. Staying at the "Bungalow" Hotel, ²⁶ it was the first time I RON there for an extended period. With the projected work in the province, it looked like that would be the future policy. "Chris" Crisologo, one of my favorite Flight Mechanics, rounded out my cabin crew. Neighbor Gaza Eiler joined us to crew another ship.

Despite heavy seasonal smoke and haze, flight time was fairly good while supplying locations north and west of Luang Prabang. It was obvious that the government was interested in tightening the noose around Nam Bac, while improving and securing flanks along the Nam Ou.

We generally planned the last flight of the day to be on the deck just after official sunset. That way we maximized daily flight hours and logged some night "twilight" time, without risking potential after dark problems. Late one day, with

²⁵ Mike Jarina Interviews.

²⁶ This was known by several names over the years; at one time it was called the French or Phu Si Hotel.

daylight waning, I heard Captain Jack "Pogo" Hunter broadcasting in the blind, seeking assistance from all within radio range. Hired in November, it was the former Army warrant officer's first smoky season. Returning at altitude from a site well north of Luang Prabang, without forward visibility or ability to navigate using known checkpoints, he had become disoriented (lost). There was no pilot currently flying in Laos who had not experienced a similar situation at some time; empathizing with him, we all knew the psychological stress "Pogo" was under. There was no doubt that he was severely stressed, for he talked in stilted, panicky tones that were several octaves above his normal voice. We attempted to calm and provide him a steer, while he continued incessant chatter in his gravelly, squeaky voice. It was easily identifiable, and like Tony Byrne's tone of voice, so unique to our program. The entire scenario would have been especially humorous had not the implications of searching for a downed helicopter and pilot at that time of day and in such poor conditions been so serious.

Finally, looking straight down, Pogo intersected and spied the brown water of the Mekong River, a color that contrasted with the green jungle. He announced his find with extraordinary glee and enthusiasm. Naturally, we all shared his joy and were relieved of further responsibility in helping to search for him. Apparently, he had been on the correct course from the time he left the northern landing zone. The episode was all part of a new Captain's learning experience and would provide many laughs at the Club bar.

DOWN IN LAOS

Working out of Luang Prabang often involved missions to the west out of Xieng Lom. Turned up on the deck just after refueling, and waiting for loading instructions at Site 69A, I

heard Captain Sam Jordan radio a quick, clipped Mayday. Then there was an eerie silence. Other than reporting an engine failure, I had no clue where Sam was actually located, and he failed to answer my query. A moment of panic swept over me. Normally, only one aircraft worked Site-69. Hence, the degree of difficulty of a SAR in that region flashed through my mind. I was very worried, for I thought he might be down west of the river in high, rough hills, which harbored unfriendly individuals. I also believed I might have a difficult time locating Sam in such heavy smoke and haze. This and the time element could prove critical, especially if Jordan or his Flight Mechanic were injured.

After launching, I heard a Boun Oum Airways (BOA) pilot en route from the Ban Houei Sai area to Udorn. All the Thai pilots spoke fluent English, and I casually knew most of them. After explaining the situation to him and asking him to assist me in a search, he politely refused, claiming a low fuel state. This may have indeed been the case, but as a former Marine aviator, I could not fathom another pilot refusing to help another during an emergency situation.

I was really angry and was not compassionate later when the fat Thai was declared missing on 17 April, while conducting a MR-2 mission involving ammunition drops northeast of Ban Song (LS-29). Some larger stiff wing pilots occasionally crashed on mountain tops in marginal VFR conditions, but in this case, it was assumed the plane was struck by ground fire. A month-long search failed to uncover the plane or its Thai crew.²⁷

I climbed to altitude and headed upriver for about fifteen minutes when I heard Sam radio. He had performed a successful

²⁷ Ken Conboy, 149 fn 20.

autorotation into a sizeable rice paddy on the east bank, about halfway between the bend in the river north of Xieng Lom and the town of Pak Tha, where the Nam Tha entered the Mekong. After a few minutes, I landed next to the machine. Leaving his Flight Mechanic to guard the aircraft in the apparently friendly area, Jordan entered my left cockpit window.

I was quite relieved over the relatively innocuous SAR and wished they had all been as easy. However, I was not ready for what happened next. Instead of assuming a happy and glad-handing attitude like most individuals would have exhibited over my timely performance, Sam was authoritative, abrupt, and deadly serious. He **ordered** me to fly to Ban Houei Sai to obtain security troops and return them to the site to protect the helicopter. Normally taciturn, never an extravert, his aggressive demeanor concerned me. Passing it off as shock I complied, but wished he had asked me in a nicer way.

While I continued to keep the rotors turning, he gathered a handful of Lao troops and we returned to his H-34. We talked very little. He still seemed pensive, preoccupied, and totally absorbed in his own thoughts. While FAR troops deployed around the area, Sam confessed that he possibly might have run out of fuel. The ship he was flying was one of the earlier production models equipped with manual fuel boost pump switches. As the engine consumed fuel from the forward tank, it was imperative that the pilot activate switches to transfer fuel forward from the center and aft tanks. Failure to perform this operation would eventually result in an empty forward fuel cell, boost pump cavitation, and subsequent fuel exhaustion.

While I waited, he entered his ship's cockpit. Within a short time, he confirmed that what he deduced had actually occurred. After transferring fuel to the forward tank, the engine started with a roar and he was back in business. It must

have been an embarrassing situation for him. He never thanked me for my assistance. I was relieved and happy to go back to work, content with the knowledge that as the only aircraft available that day to assist a fellow airman, given different conditions, the end result might not have been too pleasant.

Since it was Sam's blunder, I never mentioned the incident to anyone and he never admitted his error to the CPH. Instead, he opted for Jim Rhyne's high altitude fixed wing Volpar program when it became viable in 1967. ²⁸ ²⁹

After flying a cursory two and a half hours on the 22nd, I was relieved and caught a ride on Porter 60-Romeo to Vientiane. From there a C-123 driver flying 851 took me the rest of the way to Udorn. Unlike the earlier days, there was considerable air traffic between most sites, and a lack of connections was rare.

With one day off, I managed to cash a check at the Siam City Bank. Thursday morning, I left hearth and home for Sam Tong on Helio Courier XW-PCA. Arriving late, I relieved Tom Hoppe, who had been flying Hotel Foxtrot around Phou Vieng (LS-06), Bouam Long (LS-88), and areas north of Route-7 and west of Phu Fa Noi (LS-102). I only logged two hours and twenty minutes.

After a night in the hostel, following a satisfying breakfast and fortified with a sack of sandwiches, I departed for Bouam Long, a site of ever-increasing importance since the losses of Na Khang and, most recently, Mounng Heim. Lima Site-88 had long been significant as a staging area for observation and forays to LOCs on the northern Plain of Jars. Unlike most other

²⁸ On 04/09/09, after not seeing him for thirty-five years, I learned from Sam Jordan at an Agency-sponsored SAR symposium at the University of Texas at Richardson that he had been suffering from influenza on the day of this incident. I was not aware of this at the time, and Sam's admission went a long way toward explaining his dour and negative attitude that day.

²⁹ EWKnight Email, 07/30/00.

major sites in upper Military Region Two, the sizeable Meo redoubt had never been captured by enemy forces. Together with Phou Vieng, it represented the last defensive position of any consequence leading to the northern Plain of Jars and Moungr Soui.

The Bouam Long complex was lodged at the 5,000-foot level on the northern portion of the Phou Kheo, Phou San and Phou Lat Tai massifs. The mountain ranges stretched eighteen miles from the corridor leading east to the Ban Ban Valley close to the western Moungr Kheung area. Almost equally long as wide, the mountains flowed north and south, the greatest point starting at the Nam Khao (White River), a tributary dumping its contents into the Nam Khan at Sop Khao (the Four Rivers checkpoint). The southern portion of the mountain ranges stopped just short of the Nong Pet road junction, where Route-7 and Route-71 split, and Route-7 turned south while Route-71 continued westbound. All were controlled by the enemy.

I was sent southwest into foothills near Ban Lo on the western mountain range of Phou Lat Tai. Located only four miles from Route-71, the location overlooked part of that segment, particularly a truck turn-around. Therefore, it was chosen as a forward listening post and a guerrilla harassment launching site. Undeveloped, the terrain was tricky and a bit dangerous to work, for there was nothing there at the time except high grass growing from rocky ledges where vicious, swirling winds whistled through the terrain. At first, temporary landing sites were cut in defilade on ledges parallel to higher ridges. Later, when more developed and "secure," circular pads were hacked out of small knolls which could be approached from several directions.

BOOM

On the 26th, after working all morning out of Sam Tong, I was assigned to Luang Prabang. It was not unusual to reposition to a major site for the following day's work, and from my last RON at Lima-54, it seemed that more than normal emphasis was being afforded the area. The royal capitol was about sixty miles northwest of Site-20, less than an hour flight on a good day without headwinds or a heavy load. Since the en route ground track was rough and little patrolled by FAR, and I was generally unfamiliar with the current enemy situation, I chose to fly at my thumb rule altitude of 1,500 feet above terrain. To ensure this, I adjusted the knob on the lower right-hand corner of the radar altimeter to that setting. Then, should terrain increase, a red light would illuminate alerting me to higher terrain.

I was a little more than halfway to my destination when a loud explosion occurred below in the cabin section. Simultaneously, "Blackie" Mondello yelled something over the intercommunications system (ICS) that sounded like "*Ground fire!*" The noise had already prompted me to begin a high rate of climb to evade additional ground fire. However, since I was in the vicinity of LS-04, Kiou Kacham, on Route-13, reputedly a government position, I was puzzled. I asked "Blackie" to check and obtain additional information.

Almost immediately his next excited transmission was "*Fire!*" Dropping the collective, I dove for the deck at high speed. I had never landed at Site-04 or on the dirt road before, but that was secondary to landing ASAP before the flying bomb I was piloting exploded. I never landed.

After Mondello's initial panic call, a symptom common with many Filipino Flight Mechanics when anything occurred out of the ordinary, "Blackie" discovered the cause of all the excitement.³⁰

The majority of the H-34 electronic equipment was located on shelves in a compartment just aft of the main cabin section. Like all the gear in that area, the brains for the F/M radio transceiver were mounted on heavy springs to absorb and minimize vibrations. Two cylindrical aluminum covered dynamotor units were incorporated into the unit. For some reason, probably overheating, they had exploded, hurling and scattering shards of aluminum throughout the cargo hold. Seeing shrapnel on the plywood flooring, "Blackie's" first assumption was that we had been hit by small arms fire and incurred substantial battle damage. He reacted vocally. Then, smelling smoke, reversing his assessment, he went into overdrive that resulted in my dive for the deck.

While searching my memory banks for an explanation for the incident, I continued flight toward Luang Prabang. Aware that "Murphy" always lurked around the corner, particularly after an incident like this one, I made a radio call in the blind hoping to let someone know of my plight. Aircraft were few, and at my altitude radio reception was poor in the area. After several unanswered calls, Captain Herb Baker, working at Luang Prabang, came over the radio. I managed only a few words. "*Herb, I am experiencing...*" Then silence prevailed. Hotel-Foxtrot's radios went silent, and all electrical instrument needles on the cockpit console spun south, signifying a complete electrical failure. Great! I was still twenty minutes south of LP. Now, if I had further problems such as an engine failure, I was on my

³⁰The tendency to panic during anything out of the ordinary, plus language difficulty, were some of the reasons we preferred to fly with American Flight Mechanics.

own over unfamiliar and possibly enemy territory. Fortunately, the remainder of the flight continued without further incident. However, until landing, I was considerably stressed by the knowledge that I would not be able to contact anyone should further problems develop.

Later, after extensive investigation, we discovered that a faulty voltage regulator had permitted a massive overload to the electrical system that manifested in an explosion and subsequent electrical failure. There were two screw type settings on the device, one for cold weather, the other for hot season conditions. Apparently, maintenance had failed to make the appropriate adjustment at the proper time.

We were officially grounded (AGP) until a new voltage regulator arrived later in the day, properly installed, and tuned for the season.

I was unhappy with Baker for not investigating my problem. Of course, because of the abbreviated radio call before complete electrical failure, he really did not know my problem or my location. However, at the very least, he could have initiated a radio search. But Herb would always be Herb, and we could never change that.

On Sunday, after working most of the day out of Luang Prabang, I returned to Sam Tong to RON in preparation for the next day. After working most of the day, I was relieved and caught a ride south with the PIC of Hotel-12.

Tuie's size indicated to me that her birthing time was fast approaching, and another medical checkup in Bangkok was warranted to ascertain if the Air Force Doctor's latest prediction of June was valid and reliable. In addition, I required another amoeba check to ascertain if I was negative or still positive. Therefore, Wayne and I jointly planned to

organize an early STO in April. Flight time upcountry would be arranged and scheduled to reflect this.

On the final day of March I returned to Sam Tong in Hotel-35 and worked until almost dark. Eight hours was the norm during my four days there. Since the hostel was erected, flying was more casual. No longer did we preload our helicopters or scramble to begin flying early like in former days. Instead, we enjoyed a casual breakfast and waited until the Customer arrived with assignments. A few pilots like Chuck Eckerle still complained about current living conditions, and had to be gently reminded about the poor accommodations and food we had previously endured. Tending to curtail high time was the fact that more helicopters and planes were in the system, and job requirements were largely completed for USAID. Of course, this depended largely on the current refugee situation.

Personnel wise, Long Tieng had changed a great deal over the past year. After almost four years in the field at Long Tieng as Vang Pao's chief Western advisor and confident, Vint Lawrence was preparing to leave for America. He had suffered bouts of hepatitis and decided that it was time for an extended home leave, and to let a new team take over. ¹ Vang Pao was due back soon from his Na Khang battle injuries that had required a lengthy sojourn to Hawaii for follow-up treatment. Original Customers had rolled over. Banished from The Alternate, Tony Poe was gone, now heading up the Nam Yu operation. Following the Bouam Lao incident, Terry Burke had moved on. Customers Mike Lynch, Jerry Daniels (Hog), and Frank Odom (Bag), and others had

¹ After due deliberation and advice while in America, Vint Lawrence never returned to Laos.

attempted and would continue attempting to assume the mantle advising Meo forces in Military Region Two.

While working out of Bouam Long (LS-88) areas I learned that General Vang Pao's troops still probed the Phu Cum (LS-50) and Moung Son (LS-59) areas north of Moung Heim (LS-48A). They were preparing to recapture or secure the sites to use as forward springboards in recovering lost territory when seasonal rains began in earnest. There were not many large friendly sites remaining in upper Military Region Two, but the leapfrog advantage we enjoyed over road-bound enemy forces allowed us to work well to the north reinforcing Nhot Phat (LS-179) between the Phu Pha Thi (LS-85)-Houei Ma (LS-107) area and Houa Moung (LS-58).

On Sunday, I was relieved and RTB Udorn on Hotel-22.

INCIDENTALS

Tuie had received several years of basic British English education at Bangkok's Saint Joseph School, staffed mainly by Australian nuns. However, in a country where Thai was the predominant tonal language, she had not frequently spoken English, and never with an American inflection. Therefore, in preparation for our stateside sojourn I recommended she attend the American University Association (AUA) course conducted at the corner USIS building across the street from the city zoo and park. The spoken English classes conducted by Mrs. Perkins, wife of a missionary and Ms. Pernou, stressed simple English phrases like Lazy Lady, The Quick Fox, and essential phonetics. After completion, I believed that she had gained confidence and spoke English with considerably more ease. In addition, I attempted to correct what errors I could without alienating her. Because another more advanced course did not begin for a time, I obtained a second book to work on in our spare time

Adhering to our usual travel plans, we purchased tickets and boarded the night train to Bangkok for scheduled time off (STO). After making an appointment at the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital, I walked along the hot sidewalk of Patpong Road to the Bangkok Christian Hospital. The saline enema wash to test for amoebas was as nasty as I recalled, and left me with loose bowels for two days. Despite taking the lengthy "cure," the test revealed evidence of the dormant cyst type still in my body. Apparently, this version of the one celled animal was particularly difficult to eradicate. Lodged deep in the intestinal wall, it could develop at any time to re-infect its host. Concerned, I discovered that there was a tropical school of medicine in London, England, where I could get an expert medical examination and second opinion on our trip home. I was also considering medical facilities in the States, if I could find one that dealt with such diseases.

I went to Cars International, the automotive division of Tourist International, Ltd., located on Bangkapi to talk with the representative there regarding the Ford Mustang price Dad had sent me. When I informed him of Day's quoted price, he could not understand how the dealer could match his organization's price. He wondered if the freight cost, dealer's preparation charge, and excise taxes were factored into the final cost. It was obvious that more work needed to be done before a final decision was made on where to purchase the machine.

Doctor Springle examined Tuie and indicated that he expected the baby to arrive soon. Because of Tuie's large size, I was not totally surprised.² However, the doctor did put us in a bit of a quandary when he requested that she remain in Bangkok

² I joked that she needed a four wheeled market basket to place under her belly.

until her birthing time. Not having made arrangements to stay with anyone, she was not prepared for that news and wanted to return to Udorn. Also, we had not brought any baby clothes or other equipment with us.

During the examination we learned that Tuie's teeth were in very poor shape. While I was on leave over Christmas, she had one tooth extracted by a Chinese dentist, who relied on pulling rather than filling and saving teeth. I was surprised, for she had supposedly been taking Hudson mail order vitamins fortified with calcium, and attempting to drink powdered milk. As to her actual intake, I had no idea.

The American dentist at the hospital confirmed that she had four deep molar cavities. However, he claimed to be very busy, and her state of pregnancy precluded any immediate or extensive work until after the birth. In the meantime, he would attempt to preserve and save what teeth he could, and an appointment was made for the 13th.

I made contact with Jim Moore to discuss the financial arrangement he had with Big Andy, and what he would propose for me. On Sunday, Jim took me to a Chinese restaurant for a Dim Sum lunch. I had never been to such a place before, which traditionally only proffered the difficult-to-make and time-consuming Oriental cuisine on weekends. Wicker baskets containing four steamed dough dumplings filled with various meats, seafood, and other delicacies were offered by a waitress wheeling a cart. Each basket of four goodies held different items, and the price of the meal was determined by the number of baskets stacked on the table.

Moore's program involved collateralized loans. On the surface it appeared a fairly safe investment. A member of the new Bangkok stock exchange, Jim held listed shares in large conservative Thai companies that steadily advanced in price. If

I chose to invest, he would tender a contract or produce a demand note backed by a certain number of Siam Fiber shares, a cement company introduced by the Thai king eighty years ago. The securities would then be placed in a trust account with Tilke and Gibbons, an old law firm established thirty years before, and located in the Bank of America building on Suriwongse Road. Because of construction in the city, there was currently a good demand for cement.

During the course of our conversation, which included aspirations and investment subjects, I learned that the large man, a former World War Two and civilian airplane pilot, had lived in Beirut, Lebanon, and the Far East since the end of the war. While in Beirut, he invested in a hotel project and had to leave when the deal went sour and he felt his life was in danger.

Of course, I knew that Jim was a speculator, but he was recommended by persons who had known him for years. It appeared that he was a stable person and had done well over time. He was married to a Chinese lady, Ann, and had children. Moreover, he had won me over and I afforded him a modicum of trust and respect.

To be safe, I decided to hedge my bets. While still trying to decide about effecting the transaction, I journeyed to the Lyman father and son-owned firm of Tilke and Gibbons on a two-fold mission. I discovered that indeed everything Jim related to me regarding the structure of his investment proposal was true. Therefore, I considered the note and proposal much more interesting from an investment viewpoint. It would be relatively secure, certainly more than the unsecured note for 10,000 dollars that I had received from Don Valentine for the Sunray Land Corporation venture in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. That

one was based more on blind faith and potential that the fledgling project would succeed. Still, I opted to wait.

The second part of my trip to the attorney's office related to current problems with our landlady, Longmoun Godnoma. The previous month, she had approached me with an overdue electric bill, one for which I had already provided money. At first, before separate electric meters were installed on each house, we had worked off one central meter. However, despite her claims that we equally shared expenses, all of us in the compound suspected that she never paid a cent. Now, because of her "Thai Disease," an addictive gambling habit, she had neglected to pay the bill. In addition, the woman had the gall to demand more rent and wanted me to sign over my furniture to her.

In the very beginning, unaware of how dishonest and conniving she was, we had trusted the woman and failed to obtain receipts for rent and utility payments. Fortunately, despite attempts to charm us, equating her to being "crazy like a fox," after a few shady deals, I became a little skeptical of anything she said. Therefore, instead of cash, I wrote at least five checks with her name on them. Two more were written to Tom Moher for furniture, cabinets, and other house improvements he had made. The Thai lawyer that I talked to indicated a lack of receipts might present problems should the matter be referred to a court, but proof of payment to her in the form of cancelled checks would be helpful. It was sound advice and I resolved to ask Dad to forward to me all cancelled checks related to the situation.³

While still in Bangkok, we began preliminary work to obtain a Thai passport for our projected trip to the States. As with

³ By month's end he found and forwarded to me four cancelled checks written to Longmoun Godnoma and one to Tom Moher.

most official paperwork in Thailand, the process was considerably involved. It required items we did not have in hand: mainly, a marriage certificate, birth certificate, a family residence paper, and possibly a Criminal Investigation Division (CID) clearance. As to the latter, I had heard horror stories regarding delays and enormous bribes required by Thai officials from girls married to foreigners, while processing and obtaining the required documentation. The other items were deemed easier. I had the original marriage certificates. Khun Tha could probably provide the birth certificate, and a family paper. On receipt of the Thai passport, all these could be later translated and delivered to the U.S. Consul at the Embassy on Wireless Road to obtain an American tourist visa. The baby's birth also needed to be registered for American citizenship, and because Tuie would travel on a Thai passport, a separate U.S. passport for him was required for travel.

Because of the red tape problems facing us, on the advice of Khun Tha, we visited the Prasat Sukunthamun family in Thonburi. I was not aware of the exact relationship between the two families, but there was a lot I still did not know about Thai people and the overall culture. The upshot of this visit resulted in an invitation that specified if she chose, she could remain with Judge Prasat's family until time for the birth. The son, a doctor, was still interning at Sirilart Hospital and he maintained a residence with an extra room directly across the street from the retired judge. In addition, the judge indicated that at the appropriate time, he would ease the way through CID or police clearances if required. Considering this a potential obstacle, this information was an enormous relief.

Judge Prasat was an intensely interesting and refreshing study. Although serving as the Chief Justice in the Thai Supreme Court System for many years, he did not project an opulent style



Retired Judge Prasat Sukunthamun and family in front of their modest home. Left to right: Tuie, Lek, wife Lamoun, Nim holding our son Ricky. The oldest daughter is not present.

Author Collection circa 1967.

of living one might expect of a government official holding such an exalted position. His green, wooden house was quite modest. The kindly man was soft spoken, modest, and friendly without the creature comforts normally attributable to status and great wealth. The judge had a reputation of being fair and impartial in a country that thrived on bribes and influence peddling. Granted, he owned land which contained another house for the oldest of his three girls. As part of his retirement perks, he was afforded the use of a Mercedes Benz and driver when requested.

After cashing a check and obtaining 250 dollars from the authorized money changer, Vanida, I returned to Udorn without Tuie. Despite Springle's recommendation to remain in Bangkok, my strong-willed wife intended to follow me home after the dental appointment. I caught a ride in a taxi with Charlie Weitz and a couple of other pilots who had completed their STO. Because of the February and March grounding for the "cure" and earlier leave, I was somewhat behind other pilots' total yearly time and anxious to get back on the flight schedule to attain the monthly prescribed flight time.

There was a very heavy storm in town on Tuesday. The "Mango Rain" was welcome, for it washed away some of the red laterite dirt accumulated on the tin roofs and roads. It additionally cleared the atmosphere, settled the dust, and provided temporary cooling relief.

The next day I was scheduled for night training in Hotel-21. Therefore, in the morning, I pedaled the cycle downtown to the USIS building to read the Wall Street Journal and peruse other investment material. I noted Walt Disney, the stock Tony

was so high on had increased earnings and a price earnings (PE) ratio of ten. Based on this, I wrote home for more information. ⁴

I forgot that 13 April was the beginning of Maha Songkran, the annual three-day water festival marking the end of the Buddhist New Year, and the beginning of a new one. The sprinkling of water on individuals was a time revered method of purging bad luck among friends, but some people, mainly children, often took the event to extremes, throwing large amounts of water to soak an individual. Naturally, while pedaling home through the town gauntlet, I did not escape a through drenching. While riding on a slow and not too stable vehicle, such action could be dangerous in traffic, but I tried to understand the tradition attributed to the Thai culture.

LOSS OF A FRIEND

Only the dead have seen the end of war.

Plato

On the ninth, while I was still in Bangkok, Romeo B. "Chris" Crisologo was killed in the crash of Hotel-14. PIC Ray Semora, new pilot John Ford (DOH 12/02/66), and Flight Mechanic Crisologo had been supplying in the Bouam Long-Ban Pak Lo (UH6641) area, where I had recently broken ground in the new work area. For much of the day Ford had been flying from the right seat. Ray was not happy with his performance, for he believed that he used too much power during takeoff on high pads. After loading a 75mm pack howitzer, twenty-four rounds,

⁴ Unfortunately, wanting to first peruse Standard and Poor reports, I dragged my feet and never purchased the security which rose dramatically in price and split many times in the future.

and three passengers at the T-11 pad for delivery to another landing zone, Ray indicated that he was going to show Ford how to conduct a proper takeoff. He attempted a lift to a hover, but, because of the overloaded condition, the RPM began to slowly bleed off. Ford expected him to land, offload items, and attempt another departure. Instead, he rotated the nose forward intending to dive off the pad, trading altitude for flying speed. Ray miscalculated. Too heavy for conditions, the aircraft plunged downward, slicing through trees close to the mountain. Because of belly fuselage damage and fuel cell rupture incurred from tree lacerations, Hotel-14 was burning at impact. Seeing the fire, the cockpit crew and the passengers evacuated before the aircraft exploded. However, "Chris" never got out. The sudden stoppage had caused pieces of the unsecured gun to shift forward crushing and killing him.

The Company norm after a fatality required an investigation. The investigation board's report cited loss of RPM for the accident. Although Ray Semora had exceeded the capabilities of the helicopter, nowhere was definitive pilot error specified. It was an error of both commission and omission. In a whitewash, Semora was retained in our program. Since the death was totally unnecessary, I never forgave Semora for killing Crisologo, and refused to have anything to do with him again. This was easy, for the man was a gross introvert. When appearing in the Club bar, he sat tucked in the far corner of the bar quietly drinking his beer.

Since Crisologo had arrived to crew H-34s, it seemed Air America Captains were always trying to kill him. He had been with Mike Marshall in 1964 when Mike became disoriented in weather and was forced to land and overnight in no-man's land north of Na Khang. Ultimately wounded in the shoulder and lung

during the SAR attempt, Crisologo survived to fly again. ⁵ Now a fellow pilot had killed a person I considered one of the ablest and best Flight Mechanics in our inventory. After the incident, I could imagine the remaining Filipino Flight Mechanics thought long and hard about continuing to fly upcountry. However, they were generally spooked during the best of times, and we lost a few to ground duties, if only temporarily. ^{6 7}

⁵For a detailed account of this incident refer to Book-5.

⁶ John Ford: Phil Goddard asked me to help him out in the office, but I preferred the lure of money, challenge, and the excitement of a line pilot. John Ford did not remain in the CPH position long, as Paul Velte required him as an assistant in Washington, D.C.

We did not know Ford's true roots for some time. According to Phil Goddard, whose political tentacles were quite lengthy, John arrived at Udorn as an Agency employee. John mentioned to me in the bar that he had previously owned a helicopter company in the States, but it had failed. However, that might have merely been a cover story.

Wayne and John spent a few STOs in Pattaya building a Trimaran. They enjoyed sailing it in the Siam Gulf. Knight had a habit of calling males by their initials. Unaware of John's code name, he called him J.D. Years later, while visiting Goddard in Barbados, John asked Phil how Wayne possibly knew about his Agency relationship.

When John worked out of the U.S Embassy in Mexico City in the late 1970's, he hired some former Air America helicopter pilots for short term contract drug interdiction work in the country. Recently returned from Iran and bored, I sent him an application via the U.S Embassy, but never received a reply.

Our relationship came full circle when Ford contacted me for a job when I was Chief Pilot of a small FAA 135 operation in Metairie, Louisiana. Since our operations extended to Texas and I preferred to hire former Air America pilots, who I knew were reliable and had high bona fide flight time, I hired John. When he indicated that he could only work for a specified time. I did not broach the subject, but assumed he was still active with the Agency and somewhere between assignments.

⁷Segment References:

William Leary April 1966 Notes.

Joe Leeker The Aircraft of Air America, Sikorsky UH-34D Hotel-14 (2nd Series), 03/04/13.

Author's conversation with former line Captain and CPH John Ford at the Joint Agency-university SAR Symposium at UTD 04/17/09. Ford considered Semora totally at fault for the accident and Crisologo's death. John passed from cancer shortly after this conversation.

Mike Jarina Interview; EW Knight Email, 06/14/00.

HORN LOCKING PIN

At the President and Joint Chiefs' of Staff choosing, one of the U.S. Navy's missions involved sailing to and delivering Fleet Marine Corps troops and equipment to various hot spots in the world. Since this policy was conducted on small converted World War Two Jeep carriers, Sikorsky engineers were required to design the large HUS-1 (UH-34) for maximum compactness and storage on both flight and hangar decks. This problem was solved by incorporating a means to fold the tail pylon and main rotor blades. Although time-consuming and laborious in manpower, it allowed aircraft to be "stacked" on the fantail or "down below" on the hangar deck. ⁸

Eventually, as with most mechanical devices used continuously, failure occurs, either in the form of metal fatigue, corrosion, worker inexperience or abuse, or inspection neglect or repair. In the case of the UH-34D, cursed with thousands of moving parts, to minimize crashes and crew injuries, scheduled maintenance inspections and overhauls were conducted at known hour levels, as were engine and other large component changes. These were predicated on previously collated statistics regarding known failures and other service-related safety requirements.

On our crew level, when an aircraft was released for flight, the Flight Mechanic and then the Captain conducted a preflight of visible external items prior to launch. This

⁸The HSS-1, originally manufactured by Sikorsky for the U.S. Navy in the 1950s, was soon integrated into Marine Corps aviation as a temporary utility aircraft (HUS-1) pending development of a larger helicopter. So revered and useful, the UH-34D remained in the military inventory until retirement in 1968. Air America continued to operate the model until Udorn close of business (COB) on 30 June 1974.

included inspecting the ship's overall condition: fluid leaks, cracks, slippage marks on threaded nuts and bolts, color coded oil lines, safety wiring, cotter pins, "Zeus" key fasteners, and other visible items. Done religiously and thoroughly, a complete pre-flight could normally preclude future problems. For example, when maintenance work was hastily performed overnight by flashlight in the poorly lighted hangar, potential problems were overlooked. Over the course of time, while conducting pre-flights in morning sunlight, on two separate occasions I discovered a cracked transmission mount, and battle damage on the leading edge of a main rotor blade. Despite the inspections, I always maintained that it was not the obvious external items, but those secreted among internal parts that I could not see that would kill me. I applied this theory not only to helicopter components, but also to emergency conditions throughout my flying career. Therefore, I was always asking probing questions, which sometimes incurred the ire of mechanics and supervisors. My reasons were predicated on a constant learning process about the machine I was flying and to determine how knowledgeable the individual was in relation to my query.

The main rotor head on the H-34 comprised a myriad of moving and stationary parts, many hidden from view. In a "works well, lasts a long time, do not mess with it" philosophy, the component was never completely torn down except perhaps during an extensive major overhaul. However, some problems had been discovered at heavy maintenance bases with corrosion forming inside the internal blade cuffs during shipboard duty. Also, as the machines were normally staged near oceans at U.S. east and west coast bases, damage from salt air could be anticipated. Moreover, many H-34s had been in service since the early fifties.

One day in 1966, I strolled into Wayne's office expecting stimulating conversation and observed a horn locking mechanism on his desk. The CPH allowed that Jack Forney's people had recently discovered a sheared pin within the unit. Such a revelation was not only scary to a lowly line pilot, but potentially fatal in flight. The disclosure was also disconcerting to us pilots, who had endured the serious engine problems early the previous year and the death of two of our own. Accomplishing our difficult job and expecting longevity warranted complete trust in our machines--now what...?

The horn locking pin mechanism was incorporated in the rotor head and blade system. When manually backed, out blade folding could be accomplished. Performing this operation required both experience and competence. Therefore, in contrast to U.S. Navy shipboard standard operating procedures (SOPs), during Forney's tenure, Air America maintenance personnel rarely folded blades, preferring instead to remove two or more blades when necessary to obtain maximum hangar space.

The four horn locking pins incorporated in the main rotor head system were generally a concern to persons who gave thought to the severe consequences of a failure. Realistically, without being able to see or fully understand the inner working of the mechanism, during pre-flight the line Flight Mechanics and pilots merely checked the painted open-faced portion's mark for slippage, and a safety wire for correct installation to the pitch change horn and its condition.

Pin assemblies in the main rotor head were housed within sleeves to form subassemblies. These in turn were screwed or otherwise imbedded into the rotor head blade grips (top of the pitch change horn assembly in the graphic). The pin employed

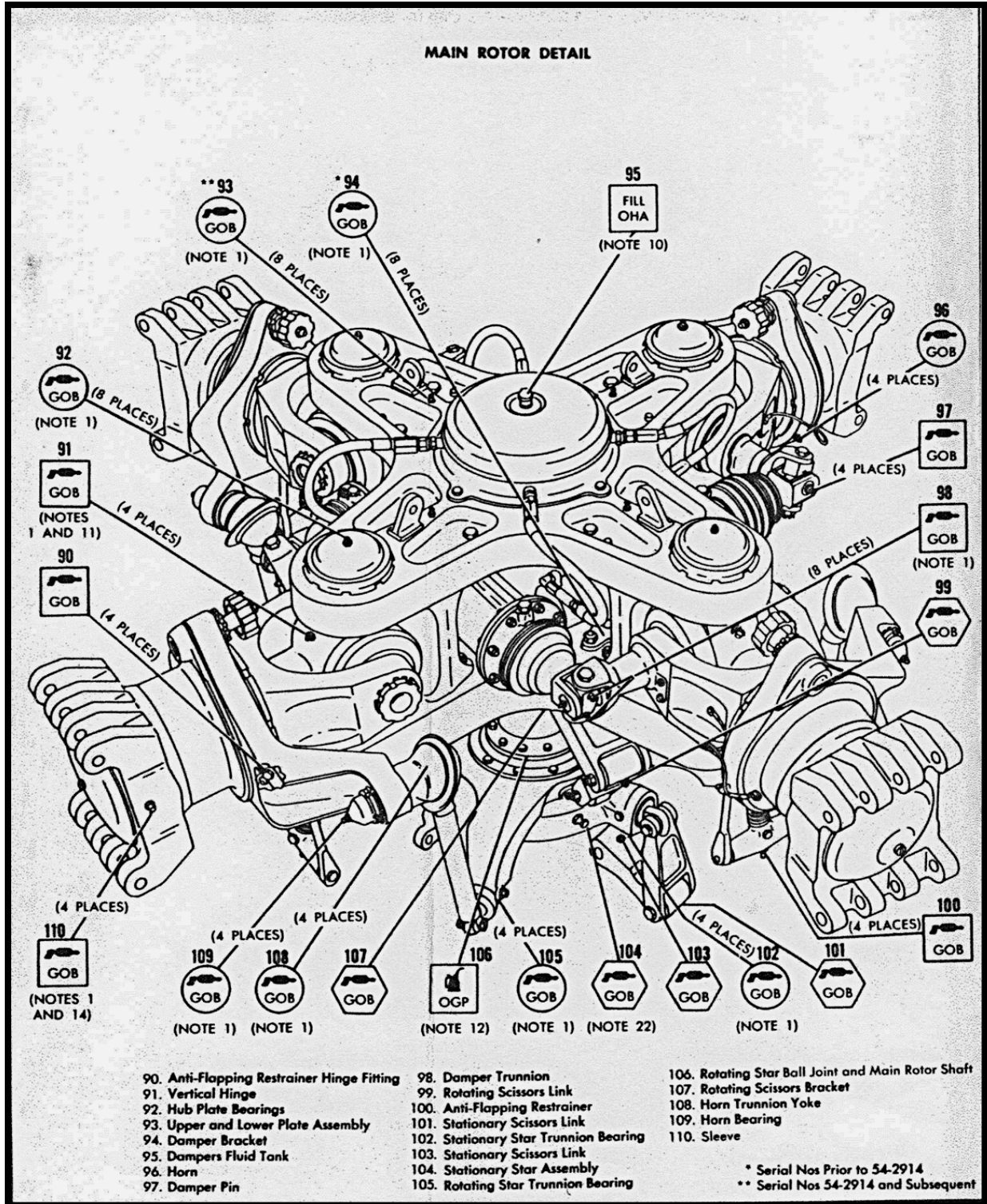
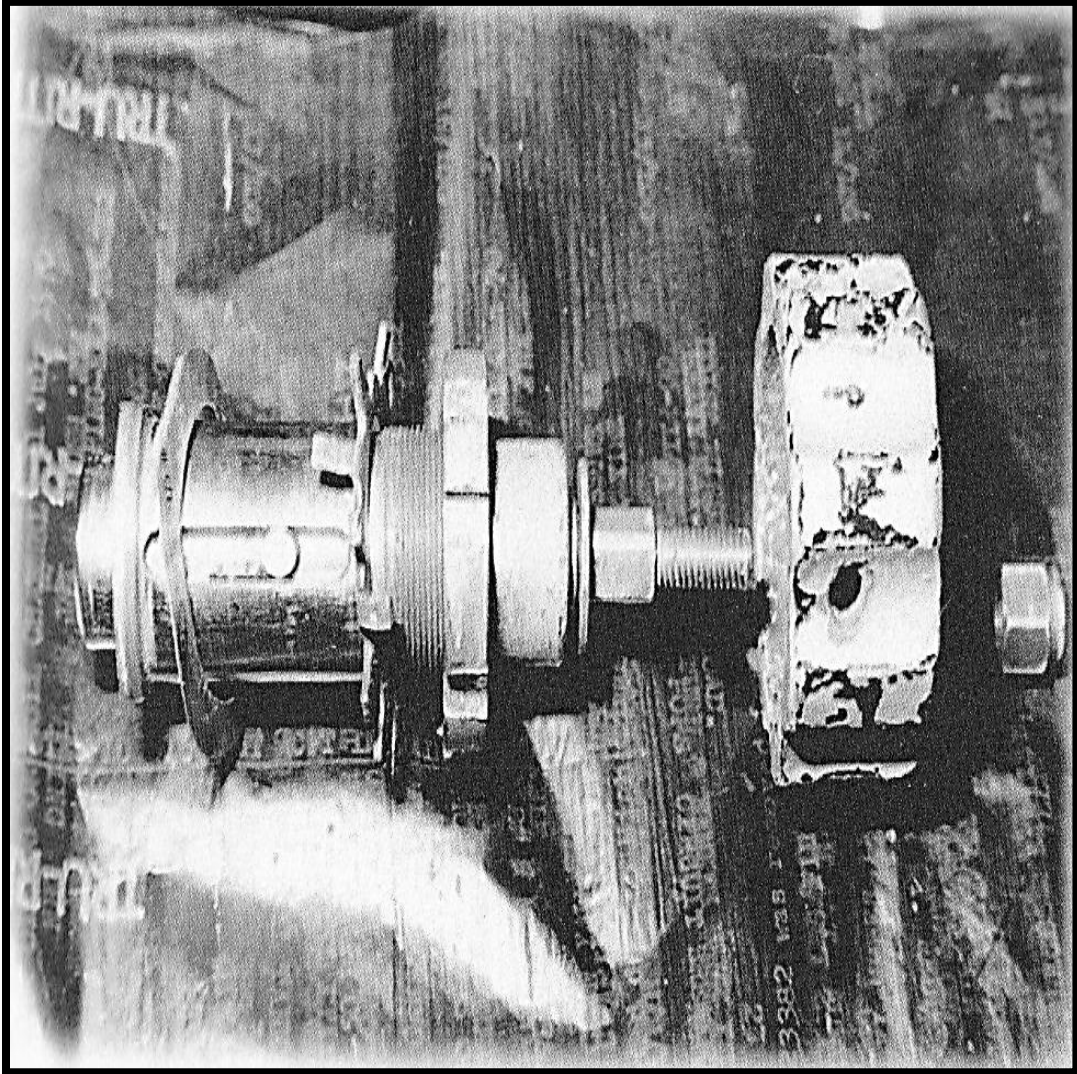


Diagram displays the knurled knob four horn locking pin assembly on top of pitch change horns and the blade cuff and sleeve assemblies.

UH-34D Air America maintenance manual in Author's possession.



A damaged horn locking pin assembly that was installed on each of four main rotor head cuffs. The component was designed to enable main rotor blades folding. If the knurled knob to the right was over torqued, the internal pin could shear, resulting in the barrel rotating and a rotor blade to flip over with devastating results.

Steve Nichols Collection.

threads in its sleeve housing to screw through the sleeve into the matching blade grip socket, a part that was also sleeved. This firmly locked the rotor blade to the rotor head grip, which controlled blade pitch. The unit could be controlled by pilot command and was limited by pitch change rods connected to the swash plate assembly.

In the drafting board dream world, Sikorsky engineers probably never foresaw the problem that humans could instigate. When turned, a knurled knob permitted activation of the unit. Besides failing to safety wire the knob correctly to the pitch change horn, over time overzealous, inexperienced, or unwitting mechanics likely over torqued the knob. This action had the tendency to force the short guide pin within the internal mechanism against the far end of a slot. When sufficient strain or metal fatigue set in, the pin could bend, shear, or otherwise fail. Depending on circumstances, this could allow the assembly to disengage from the rotor head grip. Then, after backing out in flight, the corresponding blade could become uncontrollable, allowing the entire blade grip to rotate freely. The ensuing disruption of the airfoil's aerodynamic lift capabilities and extreme angle of attack would cause immediate blade stall. Blade separation and loss of aircraft control would be instantaneous, resulting in the death of everyone onboard the craft. ⁹

Naturally, line pilots were interested in a quick fix, a solution allowing us to perform our job without worrying about such a catastrophic event. Jack Forney, the ever-practical supervisor, believed further education was warranted for all those dealing with the H-34. Although already included as a

⁹ During flight school at Ellison Field an instructor informed my class that a blade separation from the HO4S (Sikorsky S-55) rotor system would result in enormously high "G" forces which the human body could not tolerate.

specific pre-flight checklist item, he believed horn locking pin inspections were generally performed in a perfunctory manner in the past, and that the main problem lay with complacency or inattention of those charged with inspecting the units. Except if an internal pin was actually broken, the unit was easily inspected. If loosened or "working" in place, slippage marks would have left clear signs of movement upon inspection. However, realistically, Jack believed that with all the crews had to think about day in and day out, it was easy to understand how a specific inspection prior to every flight for such a small item could easily be overlooked.

Besides mandatory inspections, another "fix" was incorporated ensuring that the pin and sleeve assembly were double safety wired to avert movement should pin damage occur. An opposed wire was fashioned to its sleeve, and the sleeve safety wired to the grip, so that neither sleeve nor pin could move independently of the other or the assembly. During the course of detailed inspections, future potential failures were discovered and corrected before they resulted in accident statistics. In a realistic world, it was a glowing tribute to the Sikorsky Company that Air America did not have more rotor system problems given the numerous hours and harsh conditions components were subjected to.

Apparently, despite inspections and "fixes," this was not the end of horn locking pin problems. In later 1966, while servicing a difficult landing zone in the forested hills north of Xieng Dat (LS-26), Ray Semora and Flight Mechanic Jim Agnew crashed. After aborting an approach and commencing a go around, Ray crossed a ridge at a ninety-degree angle in a strong wind. During the maneuver, something happened and he lost control of the helicopter. ACP Marius Burke was part of an investigating team sent to the crash site. During the course of their work, a

horn locking pin assembly was discovered backed out of its housing on one of the blade grips. Although Semora badly injured his back, the team marveled at his survival, attributing it to the helicopter's proximity to the ground.

On the basis of the investigating team's findings, reinforced by Semora's testimony, the accident board's report subsequently recorded a horn locking pin failure as the primary cause for the incident. However, because of the unlikely survival of anyone onboard a ship following such a malfunction, and Semora's checkered record, particularly his part in Crisologo's untimely death, not all of the board members agreed with the finding. Additionally, some of us were skeptical, not entirely convinced that the incident was entirely a maintenance factor. Like so many other suspicious crashes, the finding was merely an excuse to "whitewash" the event and cover up pilot error. In fact, Captain Herb Baker, our self-professed resident expert on nearly everything pertaining to flight items, postulated that he had induced a steep turn stall during unorthodox maneuvers that exceeded the H-34's flight envelop. The theory was entirely viable, for Herb's knowledge and credentials were rarely challenged among us lesser mortals.

Semora temporarily returned to flight duties after his back healed. Burke flew with him on the mandatory flight check and indicated that although not the strongest pilot in our group, he passed the required maneuvers. However, soon after the check ride, Semora quit, opting to return to the U.S. Army. Among our pilot group no one was sorry to see him leave.

A Military Assistance Program (MAP) to train Lao aviators in H-34s had been in place since the spring of 1964. Paul Walton became the program's third instructor pilot assigned to train pilots in Thailand. ACPH Marius Burke had attended Pensacola flight training instruction with Paul. During March 1961, while

-serving on the USS *Bennington*, Walton volunteered for duty with Air America. Selected as one of the Marine "temporaries" for the Madriver project, he flew in Laos until implicated in the "Dirty Six" episode, in which a few pilots refused to fly north of Vientiane. Because of the clandestine nature of Air America and a reluctance of the Agency or USMC to go public with anything regarding the Company or its work in the neutral country of Laos, Paul and others were allowed to return to active duty. Walton flew CH-46s in South Vietnam and attained a chest full of medals, including a Silver Star. Other than not being pleased with Abadie because of a significant hearing loss, attributed to the lack of helmets or headsets available to the crews at the time, Paul never spoke to Marius about his "Temporary" period with Air America.

Burke spent considerable leisure time with Walton during his JUSMAG-sponsored year tour in Udorn. He even helped train and conduct cross country flights with the Lao pilots when Paul needed a break. The three Lao pilots, originally trained by Russian and French instructors, had a lot of fixed wing experience. One of the pilots had close ties with the royal family. However, within a year of completion of their training, they all defected to North Vietnam. One night one of the Lao pilots landed in his own backyard, retrieved his family, and headed north. The other two, while flying together, did the same. Marius subsequently jokingly harassed Walton regarding his record in training the defectors.

During Walton's tour, one morning about 0200 hours, he arrived at Burke's new house at the end of the Godnoma compound. Panicked, he indicated that the Thai girl he was living with was

extremely angry and threatened to kill him.¹⁰ Because of his state of mind, request for help, and reluctance to return home alone, Marius agreed to accompany Walton to his house. After briefly searching the house and finding no one there, much relieved, they sat down to enjoy a drink. Thirty minutes passed. Out of cigarettes, Paul went into his bedroom to obtain a new pack from a carton he kept in the closet. Upon opening the door, the girl leaped out toward him, brandishing a knife. Issuing a blood-curdling scream, Paul dashed back into the living room with the irate female close behind. The two men managed to disarm the distraught assailant and chased her out of the house, effectively ending the incident.

In 1967, Walton's tour with Deputy Chief Joint United States Military Group Bangkok, Thailand (DEPCHJUSMAG-Thai) was complete. He was replaced by U.S. Army Warrant Officer (CW-4) George McKenzie. While stationed in Germany for some time, George had not flown a UH-34D for nearly six years. Therefore, Marius Burke provided McKenzie local familiarization and proficiency training flights that actually amounted to initial training. George requested that they practice no autorotations until he reached that particular phase with the Lao trainees. At the time of his autorotation training, he was reluctant to practice full autorotations, but instead requested the power recovery type. Unlike those practiced in the U.S. Army, power recovery autos were standard in the Marine Corps to save wear and tear on the machines, and to prevent possible losses the service could ill afford. With Air America it was different. Over time, we gravitated to full autorotation practice during proficiency checks. Burke had not performed the maneuver George requested in some time. Therefore, when he attempted to

¹⁰Since Thai people were normally patient and slow to anger, such a threat was taken seriously.

demonstrate the first power recovery termination, he forgot to lead with throttle application and restore the power early. As a result, he nearly crashed. During the flare, while scrambling to roll the throttle on, marry the needles, and regain sufficient power to terminate at a hover, he ended up making a dismal full auto. After the unimpressive demonstration, he asked George if he would rather not practice full autorotations because they were much easier. He refused.

AN ERRANT PIN CLAIMS OTHER VICTIMS

Like Walton, McKenzie's job was to train Lao pilots to fly the UH-34D). This entailed all aspects of helicopter operations, to include navigation. For some time the warrant officer had been using 8803, the only white H-34 in the Air America helicopter inventory, for this purpose. After departing Takhli Air Force Base for Udorn on 25 October 1967, McKenzie, his crew chief Henry Hunter, six Lao students, and one Thai man were killed around the Phitsanulok area. Evidence from the recovered wreckage pointed to another horn locking pin malfunction, where the sleeve and pin had backed out of the housing.

Shortly after the accident, on a rainy day, Steve Nichols, accompanied Captain John Ford and his Thai Flight Mechanic, flew to the crash site in an H-34. A U.S. Army investigation team from Bangkok tagged along in a JUSMAG Huey. The aircraft had augured into a flooded rice paddy at an accelerated impact, and the resulting wreckage of 803 that could be seen above water was substantial.

While the bodies were bagged, Ford departed to obtain the governor's approval to deliver the bodies to Udorn.

Army personnel who knew McKenzie attended his funeral in Bangkok.

After additional research, Nichols learned that after an Army H-34 crashed in Germany during the early H-34 years, a design flaw was discovered. Despite the hand knob being safety wired, it was possible for a main rotor blade horn locking pin to unscrew and back out of its housing. Subsequent to this finding, rotor head assemblies were retrofitted with a lock plate to keep the locking pin in place. However, since the Army did not fold rotor blades, the lock plate was rejected in lieu of a permanent bolt. Consequently, "their overhaul instructions contained neither the lock plate nor the permanent bolt."

Because Air America helicopter flight time was high, this resulted in a constant demand for component parts, so many suppliers were tapped, and an unmodified Army rotor head had found its way onto 803. A check of rotor head serial numbers revealed that a few of the Army components were installed on aircraft currently in the inventory. These were brought up to specification and there never was another horn locking pin incident. ¹¹

NORTHEAST THAILAND INSURGENCY

Perpetrated by guerrilla activities from adherents of the communist-sponsored Thai Patriotic Front (TPF), northeastern Thailand continued an enigma for the Royal Thai Government (RTG). Predictions indicated that the insurgent activity was accelerating and likely to expand to new areas in the future.

¹¹ Jack Forney Email's, 03/18/99, 04/09/99.
EW Knight Emails, 07/30/00, 07/31/00.
Marius Burke Interview.
Former USA Caribou Pilot Flowers Interview at Dothan, Alabama
Regarding McKenzie's death.
Internet, (army aviation.com), Other Heli Crews.
Stephen I. Nichols, *Air America Laos: The Flight Mechanic Stories*,
self-published book, *The Fate of Aircraft 803*, 312-315.

Long term commitments to support economic, social, and military development in Thailand under the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Administrations had been strengthened over the years. By 1966, to thwart or slow further inroads into Isan, after improving aid programs, Thai and U.S. efforts were increased over the year in the form of helicopter assaults of Thai police and army units into areas of concern. However, despite this action, reports from remote villages persisted regarding terror activities.

Communist guerrillas were also present and somewhat active in the southwestern peninsula close to the Malaysian border.

The northeastern Korat Plateau region of Isan was long considered an area of unrest, and was a lingering problem for the Bangkok central government. In close proximity to Laos and North Vietnam, populated by over a third of the nation, the region was considered relatively easy to exploit. Most of the populace considered themselves Thai citizens, maintained a Lao dialect, customs, and traditions identified with their original Lao roots. The disparity between Bangkok Thai and Isan Thai was particularly evident to persons journeying across the river into Laos looking for temporary work, when unable to find any in their areas.

Exacerbating the situation, Isan was an impoverished area containing poor soil, meager roads, lack of communications, and proper educational and medical facilities. The region also endured seasonal drought and flooding. These factors contributed to a low economic level unlike that found in other parts of Thailand. Combined with the belief that the central government cared little about their plight, the people were ripe candidates for change. Communist inroads began as early as the late 1920's, when branches of the Vietnamese communist Party were established in Nong Khai and Khon Kaen, and a young Ho Chi Minh roamed the

area spouting his ideology. Since then, as conditions dictated, the Royal Thai Government (RTG) ordered police action to suppress widespread insurgency.

Trouble accelerated when the First Indochina War brought many North Vietnamese refugees to the area. Eventually, these people numbered an estimated 30,700, and became a distinct security concern for the Thai government. Other extraterritorial ethnics were Cambodian, Ku, and Phu Thai. Many of these people assimilated and became good citizens. Few were considered militant, but not many identified with Bangkok Thai.¹² This sentiment was reciprocal.

After the Thai Independence Movement (TIM) and the Thai Patriotic Front groups were created in Peking, armed insurgency increased in late 1964 and early 1965. Subsequent large-scale government sweeps by Thai security forces into suspected areas proved generally ineffective in clearing insurgents from the region.

Stimulated by increased American air activity in Laos and North Vietnam from several RTAF bases, the communist insurgency conflict level rose significantly during mid to late 1965 and early 1966, when the size of generically called Communist Terrorist (CT) bands rose substantially to fifty in some cases. Reported northeastern incidents in the first five months of 1966 outnumbered the entire total for 1965. Government officials, school teachers, and informants were primary targets.

Total guerrilla numbers were estimated to be tripling from 200 to 750, with some estimates reaching 1,000. These increases allowed aggressive attacks on police stations and other

¹² When I was in the Bangkok Christian Hospital in early 1967 recovering from painful sciatica back problems, my hefty Thai female doctor was offered a job practicing in the northeast. Concerned, she asked me many probing questions regarding the area and seemed very reluctant to work there.

officials in several areas in the northeast. Most of the reported incidents which escalated from fifty to over 500 occurred in Nakhon Phanom and Sakon Nakhon Provinces. Na Kae, Pla Pak, and Mukdahan districts connected to the Phu Phan Mountains were the most active in Nakhon Phanom Province.

Because of suspected CT border crossings at night, free fire zones were developed and Air America aircraft were forbidden to fly at night in these areas. In addition, blanket flight restrictions over the Phu Phan Mountains applied to all aircraft.

The situation was increasingly touchy. When proceeding east, day flights required positive control with the Invert radar unit located at the Nakhon Phanom Air Force base. Late one day during the period in question, Marius Burke was airborne in a T-28 performing a local test flight, when he heard me report an en route flight plan and estimated time of arrival (ETA) to the Air America radio operator. I was headed east to one of the river towns to work. Envisioning some fun, Burke flew east to intercept me. After sighting my H-34, he flew underneath Hotel-31 and climbed abruptly, suddenly flashing in front of my nose. Shocked and sensitive about such an occurrence, particularly after being jumped in 1962 by a Thai fighter pilot while still in the USMC, and with Jim Hastings the previous year, I reacted by performing evasive maneuvers and shouting epithets over the air. Observing my discomfiture, Marius headed back to Udorn. ¹³

In May, there were twelve armed clashes with the insurgents and the discovery of six additional enemy camps. Despite RTG actions in Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom Provinces involving large sweeps, supporting artillery, and air support, the overall

¹³I was not aware that Marius Burke was the perpetrator of the T-28 incident until later years when, during one of our interviews, he confessed to me the transgression.

success against the communist movement was not entirely fruitful. The most problematic areas containing communist sympathizers and adherents were found in the Na Kha district, Nakhon Phanom Province, and in Sawang Daen Din district, part of Sakon Nakhon Province. ¹⁴

With the failure of existing policy and counter actions in Isan, a continuing rise in communist insurgency was recognized as Thailand's most pressing concern. Consequently, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Interior, and Commander-in-Chief of the Army, General Prapass (Praphat) Charusathian, independently assumed control of all communist suppression operations in the country. Conceived in December 1965, the Counter Subversion Operation Command (CSOC) was established in Bangkok to coordinate central government suppression activities. A joint civilian-police-military headquarters was first established on the Mekong River at Mukdahan and then at Sakon Nakhon to organize and coordinate activities in the most critical northeast region. Subunits were established in other sensitive provinces. It required an entire year before a comprehensive, coordinated counterinsurgency plan was entirely in place. The basic concept stipulated locating sensitive areas harboring armed CTs and isolating the bands from the general population.

Much earlier, Ambassador Graham Martin, replacing Ambassador Young, had arrived in late 1963 and begun increasing

¹⁴ In a region of few large population centers or landmarks on my map, I used Daen Din town as a checkpoint when flying from Udorn to NKP and Thakhet. It was here that Prime Minister Sarit ordered political agitator Kru Krong Chandavong executed in May 1961. Krong was a follower of Tiang Serrikkhand, a separatist politician executed by Thai police in 1952. Sarit, an ardent anti-communist, ordered Suphat Wongwhathant, governor of Udorn Province and Tuie's uncle by marriage to oversee the job. It must have been a difficult task for Suphat, as he and Kru Krong had attended school together. The old adage of what goes around comes around was apt, for in 1963 Suphat was "accidentally" shot and killed by his wife.

methods to aid the RTG in combating the budding insurgency. In addition to adding a special department to cope with the problem, he emphasized training and reequipping the Provincial and Border Patrol Police forces; building roads to and along the Mekong, and establishment of the Accelerated Rural Development (ARD) program. Throughout most of 1964, Martin pushed the RTG to take counter measures against potential communist terrorist problems and lobbied Washington to provide more aid for this task.

By January 1966, a critical time in the northeast, the ambassador had increased his support of U.S. Operation Mission (USOM) programs to enhance the CSOC and move it forward ASAP. Priority was assigned to items already ordered and other equipment such as helicopters for a Police Air Division. His earnest belief that USG had waited too long in South Vietnam to turn the situation around led the ambassador to increase villager security through fledgling People's Assistance Teams (PAT) in Sakon Nakhon Province. Supplementing CSOC teams, these units were tailored to assist in the people's wellbeing, demonstrate government interest, gather intelligence, and provide village security. Other means of collecting intelligence were instituted.

Agencies directly under the USOM umbrella and others were challenged to increase active participation in insurgency matters. Agency for International Development (USAID) increased ARD and Thai police programs. U.S. Information Services (USIS) expanded and established branch offices, specifically to assist province officials in countering CT propaganda and its actions. Military Assistance Program money was increased to enhance counterinsurgency training programs and civic action. In addition to these measures, USOM and Military Assistance Command, Thailand (MACTHAI), provided POL to the Thai police and

military.¹⁵ The Department of Defense Advanced Projects Research Agency (ARPA) shifted its original mission relating to radio wave propagation experiments to those on counterinsurgency research.

As the situation continued to escalate in Isan, there was considerable political pressure on USG to provide assistance in the war on insurgency. In late June, Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman stated at a SEATO-ANZUS meeting at Canberra, Australia, that he had urged a maximum effort to repress communist activity in northeast Thailand. However, General Praphat informed him that delays in U.S. military assistance program (MAP) equipment deliveries had left the RTA without adequate means to perform the counterinsurgency job. Furthermore, use of Thai troops there might stimulate Vietnamese incursion. He could not rely on American materiel assistance, and did not want American troops involved. Because of the general's attitude, Khoman solicited help from the King, who used his influence in introducing RTA elements to northeast suppression operations.

Despite a July National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) stating that insurgency did not currently represent a danger to total Thai government stability, or a threat to government control over any large section of the country over the next two years, a U.S. State Department fact finding mission about the same time reiterated and convinced U.S. investigators the Thai insurgency threat was serious and real. The NIE report contained a disclaimer: Depending on the ability of friendly forces in Laos and South Vietnam to hold at bay, the Thai problem was deemed manageable, but would require money and time to resolve. However, all bets were off should the communists sweep Southeast Asia.

¹⁵ POL: Petroleum, oil, and other lubricants.

State stressed that improved airlift mechanisms and increased Thai effort were required to address the problem. However, the assessment revealed that the Royal Thai Army was not performing enough with the supplies already provided by the MAP, and deemed sufficient for the job. Their approach to the insurgency was unmanageable and likely to worsen, and that U.S. Mission's assistance to the RTG in a few activities lacked coordination.

Although admitting that insurgency was becoming a serious problem, particularly near U.S. air bases at Takhli, Ubon, Udorn, and Korat, a Department of Defense paper did not agree with all State's findings. USG's reluctance in responding to RTG request for help was based on past Thai performance in countering CT insurgency. This had led to Washington's delay in providing helicopters for airlift. Moreover, despite firm commitments, there were delays in MAP delivery. Also, U.S. coordination in assisting the current Thai effort was not consistent among the USAID, USIS, and DOD programs.

Thai contributions to USG's effort in prosecuting the Southeast Asian wars over the years were varied and essential to the effort. They were effected in ways affording minimum publicity to world opinion. Some of these included: agreeing to every request to deploy USAF and army units to Royal Thai bases in Thailand; accepting recommendations for construction of military facilities for U.S. needs; approving every request for assistance on highly classified operations; loaning aircraft and bombs from Thai stocks to accommodate emergency requirements in Laos; providing qualified "B Team" pilots to fly T-28 missions in support of Lao operations in Military Region Two; committing artillery and infantry units to operations at and in defense of Moung Soui, Laos; and providing cadre for most of the Military

Region Three intelligence teams (named Star) currently operating in denied areas of Laos and North Vietnam.

In the interest of preserving the special relationship between the U.S. and Thailand since the end of World War Two, Department of Defense (DOD), U.S. Operations Mission (USOM), and CIA agencies all agreed that supporting the RTG was necessary to continuance of the programs involving the above assets.

Therefore, beginning in April, responding to Ambassador Martin's previous efforts, requests, and Thai pressure for tangible assistance, and to help reinforce the Thai CSOC program and train RTAF personnel in counterinsurgency methods, four USAF UH-1F Bell and several Sikorsky CH-3 helicopters and crews were dispatched to the Nakhon Phanom base from South Vietnam. Additional USAF helicopters continued to arrive at NKP and Udorn to support Thai training, and to perform road watch missions and SAR duty in Laos. In September, ten UH-1Fs and fifteen CH-3s (using the Pony Express call sign) were distributed TDY to the two bases to assist in the Thai counterinsurgency movement, SAR in Laos, and delivering and retrieving intelligence gathering teams in Laos and North Vietnam.

Soon after CSOC was formed, the Bangkok unit was tasked to support Nakhon Phanom headquarters with a regimental team to assist in rounding up communist terrorists and spreading the word to Na Kae District, which was infused with a Soh ethnic minority. Another requirement provided an infantry battalion to Sakon Nakhon. Movements were achieved by U.S. helicopter crews and machines originally only intended to remain in Thailand for training until January 1967. One airlift from Udorn, employing eight UH-1F Bells and one CH-3, took place in early August, when 350 Thai police and RTA troops were delivered to Sakon Nakhon to occupy positions adjoining an insurgent area.

Initial operations caused the insurgents to fade back into their villages, largely negating success. CSOC leaders and Americans closely associated with the project learned that CT activity could not be controlled through military action alone. They also understood that CT operations were still relatively small and lacked secure bases required to expand activities. Therefore, RTA tactics were modified to function more efficiently by employing small units in jungle or mountain areas. They remained relatively close to villages to deny access to food, intelligence, and recruits. In addition, over time twelve-man joint security teams were distributed to 250 villages within ten problem areas. ¹⁶ Teams were generally comprised of two policemen and ten or more Volunteer Defense Corps personnel. Trained by RTA for about four weeks, the teams' mission involved protecting villagers from attack, intimidation, and preventing CTs' access to food and supplies. Each target area normally was staffed by a regular Thai army unit.

Despite these precautions, desultory government operations in the rugged Phu Phan area provided CT units additional propaganda for their movement. Relatively untouched in the mountains, they touted RTA's inability to root them out. In fact, later in the year the insurgents began employing armed propaganda meetings to demonstrate that they were still able to surround any area village of their choosing.

By early August, administration leaders were more optimistic regarding the Thai government's increased effort to combat the internal communist insurgency. Because of this and the Thai accommodation in all aspects of supporting U.S. military efforts in Southeast Asia, Dean Rusk was amenable to

¹⁶ Six in Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom Provinces, plus four in Udorn, northeast Nong Khai, northern Ubon, and northern Kalasin.

increasing the military assistance program (MAP) the following year.

Agency intelligence memorandums were generated to reflect the improving situation in August. On the upside, they indicated that at the present time, insurgent activity did not appear to win the day. Mainly, a stable Thai socioeconomic condition and lengthy independent history boded well against Isan communists. Increasingly, Royal Thai Army (RTA) leaders were recognizing the problem and operations were increasing.

Contrasting these positive aspects, there was still an abundance of underdeveloped and remote areas in the country that were ripe for communist inroads. Thanom's government did not elicit universal public support. Outside Bangkok the government civil service apparatus was not strong, and it was not realized what a strong government throughout the country could achieve in combating insurgency.

In the final analysis, communist insurgency was considered a movement in infancy. Lacking experienced and dedicated cadres, the faction did not display the discipline and organization seen in Laos and Vietnam. In spite of these limitations, CI units were expected to increase recruiting, propaganda measures, and terrorism in the near term.

The CIA's Bill Colby attempted to boil the situation down, indicating that the communists in Northeast Thailand were in Phase One of a People's War. Similarities with the Southeast Asia situation were noteworthy. They involved armed propaganda teams roaming villages, agitating, taxing, and recruiting; murder of village leaders, and attacks on police posts; a radio Voice of Free Thailand; a Thai Patriotic Front; and the circulation of subversive leaflets in Bangkok.

In a somewhat nebulous statement that lacked detail, Colby concluded by comparing the current situation in Thailand to a

foot race, noting that the model used to pursue the issue should be the one employed in Laos. Ultimate victory would be achieved from effective organization, a development and application of "people" technique, and prevention of the political quagmire as experienced in South Vietnam. ¹⁷

MIKE

Tom Moher, who always disliked flying in Laos, but even more so after the Klusmann SAR, had been living and working in Bangkok since early 1965 for Jansky and Bailey and JUSMAG.

"In 1961 the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), of the U.S. Defense Department [DOD] established a field unit in

¹⁷ Segment Sources:
 World Book Online Americas Edition, Thailand: Back in Time, (www.aolsvc.worldbook.aol.com/na/bt/cpl67113.html).
 Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 180.
 Sayad Kurdpol, *Counterinsurgency*.
 CIA Intelligence Memo Northeast Thailand, (focia.ucia.gov/scrips/cgiserv), 08/67, 4-6.
 George K. Tanham (Former State Department Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency at U.S. Embassy, Bangkok), *Trial in Thailand* (New York, NY: Crane Russak, 1974) 34, 48-49, 51-52, 86, 116-117, 129.
 United States Foreign Relations (FRUS), 1966 Staff Study Prepared by the Department of Defense, *Developments in Thailand* (attachment), FRUS 314, 1964-1968 Volume. 27, Mainland Southeast Asia Regional Affairs, (www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xxvii/zh.html).
 1966 Foreign Relations (FRUS), Thailand, Memorandum of Conversation between Secretary Rusk, Secretary Bundy, Ambassador Martin, Thanat Khoman, Sompong Sucharitkul at Canberra, Australia During SEATO-ANZUS Meetings, Situation in Northeast Thailand, 06/28/66.
 FRUS, 314-316.
 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE 52-66), *Communist Insurgency in Thailand: Conclusions*, 07/01/66.
 Foreign Relations U.S. 317, Telegram From the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State, 06/07/66.
 FRUS #318, 07/21/66, Memorandum from Assistant Defense for Systems Analysis-Enthoven to McNamara.
 Letter Dean Rusk to Robert McNamara 319, 08/06/66.
 FRUS #321, 08/11/66, Intelligence Memorandum Prepared by Bill Colby's Staff.
 FRUS #320, 08/16/66, Report Chief Far East Division, Directorate of Plans CIA (Colby).

Bangkok.¹⁸ The unit's mission involved research on remote area conflict. This required conducting research in tropical environments; helping to develop Thai counterinsurgency capabilities; and to encourage and strengthen development of a Thai military research and development effort.

Under the auspices of the joint Thai-U.S. Military Research and Development Center (MRDC) in Bangkok, research and development work in tropical environment was begun. After overall direction of the U.S. portion of the MRDC was assigned to ARPA in 1962, ARPA leaders solicited the U.S. Army Electronics Command and the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) to establish an electronics laboratory in Thailand to facilitate the study of radio communications in the tropics and other related items. In 1963, a contract was awarded to the Jansky and Bailey engineering department of the Atlantic Research Corporation of Alexandria, Virginia to conduct the field work. In limbo, standing down and waiting for return to work in Laos in 1963, while working out of Bangkok, Air America H-34s and crews serviced the initial remote J&B research station.

Early ARPA studies were related to ground mobility and radio communications under tropical conditions. They also sought to improve individual combat rations, clothing, and equipment for the Thai soldier. In 1966-1967, the majority of the ARPA effort in Thailand was shunted to research relevant to counterinsurgency. Consequently, the ARPA field unit was recognized as the research arm of the United States Mission for internal security problems. This involved studying border

¹⁸ ARPA was the same organization that developed the Internet capability.



Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) jungle sites overseen by the Jansky and Bailey Company and supported by Air America H-34 crews.
Map acquired from the Internet.

control, village security, insurgent psychological operation, ethnic groups in North Thailand and other items." ¹⁹

Tom, a UH-34D pilot possessing the lowest seniority number in our group, opted to take annual leave in April. Desiring to see a bit of Thailand and gain experience in the country, although no hazard pay was involved, Mike Jarina volunteered to substitute in Tom's absence. Mike rented Tom Moher's house, staying there either while in Bangkok or on time off.

Hotel X-ray (148803) had been dedicated for the J&B contract. The aircraft had been one of the first International Control Commission (ICC) ships delivered to Vientiane in late 1962 to satisfy the requirements of the Geneva Accords agreement in "monitoring" opposing hostile parties in Laos. Designated CIC-1, the ship was spray painted a distinctive white for easy identification, as opposed to the normal H-34 olive drab color, and was inspected and serviced by Udorn maintenance personnel. Flown by French pilots, the enemy never respected the immunity of the neutral organization, and occasionally shot a ship down when they believed the group was encroaching on their territory. The H-34 was later returned to the Air America inventory and re-designated 803. It was not repainted.

During the period, Mike flew 803 for sixteen days in Thailand. He considered the time spent in the field worthwhile and interesting. His Flight Mechanics were old timer "Punz" Punzalan and "Pete" Peterson. As we had been doing for several years, he serviced what was called J&B, shuttling groceries and

¹⁹ George Tanham, 125-126; HW Parker, Preface to Special Technical Report 43, Electronic Constants Measures in Vegetation and in Earth at Five Sites in Thailand Advanced Research Projects Agency for the Thai-U.S. Military Research and Development Center Supreme Command Headquarters Bangkok, Thailand, 12/6-Downloaded from the Internet.

personnel into and out of remote research sites in the process of expanding to five. The organization, under a contract with ARPA, was still experimenting and testing the viability of radio wave propagation within a tropical jungle environment. As this regularly scheduled run was only required once or twice a week, Jarina flew other individuals to several different areas. Much like I had done while with the Third Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) in the spring of 1962, a majority of his work involved road surveys for the Thai government north of Bangkok and into the northeast. The survey was tailored to identify and plot long road stretches suitable for constructing fixed wing STOL strips to accommodate up to and including C-123 aircraft. Scattered throughout the northeast, these landing sites could be utilized to quickly move large numbers of troops in the event of increased insurgency problems, war, or enemy movement across the border.

Jarina's stint began with the road survey. Consuming most of his daily flights during Moher's absence, he flew with a British flight commander, and a Marine lieutenant colonel attached to the U.S. Embassy or JUSMAG. He also accommodated a Thai colonel from Korat, recently relieved from commanding officer duties because his SNJ pilots were selling rides to civilians.

Upcountry RONS occurred at Roi Et (T-02), Khon Kaen (T-40), and Mara Sarahkam (T-415). The latter was located fifteen miles southwest of Sawang Daen Din, an occasional hot bed of communist activity. At Tango-415, a police chief met and hosted them. He took them to a small village where Mike snapped photos. Another flight took them to That Phanom (T-419), located on the Mekong River.



Former CIC UH-34D with a distinctive white paint scheme assigned to a Bangkok Jansky and Bailey contract performing a road survey in northeast Thailand.

Mike Jarina Collection.

Fuel was always a consideration at outlying sites. It was readily available from commercial operators at larger sites like Korat and Khon Kaen. Emergency drummed fuel could be obtained at a few police stations. On one occasion where a planned flight involved a remote area with no fuel available, a fuel tank driver was programmed to meet the helicopter at a prearranged location. As planned, Jarina flew until low on fuel and neared the area where the tanker driver was supposed to meet him. Not plotted on his map, he found that the spot involved a river with no bridge crossing. Perplexed, he elected to continue flying down the road until reaching fuel exhaustion or spotting the tanker. Fortunately, within ten minutes he found the truck.

The Marine lieutenant colonel accompanying Mike for part of the road recon was a particularly aggressive individual. Attempting to dominate the flight from the left seat, the man constantly harassed and annoyed Mike regarding his flying. Later, when Mike told "Beng" Bengston, one of our new pilots, about the colonel, he learned that "Beng" knew him in Hawaii. The colonel was slated to command a helicopter squadron, but did not have any experience in the machine. Therefore, Marine instructor pilot Bengston instructed him. The training was mostly indoctrination. The man did not attend any lengthy ground school including engineering, engines, aerodynamics, meteorology, and other courses; all he did was learn how to fly the H-34.

Mike could understand this, for the situation was similar to events during the Korean War, when Navy reservists were sent to NAS Pensacola for retraining. These individuals were referred to as "retreads." He remembered one full lieutenant, a F6F pilot in World War Two, who had been assigned to the squadron as a radar operator and not released for the "retread" program. As requirements for pilots increased, one day the skipper asked

Mike if he could draft a syllabus to provide the man sufficient training to reestablish his aviator designation. Mike had not fully completed the program when the skipper inquired about the man's progress. After indicating good, the commanding officer said to take the handbook exam on a huge aircraft that weighed about the same as an R-4D with a sixty-foot wingspan and then fly it. The lieutenant soon had his pilot designation back.

Other interesting sites visited during the month of April supporting J&B were to Cholburi and Pak Chong. ²⁰

ARC LIGHT

Supported by KC-135 refueling planes from Kadena Air Force Base, Okinawa, Strategic Air Command B-52 bombers from Anderson Air Force Base, Guam, had been striking targets in South Vietnam since June 1965. To supplement U.S. air action on southern Lao infiltration routes, the first super bomber strike occurred in early December 1965, without official consent of the RLG. Ensuing media publicity caused the ambassador to place a temporary hold on further sensitive Arc Light strikes.

During January, under strict secrecy, B-52 flights and strikes resumed along contiguous border areas. Generally carrying twenty-four 750 and twenty-seven 500-pound bombs per sortie, during the next three months, the large planes conducted eight raids near the South Vietnamese border. Unannounced, and conducted in remote areas, the strikes evoked little publicity. Therefore, at a Udorn conference in early March, General Westmoreland proposed attacking both sides of Mugia Pass, a main through point for supplies funneled from the Haiphong port. The Pass itself was two and a half miles at its widest point and twenty-one miles long. Protected by 300 AAA sites, seventy-five

²⁰ Mike Jarina Interviews.

percent of vehicle traffic entered Laos through the pass. So far tactical strikes had failed to permanently close the logistical conduit.

Despite the political risk of the first Arc Light well above the 17th parallel, without informing Souvanna Phouma, a B-52 strike commenced against Route-15 and the Pass on 12 April. Each plane, carrying twenty-five 1,000-pound bombs internally and twenty-four 750-pound bombs externally, thirty aircraft saturated a three-mile area on both sides of the pass. However, the high level and inaccurate bombing failed to cork the Pass. In less than two days, the efforts of excellent road repair crews allowed road traffic to continue infiltration.

In 1966, road repair operations became big business. By May, intelligence analysts estimated that thirty-nine Vietnamese engineering battalions were employed in Laos to keep the trails open to traffic. This task required 25,000 laborers, with an undetermined number of villagers participating. Some units contained only Vietnamese. Others were mixed with Lao.

Repairs were normally accomplished under the cover of darkness, and in many cases a road could be reopened within a short time. A majority of the work was performed using only shovels, hoes, and axes. Workers and supplies were well dispersed to prevent destruction. Sustenance was provided by living off the land.

With supposedly improved targeting information, a second Arc Light strike was conducted on 27 April. Despite creating thirty-two craters along Route-15, within eighteen hours the holes were filled and trucks again rolling. During the raid, SA-2 missiles were launched, and one escorting USAF jet was damaged, but the pilot managed to land safely.

By April, Theater commanders admitted that the massive amounts of ordnance being air dropped on Laos and South Vietnam

had created critical weapons shortages. A large number of high explosive bombs required for B-52 strikes were the primary culprit, with logistical delivery a secondary problem. Although Secretary McNamara denied that there was a shortage at first, military planes were being dispatched on missions without proper loads for the job. To help alleviate the problem, hard bombs were delivered from worldwide American bases, and bombs were repurchased at premium prices from German military stocks.

With these ongoing measures, the situation continued to improve and by December the ordnance shortage was at an end. However, the upshot of the flap was that Mugia Pass was not struck by Arc Light bombers again until early December, when the bomb shortage was generally over.

American air was not the only force affected by bomb shortages. During February and March, only a little more than half the 5,000 iron bombs ordered by AIRA had arrived for T-28 use. Therefore, bombs were rationed for RLAF and Firefly missions.

Based on recommendations from various commanders and collated information, General Westmoreland approved Arc Light strikes. By early June 240 B-52 strikes had been conducted in the theater with twenty percent allocated to Laos.

Admiral Sharp inquired from Westmoreland if some of the Panhandle targets were not better suited for tactical planes than saturation bombing by B-52s. This was particularly the case during a time of scarce ordnance.

In reply, and follow ups, Westmoreland stated that his team envisioned Arc Light activity assisting in destroying the integrated enemy logistics system, defined by air and ground intelligence and positive terrain references, and that it was considered essential that B-52s be employed in Laos. Numerous FAC-piloted aircraft sought to identify and destroy storage

depots, staging areas, maintenance facilities, choke points, truck parks, bridges and ferry sites, control installations, and road repair capabilities.

So far, with the enemy operating overtly in Southern Laos, the Tiger Hound operation yielded positive results in trucks and structures destroyed, and secondary explosions. Additionally, using FACs to direct timely strikes against targets in the Cricket Operation was working because of instant communications between the FACs and RLAFF headquarters.²¹

PERSONNEL

By mid-April, our Captain and First Officer line pilot pool, calculated to crew about twenty operational UH-34Ds, reached proportions not seen since March 1961. Desired manning levels were predicated on two and a half individuals per aircraft to cover flight commitments, time off, sickness, and leave. The Papa (Captain) list roster alphabetically included:

Herb M. Baker, "Beng" N. L. Bengston, Jim F. Brown, Tony R. Byrne, George W. Carroll, H.R. "Dick" Casterlin, Verne Clarkson, Charlie O. Davis, Ron L. Dubinsky, Chuck R. Eckerle, R. "Dick" W. Elder, John D. Fonburg, Chuck H. Frady, Phil C. Goddard, John L. Grassi, D. D. "Roy" Hickman, Lloyd A. Higgins, Tom L. Hoppe, Jack "Pogo" Hunter, Mike Jarina, Sam T. Jordon, Julian "Scratch" S. Kanach, Lou P. McCasland, Bob C. Mitchell, Bob J. Nunez, Bill L. Pearson, Tom W. Pitkin, L. "Mick" Prulhiere, Ed Reid, O. E.

²¹ John Smith, *Rolling Thunder*, 91, 93-94, 173-174, 336.
 John Bowman, *Almanac*, 138.
 Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 132-139, 140-141, 147.
 Telegram COMACV (Westmoreland) to CINCPAC (Sharp), Arc Light, 06/04/66.
 Telegram from the Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Westmoreland) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Sharp), Laotian Air Operations, 07/13/66, 241.
 Victor Anthony, 193.

"Robbie" Robertson, Ed. D. Rudolfs, Ray V. Semora, Frank E. Stergar, Steve N. Stevens, John L. Tarn, Wayne H. Webb, Charlie A. Weitz, Larry D. Wilderom, Jim Williams, J. Bill Wilmot, and Richard H. "Pappy" Wright.

In addition to these line Captains were First Officers (designated by Mama numbers) John D. Burkeholder, Bob D. Davis (DOH 01/03/66), John D. Ford, Jim L. Hastings, and J.J. McCauley (03/04/66). Unidentified, there were others moving along the hiring pipeline. Several other pilots included on the Papa (Captain) roster held no, or minimal, flying management jobs or were away on other assignments: C. J. "Ab" Abadie (COO), E. Wayne Knight (CPH), and Marius Burke Jr. (ACP). Burke did fly the line at times. Jerry A. McEntee and Elmer F. Munsell flew in Nepal for Air Ventures. Tom A. Moher worked in Bangkok for J&B.²²

On the thirteenth I completed the Company-required night training for the period. Within two days I was scheduled to RON at Sam Tong. After spending most of the morning testing and rejecting Hotel-28, I was reassigned Hotel-31. The machine met my airworthiness requirements, and after arriving at Site-20, I managed to salvage what had previously been a bad day.

UPCOUNTRY

To keep the machines upcountry and achieve maximum time on the airframes before inspections or component changes, aircraft and pilots were frequently swapped. Therefore, on Saturday I was assigned Hotel-42, a recent UH-34D arrival to our inventory. With a zero-time engine and fresh off the Sikorsky production line, the helicopter performed beautifully for the next four days. I wondered how long this would last before the ravages of

²² Flight Crew Designators Revision 96, Date of Issue 04/15/66, Effective 05/01/66.

the environment, high flight time, and pilot abuse would take its toll.

We were still beefing up Bouam Long, surrounding sites, and outposts for defensive purposes in anticipation of possible enemy movement south from Na Khang or Route-6, located only five miles to the east. Except to move on Moung Soui, or possibly attempt to eliminate the highly entrenched mountain fortress, pressure on Bouam Long really did not make sense to me, for because PL-Vietnamese forces had achieved complete control of their main supply artery from Sam Neua to the Ban Ban Valley, it would be much easier to bypass the site.

Preparations at Lima Site-88 were also being completed for future moves on the Moung Son area and then Na Khang. First, the high ground surrounding the Moung Heim Valley had to be cleared of whatever hostile forces or patrols lingered in the area. Therefore, emphasis centered on traditional Meo sites at Phu Cum (LS-50), eighteen miles northwest of Bouam Long and San Pa Kha (LS-33), six miles further north of Phu Cum. In support of these ongoing operations, we delivered troops to secure forward advantageous spots in preparation to move on the sites. Then, after these elevated locations were secured, and a base of operations established, and further reconnoitering and information from spies left in the area collated for targeting, air and ground movement on Moung Heim could commence.

Working from LS-88 was not without periodic excitement.²³ Late one afternoon, prior to returning to Sam Tong for the

²³ The short Site-88 strip was located across the lower bowl on top of the west ridge. We often worked out of the bowl located 200 feet below. Almost 500 feet longer, and capable of receiving larger aircraft, and in defilade, the lower portion was eventually improved and became LS-32.

night, I launched from the eastern ridge overlooking the bowl with a final troop load for Phu Cum.

Although heavy, the departure was not difficult. However, while lacking ground effect, I must have also been slightly downwind, for I had trouble achieving the characteristic shudder upon entering translational lift.²⁴ Since there was no substantial drop-off to dive and attain flying speed, and I was already at 2800 rpm and raising the collective to develop the power available for that altitude, further options were limited. I became concerned, and my pucker factor increased to a maximum state, when the down slope of the mountainside and high trees loomed ever larger in the windscreen. Then, as the main gear scraped the treetops, just as I had been fervently willing it to do, the machine responded and began flying. That wonderful Sikorsky product we all loved, cherished, and sometimes cursed had seen me through yet another close scrape.

BAN SONG

On Monday the eighteenth, while again working Bouam Long and the Phu Cum areas, I received a radio message over the high frequency set from Vientiane to proceed to Ban Song (LS-29) and retrieve a pilot. Additional details were not forthcoming. A Thai-crewed Boun Oum Airways (BOA) C-47 had disappeared in the area the previous day, and I thought this request might possibly have something to do with a sighting or something associated with the missing aircraft and crew. If so, it would be ironic, for this was the same pilot in command (PIC) who refused to help me look for Sam Jordan in Military Region One the previous month.

²⁴ Following an airframe shudder when passing through thirteen to fifteen knots, increased lift is encountered.

Marching south in upper Military Region Two, to ensure unrestricted travel along Route-6, the enemy had systemically rolled up major government strongholds at Houa MOUNG, Na Khang, and finally at MOUNG Heim. After achieving these objectives, like the Anaconda Policy employed by Union forces during the "War Against the States," they tightened the noose, moving against smaller government sites that were more difficult to support. In some cases, only introduction of friendly air helped these sites to survive.

To buffer the effects of an aggressive enemy, Thai "B" Team T-28 pilots were increased to twenty-three. Used almost exclusively in Military Region Two, the pilots flew more mission sorties, achieving far better and more accurate results than their Lao counterparts. Fostering the improved results was an embassy requirement that the Fireflies be directed by forward air controllers (FAC) or an indigenous spotter in the flight leader's rear seat. Helping to implement this policy in Military Region Two, by April USAF combat controllers were expanded to four individuals: Major John Garrity, Captain Robert Farmer, and Sergeants Charlie Jones and James Stanford. Known by a Butterfly call sign, if not directing air strikes from the ground, they flew in Air America and Continental Porters to perform the function. Because of language disparities between friendly parties involved in mission strikes, a Meo observer and Thai Forward Air Controller accompanied the American.

I had not been to Ban Song for some time and was not aware that the site was still held by friendly forces. Therefore, it was with some trepidation that I flew twenty-six miles north northeast over hostile terrain. This included passing over Route-6 and then alternate Route-61. Consisting of undeveloped trails and footpaths, the latter was not well developed yet, but leading from the Sam Neua area to the Ban Ban Valley, it was

functional for infantry. Feeder trails bracketed the system. Of course, I flew at altitude to avoid potential small arms fire.

Ban Song, an old Meo road interdiction and observation site in Houa Phan, sat on a long finger perpendicular to and three miles east of Route-61. The 560-foot strip was oriented east-west at the 4,300-foot level. Like so many mountain strips in Laos, since the runway abruptly terminated against Phou Sampatap, the only approach and takeoff path was from and to the east. While circling overhead, I could see a Helio Courier sitting on the approach end of the strip. Three or more individuals were huddled in the vicinity of the plane. After landing toward the far end of the strip at a point that afforded some defilade from higher ground to the front and an excellent view of hills to my right, rangy Bill McShane arrived breathless to Hotel-42. Bill, originally a USAF Air Commando, had arrived in Southeast Asia as an AT-28 instructor pilot early in March 1964 as a member of the Waterpump program to train Lao, Thai, and Air America pilots in the attack aircraft. Becoming well acquainted with Lao and Air America operations during his tour, he and Joe Potter later elected to join our organization in the fixed wing program.

Hoping to minimize time on the ground, Bill immediately hopped into the cabin section. After donning the Flight Mechanic's helmet, he informed me that while landing to deposit a U.S. Air Force Forward Air Guide (FAG) or Combat Controller and his interpreter, who intended to coordinate a T-28 airstrike, the tail section of his plane had broken. Apparently, the site was still incurring attacks from high ground to the north northwest. T-28s were inbound to hit suspected enemy positions. The American FAG elected to remain on the ground to control the strikes.

Finally understanding the situation, I launched. After climbing to 8,000 feet, I orbited west, where I could observe the action and dash into the strip to retrieve the American FAG and his interpreter should the situation warrant. After the "B" team AT-28 pilots arrived and prepared for action, friendly "Willy Pete" mortar rounds were directed northwest to spot targets. This gave me pause for reflection, for if we could mortar the bad guys, they could certainly reciprocate in kind.

Chattering over the assigned frequency, the Thai pilots made several passes dropping bombs, firing rockets and machineguns at suspected enemy positions. The only ordnance they did not employ was napalm, strictly forbidden at the time for usage by "B" Team pilots. I enjoyed the show, but not a particularly bloodthirsty individual, wondered about the men being killed on the ground. That was until I considered what the bad guys would do to our people and me if the chance presented itself.

Then it was over. The T-28 pilots departed and the FAG called for pickup. Not sure if the air strike had eliminated the enemy, I elected to again land toward the far end of the strip where I had a little cover, and which afforded me some maneuvering room. Maintaining 2,800 rpm and pitch, calculated to effect a rapid transition if necessary, I parked as before to observe the strike area and any flashes that might indicate enemy fire directed at Hotel-42. It was kind of academic, for even though probably out of RPG range, I was still a prime target, exposed to either mortar or recoilless rifle fire.

I waited, expecting the FAG's momentary arrival--nothing. It seemed like an eternity. Just when I nervously suspected that he had been delayed for some unknown reason, the man appeared below at the cabin door. He tossed his heavy radio pack in the passenger door. As with McShane, I expected him to follow his

gear into the cabin. The Flight Mechanic did not give me the thumbs-up OK to depart, but, anticipating takeoff, I raised the collective even more. Then, suddenly a head of dark hair appeared at the left cockpit window. A very large American dressed in green fatigues with no rank or rate displayed followed and entered the cockpit. In the process, perhaps his first time in an H-34 cockpit, the clumsy guy stepped on my collective, effectively negating and destroying my plans for an immediate departure. Without the necessary power to instantly jump off the narrow strip, we were then prime meat for any accurate fire enemy gunners delivered. Disgusted, mentally cursing him, I reduced the collective to a full down position. Fearful that he might do something else stupid, I waited until the man finished strapping in. ²⁵ Sometimes things in life work out. Despite the unanticipated delay, we departed safely without incurring battle damage. I was surprised, but assuming a somewhat positive, but fatalistic attitude from past experiences, philosophized that good incidents often outweighed the bad ones.

My experience was not unique. Likely all helicopter pilots had something similar happen to them. In the early days, while working out of Savannakhet, Wayne Knight was carrying a White Star captain in the left seat. Preparing to launch, Wayne discovered that he was unable to move the cyclic much aft of neutral. Looking at his passenger, he noticed the man wore two canteens on the back of his web belt, causing him to sit too far forward and inhibit the controls. The Special Forces captain had no head set, but by shouting Wayne made him understand the

²⁵As was my general policy, I never asked or learned the person's name. Normally too busy flying and navigating to socialize, I also could not inadvertently talk about him and blow his cover.

problem. After he removed the canteens and assumed a normal position in the seat, they departed.

That was not the end of the story. Shortly after take-off the captain opened a large map, so huge that it covered nearly half the instrument panel and some of the left windscreen, restricting his vision. When Wayne gestured for him to move the chart, the man mistook the gesture as an invitation to take the controls. Like a greedy kid, he grabbed the cyclic with a grip of steel and a huge grin on his face. After an interesting few minutes and a wrestling match, Wayne eventually managed to regain control of his ship.

After depositing my charges at Bouam Long, I returned to work and then to Sam Tong for the night. Because the FAG was USAF, I logged three hours and ten minutes SAR for my effort. More than anything, it was for my own personal satisfaction, for by that time nearly all of us had despaired of ever receiving any tangible compensation.

The exercise at Ban Song was only temporary, delaying the inevitable. By early May, road watch teams reported increased movements along both Routes-6 and 7. There was some confusion and speculation as to the reason. It could have been an attempt to increase supplies before the rains started in earnest, or for local security, or an unlikely attack on Moung Soui. Then, on 11 May, the enemy attacked Ban Song in force. After holding in place for two days, 800 Meo troops, with 650 dependents, withdrew to safer areas.²⁶

Despite seasonal smoke, haze, and embedded thunderstorms, along with foot-dragging locals, that curtailed maximum time, I

²⁶Ken Conboy, 154, 160 fn 12.
Victor Anthony, 196.
EW Knight Email, 07/31/00.

put in almost a full day, which then normally was about eight hours. Although we still sought the ten-hour criteria of the old days, more leisurely hours and a good breakfast went a long way toward keeping us fit and healthy.

On the 20th, I ferried Hotel-15 to Udorn.

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma had long reminded Ambassador Sullivan of the need for more emphasis on USAF close air support and interdiction in MR-2 to thwart any communist designs on the lower Mekong Valley and its population centers. Although air power was used in the Barrel Roll area, the U.S. air operation there was much less than in the Panhandle and southern Laos.

Communist movement into the lower regions, and a threat of a takeover of the river towns, would likely stimulate a capitulation of the present RLG. After Lao accommodation with the enemy, USG would be restricted from using Lao air space for striking North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh Trail system.

In April, realization of the result of neglecting Barrel Roll prompted high ranking 7/13th Air Force officers based in Udorn to authorize thirty-two sorties per day in the Barrel. The aircraft would primarily target enemy logistic bases to destroy munitions, supplies, and food stocks required to mount a large offensive. As targets of opportunity, alternate objectives would center on troops and vehicles.

Although not overwhelming, the few aircraft were employed to assist in the projected move to recover lost territory in and around Moungh Heim, Moungh Son, and Na Khang. ²⁷

²⁷ John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices: Perspectives on the War Years 1941-1982*, Briefing Notes from 7/13 Air Force Udorn (Viking, 1984) 240-242.

UDORN

Four months and twenty-one days after the projected completion Ben Moore's dream project was realized. Aided by assistant Tex Dew and Clarence Abadie, employees began transitioning into the two-story operations-administration building. During a time of rapid infrastructure expansion, "Tex," a former U.S. Marine Corps colonel, had been hired the previous year as Ben's assistant. He spent considerable time with the Deputy Chief JUSMAG (DepChief) working on the facility's bricks and mortar projects. In addition, Company management relations with Pat Landry thawed under "Tex." However, Dew never became overly involved in the Flight Department's operational matters.

CPH Knight got along well with Dew, but he had the feeling that he was wary of CJ Abadie. On the surface, their relationship appeared cordial, but they never worked well together. This may have stemmed from former military rank disparities, job classification, or the fact that not many people were fond of Ab's particular personality.

Air America's gleaming white edifice constituted the largest construction project anywhere in the vicinity of the constantly evolving compound, and a testimony to Western architectural brilliance. Everything had not been completed, but what was certainly represented a vast improvement over the rotting subpar offices utilized over the past few years. Because of the Theater's escalating war, and requirements to expand Air America's maintenance and field services in neutral Laos, we had come a long way from the 1961 tent operations to permanent concrete structures...and construction was not over.

Ever critical of his superiors, Tom Penniman believed the excess time assigned to the bricks and mortar operations of the new building by Moore, Abadie, and to some extent by Vice



North view of Air America Udorn Administration-Operations building. Begun July 1965, construction was supervised by OICC, Bangkok. Completion and transition to the structure began during April 1966.

Air America Log, Volume 2, #4, pg 1.

President of Flight Operations (VPFO) Taipei, Tom Boyd, were conducted at the expense of normal upcountry operations. It closely mirrored agonizing decisions they exhibited over the Club waitress uniforms in 1965. Having some input into the operations area as Operations Manager, Penniman lobbied for a glass wall with a sliding opening at the counter where pilots could access the aircraft log books. However, Boyd was anti-glass, claiming it displayed fingerprints. The two men eventually settled on a roll down louver type barrier at the counter, and a pass-through window to the adjoining radio room where flight slips were exchanged.

Tom was also in charge of ground transportation, responsible for dispatching Volkswagen B-bus drivers to pick up scheduled crewmembers. The Company was still hiring pilots and mechanics. The original map displaying employee residences was crowded with "X" marks referring to former residences like Abadie's old house, Connor's former house, the Vichit Compound, and others. Over time the map had become very congested and difficult to read with the numbers of outdated addresses, so Tom traced major roads, klongs, and compounds on a fresh sheet of paper. Then he assigned fictitious street names like Pennsylvania Avenue, Knight Compound (Chet's place), and Pine Tree Lane. For driver ease of recognition, numbers were plotted on the roads or alongside employees' houses.

After reviewing Penniman's original map, "Tex" Dew stormed downstairs challenging Tom's handicraft, *"By whose authority have you been naming these streets?"* Tom considered "Tex's" tirade "much ado about nothing." He was not creating an international incident, only attempting to simplify an antiquated system. However, from that moment, "Tex's" abusive manner ended all attempts at a friendly relationship.

A second confrontation occurred when Tom's clerk, Mrs. Tomsak, answered a phone call from Dew. As instructed, she politely inquired as to the caller's name. Taking umbrage with this technique, like before, "Tex" stormed downstairs angrily demanding to know about the problem recognizing his voice. Tom patiently explained that in the culture he was raised, callers always identified themselves at the outset of the call. Then Dew left, mumbling to himself when Penniman facetiously indicated he that would consult his copy of *The Officer's Guide*, issued him by the USAF when commissioned. The book of military etiquette dealt with issues such as dining in, commander's receptions, and so forth. Aware that he was able to easily nettle Dew, Tom continued his fun for the short time he remained in Udorn.

Tom was largely unconcerned about Dew, for he was already receiving feelers from Vice President of Flight Operations Tom Boyd to relocate to Taipei. Boyd liked Penniman's writing talents and wanted him at the head shed. Therefore, marking relief to both men, in late August, Penniman accepted the promotion as one of Boyd's Assistant Directors of Flight Operations, reporting to Tom Boyd and Bob Chase. He was replaced by Dennis Grace.

Major area improvements required increased utilities. Water was always the main issue at the Air America facility. The small lake located to the southwest, where all water was obtained for the base treatment plant, was almost dry. A large reservoir was needed to supply year-round water, but negotiations for land and funding had not been fruitful.

As Base Manager and overseer of our facility, Ben Moore was exposed almost daily to diverse and varied situations. Many were entirely new and subject to trial and error, required sensitive and creative deliberation. Right after the pool was opened and third country national children began using it, there were

complaints, and some evidence of urinating and defecating in the water. Therefore, Ben had a no-no sign fashioned and erected with a picture of a child's arcing stream into the pool. It was both humorous and effective.

During earlier days, when our local organization was much smaller, Chinese staff, who conducted operations, operated the radios, and performed other critical jobs, attempted to ingratiate themselves to Ben. To accomplish this, they took Ben and CPH Wayne Knight downtown once a month to a second-floor Chinese restaurant. His Chinese hosts always took great pains to ensure that the guests of honor fully enjoyed themselves. Part of this task required getting them, particularly Ben, totally snookered. While the guests imbibed authentic alcoholic drinks, all the Chinese except Y.C. Chiang drank tea. Therefore, in order to keep Ben's drinks flowing and achieve their end, they toasted each new dish served. Naturally, there were enough dishes to ensure their goal. Ben would get wobbly, but nothing like Y.C., whose peers had to carry him down the narrow set of stairs. In his friends' eyes, it was a shameful thing for Y.C. to do, one that lost a lot of face.

The new building and ensuing expansion of services required additional employees. As stipulated by USG-RTG bilateral agreements, expanding personnel slots were filled by well qualified and educated Thai personnel. Some were truly outstanding.

After the Club Rendezvous had been built, Ben discovered that, unused to Western sit-down toilets, the Thai male tendency of squatting on top of the seats had not waned. Since the

employees squatted with their shoes on, the habit had a tendency to dirty the seats for more conventional sitters.²⁸

Hoping to forestall problems faced at Club facilities, the Base Manager had a sign placed at a strategic location warning employees not to "perch." One day, Ben sat on a cracked plastic seat, likely broken by a "percher." After adjusting his wide derriere, the crack widened, pinching a fleshy and highly tender portion of his anatomy. In addition, he had a difficult and painful time pulling loose from the seat. Ben was livid, determined to take action. As a result of the incident, he had Facility Maintenance erect anti-perching signs in all toilet stalls.

One day, as a serious flap was unfolding, Wayne climbed the stairs to Ben's office to brief him. Because of the critical nature of the problem, Ben decided to venture downstairs with the CPH to more closely monitor the situation. On the way outside they stopped at the rest room. While relieving themselves, Ben noticed a toilet door closed with no feet visible on the floor. Angrily, he grabbed a mop and began swinging it under the door. At the same time, he shouted, "*I want to see feet in there!*" The Thai man, probably a bus driver or operations employee, recognized Captain Moore's voice and was terrified. Shivering with fear he opened the door and was indeed observed "perching." After the word circulated among the

²⁸ Instead of elevated Western commodes, Oriental toilets were efficient one-hole porcelain devices almost flush on the floor with side foot pads to accommodate squatting. I first observed Asian "perching" at the USMC Basic School Quantico, Virginia. As our allies in the early war against the Northern communists and Viet Cong, several South Vietnamese officers attended the school. With open stalls in the men's room, the reader can imagine our amusement and glee when first observing the South Vietnamese "perching."

employees, Wayne was reasonably certain "perching" largely ceased.

Accountant Chuck Schwartzburg maintained an office on the second floor. Next to him were popular Personnel Manager Bob Klann, and then Ben Moore.

Chuck was single and an interesting study. The heavy individual imported a very classy and good-looking female named Pria from Bangkok for carnal purposes. Sans Chuck, Pria occasionally liked to sit at the bar with a girl friend to drink and pass time with men, whom she could charm and count as potential clientele. As expected, this was not a popular move with the married women, particularly Lai Knight, the somewhat haughty, self-professed mother hen of our organization. On a bingo night at the Club, Lai and Pria engaged in "Thai conversation," that likely centered on Pria's presence in the Club with a fellow lady of the night. Whatever was said fomented heated agitation. Consequently, Club Manager Art Angelo was summoned by Lai to escort Pria and her friend from the Club. Later, when Lai opened her green Volkswagen's door to return home to the Chet compound, she discovered "someone" had defecated on the driver's seat. The car had been rendered a foul and smelly mess. Compounding the situation, and to her ultimate disgust, feces had been wiped and pressed into the vehicle headliner's perforated holes. Apparently, there were no witnesses to the act. Although skating for lack of proof, it seemed that Pria had exacted her revenge. However, circumstantial evidence implicated her, and for this inferred socially incorrect infraction, she was banished from the Air America compound. The brief episode marked a first and last. No one had ever heard of such a dastardly deed being committed before. As were all interesting and diverse occurrences in our relatively sterile society, the incident was the talk of Air

America for a time, then it quickly faded into the dustbin of obscurity. To many not involved it was humorous, but the ultimate recipient, CPH Knight, was not at all amused.

Pria, a working woman reputedly capable of enormous appetites, became too much for Chuck to handle. Therefore, she gravitated to Charlie Weitz, and then ended up in Vientiane, where she provided services, and much later starred in "Dirty" George's blue movies.

Schwartzburg later engaged another girl to live with him. When leaving Air America to return to Brooklyn, New York, he presented the lady his red sports car. ²⁹ She encountered Tom Penniman at Max's bar on Patpong and gave him a nude eight by ten-inch colored photo of herself for Chuck. Tom, who considered sending the photo to Chuck's mother's house entirely unsuitable, tossed it into the circular file.

Management had access to the new building's roof, where they could observe the runway and flight line. It was a busy time for the USAF Kaman HH-43 helicopter crews suppressing fires. One day, Penniman observed a T-28 training pilot cob his engine during takeoff. Without using proper rudder control to counteract torque, the aircraft stalled and crashed. Another time, an F-4C pilot staggered over the numbers. Halfway down the runway, "walking on afterburner," the nose pitched up. At this point, the pilot ejected laterally and was killed. ³⁰

²⁹ I later encountered Schwartzburg in Esfahan, Iran while working as a helicopter instructor for Bell Helicopter International. Having trouble with another Thai woman and planning to leave the country, he sold me his white Paykan vehicle at a fair discount. Right after the transaction, the acrimony was resolved in their relationship. As a result, Chuck did not leave and had to purchase another car.

³⁰ Ben Moore April 1966 Monthly Report.
EW Knight Emails, 06/28/00, 07/18/00.
Tom Penniman Emails, 03/02/00, 02/27/00, 03/03/00, 03/04/00, 03/08/00, 03/31/00, 04/02/00, 07/05/01.

The buildup continued on the Air Force side of the field. Charlie Carlson, who kept his eyes and ears open and seemed to know everyone, was still pursuing the idea of creating a bakery to provide bread to the Air Force. In addition, he mentioned to me that Air Force leaders, disgusted with local contractor incompetence and corruption, were looking for someone to erect 200 more barracks. They would prefer an honest American to assume responsibility and honcho the work. The idea of a project or two to fill in my increasingly spare time was somewhat appealing to me. Of course, Charlie wanted a partner with money. However, there were other factors to consider: I was still curious about Carlson's motives and methods in dealing with people. In addition, I was aware of, and suspicious, of the Thai methodology in business matters. Tony Poe had a gravel business that was usurped by a Thai partner when it proved lucrative. Others had started bars and restaurants with Thai fronts, only to lose them to greedy individuals. For these reasons, I never entertained investing or doing business with a Thai. Jim Moore's deal was different. Lastly, with prime American targets located at the airfield and increasing communist trouble in Sakon Nakhon-Nakhon Phanom Provinces, I worried about commencement of overt communist subversion in our area. Trouble seemed only a matter of time. A little common sense and caution caused me to wait and observe.

Except for his vegetable business with Khun Yai, none of Charlie's proposed projects ever achieved fruition.

Doctor Springle's assessment and recommendation was correct. Tuie never should have returned to Udorn, for she was experiencing pains and those symptoms associated with a birth. Although she did not want to return to Bangkok so soon, to be

safe, on Saturday 23 April, I sent her south on the train with receiving blankets and recommended items. I had not completed flying for the month, so Khun Tha accompanied her. If her stay was extended, I planned to join her later. I kept Wayne informed about our situation and my need to stay "light on the skids."

BOO-BOO

On the 28th, I was scheduled to fly Hotel-12 and work at Pakse. After completing a preflight, and while preparing to climb to the cockpit, Captain George Carroll arrived and informed me that operations wanted me to drop him off at Savannakhet. With him was Richard "Pappy" Wright, an older looking man who I thought was a new training flight mechanic. I told George to hop into the left seat, while "Pappy" entered the cabin section. Halfway to L-39, George informed me that the guy in the belly was a pilot recently arrived from the Saigon Huey program. Possessing an abundance of H-34 experience, he was already a Captain, and he should be sitting in the left seat. This was quite a revelation. Since Wright was not on the flight schedule and I had never seen him before, I had no idea of his status and never considered that he was a pilot. In fact, I thought we were through hiring new people.

Well, after being apprised of my embarrassing error, I told George to go below and inform the man to climb up and take his seat. Smiling and looking sheepishly at Wright, I hoped he was not too upset and apologized profusely. He was seemingly a good sport and accepted the poor explanation for my blunder. I resolved to be more careful in the future. In later years Pappy and I enjoyed laughing about the incident.

"Pappy" and I worked around the Plateau supporting the PS-22 guerrilla training movement there. In 1967, as special guerrilla units SGU were trained and enlarged, additional

eastern and southeastern rim outposts and bases were developed as listening posts and launch pads for raids east across the valley on the enemy trail system.

The following day, after flying one fuel load, I was relieved and caught a ride to Udorn on YB-PCJ.

John Richard Casterlin entered this world at 0921 hours on Monday 2 May in the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital. He was nineteen inches long and weighed six pounds seven ounces, quite large for a petite female like Tuie to deliver. My son was named John in memory of my favorite male cousin John "Bruce" Anderson, who died in Germany while serving in the U.S. Army. Richard after his Dad, although we called him "Ricky" after my former roommate and squadron mate at New River Rick Sweeney, who also died prematurely.

As the Thai communication system was still largely undeveloped, news was slow moving through the kingdom. Therefore, I learned about the birth early the following day when Khun Tha arrived by the overnight train. After informing Charlie, they Jeeped to my house and woke me. I think Charlie was more excited than I was, for while I readied for a trip south, he rushed to the airport to try and organize transportation south for me. After I obtained money from the Siam City Bank, made other preparations to leave, and arranged with Wayne for sufficient time off, Charlie took me to the airfield. Amazingly, he cut through all the military red tape and received permission for me to ride on an Air Force C-123 to Don Muang Airport. As a civilian I could not have achieved this on my own, and as Thai Airways was not flying that day, I would have had to wait hours for the night train.

After a long taxi ride to town, I checked into the Suriwongse Hotel. Then I hired a taxi for the trip to the hospital, where I discovered that all was not well. Although having cold spells and feeling tired, Tuie appeared fine. Doctor Springle indicated that the natural birth of about six hours had

proved relatively easy. ¹ However, there were serious complications with my son. The Doctor said although appearing normal at birth, "Rick" was blue when delivered and failed to breathe for about five minutes. The doctor called it anoxia, adding that it required his mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and oxygen to initiate respiration. He could provide no medical explanation for the problem, and did not comment on the baby's near-term prognosis or possible brain damage.

I walked down the hall with dark thoughts coursing through my brain. After viewing "Rick" through the receiving room window, I was devastated. He was still a bit cyanotic, and twitched constantly in the nurse's arms. It looked like he was fighting for life. A plastic tube introduced through his nose into his stomach was used for medication and feeding. I did not say anything to Tuie at the time, but left later not feeling optimistic regarding his survival. As when my dog, Caesar, became sick and died, I felt totally helpless, unable to influence the outcome.

By Thursday, although still twitching, the baby was resting better and displayed a much-improved color. Although he looked strong, he was not well enough to be brought to his mother. She had not seen him yet and, beginning to produce milk, wondered at the delay in seeing him. To mollify her, I positively described his black hair, blue eyes, tiny nose, and commented that it appeared he would favor Western genes.

Because of the baby's size, Tuie had been surgically opened to allow his passage. She was slow in healing, and developed a minor infection which required frequent treatments with a heat lamp. At such times I was requested to wait in the small

¹We were not sure if a caesarean section would be required.

anteroom across from her room. I filled in this time reading a most interesting book about General Douglas MacArthur.

"Rick" made steady progress and was nursing. During my time away from the hospital, I found a medical book in the USIS library that described his condition at birth as asphyxia neonatorum. The technical material gave me hope that he might be alright. Unlike adults, apparently babies could survive short periods of oxygen deprivation to the brain without serious consequences to their overall development. Of course, in my son's case, this was an unknown.

Doctor Springle indicated that "Rick" was strong enough to be circumcised. After hassling with Tuie about having him circumcised, one was scheduled on the tenth. She must have thought it was a major operation, and initially opposed it until one of the nurses convinced her to the contrary. Better to have it done as a baby when it would not be remembered. I recalled Captain Guy Destefano walking around the Air America compound like a bowlegged crab and hurting for days after enduring a circumcision at the Bangkok Christian Hospital just prior to his Air America termination and departure for Boston. Normally an upbeat person who joked a lot, he was not joking then. Healed and feeling better, Tuie was also supposed to have work done on her teeth that day. Consequently, I was writing sizeable checks (a mere pittance compared to today's standards) to cover hospital expenses.

Khun Tha returned to monitor the situation. After receiving a "thumbs up" from Springle as to "Rick" and Tuie's condition, with Plang's support, and feeling both my people were doing fine, I returned to Udorn. I had exceeded my STO and was not sure if I would be docked accrued leave for the extra days, which I wanted to save for actual leave in the States. In addition, I needed to get back to work.

Before leaving on the Thursday night train, I sent a letter home with an update on the baby and Tuie. In the letter, as Dad had found prices for the Mustang as good as or better than that quoted by the Cars International representative, I authorized him to purchase the vehicle in his local area of Plainfield, Westfield, or Maplewood, New Jersey. The car would come equipped with all the accessories I specified. Tuie and I agreed on a black paint scheme with a red interior. Pending paperwork, health, and work scheduling, the trip home was planned for the middle of July or before.

Posting mail through the Thai system at a small branch office located on New Road was always an experience. At any time during working hours, there was hustle and bustle involved, with undisciplined individuals cutting into the line and also squeezing in at the front grill where a civil servant issued stamps. Despite my hard glares, interlopers were not intimidated or dissuaded, and I was happy they could not read my murderous thoughts. The standard glue pot sat on the counter to provide patrons with additional mucilage to prevent theft of the stamps.

RLAF GENERAL THAO MA MAHAANOSITH

Like his friend Kong Le, Thao Ma was a southerner who had sprung from humble roots. Displaying leadership qualities during the First Indochina War as an enlisted man, he was chosen by French mentors to attend the Dong Hene officer academy east of Seno in MR-3, with other potential leaders of the period. Initially serving with paratrooper units, he gravitated to aviation. He received flying training from French instructors at various locations in the T-6 and multiengine aircraft. Through friendship with Phoumi Nosavan, Ma was assigned command of the fledgling RLAF. Earning his bones and reputation as a fearless leader, when Savannakhet became operational in mid-1963, Ma's

AT-28 pilots were the first to commence air strikes against the Ho Chi Minh Trail system in the fall of 1964.

Ma was known as a fighter and nationalist, one who was exceptionally firm regarding Lao independence and defense of his country from enemies, both within and without. However, the emotional man was never a particularly good manager or politician. Indeed, he exhibited a temper, and distinct inability to organize a staff, delegate authority, duties, or multi task. He was considered by several top echelon generals too independent in T-28 operations. Ma made enemies. Outside the system, he failed to conform to standards set by elitist and moneyed Vientiane generals, individuals who, due to family influence and corruption, purchased their commands. In addition, largely because of his association with Generals Phoumi Nosavan, Kham Khong, Vang Pao, and Siho, and while striving to maintain independence for his command, the stubborn general often butted heads with biased General Staff members over military issues and other matters.

Ma managed to remain neutral during the 1965 coup. However, later that year, he incurred top level ire when Generals Kouprasith Abhay, Ouane Rathikoun, and Oudone Sananikone ordered him to transfer several C-47s to Wattay Airport. He refused for several reasons. The previous year, he had experimented with using C-47s as close ground support gun platforms, and he wanted to continue the conversions. Secondly, he was aware that the generals wanted the ships solely for personal reasons to haul relatives' livestock. Also, to slake their greed and enrichment, they paid Ma's pilots to deliver opium from what became known as the "Golden Triangle," the tri-border area of Thailand, Laos, and Burma to French ships off the Cambodian coast; and illegally smuggle gold into Saigon. His refusal to honor superiors' orders, his independence, and jealousy of other officers for his

acknowledged accomplishments, placed Ma on the top line of a target list of people to be replaced. ²

April Fool's Day 1966 found Ma standing tall in front of the General Staff and Souvanna Phouma in Vientiane. General Ouane dressed him down, indicating that he was too independent, that his command was not a separate service beholden to USG, but just an arm of the RLA General Staff. During the face losing session Ma was accused of failing to delegate authority and mismanaging the C-47 program. The crowning blow occurred when generals accused him of according excess emphasis to trail interdiction and ignoring Military Region Four operations. Close air support of the troops was deemed the primary T-28 mission.

Because of a previous high-level objective to replace General Ma, a decision had been made to assign him to a desk job at the General Staff headquarters as Deputy Chief of Operations. However, Ma was noncommittal as to accepting this billet.

Two days later, during talks with Souvanna Phouma, Ambassador Sullivan was apprised of points made at the "Fool's" meeting. He stated that T-28 pilots under the command of General Ma had performed well. Furthermore, the military would most likely find a solution to the C-47 problem.

By then it was abundantly clear to American leaders that General Ouane and his cronies were intent on replacing Ma with a more compliant ground-pounder, Brigadier General Sourith Don Sasorith, who was currently attending a staff course at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. It appeared the Prime Minister was sympathetic with the move. Taking the position of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it," some Americans in high positions,

²This Sierra list included FAN leader Kong Le. The generals would have liked more control over Vang Pao, but his army, supplied and advised by the Agency, was still outside the Lao MAP.

cognizant that General Ma was **the** important cog in RLAF effectiveness, organizational morale, and USG Theater interests interdicting the Trails, did not concur with such a change. However, Ambassador Sullivan, who was realistic enough to discern that this change was probably going to happen sooner rather than later, elected to remain neutral in the internal Lao problem.

An unrepentant general Ma departed for his command to resume pressing duties. During the first week in May, amply rewarded by Vientiane generals, his chief of staff and several T-28 pilots began fomenting problems. Since escaping one assassination attempt in mid-1966, like that portrayed in besieged Mafia family battles, Ma temporarily "went to the mat." On the seventh, the U.S. Embassy received reports of trouble brewing at Savannakhet, with Ma being arrested by his men. When Sullivan further investigated the rumor, Souvanna Phouma allowed that it was greatly overstated, but concurred that something unusual was occurring.

Tom Hoppe was directed to Lima-39 to work on the seventh, but was reassigned to Pakse to avoid the internal Lao problem. During APMS in the movie room, he recalled Ed Reid railing about the treatment General Ma was receiving from his superiors.

By the eleventh, Sullivan apprised State that the situation at Savannakhet was reported tense, and that troops and artillery surrounded the airfield. The Prime Minister informed him that Ma was being relieved as RLAF Commander. Sourith would assume the duty upon his return from C&GSC School at Fort Leavenworth in the USA. At that time, Ma would be assigned to the General Staff as Deputy Chief for Operations and Intelligence. With no promotion involved, this would strictly amount to an army job. Sullivan, harboring a plan for compromise, accepted an invitation to a meeting the following day in Savannakhet. Ouane,

Sisouk na Champassak, who was Boun Oum's nephew and Minister of Finance, would also attend.

Ma had at least one supporter in Sisouk. The ambassador, another lukewarm supporter, requested that T-28 tactical flexibility be maintained. A compromise was reached and Ma was allowed to remain temporary RLAF commander. However, in return for this, with the U.S. Embassy monitoring the situation, he agreed that by 5 June he would relinquish control of the RLAF to his chief of staff. The air headquarters would subsequently relocate to Vientiane and be restructured along lines to please the General Staff. Transport plane activity would be regulated under General Staff control.

Ma agreed to the changes in principal, but was not satisfied. He, and other disgruntled southern generals, Colonel Noupheet and Colonel Bounleut Saycocie, mostly former Phoumists, saw the handwriting on the wall. They conspired to rebel against the Vientiane generals prior to the takeover date. However, at the eleventh-hour cold feet prevailed. Only one GM commander participated, surrounding the Savannakhet airfield. The ill-conceived revolt attempt was over within two days. Even the Vientiane U.S. Embassy staff was displeased by the distasteful action. Left with no other choice, and under heavy pressure, Ma agreed to the stipulated reorganization provisions. These were implemented with an additional provision that when Pakse, Savannakhet, Vientiane, and Luang Prabang fields were adequately prepared to accommodate sustained air operations, the forty T-28s and pilots would be split into four units and assigned to the four airfields. Thus distracted, Lao T-28 reconnaissance came to a virtual standstill against Route-110. Therefore, unable to rely on unproductive U.S. reconnaissance, General Westmoreland suspended further air action against the Sihanouk Trail until October.

Acquiescing to FAR General Staff demands, in June, General Ma, along with twelve T-28s and thirty pilots, relocated to Luang Prabang to begin supporting a proposed Nam Bac operation code named Operation Prasane (Cleveland to Air America crewmembers). Although required for the operation's success, Air America pilots found the Lao pilots arrogant, usurping airspace in the immediate airport landing pattern. Perhaps they were low on fuel or anxious to conduct another bombing run. Whatever the reason, one had to be extremely careful flying around the airfield. Even if helicopter and fixed wing pilots were cleared to land by the tower operator, T-28 pilots returning from northern missions often flew directly through the normal traffic pattern ahead of other landing traffic.

Later in the year, Captain Ted Cash was cut out of the pattern one day by a Lao T-28 pilot. Ted, a highly aggressive individual, who often allowed his emotions to take precedence in lieu of common sense, was so incensed that he confronted the Lao pilot on the ground with physical harm. As what previously occurred at Mounng Soui with a FAN officer, fearing for his life, the pilot brandished his personal handgun in Ted's face. Stories like this circulated rapidly through our outfit, creating a sense of distrust with our supposed allies. As opposed to Vang Pao's strict law of death regarding threatening an Air America pilot with a weapon, nothing was done about this incident. However, I, like most other sensible pilots, gave the T-28 boys

a wide berth while landing at Luang Prabang. After all, it was their country. ³

MR-2

Shortly after Vang Pao returned to Long Tieng, following a long and painful recuperation from his wounds incurred during the loss of Na Khang, joint Meo-Agency planning and execution of an offensive to retake lost territory in upper Military Region Two moved into high gear. Because of a dearth of troops available for the operation, men would have to be scrounged from other areas of Military Region Two, and delivered to forward sites. Therefore, mostly Special Guerrilla Units and ADC regulars were tapped in lieu of depleted FAR units.

After Tom Moher returned from home leave, Mike Jarina was released from the J&B commitment in Bangkok. On 2 May, he deadheaded to Sam Tong on Helio Courier B-849. Because of early rains that began in late April, the trip took two and a half hours for a normal one-hour flight. Continuing poor weather inundating the area prevented Mike from flying Hotel-42 until the fifth.

³Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 156-157.
 Victor Anthony, 200-202.
 Officer & Gallacher, United States Air Force Oral History Program, Interview #651 Lieutenant Colonel Bill Keeler, Eglin AFB, 02/05/73, p 14.
 Memorandum Office Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Deputy Director Far East Region William Hamilton) to Deputy Assistant for Far Eastern Affairs (Leonard Unger), Prospective Change in RLAF, 05/04/66 FRUS, 232.
 William Sullivan to State, 05/07/66.
 Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, 05/15/66, 233.
 Tom Hoppe Letter.
 Jacob Van Staaveren, 125.
 John Pratt, *Project, 31-34 CHECO: The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970*, Headquarters PACAF, directorate Tactical Evaluation, CHECO Division, Reprinted by Dalley Book Service, Christiansburg, Virginia.

On Tuesday, despite still being hampered by foul weather, Mike and Joe Galulais managed nineteen landings. Covering a wide area, they either moved or redistributed troops to the hills four miles east of Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72). A secondary purpose was to count noses and alert local commanders to prepare to release troops to supplement and reinforce the Na Khang operation. Another mission took Mike to high ground three miles west of Khang Kho (LS-204). Both sites more or less overlooked what we called the back door from the southern Plain of Jars. Afternoon marshalling trips continued fourteen miles east of Vang Vieng and Phou So (LS-57), an old Meo area located on a high mountain north of Moung Soui, where we "turned the corner" when flying to upper Military Region Two. General Vang Pao frequently obtained men from this site for operations. Toward day's end, Mike went to New Ban Bouac (LS-116) eight miles east-northeast of Ban Peung (LS-95) and Phou Sao. After retrieving SGU troops from the training site at Moung Cha (LS-113), culled from the best recruits available in the Moung Moc region, he flew back to Long Tieng and Sam Tong.

As had been the pre-monsoon season pattern of previous years, most Pathet Lao and Vietnamese units in upper Military Region Two withdrew toward Sam Neua Town to rest and refit, until the dry season. Impassable roads presenting logistical problems played a major role in this policy. Spies and scattered farming families living throughout contested areas reported the presence or absence of enemy forces to Vang Pao, who would then plan his next move. One great advantage we enjoyed over a far superior army equipped with outstanding weapons was the UH-34D. It was a versatile helicopter that possessed the capability to move troops quickly from mountain top to mountain top, despite adverse weather patterns. Consequently, each year Vang Pao used this period to advantage, using H-34 crews to commence

offensives and retake lost territory. The tactic was mostly successful and few troops were lost during the operations. From all indications, the 1966 wet season appeared to be beginning early.

During April, 7th Air Force, in conjunction with CIA Vientiane and Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Tieng, along with the assistance of USAF personnel John Garrity, Bill Keeler, and Charlie Jones, formed a close working relationship. They collectively responded to timely intelligence for strike aircraft in support of ground action in upper Military Region Two. By late April and early May, the troops we had positioned northwest from Bouam Long in mid-April simultaneously moved unopposed into the heights at Phu Cum and San Pa Ka. Highly motivated, with nothing seemingly inhibiting them, and using covering weather, they continued down the mountainsides into the Moung Heim Valley. Essential to the operation was the USAF Birddog FAC pilot, who was knowledgeable in the area and carried latest photo intelligence. Aided by Meo troops, who ferreted out enemy hiding places and supplies, successful air strikes were conducted. Pounded by air, well behind their supply lines, and anticipating an early wet season, most PL units originally left in place by main Vietnamese units to occupy conquered territory, withdrew to the east. Probably also influencing their decision to depart was an appalling stench of death permeating the area. Attaining and securing three of four primary goals, encountering only minor resistance, one friendly group began moving north toward Moung Son, another toward Na Khang. By the sixth, Moung Son was deemed secure enough for helicopters to shut down. The western flanks for the proposed Na Khang offensive were taking shape.



Captain Ron Dubinsky taking a break during Moung Son, Laos (LS-59) fueling operations.

Jarina Collection.

On the same day, Jarina departed Sam Tong to shuttle troops into and refugees out of Site-59. During the course of a twenty-nine landing day, he ferried a Meo officer to Phu Pha Thi to consult and coordinate with the commanding officer there to obtain additional troops for Mung Son and the push on Na Khang. Teaming up with Mike, John Fonburg also worked the area. Both were aware that some enemy elements were possibly still lurking in the vicinity. In passing, while flying at 2,000 feet ASL toward Mung Son, they observed a gaggle of people marching south. On the way back, the "people" began shooting. John added power and departed. Noting the people were not wearing uniforms, Mike radioed they were most likely our folks. John was still unconvinced, so they departed the area. Later, they discovered that the individuals on the ground were attempting to obtain their attention by firing shotguns. ⁴

MR-1

As with operations developing around Na Khang, preparations were still underway to probe, capture, and consolidate high ground surrounding three sides of the Nam Bac Valley for a possible wet season offensive. With Dien Bien Phu, a major North Vietnamese training and staging area, not far away, this was a risky proposition. Working out of Luang Prabang to achieve this end, we all took turns supporting sites deemed important to the operation. In addition to encircling the LS-203 area, in order to thwart enemy movement south and east from the airhead at Mung Sai, FAR and ADC work continued in the lower Beng Valley.

⁴Memorandum CIA to 303 Committee, 09/08/66.
Ken Conboy, 154-155.
Mike Jarina, Interviews.
Bill Leary 1966 Notes.

During the final days of April and first two in May, Tom Hoppe, assigned Hotel-33, flew missions to Phou Keu, twenty-three miles northwest of LP, thirteen miles northwest of Nam Bac and five miles northeast of Route-4, close enough to keep track of any enemy movement. Also working north of Nam Bac, he landed at Ban "Y" (LS-187), located seventeen miles north northeast of the valley, then twelve miles North Northwest to Ban Chik Chung. One trip took him twenty-five miles northeast of Luang Prabang (LP) and east of Nam Oy. Another assignment was flown twenty-seven miles west of LP to an observation post overlooking the Mekong at the river's "S" turn. One flight involved supporting Phu Houei Mouei, twenty-six miles southwest of Luang Prabang in Sayaboury Province, a site AID representative Duane Hammer and I had journeyed to several years before to check for suspected phantom troops and a resulting padded payroll the village leader/commanding officer was reporting.

On the seventh, two days before returning to Udorn, Mike Jarina was directed to Luang Prabang. With improved weather in Military Region One, he serviced positions out of Pakbeng, to include those five miles east of Bouam Lao. Then he supplied sites along the Thai-Lao border and in the hills twenty miles west of Luang Prabang, and three miles west and east in the foothills of Phou Vaysom Gnai.

The next day, after completing a mission seven miles east of Bouam Lao and Xieng Lom (LS-69A), Mike returned to Luang Prabang. Agency emphasis was focused on the north. After Ban Mok Plai, (LS-193), ten miles west northwest of Nam Bac, Mike flew missions to areas Hoppe had supported at Ban Chik Chung (LS-138) and Ban "Y" (LS-187).

On the 16th, I was assigned PIC of Hotel-41. With "Wot's that, Cap," Frankie Claveria as my Flight Mechanic, during the late morning we departed to work at the royal capital of Luang

Prabang. Since working with Air America, the old man's English comprehension and language ability had improved very little, and I hoped nothing serious would occur during our time upcountry to trigger language problems, for he would prove virtually worthless understanding, much less responding to a command. Filipino families tended to cluster in selected areas in Udorn Town. They most certainly conversed with each other in their native Tagalog language to the detriment of English. Therefore, language problems between many older Filipino Flight Mechanics and pilots, as recently evidenced with "Blackie" Mondello during our exploding Fox Mike radio dynamotor incident, continued.

After working many of the same positions as Mike Jarina and Tom Hoppe, I RON at the government "Bungalow." The next day, which included maximum flight time, I was redirected to Sam Tong. ⁵

THE COSTLY NA KHANG OPERATION

Teamwork is important to the success of any campaign. On the athletic field, teammates learn to trust each other's ability to catch a ball, or to run interference for the ball carrier. Some injuries may be incurred before victory is declared. Teamwork is even more essential on the battlefield, where trust is paramount and injuries can become a matter of life or death.

Na Khang (LS-36), north-northeast of the Plain of Jars, had been captured by the North Vietnamese forces in February. Despite evicting General Vang Pao's mixed FAR/Meo/Lao Theung units, the Vietnamese still smarted from the Pyrrhic victory and serious fanny licking incurred by allied air strikes and

⁵Mike Jarina Interviews, including his Flight Time Records. Tom Hoppe Letter.

friendly ground forces' deadly fire during that costly operation. After consolidating and reinforcing gains, they were determined to hold the site at all costs.

Efforts to counter and dislodge the enemy were already underway. Master Sergeant Charlie Jones, U.S Air Force Forward Air Ground and Forward Air Controller (FAG/FAC), using the Phu Cum (LS-50) strip as a base of operation, plus an Air America plane as a platform as a field-expedient to direct U.S. air strikes, proceeded with the Na Khang offensive. ⁶

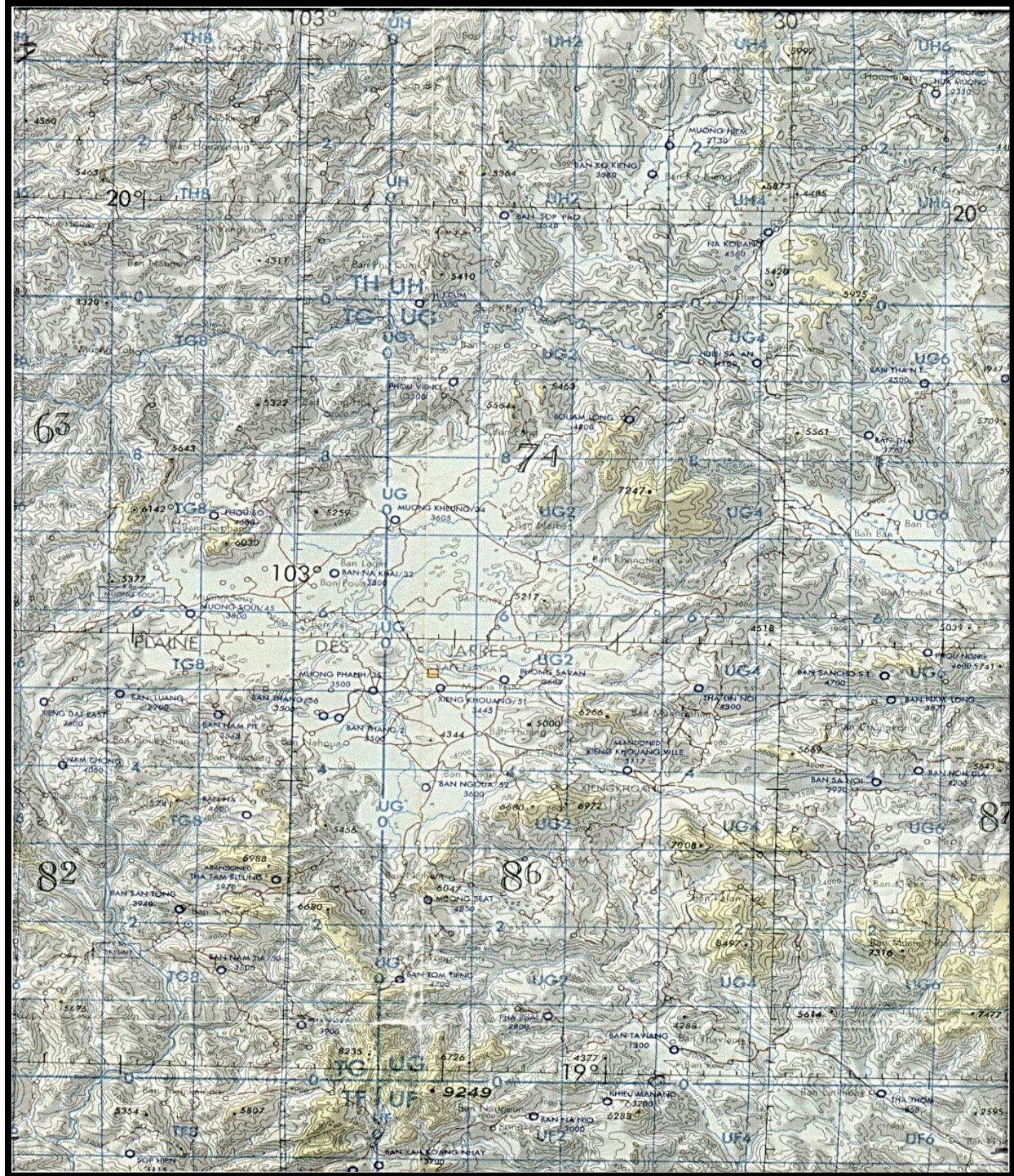
The May campaign to re-capture Na Khang illustrates the dire consequences that can develop when there are weak links in the team responsible for planning and execution of an operation.

The ground base of operations for the operation was the Moung Heim Valley, west of Na Khang. But to defend the northern and eastern flanks, first Moung Son (LS-59) located close to the border at the northern most portion of the valley had to be occupied, secured, defended, and supplied. This process was underway.

The morning following Company-required local night training with Bob Mitchell and Flight Mechanic Punzalan, Captain Mike Jarina launched for Sam Tong in Hotel-42. Accompanying him were training Flight Mechanic Jim Agnew, and Steve Nichols, who was assigned to show Jim the ropes. Logging thirty-four landings, Mike worked areas north of Vientiane and Moung Soui.

On the 11th, the men worked Phu Cum (LS-50), Moung Son (LS-59) and Phu Pha Thi (LS-85) in upper Military Region Two. Fuel hauled from Long Tieng (LS-20A) by helicopters and flown in by short takeoff and landing (STOL) configured Caribou planes enabled work to proceed at Lima Site-59. Shuttles from Site-85 to Moung Son provided additional fighting men to consolidate

⁶Ken Conboy, 155.



Object of the Meo offensive, Na Khang (LS-36), was located north-northeast of the Plain of Jars along Route-6 (brown line). Mounng Heim (LS-48) lay in a valley a few miles northwest of Site-36; Mounng Son was several miles north of Site-48. The high Tango mountain was south of Mounng Heim. The Route-6 valley where the incident occurred was east of the Tango mountain and below the road.

Author Collection.

positions around the site, protect the flanks, and provide troops for the push on Na Khang projected to commence on the 18th.

Thursday was spent shuttling ADC troops from Pha Phai (LS-65) east of Padong (LS-05) to Phou Cum, replacing those who had moved down the mountain into the Moung Heim Valley. Friday, the final day of the RON, was a rare high flight time period of eleven and a half hours and fifty-one landings, involving a frenzy of activity in preparation for the upcoming offensive. Numerous shuttles into Moung Son from the villages of Phu Pha Thi (LS-85), Houei Kha Moun (LS-111), and Houei Ma (LS-107) virtually stripped the northern sector bare of all but a skeleton force of Meo warriors. Toward evening Mike Jarina deadheaded back to Udorn leaving Hotel-40 and the Flight Mechanics for relief Captain Steve Stevens.

PLANNING

Air America operations Udorn was committed to providing a large number of H-34s and crews for the Na Khang operation. However, in order to preserve secrecy, all tactical preparations were to be conducted and implemented in the field. Consequently, the Sam Tong (LS-20) hostel was chock full of crewmembers on the evening of the seventeenth. Naturally, I was curious about this influx of personnel.

Overhearing back-of-the-hand, hush-hush conversation during and after dinner, I gathered that something was going to happen soon. From snippets of information, and by counting noses, I surmised that six aircraft and crews were involved in a large operation. However, when I inquired no one would divulge anything. I thought this quite strange and made a blanket statement that from previous experiences like the failed Ernie Brace rescue attempt in the Beng Valley last year, if anything

serious happened, I would surely be called upon to help. Therefore, it was far better if I was apprised now with the basics of what was going down. Despite my entreaty for information, my Socratic logic fell on deaf ears.

Later in the evening, while the in-the-know-people huddled around Assistant Chief Pilot Marius Burke, I asked blond-haired Helio Courier pilot, Paul Severson, if he knew anything. Paul, who lived in Udorn with his young Chinese wife, was a little more responsive than my peers. Offering information of which I already was aware, he indicated that six helicopters were going somewhere in the morning. Right. Armed with that morsel of non-information, annoyed with my peers' reluctance to divulge anything of substance, and more than a bit miffed, I retired.

The next morning, I was directed to work the Moug Son Valley near the mountainous border, some distance north of Moug Heim. There I shuttled supplies to hilltop outposts supporting troops who had recently occupied the site.

Fortunately, weaponry was not a negative factor when incorporating native populations into our operations. I had not been in the area since the time tribal refugees, disgusted with communist ideology, methodology, and constant abuse, walked south from both sides of the border to join Vang Pao's military efforts. Agency Customer Vint Lawrence had honchoed the day long operation. When the men arrived at the rally point, their flintlock rifles were confiscated and they were immediately reissued U.S. Army carbines or M-1 rifles. Unlike other pilots, I had never obtained a prized flintlock, so I asked Vint if I could have one. Before the day ended, my Filipino Flight Mechanic and I proudly possessed a native weapon.

My native artifact was a complete unit, with the customary bird feathers, and blood from the first kill smeared on the weapon's front stock. A buffalo powder horn, priming apparatus,

pig scrotum, bits of metal, and other culturally related items accompanied the rifle. The plugged horn was filled with fine black powder. From past discussions with USAID Customer Blaine Jensen, I knew that Meo tribesman collected bat dung from caves for its nitrate chemical properties. I assumed that black powdered charcoal was derived from crushing burned wood, but where yellow sulfur was obtained, I did not know. Perhaps bat dung contained most of the chemicals necessary for the mixture.⁷

Knowing that gunpowder will not explode unless sufficiently confined. I was curious as to the powder's burning potential. Therefore, sometime later, one night at dusk, I poured a large amount on the ledge of the low wall enclosing the small porch that overlooked a pond behind our house in Udorn. I was wearing the standard uniform of the day: "T" shirt, shorts, and shower shoes. Whoa! In an impressive display of the powder's capability, upon ignition heavy smoke, followed by an intense white flash and fire flared, singeing and burning a good amount of hair from my leg. With the odor of burning hair lingering to remind me of my folly, I became a believer in the tribal gunpowder's lethal potential.

Early that afternoon, I was instructed to proceed south to Moung Heim (LS-48A), located on the banks of the Nam Khan, about three miles north of two burned out villages at Chong Ha (LS-48).

As I landed, an excited red beret soldier waved a map at me. That meant little to me, and there was no Customer in sight to explain what he wanted. Apparently, as I suspected the previous night, I was being introduced to a situation without

⁷ I used to formulate a flash powder from these ingredients contained in my basic chemistry set when a boy.



One of two villages at Chong Ha (in the Moungh Heim Valley) destroyed by enemy forces during March 1966. As can be seen from the "permanent" structure on the village's left perimeter, the previously held neutralist area was viable for many years because of a bilateral accommodation with the Pathet Lao.

Jarina Collection.

benefit of a briefing. I made a mental note to say something about this at a more appropriate time.

WILMOT

While searching for answers I heard Bill Wilmot, pilot in command of Hotel-42, talking to another Captain on a standard frequency modulated (FM) radio channel. Bill, scheduled for standby at the Air America facility that morning, had been teaching Pinochle to Flight Mechanic Gary Gentz (DOH 02/15/66) in the Rendezvous Club bar lounge. Toward afternoon he was assigned to work upcountry with Flight Mechanic Matt Luca.

A former U.S. Marine crew chief and Temporary Flight Mechanic during the early days of the Air America Madriver Operation, Wilmot had departed the Company in 1963 to pursue a commercial rotorcraft pilot license and experience. Employing backdoor procedures, Bill was not the first pilot the Company hired who had "pencil whipped" flight time in his logbook to increase the number of fictional hours at the controls of an H-34. However, he was the first former Flight Mechanic to achieve pilot status. Unlike others, at least the well-liked individual was honest about the padding. ⁸

During previous periods of intense high time flying days, Wilmot had amassed considerable "bootleg"--not valid or accredited--flight time with willing pilots, who were happy to have someone spell them during the long boring hours alone in the cockpit. Straight and level flight required neither talent nor involved quality instruction for most people. Along with considerable flight time at the controls, illegally signed off by pilots possessing instructor ratings, Bill had logged additional non-cockpit time while performing duties as a Flight

⁸ Pencil whipped: Something signed off or fabricated by a mechanic.

Mechanic. Later, with valid instruction obtained in the States, he obtained a commercial helicopter license. Then, having garnered field experience with Canadian-based Okanagan Helicopters, he applied to Air America and was hired in 1965, when requirements for additional, but rare, UH-34D "throttle twisters" reached a peak. Some of us were astonished that the Company had hired a pilot with so little experience, or with no military training.

However, Bill surprised everyone. He was judged a talented and natural pilot, who performed very well while training with the Chief Pilot and Captains upcountry during his checkout period. Despite this, in addition to lacking the benefits of professional military training, we wondered about Bill's overall air sense that could only be obtained by hours of air experience. How would he react as a pilot in command during actual combat situations? The ability to survive in our low intensity conflict could only be gained during actual on-the-job (OJT) operations. In Bill's case, time would determine the outcome and constitute the final equalizer. Thus far, he had performed extremely well.

Unknown to many of us at the time, this was intended to be Wilmot's final RON upcountry as a Company employee. Bill had only been flying a few months as a Captain, but, perhaps because he had attained his economic goal, or considering the flying too rich for a new family man, he planned to leave Air America. More likely, it was because his wife Hazy was eight months pregnant that Bill had committed to another job on Kwajalein Island, flying a HRS-3 retrieving missiles from the test range.

Captain Lou McCasland arrived later at Sam Tong in Hotel-15 to participate in the operation the next day. Like Wilmot, Lou planned to leave Air America soon. Bill and Hazy attempted to interest Lou and Joan into applying for the same job on

Kwajalein. About to depart on home leave, and still unsure of his plans, Lou seriously considered such a move. Since Joan no longer taught at the Air America School, through conversations with Lou, I already knew he was thinking about pursuing another vocation. One day I had asked him what he would do for a living. He waxed elegant about returning to Texas, and working as a farmer with other relatives, planting cash crops of tomatoes and bell peppers.

EXECUTION

The major Na Khang operation involved the first sizeable troop movement conducted by Air America helicopter crews since the ambitious Route-13 operation north of Vang Vieng in 1961, intent on capturing the Sala Phou Khoun Route-7/13 road junction. However, this operation was different. Since we were not expecting trouble, the search and rescue mission standard operation (SOP) requirements were bypassed, and all helicopters were configured single pilot. Arriving upcountry at various times of the day, six of us were initially programmed to move hundreds of troops already staged at, or being delivered to the Moung Heim valley by fixed wing Caribou aircraft.

Bill Wilmot and Matt Luca crewed Hotel-42, Steve Stevens and "Rusty" Irons were in Hotel-40, Frankie Claveria and I in Hotel-41, Larry Wilderom and Steve Nichols in another ship, Marius Burke commanded Hotel-35, and Ed Reid was in Hotel-34.

After I established radio contact with Bill, he indicated that he and fellow H-34 pilots were assigned to shuttle numerous troops to a white tango signal, located on a pad on top of a prominent 5,400-foot mountain, six miles south of Na Khang. The initial objective of the offensive was to obtain and secure a base camp on the mountaintop prior to marching north to Lima Site-36.

A direct eleven-mile flight to the site would have normally required about ten minutes. Under ordinary circumstances, a roundtrip, when factoring embarkation, debarkation, and climb to altitude, probably required no more than a total of twenty to twenty-five minutes. However, a direct flight crossed very rough terrain. Nearly invisible sheer ravines and rushing streams were buried deep in a morass of inhospitable, heavily forested and jungled landscape. Therefore, utilizing the safer, lower, and generally flat terrain, most of us opted to fly down the valley. Then we would turn southeast toward the Tango Mountain, while conducting a high-power climb to altitude. Compared to a direct flight, this route also offered more potential forced landing sites. Although this extended flight to slightly more than sixteen miles one way, during a direct return flight, trading altitude for increased speed only extended total time to approximately thirty minutes per sortie.

During my first approach to the landing zone, I recognized the area as the old Alpha pad near the refugee site of Ban Vang.⁹ We had formerly occupied this site and occasionally serviced it from Na Khang. The flat pad was high, but could safely accommodate one, perhaps two helicopters.

As fuel was consumed, carrying extra men during four trips, I delivered a total of forty-four combat-loaded soldiers to the site. While refueling from steel red and white barrels delivered to the grass strip by Caribous, I talked to Mike Lynch and General Vang Pao, who still had his arm in a sling from his February wounding, regarding the operation's objective. They indicated that the master plan envisioned reoccupying Na Khang

⁹ Pha Poun-LS-230 was later developed on the west side of the mountain to accommodate refugees.

within three days. I continued the drill until time to return to Sam Tong for the night.

While mechanics diligently inspected the machines and greased components, and readied the ships at Sam Tong for an early launch the next morning, we chatted excitedly, elated that the operation had proceeded so smoothly thus far. I was quite happy to finally be included, and chided the other pilots for not originally including me in the planning and briefing phases. Secrecy and a need to know had long been drummed into us, and some pilots relished acting mysterious.

THE MASTER PLAN GOES AWRY

Planning to move the remaining troops as soon as possible (ASAP) on Thursday, we arose very early for breakfast. We instructed the cooks to pack brown bags of ham and cheese sandwiches for lunch, which constituted a yeoman's task for those working in the kitchen. After performing a predawn preflight of Hotel-41, I had my rotors turning by 0540 hours. The temperature was not as low as the bitter mountain cold often experienced in January, but throughout the year early mornings in the mountains were never warm.

Departures were staggered by a few minutes so we would not all arrive at the same time and get in each other's way. The sixty-mile trip overhead Moung Soui (L-108), and around Phu So (LS-57) to Phu Cum (LS-50) was second nature to me from numerous trips over the years. After fifty minutes elapsed time since engaging the rotor blades, I landed at Site-48. I arrived with high anticipation of accomplishing something worthwhile that day. Had I known what was in store for a couple of us, I probably would have instantly reversed course and returned to Sam Tong. But that is exactly what makes life interesting for humans: not knowing the future.

Except for a daisy chain to the Tango pad and back to the valley for additional loads, there was no specified coordination or agreement on how to conduct the lift. Although I was never briefed on this aspect of the operation, it was not very complex. Still, because of flight over harsh terrain, a possible enemy presence, and overall ease and safety of operations, some of us elected to fly in very loose formations of two and maintain contact on Fox Mike. I paired with Captain Steve Stevens. Unlike military operations, other than our side numbers, there were no assigned call signs. We were a small enough group to know from the pilot in command's voice who was speaking.

Neither American Customer Lynch nor Vang Pao had arrived at the site yet, but the local commanding officer and his subordinates had troops lined up and organized for loading. We completed one run without difficulty. However, early morning cloud build-ups associated with a narrow dew point, convective heat, and the early monsoon season were already in evidence. Rising steadily around the mountainsides, visible moisture-laden formations portended a problem before the day was over. As other pilots arrived in the valley and departed with loads, a staggered daisy chain of H-34s ascending toward the mountain was visible for miles.

On the return flight to Moung Heim for another load, we had to detour a little north to avoid low cloud banks before turning northwest toward the valley. While dodging clouds, Steve radioed over Fox Mike that two "Sandys" were approaching from our rear.¹⁰ Skittering between low cumulus clouds, they passed alongside and broke across our bow, as if trying to obtain our attention.

¹⁰ Sandy: A generic call sign accorded search and rescue escort A-1H or A-1E Skyraider pilots.

Then, as quickly as they had appeared, they disappeared toward the southwest. Since I had not been briefed on any airstrike or escort assets, or for that matter anything pertinent regarding the mission, I deferred to Steve's knowledge. He was also nonplussed, professing no knowledge as to what the planes were doing there. Furthermore, except for guard channel, we had no discrete frequencies on which to contact them. Apparently, no one else had seen the planes. Assuming that they were conducting a bombing mission on Na Khang, we continued toward our operations base.

The next trip was not as trouble free as the first. Except for the northern side of the landing zone, heated by the morning sun, developing and ascending clouds now drifted lazily over the mountain top, temporarily obscuring the landing zone. Taking advantage of a small break in the clouds, I managed to sneak through a hole, land, quickly discharge my passengers, and depart through the same gap. Steve was barely able to deposit his load and takeoff before the site completely socked in. Except for a hint of mountain peaks poking through the white layer, the landing zone disappeared. With the advent of worsening conditions, and lacking an alternate landing zone, we talked about temporarily aborting the operation, shutting down at Moungh Heim, and awaiting more favorable conditions.

By this time, doubts regarding some facets of the operation began to creep into my thinking. What I originally considered to be a relatively standard operation now appeared somewhat flawed. We had been tasked to perform what should have been an easy job. Moving troops or refugees from one place to another was standard procedure for us, but had never before been accomplished on such a large scale, one requiring so many assets as the current operation demanded. Furthermore, in a typical muddle through fashion reminiscent of some military operations I had

participated in, the exercise lacked a current briefing on latest enemy dispositions and introduction of friendly air cover. Now, unforeseen variables--weather, no assigned alternate landing zone, and the presence of fighter bombers--tended to complicate the mission. What would happen next?

We had almost reached the Moung Heim Valley's perimeter when I heard Lou McCasland and Bill Wilmot chattering on the Fox Mike radio net. They were also prevented from landing at the Tango pad, and wanted to explore the possibility of finding an alternate landing zone. I wondered what they might select, for there were no other high points in the vicinity. Moreover, uneven terrain and heavy foliage severely limited other feasible landing options. Then Wilmot excitedly radioed that he had discovered an open rice paddy area, located two kilometers east of and below the Tango hill, which appeared a choice place to deposit troops. He called Mike Lynch on VHF to describe the location and inquired about the viability of using it to continue the troop lift. It sounded like he seriously intended to land there.

I was shocked by Wilmot's boldness. Although he had previously flown in the Theater in the capacity of a Flight Mechanic, during his crew duties he was never challenged to make critical decisions required of a pilot-in-charge. Additionally, he had not been a Captain long enough to acquire the necessary acumen and sixth sense to analyze situations that would tend to keep him out of trouble. Such insight could only be acquired following hours of solo flight, and correctable errors. After hearing only a portion of the dialogue between Wilmot and Lynch, I was appalled. The proposal fostered a sinking, unsettling feeling regarding the location and the dire implications of such a plan.

Without adequate air support, ground reconnaissance, or knowledge of enemy disposition, from both a helicopter pilot and troop perspective, there was considerable danger involved in switching from a safe landing zone to the unknown in the middle of an operation. Changing from the pre-programmed high to a low ground site, one of questionable security, added to the risk. Besides, if the projected area was as I suspected--the one enemy forces travelled on Route-6 toward the Ban Ban Valley--then it had always been a place of contention. In the past, I either avoided or overflew that valley at altitude. Moreover, to my knowledge, if the area had ever been considered in the friendly camp, it was not for long periods.

A year and a half before, toward the end of 1964, a difficult struggle for some of that same terrain had occurred. One day, I flew General Vang Pao, a weapons team, a 4.2mm mortar tube, base plate, and ammunition from Long Tieng into a western hill position. Evidently, the general possessed information that an enemy unit was concentrated in the area. I watched fascinated, as he and his men quickly assembled the "four deuce" tube to the base plate, then aimed and began firing "Willy Pete" rounds to the east. ¹¹ From our vantage point, I could see clouds of white phosphorous smoke rising above the trees. During the course of the action, Vang Pao walked over to me smiling broadly. In guttural English, he indicated that his forward patrols heard enemy screaming in agony over the radio, as the lethal phosphorous shells scattered them and burned holes deep into their skin. Yes, this was a dangerous place of death, and working there would require extreme caution.

Combining Wilmot's inexperience in flying upcountry, and young Mike Lynch's unfavorable reputation among us pilots, I

¹¹ Willy Pete: White phosphorous mortar shells.

felt that I had to speak up regarding Wilmot's alternate landing zone proposal to Lynch. The Lynch problem was mostly a matter of lack of rapport, bonding, and special trust and confidence engendered and developed between men during combat situations. Mike was reputed to have obtained his job through political pull.¹² He had undergone Agency training at the "Farm" facility (Camp Peary) in Virginia at the same time as Terry Burke. Citing an uncomplimentary issue of personal hygiene, Terry did not have a high opinion of Mike either. Lynch arrived at Long Tieng to supplement and replace Tony Poe or Vint Lawrence when one or the other was wounded or sick. His arrival occurred during a period when we were beginning to transition across the ridgeline to the Sam Tong hostel. The move failed to stimulate or develop Customer rapport, as it had earlier when we overnighted at Long Tieng. Therefore, I never got to know and form respect for Mike, as I did with Tony and Vint. Granted, we were spoiled by Poe's "old breed" charisma and concern for pilots, and Vint Lawrence's work ethic and steadfastness of purpose. Furthermore, especially when working at Na Khang, Lynch did not seem in tune with helicopter pilots, but appeared indifferent to probing questions and our concerns regarding items deemed important. Possessing a somewhat negative personality, he just did not appear the appropriate person to be Vang Pao's advisor.

Although Assistant Chief Pilot Marius Burke unofficially "honchoed" the operation, next to Captain Ed Reid, I was the senior pilot in this operation. Numbered seniority meant very little at the time, but I certainly had performed and experienced my share of combat flying, considerably more than some others, including Captain Wilmot. I felt a keen sense of responsibility for my fellow pilots. Knowing what I had

¹² Depending on who one talks to, this is still unsubstantiated.

experienced in the past, and believing that it was unwise to look for trouble, I felt obligated to impart my considerable knowledge of the area and issue a strong warning. Therefore, I cautioned Wilmot with my assessment of the danger, briefly advising others within radio range as to the area's shady history. As expected, there was no comment or rebuttal.

Returning from an obscured Tango pad, I found Marius Burke already on the ground huddled with Lynch. Vang Pao, still suffering considerable discomfort from his February wounding at Na Khang, was absent. Because of a perceived pressing requirement to position troops and adhere to Vang Pao's strict timetable for the offensive, Lynch briefly looked at his map and elected to sanction Wilmot's proposed alternate landing zone should landings at Tango continue unattainable. To Wilmot's query, he passed his edict authorizing the site. Still apprehensive, for a second time, I cautioned over the radio in the blind about the risks involved in landing there. That was all I could do.

Steve and I conversed over the Fox Mike net regarding this new development and decided there was always a possibility that the Tango pad would clear reasonably soon. We elected to make another run to the site. However, while ascending out of the valley, from my angle of vision, I could see that additional dense clouds covered the mountain's entire western and northern perimeters. With increasing heat and convection, they were still building. Unless another quadrant was open on the downwind side, which would pose additional landing problems, there did not appear to be a feasible approach and departure mode available. It appeared that we would have to curtail further troop movement until the weather appreciably cleared. Nevertheless, while I was a mile or more behind him, Steve elected to conduct a fly-by to further assess the situation.

Wilmot, hearing us speculate about landing, informed us that weather conditions on the east side of the mountain were considerably improved. Therefore, the others, aware that a priority and urgency existed to complete the job and secure the area according to the timetable, elected to continue to march. Apparently, they did not want to await better weather, lose revenue, or unduly antagonize Lynch. Ignoring my previous warnings, Wilmot and McCasland landed in a rice paddy, offloaded their troops, and prepared to return to MOUNG HEIM for another load.

Ed Reid, the third man to land, warned in the blind that the troops were confused, and advised that officers or non-coms should accompany the next trip to direct them up the mountain. Previously briefed that they would be deposited on top of the mountain at the rally point before regrouping and proceeding toward Na Khang, I was not surprised that the troops were now disoriented.

Unlike orders issued by superior officers in the military, we civilian pilots were not obligated to strictly adhere to any particular agenda, but were free to employ our own common sense, and perform a mission in our own way. Accordingly, each Air America pilot individually decided what he could, or would not attempt to accomplish during any particular situation. This was especially the case in tight spots. I, for one, disliked others telling me how to fly, or what to do in a circumstance over which I could exercise or effect little control. That was one of several reasons I had chosen not to continue pursuing a USMC military career. Mainly, I did not want World War-Two dinosaurs, who I considered somewhat deficient in H-34 proficiency and

thought processes, blindly leading me into combat. In the Lao conflict, this individuality constituted a matter of survival. ¹³

After all exchanges regarding the new landing zone had ceased, and operations actually commenced in the eastern valley, Stevens had no desire to operate at a place of unknown status. Instead, using discretion, discipline, and excellent common sense, he elected to return to Site-48A, shut down, and await improved weather conditions on the mountaintop. While his mechanic was refueling his ship, Lynch told Steve to load more troops, as the lift was going to continue in the eastern rice paddy area. Steve, equally unimpressed with Lynch, his personality, or *modus operandi*, angrily informed the Customer that if he wanted him to land at that site, then he better fly there himself first, and place a signal panel on the ground. With that the conversation terminated. In like manner, following one landing at the site, Lou McCasland experienced bad vibrations. He did not like what he felt or observed in the paddy area. Like Stevens, he elected to secure and discuss the situation with Lynch.

I was curious as to the success of the men landing in the new landing zone without opposition. While conducting lazy orbits, I lingered near the eastern slope of the mountain for cover following Stevens's departure. As the three ships departed the alternate landing zone, I confirmed that their initial landing spot was toward the southern portion of the north-south paddy area. In order to observe the landing spot and possibly drop my load if all looked suitable, I started descending the

¹³ It is fair to mention that not all field grade officers in my HMM-261 squadron were categorized by the younger generation as incompetent dinosaurs. For example, our skipper, Colonel Fred Steele, worked hard at personal helicopter proficiency and satisfactorily led our field flights.

east side of the mountain toward the valley. Previously, from my vantage point hugging and masking against the mountain, I could see that, unlike adverse conditions at the Tango pad, weather was not a problem in the valley. Ragged, broken cloud bases lingered about 1,000 feet above the lower terrain. The valley actually afforded a wide selection of landing spots. However, cautionary alarm bells continued jangling loudly in my head, and I still considered the area a high-risk landing choice.

Oriented north-south, six miles south of the lower Na Khang Valley, the flat area was generally surrounded by forests, jungle, and higher ground in both the east and west quadrants. Well-watered by the Vang River, the valley had once supported a sizable Lao Theung community, including a number of large, asymmetrical rice paddies. From all outward appearances, the area was now abandoned. No village or a trace of Route-6 was visible from my vantage point.

During previous work out of Na Khang, I had never been assigned to land there. It was considered too dangerous. We always landed on the elevated Alpha pad mountain top to support radio intercept and road watch activities. Besides the primary mission there were good reasons for this. Namely, adjacent to or forming part of Route-6 and an eastern feeder trail winding south toward the Ban Ban Valley, the low ground was far too difficult to defend. Moreover, it represented a historic enemy route of march north from Ban Ban and south from Sam Neua.

From overhead, I observed troops located in two separate places. Just as Ed Reid reported, they were milling about in apparent confusion, unaware of what to do next, or in which direction to proceed. Except for our people, the rest of the valley appeared devoid of signs of human or animal life. Still unconvinced of the viability of landing there, while dragging the area I commenced a high, wide reconnaissance, overflying the

eastern foothills that sloped gently upward toward the towering, cloud shrouded mountain. It did not require a rocket scientist to suspect that the delay of more than a day in completing the operation had potentially allowed the enemy an opportunity to react to the government movement and respond in kind. Therefore, as a single piloted aircraft, just in case of trouble, I chose not to land in the same place as Wilmot and the others.

Despite my apprehension, since everything sounded and looked quiet, I landed a little north of the initial landing zone, near an ample trail that looked as though it gently ascended toward, and directly up the foothills toward the mountain slopes. Facing north, from the left center of my narrow landing spot, I observed numerous bamboo stands scattered about, and heavy foliage protruding from the paddy field sides. Lying fallow now, the once cultivated land appeared fairly dry and strewn with old straw rice stalks. The area did not appear as if it had been occupied or farmed for a considerable period.

My load of eleven soldiers charged out the cabin door toward the east. Before taking ten steps, they stopped and began looking around in confusion. There must have been an officer or sergeant in the group, for a semi-intelligent looking man peered up at the cockpit from the right front of the helicopter as if to inquire, "What now?" Although I failed to possess a good view of the trail from my seat, I gestured toward my left in the general direction of the mountain. The man still looked confused. After craning my head as far as possible, I saw that the Tango pad, located more than a mile to the west, and several hundred feet higher than the rice paddy, was still obscured in clouds. I thought about asking Filipino Flight Mechanic to help directing the trooper, but I knew that asking Frankie Claveria to do something so complicated as this was fruitless. Even during the best times, the man barely understood a word I said.

In any other situation, I would have shut down and attempted to convey my message by using pantomime hand signals and universal sign language.

According to my philosophy, and experience acquired from working the front lines, and signals from my nervous stomach, like an anxious sparrow pecking bird seed, I deduced that I had been on the ground entirely too long. Not desiring to spend any more time in the shot pattern than absolutely necessary, it was imperative that I leave. After gesturing to my left again toward the mountain, I departed.

Before proceeding northwest toward Mounq Heim, I elected to check the upslope area once again for any troop movement toward the hill. By then, it looked like some of the troops might have finally understood my message and were actually beginning to move upward from the rice paddy in the correct direction. To assure their continued progress toward the appropriate assembly area, I flew toward the trail to ascertain if the path indeed continued the entire way up the mountain, and if anyone was already progressing along this route to the objective. Emulating ancient pathfinders, I reasoned that flying up the trail would point the way and assist the troops' advance.

As I proceeded uphill, I noted a series of narrower footpaths just south of, and paralleling the wider main trail. The area appeared to have been well used at one time, perhaps even recently. Along both sides of the complex of trails stretched a long high, lush Kuni-grass (sometimes called saw or elephant grass) area. Circling, I was happy to note that individual troops were continuing to straggle uphill.

BATTLE DAMAGE

I rolled out of a right-hand turn, planning to continue following the trail uphill to a point where it penetrated a

heavily wooded area. Toward the center and top of the grassy knoll, I spotted a series of what looked like a tight cluster of light gray boulders. However, even to my untrained eye, the "rocks" and patterns they made looked much too symmetrical and artificial to be construed as inert objects. They were spaced at intervals to the right or north side of the main trail. In addition, grass was trampled down, like individuals or animals had recently thrashed about. The entire scenario was morphing into something highly suspicious that required further investigation. I suspected that if the objects I had just observed were not large rocks, then they must be humans, prone, crouched, or curled in fetal positions to appear inconspicuous. If they were indeed enemy units, they were wearing light khaki or wash gray uniforms, definitely not commonly worn by our green clad forces.

All the visual cues tended to coalesce, and visions of a Viet Minh or North Vietnamese Army ambush flashed through my mind. The thought horrified me. If my supposition was accurate, then our troops were proceeding directly into a death trap, and I was unwittingly leading them into an ambush.

Feeling responsible, but not absolutely positive regarding my suspicions, I elected to conduct an additional reconnaissance to confirm my sighting. I commenced a tight climbing right 270-degree turn, calculated to place me over the same spot. Before I rolled out of the abbreviated circle on course, thunderous and sustained automatic rifle fire commenced. At my low altitude, and reduced turning speed, I was meat on the table for the bad guys. The helicopter was taking serious hits. No stranger to the sound and effects of ground fire, I estimated the volleys and discharges were issued from formidable, high-rate-of-fire AK-47 assault rifles. The sneaky devils on the ground, thinking I had discovered their devious purpose, had decided to take action.

But then, perhaps it was only a "nervous Nellie" or two who initially opened up on me. If all the troops I estimated were on the ground had fired simultaneously, I most certainly would have been shot down.

It was past time to vacate the area. Exercising my hypothalamus' inherent fight or flight function, I increased power, darted into the low cloud base and proceeded northwest away from that hot area of death and destruction.

Aware that other ships would soon be arriving with troops, without specifying anyone in particular, I attempted to call "in the blind" on the common Fox Mike frequency to warn my peers that bad guys were in the area. However, despite being able to reflect and function normally, I was surprised that no intelligible sound issued from my mouth. I suppose that a combination of instrument flight, shaken by the close encounter with injury or death, and worried about returning to Mounq Heim safely before the machine came apart, a bone-dry mouth and throat had rendered me mute.

When deemed expeditious, I descended beneath the cloud cover to visual flight conditions. I took little solace in the fact that I had been vindicated in my original negative assessment of the area and its deadly potential. Then I looked up from the instrument panel and discovered battle damage in the right corner of the glass windscreen near my head. In my estimation shooting at the cockpit was dirty pool, and it was sobering to consider what the bastards had been attempting to accomplish, as the large spider-web pattern radiating from the glancing hit attested. It was my first such battle damage of that kind, and I considered it very up close and personal.

After conditions stabilized, and I was a little more confident that a crash was not imminent, or an immediate forced landing into hostile terrain necessary, I attempted another

situation report in the blind. This time the message boomed loud, clear, and concise through my headset, and over the airways.

"Attention all aircraft! This is Hotel-41. I have just been shot at and hit by enemy fire to the north of the series of trails 1000 yards west of the rice paddy. Be very careful entering the area."

Inexplicitly, no one answered my call. Did I actually transmit the message or was that just my imagination? Were my radios damaged? No, that could not be the case, for side-tone was heard when I transmitted. Perhaps no one was within radio range, or they were too shocked to talk. Although I did not declare a Mayday, it was obvious and sobering that no one in the immediate area was available to assist me should I require help. Then as I cleared a ridgeline outbound, like something out of the Arabian Nights tales and magical flying carpets, two H-34s materialized and surged past me in the opposite direction. Inconceivably, the pilots gave no indication of either seeing me, or hearing or heeding my last transmission. Instead, they continued--balls to the wall--onward toward the rice paddies. I marveled at their boldness, particularly if they had heard me and had chosen to ignore my explicit warning. At that particular time, however, not cognizant of the extent of my ship's battle damage, I had my own problems that needed to be addressed. ¹⁴

Even during times of extreme stress, a form of humor often surfaced. A few miles from where we received ground fire, Frankie keyed his ICS hand button and casually said, *"Hey, Cap, I think we are being fired at."* Ludicrous, it was all I could do to

¹⁴ Years later, at the 2012 Air America reunion at a hotel in New Orleans, former Flight Mechanic Matt Luca, crewing with Bill Wilmot on Hotel-42, conceded that he had indeed heard my radio call. I had "spotted tan uniforms on the ground and they were firing at him." If the pilots heard the call, no indication or action was taken.

prevent laughing into my microphone. What could I say? At least the old boy had enough presence of mind to fathom that something out of the ordinary had occurred. He carried a rifle, but never fired a round during our predicament. In a combat situation, a weapon fired immediately in any direction would have displayed our capability and resolve, and likely would have been useful in suppressing enemy fire. I seriously wondered about Frankie's hearing and reflexes, and became a little exasperated with him. However, since the danger was well behind us, I keyed the transmitter and radioed, *"Yeah, Frankie that was five miles back. Just check the interior cabin to see what damage we might have incurred."*

Although somewhat improved now, prior to the arrival of American battle-seasoned Vietnam veterans, this was how our personnel crew problems were in the early sixties. At this time, we still had to deal with a few incompetent crewmembers, who virtually never knew what was going on, or did not seem to care. All they wanted to do was earn a day's pay with minimum trouble. During the course of "normal" work there was rarely a problem with this type, but introduce an unforeseen variable like a serious mechanical malfunction, or what we had just experienced, and these people were of little or no value to the pilot. Unfortunately, we lacked the luxury of selecting our Flight Mechanics and were required to fly with some ineffectual individuals, even if it meant our lives.

Aware that Hotel-41 had incurred several hits during the encounter with the "rocks," but not yet knowing the extent of damage, I sweated the few remaining miles to Moung Heim. Flying over rough terrain that had I previously hardly ever acknowledged or considered a problem, minutes seemed like hours.

Now, when it was important, the inability to distinguish even a single decent forced landing spot became cause for concern. ¹⁵

At last, I reached the long, flat valley south of Moung Heim. Greatly relieved to have departed terrain where a successful forced landing was highly questionable, now I was relatively unconcerned should the engine malfunction or quit. I was confident that I could autorotate anywhere below me, and given proper technique, could expect to walk away from the aircraft. Just prior to landing, I again radioed in the blind that I had incurred battle damage.

ONLY THE GOOD DIE YOUNG

While descending, I overheard a garbled radio message from Marius Burke flying Hotel-35. It sounded like he said something about Hotel-42 crashing at the drop site. The Customer should be informed, and we should ferry additional troops into the area. I wondered what had occurred and if all our people were all right.

Bill Wilmot, who was flying one of the two helicopters carrying ten troops each that had passed abeam me, was about to touch down in a small rice paddy. Burke, crewing the number two ship, was fifty to one hundred feet behind, with Ed Reid considerably further back in a loose trail formation. Suddenly ground fire erupted. In a scenario imitating a slow-motion movie film, Burke, who later claimed he never heard my radio calls regarding the danger in the area, had just begun decelerating

¹⁵The anxiety related to this short trip probably bothered me more than during the previous year's extended voyage to Laos from Na San, North Vietnam. During that time, I was a little numb with shock and had a strong cockpit mate, who did not need a weak-kneed Captain to deal with. Furthermore, most particularly upsetting events in life are relative. As our Creator or eons of evolution intended, it was easy for our pre-programmed brains to disregard trauma, and the ability to rearrange, and relegate disagreeable events into the recesses of our minds.

for landing when he observed pieces of metal flying off H-42's rotor blades and fuselage. Concurrently, Wilmot's aircraft pitched uncontrolled up to the left and impacted the ground on its left side, approximately 180 degrees from the original heading. The crash was soon followed by an explosion and intense fire. With no evidence of the friendly troops which had been deposited in the area about twenty minutes before, and amid heavy rifle fire, both Marius and Ed took immediate action to "get out of Dodge." While clearing the area, Burke's ship incurred light battle damage. Amid the excitement and confusion, he did not observe anyone exit Wilmot's helicopter.

LUCA'S ORDEAL

Years later, Matt Luca, who had been Wilmot's crewmember reconstructed his participation during the Na Khang incident in Steve Nichols' book, *Air America in Laos*:

"...Just as we started to set down, all hell broke loose. Shots rang out and we were being hit. There were loud explosions and sparks flying inside the cabin...

H-42 was bouncing about almost as though we were being dangled on a string...

We were at a 45-degree angle and had not turned completely on our side.

Again, they opened fire on us. Dozens of white holes appeared as bullets tore through the [fuselage].

All was quiet again. I could hear no voices. My depth perception was off. I was looking toward the rear of the cabin but all I could make out were piles of 'green laundry bags'...They were dead soldiers.

Everything had taken place in the space of a minute but it seemed much longer.

Suddenly I heard a voice. It was my pilot Wilmot. 'Luca, get the survival kit.'

Without thinking of answering, I grabbed the kit and leapt out the door twisting 180 degrees, facing the front of the helicopter. No sooner [had] my feet touched the ground, bullets rang out. I ran but only got two steps when there was an explosion followed by a hot orange ball of flame. I threw my right hand up to protect my face and continued to run.

...I still hadn't opened my eyes when I tripped and went head first toward the ground. I felt a hard rap to my right foot...

...The rains the day before had left a few inches of water in the rice paddies. This helped extinguish whatever clothing that might have still been on fire...the water cooled my burns.

...My face is burned. My eyes were swollen shut and my lips were balloon size...

Then the explosions started, one, two, and three in succession. Hotel-42 was blowing itself apart. Ammunition was cooking off from within it. I could feel objects landing on my backside...

...I peered at my right foot. There was indeed a hole in the top of my boot...My right hand had the most pain and when I lifted it from the water, there were sheets of flesh hanging from it. I put it back into the water.

It was about nine thirty in the morning, I was twenty-four years old and about to die in some rice paddy."

While taxiing toward two parked H-34s, I noticed Steve Stevens and Lou McCasland deep in conversation near their birds. I assumed that Steve was telling jokes, as usual. Wanting to caution them about the enemy I had just encountered, I began waving my right arm madly out the open window, attempting to obtain and direct their attention toward my bullet-crazed

windscreen. They ignored me and were not interested until after I climbed to the ground. I moved toward them on wobbly knees, bummed a cigarette, and began an animated, rapid-fire monologue regarding the hairy incident. My continuously pointing to the helicopter, and babbling about the "rocks" that shot me, triggered uproarious laughter. In my mind, I had just survived a really bad event. I considered this a highly serious matter and failed to understand why they were laughing. Then they assumed a more serious tenor when I again pointed out the battle damage to the windscreen and where my head had been. Steve climbed up the side of the fuselage for a closer examination. Placing a pencil in the hole, he noted the round indeed had been directed toward my head.

Then Lynch arrived. He had received Burke's broken message about a crash and urgent request for additional troops, and wanted an investigation and further information. I quickly briefed the pilots and Lynch, and plotted the exact location of the enemy. The two pilots cranked up their machines, loaded troops, and launched for the area. At the time, I was still considerably shaken by my own experience, and unaware of the actual event that occurred in the rice paddy, or the sum total of damage to my ship. Otherwise, I might have joined Steve or Lou as a second pilot in the cockpit.

After they departed, Frankie and I had sufficient time to thoroughly examine the H-34 for less obvious or overlooked battle damage. At first glance, most of the dings to the blades and fuselage appeared minor, not prohibiting further flight. However, we discovered a popped BIM indicator in the plastic housing of the red blade root. This revealed that pressurized nitrogen had leaked from the blade's extruded aluminum spar. It clearly indicated penetration of the rotor blade and breaching of the leading edge. Further examination revealed a neat hole

drilled through the bottom and top of the spar through which a ray of sunlight focused and glinted on the ground. According to our go-no-go policy and common sense, this was a grounding item. It limited further operational flight and indicated a ferry to a maintenance base.

Meanwhile, Captains Burke and Reid arrived at Moung Heim during a break in the action. They used the time to debrief Lynch and marshal additional forces. After describing the events observed, they speculated that Wilmot was most likely shot down. However grim the scenario appeared, Wilmot and Luca's disposition was not yet known, and the situation warranted continued scrutiny.

Long Tieng Chief of Unit (COU) was alerted over a discrete single side band radio frequency, and General Vang Pao was reported to be leaving shortly for Moung Heim to take charge of the situation.

Captain Charlie Davis and "Champy" crewing Hotel-33, had been delayed by adverse weather while en route upcountry from Udorn. Charlie was still at Sam Tong and was expected to launch north pending improving weather conditions.

Steve and Lou returned to Moung Heim. They reported that Hotel-42 was still burning and was too hot to approach. From a safe altitude they observed no movement on the ground--no survivors, no friendly or enemy troops--and decided against further reconnaissance.

The damage to Hotel-41 dictated that there was nothing more I could do to help. Therefore, I departed for Sam Tong. The chances of receiving a rotor blade by late afternoon were far greater there than at Moung Heim. Besides, I sorely required a brief respite removed from combat and the front lines.

After talking to an individual at Udorn over the Company high frequency net, a decision was made for me to remain at Lima

Site-20 pending a rotor blade delivery. However, because of worsening weather conditions, this was not likely until the following day. I spent a few lonely hours brooding and waiting for the main body of the H-34 contingent to return. I wanted to know what had taken place in that cursed rice paddy after I left, and the disposition of Bill Wilmot and Matt Luca.

The solitude also afforded me time to consider my mortality. For the second time in less than a year, I had come close to "buying the farm." Moreover, my son was not even three weeks old, yet he had nearly lost his father. It was a sobering thought. Now that I had additional family responsibilities, I had to further assess the wisdom of continuing to fly the line.

Vang Pao arrived at Mounng Heim not long after I departed. Steve and Lou, who had returned to the valley, and not yet knowing whether the situation was relegated to a SAR or recovery phase, conducted a serious discussion with Mike Lynch about what action to take next. Other crewmembers stood quietly around, stunned by the events. Although there was considerable danger involved, Stevens wanted to return to the crash site, land as close to the helicopter as possible, and conduct a search for survivors. Lynch, believing such a mission too risky, and probably as a CYA attempt, refused to approve Steve's plan. He preferred to await further advice from AB-1 superiors and air support. Other crewmembers concurred with Lynch, favoring to await approval from Udorn.

Steve persisted, saying that he was leaving for the downed area. Then realizing that it would be difficult to determine much from altitude, he asked to borrow Mike's binoculars. Lynch refused the request. Flight Mechanic Loy "Rusty" Irons agreed to go with Steve, and proceeded to remove the five Plexiglas windows in the cabin section to provide firing ports. Vang Pao commandeered a British Bren gun from a twelve-year-old soldier

and loaned it to Rusty for protection. Irons had never handled such a weapon before, but by the time they reached the crash site, he had the firing process figured out.

While Steve circled at 5,000 feet above sea level (ASL), Rusty snapped a few still photos from the cabin door for posterity. He was not certain, but thought he had detected an individual moving very slowly near the destroyed helicopter. From altitude, the crew observed the helicopter lying on its side, smoking, and still burning. Typical of torched H-34s, except for the very aft portion of the tail cone and tail pylon with tail rotor, engine, and a few twisted rotor blade pieces, most of the aircraft was reduced to white ashes.

Then Steve thought he saw an orange flight suit, but Rusty believed that it was probably just transmission fluid on fire. While they were communicating with Lynch over VHF about further action, two U.S. Navy A-1E drivers, heard the chatter and called to offer assistance. Unknown to all of us, the Spads had been assigned support duty for the operation from a Tonkin Gulf based aircraft carrier and were presently orbiting over the northern PDJ. ¹⁶

With a semblance of a plan developing, Steve asked if the "Sandy" pilots were familiar with Phu Cum (Site-50). Learning they had knowledge of it, he told them to fly to Phu Cum, then turn to an easterly heading, and fly for about ten minutes until they spotted him at 5,000 feet over the only rice paddy area just east of a big mountain.

Steve then asked Rusty if he was amenable to a low pass, and, if everything was acceptable, a landing to search the rice paddy for survivors. Since this was the entire point of the drill, Irons answered in the affirmative.

¹⁶ These were likely the same two Spads Steve Stevens and I had seen earlier in the day.



A U.S. Navy A-4D Spad "loaded for bear."

After the fighter bomber pilots arrived, Steve briefed them to follow him down low to suppress potential enemy fire. With one fighter on each side of him, the trio proceeded to conduct a high-speed run from south to north. When in range of the target area, staying as close as possible to the H-34, they hosed both sides of the rice paddy perimeter and heavy tree lines in proximity to the burning ship with .50 caliber fire.

LUCA

From the ground Matt Luca recalled:

"The morning wore on. The water dried up and the heat was getting to my burns. I decided to crawl out of the rice paddy, staying close to the mud dikes that make up the sections of the fields...

I heard the sound of a helicopter high above, circling about. I flipped onto my back and moved my white handkerchief slowly across my body...Then I heard another roar...Sandys...I watched as they turned and started their strafing runs. They were heading straight for me...they passed over and hit the tree lines and turned back for another run. I was near some bushes and threw my body into them...

For the first time in hours I felt safe. I could hear the flapping of helicopter rotor blades coming in low and fast. They came in directly over my head and landed."

After the armed preparation was accomplished, with the A-1 pilots flying tight orbits overhead, Stevens landed as close as he could to Hotel-42. No recognizable remains were visible, just scattered inert, little black charred balls that were once humans. Reluctant to press his luck, Steve lifted to a hover to depart when Rusty noted that something appeared to be moving toward the left side in an area shielded from Steve. Stevens landed quickly, while Irons, encumbered by the Sten gun, jumped

out to search the local area. He discovered, and began loading, one badly burned soldier. Because Steve maintained high rpm and some collective pitch in anticipation of a hasty departure, with the landing gear air-oil oleo struts fully extended, loading the injured man in the cargo compartment was not an easy task.

Then Rusty hopped out of the cabin to check the local area one more time. After a few minutes, he returned to the cabin door, connected the ICS cord into his helmet, and began to talk to Steve when an inhuman-looking apparition touched him lightly on the shoulder.

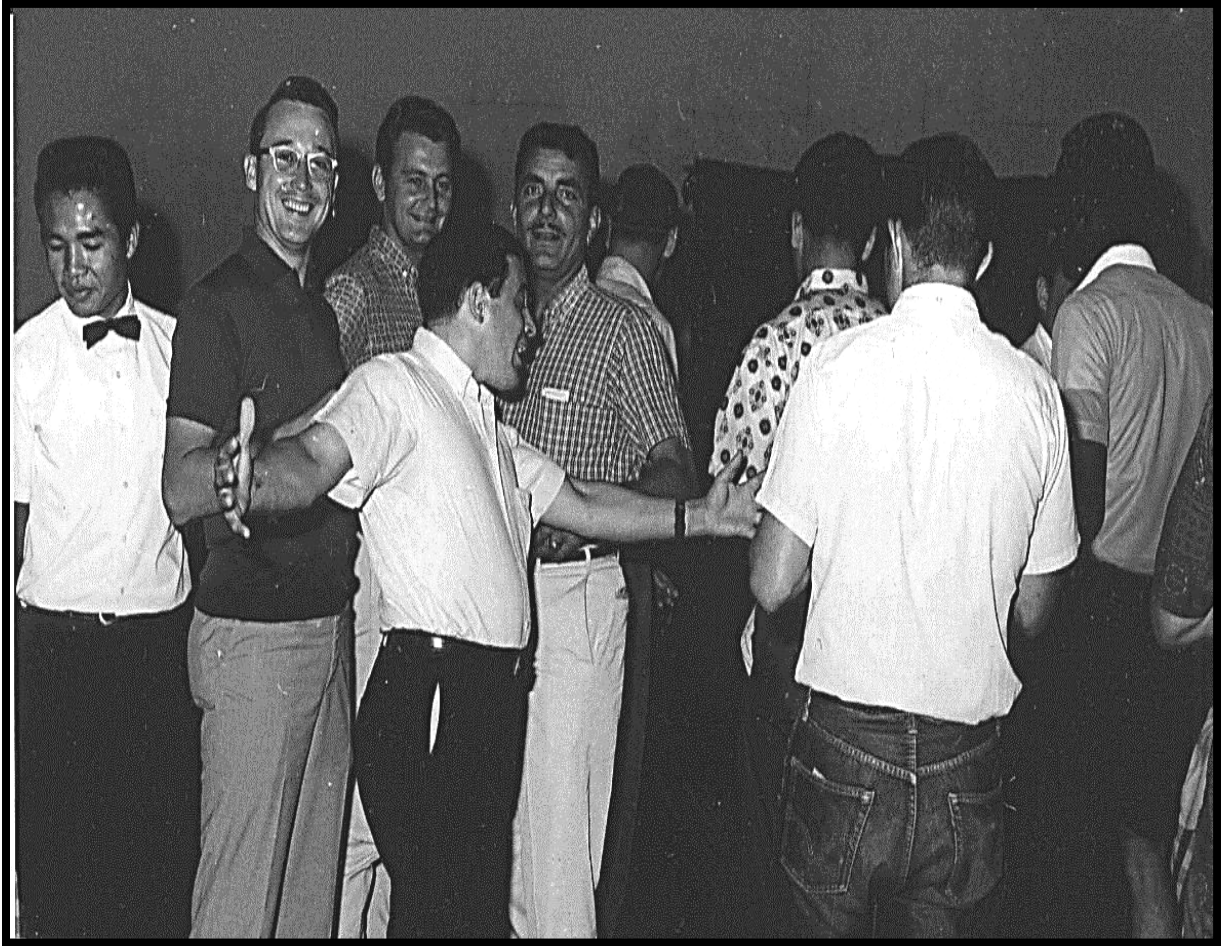
It was Matt Luca, apprehensive that the helicopter crew was departing without him.

"...I ran for the rear of the chopper. I would travel several yards and fall because of the gunshot to my foot...Just as the flight mechanic turned our eyes met.

I tried to step into the cabin but my foot gave out again, Rusty boosted me in and asked about my pilot Wilmot."

Shocked and surprised, reacting to the charcoal-scorched specter, Irons figuratively jumped about two feet in the air. Luca was in horrible shape, almost completely black from severe flash burns to his face, arm, and body incurred during the explosion. In addition, one foot was injured. Too weak to enter the cabin by himself, Rusty gently lifted Matt up and into the Sikorsky womb's enveloping safety.

On the way back to Mounge Heim, because there was no effusive bleeding from Luca's bullet wound, Rusty elected to forego administering first aid. During the flight, Matt related what had happened in a weak voice. After exiting the cabin door, he had managed to crawl clear of the burning ship toward cover and concealment. Despite excruciating pain, he had maintained silence and avoided detection by unfriendly troops circulating through the area. He only left his hiding spot after seeing



During better days, at an Air America party in the Club movie room, Flight Mechanic Matt Luca (center) likely describing catching a very large fish. Also portrayed in the photo from left to right: Thai waiter, Flight Mechanics Dick Conrad, Gaza Eiler, Captain John Grassi. Backs turned, Ground Mechanic Lou Moser, Flight Mechanics Steve Nichols, and Willie Parker.

Nichols Collection.

Steve land. Fearing the crew would depart without him, he then took a chance and exposed himself.

Back at Moung Heim, Luca and the burned soldier were injected with pain-killing morphine. They were then transferred to a Porter aircraft for evacuation south to more competent medical attention at the Sam Tong hospital. There Matt was loaded into a Caribou where Father Luke Bouchard offered him confession. Luca survived, and endured a painful healing process over several months. The soldier was not as fortunate, and died from extensive third-degree burns and shock. ¹⁷

THE OPERATION CONTINUES

Departing an open gap in the Sam Tong bowl, Captain Charlie Davis proceeded to Moung Heim. With low clouds and visibility plaguing him, he had to gingerly pick his way over Moung Soui, past Phu So to Phu Cum, and then continue north to Moung Heim. Two H-34s were shut down for refueling. Anxious to know what had transpired earlier, he asked Lou McCasland for information. Lou, who was Wilmot's good buddy, was despondent, but he related what little was known regarding events of the day and the current situation. Like most initial reports following the aftermath of any aviation crash or incident, there was considerable confusion as to valid and reliable details.

Marius Burke soon returned from a pow-wow with Vang Pao and Lynch. In order to supplement the troops already in the valley, and to help secure the area in preparation for a move on Na Khang, while keeping an eye on the weather, the lift continued

¹⁷ Luca returned to a ground maintenance job at Udorn. Not the type of work he enjoyed or was hired for, he quit Air America in 1967 and returned to CONUS.

into the rice paddy area and to adjacent sites, until one hour prior to sunset.

Since Moung Heim was not judged safe enough, nor could it provide provisions for helicopter crews to spend the night, the four crews started back to Sam Tong. For separation, they intended to maintain a loose formation. Davis followed Burke, but soon lost sight of him in a heavy rain storm. Before long, it became obvious to all parties that they would have trouble preserving visual contact with each other, while punching through or circumnavigating dense rain and clouds. Carrying a Meo soldier sick with malaria, Captain Larry Wilderom was reduced to flying just above the treetops at thirty knots. Although separated, through some miracle and despite the low visibility, all pilots managed to identify and land at Neutralist held Moung Soui.

It was already dark, and the crews were exhausted by the day's activity and ordeal. Lou McCasland had logged ten hours and forty-eight minutes, including thirty-three minutes night time. Therefore, it was determined that further flight was not feasible.

Because of previous issues with the arrogant and often unreliable Neutralists at the site, no one knew what kind of reception they would receive. However, after talking to the FAN commanding officer, Burke managed to obtain the use of a large tent, equipped with C-rats, and sufficient military cots for the men to sleep on that night. The loss of a fellow pilot during the day elicited a somber demeanor and precluded small talk among crews.

As daylight waned in the Sam Tong bowl, I anticipated the momentary arrival of the H-34 crews. Weather worsened, with heavy rain squalls passing through the area. I desperately needed to talk to another pilot to ascertain exactly what had

happened that day, and to thoroughly critique the operation. From the very beginning, when I was not briefed, the lift represented the worst fiasco I had ever experienced. I vowed that regardless of the outcome, we should never allow such foolishness to occur again.

After dark, I really became worried about the other crews' disposition and had the AID Customer call the Vientiane Oscar Mike over the high frequency single sideband radio, soliciting news of my peers. Tom Krohn reported that the H-34 pilots had flown as far as Moung Soui and elected to RON there for the night. I mentally wished them well, for I did not relish any of us staying any period with unpredictable and unreliable FAN troops. For all I knew, the turncoats might take our people prisoner by morning. Conflicted, I tossed and turned that night, with my mind wrapped around dark thoughts. I wondered if Wilmot had had sufficient time to utter the classic standard, and time-honored pilot epithet, "**Oh, shit!**" when facing disaster.

The following day, horrible weather conditions precluded an early shipment of a rotor blade and repair crew from the Udorn Maintenance Department. Finally, by late morning, when Zeus of the mighty thunderbolts had sorted it all out, parts and people arrived.

Inspections and repairs were made to Hotel-41. After I completed flag tracking to match all four blades to an acceptable tip path plane, I returned to work locally for a couple of hours. Eventually, the Moung Soui campers returned to Moung Heim to continue the troop lift.

Within a day or two Wilmot's remains were recovered and it was later determined that he had incurred a fatal wound to the head, likely directly after ground contact. Rusty Irons participated in the grisly recovery. At the time of the crash,



Lying amid piles of gray magnesium ashes, the greasy remains of Hotel-42 were spread eagled in a rice paddy south of Na Khang, Laos (LS-36). Characteristic of a torched H-34, the tail pylon and some main rotor blades remain partially unburned.

Steve Nichols Collection.

the aircraft was chock-a-block with soldiers; there were estimates of up to fourteen souls on board (SOBs).

I was relieved to see all our people return intact to Sam Tong that night, but we did not discuss the rice paddy incident. What more could be said? The silence could have been out of respect for Bill, or a desire not to impart a bad omen to the ongoing operation. ¹⁸

On Saturday some of us returned to the Moung Heim area to help support the ongoing Na Khang operation. During early afternoon, I was relieved in the field at Moung Son, which by then was firmly established in government hands. It was a long, tedious journey home, but I was lucky enough to catch a ride on Caribou 169 to Site-20, and later with the PIC of Hotel-43 via Wattay Airport to Udorn.

I arrived quite late. After checking my mail box, I immediately departed for home. Therefore, I did not have a chance to debrief Chief Pilot Wayne Knight regarding the sullied Na Khang operation. It was a good thing, for I was not in a mood to whitewash an event that never should have occurred. I was pleased to be home in one piece, and did not burden my wife with details of the incident. She had quite enough to do breast feeding, worrying, and caring for Ricky, without being troubled with the knowledge she had nearly lost her husband and the new father. ¹⁹

¹⁸ Were we superstitious youngsters at the time? Let the reader draw his or her own conclusions.

¹⁹ Because of a lack of sanitary conditions, we had agreed that she would nurse the child for three months, or until we returned from our impending home leave. This was recommended in the Doctor Spock book I obtained long before the birth. The advice must have had some merit, for Ricky appeared to have grown and gained weight.

DEBRIEFING

When I arrived in the chief pilot's office the following day, Wayne handed me my Olympia script typewriter that had been missing for well over a year. After an exhaustive search, I had asked Martha Jones if there was a possibility that it had been sent home with Charlie's personal effects. Receiving a negative reply, I despaired of ever seeing it again. Within the past few days, Wayne had finally managed to open a locked desk drawer and discovered the black case with my name scrawled on the inside cover. Apparently, Captain Jones had placed the machine there before departing for Long Tieng and his appointment with fate. Ironically, I had talked to Charlie that same morning on the parking ramp area, and he had failed to mention the typewriter. I was ecstatic to regain my personal writing tool, for I had serious trouble reading my own scribble, and knew it was next to impossible for others to decipher. The extended period sitting in an enclosed space had dried out the black portion of the dual colored ribbon. Therefore, I was reduced to typing letters in red script.

Wayne and I began a serious dialogue regarding the troop lift from Moung Heim to the Tango pad. I began my narrative describing how I had not been informed about the operation by peers until I was actually involved in it, and even then, there was no decent briefing. It smacked of the same paranoid thinking regarding anything connected to the war that had plagued our group in the past. Wayne considered it highly unusual that pre-briefed crews would not reveal details of the mission to me. No real security implications were involved, and he found most crews only too eager to talk about classified operations, especially if it included information relating to the H-34 program and an operation which they might be included.

The basis for his observation was that Captains Ed Reid or Dick Elder sometimes stopped in his office and hinted about an operation. When Wayne pleaded ignorance to any knowledge, they would say, *"Oh, come on. We know all about that."* Consequently, Wayne found it very difficult to keep a secret, which made it odd that the Na Khang operation was not discussed with me. Later, Wayne occasionally told me things in confidence, but always added a disclaimer, interjecting that I was the only one he had told; if it got back to him, he would know I had disclosed the information. Perhaps he was testing me, but I never violated his confidence.

Although committed to a large number of H-34s and crews for the mission, Wayne indicated that tactical preparations and decisions involving the current situation were always delegated to the onsite Customer. This was exactly the opening I needed. I stated that I was extremely unhappy with Customer Mike Lynch for authorizing an alternate landing zone when he apparently knew nothing about the past or current situation there. Furthermore, it was obvious that we all needed to converse more and respect each other's opinions. This was particularly necessary in the case of inexperienced junior pilots, who could learn from their seniors.

I maintained silence regarding the actions or non-action of some of my other peers. I emphasized that we required competent and well-respected leaders to lead future missions, preferably senior individuals who displayed clear unbiased thinking, people who would not be intimidated or unduly influenced by an overly ambitious Customer.

Then I launched into a passionate description of what happened to me in the landing zone. Wayne listened patiently as I relived the account of the small "boulders" standing up and firing at me. Because of Wilmot's recent death and yet

unanswered questions, Wayne requested that I compose a narrative of the fateful operation from my perspective. This would be channeled through AB-1 and then to Taipei headquarters, where a special vault for such classified material was maintained.

In the Club bar people still toasted Wilmot's memory. The statement, "Only the good die young" was uttered time and again. No one wanted a repeat of a crewmember loss such as what occurred during the Na Khang operation. We realistically knew that death was inevitable in our business. Although unfortunate, Charlie Jones and Dick Lieberth losses were probably maintenance related. Almost understandable, but without being a cockpit participant, or aware of the conditions involved, they may or may not have been preventable.

I considered Wilmot's demise entirely unwarranted. The incident never should have occurred, and it should not be brushed aside as just another operational accident. With this in mind, I submitted a draft of the incident on 24 May. I was in a very angry frame of mind. I considered burning some individuals, but ultimately, like the Na San/Son La statement I had prepared the previous year, I sanitized the statement for upper echelon types. I also had to continue to work and associate with my peers. Consequently, hoping that some would take time to carefully read between the lines, in the last paragraph, I penned the following jab at all collectively involved:

"Not being in a policy making position, I am going to keep my opinion to myself about this operation, unless otherwise instructed. I sincerely hope that all facts will be explained and that this sort of thing will never happen again. There should be a lot of soul searching among all the so-called professionals involved."

Statements such as mine were not maintained in local files. Instead, some were channeled to AB-1. Others shunted to

Headquarters Taipei through AB-1. Wayne believed that Marius Burke, as a first-hand witness from management, must have handled most of the after-action report, and our statements would go to Taipei.

Since Wayne was still allowed to fly upcountry to conduct route checks, he was familiar with most of our work areas. In fact, following our talk, he journeyed up country on the 25th and 26th administering line checks first to Captain J.J. McCauley (DOH 03/04/66) and then to Captain John Ford (DOH 02/12/66). J.J. and Wayne conducted flights into MOUNG HEIM, recently occupied Na Khang, and Phu Cum. Na Khang was considered secure enough for helicopters to land by this time.

That was the last I heard regarding the incident. As far as I was aware, Lynch was never formally jacked up by his superiors. Perhaps relegated to the dustbin of history, it was as if the incident had never happened. However, from then on future missions were better planned, organized, and led by competent senior pilots respected by the majority of us who were involved. While it can be true that the good die young, it is some comfort to know that Bill Wilmot did not die in vain. ²⁰

NA KHANG RECLAIMED

Captain Tom Hoppe relieved McCasland at Phu Cum on the 22nd, and Lou deadheaded south to Udorn. Tom supported the Na Khang operation for four days, and then worked MOUNG HEIM and

²⁰ EW Knight Email, 08/01/00, 08/02/00.

Phu Pha Thi areas until relieved. ²¹

By the 23rd, with American and Lao air support employed as airborne artillery, Vang Pao's troops moved to Na Khang's perimeter and effectively surrounded the site. Because of weather concerns across the border in North Vietnam, normal Rolling Thunder missions were fortuitously cancelled, providing eighteen diversions. Air Force FAC Charlie Jones' initial airstrikes caused the remaining enemy to withdraw across the rice paddies toward the heavy tree line east of the strip. Succeeding waves of jet bombers, each loaded with 3,000 pounds of iron bombs, dropped ordnance on these troops, breaking the back of enemy resistance.

Within two days Site-36 was deemed relatively secure, and a fresh SGU battalion was air lifted there from the Moung Cha (LS-113) training camp. Vang Pao claimed 300 enemy troops had been killed by bombing, with numerous undetermined casualties. Americans walking through the paddies, and observing the body parts, considered the stated number low. Whatever the total, enemy losses were little consolation or adequate payback for losing a valued Air America pilot.

While the mopping up process continued during the following weeks, reinforcement, consolidation, and rebuilding began at the Na Khang base. This was followed by an eastern expansion to Houei Thom and to other sites, where enemy patrols still

²¹ Tom Hoppe had worked the Pakse area from 14 to 17 May in Hotel-12. During four days there, he supported operations at Attopeu and Saravane. A stop was made at Phou Batiene (PS-17), the mountain radio relay site outside Lima-11 along Route-23. Another trip went to a location eighteen miles west of the Bolovens. Work on the Plateau out of Don Stephens' training camp at PS-22 took him to outposts at PS-4 on the southwest rim, PS-23 on the south rim, and PS-45 on the southeast rim. The longest flight was to Ban Kong Mi (PS-7), well south of Attopeu, where ethnic Brao maintained a presence.

harassed recently recovered sites along Route-6. Fighting was still reported on the road during early June.

The harsh lesson and determined Vietnamese attacks in February weighed heavily on Vang Pao's mind, and he did not develop or accord Site-36 the same status the base previously enjoyed. Without full support of the disinterested RLA General Staff in Vientiane, who considered much of upper Military Region Two operations to be CIA inspired, there was too much else to accomplish, and too few assets available.

AFTERMATH

As the McCasland family was departing on annual leave in a couple of days, Lou found Joan packing belongings they did not sell; these would be delivered to a Bangkok storage facility. This was done in case he chose not to return to Air America, and the effort would expedite moving the shipment to a chosen location.

He inquired about Hazy. Joan reported that after receiving word of the crash, several concerned wives converged on the Wilmot house to console her. Following confirmation of Bill's death, movers arrived to box their personal belongings. As per strict Company and Base Manager policy, which stressed removing the bereaved from the community following the death of a crewmember, she was immediately sent to Bangkok for repatriation to CONUS.

While Lou was counting the days before departure, Wayne Knight contacted him with unwelcome news that he was being assigned to fly Hotel-31 in the Pakse area. McCasland reminded Knight that he and his wife were leaving Air America soon. Wayne replied that with the increased action up north taxing manpower, he had no one else to fly.

On the 25th Lou deadheaded to Lima-11. Arriving too late to switch pilots, he relieved the PIC the next morning and spent three high time days in the area before returning to Udorn.

The next day, the McCaslands departed for Bangkok and El Paso, Texas, where Lou's father was chief pilot for a construction company. Suffering from the "runs," Lou had lost twenty-five pounds, and suspected the cause to be amoebas, but tests revealed no parasites. Instead, the prognosis was a nervous stomach, something that could have been diagnosed in any one of us. He was advised to follow a strict diet.

After a few days, they flew to Joan's parents' house in Birmingham, Michigan. While there, they phoned Hazy Wilmot, who lived in Wisconsin. Air America had flown her home without fanfare, and she had the baby. When Lou asked if any insurance had been paid, she replied that she had received 10,000 dollars, and nothing more.²² Through the years, like Charlie Jones' wife Martha, Hazy remained bitter about the incident, the small settlement, and her perceived shabby treatment.²³

After mulling over Hazy's plight and his own close calls over the past twenty-three months, McCasland began looking for another job. He never returned to Udorn.

²²Under the circumstances in which Wilmot was killed, Hazy should have received twice that amount from the Company. There was a provision in the Company Personnel Manual that stipulated double indemnity for death by hostile activity. However, not stated in the manual was a caveat that the board of directors had to convene and vote on the subject. Very few, if any beneficiaries ever received the full amount for a combat loss. Furthermore, due to the clandestine nature of Air America, its mission, and requirement for secrecy, the Company was never particularly accommodating in the couth department. Unmentioned were survivors provisions under Social Security and the Longshoreman and Harbor's Act.

²³ Actually 10,000 dollars was a considerable sum of money in 1966. However, inflation from LBJ's "Guns and Butter" policy soon devalued the dollar's purchasing power.

A couple of other grievances contributed to Lou's decision to terminate his employment. In 1965, Art "Ule" White threatened to quit if he did not obtain a requested transfer to the fixed wing program. A precedent for this had been set when Porter Hough and Captain Bill Zeitler had been allowed to transfer to Caribous, so Art got what he wanted. Lou did not believe in threatening the Company to obtain something. He considered that upgrades or changes in status should be earned. Therefore, he went to Taipei, studied and passed the Airline Transport (ATP) ground school. Then he requested a transfer to a fixed wing program from the Vice President of Flight Operations, Talmadge Boyd. The VPFO was contrite, indicating that no fixed wing positions were presently open, and he was unable to help Lou.

Upon returning to Udorn, McCasland discovered that a former Army helicopter pilot, after getting the thumbs down sign from Tony for not carrying a full load at Nam Yu, getting lost, and not performing the job to his standards, was transferred to Caribous. Rightfully, Lou was a little more than angry. It did not make sense. White threatened to quit and obtained a transfer. The other pilot fouled up and was transferred. Lou asked Wayne Knight why he was being denied the same. Wayne was truthful, telling Lou he was making Air America a lot of money flying H-34s and upper management did not want to rotate anyone else out of the program if at all possible.

Another of his grievances stemmed from an all-pilots meeting (APM) in the Club movie room when he requested extra pay for SAR standbys and crashed helicopter recoveries. Of course,

if even considered, neither request ever was realized. ²⁴, ²⁵

UDORN

Apparently, if landlady Godnoma was to be believed, a thief attempted to break into Bobby Nunez's house, but the nighttime guard chased him away. At the time, our maid and her husband were in our house babysitting while we were visiting friends. It was a disconcerting occurrence, for if I was away, Tuie could not protect herself from such an intrusion. Furthermore, the

²⁴As part of future employment, Lou McCasland operated helicopter companies in Atlanta and Perry, Georgia. Then, in 1977 Lou started a helicopter maintenance company in San Antonio, Texas. In 1981, he moved to Castroville, Texas, where he owned and operated a fixed based operation.

²⁴Na Khang Operation/Bill Wilmot Segment Sources:
 Author's Statement Requested by CPH Wayne Knight Regarding Events of the Moug Heim-Na Khang operation, 05/24/66.
 Charles O. Davis, *Across the Mekong: The True Story of an Air America Helicopter Pilot* (Charlottesville: Hildesigns Press, 1996) 128-132.
 Davis Rough Copy Sent to Author, 03/08/96.
 Charles Davis Phone Call to Author, 03/10/96.
 Charles Davis Letter, 03/20/96.
 Steve Stevens Emails, 08/12/09.
 Marius Burke Interview.
 Marius Burke Email, 10/27/09.
 Bill Leary Notes for May 1966.
 Bill Leary Letter to Author 04/16/88.
 Lou McCasland Email, 07/30/08.
 Lou McCasland Phone Call to Author, 04/08/90.
 Lou McCasland Flight Time Report, 05/66.
 Gary Gentz Interview at Author's house, 06/13/97...
 Ken Conboy, 155.
 Victor Anthony, 196.
 Terry Burke Email.
 Loy "Rusty" Irons, Email, 08/20/09.
 Tom Hoppe Letter Summer 96.
 Tom Hoppe Letter, 11/05/96.
 EW Knight Email, 08/01/00.
 Matt Luca Interview at the May-June 2013 Air America Reunion in New Orleans, Louisiana.
 Stephen Nichols, *Air America in Laos: The Flight Mechanics Stories*, 2013-Matt Luca's Account of the Hotel-42 shoot down.

house, being the first one in the compound, was exposed to this sort of activity from the Soi Mahamit side. If such incidents continued, I might have to consider moving to a more secure area. However, thieves were a problem everywhere, and there really was no place a hundred per cent safe in Udorn town.

Dad ordered the Mustang from the Day automobile dealer and placed a 200 dollar down payment. As prices varied it cost a little more than I expected. He expected the vehicle to be delivered, registered, and inspected well before we arrived in Plainfield.

At our base, long range power and water reservoir plans were completed and funded. However, water projects already underway at the Air America facility involving drainage ditches and storage areas were hampered by early rains, but would continue as conditions permitted.

In other projects, the two supply buildings were almost finished. Construction on two additional hangars was progressing well, with two more supply buildings and a utility building to break ground soon.

Previously completed road paving was substandard and had to be redone.

Art Angelo and the large number of Club workers were performing a commendable job of feeding all those allowed to partake of the amenities. One problem Art faced was the loss of condiments like mustard and ketchup from the tables. Missing salt and pepper shakers had also constituted a past problem. Theft of these items had been occurring for some time and, short of banning third country nationals from the Club dining room, the thefts appeared insolvable and likely to continue unless sniffer dogs were employed to curtail the pilfering.

Taking some pressure off the Club, an indigenous snack bar built in back of one of the hangars went into full operation in

June. It became quite a popular food dispensing facility among the third country employees. I occasionally went there to purchase and consume a delicious bowl of bam mi nam containing a large pork chop on a bed of egg noodles.

The main dilemma we were currently facing was the apparent loss of commissary and supermarket privileges for yet unknown reasons. Further investigation into the enigma revealed a "witch hunt" by parties indicating stateside items were being resold in town. This had been the case in the past and was resolved after being adequately addressed and guilty parties sanctioned.

Contract perks were often misunderstood and abused, depending on the individual who interpreted them. Because of the large number of Company personnel, and glitches in the supply system, there had been problems with Vientiane and Bangkok commissaries in the past, but they were only temporary and eventually resolved. Discussions regarding Army Post Office (APO) and other privileges reserved for embassy and military personnel had raised issues in the early days. Retrieval and distribution of APO mail was settled when Air America assured the military that a U.S. citizen would be in charge of the function.²⁶

Ben Moore was very agitated during this period and threatened to withdraw all U.S. Air Force privileges at the Air America Club. He was also aware that the DepChief contract contained a provision allowing American employees everyday commissary purchases in Vientiane and supplies for the Club and supermarket from Bangkok. In his monthly report to Taipei Ben wrote in part:

²⁶ I can recall at one time having to use the local Thai post office in town while the issue was being resolved.

"...But why worry about next year? With the present witch hunts being conducted (with us the quarry) by so-called companions in the defense of Western Culture, maybe no Americans will be here to need any water. Progressive deprivation of privileges, harassment, and general accusations of wrong doing (no specifics or facts are made available to us-we must be guilty; somebody said so) have begun to get people's backs up. Already some are preparing to send families home, after hearing the Commissary and Supermarket privileges were no more..."

No other contractors in Southeast Asia experienced similar problems, but they did not have the large number of individuals and dependents that we did. For as long as I could remember, post exchange privileges at the Udorn facility depended on the whims of the local military base commanding officer, who rotated every year. So far, except for the U.S. Army STARCOM PX access, they had been denied for what may have been a number of reasons. Mainly, we were resented by the Air Force hierarchy and others because of a lack of curfew, not being subject to military police control, the general secrecy surrounding our operations, and the money we earned. In addition, because of limited room in the Club, not all the officers were allowed in the facility.

Without the ability to purchase American food, some people were seriously talking about sending their dependents home. In our case it was not such a problem, for we purchased food locally from the market and lived mostly on the Udorn economy, but I counted on purchasing of some baby food were often baby food from either our facility or the Vientiane commissary when Rick was old enough to consume those prepared items. Jars available downtown, but extremely expensive and probably well beyond their unmarked shelf life. Because we were going on leave soon, it would not constitute a near term problem and I would have to wait and assess the situation upon our return.

Eventually, a primary and specific reason for the exclusion surfaced with the Air Force claiming that Air America personnel were reselling Levis downtown. An extensive investigation into this allegation revealed that an NCO was involved in the scheme through his local girlfriend. After this was revealed, our privileges were restored. ²⁷

UPCOUNTRY

On the 26th, I was assigned to fly four days at Luang Prabang. Since I was to relieve the PIC of Hotel-36, I deadheaded to Wattay Airport on Hotel-40; from there I caught a ride on C-123B, 374 to Site-54, arriving there about noon. Jeep transportation from the airport across the Bailey Bridge spanning the Nam Khan to the Bungalow after work, and back in the morning, was timely, and the Lao loaders cooperative. Fair weather in the royal capital area continued throughout the period. When cloud buildups interfered with direct flights, circumnavigation allowed high flight time, while working western and northern sites around Nam Bac to support the projected FAR move north toward the Nam Bac Valley. I was not particularly happy working the area in a sole helicopter, particularly alone or late in the day, when response time for a downed aircraft was at a low ebb. However, at least I had not been shot at there to my knowledge, and was considerably more comfortable and familiar with the area than during past RON periods.

On Sunday, I completed my monthly flight time and was allowed to return the ship to Tango-08 for an inspection. After the extra pilots were hired, we had been averaging a little over

²⁷ Ben Moore May 1966 Monthly Report.
EW Knight, Emails, 07/18/98, 07/31/00.
CJ Abadie Email, 07/18/98.
Marius Burke Email, 07/24/98.

seventy hours. This made the Customer happy and fulfilled whatever agreements the Company had negotiated in the contract. However, as any flight time over seventy hours was considered overtime and provided an additional ten dollars per hour, we wished for a little more work. But even more pilots were being hired, and without more H-34s to fly, our time would erode further. It seemed like a feast or famine job.

During a change of command ceremony in Saigon on 1 June, General William E. Momyer replaced General Moore as commander of the Seventh Air Force. After sufficient time to obtain "feet wet" credentials, because of difficult and separate command reporting structures used in the Southeast Asian war and in order to achieve improved and more decisive results, Momyer complained to his superiors. He believed that an overall Theater commander was required to accomplish better coordination and timely action: one person to direct the air war. He was correct, and under such a person likely more could be accomplished with less loss of life and machines. However, politics and thirst for power being what it is at top echelons, such a central entity was never employed.

The problems of command and control, evident from the beginning of the war, were derived from the many military and civilian individuals in the advise and consent structure, and the fact that they were often at odds over control. Five levels of command were generally required for 7th Air Force operations in Southeast Asia. For the Rolling Thunder operation in North Vietnam, the commanding general Saigon was responsible to the Pacific Air Force commander in Hawaii; for South Vietnam sorties, he was under the command of General Westmorland in Saigon; for Lao bombing the American Ambassador in Vientiane was the final authority. Residing under the powerful Strategic Air Command's umbrella, B-52 Arc Light and KC-135 air refueling missions were closely watched and monitored. Targets could generally only be selected from a list compiled by the Johnson Administration. Additional targets could be submitted for consideration, but these had to pass muster from PAC and JCS

before reaching administration types in Washington. ¹ Finally, although there was better coordination and liaison between U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force field commands during Rolling Thunder, there was no overall commander, except Admiral Sharp in far removed Hawaii.

To us lesser mortals working in the nasty, sweaty conditions of Laos, from the start of the air war it was obvious that dysfunctional air operations proved the wrong way to conduct the conflict, and it was a miracle that we did as well as we did. Also, while only speculating about what occurred at the top, and without true knowledge, it was easy to censure military pilots flying larger fixed wing aircraft for seemingly performing inane and useless missions that did not address the greater goal. Even pilots like Captain Curt Briggs joked about F-4s repeatedly striking "smoking holes." Still, it was great fun for me watching smoke and dirt plumes rising from the PDJ or other sites during strikes. ²

To some extent, on a far less convoluted level, there were similar command problems for the Air America operation in Laos. Company control was tightly maintained in Taipei, Taiwan, by people far removed from the action—those who failed to understand the situation, possessed no helicopter experience, or rarely visited troops in the "field." Even when Bob Rousselot was the Vice President of Flight Operations, and normally visited out-stations once a month, to my knowledge, he never journeyed upcountry. Therefore, he and, to a greater extent,

¹As conceived by the founding fathers in the constitution to have civilians control the military.

²In the Authors' opinion, the relatively stable situation in Laos was partly because of Meo ground efforts and Hanoi leaders' decision to prosecute the war primarily in South Vietnam and only secondarily in Laos.

successive VPFOs often relied on second-hand information presented by sycophant yes men. Like most other management types in the organization, those at Taipei headquarters were oriented more toward fixed wing than helicopter operations. The culmination of total pilot dissatisfaction did not surface and resolve itself in a hard-fought union, until later when a high intensity war evolved in Laos and our losses escalated.³

Although somewhat hampered by the non-unity of command and shortage of iron bombs, the air war in both Theaters continued under Washington-imposed restrictions. At the end of May, when weather patterns improved, during a two-day air operation, the largest bombing raids commenced since the advent of Rolling Thunder in February 1965. Reconnaissance bomb damage assessment (BDA) revealed five bridges, seventeen rail cars, and twenty buildings in the Vine-Thanh Hoa marshalling area were destroyed. Other raids struck Highway-12 north of Mugia Pass, and the Yen Bay arsenal seventy-five miles northeast of Hanoi.

The question of destroying enemy petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL) supplies to curtail Vietnamese war potential had been posed by pilots, media, and politicians since November 1965. In a major U.S. administration policy change and escalation of the Rolling Thunder campaign, U.S. fighter-bombers were allowed to strike selected storage facilities for a week in late June. Then, on the 29th, representing the first strikes close to major cities, in one day F-105 "Thuds" from Takhli, and Korat, and carrier-based Navy jets, pounding seven out of nine facilities, destroyed an estimated fifty per cent of the country's oil supply in the Hanoi, Haiphong, and Do Son areas.

³ To Bob Rousselot's credit, he invited CJ Abadie to permanently join him at headquarters for consultation regarding helicopter operations and to groom him for management advancement. However, Rousselot left Air America shortly afterward and Boyd, the succeeding VPFO, failed to use Ab's talents to advantage.

BDA revealed good results, but much POL had been previously dispersed in drums to concealed, off limits, or impossible-to-strike areas. Therefore, the effort was not totally effective in stemming Hanoi leaders' continuing intention to prosecute the war in the South. For obvious political reasons, foreign ships carrying oil into the Haiphong port were still off limits, but not so barges and lighters that offloaded the petroleum at night. These were attacked with impunity.

Increased bombing pressure on North Vietnam's infrastructure failed to move leaders to less aggressive measures in the South. Although aware that sustained bombing would eventually cripple its war potential, stubborn Hanoi leaders reiterated demands that an unconditional bombing halt precede any American overture for beginning peace negotiations.⁴

UDORN

In a fitting testament to the Sikorsky machine's durability and the Maintenance Department's resolve to keep them flying, twenty UH-34D helicopter pilots logged 2,890 hours in June. Helicopters were not the only aircraft maintained at Udorn, as a C-45, C-47, C-123, DHC-4A, nine Porters, and seven Helio Couriers were also stationed at the facility. Other maintenance contracts covered the Lao H-34s, Waterpump and Lao-Thai AT-28s. Battle damage alone kept full time teams at work repairing them.

Detachment 6, 1st Air Commando Wing, which had conducted Waterpump operations since March 1964, was re-designated Detachment 1, 606th Air Commando Squadron, and assigned to the newly created Lucky Tiger Squadron. Operating out of an Air

⁴John Smith, *Rolling Thunder*, 94-98.
John Bowman, *Almanac*, 141-142.
Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991) 390-391.

America hangar, Waterpump headquarters remained at Udorn with no change in maintenance contracts. In fact, the operation had expanded to such proportions that a separate hangar was required and planned for the unit, with Air America employees continuing heavy maintenance.

Plans for construction of additional hangars and new buildings were delayed, for they depended on proper funding and available land, which was almost exhausted. Some small parcels had been obtained in the past and, as then, negotiations with the Royal Thai Government were required for additional Royal Thai Army property adjacent to the compound to expand.

Facility improvements continued. Because existing hangars could accommodate only a finite number of fixed wing and helicopters at night, after many years, excellent parking ramp lights were installed so timely inspections could be effected for morning launches. No longer would ground mechanics have to rely solely on inefficient flashlights to perform their job or "pencil whip" items. Now small cracks and difficult-to-see battle damage could be discovered and addressed without the benefit of sunlight.

A beautification program was underway to sod the front lawn of the Operations-Administration building. Only twenty-five per cent was finished before the rains commenced, curtailing further work.

In a humorous vein, the latest rumor circulating involved moving the Udorn operation to a new location. To somewhat validate and fuel the rumor, some individuals had placed offers to sell their household goods on the Club bulletin board. To my knowledge, since the "rumor-a-day-club's" demise, this had not been an item. At that time, Ben was hassled by town landlords, who feared losing their livelihood. As a result, he went looking for those involved in the prank and I was implicated. Wiser, now

he suspected that idle wives, with which he always had to contend, were merely having fun. Besides, anyone in his right mind knew that the facility was too large to move. ⁵

NAM YU

Following a couple of days of babysitting at the house, I began flying on the second. Along with former Marine pilot Hal Jowers, I was assigned Hotel-21. Hal had recently arrived in Udorn and received his initial acceptance ride. Our RON would constitute his first trip upcountry. He was one of the first of several newbies hired.

The aircraft had been previously cleared by the Maintenance Department and a test flight pilot. Therefore, after a thorough preflight, engine crank up, and rotor engagement, with everything looking fine, I taxied to the warm-up ramp adjoining Runway-30. After scanning my instruments, as accustomed prior to lift off and before departing for several days upcountry, I raised the ship to a low hover and commenced a minor turn to check power, vibration level, and look for major engine or hydraulic leaks. During this process, I always mentally challenged the engine to quit where I enjoyed maintenance backup. Looking out the open window and down at the mat, a spreading, black pool of oil contrasting with the white concrete immediately caught my eye. We were not going anywhere in Hotel-21 that day. ⁶

⁵ Bill Leary June 1966 Notes.

Warren Trest, Tactical Evaluation *CHECO Division: Lucky Tiger Combat Operations* (Headquarters PACAF Directorate, 15 June 1967) 2,5; Reprinted by Dalley Book Service.

Ben Moore June 1966 Udorn Monthly Report.

⁶ Strangely enough, I never experienced a complete engine failure during thirty-five years of flying various types of reciprocating and turbine engine helicopters and accumulating 19,000 hours.

After taxiing back to the parking area, grounding the machine, and completing the logbook, I was reassigned Hotel-40. This machine passed muster with a minimum of effort. We were scheduled to work at Nam Yu. Therefore, as he had on the aborted Hotel-21 attempt, Mike Jarina rode along with us to retrieve and ferry Hotel-33 to Udorn to correct maintenance problems.

During the long flight I got to know Hal a little better (if that is possible while bouncing along in a lumbering H-34). He was a thin, wiry sort much like Howard Estes, but taller. A bit talkative, even aggressive, he indicated that his family was quite large. It usually took me awhile to acclimate to a new person's personality and Jowers was no exception.

That night after work, we walked up the hill from the strip to Tony's house for the standard evening watering and food. While waiting for the houseboy to return from below with beers, I introduced Jowers to Tony. Then I spied another familiar face. It was Reed Charlton. Like Don Courtney, Reed was another member of our fall 1957 20th OCC Training & Test Regiment training contingent at Quantico, Virginia, and was now an Agency Case Officer. Our closely alphabetized names dictated that we served in the same platoon or company throughout this and Officer Basic School training at Camps Upshur and Barrett. I had not seen Reed since graduating from what we called the "charm school."

Reed, a pudgy fellow, was a cultured "Southern Gentleman" from an established Virginia family. Good natured to a fault, but considered a character (we had many of this type), he was naturally funny and appeared to shuffle a bit. For this unusual habit, which may have been a charade, he was accorded the dubious name "Snuffy" after "Snuffy" Smith in Billy DeBeck's humorous and enduring Sunday morning comic strip, *Barney Google and Snuffy Smith*. When I whipped this name on Reed, Tony doubled over and broke up in howls of laughter. I thought he would die.

Reed had earned an entomology degree at college and had recently discovered and caught a rare butterfly in the adjoining jungle. However, he had trouble cataloging or taking credit for the new species because he was prohibited from divulging that he was even in Laos. During the ensuing days, I rarely saw Reed. He was generally off in the jungle chasing insects with his butterfly net, and as I rarely worked at Site-118A, I did not see him again.

Investment guru Poe was still touting Disney stock for capital gains. Good things were happening with the company. There were plans for a Disneyland east in Florida. However, at fifty-one dollars per share I considered the issue too dear. Instead, I opted to wait for a pullback anticipated by "the street" after LBJ announced his eight billion increase in taxes at the end of the month to pay for the war in South Vietnam.

After a few belts of Mekong Whiskey, Tony was usually in rare form, particularly with a captive audience. His brute strength was renown, something to be respected, and could be scary at times. Aware that I had been a college wrestler at Duke,⁷ he trapped me on the stair landing leading to the porch one evening. Placing his huge arms around me, he proceeded to bend me backward over the railing. One glance at the rocky ground fifteen feet below convinced me that the dangerous game had to cease before I was incapacitated or killed. Fortunately, he was only playing with me and backed off when I relaxed and failed to resist.

Tony kept us busy. Logging one hundred per cent project time and some night, we did very well. Hal had a chance to see most of the area and sites, including some teams located close to the border region.

⁷ Albeit saddled with the pejorative nickname of "canvass back" by my Kappa Sigma fraternity brothers.

I was relieved on the sixth, but without a way home had to overnight until the following day when the PIC of 06 X-ray provided a ride directly to Udorn.

As for Hal Jowers, he was eventually upgraded to Captain. However, he displayed a distinct proclivity to commit both errors of commission and omission.⁸ Additionally, from the beginning, he and ACPH Burke failed to see eye to eye on many standard Company and local management policies. Marius considered Jower's learning curve poor both in and out of the cockpit. Conforming like his peers was only one problem. These problems stimulated a few counseling sessions after which Jowers attempted to correct his ways. However, after upgrading, during his first trip to Savannakhet, the maverick's problems really surfaced. One mission entailed delivering a Customer to Thakhet, waiting for him to attend meetings, and returning the man to L-39. As this process involved a wait of several hours, Hal decided he was not earning any money for himself or the Company while parked in a static position, so he wrangled a mission from another Customer. This resulted in his not being available when the first Customer was ready to RTB. Naturally, this created a stir after reaching the ears of superiors in AB-1 and was subsequently relayed to the chief pilot's office. Hal debriefed with Marius after returning and presented his side of the story. He was convinced and adamant that he had done the proper thing. Trying to jack Jowers up a notch, Marius attempted to convince the man that such actions were not the way the Company conducted business, but the ACPH's admonitions fell on deaf ears.

⁸ Frank Stergar Email, 04/16/97. Verne Clarkson and Hal Jowers were flying missions out of Thakhet. En route, Verne noticed that Hal continuously cruised at red-line power settings. He inquired about this and was flabbergasted to learn that he always flew in that manner.

Hal's deficient mental reasoning surfaced further when he complained in the bar to the Military Assistance Program (MAP) Lao trainer, helicopter IP Paul Walton, regarding Marius's attitude and expectations that he should conform and perform like his peers. It was the wrong thing to say. Hal and Paul had served in the same Marine squadron and he looked to Walton for sympathy, but he was unaware of Walton and Burke's close personal relationship. ⁹ ¹⁰

In addition to Jowers, Ted Cash (DOH 13/07/66) joined the helicopter group and former Marine Larry Egan the previous month. Ted, like John Fonburg, had served in the HMR-163 squadron on the USS *Bennington* with Wayne Knight when "spooks" were recruiting unmarried HUS-1 pilots for work in Laos during March 1961. John made the cut, Wayne and Ted did not.

Ted, a reserve senior captain, had a mediocre military record. He had been "riffed" from the Corps for what I heard was a bar fight in which he struck a major. However, Knight, who knew Ted at the MCAF Santa Ana, California, indicated he had two bar altercations in the "O" club, but not with a senior officer. One was with First Lieutenant Harry Gast who was his junior. After that fight, Ted wore a cast with a metal frame around his hand for some time. The impetuous Cash had broken his knuckles so many times during fights that doctors feared any new break might permanently ruin his hand. Ted was indeed a colorful character and remained with Air America many years. ¹¹

⁹ Hal Jowers' termination over a serious incident at Nam Bac in 1967 will be related later in the next book.

¹⁰ Marius Burke Interview.

¹¹ EWKnight Email.

JARINA

While we were having "fun" in Houa Khong Province, after ferrying Hotel-33 to Udorn, Mike Jarina was sent to RON at Sam Tong.

Flying Hotel-34 with a crew of Flight Mechanics Pat McCarthy and Jim Agnew, he worked Long Tieng and Sam Tong areas the first day. Along with Tom Hoppe flying Hotel-31 and other pilots, they shuttled Vang Pao's soldiers and their dependents to locations in and around Moung Heim-Na Khang to consolidate and resettle previously abandoned areas. Attesting to the enormous amount of work accomplished by H-34 crews in helping government forces develop new landing zones, consolidate and reinforcing the region, during a three-day period, Jarina landed multiple times at Chong Ha (LS-48), Moung Heim (LS-48A), Moung Son (L-59), Na Khang (LS-36), Phu Cum (LS-50), and San Pa Ka (LS-33). Perhaps setting a record, while shuttling to various pads he logged 123 landing and takeoffs during the period.

Next Mike deadheaded to Savannakhet on Hotel-34 for an unusual two aircraft mission. Assuming control of Hotel-35, carrying several drums of fuel, he and another pilot flew a long-distance northeast to Ban Done (LS-28), thirty-five miles northeast of Paksane in the Nam Mouan river valley. (I landed at the same site years before.) From there they went eleven miles north-northeast to Moung Tiouen in a smaller river valley only seven miles from the North Vietnamese border. After making a stop at Ban Done for fuel and another landing at a remote site twenty miles northeast, they flew to Thakhet with their loads and intelligence information.

The 116-mile trip to Tango-08 resulted in recovery well after dark.

Mike returned to Military Region Two on Tuesday 14 June with Flight Mechanic David McDonald in Hotel-41. After a trip to

Moung Cha to retrieve freshly graduated SGU troops and fuel, he flew north to Pha Bong (LS-76). Located eighteen miles north of Moung Heim, Site-76 was one of several mountain tribal sites within a few miles of the Moung Son area where enemy pressure was expected soon. After conducting local shuttles around Na Khang, the loader directed the Captain east across Route-6 to Ban Vieng (LS-89), twenty miles southeast of Site-36. From there, he flew to Sam Song Hong (LS-210), five miles southeast of Ban Vieng. While the weather held, he supplied these sites a second time. Following a landing at Phu Cum to retrieve people for Sam Tong, he RTB for the night.

The next two days were very active working the Moung Heim-Moung Son-Na Khang complexes. They encompassed high time and between forty-five to fifty landings per day. The supplies and reinforcements delivered to Moung Son and environs were timely, for during the late night and early morning of the 16-17th, 200 enemy forces attacked Site-59. Well prepared for such an onslaught, the Meo warriors held the site.

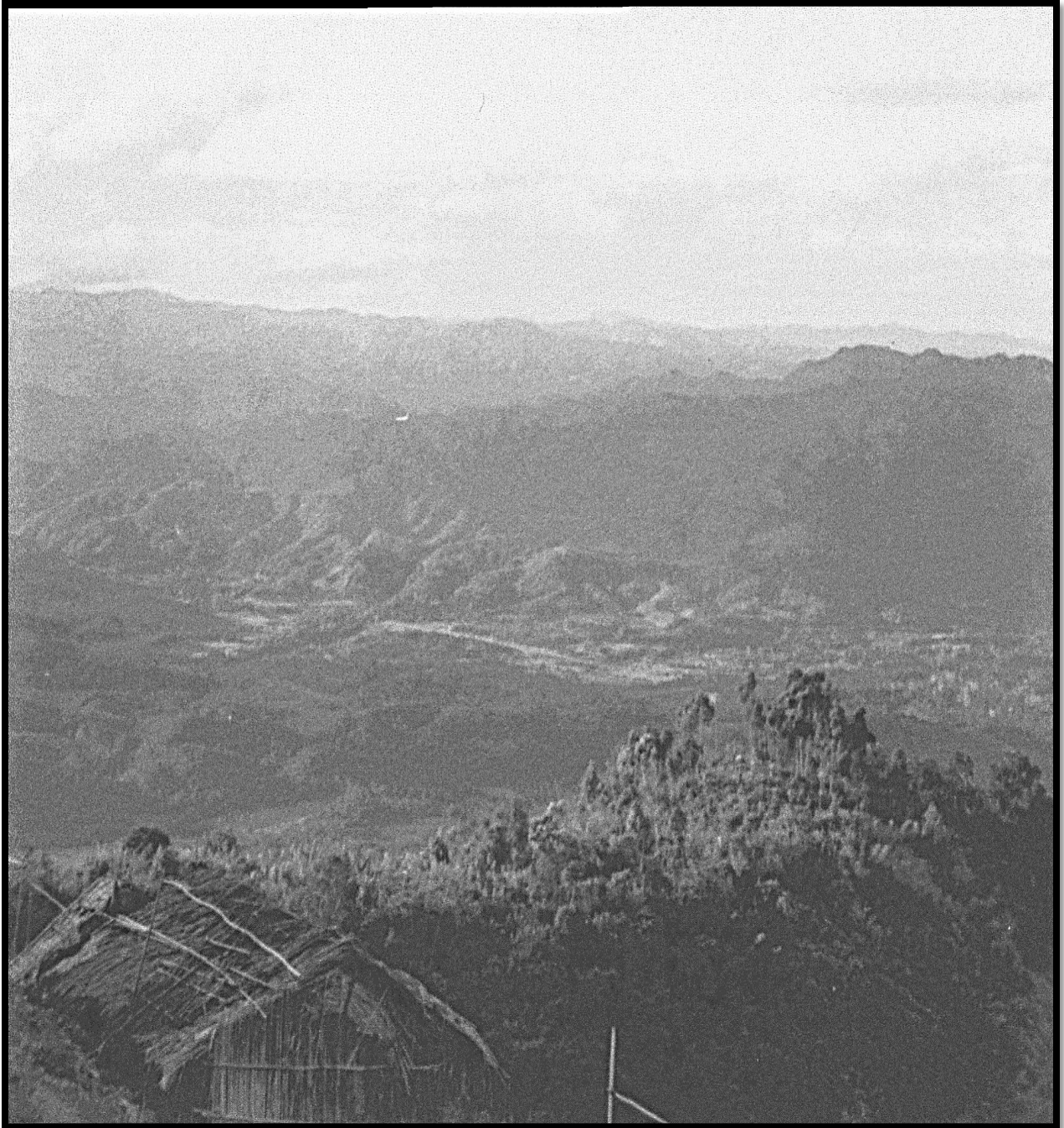
We still controlled Site-59 on the 29th. On Thursday, while the PIC of Hotel-35 was turning around, the tail wheel broke off in a chuck hole (or perhaps he forgot to disengage the tail wheel locking pin). Wayne Knight deadheaded to Moung Son with Tom Hoppe and flew the damaged aircraft to Sam Tong without a tail wheel and RON at the hostel. He spent an extra day at Site-20 waiting for a part, and team to install it, before a short test flight and return to Tango-08 on 1 July. Tom remained working MR-2 until 3 July.

Jarina worked part of a day at Moung Soui for the Requirements Office (RO). After a final RON at Site-20, he



A freshly constructed helicopter landing zone (HLZ) in the hills overlooking the Moug Heim Valley.

Jarina Collection.



A hilltop outpost overlooking the Mounng Heim Valley.
Jarina Collection.



Air America H-34 crews at work at Mung Son (L-59) on a misty, rainy day. USAF CH-3 Jolly Greens are parked to the rear of the loading area. As soon as friendly forces captured northern sites, the SAR ships positioned forward during the day to be closer to North Vietnam and their Rolling Thunder area of operation. No one RON at the site.

Jarina Collection.

deadheaded to Udorn. ¹²

TIME OFF

The back-to-back scheduled time off (STO) of thirteen days off with the end of one month extending into the next had worked well and kept many pilots happy who wanted extra rest or travel. In 1966, the pilot excess prompted CPH Knight to experiment providing even more time off to spend at home or in Bangkok. If one remained in Bangkok and was available within one day, then the time off could be arranged for two weeks at any time in the month.

Mike Jarina enjoyed this system, for it allowed him sufficient time to scuba dive one week in Pattaya and to enjoy an additional week with his family in Bangkok. He always had a telephone available and could take the night train to Udorn and be ready to fly the next day. However, in order to do this, flying had to be concentrated to amass the seventy odd hours required, and depending on the weather and situation, one had to hump at times to acquire this number.

There are always a few individuals who foul up good deals for the majority, while trying to circumvent a system. ¹³ Ron Dubinsky and a couple of other pilots elected to take advantage of the system and journey to Hong Kong for two weeks. Nothing was secret in our small organization, and after what they were doing circulated, management called the hotel in Bangkok

¹²VictorAnthony, 199 fn 12.
EW Knight Email, 08/01/00.
Joe Leeker, The Aircraft of Air America, UH-34D Hotel-35 (Second Series). Jarina Interviews,
Tom Hoppe Letter.

¹³ Remember when you were in grade school and someone was talking and the teacher kept the entire class after school to set an example?

Dubinsky had recorded as his lodging. Naturally, he was not there and the generous time off policy was terminated.

Both Mike and Abadie enjoyed diving and spent much of their time off in the Pattaya area. Mike got to know Ab fairly well and developed a high regard for him. He considered him a good leader, who always made the right judgment in a cool and calm manner; that VPFO Bob Rousselot had known exactly what he was doing when he chose Ab for advancement. Having a Thai wife, he had learned to speak fluent Thai, but for personal reasons was careful where he spoke it. A lot of people were aware Ab spoke Thai, Mike among them. ¹⁴

From the early days, Air America helicopter pilots were required to go to the Thai hospital across the street from the Nong Prajak reservoir to obtain an X-ray to satisfy the six-month Company first class physical. One day, both Ab and Mike were there. Ab obtained the proper forms to complete. The receptionist asked him if he spoke Thai. Ab answered with a definitive no. Mike was surprised until realizing that the man did not want to divulge that he spoke Thai.

Another example of Ab's reluctance to speak Thai surfaced in the Barbos open air restaurant near road's end in Pattaya. It was Mike's first time eating there with Ab. The daily menu was written on a large chalkboard in block letters outside the eatery. Mike selected a Thai dish from the list consisting of spaghetti intertwined with sea creatures. Curious as to their names, he asked Ab. Ab replied that he did not know either. Mike called the waiter over to the table and then, thinking his friend would inquire in Thai, asked Ab to find out.

Ab said in plain English, "*What are those little sea creatures?*"

¹⁴AB-1's cagey Pat Landry was of the same persuasion.

The Thai man replied in English, *"They are baby squid."*

Then Abadie turned to Jarina and without cracking a smile said, *"The next time you can ask."*

Another instance occurred when Ab, Alex Nadalini, Mike, a few other pilots, and some of the wives were on a rental fishing boat in the Siam Gulf captained by a sarong-clad Thai with a hair lip deformity. The trip's purpose was to enjoy fishing, diving, and snorkeling in the clear water.

The second day the group went out again. Nadalini, who spoke concise "King's English," was unable to find the fishing gear left onboard the previous day. Perplexed, he asked Ab to inquire as to the gear's whereabouts from the boatman. Ab looked at Alex in a queer way and said, "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

"I don't speak Thai."

"Oh well, then come with me." Ab called the man by name and asked him in English what he did with the fishing gear.

Hair lip looked up from his duties saying in equally clear English, *"It is in the cabin."*

Ab looked at Alex with his characteristic deadpan expression uttering, *"Tomorrow, if you have questions regarding anything onboard, you ask him."*

Yet another time Mike, Ab, and Ab's ten-year-old son were on the way home from a Pattaya fishing trip. During the journey they stopped at a Thai store. Still reluctant to speak Thai, Abadie told his son what he wanted and told him to do the asking in Thai. ¹⁵

¹⁵ Mike Jarina Interviews.
EW Knight Email, 01/25/01.

PREPARATIONS FOR HOME LEAVE

I had been feeling unwell again. Suspecting continuing amoeba problems from the symptoms, I was completely frustrated. Something needed to be done, so I inquired from the parents if there was a hospital specializing in tropical medicine in Albany, New York, as I had heard. I also had previously written to a doctor at the Tropical School of Medicine in London, England. I received a letter from the good doctor indicating he was willing to examine me and to contact him when I arrived. Based on this information, I began planning the trip home through Europe instead of the Pacific route about the middle of July. Of course, this depended on obtaining necessary passports and visas.

Armed with documentation of births, marriage certificates, and a Thai resident family paper, we boarded a USAF Caribou returning to Bangkok on a milk run. Charlie Carlson came through for us once more, for Air America could never arrange such transportation for its employees. On the way, unembarrassed, Tuie nursed Rick in front of several men. I was very proud of her. She had been concentrating all her energy on Rick's welfare and development to the detriment of her own health. While the baby's weight had increased to nine pounds, she had dropped below ninety. As she was always petite, this was not dangerous, but noticeable.

As before, we booked an upstairs room at the Suriwongse Hotel on the street of the same name. Not the best area accommodations, it was clean, inexpensive, adjacent to and convenient to Patpong Road where the Air America office, the money changer, the CAT ticket office, the Bangkok Christian Hospital, and other places we needed to visit were located. In addition, the hotel had a small place to eat off the reception area and was run by a portly, kindly Chinese gentleman we liked,

and ensured we always had the best service from a personal houseboy.

We had considerable tasks to accomplish in the short time allotted. I obtained a Pan American One schedule from the CAT office and tentatively selected 20 July for our departure date to CONUS. Rick would be more than two months old by then, slightly more than the airline's minimum age requirement for infant travel.

To help smooth the way for Tuie's tourist visa, I visited Base Manager Bill Shaver at the Air America office to obtain a letter stating that we were going on home leave, after which we would return to Thailand. By the 14th, I had the following letter in hand. It was typed on Air America stationary to the American Embassy Bangkok, Thailand:

"Dear Sir:

This is to certify that Mr. Harry R. Casterlin is one of our pilots and is presently stationed in Udorn, Thailand. Mr. Casterlin and his family are proceeding to the United States of America for their home leave during July 1966 and will return to continue his services with the company in November of the same year. It is requested that you kindly issue the Tourist Visa to his wife, Mrs. Prapapon Casterlin at your earliest convenience.

Your assistance in this matter will be highly appreciated."

I had our marriage papers and Tuie's birth certificate translated and photos of her and the baby taken at a service across the street from the hotel. Then Tuie easily obtained a Thai passport. With all the "necessary" papers in hand, we taxied across town to the U.S. Embassy to obtain a tourist visa. Registering John Richard's birth at the consular office was

accomplished without difficulty. I was assured that his passport would be ready by the sixteenth.

However, obtaining a tourist visa that we thought would be relatively uncomplicated became a prime challenge. Despite Shaver's letter, the acerbic and overbearing female officer dealing with us informed me that the consular service no longer issued tourist visas to the USA for Thai women married to Americans. Apparently, in the past some of our Air America or military personnel had failed to return and this resulted in a complicated deportation process for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Department. It was the old saw. Because very few took advantage of the system, everyone suffered. Now the only travel document State would approve for a short stay in the States was nonimmigrant. Obtaining this visa entailed additional expense, delay, and considerable trouble. For one, I required a certified copy of my birth certificate to process additional paperwork for State Department files. Another required Tuie to obtain a dreaded Criminal Investigation Department (CID) clearance from the central headquarters of the Bangkok police department. A final requirement, seemingly an embassy CYA maneuver, was a shocking "barn burner." Barely civil and appearing to talk down to me, the female consular section drill sergeant, who reminded me of SPECTRE villainess Rosa Klebb in the 1963 James Bond movie *To Russia With Love*, demanded that I produce a letter from my supervisor attesting to and guaranteeing my timely return to Thailand. I thought this foolish, for as one's plans constantly evolved and nothing in life was certain, I was not convinced this was something anyone could assure. Since we had little time to achieve these requirements, I was unsure that we could accomplish all of them and depart Don Muang on the target date. I left muttering to myself. I was not happy with the service at the embassy consular

section, and began to understand why people often said that if an American had a serious problem overseas not to go to the U.S. Embassy, but to the more considerate and accommodating British Embassy. I also better understood now why Tony Poe often ranted about State Department policies. The entire episode that day did not speak well for U.S. State Department personnel, people our taxes supported. But that was the nature of the beast.

Taking a break from the paperwork grind, I called Jim Moore. I wanted to talk to him about our agreement and have Tuie meet him in case something happened to me. Affable as ever, Jim invited us to dinner with his family. Jim lived on a Soi close to the Coca Cola factory off Satorn Road. We spent a pleasant evening with Moore his Chinese wife, Ann, and their two little girls. Noting that we were recent and largely inexperienced parents, in the role of an excellent hostess, Ann attempted to provide Tuie sage advice about caring for a new born without incurring personal undue stress. These were things I had attempted to convey to her without much success, but she seemed to pay attention to Ann.

I took Tuie and Rick to the Seventh Day Adventist for a follow-up progress examination. Both received a clean bill of health, and Tuie obtained a few vitamins to help build up her strength. I had to get back to work, so our houseboy at the Suriwongse obtained a ticket for me on the night train. Since I would be away in Laos for a few days there was no reason for Tuie and Rick to return to Udorn. Therefore, they accepted an invitation to stay at Judge Prasat's house. There was a dual purpose to this. Prasat would address a letter to his good friend, a police general who held a top position in the CID Department, requesting him to provide a required police clearance to his niece. The second involved an attempt to accord her some leisure while consuming nutritious food. Her trip to

police headquarters was merely a formality. After a minimum time waiting in the reception area, she was ushered into a luxurious office to see the person in charge. A friendly chat ensued, in which she was offered a glass of orange juice. The general inquired if she thought she would be happy in the States, as it was much colder there than Thailand. Not long afterward, she received the CID clearance. It certainly helped to have friends in high places.

CPH Knight was upcountry from 12 to 14 June conducting route checks, new pilot training, and evaluations. The first day, he and the individual flew in the Vang Vieng (L-16) area. Working for the Neutralists, missions took them to Nong Pet (LS-154), eighteen miles southwest of Lima-16; Moang Soum (LS-157), thirteen miles south-southeast of 16; and Moung Kassy (LS-153) on Route-13 between Vang Vieng and the 7/13 road junction.

Following an overnight stay at the Sam Tong hostel, the men performed refugee work for AID at diverse locations at Ban Na Luang (LS-66), twenty-five miles south of Site-20; Nam Tang (LS-73), eight miles south of Sayaboury town; Nam Song (LS-199). The longest trip over hostile terrain was well to the east of Long Tieng to Nam Song (LS-199), fifteen miles east of LS-95, and not far from the border.

On the third, before returning to Tango-08, they flew to Luang Prabang and conducted four shuttles to the village of Ban Pho Bok, thirty-three miles south-southeast of Lima-54 and a couple of miles north of Route-13.

The day I returned to Udorn, Wayne informed me that he was departing on STO. I explained the Consular section's nonimmigrant visa requirement to provide a supervisory letter stating that I was going on extended home leave and would be returning to Thailand with my family. Stating he did not have time, the authority, or simply passing the buck, Wayne

recommended that I talk to Ben Moore. I am not sure Ben had ever written one of these letters before, for he hemmed and hawed, finally indicating in his Texas drawl that he would have to think about it. That was definitely not what I wanted to hear. It seemed that all along the chain of command I was running into bureaucratic red tape and roadblocks that might stymie my leave.

As another possibility to obtain advice and assistance, I boarded a bus headed downtown to the USIS building located on the corner directly across from the park. I had utilized the facility to read newspapers and magazines for several years and knew the friendly Thai couple Kuhn Joe and Kuhn Jun, employed in the library, quite well. Jun was well known in town for adopting and caring for stray dogs, which were plentiful in town. In contrast to the female idiot in the Bangkok consular section, I had developed pleasant relations with former Vice Consul Officer, Gordon Murchie, and the current officer, Ralph Jans. Ralph commiserated with me, but in the end indicated that my local supervisor would have to compose the letter. Armed with this sage advice, I returned to Ben Moore and attempted to convince him in my best MacArthuresque style that my family and I would definitely return to Udorn. Ben, being the nice person, he was, finally agreed to create something along the lines we discussed and one the Consular Section required. From his monthly reports sent to Taipei, I knew Ben possessed the ability to write well and would produce the letter that I needed. By 28 June, I had the following letter:

"To Whom it may Concern:

I, Ben Moore, Jr. am Base Manager of Air America, Inc. in Udorn, Thailand and supervisor of Mr. Harry Richard Casterlin, an employee of Air America, Inc. in Udorn, Thailand, who is married to Prapapon Casterlin. I certify that Mr. Casterlin is

not a United States resident for U.S. income tax purposes, but is a resident of Udorn, Thailand, indicative of which, he is maintaining a physical residence in Udorn during the period of his absence in the United States, and I certify that Mr. Casterlin is working under an unexpired contract with Air America, Inc. in Udorn, Thailand. Furthermore, I certify that to the best of my knowledge and belief Mr. Casterlin will return to Udorn with his wife Prapapon by January 1, 1967."

In my mind the letter was perfect. It seemed to satisfy all required by the counsel's office. Only time would tell.

AIR AMERICA AIRCRAFT

Although far superior to the Helio Courier, the Swiss manufactured Pilatus Porter had caused Company pilots and Vientiane and Udorn maintenance departments problems, particularly during the hot season. Engine and propeller shortages kept the fleet frequently grounded. By May, Air America had fifteen Porters in its inventory with twelve theoretically in operation. Three were in Tainan, Taiwan, undergoing French manufactured Astazou engine conversion to more reliable Garrett engines. An additional three were slated for June delivery. The Astazou configured Porters had recently incurred two operational accidents upcountry, but the fleet was back in operation. After being retrofitted to Garrett engines, three Porters reached Udorn by the end of May out of a total of eight reputed to be assigned to the facility. Following local testing they were assigned and sent upcountry to work. Initially deemed efficient, by the end of June, they began developing problems with fuel pump drives failing.

As a continuing process to upgrade the fixed wing fleet, the first two C-45 Volpar engine and tricycle landing gear

conversions commenced at the end of April, and the first plane was completed in June. ¹⁶

UPCOUNTRY

On Wednesday, 22 June I deadheaded to Sam Tong on Porter 194X with CJ Abadie, who was along to conduct my annual route check. Since he rarely went upcountry, there may have been additional reasons for his trip. Management types liked to periodically journey upcountry to inspect hostel conditions, and discuss pilot problems with various Customers. Although I had remained upcountry a couple of days after being shot up during the Wilmot incident, it was my first RON since. Perhaps the COO wanted to observe if I was psychologically fit to perform the work. ¹⁷

Upon reaching Site-20, I assumed command of Hotel-41. I worked locally, and Abadie did not remain in the cockpit with me long. Despite the monsoon's fury, the next two days were spent supporting Vang Pao's operations in upper Military Region Two. It was relatively quiet at Na Khang and other areas due to the fact that the 148th Vietnamese Regiment had already, or was in the process of withdrawing to Moc Chau, North Vietnam, to rest and refit with the 316th parent division. Preparing for the upcoming dry season, two new regiment sized infantry units were being formed in the Northwest Military Region preparing for dry season operations in north Military Region Two. ¹⁸

¹⁶ Bill Leary April, May, June 1966 Notes from Technical Services Reports.

¹⁷ I am not sure how he would have determined this. The job and war had changed appreciably since he last flew the line and his experience and air time in Laos was quite limited.

¹⁸ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 155.

On Saturday, I was assigned Hotel-40 to ferry south. Thick cloud layers and heavy rain necessitated much circumnavigation. The weather never changed. After crossing the Mekong, utilization of the iron compass, the narrow gage railroad track stretching from Nong Khai to Udorn, was required to reach the base. The extremely low altitude flown to remain marginal visual contact (VFR) eliminated non-direction beacon (NDB) coverage, radar vectors from Brigham Control over 278.4, or contact with the tower on VHF 118.1 until very close to the field boundary. The request to commence a special VFR steel track approach to Runway-30 was met with confusion at first, until Air Force tower operators became more familiar with our unorthodox terminology and methods.

Arriving at the house, I found that Tuie was still in Bangkok working on the necessary paperwork required for the U.S. State Department nonimmigrant visa.

After a couple of days off the schedule, I was assigned to fly a local familiarization flight with former Army pilot John Cooney in Hotel-43. Taking him through his paces, we put over two hours on the machine.

I was in the bar having a refreshing brew when John first arrived at the Air America facility. Seemingly very popular, the short, bald headed individual was greeted by many who knew him in his branch of the service. John had been an Army instructor pilot and talked a great deal about flying and teaching helicopter instrument technique. Naturally, this was a controversial subject with some of us senior people, who frowned on **any** instrument (IFR) flight in the mountains unless absolutely necessary to avoid or escape a tight situation, like enemy fire, or inadvertently entering IFR conditions. Even if only temporary, everyone had flown actual instruments (AI) in Laos, I as recently as the past month to evade enemy fire during

the ill- fated troop lift that preceded the recapture of Na Khang. At other times, to journey to or return from a work site, one had to occasionally descend through a narrow hole to either remain VFR or to continue underneath a cloud layer. We did not practice or maintain that instrument proficiency our Marine or Navy military cards required. But I always considered that because of the unique flying rotorcraft helicopters demanded, particularly during the smoky season, we frequently scanned cockpit instruments and were on the gages an estimated fifty percent of the time or more. Having flown both fixed wing and helicopters, I found cockpit division of attention to be much more concentrated in helicopters, especially during critical flight operations. However, to consciously fly IFR long distances in a vibrating, single engine machine without adequate radio navigation aids and unreliable maps as to minimum en route altitudes, flying IFR was not smart. Many agreed with me and the blanket theme of "rocks in the clouds" philosophy prevailed. Unfortunately, within a year and a half, Cooney was dead.

NIMROD

During May eight A-26K bombers, crews, and support personnel were deployed to Nakhon Phanom from England Air Force Base, Louisiana, to replace AC-47 gunships that had proved too slow and vulnerable a target for enemy AAA guns over the trails during night interdiction operations. The A-26 unit was folded into Detachment 1 of the 603rd Air Commando Squadron.

Formerly a World War Two bomber, the B-26 had been reconfigured for counterinsurgency operations and designated a B-26K. To preclude Thai sensitivity, the aircraft had been re-designated A-26K to eliminate the "B" bomber connotation. As a formidable weapon, like the A-1E, the plane had excellent loiter capability, mounted two stout power plants, eight .50 caliber

nose guns, eight wing stations for 7.62mm pods, and rockets, and twelve bomb bay stations.

The A-26K crews, two FAC qualified pilots, were aided by a recently installed MSQ-77 Combat Skyspot radar system at Nakhon Phanom, which was placed online by the end of June. Previously designed for training, and used in Western desert ranges as a bomb scoring radar device, it was converted into a strike directing system. The mobile ground-based radar, with a maximum line of sight of 200 miles at 30,000 feet, was intended to enhance navigation, and allow improved bombing accuracy at night and during adverse weather. During usage over the next few months, the system was not considered perfect in regard to pin point bombing, but misses at night and foul weather were measurably reduced compared to previously sorties.

First daylight Nimrod missions commenced during the third week in June. The following week, night evaluation missions began. Enemy AAA gunners were undeterred by the new planes, with one aircraft incurring battle damage on the 26th. Another was lost, and one damaged on the 29th. Because of many curtailed missions because of adverse weather, the original forty-five-day evaluation of the Big Eagle program continued through October. Flying exclusively at night, the A-26s demonstrated excellent loiter time and heavy ordnance loads, and no further planes were lost during this ninety-day period. Ambassador Sullivan, impressed with the machine, relaxed Cricket strike rules to permit attacks without FAC control, and requested more planes.

At the end of June, U.S. intelligence estimated that 600 miles of vehicle roads wound through the Ho Chi Minh corridor. Supported and maintained by the 559th Transportation Division of the Rear Services Directorate of the North Vietnamese Ministry of Defense, 200 miles of crushed rock and corduroy surfaces along Routes-23, 92, and 911 were deemed all weather capable.

Steel Tiger terrain and geography provided excellent means for interdicting roads. Twenty-four-hour visual reconnaissance (VR) was conducted by O-1 and A-26 crews from Nakhon Phanom, A-1Es from Udorn, and AC-47s from Ubon.

In addition to FAC-generated reports, Agency-inserted road watch teams delivered information on traffic movement. Two teams were also being readied to emplace battery-operated electronic sensors developed by the Agency "Skunk Works" both north and south of Tchepone, for the purpose of counting vehicle traffic. At first, the system worked too well, counting a single bicycle several times.

However, despite numerous bombing missions, with thousands of laborers maintaining LOCs, the Mugia Pass remained open to traffic. Improved means of target acquisition had to be developed. Adding to this assessment was the impression that the military situation in South Vietnam had not improved. Because manpower and supplies exceeded losses, U.S. air and ground anti-infiltration programs had not achieved the anticipated goal of weakening the enemy forces in South Vietnam.

From July through September the flow of Vietnamese trucks, men and supplies slowed because of seasonal monsoon downpours, although intelligence reports indicated that infiltration continued at a relatively high level. With flying conditions marginal, during a two-week period beginning on 29 July, foul weather caused cancellation of forty-six sorties.

In order to produce improved and timely information regarding Vietnamese movement, during the second half of 1966, under the auspices of the new Chief of Station Vientiane and embassy approval, indigenous road watch was greatly expanded in MR-3. To conduct this task, the Agency's Whiskey-3 training base outside Savannakhet was enlarged. For transportation to areas of interest, the total number of USAF CH-3 Pony Express ships was

increased by eleven aircraft. For missions, Star (Thai) and Hardnose (Agency name for indigenous Lao Theung RWT) teams were shuttled to a segregated remote Agency compound at NKP, where they boarded the CH-3s for insertion.

Apparently not all enemy troops and supplies were destined for South Vietnam. Road watch teams, Birddog FACs, and FAR soldiers reported porters and pack animals continuing to transverse roads and trails. Alarmingly, supplies were moving along the Ngo River south and east of the Se Bangfai (river) toward Mahaxay in south-central Military Region Three. Teams detected the heaviest truck traffic in and near Mugia Gia pass and along Routes-911 and 912. With large volumes of enemy troop units moving toward Thakhet, speculation was rampant that they planned to engage Group Mobile 12, capture Lima-40, and cut Laos in two.

To counter this unsettling development, Ambassador Sullivan, with the assistance of AIRA advisors, instituted Cricket West. Within a specified box five to fifteen miles east of Thakhet, American and Lao pilots were tasked to surveil and interdict roads. Lao pilots were scheduled to conduct eighteen sorties a day. The area heated up on 24 July when a RLAF T-28 was downed supplying close air support to a unit of GM-12. Air power temporarily broke the back of a major enemy engagement. Enemy activity continued through September, when friendly air responded to GM-12's warning that they were about to be overrun. A Nakhon Phanom based A-26 bomber and jet aircraft so devastated the enemy unit that not only GM-12, but Thakhet was saved. Toward the end of September, A-26K crews again scattered a large enemy force threatening to overwhelm GM-12 near Thakhet.

As road watch teams and missions eventually expanded, and Pony Express aircraft and crews were overwhelmed with work, H-34s and crews were increasingly employed to help support trail

watch missions. Early one morning, ACPH Marius Burke flew to NKP for this purpose. Arriving about 0700 hours, with adequate time before the mission commenced, he and his crew went to the mess hall for breakfast. Nimrod pilots, just returned from night trail work, were whooping and hollering in the bar. Dressed in his frumpy prison gray Company uniform, John Fonburg was standing in the hallway when a couple Air Force pilots left the bar. Spying the huge, rumped individual, puzzled, they stopped and inquired, "*Are you really a pilot?*"

The success of the Nimrod program in Military Region Three, duly noted by Saigon and AIRA Vientiane, was expanded to Military Region Two. During the latter portion of September, Meo road watch teams from the San Tiau (LS-02) area reported many vehicles moving along Route-7 toward the Plain of Jars and Moung Soui. RLAFF T-28 pilots were unable to find them and later road watch team reports confirmed night movement. The situation appeared a perfect setting for A-26s, deemed more efficient than jet planes because of improved loiter capability, munitions, and effective night strike capability. Therefore, the first Nimrod mission took place there on 10 October. In post-strike BDA, teams reported ten trucks destroyed, Route-7 heavily damaged west of Ban Ban, and an estimated fifty enemy killed by air (KBA). With the assistance of timely intelligence information, it appeared that the Air Force and embassy had finally produced a plane adequate to interdict enemy LOCs at night.

In order to direct nocturnal air strikes against enemy positions and LOCs, a Forward Air Guide (FAG) program had been envisioned at Na Khang. A local man fluent in English was required to communicate with the bombers. Such a person proved difficult to obtain, but a young man, Moua Chung, was discovered at Long Tieng and sent to Site-36, where Mike Lynch and others trained him to direct airstrikes and correctly operate a two-way

radio. Because of his large size for a normally small Meo, Moua Chung was accorded the call sign, "Tall Man."

Along with supporting Meo guerrillas, "Tall Man" was lifted east of Route-6 to the top of Phou Pha Lang and south of the Sam Neua Valley, where he dispatched road watch teams who directed successful night strikes on enemy targets.

Moua Chung's popularity and recognition soared throughout the region, and refugees flocked to Phou Pha Lang. This called attention to the base and caused some problems for the road watch project.

In early December, during inclement weather, while climbing the slopes to the mountain, Moua Chung's team was attacked. Moua Chung was killed. Confusion reigned. Nervous local people thought enemy were on the trail and fired in defense. Although people were punished, the situation was never totally resolved.

The vacuum left by "Tall Man's" untimely demise was filled by a Bangkok Thai English Speaker, with the call sign of "Red Hat." After training at Long Tieng, this second FAG proved equally competent as "Tall Man" and was successful in directing Nimrod aircraft.

By early November, A-26 pilots were flying four Barrel Roll sorties per night. In conjunction with F-104 and A-1E aircraft, the concept was to strike enemy bivouac areas before the troops dispersed to attack FAR positions in Sam Neua. This would be implemented by current intelligence provided by VHF radio from Meo road watch teams (RWT) led by "Tall Man," or "Red Hat," in association with other local sources. Early results were considered successful with sixty-seven trucks destroyed or damaged, AAA destroyed, and 384 enemy troops KIA within one week along enemy-controlled Routes-6 and 65. Meo commanders were soon reporting much diminished or no nightly traffic along these LOCs.

In early December, U.S. Air Force Colonel Harry "Heine" Aderholt, an innovative individual who had been involved in the Lao War for many years, arrived at Nakhon Phanom and began pursuing ways to exploit A-26 capability in Barrel Roll. One major problem in that sector was the lack of C-130 flare ships, called Lamplighter in military parlance. There were only seven in the entire operational theater and Aderholt wanted the entire contingent of twenty-nine directed to Southeast Asia.

Nimrod activity continued successful interdiction activity on upper Military Region Two LOCs throughout December. On the 25th, an enemy convoy was observed on Route-7 near Nong Het. In four A-26 sorties, eleven trucks were destroyed and secondary POL fires were triggered near the road.

After only a short time the innovative Aderholt wanted to use twenty-five T-28D planes to supplement Nimrod operations in Steel Tiger. The maneuverable aircraft mounted two .50 caliber machine guns and six external store stations for 3,500 pounds of ordnance. It had self-sealing fuel tanks, protective armor plate, and the same engine as our UH-34D helicopters. With a combat range of seventy-five nautical miles, it was deemed a perfect escort ship for Pony Express trail watch missions.

Aderholt got his wish. By 9 January, T-28 Zorro pilots began flying daylight missions that included SAR, Ranch Hand (defoliant operations) and Pony Express Escort. After one aircraft was downed, the program was switched to night operations.

High level discussions regarding an MSQ-77 radar installation in northern Laos to supplement the TACAN unit and aid in the success of Rolling Thunder and Barrel Roll missions, continued between military and civilian agencies into November. CINCPAC planners requested authority from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to develop a concept and plan to use the Site-85 location

as the most likely spot, but Ambassador Sullivan was not keen about the installation of such a high-tech electronics unit so close to the border. Any unit would provide a focal point for enemy targeting and not be acceptable to RLG officials.

Early in December, Commanding Officer of CINCPAC, General Harris sent another message to Ambassador Sullivan stressing the urgency of acting on the MSQ-77 proposal and the positive impact installation on Site-85 would have on North Vietnam and Barrel Roll operations. Harris indicated that he looked forward to briefing the ambassador at the Udorn meeting on the tenth. Sullivan replied and restated doubt that the RLG would allow such equipment in the country or his superiors in Washington would allow him to propose such a plan.

At the Udorn briefing, Sullivan showed interest in the tactical potential of a MSQ-77 in northern Laos. However, he was still concerned that Souvanna Phouma would consider such a move as supporting offensive operations against North Vietnam instead of maintaining a normal defense neutral stance. As a result, no commitment was forthcoming. ¹⁹

¹⁹Victor Anthony, 209-210'

Warren Trest, *CHECO: Lucky Tiger Operations* 5-8, 14-16, 19, 06/15/67-Dalley Book Service.

Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 144, 145, 151, 160, 170, 172-175, 178.

John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices: Briefing Notes from 7/13 Air Force Udorn* (Viking, 1984) 240-242.

Marius Burke Interview.

Bill Leary 1966 Notes.

Tom Ahern, 250, 255, 249.

Ken Conboy, 144, 155.

Tim Castle, 74.

Telegram Ambassador Sullivan to State Explaining the MSQ Controversy, 12/10/66.

Ernie Kuhn, 21-22.

POLITICS

Nineteen months after leaving his ambassadorial post in Vientiane, Leonard Unger, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, returned to Laos between 24 to 26 June to conduct a fact-finding mission. Because of foul weather inundating Luang Prabang, an audience scheduled with King Savang Vatthana, and a luncheon with Crown Prince Vong Savang were cancelled. Instead, Mister Swank, standing in for Ambassador Sullivan away on home leave and consultations in Washington, arranged a VIP visit to RLG and USAID-sponsored cluster villages in the Ban Yeun area on the northern Vientiane plains. This trip too was nearly washed out by heavy monsoon rains.

Acquainted with many Lao people from his previous assignment, Unger talked with several individuals during his short visit. All conceded that there had been improvements in political, economic, and military matters over the last eighteen months. Contributing to this were several elements: the removal of Generals Phoumi and Siho and the disruption and governmental corruption they fostered; a return to constitutional government with election of a new National Assembly; economic gains displayed by the success of the stabilization plan, a broad based attempt to finance the Nam Ngum hydro-electric project (at Ritaville), and under the auspices of USAID, government services provided in the rural countryside; growing effectiveness of air strikes and military pressure against enemy forces; and defections of PL and dissident Neutralists to the RLG. All queried professed to believe the Vietnamese aggression would be stopped and the RLG would eventually achieve some peace and prosperity.

Unger found that Souvanna Phouma was concerned with the problem of national unity against the Neo Lao Hak Xat, the political wing of the leftist faction of the tripartite

government.²⁰ Souvanna was interested in a union of parties in the National Assembly, which showed a willingness to diminish Neutralist political aims, but still maintain a neutral Laos. This would pave the way for unification of the armed forces, something that General Kouprasith Abhay favors.

On the military front, because of the low level of military activity, the conflict was not discussed at length. General Kouprasith indicated that the enemy could seek a base on the Bolovens Plateau if pressure continued on their Panhandle sites and in South Vietnam. He predicted that guerrilla, conventional, and air operations in northern Laos would keep the enemy at bay and a minor threat for some time.

Unger's visit tended to reaffirm that Souvanna continued to be the central authority on all important decisions, remained in firm control, and displayed no sign of resigning.²¹

As a prelude to a proposed meeting with Secretary of Defense McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 1 July, Ambassador Sullivan met with ranking civilian and military personnel at the Pentagon on the twentieth-eighth to discuss the Lao situation and generate talking points. He began by saying that improvements in Vietnam were assisting in maintaining a quiet Laos. Also, in a change from the previous year, the economic trend was improved.

He raised the subject of a proposed transfer of the Lao Military Assistance Program (MAP) to the military services. He favored this on the condition that the sensitivity and classification of the Lao program be maintained in the presentation of the service budgets and implementation of the

²⁰The Pathet Lao was the military portion of the NLHX.

²¹Telegram Embassy Laos to Department of State (Swank), 238, 06/27/66.

program. He discussed the present organizational structure of MAP, which was administered in Vientiane and in the field by Requirements Office (RO) USAID. ²² He deemed it necessary to maintain the unit as a paramount entity for preservation of the Geneva Accords. A similar extraterritorial type organization, DEPCHIEFMAG Thailand was also important to support the Lao program.

Secretary of Defense McNamara and his cost-conscious advisors, citing that Rolling Thunder and the air war in general had largely been ineffective in its goal to thwart insurgency in South Vietnam, increasingly became disenchanted with the air method of victory. Instead, to curtail infiltration, they resurrected an original theme of creating an anti-infiltration barrier across the demilitarized zone, and extending across the narrow waist of Laos to the Mekong River (a distance of approximately fifty miles). This had been proposed earlier in the year by MACTHAI leaders who wanted to isolate the South Vietnamese battlefield by severing the trails. Envisioning an effort requiring one and a half years, they wanted to begin preparing for a two-pronged expanding operation from the east and west sides of the infiltration corridor. Westmoreland had similar aspirations, but CINCPAC and the Bangkok Embassy did not.

Operation Full Cry had been developed earlier by Colonel "Bull" Simons and others that envisioned the 1st Cavalry Division moving into Attapeu, then to Saravane, and finally to Savannakhet. The 3rd Marine Division would attack west from the Provisional Military Demarcation Line (DMZ), and cross Route-9 through Tchepone to Savannakhet. When this phase was complete the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) would hold the

²² These were the same folks who monitored Neutralist requirements, particularly at Moung Soui.

terrain along Route-9. Beside the political danger involved in such an operation, Ambassador Sullivan foresaw problems with logistics and the ever-present threat of Chinese intervention.

During the discussion, Assistant Secretary of Defense McNaughton inquired as to the Lao attitude toward such a barrier. Sullivan, who was very negative regarding the plan, responded that the Prime Minister would not condone such an action that would require up to six divisions of U.S. or other foreign troops to implement. Such a huge operation would not be deniable, unlike other U.S. activities in Laos. Souvanna would certainly resign, thereby dissolving the Geneva Accords. Tacitly ceding territory north of a barrier to the Pathet Lao, the war would intensify. The Soviets would withdraw support for the Geneva Accords and resume assistance to the Pathet Lao and eventually encourage an invasion of Laos by Vietnamese forces.

Instead of a politically incorrect barrier, Sullivan reiterated a previous pet theme of a ship-to-shore invasion near Vinh.

The Ambassador complained of U.S. air strikes that concentrated in southern Laos rather near Mugia Pass. From road watch intelligence and input from his AIRA staff, he believed this area far more important for interdicting Vietnamese personnel and material. 23

²³Memorandum of Conversation, 239, 06/28/66.
Hannah.

By July many leading personnel changes were effected in the Lao Theater. Air America's Dave Hickler, who had been General Manager of the Vientiane operation from 1964, was replaced by Frank L. Dunn and assigned a General Manager position in Bangkok. Dave would remain GM Bangkok until 1974.

In Saigon, General W. W. Momyer replaced Lieutenant General Joe. H. Moore as commander of the Seventh Air Force. Moore had held the slot for more than two years and forwarded many letters of appreciation to our pilots for their participation in military SAR operations.

On the Agency side of the ledger, Ted Shackley replaced Douglas Blaufarb as Chief of the Vientiane Station. The new COS arrived with a mandate to expand CIA operations throughout Laos, particularly in southern Laos, where additional road watch and action teams were required to monitor and mine trails and direct airstrikes. Operations, more tailored to support the greatly enlarged war effort in South Vietnam, would require more funding, more experienced and battle tested American Case Officers, and additional special guerrilla units (SGU), which would result in increased spilling of indigenous blood. The concept was anathema to AB-1 boss man Bill Lair and his deputy Pat Landry. Both men previously predicated their programs on minimum, but economically efficient operations. However, as the new boss in town, Shackley implemented fresh Washington-inspired-and sanctioned ideas. He remained COS until August 1968.

Not by any design of Shackley, USAF Captain, Dick Secord arrived in Udorn the same week as Tom Penniman departed for Taipei. The captain was assigned to work with AB-1 and Vientiane

air branches. Secord had been vetted by the Agency and in his new role of Air Liaison Officer tasked to coordinate tactical, airlift, and reconnaissance air plans with General Momyer's Seventh Air Force. As his predecessor, Don Cherry USAF-AB-1 air liaison officer discovered, Dick quickly learned that obtaining tactical air from the U.S. military on a moment's notice to support troops in the field could prove very difficult. Additionally, to better manage and control separate unit chiefs' requests in the five military regions of Laos, with Lair's approval, Secord established an Air Liaison Office within the dilapidated AB-1 building.

True to his word, among other changes, Chief of Station Shackley ordered a dramatic increase in trail watch teams. Eventually reaching about eighty, the majority were created for use in Military Region Three and Military Region Four. Representing an enormous increase from the small number of teams formerly employed for the job, this directive required time and additional assets to fulfill. To a small degree, Air America had already been assisting in trail watch missions, but Shackley's edict was eventually considered well beyond the scope of the limited number of Nakhon Phanom-based USAF CH-3 Pony Express helicopters and crews. Therefore, planning began for the funding, manufacture, and purchase of Bell turbine engine helicopters for Air America to achieve the Agency's goal to conduct long range trail watch missions. In lieu of using large, lumbering, and noisy UH-34Ds, smaller turbine engine Bells that produced less noise (which could be disputed), and had a lower profile, but were still able to carry substantial troop numbers, were believed to be a safer, more efficient means of transportation. Because of procurement procedures and manufacturing specifications, the changeover did not begin until 1967.

Wayne Knight knew Dick Secord well, often working closely with him at AB-1 headquarters while scheduling helicopter assets for road watch missions. The chief pilot noted Captain Secord was brusque, brash, sometimes insulting, but always very efficient in his dealings with him. He appreciated the fact that Dick made quick, honest decisions and did not procrastinate like others did. However, Knight inferred that Secord could present a nasty opponent if one was not in complete accord with his ideas.

Although approved and monitored by AB-1 Udorn, all planning and execution of road watch team (RWT) missions were initiated and performed on a local area basis by the regional Chief of Unit (COU) and his Savannakhet and Pakse Case Officers. They alone had the ultimate responsibility to oversee, support, and guide their troops in the field. Secord's input normally involved crew and aircraft scheduling with the Air America Operations Department, and coordinating tactical escort aircraft out of NKP. In this, he performed an excellent job. Regardless of adverse weather or the situation, A-1E pilots generally always arrived on station in a timely manner. Wayne noted that Secord also assisted in the selection of bombing targets.

Tom Fosmire was reassigned to Savannakhet as Chief of Unit (COU) with the primary duty to administer the Military Region Three trail watch program. He relocated from Phitscamp in Thailand where he had been training Special Guerrilla Unit and other troops in the same specialized work. Tom had quite a history. He had worked in Thailand, first for Sea Supply and then with Bill Lair's PARU, and later as a Case Officer for the early Meo program at Pha Khao. Tom had been a passenger on a H-34 flown by Dominic Gucchioni and Andy Glutting that was shot

down in 1961. An expert escape and evasion person, he led the pilots and Special Forces Captain on a three-day trek to safety.¹

After Shackley ordered the trail watch program expanded, Fosmire always had twenty teams deployed in the field. Another dozen teams were resting or undergoing training. A list of teams and their call signs was posted on the wall of the headquarters communications wall. He monitored the board frequently to check on his teams' periodic reporting status. With no contact for twenty-four hours, suspecting something amiss, he would dispatch a Case Officer to the location to look for a signal mirror or panel. Then, if a team was determined to be on the run from the enemy, an emergency exfil would be arranged.²

Ambassador Sullivan was still on home leave when State requested Assistant Ambassador Emery Swank to forward an assessment of Laos under Prime Minister, Souvanna Phouma. Swank's reply, anything but completely honest, was sprinkled with nebulous terms like relative, generally, increasingly, and was marked with misguided optimism. It seemed like I was living on a different planet than the cloistered embassy folks.

"Over the past 18 months, there has been moderate progress in Laos against great odds."

Commenting on the political aspect, Swank's message read in part:

¹For details of this harrowing experience see Book One-Genesis.

² Professor William Leary July 1966 Notes Representing Jim Glerum's Recollection of the Period.

Bill Leary Notes, Interview with Tom Fosmire, 12/26/66.

Ken Conboy, 163.

Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos* (Vermont: Steerforth Press, 1996) 182-183, 188, 191, 195-196.

EW Knight Email, 08/05/00.

Pat Landry Interview with the Author in Bangkok, Thailand.

Tom Penniman Emails, 04/01/00, 04/02/00.

Although the country was divided and still at war, it enjoyed relative political stability under Souvanna.

The economy:

The value of the kip remained relatively stable. The RLG was focusing on problems of long-range economic development. They were taking measures to increase rice production. The country was a member of the Asian Development Bank. Under this organization's auspices, and international financing, the Nam Ngum dam project was slated for construction and completion during 1967 through 1971. The development would irrigate a large area of the flood plain above Vientiane, and provide hydro-electric power to both Laos and Northeast Thailand.

The military:

RLA armed forces extended security deep into the countryside permitting programs of rural development to make surprising strides in bringing roads, schools, dispensaries, and agricultural services to the villagers.

The end to fighting was not in sight. However, the RLG took pride in its ability to contain and thwart enemy aggression and subversion. The RLAF pilots enjoyed generally good morale and were efficiently deployed. Enemy defections increased over the past six months. Refugees continued to flee from enemy territory. The Meo and other "minority" people increasingly identified their future with the RLG.

Government leaders were cognizant their future relied on a successful outcome in South Vietnam. They were encouraged by USG and its allies' determination to prosecute the war there.

MR-3

On Sunday the second, I was scheduled to fly to Savannakhet, an hour and a half trip granted a no wind day. After a twenty-minute test flight Hotel Foxtrot failed airworthiness checks, and I was reassigned Hotel-31.³ I arrived in time to participate in a road watch mission, but twenty minutes into the flight, we were turned back by reports of adverse weather in the landing zone area. At the time, teams were still small and requirements usually entailed only two aircraft, one to carry the team or supplies, the other to function as a SAR backup ship.

After a night at one of the local "luxury" hotels, logging one hour and fifty-five minutes project time, we completed the previously aborted mission. Single missions like this were never conducive to achieving high flight time. Long waits for team contact, fixed wing weather reconnaissance and escort join up, all contributed to our down time. The dearth of flight time was almost as bad as former SAR standbys that cost us dearly from a financial standpoint. It so aggravated some pilots that complaints were voiced to management. At least one letter was written regarding T-28 pilot mission pay vs. none for helicopter pilots. Also, missions were not without hazard, and unlike SAR SOPs, were flown only single pilot. L-39 Customers, aware of the pilot dissention, chose to use U.S. military hardware in lieu of Air America when possible.

On Monday, skies cleared sufficiently that by mid-morning we launched across the river from Nakhon Phanom. Work expanded over the next six hours to shuttling troops and supplies to the Mahaxay area in Khammouane Province. This mission was sanctioned to support GM-12 and counter a large enemy troop buildup in the

³Unfortunately, from this time forward I generally failed to log Flight Mechanic crewmember names for posterity.

area that analysts believed was going to move on Thakhet. After logging twenty-five minutes night, I recovered at Nakhon Phanom for the night.

NAKHON PHANOM

In 1963, after tons of dirt were moved, shored up, and compacted, a Seabee battalion laid the Nakhon Phanom) runway and parking matting, which consisted of durable metal pierced steel planking (PSP). Few buildings graced the facility then. Only a handful of HH-43s and a few other aircraft were staged there by mid-1964 when U.S. military planes from South Vietnam and the Fleet began "armed" recon in Laos. Life was casual, with the Afterburner Club to relax in after work. During Thakhet missions, RONS were rare at Nakhon Phanom and the occasional refueling requirement at the base was furnished by a tanker driver armed with a .45 caliber sidearm.

On one occasion in 1965, the engine carburetor on Mike Jarina's helicopter was "breathing fumes" from depleted fuel tanks, so he crossed the river and landed at NKP for rapid refueling. There was one problem with this rationale. He was carrying a full load of rice and war supplies for a FAR outpost. This politically incorrect "contraband" caused a considerable stir with the base commander and higher ups.

Another time, Mike stayed at the base with Beng Bengston. There was a new commanding officer at the facility and construction of new buildings were underway. Bengston wanted a bottle of liquor and asked Mike if he could obtain one for him. Until meeting the commanding officer, Mike was not sure, but the man assented. He indicated they had the key to the base, and that everything was open to Air America crews, including the post exchange and commissary. However, there was not too much there to choose from at the time.

Jarina asked a sergeant where the quarters were located. He was informed that he would be sleeping in the officer's barrack. Still a novice in the area, Mike inquired as to its location. The man pointed to a wooden structure and said T-1 (Temporary One).

Curious, Mike pointed to another building asking, *"What is the name of this building?"*

"T-2?"

"Correct."

"Then the next building must be numbered T-3. The first thing erected on a new base is the Officer's Quarters, then the 'O' Club, and then the base exchange."

After dinner they found the "O" Club. Mike was unable to drink the obligatory flaming afterburner, but was still issued a club card.

Before a permanent tower was erected, Mike was again obtaining fuel at Nakhon Phanom when A-1s began recovering. It had been raining and the PSP was sopping wet. Half way down the runway, a pilot began turning into the parking area. However, he applied excessive brake pressure, which caused the plane to spin 180 degrees on the slick surface. The machine's momentum caused it to slide backward to the end of the strip where it came to rest. After control was once again established, like it had never happened, the pilot turned off a cross section available at the end and nonchalantly taxied back to the parking ramp.

Mike often noted a gray Air America C-123 parked on the ramp. Black identification markings were so tiny one could barely read them. Curious, he inquired as to its presence. Similar to the trite expression going around, *"If I tell you, then I will have to kill you,"* he was informed the mission was so secret that the pilot and copilot were not even allowed to

talk to each other. Also, the navigator would not provide a position to either pilot.

Not long after his first sighting of the unusual plane, a sentry was installed at the parking ramp gate. A little later a pass was required for access to the runway. The parked gray C-123 was still visible. Like the clandestine plane, our work uniforms were gray. When Mike attempted to walk through the gate wearing his gray clothes, the guard demanded to see his identification card. The Captain presented his gray retired ID card. Probably confused by the gray color and secrecy involved, the Air Force military policeman looked at it bewildered, saying he had never seen one like it. Always one for humor, Mike said, *"If you try hard, you might get one."*

Because of the close relationship between our organizations during SAR work, the USAF men were very receptive to us helicopter pilots in the beginning. Forming the famous band of brothers' rapport all aviators share, we even overnights in the same barracks as A-1E pilots. This attitude changed somewhat when sufficient Jolly Green crews and equipment became available and they assumed most of the SAR work in North Vietnam and parts of Laos. However, in Military Region Two we still managed to achieve many saves before Jolly crews arrived on scene and demanded to ferry the downed aviator (s) back to Thailand. In the Nakhon Phanom bar one night a guy deep in his cups was overheard making disparaging remarks about overpaid Air America pilots. Taking exception to the man's comments, a friendly Skyraider pilot decked him. The rest of the pilots cheered.

The base evolved. With the buildup of personnel and aircraft, and as the communist-inspired insurrection in the northeast worsened, base security tightened considerably. We were no longer allowed to wander about the facility. Instead, after landing we were met and challenged by guards. Then we had

to wait until a Jeep driver with a duty officer arrived at the helicopter to escort us to the mess or officers club. We had no choice but to comply. We adapted easily and the new rules and regulations became acceptable to us.

At first light on 12 July, Mike Jarina and Bob Bedell, crewing Hotel-37, flew from Udorn to the Nakhon Phanom air base to conduct road watch missions. To prevent security breaches, teams were delivered from Whiskey-3 training base in the Savannakhet area to a secure portion of the Nakhon Phanom complex. Furthermore, Americans rather than our third country national Filipinos and two Thai Flight Mechanics were used for sensitive missions. ⁴

It was a full day flying over nine hours and performing fourteen landings. Calculated to save time and effort during long flights, for economy of assets, the Customer arranged combined missions. Rotating teams, one went to the elevated "Yankee Pad," forty-five miles northeast of Nakhon Phanom; another to a location three miles southeast of "Y." After refueling at NKP and loading another team, the flight returned to the "Yankee" area. A final mission from NKP was directed twenty-eight miles southeast near Ban Na Than. The crews recovered at Savannakhet for the night.

Wednesday, the second day of road watch work, involved supplying the road watch teams. It did not require quite the tight precautions of the previous day. The first mission from Savannakhet returned to the "Yankee Pad." Located on a broad, high mesa, the Customer wanted the three H-34 pilots--J.J. McCauley, Ron Dubinsky, and Mike Jarina--to shut down so he could talk to his team. Shortly afterward, a jet plane dove on

⁴ All our Flight Mechanics were vetted and loyal employees; this was merely an Agency policy.

the landing zone, while others circled. Naturally, the crews were concerned, for they were flying unmarked helicopters. J.J. climbed into his cockpit, called the aircraft on guard, and apprised them of their friendly status. Since there had been activity by unmarked aircraft in the Mugia area, a jet buzzed them for another look and then left.

From "Y" the pilots flew to a location eight miles east of Route-8 along the Nape Pass road. It was two miles east of LS-77, Ban Song Khone. Nape Pass had been largely shut down by interdiction, but, like Mugia, was still kept under close surveillance. The team recovered from this spot was returned to Thakhet's remote strip for Customer debriefing.

Another team was delivered from Nakhon Phanom to a point six miles south of the second mission and nine miles east of Route-8. From there, the aircraft went to the final mission of the previous day and returned to NKP for the night. ⁵

On the fifth, with my requirements in Military Region three complete, I was sent to Pakse. I spent three days working the area, particularly the eastern Plateau region. Early afternoon on Thursday, I was relieved and caught a ride to Udorn on Caribou 389.

The same day I returned home, in a hurry up mode, Mike Jarina and maintenance lead man, Pete Mayor, were told to board C-123 655 bound for Vientiane and ferry CIC-4 to Udorn for a scheduled maintenance inspection. After arrival at Wattay Airport, Jarina observed the white helicopter on the ramp. He walked to the operations building and informed the indigenous man at the counter why he was there. After retrieving the

⁵ Mike Jarina Interviews.

logbook, conducting an inspection and a short test flight, he flew the ship south to Udorn.

Assistant Base Manager, "Tex" Dew met him at the aircraft with word that he had just received a nasty gram from the Operations Manager Vientiane concerning Mike's unauthorized flight. Representing a first such ferry for him, never having been briefed on transfer procedures required by the ICC unit, unknowingly Mike had violated protocols. Mike was unhappy over the episode, but no repercussions followed. ⁶

Since we were leaving soon on home leave, and I was only about halfway through the Operation Department's targeted flight time for the month, the next few days were packed with scheduled flights.

The day after returning to Udorn, Charlie Davis and I conducted the required local night training. This amounted to an ADF and GCI approach and five landings.

The next day I deadheaded with the Porter driver of N-195X to Nam Yu. Upon arrival, I assumed command of Hotel-41 with a short, balding former Marine, First Officer Mort Shearer. Logging maximum flight and full project time, to include more night flying than usual, I remained there four days before returning the ship to Udorn.

In a final flight before leaving the base, Wayne and I had a proficiency session around the local area. With such a long home leave planned, the exercise was quite senseless, only satisfying a Company requirement. Naturally, I would need a warm-up flight upon return.

Tom Hoppe took up the slack in Military Region Two. Over a four-day period, flying Hotel-39, Tom flew varied missions

⁶ Mike Jarina Interview.

throughout the area. One took him to Houei Hong, ten miles north of Xieng Dat (LS-26), Route-7, and west of Phou Fa (Agony-LS-16). There the officer he had onboard gathered several village males for SGU training at MOUNG CHA (LS-113). Another flight was conducted to a position three miles south of Vang Vieng (L-16), where he picked up Father "B" and returned him to Sam Tong to perform mass. Other flights were to Lima Site-170, six miles north of the Sala Phu Khoun road junction, and close to the site where Charlie Jones was killed in early 1965. Another site was located four miles southeast of Site-170.

Working north of the Plain of Jars, where elevated Meo sites now abounded and were constantly improved, he landed at Pha Bong (LS-76), seventeen miles north of MOUNG HEIM and Houei Tong Ko (LS-184). These positions not only represented refugee havens, but were also used as listening posts reporting on any enemy movement in the area.

On other days, still involved with the 713 Customer (CIA), Tom worked east of Padong Ridge at Khang Kho (LS-204) and positions to the southeast. USAID work involved flights to Ban Nam Moh (LS-207), an old refugee village south of Sam Tong.⁷

On the 14th, the same day Hoppe departed Military Region Two for Udorn, Mike Jarina and Bob Bedell flew direct from Nakhon Phanom to Sam Tong. During a full day encompassing almost eleven hours and thirty-five landings, flying many missions out of MOUNG SON and Na Khang, he went north of Site-36 to Phou Pha Thi (LS-85) and landed at Houei Hok (LS-198), a new east-west strip located at the southeast base of the mountain. Hacked out of the hillside to offer a more accessible strip, the position

⁷ Tom Hoppe July 1966 Information from his lengthy Winter-Summer 1996 Letter.
Tom Hoppe 11/05/96 Letter.

would stage fuel and provide security for contemplated operations on top of the "rock."

Following a night at the Air America hostel, Mike conducted missions for Requirements Office (RO) at Moung Soui, and then was relieved there. After deadheading to Sam Tong on Hotel-39 with Hoppe's relief pilot, Mike continued south on C-123s 671 and 555 (Triple Nickel).

Four days later, Jarina returned to Military Region Two in Hotel-37 with Flight Mechanic Sizelove. They flew direct to Moung Cha (LS-113) to pick up SGU troops, stopped at Sam Tong for fuel, and proceeded on a lengthy flight to the hilly village of Sam Song Hong (LS-201), thirty miles east of Bouam Long (LS-88). The typical Meo enclave included a short, grassy STOL strip with a village situated downhill for security. The site was only nine miles west of North Vietnam and sixteen miles north of Nong Het and Route-7. Its strategic location, far off the enemies' logistic routes in high country, afforded teams the ability to penetrate close to Route-7 to observe, call in air strikes, harass, and interdict vehicular movement. In later years, flying Huey Bells, we used this site to stage troops forward to the border for missions into the DVR.

After returning to Na Khang for local work, Mike flew to Site-20 for fuel, and completed the day with missions to Meo training bases at Phou Khao (LS-14) and Moung Cha.

The next day he conducted a fantastic fifty-one landings north of the PDJ that encompassed work at Bouam Long, Na Khang, Sam Song Hong, Pha Thi, and Houei Ma, the same site where Frank Stergar, Steve Nichols, and I recovered and RON after the Briggs SAR in the Na Son-Son La area of North Vietnam. ⁸

⁸ Mike Jarina Interviews.

TACAN

In July, two members of a U.S. Air Force team deployed "in the black" from the First Mobile Communications Group (AACGS), Team 72-66 located at Clark Air Base, Philippines, to Lima Site-85. Their assignment was to conduct a comprehensive site survey for installation of a sanitized TRN-17 TACAN unit. The First MOB's mission was both the overt and covert installation of a substantial amount of communications equipment in Southeast Asia. Many deployments were often difficult, resulting in manning "dangerous locations under austere conditions."

Following a drop-off at the Site-85 strip, Meo tribesmen ushered the men up wooden ladders to the top of Pha Thi, where they plotted locations for the equipment and a small camp for technicians. Before departing, the team arranged with locals to assist in preparing the site and provide help when the equipment was delivered.

By August, the remaining portion of the team, along with generators and the TACAN equipment were flown to Udorn. After a briefing regarding the mission and its elevated classification, the team attended a week-long weather class calculated to enable them to relay daily weather reports south. With two U.S. Army Chinooks and crews available TDY from South Vietnam to lift the navigation equipment to the top of Pha Thi, and the team ready to deploy, the weather system that impacted the upper Mekong River basin, and so devastated Vientiane, delayed departure. Instead, the helicopters were used to help supply rice and other commodities to impacted villagers along the river.

Eventually the equipment and civilian-attired men were flown to Sam Tong in helicopters and a C-123. During a leapfrog operation, the TACAN CONEX box unit was slung by a CH-47 Chinook crew to Na Khang. After fueling, the TACAN was delivered to a level spot Meo tribesmen had cleared on top of Pha Thi. Three



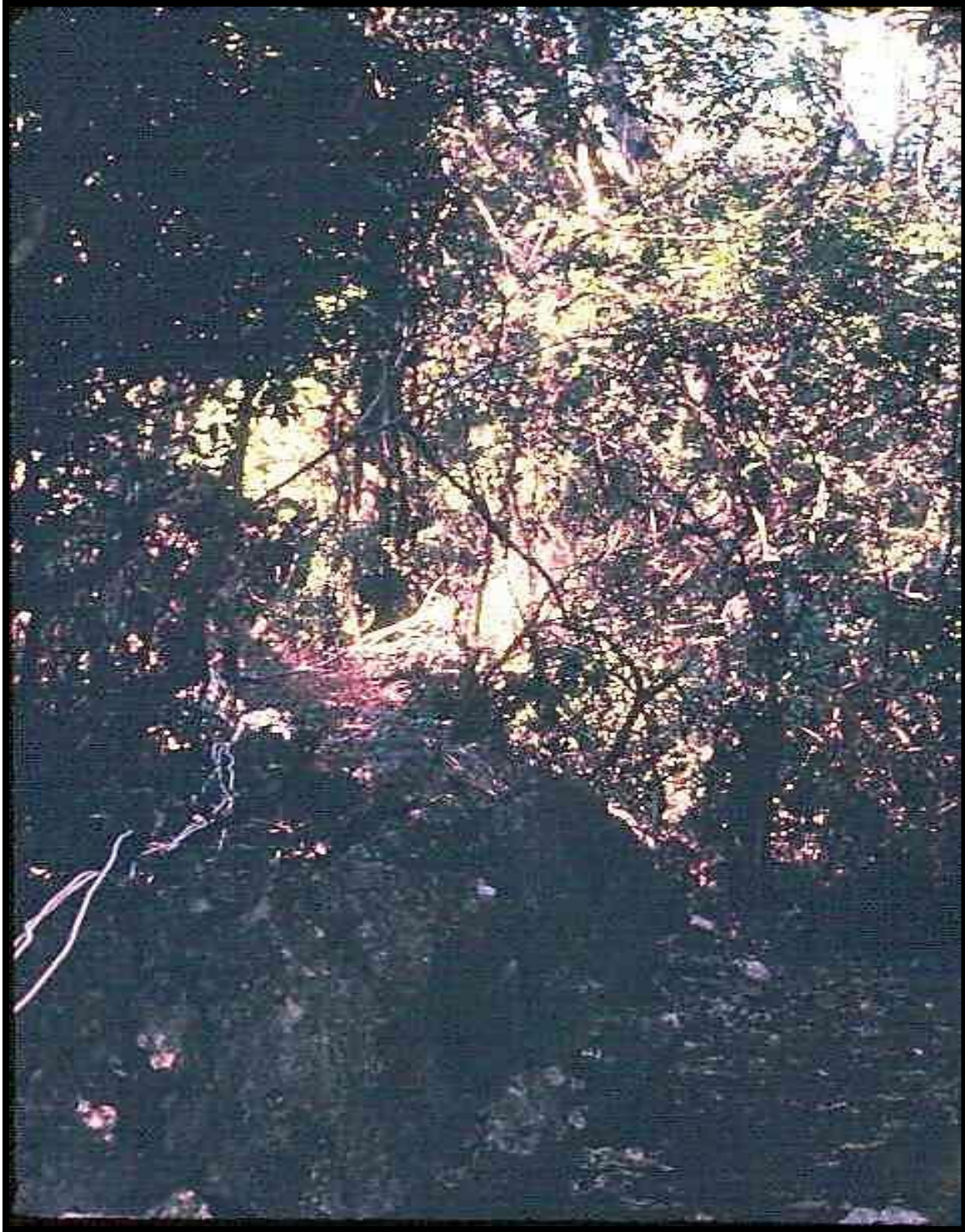
Cleared right hand rim of the "Rock" shows the USAF TACAN site on the top of southwestern Phu Pha Thi circa August 1966. The Meo village and Lima Site-85 strip were located below and to the lower right.

Photo Richard Grimes, a member of the 1966 TACAN installation team.



The TACAN unit emplaced at the designated site on top of Pha Thi following Chinook helicopter sling load delivery.

Richard Grimes.



Tangled jungle through which power lines wound from the helipad to the upper TACAN site.

Richard Grimes.



Looking south from the lower helipad where three generators and POL drums were staged (foreground) to provide power to the TACAN unit. Air Force and Air America helicopters utilized this helicopter landing zone to deliver personnel, supplies, and drummed water obtained from streams at the base of the mountain.

Richard Grimes.

diesel generators were installed on the short "strip" below the facility, and power lines were strung to the TACAN unit. Members of the two-man teams were placed on a seven on and seven off day rotation to maintain the facility and radios. After arriving at Na Khang by whatever means available, delivery to Udorn or the TACAN site depended on Pony Express or Air America helicopters. Water was supplied from steams flowing below the mountain and delivered to the helipad by helicopter. Groceries were purchased at the Vientiane Embassy commissary. Forbidden to carry weapons themselves, their security was provided by Meo and PARU personnel. Dubbed Clara, Channel 97 became operational on 24 September.⁹

HOMEWARD BOUND

Exactly on cue, I developed a bad cold upcountry, but with all that needed to be done, I did not have time to address it. I hoped it would pass by our target date for departure on the twentieth. With insurrection in Northeast Thailand increasing, resulting in bombings similar to those occurring in Saigon, seeds of doubt about even returning to Udorn were sown in my mind. However, since attacks were still conducted on a small scale, and Thai Army and Police units were active in the affected areas, I was not too worried. Still, rumor indicated that Americans would be targeted, and I now had a family to consider. Probably derived from Khun Tha, a retired military man with many high-level contacts, Tuie reported that a large bounty was offered for our scalps. This was a new revelation for

⁹ Grimes and Boros, TRN-17 TACAN Installation, Lima Site 85, Phu Pha Thi, Laos
(http://limasite85.us/the_construction_of_lima_site_85.htm).
Tim Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 26.

Thailand, but not the Theater, for years before I had learned this from AID personnel at Sam Tong.

In preparation for our trip to CONUS, I began writing sizable checks to cover incidental and en route expenses. Any written to the Club Rendezvous required a counter signature by Assistant Base Manager, Tex Dew. I thought that I had the house sub-rented to an individual for the four-month period I planned to be absent. However, the deal fell through at the last minute. Therefore, I wrote a check for 177 dollars to cash, calculated to satisfy rent and guard charges while we were away. To prevent any sneaky future denial of payment the larcenous Longmoun Godnoma might conjure, I wrote on the back, "*The endorsement of this check certifies that the full rent and guard for the months August-November has been paid in full.*" Then I explained what this meant to the landlady and presented her the check. Probably thinking how she would have fun losing it to card sharks, she appeared happy to receive it.

We headed for Bangkok on the night train. With Company employees doing the footwork, we had previously booked a flight for three on Pan American One through Europe on Wednesday, the twentieth. All I had to do was retrieve the prepaid tickets at the Air America office on Patpong Road and show up at the airport. We were going to stop in London, England, where I planned to obtain a thorough examination at the Tropical School of Medicine for my long-standing amoeba problem. Time was short, and we still had to complete Tuie's nonimmigrant visa at the consular section. Since I had everything required to satisfy State's regulations, the process went smoothly. Obtaining a British visa for Tuie took us down to the wire.

Thus began a long international trip that would become standard for our growing family over the next few years. Pan Am was still flying the narrow-aisled 707 aircraft, and smoking was

permitted. The flight through Europe stopped several times for fuel and passenger exchange. Because of the baby, we were allowed a front row seat where a basinet could be secured to the front wall and Rick could sleep. He did what babies do best-eat, sleep, and sierra.

Strike one. I was not ready for what awaited us in London. Arriving at Heathrow Airport about noon, I discovered that the World Cup was in progress. Not a soccer fan, I had no idea the implications this event would cause us. London was jam packed with humanity, and not having made previous accommodations, we had a difficult time finding overnight lodging. However, after considerable time and several stops in one of those funny English cabs equipped with door that opened the wrong way, our friendly driver delivered us to a third-rate hotel. Even here, rooms were expensive. By then we were very tired and would have accepted a tent or mat on the street like indigent families in Hong Kong. The only available room was long and narrow with a stand-up shower located in a far corner. The unit was so small as to barely allow one to turn around and I was not impressed with the cold water. Two single beds were placed head-to-head along one wall. So far London failed to meet my expectations, but with little choice available, we decided to make the best of it.

Strike two. After setting up a fold-up stroller and securing Rick in it, we headed into the streets, where yet another surprise awaited us. We had come from a very hot and humid climate. Deep into July, the cool English weather was quite noticeable, even cold to us. We had some warm clothes for the baby, but none for ourselves.

In 1966 miniskirts were in vogue and highly appreciated by male observers. Many people on the bustling street were friendly and sociable, making time to stop and talk. I think Rick, who

was an extremely cute little devil, had a lot to do with this. Also, London was a cosmopolitan city, one accustomed to many diverse ethnic types. We continued on our way and came upon a heavy individual selling fruit from a push cart. Tuie chose an apple. Unfamiliar with the currency, I held out a handful of British coins for the man to cull. After a while, we entered a small clothing shop to price sweaters. That was my first experience with a value added tax (VAT) popular in some European countries. The cost of the items seemed very high, too high by American standards. Therefore, we thanked the clerk for her time and departed.

We walked to the subway, a mode of transportation the English called the underground. I discovered that I would have to find my way to the Tropical School of Medicine using this conveyance. Tired from the trip, we decided to eat early and retire. Our time zone mechanisms had been so mixed up that morning was night and vice versa. Unaware of the English preference for food, we entered a restaurant.

Strike three. Thinking no one could possibly corrupt spaghetti with meat balls, we ordered two plates. Wrong. The largely unpalatable mess placed in front of us was so bland as to be barely edible. The watery sauce reminded us of tomato soup containing no meat. Furthermore, there was no seasoning or cheese to make it more appetizing. The poor food, accommodations, cold, and other problems made me elect to depart for the States ASAP.

Pan American One flew daily. Therefore, after returning to the hotel, I called the airline office and managed to obtain reservations for a continuing flight to New York the following afternoon. Exempting Rick, who could sleep anywhere, rest was difficult that night in a room that could best be described in Edgar Allen Poe's book the *Pit and the Pendulum*.

By morning I was really hungry and a complimentary breakfast was provided as a portion of the room rate. Consisting of eggs, baked tomato, toast and jelly, the hearty English breakfast was well prepared, and served to restore my faith in cooks. Later, after packing, dressing, and checking out, there was still time before leaving for the airport. While awaiting transportation, I had an interesting conversation with the biased Irish bartender who had various negative opinions regarding the English.

The rest of our journey was uneventful. We arrived at JFK Airport early Friday evening and flew to Newark on New York Airways. I called Dad, requesting him to pick us up in the new Mustang. Coming from a developing country, it was Tuie's first experience with super highways and an excess of people--lots of people. An hour later, we arrived at the 1123 Dorsey Place house to begin our long, interesting vacation.

OPERATION CLEVELAND (AKA PRASANE)

Since losing Nam Bac (Lima Site 203) and the surrounding lowlands north of Luang Prabang at the time of the 1962 Geneva Accords signing, Vientiane leaders looked forward to recapturing the strategic site. In addition to being both a province hub and market town, the area was very fertile, and renowned for its citrus orchards. By 1964, the successful Triangle operation around Moug Soui and huge areas north and west of Vang Vieng set a precedent reestablishing government control in formerly denied areas. It also established confidence at General Staff headquarters and the embassy that a similar offensive could be duplicated in Military Region One. If successful, the northern area and the Nam Ou valley would be cleared of Pathet Lao. Moreover, the enemy line of resistance would be pushed well back from Luang Prabang, and pressure diminished on northern FAR and

ADC positions. Such bold action might dissuade any enemy thoughts of surging down the river from Dien Bien Phu to harass the royal capital. However, proper planning and timing were required. Such an undertaking needed to await sufficient assets and trained personnel to encircle and buffer the area from enemy reinforcement.

By mid-1966, after months of supplying and enlarging northern Meo sites, outlying positions were largely in place, supplied, and prepared to serve as listening posts, flanking, and launch sites for troop movement toward Nam Bac. In addition, Vang Pao's troops held areas of high ground east of the Nam Ou to spot and relay information on enemy movement from that direction.

By mid-July a USAF air operations center was established at Luang Prabang. Several of General Ma's T-28s and crews were entrenched there. Implementing Phase One of Prasane, on the 18th they began pounding areas around Nam Thuam (LS-176), Mok Lok (LS-131), and Ban Pha Thong (LS-169). These areas were deemed critical to the early stages of the operation and would provide launch pads for a three-phase double envelopment of Nam Bac. They also had been interdicting the Nam Ou, sinking boats carrying supplies required for enemy troop maintenance.

Although acceding to support of a ground operation, State believed that at this point in the war, USAF Pony Express CH-3s were too controversial to haul 1,400 FAR troops for conventional operations. ¹⁰ Therefore, after some deliberation, realizing the lift would require a large number of H-34s, State deemed Air America helicopters adequate for the envisioned massive three-day airlift. Using local GM-11 and ADC units and GM-19 from Thakhet, FAR possessed the necessary troops and equipment to

¹⁰ Road watch operations were remote and covert, thus discounted as to broad exposure.

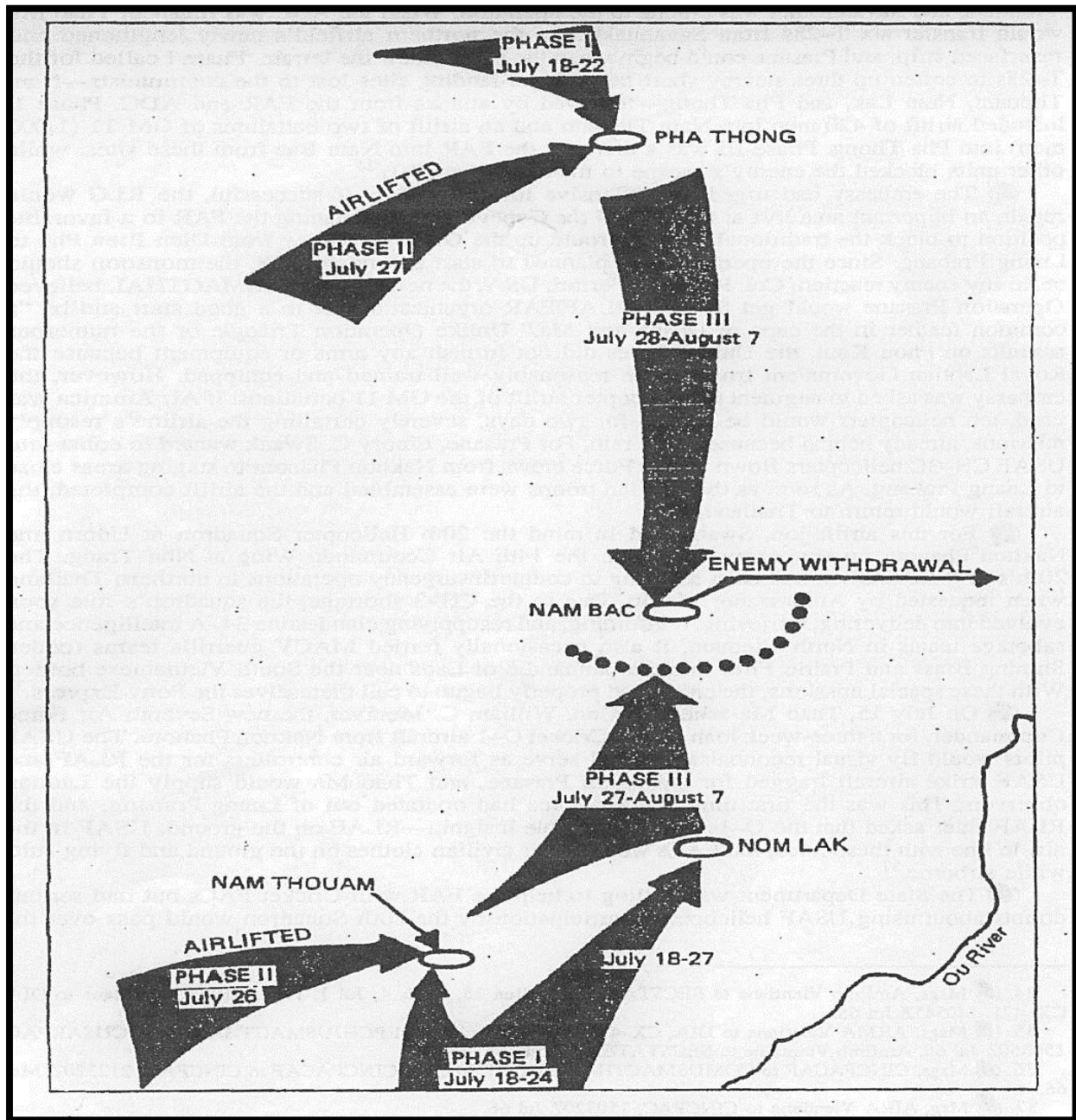


Diagram of the basic FAR Operation Prasane (Cleveland) plan, conducted during the summer of 1966 to recapture Nam Bac, a large, fertile area north of Luang Prabang. With airlift provided by Air America H-34 crews and T-28 pilots in support, and little enemy resistance, the operation was highly successful, and much of the area remained under government control until early 1968.

Thomas Ahern, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961-1973*.

conduct the operation. The monsoon season would serve to mask the operation and hinder any serious enemy reaction.

While Stage One of Prasane was underway and first units were marshaled for movement into the field, on the 21st, Mike Jarina was dispatched from Sam Tong to Luang Prabang. Conducting twenty-two landings, he and other pilots moved troops and supplies across the Mekong to a pre-staging area in a long, narrow northeast-southwest oriented valley three miles north of the royal capitol.

Experiencing little or no resistance, small units of mostly ADC troops moved down from high ground toward the primary objective located forty-two miles north of Luang Prabang along Route-4 in the Nam Khan Valley. Advance units moved into Nam Thuam on the 22nd where a 1,200-foot strip, although liberally peppered with bomb holes awaited a major airlift of 420 troops.

DICK FORD

With both the King and Souvanna Phouma out of the country, perhaps scheduled for claims of plausible deniability, Operation Cleveland's airlift officially began on 26 July.¹¹ Following a short briefing at Udorn, fourteen double crewed H-34s were repositioned to an unmarked pre-selected grassy strip across the Mekong and a little north of Luang Prabang near the village of Ban Khom Khoang (TH0204), that included a strip long enough to accommodate a C-123. Stripping other military regions of helicopters, according to battle plans, they would remain in the area until the job was completed. Closely resembling U.S Marine Corps field operations, with Senior Operations Manager Dick Ford

¹¹ Cleveland was the unofficial name Air America crews attributed to the operation. It was likely derived by participating crewmembers from the fact that Dick Ford had worked for Eliot Ness' Vice Squad in the Cleveland, Ohio, Police Department in the Thirties and once arrested Al Capone.

in charge of crewmember logistics, three large general purpose (GP) tents, "C" rations, and fuel bladders and drums were in place beside the C-123 useable runway. The site was located there for "security" and because of embassy staff's' desire to keep spies and other persons out of the loop. However, unaware of royal and political entities absence, tongue in cheek, Mike Jarina, humorously reflected to a peer, *"All the King has to do is glance out his window and he can probably see where we are staged."*¹²

In addition to basics, prior to the operation's commencement, Dick attempted to anticipate requirements for housing and sanitation. Considering himself a general housekeeper and gofer, he obtained support in the form of tents, field desks, and other items from Captain Ivan Pavlin, attached to the Army Security Agency.

Pavlin, along with Jarina and Ford, lived in the "Duck House." Mike considered Ivan a sharp, easy going, considerate person with a fine sense of humor. He believed the captain was OIC of a classified communications station south of Udorn, called the "Elephant Corral," and described as a place littered with antennae and wires (the intercept station at Ramasun. Also spelled Ramasan). Because of its classified status, Mike did not ask questions.

The "Duck House" had white cotton strings wrapped around its perimeter when Jarina returned from an STO. When he asked Pavlin the reason for the decorations, he explained that monks had appeared one day to bless the house and frighten malevolent spirits away. The strings were strategically arranged to prevent a return of evil spirits.

Mike smiled and facetiously replied, *"Oh, really?"*

¹² Mike Jarina Interviews.

Then Ivan countered with a straight face, "*Seen any ghosts lately?*"

Mike was convinced the exorcism had worked.

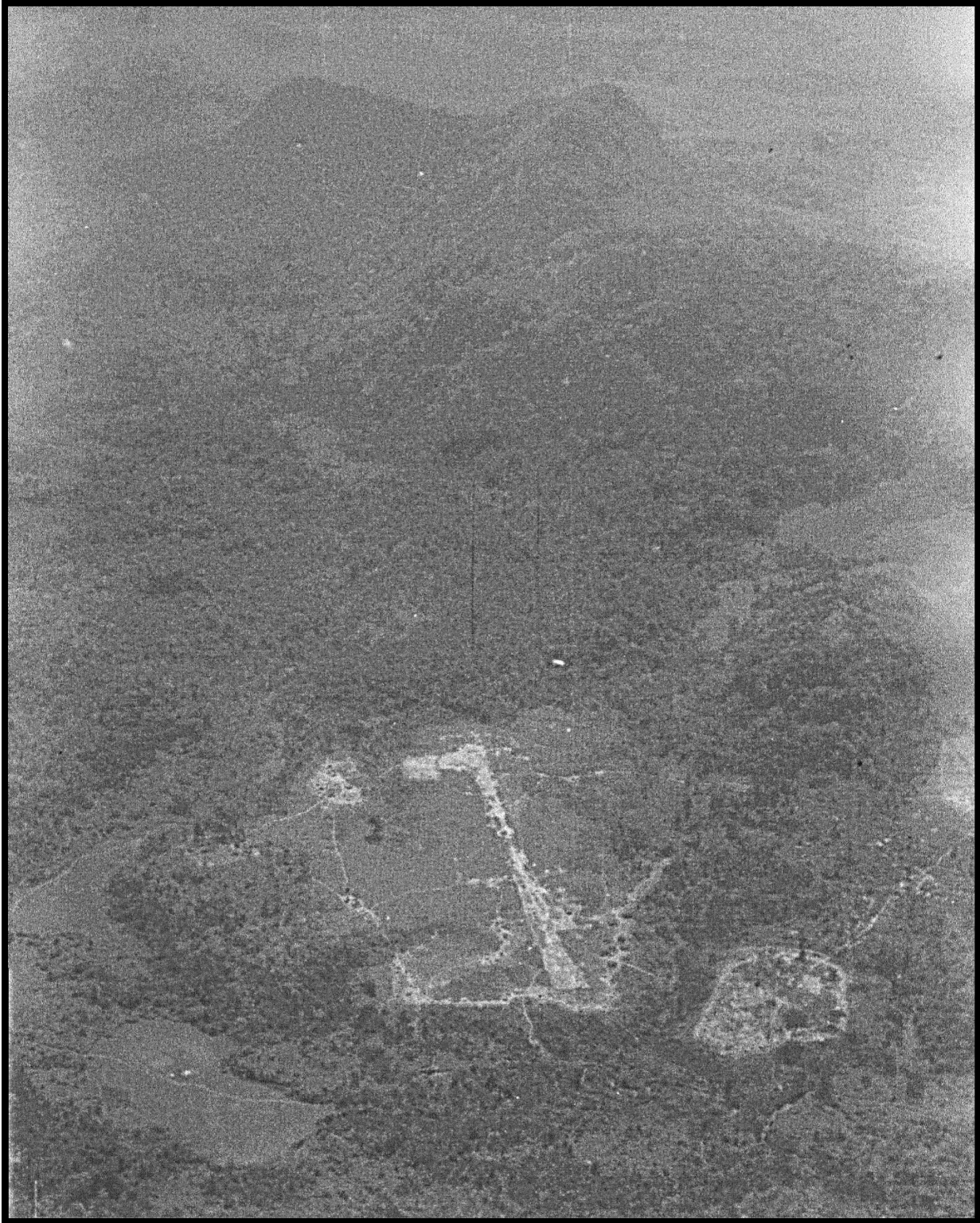
Later, his landlady invited him to visit the head monk of a temple. Although Catholic, he readily accepted and found the visit to the wat a pleasant and impressive learning experience. It led him to understand that all religions possessed something in common: beliefs of sincerity and faith.

Ford's participation during the operation was limited, but he attempted to maintain a tight ship. After the first day, he was quite unhappy with crews littering the area and failure to bury their garbage. During considerable grousing, he was overheard to say, "*Man is the only animal other than an ape that messes up or craps in his only tent.*"

Before the operation began, Abadie instructed Ford to include names of all participants in his report. Copies of reports were forwarded to Taipei. File copies were retained in Udorn. And when operations were terminated there in 1974, all files were boxed and forwarded to Taipei. ¹³

Monsoon conditions were producing low clouds, overcast conditions, and periods of wet weather. After a briefing and division of work areas, the operation commenced. Troops were loaded from the nearby staging area. Flying maximum hours encompassing fourteen landings in Hotel-34, Mike Jarina, Ron Dubinsky, and Roger Burdwood shuttled FAR troops forty-five miles north to the Nam Thuam strip that was located in a broad valley just east of Route-4, twelve miles south southwest of Nam Bac, and equidistant between LS-131 and LS-234. The troops spread out throughout the area, erected a defensive perimeter,

¹³ Dick admitted to the Author that if he knew we were making history, he would have secured a copy of Cleveland for himself.



Nam Thuam (LS-176), located in the lower Nam Bac Valley, one of the objectives during the initial phase of Operation Prasane.

MacAlan Thompson Collection.

and commenced patrolling actions. The final trip of the day placed H-34 crews back at the RON site well after dark.

CPH Wayne Knight participated in Cleveland over a period of four days. Overseeing his pilot group, he also utilized the opportunity to conduct upcountry route checks. Beginning in Hotel-41, he and the pilot shuttled to Site-176 and then focused on executing a GM-11, two battalion 1,000 man lift to the northern heights of Ban Pha Tong. They flew in excess of eleven hours.

All went smoothly until late that night when Alex Nadalini suffered a medical problem. With appendicitis suspected, Ford arranged Alex's evacuation to Udorn at 0200 hours.

On Wednesday, Knight switched aircraft to fly with the PIC of Hotel-33. Picking up troops at a west bank site a few miles from LP, they continued Nam Thuam and Pha Tong shuttles. Foul weather and other delays precluded logging the high time obtained the previous day.

Advance air and ground reconnaissance of the Site-203 area and southern territory revealed no evidence of enemy presence. Therefore, during the course of the day, with low clouds blanketing the area, Jarina and his crew returned empty to LS-176, intending to ferry troops into Nam Bac. However, the troops never materialized. Taking the opportunity to ensure a lack of enemy opposition, FAR leaders ordered units to hike ten miles north, probing and clearing adjacent areas. With this development, the lift operation requirement for the southern portion of the pincer envelopment was substantially reduced and the massive airlift involving so many aircraft and crews was no longer required. As a result, some helicopter crews were redirected back to other work areas or returned to Udorn. Others would continue supporting the northern pincer movement.

Mid-month, General Ma requested two O-1 Birddog planes with sanitized military pilots from Nakhon Phanom to stage out of Luang Prabang. They would fly visual reconnaissance, and perform as forward air controllers for his T-28 pilots and any USAF bombers used during the operation. Lao observers would accompany the O-1 drivers. This USAF presence would represent a precedent at Luang Prabang.

During the Nam Thuam lift, a Birddog pilot broke a tail wheel while landing on the rough, bomb pocked runway. All that remained of the component was a piece of metal, little more than a spike hanging from the tail wheel area. Aware of the damage, the pilot elected to fly the bird out of the short strip. Revving up his engine to maximum, he managed to raise the tail. Then he released his brakes and started down the strip with a lot of new drag created. As amused Air America pilots watched, Jim Williams quipped, *"If you want to see a short field take off, watch this."*

Keeping the aircraft nose down, the pilot never managed to become airborne. Instead, at runway's end, after running through some bushes, the tail settled into the deck. This resulted in the broken strut catching and digging into the ground and the aircraft pitching forward on its nose. In effect, the pilot had created a carrier type tail hook, in place of a tail wheel. At any rate, the plane was no longer flyable and became the operation's only casualty.

At the peak of the exciting incident, Ron Dubinsky ran to his helicopter to retrieve the pilot. Jarina thought to himself, one could have run to the crippled O-1 in less time.

Jarina and others were called home, but Knight remained in the field providing check rides until the 30th. On the 28th, he flew in Hotel Foxtrot with a pilot he failed to log. They continued shuttling extra troops and supplies into Nam Thuam and

Pha Thong, where movement south toward Nam Bac was underway. After six hours and fifty minutes, they repaired to Luang Prabang to RON. Except for maintaining a refueling capability, Dick Ford had broken camp in preparation to depart the site.

Wayne and John Fonburg spent five hours in Foxtrot the next day supplying Sites 176 and 169. Refuting the impression that the operation was unopposed, early in the day, they received a single round of battle damage while cruising at 5,000 feet west of track.¹⁴ The lucky hit disabled the automatic stabilization equipment (ASE). They continued to operate, but adjusted the shuttle track to the east and encountered no further problems.¹⁵

Knight completed the day in Hotel-12 with another pilot. After a final RON at Lima-54, he left for Tango-08 when Phase One of the Prasane operation was deemed complete and Phase Two was nearing an end. Other H-34 crews remained to supply and perform evacuation missions should they become necessary.

Although FAR and Meo troops were either on the perimeter or in the valley earlier, Nam Bac was not officially declared in government hands until 7 August, largely because of heavy rain that curtailed large movement. By that time, all RLG goals had

¹⁴ Five thousand feet above sea level (ASL) was actually not far above some of the peaks in that region. For that reason, if able, I preferred to fly at 8,000 feet when flying north of Luang Prabang. Coupled with the radar altimeter, I calculated that this altitude would generally keep me out of 12.7mm range.

¹⁵ During the early days at Marine Corps Air Station New River, N.C., at the behest of my instructors, I first learned how to fly the HUS-1 without benefit of ASE. Later, when carrier qualifications loomed, this changed. The U.S. Navy NATOPs manual specified that shipboard regulations required the use of functioning ASE to operate. Therefore, I had to relearn the HUS-1's flying characteristics with ASE. This change likely helped produce a more well-rounded HUS pilot.

Howard Estes told me one day that while serving in Germany H-34 pilots never used ASE for a number of reasons. His aviation company lacked skilled, trained technicians capable of repairing the equipment; no one understood it, hence, the system was feared. I was surprised to hear this, as the system was only rated at twenty percent control, which could be manually overridden by the pilot.

been realized except Phase Three, an attempt to block enemy escape to the east.¹⁶ Regardless of the final outcome of Prasane, the rare government success was largely due to Vietnamese military leaders' disaffection with PL participation in the war thus far, and subsequent failure to maintain adequate supply lines to them.¹⁷

RECAPITULATION OF ACTIVITY AND ENEMY ORDER OF BATTLE

Emory Swank, still standing in for the vacationing Sullivan, forwarded a relatively positive report to State regarding the military situation in the northern portions of Laos. Citing a brief historical review, he stated that total enemy forces in Houa Phan, Houa Khong, Luang Prabang, and Xieng Khouang Provinces had swelled from thirty-nine battalions in July 1965 to sixty-three battalions as of July 1966.

¹⁶ The Author suspects this phase of the operation failed because of both sides' religious preference and "humanitarian" policy to leave an escape route, thus avoiding unnecessary slaughter or casualties. Employed up to this time by FAR and Pathet Lao troops, the policy was never employed by Vietnamese troops whose methods were quite severe, particularly against tribal warriors.

¹⁷ Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 157.

Victor Anthony, 203-206.

Douglas Blaufarb, *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970*, 26-27, January 1972, Reprinted by Dalley Book Service, Christiansburg, VA.

Gary Gentz, Interview 01/15/93. In later years, Gentz first made the Author aware of the name Cleveland.

EW Knight Emails, 08/01/00, 08/02/00, 08/03/00, 09/25/00, 09/26/00, 10/20/00, 01/08/01.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

Mike Jarina Email, 10/21/00.

Dick Ford Emails, 09/25/98, 10/14/99, 10/18/00.

Air America Website, In Memoriam, 06/28/09.

Bill Leary July-August 1966 Notes pertaining to Jim Glerum's assessment of the Prasane operation.

Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos, 07/16/66, FRUS, 242.

A substantial increase of Vietnamese troops into Laos commenced in the fall, and peaked with a large offensive in upper Military Region Two, with the intention of establishing secure LOCs along Route-6 to Ban Ban and the Plain of Jars. During the Na Khang engagement, a Vietnamese prisoner of war (POW) revealed movement of fresh North Vietnamese Army units into Laos. Along with this information and a long analysis of road watch reports throughout the country, as of 1 July, the Vientiane Agency estimated the presence of more than 42,000 Vietnamese forces in Laos, an increase of about 23,000 new personnel. This total consisted of nineteen Vietnamese battalions with a 7,435 total troop complement. Vietnamese soldiers attached to Pathet Lao battalions from platoon to company strength numbered 4,525. Advisors integrated into Pathet Lao battalions were 680. Engineers and coolies totaled 21,000, with an additional 7,000 in support activities.

Based on an Agency assessment, ARMA Vientiane stated there was conclusive evidence of considerable Vietnamese buildup in Laos in the July 1965 to July 1966 period. Additionally, there was evidence of a reduction in Pathet Lao combat and support activity that possibly offset the Vietnamese increase.

With the advent of the 1965 dry season, the upper MR-2 enemy offensive began in earnest in November during which many long-held government sites in Sam Neua province were captured or abandoned. This included the February loss of the large Na Khang base in northern Xieng Khouang Province. Friendly forces (Meo) presented a good account of themselves during ruthless battles against a far superior enemy. Then, when pressured beyond their capability, the garrison withdrew to previously prepared bases north and west at Pha Thi, Moung Heim, and Moung Son in order to harass enemy flanks and stall southern movement.

Assisting the overall effort to contain the enemy, by April, an integrated close air support operation was introduced, and additional fixed wing rated air controllers were stationed at Phu Cum (LS-50). A-1E fighter bombers from Nakhon Phanom were employed as airborne forward control stations and thirty-two jet sorties were scheduled daily. Coordination between General Vang Pao and Seventh Air Force provided round-the-clock detailed intelligence regarding enemy movement along Routes Six and Seven.

The combination of timely intelligence from Agency-sponsored road watchers and accurate bombing by A-1E and T-28 pilots enabled outnumbered government units to spoil the enemy movement south and initiate counter offensive guerrilla warfare, which as of July, had regained ninety percent of territory lost from November to April. This tactical support subsequently led to Na Khang's May recapture.

Enemy troop strength still exceeded that of the RLG, but high attrition rates and lack of critical supplies by air interdiction lowered Vietnamese and Pathet Lao morale. During the period, enemy losses in 952 ground engagements numbered an estimated 1,359 KIAs and 783 WIAs, mostly North Vietnamese regulars. Friendly casualties were high, but proportionally less than the enemy. ¹⁸

Even greater enemy losses by air strikes were estimated at 4,300 KIA and 700 WIA. This attrition enabled some friendly forces to gain and maintain the initiative.

In addition to the current government gains, military actions in the area substantially aided USG's military effort in Vietnam by engaging and eliminating elements of Vietnamese units

¹⁸ The report failed to mention that, unlike enemy assets, friendly losses were virtually impossible to replace.

otherwise employed in the South Vietnamese Theater. ¹⁹

COLBY

During his July Far East visit, as compared to his previous fall visit, Agency Chief of the Far East Division William Colby was very encouraged by the current Lao military situation. Including portions of upper Military Region Two, this positive assessment also pertained to Military Region Three and Military Region Four where aggressive activity from Savannakhet and Pakse targeted the Ho Chi Minh Trail system.

During Colby's October 1965 visit, Pathet Lao guerrillas were active near Pakse. In January, units attacked the radio relay site on Phu Batiene a few miles east of the city. The Bolovens Plateau was considered largely untenable, and subject to Pathet Lao incursion. Threats existed to Saravane, Attoupeu, and Pak Song. At the time, FAR leaders deliberated about which of the three and other pressured positions to defend.

Now, as of July, except for small Pathet Lao units currently being encircled and eliminated, local security forces prevailed on the Bolovens. The area near Lima-44, interdicted by both USAF and Lao air, and protected by the WAPI program village security forces and SGU forces, was open to Pakse.

Saravane to the north and PS-22, located on the east rim of the Plateau, were utilized as launch points for road watch and harassment teams on road networks north of Site-44 and east of the Se Kong. A limitation to operations was the availability of adequate helicopter support.

¹⁹ Assistant Ambassador American Embassy Vientiane, Laos, Swank to State, Effectiveness of USAF Operations in Northern Laos, 08/03/66, 244. This information closely paralleled William Colby's trip findings and 28 July report to Director Helms. Telegram Ambassador William Sullivan to State, North Vietnamese Order of Battle in Laos (via CAS), 09/11/66.

Colby was effusive in his praise for the U.S. Embassy Country Team under Ambassador Sullivan's able and strong support. He was impressed by the participation of local security forces, guerrilla units, and FAR, all aided by coordinated air support.²⁰

²⁰ Report by the Chief of the Far East Division, Directorate for Plans, Central Intelligence Agency (Colby) to Director of Central Intelligence Agency-Dick Helms, 08/16/66, 246.

During the second week in August, I received a short memorandum on Air America note paper from Assistant Chief Pilot Helicopters (ACPH) Marius Burke. Dated 10 August, the note pertained to an impending Jansky and Bailey contract in Songkla, Thailand, something I had discussed with Wayne before departing on home leave. Originally scheduled to commence on 22 August, Marius indicated that the J&B contract was now confirmed, and it appeared that the operation would begin about 1 September. Many in the helicopter program were interested in the job, but since I was interested and, as the senior man on the list, I was first in line. If I accepted the job, I would have to return to Thailand early. I was a little excited, for the offer and job were interesting. It would have been an excellent way to escape the stress and hazards of the escalating Lao war for a year, but work and living details were not delineated, so I requested additional information.

By Tuesday the 23rd, I received a reply along with a copy of an aeronautical message draft from Bangkok. The four-page memorandum did not contain much additional information because Bangkok personnel were handling details. The abbreviated message from Tango-09 revealed that it was a one-year contract, with the possibility of an additional six months. The helicopter allocated for the project was a 148 series and former CIC-4 aircraft. It would be staged locally at Songkla airport two miles west of town. Seven Company employees would support the operation: pilot, Flight Mechanic, two ground mechanics, two laborers, and a combination radio/flight watch operator. Dick Conrad was the permanent Flight Mechanic. All but heavy maintenance would be performed at the station.

The work would basically duplicate the tasks Tom Moher was performing for Jansky and Bailey out of Bangkok. A five-day work week with weekends off was stipulated. From past visits, Moher indicated the beach resort of Songkla was beautiful and he believed the job would be very relaxing and devoid of all the stresses of working in Laos.

The job provided basic pay with no anticipated project or overtime pay. Station allowance would be the same as in Bangkok, but there were rumors of an increase.

Scratch Kanach had volunteered to work there the first month; however, the customer was anxious to have a permanent pilot.

My wife had spent many of her formative years in Pattani, Thailand, a small town further south near the Malaysian border, but she knew little or nothing about the Songkla area. Still, it would have been good to live near her early roots.

Wayne was on home leave until October, leaving Marius and Phil Goddard to run the Chief Pilot's office. Catching me up on the news, he said things were generally quiet in Udorn. However, there were a few personnel changes. Following the trouble he experienced with his pneumatic nightclub singer girlfriend, Jim Brown had transferred to Saigon to fly the Bell 204B. Chuck Eckerle had resigned. I was not surprised to learn this, for I had listened to his bitter complaints at the Sam Tong hostel regarding the substandard living conditions there, and low benefits Air America afforded in contrast to every other stateside commercial aviation operator. He had also created a fuss about the need for a pilots' union to bring us up to industry standard. No one bought this line of thinking at the time. After increased hostilities, battle incidents, and crew deaths, the idea of a union came much later.

Since Scratch was assuming the first watch, there was sufficient time before I had to make a firm decision. Consequently, I requested additional information as it became available. Besides, I was thoroughly enjoying my vacation with family and friends, and therefore, I deferred any immediate decision regarding a job in southern Thailand. The accumulated stress of hours of combat flying was dissipating, and over time I was also feeling much better mentally. Whoever designed the original leave program, calculated to allow an employee the opportunity to vacate Udorn and flying for an extended time, was truly a genius. ¹

STATESIDE ACTIVITIES

I really did not want to consider returning to Thailand early, for I was having a great time breaking in the Mustang engine, driving the new car around the area visiting friends and relatives, and spending time at the Orvis Brothers stock broker office in town, where Gordon Fuller, husband of my Father's cousin Dottie worked as a Customer's Man. My Mom's younger brother, Bill Townsend, Assistant Art Director of *Look Magazine*, invited us to stay at his apartment in New York City for a couple of days. It was a talented family, as his wife, Doris McFerran Townsend, either wrote or compiled children's or cook books for Rutledge Press.

At the start of the New York City trip we all piled into the small Mustang. Tuie received an eyeful of the northeast's crowded transportation infrastructure, as I drove into the city along highways, byways, and through the Holland Tunnel. I parked in the garage in Uncle Bill's building. While Mom and Dad baby

¹ Marius Burke Memorandums, 08/10, 23/66; Message Draft-Songkla Report, 08/66.

sat Ricky, among many places we visited was the United Nations building located around the corner, and within easy walking distance of the apartment building. Except for some malodorous patrons, a matinee movie at Radio City Music Hall, with the spectacular Rockettes dance team performing afterward, was highly enjoyable.

The two days, not really sufficient to see New York properly, went by quickly. The first time driving in NYC for anyone was never fun, and the trip out of the city provided me with a taste of local drivers' discourtesy, when I failed to use the correct lane to turn right. I survived a little mouth fight with a rude, irate driver, and we returned home without further incident.

The next time visiting Uncle Bill and Aunt Doris in the city, Tuie and I took a bus to Grand Central Station. Bill met us and we went to one of his favorite art galleries to view Mom's interesting needlepoint rendition of the Garden of Eden that he was attempting to sell for 5,000 dollars. Afterward, Doris arrived, and he took us to lunch where the rich and famous often congregated. Later, I picked up a *Time Life* book collection he obtained for me at a substantial discount and we hit the road for home.

To provide Mom and Dad a break from our presence, I decided to take short motor trips and visit places in the northeast I had never seen. For starters, we journeyed to Amish, or "Pennsylvania Dutch", country in and around Lancaster County on the 17th. As a test, Ricky went along in his baby carry. Tuie was still nursing, so we had little trouble with liquid logistics. Breast feeding a child was an acceptable Asian method, and since we were travelling a lot, we considered this technique a sterile and nutritious method of feeding him. This

must have been the case, for he continued to gain weight. Cloth diapers, although a little smelly, were stored in the car trunk.

It was quite interesting observing conservatively dressed Amish farmers tending their fields and driving 18th century buggies on the rural roads.

Town names in the area were quite unique and we overnighted at an Intercourse motel close to Blueball. To experience local cuisine, we took our dinner at a restaurant with a long common table shared with strangers. Food was basic fare, but good, consisting of boiled chicken, dumplings, and vegetables. On Thursday we went to Eufaula to visit America's first pretzel factory. It was normally a tourist attraction, but with us the only customers, the proprietor fashioned and baked an enormous pretzel for us in an ancient brick oven. At Hershey, Pennsylvania, we joined a tour of the chocolate factory. While standing over huge pots of chocolate slowly being stirred by agitators, I could not recall anything ever smelling so wonderful.

It was a successful trip and since Rick did so well, I began planning longer more ambitious trips away from home.

J&B

I did not hear anything more regarding the J&B contract until receiving a lengthy letter from Scratch in late September. He indicated that despite encouraging rumors, there was nothing to report as of 19 September. In fact, CIC-4, which he had laboriously whipped into shape for the job, was sent back to Vientiane. He stated that he heard Tom Moher was currently in Songkha flying 803 on a temporary basis. Scratch recommended I write to Tom for answers to my questions, so I could make a decision on whether to commit to the project.

I wanted to be ready to return to Thailand early in case I decided to consent to the J&B job. Since our return trip would include flying over the Pacific great circle route,² I assumed new documentation would be required for Tuie as she would be traveling on a Thai passport. Therefore, in addition to writing to Tom Moher for information, I phoned the Company office in Washington, requesting information regarding visa requirements and forms for our return trip to Southeast Asia. I soon received a package of visa applications for Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and a short note from Air Asia secretary Susan Patrizio. All she required to begin processing the paperwork was Tuie's signature on the visa forms and her passport. As I did not know where we might be possibly be bumped or have to layover, I decided to obtain all or any transit visas that might be required at various stops. With this in mind, I sent my passport with the other forms.

Based on Scratch's advice, I wrote to Tom. However, he failed to receive my letter in Songkla until the end of September. I received a letter from him by the first week in October. From its content I deduced that he was anxious to return to Bangkok. He confirmed fifty to sixty flying hours per month for J&B; five days a week. The job required an eight o'clock departure from the airfield, a forty-five-minute flight to the outlying site and return to Songkla at 1630 hours.

He related that Songkla was a quiet, secluded beach resort all owned by the Thai government. It was a friendly place, cleaner than Udorn with comparable housing. Rentals were listed from fifty to 200 dollars depending on the type of desired

²Great circle route: The world is basically round, therefore, when a map is laid out flat a curved distance is shorter than a direct line between point A and B.

accommodations. There were two restaurants available locally. Night life was considered non-existent, but the J&B people were planning to open a club for employees. Moreover, Penang Island, a place with many amenities, was only two and a half hours from the town. A modern hospital in town had just been built. Television was beamed in from Malaysia to provide several channels of entertainment. The Bangkok commissary and PX were available for necessities.

About the same time I received Tom's letter another package arrived from Washington containing a CAT schedule and other visa applications for Ricky and myself.

The paperwork for our journey was completed and received by October. All we had to do then was decide when to book a return flight to Tokyo on Pan American Airline. ³

UDORN

For the first time since the 1961 Madriver Project was initiated, a fairly comprehensive informational handout regarding base data was prepared for new Air America employees and transients. Categories and sub-categories included: RTAF base field characteristics; maps; navigational aids that included tower, radar, TACAN, NDB, and Flight Watch communications; compound facilities-fuel, ground transportation, lodging, food, recreation, maintenance, Flight Information Center, money, medical, and mail. ⁴

³ Julian "Scratch" Kanach Letter, 09/19/66.
Tom Moher Letter, 09/30/66.

Notes from Susan Patrizio, Secretary Air Asia Company, Ltd. 815 Connecticut Avenue, NW Washington, D.C. 20006, 09/27/66, 10/06/66.

⁴ I did not see the booklet until returning from vacation. The information was not world shattering, but did provide some items an inexperienced spy might use against us. I never discovered if the information was cleared by AB-1 personnel.

Consistent with the Udorn facility's growth, and particularly with the opening of the new Operations-Administrative building, the management list of employees and job titles continued to grow. Topping the list, Ben Moore presided as Base Manager with E.S. "Tex" Dew his second in command. Clarence Abadie was the Project Chief of Operations.

Within the Flight Department, Jim Rhyne held the Manager of Flight-Fixed Wing slot. Wayne Knight was Manager of Flight-Rotary Wing with Marius Burke his assistant.

After Tom Penniman transferred to Taipei toward the end of August, Dick Ford assumed the Senior Operations Manager position. Dennis Grace and Jerry Hennessy were tapped as Operations Managers.

T. Tritraphant and M. Khusakul were key Operations Dispatchers.

Not mentioned in the Operations Department were the numerous more English proficient Thai radio operators, who replaced many older Chinese who had worked the radios in the early days. Of course, except for Knight's outstanding clerk, Somsak, Thai female and male clerks were too numerous to mention.

The Flight Operations Center blossomed with three individuals, Jim Alexander, Paul Montgomery, and J.M. Rock.

Supervisors from the Personnel and Accounting Departments were not listed.

The Maintenance Department was headed by Manager of Technical Services, Jack Forney; Superintendent of Technical Services, Elmer Gould; Superintendent of Aircraft Maintenance-Helicopter, John Aspinwall; and Superintendent of Aircraft Maintenance-Fixed Wing, Bob Peterson.

Superintendent of Supply was M.F. "Santy" Santos.

Traffic Manager, J.P. Hardman.

Art Angelo managed the Club Rendezvous with Y.C Chiang as his assistant.

Doctor H.P. Kao (known affectionately to "Old Timers" as Doctor Rice) still headed the Medical Department with the neatly dressed Thai Doctor W. Udarwudhipong.

Many of these people had been employed from nearly the beginning of the helicopter program. They certainly were not the only individuals who kept the operation going, but they represented the key leaders responsible for their departments.

Chief of Security, Les D. Ashe and assistant, C.W. Heath, had replaced Chuck O'Donnell, who in turn had replaced Jim Baron, the security chief when I arrived in 1962. Mister Tong had endured and lasted well after he was discovered extorting money from every Thai new hire.

Although I never had a problem with Ashe, a direct Agency employee, he was not revered by many Company employees, and was accorded the unflattering nickname, "Ashe-hole." One time, Tom Penniman and Captain Sam Jordan were boarding a blue Company Volkswagen bus for town, when Ashe, interested in finding personal weapons, exited the new building by the door next to the transportation dispatcher's office, and requested that Sam open his bag. Although against Company policy, personal weapons for upcountry survival were long sacrosanct in our program. For one reason or another, at times there seemed to be a temporary management crackdown on weapons. Regardless of the cause, ferreting out guns was always a sore subject and procedure with crew members, one that generally did not last long. After flying upcountry for a week, Jordan was in no mood for such nonsense. Therefore, he looked at Les with utter contempt, hissing in a low even tone through pursed lips, "*Touch that bag you son of a*

bitch, and I will certainly kill you." Such a venomous outburst was totally out of character for a normally calm Jordan, but the nasty curl to his lips was sufficiently meaningful to Ashe, who wheeled on his heels and disappeared.

The next unpopular item arose when the pilots were mustered in a room and then told to sign a security form to the effect that they would not divulge, print, or publish any information regarding the Air America operation. There was an implied threat of termination if one failed to sign the paper. Up to that time, admonitions to keep our work quiet were only oral, and generally followed. Perhaps something had occurred to stimulate Company or Agency action to remind everyone of their obligations in the form of a concrete document.

After Ashe departed the room, the pilots began discussing the statement's contents and implications. Deciding that they had implicit rights under the U.S. Constitution, they judged the proposal demeaning, and some refused to sign it at first. Then, fudging their signature, some employed their opposite hand or a misspelled a name. Tom Hoppe wrote:

"I will not divulge anything from this day forward unless it is illegal for you to not allow me to divulge it." ⁵ ⁶

SHINING BRASS

American-led team and platoon shallow cross border probes from South Vietnam into the Lao Trail system was authorized in September 1965, and implemented a month later. While avoiding

⁵ I was not present for this fiasco, but did sign something similar at one time.

⁶ Air America Booklet, circa August 1966.
Tom Penniman Emails, 02/26/00, 03/08/00.
Tom Hoppe Interview, 07/08/96.

contact with enemy troops and villagers, their mission was detection of enemy troops and supplies in the southern Panhandle for targeting to generate timely air strikes. Because of Souvanna Phouma's political requirement to appear neutral, and his overt reluctance to allow U.S. troops into Laos, the operations were maintained on a small scale close to the remote border for plausible deniability purposes. ⁷

Because of operational success in targeting and intelligence gathering, after deliberation and good old American horse trading, over the period of a year penetration and operations were necessarily expanded and air assets were utilized for transportation and support. Continued expansion was envisioned to prevent end-runs from enemy forces on U.S. troops engaged in operations in western South Vietnam. ^{8 9}

SLAM

Trail interdiction had evolved considerably since its 1964 inception. As additional assets became available in the theater, and both air and ground operations expanded, additional and improved coordination of resources was required. This resulted in the SLAM concept, a military acronym for select, locate, annihilate, and monitor. An integral part of the Shining Brass

⁷ Parts of the mountainous and jungle border were disputed and the border was ill defined.

⁸ Since these penetrations were shallow and our occasional road watch activity had not yet involved missions close to the border, we never interacted with teams launched from South Vietnam.

⁹ The Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs (Donneny), Shining Brass, 10/03/66, FRUS. Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 342. Memorandum from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs (Unger) to the Under Secretary of State (Katzenbach), Expansion of Shinning Brass Operations in Laos, FRUS, 270, 12/02/66.

program, it expanded the plan utilizing Special Forces-led South Vietnamese ground teams, and Air Force tactical and B-52 strike aircraft, particularly in concentrated target areas.

Before the southwest monsoon moderated, and allowed enemy infiltration to return east to the Lao Panhandle Trail system, MACV Saigon chose to conduct SLAM on a trial basis along Route-110, the Sihanouk Trail, in southern Laos. This involved intelligence gathering utilizing both air and ground resources, and developing and targeting lucrative areas for Arc Light strikes.

First SLAM strikes, incorporating B-52s and tactical strike aircraft, commenced in October near Route-110. However, without reconnaissance team follow-up, BDA was not available. Another strike took place during the second week after Shining Brass teams identified enemy battalions close to Route-110. Again, a team failed to reach the target area to fully assess the damage.

In discussions preceding the operation, the matter of B-52 bases closer to the action to improve reaction time was raised. Along with the Philippines, Sattahip, Thailand was mentioned. ¹⁰

THE MR-4 CHINESE NUNG EXPERIMENT

Following two days of test flights and night flying, on 12 August Mike Jarina, Mort Shearer, and Flight Mechanic Sizelove flew to Pakse for three days. Mike had been Shearer's helicopter instructor pilot (IP) at Ellyson Field during his Bell and intermediate HO4S training. Mike did not consider Mort a very

¹⁰ Jacob Van Staaveren, 158-159, 166-167, 342.

Telegram from the Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Westmoreland) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Sharp), FRUS, #251, 09/16/66.

Telegram from the Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Westmoreland) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Sharp), FRUS, #252, 09/16/66.

good pilot at that time; now he was charged to conduct an area familiarization with him in the Lima-11 area.

Flying Hotel-43, they went to Ban Nam Tieng (LS-165) southeast of Houei Khong. This was the same remote site where Mike had conducted FAR parachute training the previous year. This time Chinese Nung were arriving from South Vietnam.

Like other ethnic groups, Nung tribals had emigrated from China to northern portions of Vietnam in the 1500s. During the First Indochina War, deemed reliable and loyal allies, they were granted self-rule by the French, and resisted Viet Minh efforts in their areas. Following the 1954 Geneva Accords signing, thousands of Nungs of the Catholic faith, with the assistance of the U.S. Navy and Doctor Tom Dooley, immigrated to South Vietnam. Many of these people were fighters, who eventually joined the Vietnamese Army (ARVN), specifically the 5th Infantry Division.

Enjoying a reputation as fierce warriors, especially loyal to commanding officers, Nung were found to be more reliable and preferred over other ethnic groups. Therefore, even before the Second Indochina War became Americanized in 1965, increased security was required for remote camps, and Nung types were hired as bodyguards and special camp guards.

Once the American buildup commenced, ethnic Chinese Nung served in a variety of roles with several U.S. Special Forces units, particularly SOG. Agency headquarters also preferred the group, and they had been previously employed on clandestine, but generally unsuccessful, missions in North Vietnam. There were also early overtures about using the men for road operations in Laos, and Ambassador Sullivan saw some merit in the idea on a small scale.

General Westmoreland envisioned distinct advantages in utilizing Nung tribesmen for expanded operations on the Ho Chi

Minh Trail system, and pictured deploying several 540-man battalions created solely of Nung troops for Shinning Brass cross border operations into Laos. Therefore, during December 1965 he directed the equipping of one battalion against this end. By January, he sought formation of two more units. These battalions, in addition to intelligence gathering and air targeting, supported with air, would be capable of attacking and harassing enemy on the trails. He wanted to activate the battalions before midyear. However, the general had to wait to implement large cross border activity until the full gamut of Vientiane Embassy, State, and Defense officials approved the program. During the interim, activity against communist infiltration remained on the South Vietnamese side of the border.

Because of the possibility of detection and discovery of U.S. Geneva Accords violations, Ambassador Sullivan opposed the use of such a large cross border force in Laos, particularly with the large number of American Special Forces personnel required to lead and control a Nung battalion. He further stressed that Souvanna Phouma would never sanction that many Americans concentrated in Laos. At a January Bangkok SEACORD meeting, he and General Westmoreland tangled horns once again. Sullivan recommended the Nung be trained in Laos, ostensibly under Military Region Four Commanding Officer General Phasouk Somly, where they could attack the trail system.¹¹ Fearing a loss of control, the Saigon general dissented. The issue was tabled until May, when Sullivan agreed to employ Nungs in platoon sized units with three American advisors for Shinning Brass operations. Other restrictions were proposed, limiting a

¹¹This would constitute a façade, for Phasouk was more interested in pacification programs than SGU or trail activity.

force as to monthly missions, border penetration mileage, and total time spent in Laos.

In late June the first Nung Platoon crossed into Laos on foot. Aggressive teams burned huts, small villages, and destroyed livestock and food caches. In addition, they captured five enemy soldiers and killed eleven others.

MERCENARIES DRIFT INTO LAOS

Fixed listening posts and minor road watch activity had been attempted on a limited basis. Operations were successful to a point in eastern Military Region Four, but it was suspected that enemy activity was rapidly increasing along LOCs east of the Plateau, and air power was not effective in stopping movement. Now it was time to take more aggressive action against the infiltration. In a partly experimental, partly serious operation encompassing bona fide goals, and to complement fledgling Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) road watch training activity at the PS-22 Bolovens site, the Agency wanted to quickly organize and dispatch aggressive strike teams for road interdiction missions east across the Se Kong Valley. Supplementing and covering areas Shining Brass teams were not authorized to operate, the introduction of Nung teams would target stretches of Routes 96 and 110 forming a majority of the Sihanouk Trail system east and south of the Bolovens Plateau.

At the time, most Americans were unimpressed with the average lowland Lao's reluctance to direct the fight to the enemy in either Military Region Three or Four. The Thai experiment from PS-18 had not achieved envisioned goals, and the operation terminated when the Thai trail watch teams were deemed not sufficiently aggressive to kick ass and take names in the eastern hinterland. Vaunted Gurkha fighters, although Asian, did not possess the physical characteristics of Southeast Asians,

and were rejected outright by State as not being sufficiently deniable. Consequently, Nung, who properly fit the essential category of non-round-eye Asian, were chosen, but they were still an unknown quantity as to their capabilities to fulfill the mission. Brainstormers were anxious to learn, if like Meo tribals in Military Region Two, imported Nung tribesmen with an excellent reputation for soldiering could better perform interdiction goals than indigenous Kha types, who were not all that easy to recruit and control. They considered that if anything at all was accomplished, it would certainly surpass the current low level of activity from the Plateau.

To implement the heart of the concept, trained, experienced, and well-respected Nung soldiers from Phu Bai were solicited from Special Forces assets for the task. However, the program was seriously flawed from inception. Other pressing requirements like Shining Brass operations and MACV reluctance to release top soldiers, for what was then considered a mere Lao sideshow war, prevented a full complement of well trained and experienced Nung units from being forwarded to Laos. Instead, a majority of young raw recruits from the Cholon City Chinese section of Saigon were conscripted. Not all the men were inferior soldiers, and a few in the first group had SOG experience from previous military operations in South Vietnam. COS Blaufarb originally requested that Americans with Asian derivation were drawn from Special Forces inventory as trainers and leaders for the Nung group. However, the request fell on deaf ears, and the Agency would have to provide its own people and rely strictly on Nung leadership.

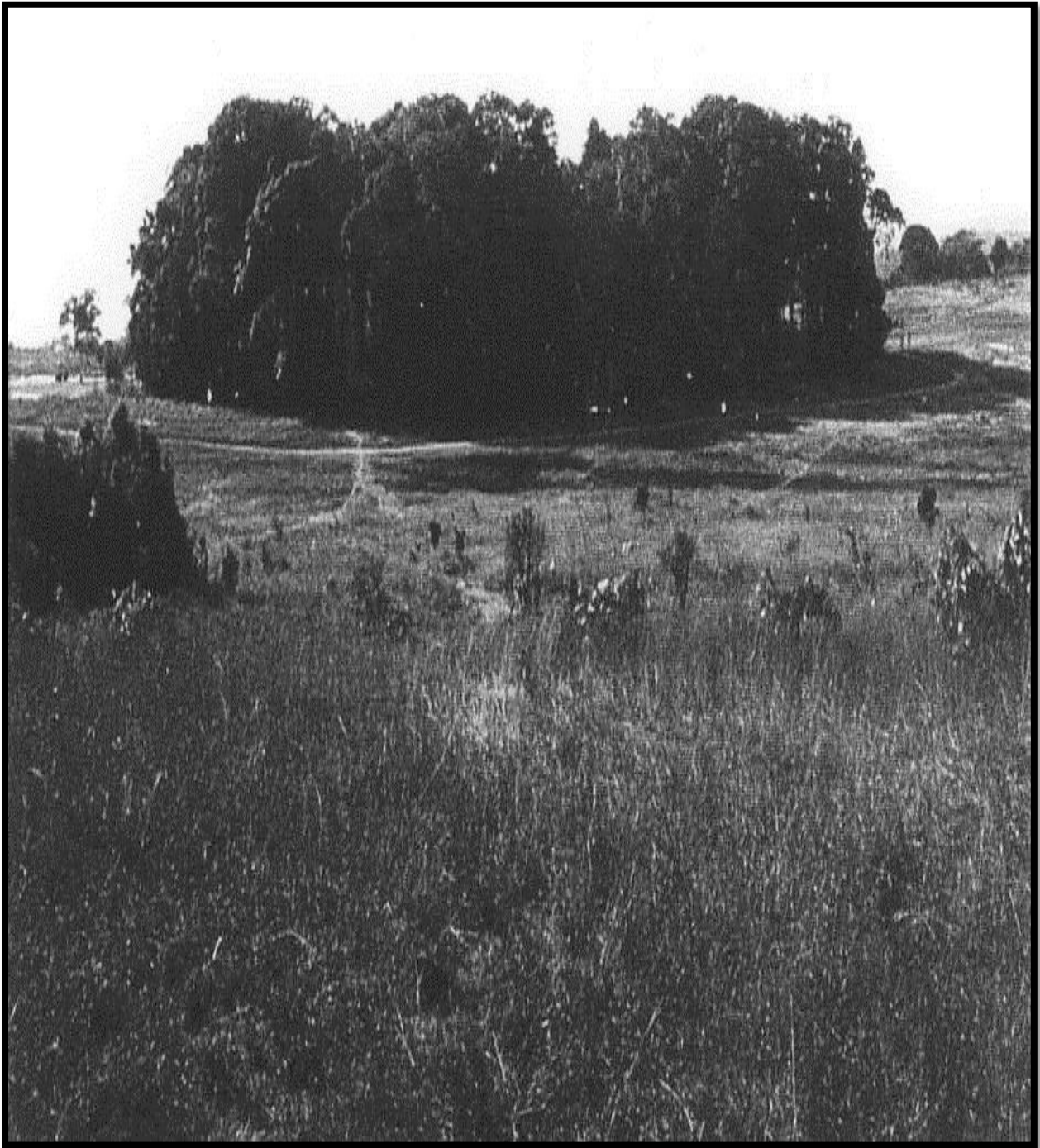
The first unit of a hundred men was provided two weeks military training, and then shipped to Ban Nam Tieng (LS-165) in August on six-month contracts.

LADUE

Mike Ladue was a former Air America AFS kicker and USAID representative at Sam Tong, who survived a harrowing experience with Captain Harvey Gulick in a March 1965 Helio Courier B-865 crash on the east side of Phu Bia. Following recovery from a serious leg injury, he returned to duties at Sam Tong, but, finding walking with a leg brace too restrictive in accomplishing field duties, he departed upcountry work. Returning to America in the fall of 1965, he worked on the USAID Lao desk in the U.S. State Department. Completing the cycle from Air America to USAID, to a spook warrior, in early 1966, Mike was hired by CIA Langley and trained as a Case Officer to organize and implement indigenous road watch operations in Laos.

Believing he was going to work running road watch teams for Chief of Unit (COU) Tom Fosmire in the Savannakhet or Thakhet areas of Military Region Three, Mike arrived in Udorn on 6 December. However, AB-1's Pat Landry had other more ambitious plans for LaDue. Retired Special Forces U.S. Army Colonel, and now Agency Case Officer, George C. Morton, arriving in-country after midyear found himself the sole trainer assigned to the newly arrived Nung unit at Site-165. Overwhelmed by the task, he requested help training the largely naïve group. Mike responded, flying via Savannakhet to Pakse the same day.

George Morton was no stranger to war, interaction with the CIA, or experience working with indigenous guerrilla personnel. Having served in World War Two, and covert stay behind operations in southeastern Europe's Balkan Peninsula area during the Korean War (Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Albanian borders), he had become an expert regarding special warfare operations. Involved in Vietnam as the Special Warfare Chief in MACV, he was selected Commander of the Special Forces there in the fall of 1962.



A view from a rise near Ban Nam Tieng (LS-165), the 1966-1967 Nung training site on the Plateau Des Bolovens in southern Laos.

LaDue Collection.

Following President Ngo Dinh Diem's assassination in 1963, Morton returned to the Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina in the capacity of assistant commandant until retirement. When the Nung program was unwinding and new advisors took over, the colonel used his talents throughout the Southeast Asian Theater. From 1968 to 1973 he headed the AB-1 team as Chief of Operations. ¹²

Concentrated training of the Nung contingent continued through December. This included familiarization with the Swedish K sub-machine gun, light machine guns, the AK-47 assault rifle, and other weapons tailored for aggressive activity. In order to interdict roads, the men were instructed in techniques of demolition, mine laying, and ambush, with and without Claymore mines. Basic to all the training was compass and map reading.

Mutually exclusive, no PARU or Royal Thai Special Forces personnel were posted at LS-165 during the period, and there was no formal support from PS-22 Case Officers. A majority of air support was provided by Thai pilots flying STOL Helio Courier, and Porter aircraft. Most of these pilots were originally involved with the ill-fated Boun Oum Airways experiment. Despite the fact that the Thai were professional pilots and considered fine individuals, the Case Officers believed that they reported what was observed at Site-165 to Udorn 333 Headquarters.

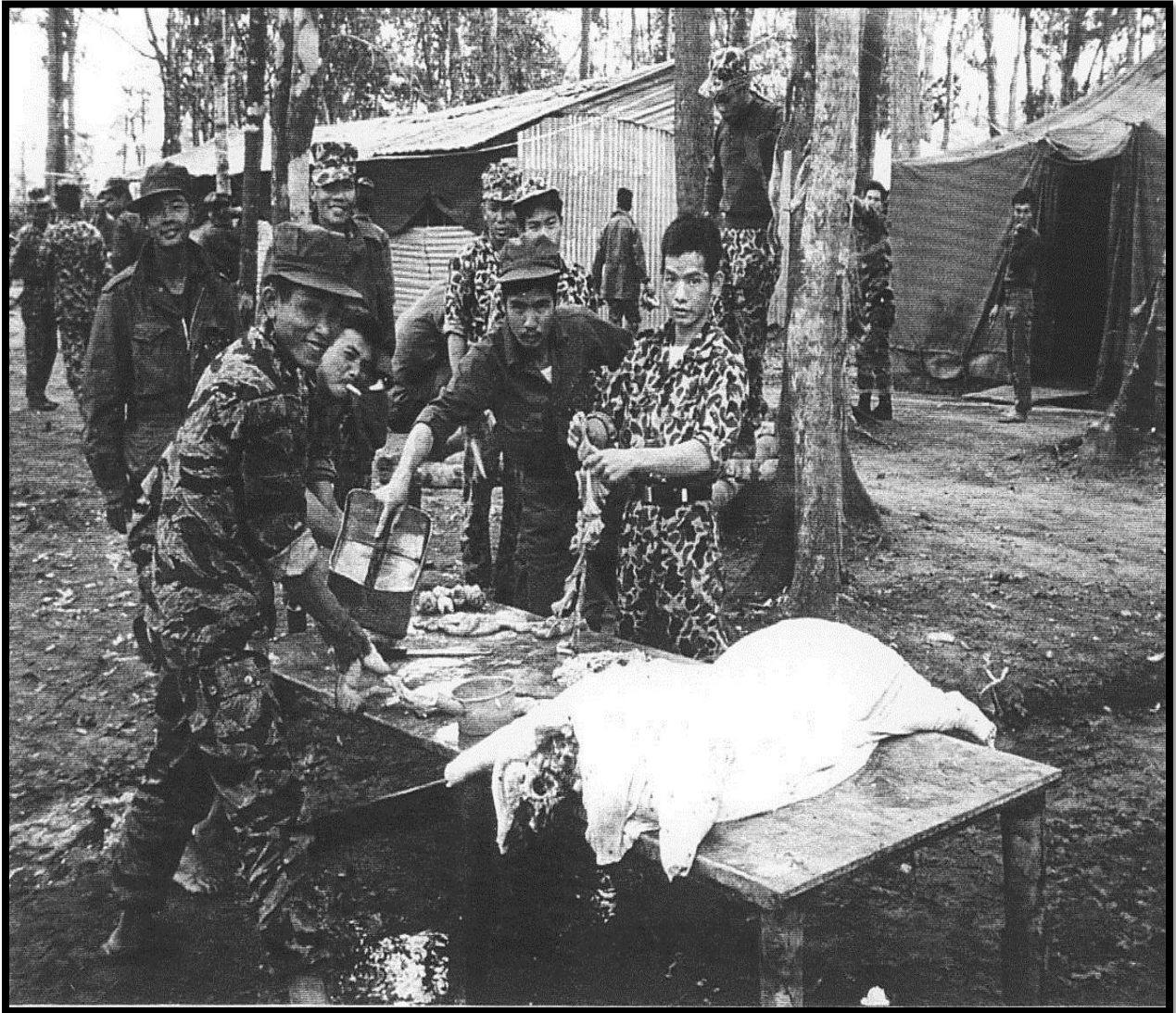
Attempting to remain abreast of enemy movements on the Plateau, Mike occasionally visited Don Stephens et al. at PS-22. He was there the day before Christmas and, since the Case Officers were celebrating a day early, he managed to cage a turkey dinner. That night, Christmas Eve, to provide some spice and flavor to the season at the remote site, George Morton

¹² The Author frequently saw Colonel Morton in the field at Long Tieng.

fashioned a small Christmas tree from cigarette wrapper tin-foil. The Nung leader was curious as to the nature of the object, so an attempt was made through the interpreter to describe the birth of Jesus, the Son of God. The difficult concept, and reference to wise men bearing gifts to the Christ child, was not well understood among the non-Catholics. (Long under French domination, many of the older people migrating from North Vietnam were of that belief.) After an hour, Nung soldiers appeared in the hut with a splendid meal and two well drawn caricatures depicting dead Vietnamese--all calculated as presents for the only two real sons of God they ever met. Rather than attempt to explain Christ's birth again through the interpreter, who was himself having trouble comprehending the intangible faith-based concept, the case officers opted instead to take the easier way and play the role of a couple "sons of God" for the evening.

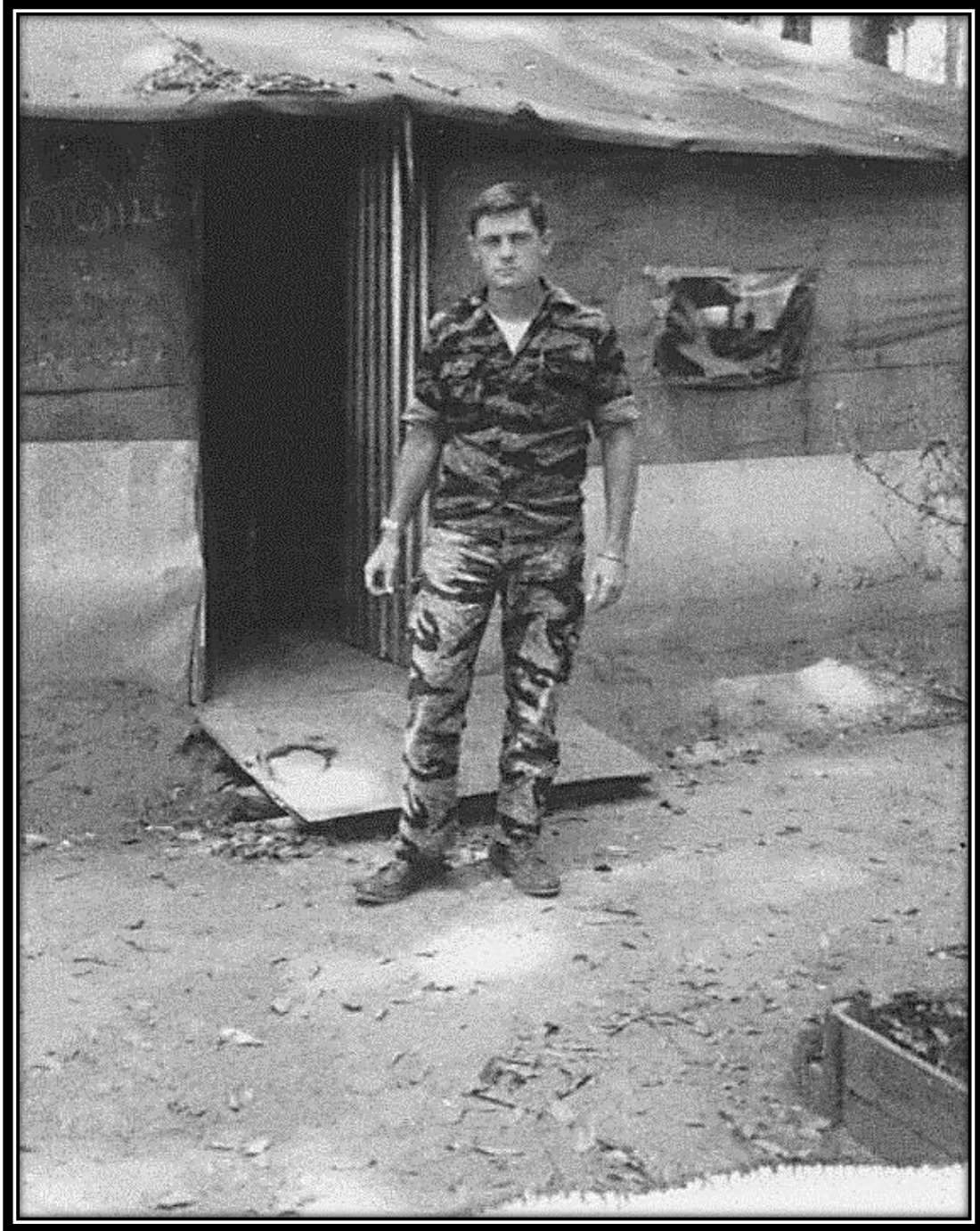
Before very long, Morton and LaDue realized that the Nung group was not comprised of one hundred percent hard charging veteran troops originally envisioned for the program; it was obvious that MACV SOG had seriously stiffed them by culling the best men for their own operations. The men represented something less than the intrepid warriors envisioned for the project, and were somewhat spoiled. Mike flew to Saigon twice to resolve the issue, but found results mixed.

In January, the U.S. Embassy granted clearance to a young reporter to venture into the field. Aspiring to greater responsibilities, Ted Koppel and his camera man elected to spend a night at a site on the Bolovens Plateau. Perhaps he had been properly vetted by the Agency like plump Tammy Arbuckle had claimed one evening to Herb Baker and me in the so called "French" restaurant at Pakse where we often dined on steak



Whether it was food, beer, or women, Chinese Nung soldiers demanded the best of everything to conduct their activities; therefore, both troops and Agency Case Officers ate well at Nam Tieng. Here Nung soldiers dress a pig in preparation for a sumptuous meal.

LaDue Collection.



Wearing standard camouflaged training gear, Case Officer Mike LaDue poses in front of his "hooch" at the LS-165 Nung training site.
LaDue Collection.

and fried potatoes on the wooden deck above. ¹³

Despite rumors circulating regarding an enemy assault by dreaded Vietnamese units on the eastern Plateau, Ban La Tee (PS-22) was chosen by the reporter. The forward site was believed to be the most secure in the area, and nothing of a classified nature was occurring there at the time.

On the selected day, about mid-January, with rumors of an attack assuming a more credible nature, panicked Lao Theung SGU trainees fled the camp, leaving American advisors, reporters, and Thai Special Forces trainers to fend for themselves. Site-190 was probed that night by a few enemy firing automatic rifles. As a result, Koppel and his associate endured a miserable night in a wet, muddy trench, while the camera man held his equipment above the lip of the dugout to record tracer rounds soaring overhead.

With the "fun" over at dawn, Morton and LaDue dispatched a Porter pilot to the site to conduct a rescue of the civilians. Both men appeared muddled and fatigued from the unexpected experience. Don Stephens et. al. temporarily relocated to PS-18.¹⁴

Ban Nam Tieng had one serious enemy night probe while Mike worked there. With nowhere else to run, the Nung held their ground and discharged a heavy dose of Swedish K SMG fire toward

¹³ Aside from his curious name, Tammy Arbuckle was considered an interesting character by most of us, but not an individual to be trusted with highly sensitive material. That was considered akin to divulging something to Maurice Cavalerie, the owner of the Vientiane Constellation Hotel during an evening of drinking and Cameroon dice games on the outside front terrace.

¹⁴ LaDue met Ted Koppel later in the main lobby of the Department of State. Ted recalled the PS-22 incident and stated that he still wondered if he had been sent to the site because it was dangerous, and if attacked, he would caution his media colleagues to avoid the Bolovens Plateau.

the hostiles. At one point, the situation was deemed so serious, the advisors attempted to radio the U.S. Air Force night control ship, Statehouse, over UHF for flare support. Calls went unheeded until, after switching to VHF 121.5 guard frequency civilian air carrier, Clipper One responded. A quick check of radio frequencies and code names to employ when requiring help revealed no Clipper One on the list. Ironically, the aircraft was a Pan American One flight en route to Bangkok from Hong Kong. After explaining the perilous situation to the PIC, the Captain, most likely a former USAF pilot, relayed the information to Statehouse. Soon afterward, at 0300 hours, flare ships illuminated the entire area like daylight. This was enough to discourage the enemy and roil local livestock. There were no friendly casualties that night, but a generator was destroyed by either an enemy mortar or an RPG round.

Following the surprise attack, Mike conducted additional precautions, planting personnel mines around the copse. He briefed the Nung troops thoroughly on sketching a minefield overlay, and ensured it was passed on to his successors.

The Nung warriors were deemed ready for field operations by January 1967. Three missions were conducted before LaDue departed for Thakhet in late March to marshal MR-3 road watch operations. Operations east of the Plateau began with fourteen troops, dressed in Vietnamese uniforms and carrying communist weapons. They planned to conduct a relatively easy offensive maneuver to provide an on-the-job experience and instill confidence for more difficult future missions. After rejecting the sick, lame, and lazy personnel for the second and more demanding operation, the team increased to twenty-one. Inserted by helicopters, units conducted operations in the vicinity of Route-96 to mine and ambush the trail, or snatch a prisoner, if possible. George and Mike monitored the exfiltration operation

from an orbiting Caribou, and then returned to LS-165 at sunrise. In general, results were considered mixed, with relatively light casualties, including two KIA.

The issue of the spoiled Cholon Nung, who increasingly demanded beer, women, and particularly a different diet, was noted and finally came to a head. While George Morton was allowed to leave for the American Embassy to discuss the matter, Mike remained as a de facto hostage. Considered a most uncomfortable time, he could not even venture to the privy without one or more Swedish K-armed Nung in attendance. He believed his "guards" were present to prevent him from slipping into the jungle and leaving them miles away from civilization without support. He also assumed that they took a childlike delight in getting the drop on a real "Son of God." Although the situation was eventually resolved, Mike developed a stomach ulcer, which was later treated at the Bangkok Christian Hospital. Remaining off booze, the ailment was considered under control within two months.

The Phou Kam Phouk (LS-166) site was located about five miles south-southeast of LS-165. The two Case Officers never utilized this position, but Mike occasionally walked a third of the armed Nung there to keep the area clear of unfriendly forces, and provide the unit a much-needed field exercise. Carrying a light pack, arms, ammunition, and grenades, he recalled that portion of the Plateau as exceptionally beautiful countryside. After he left for his duty in Military Region Three, there was contention between two groups of Nung. Therefore, to prevent open warfare, the new Case Officers relocated one group to Site-166.

About the time LaDue was scheduled to rotate to Military Region Three and assume road watch Case Officer duties, Flynn Perry, the Agency air operations specialist, flying with an H-34

pilot to Pakse, radioed with an emergency requirement to retrieve some wandering Americans at Houei Kong. The Americans happened to be acclaimed author John Steinbeck, his wife, and secretary. The recovery was accomplished. After landing at Pakse, the group, the H-34 pilot, Mike, and Roy Moffitt were invited to a party at the Chief of Base's home, where booze and good will flowed until 0400 hours.

Steinbeck was a beloved author people often referred to as a true "professional raconteur." Consistent with his reputation as a supreme storyteller, Steinbeck held forth with a veritable waterfall of interesting tales, some true and others he admittedly created or embellished. Attendees learned that in addition to reporting on the war for *Newsday*, he journeyed to Southeast Asia in December 1966 to visit his son in South Vietnam. After this visit he decided to move on to spend twenty-five days in the exotic Lao environment for additional local color.

After visiting Sam Tong and Pop Buell, Steinbeck penned a letter dated April 1967, which appeared in Don Schanche's book, *Mister Pop*:

"I flew to Sam Tong, the kingdom of Pop Buell. In about 30 minutes, I asked how far it is, and was told eight days on foot, with belongings, meaning women and children; four days by the river, but then there are rapids and the Pathet Lao; and 30 minutes by Porter airplane..

For eight days I moved about. I went with some missionaries to take some medicines to a tiny Christian village way to heaven and gone in a pine forest on a mountain top.

Pop Buell, middle-age, mid-western American farmer sometimes known as Mr. Laos, had just returned from a trip to the States and was being welcomed with an enthusiasm that might well make the Lao king a little restless. Pop Buell founded Sam



An Air America Flight Mechanic briefing Nung soldiers about boarding a UH-34D for infiltration-exfiltration operations at Site-165.

LaDue Collection.

Tong. He walked all over these, I almost said god's mountains. He brought in the hospital, the school, worked away at the small dusty airfield. But mostly he built the structure with the bodies and brains of the Meo tribesman. Once over lightly is not good enough for Pop Buell. He deserves and will undoubtedly have a book written about him.

I think Pop is an example of how the ancient gods were born and preserved in the minds and the graven images of people all over the world..

Well, I don't think Pop is likely to be taken up in a sweet chariot even if he had the time or the inclination, but that ancient story is Pop Buell's story. Whether you believe it or not, there are still giants in the earth.."

Writing for several publications, John composed articles, "Letters to Alicia," from 26 March to 9 April, datelined Vientiane. One contained information regarding his narrow escape" from Houei Kong:

"Then we moved far south near Savannakhet, Pakse and up to the fertile [Bolovens] Plateau where a cluster of 44 villages of hill people are learning to plant new crops and to improve their chickens and pigs and to move water about and raise it. It is like the world we knew in prehistoric times...showed us around Houei Khong where they are creating a new world by suggestion and example. Late in the afternoon, my old bad habit reasserted itself. I drew fire. Two battalions of enemy started up the edges of the Plateau. I guess word of the chickens and pigs and lush [conditions there] had fired up the liberators. They were not about to permit the villagers to languish in that kind of

tyranny. The firing was getting closer to Houei Kong when a chopper was sent in to pick us up and evacuate us to Pakse." ¹⁵ ¹⁶ Steinbeck left Southeast Asia in May 1967 and returned to the States.

Captain Mike Jarina's other flights were scheduled to old Paksong (PS-1), Ban Nakin Noy, south of the Houei Kong road and the radio site outside Pakse at Phou Batiene (PS-17).

Performing twelve landings, flying on the Plateau continued the following day. It began with a trip to Attopeu, then to Houei Kong, Site-165, to visit the John Davis family. That afternoon the crew of Hotel-43 went to the PS-22 camp and PS-17.

The last day of the RON was spent working the Saravane area where road watch activity prevailed. In addition to Lima-44, they worked out of Ban Nong Boua (LS-134) supplying teams at

¹⁵ LaDue believes Steinbeck was well aware of a serious medical problem that would eventually terminate his life in December 1968, and he wanted to embellish the innocuous extraction of his group from Houei Khong.

¹⁶ Segment Sources:

Conboy & Andrade, *Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret Was in North Vietnam* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press, 2000) 23, 61.

Shelby Stanton, *Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1985) 42, 52-53, 62, 72.

LTC Frank Dallas, Chinese Nungs Special Forces Association, Chapter 78, (specialforces78.com/special-forces-nungs).

Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction in Southern Laos 1960-1968*, 121-123.

Memorandum Leonard Unger to Under Secretary of State (Katzenbach), Expansion of Shining Brass Operations in Laos, 12/02/66.

Ken Conboy & Morrison, *Shadow War*, 171.

Mike LaDue Emails, 12/31/09, 01/07/10, 01/09/10, 01/10/10, 01/16/10, 02/04/10.

Don Schanche, *Mister Pop: The Adventures of a Peaceful Man in a Small War* (New York: David Mackay Company, 1970) Steinbeck Letter, Laos April 1970.

Ted Shackley with Richard Finney, *Spymaster: My Life in the CIA* (Dulles, Virginia: Potomac Books, 2005) 108.

John Steinbeck Article in the 04/09/67 *Oakland Tribune*, 29.

Tom Ahern, 268.

Phou Pha (PS-10), the area where Dick Lieberth perished, and other remote road watch sites. Late in the afternoon, Udorn operations recalled Mike to RON at Nakhon Phanom for a mission the following day. However, poor weather in the target area caused the mission to be scrubbed, so the crew was released and RTB Tango-08.

After upgrading to Captain, Mort Shearer worked the Na Khang and Bouam Long areas north of the Plain of Jars. While returning to Sam Tong during the smoky season, Mort became disoriented somewhere around Phu Cum (Site-50), and began wandering around over the Plain of Jars. Finally recognizing his predicament and requiring assistance, he quietly transmitted in the blind, *"I really hate to say this, but Pan Pan Pan,"* indicating a deferred emergency. Then he followed with his aircraft identification and situation. Some kind soul provided him a UHF/DF steer out of danger.

Mort nearly drowned in the waters off Pattaya while diving near Koh Chang, when his face mask filled with water, and he did not know how to clear it. CPH Knight rescued him.

Mort did not remain long with the Company. When Mike returned from home leave, Shearer was gone--gone with all Jarina's good maps, complete with plotted sites and current action data. ¹⁷

NAM YU

A difficult and remote place to access or depart, Nam Yu RONs were still necessarily long. With monsoon weather worsening, Tom Hoppe worked there from the 15th to the 19th.

¹⁷Mike Jarina Emails, 08/13/00, 08/15/00, 08/16/00.
Mike Jarina Interviews.
EW Knight Emails, 07/04/00, 08/01/00, 08/02/00.

Driving Hotel-31, he worked at Mounng Mounge (Site-93), a site originally named during the French colonial era. The team site at 24 Alpha was still viable near the northern border. Highly mobile, a few days later, they moved the position three miles west. Several sites were located thirty plus miles northeast of Nam Yu and up to twenty miles west of Nam Tha, or near Ban Vieng (LS-135). Another trip took Tom fourteen miles southeast of Site-118A. Yet another mission resulted in a flight forty-seven miles north northwest and west of Ban Bo Mei (LS-194).

IT ALL FLOWS DOWNSTREAM

After six days of torrential monsoon rain, and reports from natives further upstream from Ban Houei Sai regarding the rapidly rising Mekong River water level, especially at his location, USAID worker Joe Flipse twixed his Vientiane headquarters that it appeared a hundred-year flood was imminent. Despite the two week notice of impending high water, to his knowledge, no one in Vientiane acted on the warning prior to the event, or even after the fact. Consequently, much difficult-to-obtain or irreplaceable supplies and equipment were lost. Furthermore, what really galled a bitter Flipse was that awards for heroism were distributed to some AID employees.

As conditions worsened, the Air America Flight Information Center received reports from outlying radio stations that the Mekong River and major tributary water levels were on the rise in the north. Based on these facts, FIC relayed indications of a possible flood occurring in Vientiane--perhaps the worst in twenty-five years. ¹⁸

¹⁸ Depending on whom one talked to, and the time frame involved, estimated flood levels ranged from twenty-five to forty to a hundred years.

Despite Joe Flipse's insistence of apathy in Vientiane regarding potential flooding, by late August, there was concern among Agency personnel. Heavy local rain and up-country reports only portended serious problems ahead. Therefore, contingency plans were cobbled together for rapid evacuation of Agency families to Udorn or Bangkok, positioning of emergency food and water to a central location, installation of a viable radio net, and selection of high ground for operations. ¹⁹

LUANG PRABANG

Captain Charlie Davis, along with four or more additional crews, worked out of Luang Prabang supporting the Nam Bac operation. Charlie noted that flying was increasingly hampered by copious early morning fog and scattered afternoon showers.

Jarina deadheaded to Luang Prabang on the 18th to assume command of Davis' aircraft, Hotel-32. Fairly new Flight Mechanic Hal Augustine remained with the ship. That day Mike made sixteen landings supporting Nam Bac. He finished the afternoon with a trip upriver to Pak Beng, and turned north up the Beng Valley to a FAR position four miles south of Bouam Lao.

On Friday, flying eleven hours, Mike again conducted Nam Bac shuttles from the Luang Prabang airport. During the course of the day, he was flying low in a rice growing area to obtain a better look at the land around Nam Bac. Suddenly a child began throwing rocks at his helicopter. Mike reversed his course and chased the kid, who ran behind a tree. Undeterred, determined to teach the boy a lesson, he circled and approached from behind. He left the area satisfied that the kid would never throw

¹⁹ Tom Hoppe Letter.
Joe Flipse Email.
FIC Report.
COS Ted Shackley, 121.

another stone at a helicopter, and had had an experience he would talk about for the rest of his life.

Flying activity was slightly reduced the following day, but somewhat more exciting. Despite the FAR victory, the enemy still controlled the Nam Ou, and our ships were never immune from attack. After shuttling to Nam Bac, Mike was sent to eastern sites only a short distance from the river, where FAR efforts continued to root out Pathet Lao holdouts from the July offensive. While returning to Lima-54 on the Nam Ou at 1,500 feet, Augustine calmly said, "*Mike, I think you should fly higher.*" The Captain looked around and could determine nothing wrong. Then the Flight Mechanic radioed that tracer fire was burning out beneath the ship.

One trip took the crew to the large mountain complex southeast of Nam Bac.

Monsoon weather continued to dampen RLA attempts to clear the Nam Ou and Nam Bac Valley regions. On the 21st, with weather marginal, Mike flew a mission to an elevated position three miles north of Mok Plai (LS-193), forty-seven miles north of Luang Prabang. After returning to base, he was loaded for Nam Bac (LS-203). With cloud tops generally at 2,000 feet, a low overcast prevailed in the region, but there was no reliable information available regarding conditions in the 1,000-foot ASL valley. Nevertheless, Mike elected to launch.

John Ford, experiencing his first RON as a Captain at Luang Prabang, also launched toward Nam Bac. Sighting Hotel-32 underneath the cloud layer, he asked if he could accompany Mike. They followed the definitive river system that Mike knew well northeast toward their destination. While flying low over rice paddies and tree lines, almost to their objective, the tac-tac-tac of small arms fire returned them to reality.

Turning 180 degrees, they made their way south toward the Mekong. Near Nam Thuam (LS-176), a large hole opened in the overcast. Mike elected to go on top and attempt to complete the mission. They both easily broke out on top where Mike could see the 3,300-foot mountain southeast of Nam Bac. Using this as a reference point, they returned, looking for light spots in the undercast.

Once in the area, Jarina could almost see through light clouds to the rice paddies below. Deciding to attempt a landing, he told Ford to circle while he descended on a course toward the valley. Then, after providing John a heading to fly, both landed at the Nam Bac strip.

First to land and secure, Jarina looked his ship over for battle damage and found none. However, after Ford shut down excited locals began pointing at the helicopter. It had several holes.

A not-too-happy Ford said, *"Mike, you indicated they were firing at you."*

Mike quipped, *"Yeah, they never hit the lead bird."*

"Goodbye leader."

After the weather improved, Mike commenced shuttles north to Ban "Y" (LS-187). Flight time did not approach previous days, but he took satisfaction in knowing that he had survived both weather and enemy hostilities.

Much of the final day of the RON was spent supplying Meo sites fifty-three miles north of Luang Prabang and north of Nam Bac. He flew again to Ban "Y," then to Ban Pha Thong (LS-169), nine miles southwest. After returning to L-54, he was sent to the same area with troops and a load for Ban Chik Chung (LS-138), located five miles southwest of Pha Thong. Later trips were scheduled to Nam Thuam (LS-176) and Mak Phout (LS-137), ten

miles southwest of Nam Bac. The ship was recalled to Udorn that afternoon and Jarina recovered well after dark.

Tom Hoppe spent 25 and 26 August at Luang Prabang attempting to fly missions with Hotel-43. Since foul weather precluded a full day's work, he was redirected south to Pakse, where he worked new and old areas for five days. In addition to normal USAID work, he supported SGU troops, and road watch teams.

One trip took him to Ban Nam Tieng (LS-165) on the Bolovens Plateau where Chinese Nung guerrillas were forming. Another went to an outpost on a 2,500-foot hill three miles east of Route-23, north of Tha Teng, and southwest of Phu Kate. Tha Teng was a small town located just off the northern Plateau on the Route-23 road leading to Saravane. Work out of Saravane extended to the Ban Padou (later listed as LS-419) area. This site was twelve miles north of Lima-44 on the eastern side of the Toumlan Valley. Other missions were assigned to Ban Houaymun (later listed as LS-310), twenty-two miles north of Khon Sedone; to Ban Lao Ngam, (PS-11) along Route-231 that was always a place of contention; and to a spot located on Route-231 near Ban Soung, five miles south southwest of Saravane. Finally, he serviced a location three miles north of Tha Teng. ²⁰

²⁰Charlie Davis Book.
Mike Jarina Interviews.
Tom Hoppe, Summer and September reconstruction of 1966 Flights, 1996.

While water rose alarmingly along the banks of Ban Houei Sai, Joe Flipse moved AID supplies and equipment across the river to the Chiang Khong Bungalow, where the ground was considerably higher and operations could continue. At the time of the flood, authorized and funded work had begun utilizing a bulldozer on the repair and extension of the riverside Site-25 strip. Since this had to be curtailed, Joe wanted to save and use the dozer to cut a new road from Bill Young's old house on the river direct to the Heua Vieng strip, for the purpose of hauling rice and supplies. The old road was merely a bog hole in the wrong place, and a new one would negate the need for a H-34 as the only access to the airfield. However, the water came up so rapidly on the Lao side of the Mekong, that the dozer had to be hastily loaded on a boat from a hill about two meters above the strip. It was difficult accomplishing anything productive while the rain continued falling and the river still rose.

In addition to rescuing his rolling stock equipment, since the airlift had to continue, Joe's crew laboriously transferred numerous bags of rice across the river and up the bank to the Bungalow. Covered with tarpaulins salvaged from the Ban Houei Sai warehouse, partially moldy rice was stacked everywhere on wet ground. During the ordeal, his men worked continuously more than forty hours without sleep, except for the few winks obtained during boat crossings. Then, unable to move another bag without rest, somehow sixty men piled into the Bungalow to sleep that night.



Under gathering clouds, an Air America C-7 Caribou departing southeast from the riverside strip at Ban Houei Sai prior to the August 1966 flood.

Flipse Collection.



A trail of dust left by the Caribou departing Site-25 airstrip. A portion of the Mekong can be seen toward the end of the strip along with distant hills in Thailand.

Flipse Collection.



An oblique view looking southeast into Thailand and showing a portion of Wattay Airport prior to the devastating flood of August-September 1966. The turn in the Mekong River begins the "Dog Head" loop in the river.

Thompson Collection.

Flipse was unable to rest. He continued to watch the water level rise with some alarm. Realizing that only a small window of opportunity remained to salvage items, he roused the men at 0200 hours and asked them to return for one last load. USAID provided him with ample funds, so he promised the men an extra month's pay for this one trip. The high-water level allowed them to tie the boat alongside the warehouse, as they loaded the last of the rice. During later trips, the boat cleared the top of the warehouse roof by a meter.

While work proceeded on the road, an H-34 pilot worked an entire day shuttling rice bags from the Bungalow to the Tango-516 strip for further distribution by fixed wing aircraft. Joe estimated fifty or more sorties were required, and it took longer to enter the flights in the logbook than to fly between the sites. With the work accomplished, Pioneer pilot Eldon Walker began distributing bags to outlying sites before they spoiled.

The flood eventually collapsed the Bungalow's extended porch that was propped up by long posts. ¹

As observed and predicted, the Mekong River approached flood stage at Vientiane by Tuesday, 23 August. By Friday, the Mekong began overflowing its banks and crossing Wattay Road. Workers began erecting earthen and sandbag dikes for twenty blocks along the river in front of the downtown area. The following day water coursed across the road in several places close to the airport. With their homes completely flooded, hundreds of people next to the river evacuated. This included many Lao Air America personnel.

¹ Joe Flipse, Emails, 05/13/97, 05/14/97.
Bill Young Interview Chiang Mai, Thailand.

The same day, Mike Jarina and Hal Augustine left Udorn in Hotel-21 for Sam Tong. Instead, they were diverted to Vientiane and then reassigned work at Phong Hong (LS-133), located north of Vientiane and just before Route-13 entered the mountains. One trip took them to Moung Met (LS-158). After nine landings they returned to Vientiane and RON at the Air America Great House.

On Monday, flood water began running into Wattay Airport. Sandbag dikes were erected around building entrances and generator units; however, river water began seeping through the floor and floor level air conditioner ducts. As water levels rose, late in the day some crews began rotating fixed wing planes to Udorn.

Just about every H-34 and crew who could be mustered was dispatched to Vientiane to work. John Ford was one. Emulating "shower shoes" Wilson, Pogo Hunter flew in his shower clogs. Since this was expedient, Mike also flopped around in the water wearing shower shoes.

Mike and Hal remained there, working local flood relief and ferrying people from isolated spots to higher terrain at the ancient city at That Luang, where they were redistributed to safer areas. He performed ten landings, but logged little flight time. He spent another night at the Great House.

By Tuesday evening, two feet of water lay in the operations building. The parking ramp was flooded and the runway and T-28 area was in danger of being inundated with water. Employee vehicles and Company equipment were towed into the still dry hangar.

With all remaining fixed wing aircraft repaired, using the only dry portion of the runway remaining, they were ferried to Udorn, where parking was already at a premium. Aircrews, maintenance, and many ATOG personnel were transferred to Udorn to continue contract operations.

CASI planes and crews also repositioned to Udorn to continue airlift operations on a smaller scale.

Helicopter operations were established and located at That Luang east of Vientiane to perform rescue and support.

AID representative Blaine Jensen was sent TDY to Udorn to establish arrangements with Thai officials for continuing rice drops in Laos with the relocated planes. At the time, there were no Thai government regulations or agreements with Laos regarding rice export or anything else by air. Therefore, during a traditional wining and dining, Nong Khai's governor was provided a personal plane to drive him to and from work, his meals were taken at the Air America Club, and he received copious amounts of commissary alcohol. With the political niceties worked out, the U.S. military loaned a hangar and within two days rice dropping commenced.

Blaine remained generally in Udorn for about two months, working with ATOG personnel. He bunked alongside the pilots in the Club movie theater.

After working locally, Jarina conducted one run to Sam Tong with people and a mail delivery. It was difficult to get there because of low clouds and rain, therefore he followed the Nam Ngum to the sharp right and left bend in the river just south of Sam Tong. Recalling a similar situation when checking out with Charlie Weitz, he waited until observing a light spot in the clouds. He was anxious, but within ten seconds he punched through into the Sam Tong bowl. He was happy to have been checked out in the rainy season by an experienced pilot.

While returning to Vientiane, Mike employed the river route to navigate. He was only fifty feet off the water at the switchback in the Nam Ngum looking up at the mountainsides. This, plus low capping clouds, produced a tunnel sensation. It

was an eerie feeling, causing Mike to be amazed at what we had to do to perform the job.

Later in the day, after Mike had logged thirty landings, Phil Goddard arrived to relieve him. Air America people were loaded and Mike climbed into the left seat. Then Tom Krohn ran out of Operations, looking much like the Batman with his cape flying, to inform Mike that there was a higher priority and the ship was not going to Udorn. Disgruntled, everyone disembarked.

Jarina waded into Operations and was informed by a surly clerk that he would have to find his own way to Udorn. He was told to stand on the end of the runway and attempt to catch a ride south. While attempting to walk to the ATOG building with a canvas navy bag in one hand and a flight sack in the other, he stepped off the sidewalk into chest high water. That was enough for him, so he returned to the Operations building. A more motivated Captain Tony Byrne managed to reach the runway. After a time standing in pouring rain, Tony obtained a ride to Udorn.

Soaking wet and thoroughly disgusted, Mike gave up attempting to depart Wattay Airport. Therefore, he asked the heavy-set Operations Manager for a place to stay that night and to inform him when there was a ride the next day to Udorn. He was driven to the CASI compound. Since there was no electricity available, cooking was done outside on a grill. Despite worsening conditions, everyone managed to have fun.

Mike remained at the CASI hostel until the rain diminished the next day. Previously, Bill Zeitler had asked Mike to look after his wife Molly and child. Therefore, he retrieved them, went to the airport, and obtained a ride to Udorn. When he arrived at the operations desk, Dick Ford looked at Mike, who was sopping wet, and inquired what had happened. Ford was aware that Mike was not returning the previous night. Therefore, hoping that Mike would not object, he allowed the Vientiane

Operations Manager, who had caged a ride south, to take Mike's room at the Duck House. Mike was really angry, for the same person who had left him stranded in Vientiane had taken his room.

The entire runway at Wattay Airport was flooded. Water was rising rapidly near the main hangar and rice warehouse. The morning market area was passable only by small boats, rubber rafts, or high bed trucks. Eventually, fast moving currents carried flotsam and jetsam, including dead animals and humans, through town.

Water filled all the rice paddies on the town outskirts, backing up, flooding many areas, and trapping some families. With a swift current throughout the area, there were many unfounded reports of individuals drowning.

The Air America Great House became the alternate control center for administration, supply, and just about everything connected to the Military Region Two operation. FIC accounted for location of Air America personnel and their families. Operations there continued until 23 September.

Many U.S. Mission houses were elevated or located in higher areas outside of town. Through the use of weapons carriers, embassy officials were able to move about and conduct a reduced form of business. Some families were evacuated to Thailand; others doubled up with friends in drier areas. Essentials were available to ride the crisis out.

Problems arose when Chinese merchants began rice price gouging. Through tact, skill, and threats of flooding the market with the commodity, U.S. Embassy staff managed to drive prices back to normal levels.

UDORN

The monsoon's effects spared neither the Udorn airfield facility nor the town. If anything, flooding intensified toward month's end. Torrential downpours and hours-long periods of showery rain slowed all Udorn activity. Flying diminished. The Maintenance Department suffered and contractors working on base projects were forced to slow down or completely cease activities.

One bit of good news for the helicopter program, three new Sikorsky production model UH-34s already numbered Hotel-44 through Hotel-46 were scheduled to arrive in Bangkok by 10 September. To save weight, they were accepted without factory installed heaters. ²

VIENTIANE

Vientiane was eventually submerged under several feet of water during the critical high-water period that people later called "the year of the flood." A strong current coursed three feet over Wattay Airport, with some higher levels recorded in town. Flooding lasted twenty-one or more days, and it required a full month for water to completely recede or evaporate throughout the area. The flood was deemed the worst ever during recorded history. At the airport, all facilities and equipment were impacted, including Royal Air Lao aircraft and the King's Aero Commander. Inundated by copious mud, months were required to return many facilities to normal. The Prime Minister later

²Vientiane FIC reports, 08/23-31/66.
Mike Jarina Interviews.
Blaine Jensen Letter.
Bill Leary 1966 Notes, Udorn Technical Service Report, 08/31/66.
Ted Shackley, 122.



Part of the Vientiane morning market during a dry period.
Flipse Collection.



Because of poor drainage in outlying portions of the city, Udorn, Thailand, was not spared and many areas were flooded. This is a photo of a school, where small, frolicking children are taking advantage of nature's swimming pool.

Jarina Collection.



A partially dried main street in downtown Udorn. It often took days before excess water soaked into the ground, drained, or evaporated.

Jarina Collection.



In contrast to the disabled motorcycles to the right, the trusty human powered samlor was always available, and proved to be superior transportation during such conditions.

Jarina Collection.



Vientiane's That Luang or Monument to the Dead at the end of the broad Lan Xang Boulevard during better days.

Joe Flipse Collection.

made a statement to Ambassador Sullivan that the flood constituted the worst natural disaster to Laos in forty years, that about a hundred people drowned, many buildings were destroyed, livestock and rice destroyed. Monetary estimates of the destruction ranged to five million dollars.

There were elevated portions or islands in the immediate Vientiane area above the flood waters. One was at That Luang Monument in the city center. Chosen as the hub for refugee location and focus of H-34 activity, Air America radio communications were established between That Luang, Wattay Airport, and the Great House. A clinic devoted to administering critical vaccines was established and was well patronized. Indigenous payrolls were disbursed. The ground vehicle department continued yeoman service that included bus and truck transportation between the Great House and That Luang. After reports of attempted looting of the warehouse reached Operations, additional armed guards were dispatched to provide security.

The FIC office recorded on the second that water kept rising and Air America rented six boats to shuttle personnel between the T-28 ramp, ATOG, the Operations building, and Vientiane.

On Friday, Air America personnel intercepted a large band of FAR troops attempting to pillage the rice warehouse. Losses were slight, but soldiers forced their way into the Air America mess and looted it. Some offices were also breached and typewriters stolen.

By Saturday, the Mekong was still rising, but only slowly. The next day the river began to drop slightly. ³

³Menger; *Aviation Daily*, 03/07/67.
Ratnam.
FIC Reports, 09/01-04/66.

JARINA

Flying Hotel-32, Mike Jarina and bespectacled Orvil Mock left Udorn on 1 September to work at Sam Tong. Rains had virtually slowed the war to a halt, so Mike worked three days for USAID. Flying up to two dozen missions a day, supporting Meo refugee villages and logging good flight time, Mike supplied Moung Phun (LS-37), eight miles southwest of Sam Tong; Houei Hong (LS-200), ten miles north of Xieng Dat; Ban Beecher (LS-100, named after Captain Ed Dearborn's grandfather), four miles southeast of Long Pot; and Pha Khao. On the final day upcountry, Mike went to Tong Hang (LS-173), eighteen miles south of Sam Tong, on the same ridge as Ban Nam Moh (LS-207), the landing pad where Billy Pearson had landed on a stump, and the name "Pearson's Pad" was coined. A trip to Ban Nam Keng (LS-108), six miles east of Moung Ngan, was followed by a stop at Moung Cha (LS-113). Since weather precluded a direct flight south, Jarina returned to Tango-08 via Paksane.

Udorn town and the surrounding areas were also flooded, but not to the extent of Vientiane. Water covered almost every street. Making fine improvised boats, people, especially male children floated in polystyrene napalm canisters, discarded by the USAF.

Having experienced quite enough of flooding conditions, Jarina's STO allowed him to vacate the city. However, as trains and busses had stopped running, the airport was the only way out. It was also flooded, but Air America had installed snorkel devices on the Company trucks to continue operating.

The Thai Airway flight was fully booked, so he searched for a military flight. Mike produced a copy of his retirement orders for the military dispatcher and was asked where he wanted to

Vientiane Embassy to State, 10/19/66.

travel. Mike indicated anywhere but Udorn. He was informed there was a U.S Marine Corps GV-1 (C-130) scheduled to Danang, South Vietnam. He had never been there, so he boarded the plane to spend his STO in Danang.

Mike went to the money changer there to obtain some Dong. The lady asked him what he was doing with the forbidden green money (dollars). At that time, as he originally had no idea he would be travelling internationally, he realized that he had not cleared customs or brought a passport or vaccination booklet.

Air America had a station in Danang with Dennis Grace running the show. Mike spent the week with Dennis, and had a great time.

Flying around the country on Company planes, they journeyed to Hue and other places. From aloft, he could see ships firing onto the beaches and F-4 jets making bombing runs into the hills.

One day Mike, Dennis, and his girlfriend took the Company Jeep to a beach for a picnic. Mike, who was an avid water person, enjoyed the waves and body surfing. On the way back to Danang they stopped at a bridge checkpoint where Army soldiers inquired where they had spent the day and the nature of their activities. It was then that they discovered that they had picnicked in an area considered very dangerous. However, nothing happened.⁴

After the STO ended, Jarina attempted to obtain a flight on a military plane to Thailand. He told the Marine dispatcher, "*I am a retired Navy Lieutenant Commander and I want to return to Thailand.*"

"Yeah, so do a lot of other people. You cannot do that."

⁴Dennis Grace soon transferred to Udorn as an Operations Manager.



Like the acclaimed postman, the Udorn samlor driver always managed to perform his task regardless of conditions.

Jarina Collection.

Mike inquired why. Then the man asked how he had arrived in Danang. Mike said, "*On your aircraft.*" The Marine was stunned. Mike continued, saying that there would most likely be problems, as he would have to go through embassy channels to get home. This would certainly lead to considerable explaining and correspondence relating to his unauthorized presence. Mike, inferring problems, asked the man if he was regular Marine Corps and that he would be spending considerable time answering letters. In addition, Navy and Marine departments would likely become involved. That was enough for the dispatcher. The frustrated individual told Mike, "*Just go to the flight line and board that C-130 going to Udorn.*"

After his return, someone asked where he had been and was impressed to learn about his wonderful STO in South Vietnam, one of the best he had enjoyed in a long time. He planned to repeat it, but never found the opportunity. ⁵

Flying Hotel-15, Tom Hoppe worked on flood relief from the fourth through the eighth. There were flights to kilometer five and various embassy grounds. At this time, H-34 pilots were shuttling between Nong Khai, Thailand, and to a raised area at That Luang monument where many refugees had gathered. On one trip he carried alcohol and ice to embassy people. Thinking this was an incorrect supply mission, he later wrote a negative letter to the ambassador, which was not particularly well received. ⁶

By 10 September, Helio Courier and Porter operations commenced at the Vientiane race track. On Sunday, the water had receded by only thirty-four centimeters, but the following day

⁵ Mike Jarina Interviews.

⁶ Tom Hoppe Letter.

FIC reported that in the second week of the flood, the river was dropping twenty to twenty-five centimeters a day. On Tuesday, the water ceased overtopping Wattay Road. Soon afterward, shuttle busses resumed travel on Wattay Road to the airport and Great House. Work at the airport had been in progress for several days under the direction of Base Manager, Frank Dunn. As office spaces were sufficiently cleaned, departments would relocate there from the Great House. On Wednesday, inspections by qualified individuals commenced on exposed portions of the runway.

While returning to Udorn from upcountry, Scratch Kanach landed at Vientiane to drop off a radio mechanic, and noted that flood waters had receded, but all was far from normal. There were usual signs of a flood's aftermath: streets washed away, a severe lack of food and water, disease prevalent, and thick, gooey mud everywhere. Level with west end windows, mud impacted the mess hall, and three feet of muck was piled in and around the new operations building. A three-axel truck attempted to drive into the half-moon shaped hangar next to the ATOG warehouse without success. The CASI area was a large sandbar. Scratch professed that he had trouble describing the mess; one would just have to see it.

By the 22nd, flight operations transferred from That Luang to an old PSP strip at Wattay Airport. Caribou, Helio, and Porter crews shuttled between Vientiane, Udorn, and sites in Laos using a PSP extension of the taxiway. However, the use of main runways and taxiways was curtailed until 4 October or later, so the runway could be completely and thoroughly examined for damage.

A NEW PERSONALITY

International Voluntary Service representative MacAlan Thompson arrived in Vientiane on the 14th. Previously, Second Lieutenant Thompson, USAR, had spent a year from 1964 to 1965 at Camp Friendship in Korat, Thailand, with the 529th Engineer Detachment of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers before the massive influx of Air Force personnel. At the time, there were only a captain and forty enlisted men, in contrast to the 1,200 Army men. One of Mac's main jobs was to rehabilitate the 32nd field hospital, a two-story wooden building built by the Japanese during World War Two. Later, USG built a modern sprawling one story hospital.

After his service tour was complete, Mac had searched for a job, preferably in Southeast Asia. Although the pay scale was very low, he chose IVS. He could already speak some of the Thai-Lao language, and IVS provided him a hurry-up seven weeks basic Lao training, but he was far from fluent in the language. (The regular language training program was forty-eight weeks.)

While entering Laos, Thompson had to board an H-34 scheduled from Udorn to the That Luang fair grounds, because the airfield was still somewhat flooded. Downtown was drivable by shuttle busses, as was the USAID compound, but not all parts of the city were accessible due to standing water and copious mud. After checking in at the AID office, undergoing interviews, and receiving briefings, he was assigned duties at Hong Sa (LS-62), a small village located between Luang Prabang and Xieng Lom in Sayaboury Province. All he had to do was get there.

Within a week or ten days, he boarded a CASI Dornier for Hong Sa, piloted by Captain John Preston. They launched from a



A portion of Hong Sa village adjacent to the Nam Ken, where IVS representative MacAlan Thompson lived and worked until early 1967. Circa November 1966.

MacAlan Thompson Collection.

portion of the runway still open to STOL aircraft. Thompson then lived and worked at Site-62 until January 1967.⁷

⁷FIC Reports, 09/10-22/66.
Scratch Kanach Letter, 09/19/66.
MacAlan Thompson Emails, 10/19/96, 11/01/96, 11/17/96, 05/21/97,
07/05/03.
201 file.
Mac Thompson, Interview Conducted by the Author in the Long Branch
Saloon Bangkok, Thailand, 1100 to 1400 hours local time, 12/26/96.

Despite the devastating flood that tied the Vientiane relief operation in knots, H-34 pilots were able to work in other parts of Laos. On the 11th, Tom Hoppe went to Pakse in Hotel-35. During the four days he was at Lima-11, he was assigned many missions. Some tasks involved supply tasks on the Bolovens at New Paksong (LS-180), Houei Khong (L-56), Ban La Tee (PS-22), a SGU guerrilla training camp on the eastern rim of the Plateau, and other locations, including Ban Tha Teng (LS-210), which was assuming increasing importance along the Paksong to Saravane Route-23 road.

With the introduction of a TACAN unit on top of Phu Kate, security was increased on the apex of the 5,210-foot mountain and surrounding area. There was a trip to PS-30 on the rim of Phu Langon at the southern portion of Phu Kate. One assignment involved rotating "civilian" crews from Ubon to PS-21, the actual TACAN site.

Tom finished his month of flying at Nam Yu. During three and a half days he flew to Moung Mounge (LS-93), a location near Scope-14, northwest of Site-118A; Team-24A, a site fifteen miles north of Xieng Lom on the Lao bank of the Mekong; sites twenty to twenty-five miles northeast of Nam Yu; Ban Tha Luaong, thirty-five miles east of the main base; and various other places. ¹

Soon after his return from the unusual Da Nang STO, Mike Jarina headed east on the 14th to Savannakhet in Hotel-31 with Flight Mechanic McDonald. With a scheduled road watch mission scrubbed because of adverse weather, he was redirected to Sam

¹Tom Hoppe Letter.

Tong, and then Na Khang. We had not yet returned to RONs at the site, so at the end of the day he returned to Site-20 for the night.

He revisited Site-36 on Thursday. Working north and east, he noted Vang Pao's troops had recovered much of the territory lost the previous fall. Some of the sites serviced were Phu Pha Thi (LS-85); the high ground at Nhot Phat (LS-179), nine miles north northeast of Houa Mung; and Houei Thom (LS-27), seven miles east of Na Khang.

Mike's final day upcountry was again at Na Khang, revisiting Nhot Phat and other sites.

After a few days off in damp Udorn, on 27 September, Mike deadheaded to Nam Yu to assume command of Hotel-40 from Captain Tom Hoppe. Joe Siaotong continued as the flight mechanic. During two days working there he supported many of the same sites as Hoppe: Ban Houei Sai; Mung Mounge; Team-24, thirty-three miles to the north of Site-93 overlooking the Mekong; Team Seven in the vicinity of Nam Bu (LS-125); and Vien Phou Kha (LS-152).

Before ferrying the ship to Udorn for required maintenance inspection, he returned to Mung Mounge and was sent to Team-18, seventeen miles north northeast; Team Five, north of the Mung Long Valley; and Team Nine, nine miles north northeast of Nam Yu. ²

CHIANG KHONG OPERATIONS

With the advent of civilian contractor McClatchey's admirable efforts, over time the road was extended from the Chiang Khong Bungalow to the Tango-516 airfield. It was not an easy task, as rain continued every day and good fill dirt to

² Mike Jarina Interviews.

form a road base was scarce. A truck was rented and a cut bulldozed. Then the dozer operator drove onto a bank above the truck and pushed dirt into the truck bed. The soil was then dumped on low spots, which promptly sank into the muck. A hill was eventually discovered containing good quartz deposits to create a solid road base and progress was finally made. The crystals were beautiful, some two inches long and one inch in diameter.

For two weeks the Chiang Khong market was unusable, and with the entire valley under water, the CASI Pioneer was employed like a shopping cart. Joe's lady, Suzie, placed an order with Piak. Every morning about 0500 hours, Eldon Walker drove his plane to Chiang Rai to purchase food for Nam Yu and Flipse's crew at T-516. It was generally touch and go as to whether the fog would lift sufficiently to land by the time he returned.

The flood necessitated many corners to cut. AID provided funds for everything, but Joe had to journey to Vientiane to obtain the money. With Joe aboard, the Helio Courier pilot launched from the temporary strip at That Luang. Also onboard was a large wooden crate filled with 140 kilograms of kip for the Chieng provincial payroll.

One upside, because the Lao were completely isolated, air operations were not bothered by normal passenger loads. If people crossed the river, Sam's folks stopped them at the Bungalow and sent them back to Ban Houei Sai.

There was little fuel available at first. During the flood gasoline drums had floated downriver from Ban Houei Sai, and fuel tankers disappeared into the mud. Despite later searches, no one could find them. Finally, McClatchy, with the help of Piak and "Tony Two" Cattaruci, who arrived in Ban Houei Sai in the spring, employed wires as divining rods to witch and locate

the equipment in the silt. Everything was eventually found buried under a foot or more of silt. Piak, a Thai who worked for USAID and also for Tony Poe, was an army man whose father was a general in Chiang Mai.

Before C-123 planes could land with fuel at the normal strip west of T-516, Joe arranged to conduct a drop in the Mekong. Prior to the drop, Flipse hired twenty river boats with the promise of twenty to fifty baht for each drum recovered. Joe arranged to line the PIC up away from the swiftest current. The drop was successful. The drums rolled out the rear of the plane on schedule and floated in the river. The boat captains scrambled and vied for the booty and none were stolen.

During the fuel shortage, H-34s and crews RON at Nam Yu because the site had fuel. Phil Goddard arrived at Chiang Khong one day and was quite unhappy because, without rapid refueling, he was required to shut down for manual refueling. In retribution, he consequently wrote a scathing report on Joe for contaminated fueling equipment.

Rumor was rife at Ban Houei Sai. One day, Sergeant Major Thitpun arrived at the Bungalow announcing that people were stealing tin from the warehouse roof as the water level diminished. To check on the report, Joe carried his M-1 rifle he had not used in some time and fired it into the river to test it. Then the men crossed the river. The peak of the warehouse was only a foot out of water and no one was present. That trip marked the last time Flipse was near the old strip.

The following morning, a disturbed Lao Chao MOUNG arrived at the Bungalow wanting to know why the border was closed and the Thai were shooting people crossing from Ban Houei Sai. He was only pacified when Joe explained exactly what happened. However, the incident tended to exemplify the constant state of rumor, unrest, and agitation prevailing in the town.

By 19 September area water levels had receded and a normal routine established at Chiang Khong. Throughout the fall, Joe camped with Suzie at the airstrip under a large tarpaulin. They had little else than a water barrel, a hole in the ground, two cots, and an excess of dirt. However, Suzie did not have to worry about sweeping the "house," for aircraft propeller wash would flap the tarp and blow the floor clean.

During the period, Joe found time to write his mother, dated 19 September 1966:

"We have had a big flood here which completely wiped out my operation, airstrip, warehouse, everything and I have moved across to Thailand. Everything is covered with about six feet of mud."

JENSEN MOVES NORTH TO ASSIST

Tony Two had departed on vacation. During the fall, after working in Udorn and Vientiane on refugee air support, Blaine Jensen arrived in Chiang Khong to help Joe administer the AID program. They all camped out under the large tarp beside the small strip. Blaine was considered a good addition, for he knew the program. There was a kerosene refrigerator at the tent in which he kept cold drinks and sandwiches for the crews during the day. He remained there several weeks until Ban Houei Sai became operational again. The fixed wing aircraft used were mostly CASI, but also some Air America. With limited parking space available at the strip, only a single fixed wing aircraft remained overnight, and the pilot stayed at Mister Piak's house in Chiang Khong. Even if working for USAID, the H-34s and crews RON at Nam Yu. Fueling was performed at the Tango-516 airstrip until the river bank ramps were repaired, and fuel, rice, and other commodities could be barged across the river.

Before work on the new strip on higher ground commenced, a few operations were conducted out of the soccer field by the old French fort. Soon afterward, a Jeep's right wheel, with an official aboard, sank in a hole. Investigation revealed a brick tunnel leading from under the fort wall to a bunker beneath a former cemetery. No one seemed to know whether the tunnel and bunker were built as protection against air attack or as an underground escape route.

When Tom Cole's construction crew completed about half the new airstrip at Ban Houei Sai, Piak began helicopter and limited fixed wing operations there for Blaine. This commenced on a small scale before he terminated the emergency Chiang Khong operation and moved back into Joe Flipse's mud-block house.

In addition to helicopters, the developing strip could accommodate Porters, Helios, Caribous, and the triple-tailed Pioneer. Within a few months, C-123s and C-47s were able to land. Fixed wing aircraft were all supplied by Continental Air Services except for an occasional Air America C-123 from Vientiane that RTB the same day. Eldon Walker flew the old triple-tailed Pioneer. Shortly after Blaine arrived, Eldon rented a house in Ban Houei Sai and moved his family there. Other CASI pilots assigned to remain and work, stayed overnight at Eldon's place. Helicopters were shared by Tony and Blaine, but crews RON at Nam Yu.

Much later, Vientiane AID elected to switch the Ban Houei Sai contract over to Air America. Jensen was opposed to the move, mainly because his operation was primarily conducted by Porters. Since the Air America Porters had a much heavier airframe to comply with U.S. standards, they could not carry the same payload as CASI aircraft. However, the decision had been effected at a higher level. Blaine initially took a lot of heat from some Air America pilot friends for his attitude. They

accused him of being partial to the Continental crews and not caring about them. This was not so, for he never asked any pilot to fly anywhere or do anything he would not have done himself.

After the switch, Air America needed a location for RONing pilots. Tom Krohn had him contact Colonel Phan, who owned the house Walker had rented. Air America reimbursed the outgoing CASI pilot for his appliances, and the house became the Air America hostel at Ban Houei Sai. Not long afterward, refueling tankers were introduced to replace the previous manual refueling from drums.

With no parking apron or warehouses completed until early 1967, all aircraft were fueled, unloaded, and loaded on the strip. For several months, until the warehouse was completed, rice was hauled daily to the airport by truck from Ban Houei Sai.

VICHIT

Following Vichit Mingrachata's short 1963 road building stint in Thakhet, he was reassigned to Sayaboury Province until 1966, where he worked with refugees coordinating rice drops and supported road construction into the mountains. There was an early AID development project attempt to discourage Meo poppy cultivation.

Sayaboury Town was very small. During World War Two the area was a Thai possession under Japanese auspices. Most of the buildings were built by the Thai. The old people understood and could read and write Thai. Vichit's landlord trained elephants for area teak logging. The man kept a baby elephant under the raised house that Vichit occasionally played with.

The USAID coordinator in early 1964 was S. Smucker. One of the first persons he met when arriving was long time AID



The Asian elephant, a time-honored mode of transportation and reliable logging mechanism used in Laos.

Thompson Collection.

resident Jack Williamson. Vichit worked with missionaries from various denominations: The Protestant Kettle family, Catholic Father Jerry Orsino, and many Italian priests working in the mountains with the Meo. He also worked with Lieutenant Colonel Khamphai, who he considered a fine individual. His Sayaboury area of operations was quiet the entire time he worked there.

Vichit relocated to Luang Prabang during 1966. Working downtown with Bob Dakin, and concentrating on required paperwork, he was unaware of the August Nam Bac operation. Dwayne Hammer, who was still working for AID, had diabetes. ³ One day he suffered a serious attack and was revived by Vichit quickly forcing sugar down his throat.

AID was in the process of erecting another Bailey bridge over the Nam Khan to replace the decrepit, obsolete one carried away by the flood. One of Vichit's friends had just crossed the old bridge when it collapsed into the Nam Khan. Thereafter, until the new bridge was complete, boats were employed to cross the river. As a stopgap measure, two steel boats with planking were employed as a pontoon bridge for truck passage across the river.

After the flood Vichit was sent TDY to Houei Sai from Luang Prabang helping to supervise the emergency AID supply distribution work. He returned on a permanent status in August 1967. Living in Chiang Kong with his family, he commuted across the river to work and remained with AID at Ban Houei Sai until 1974.

At the new strip, particularly after a heavy rain, people discovered exposed semi-precious stones like black sapphires, either churned up by the dozer work, hewed from areas providing

³ I first encountered Dwayne Hammer at Luang Prabang during the fall of 1962.

dirt, or delivered from sand bars along the river. The entire strip was soon discovered to be full of these stones, which brought a good price in Chiang Rai, where they were sent to Bangkok and polished at lapidaries. Most of the "sapphires" had been broken into smaller pieces during the construction process. However, they still were used in the manufacture of the popular Thai Princess rings. When Jensen first arrived to help, he had to obtain military assistance from Colonel Phan to chase people off the runway so arriving or departing aircraft could function. Troops were supposed to guard the runway at night, but for months, AID employees had to provide help to fill in holes dug the previous night.

Semi-precious jewels like obsidian were common to the area and had been discovered as early as the time of the Burmese invasions. Thereafter, digging sites proliferated, some in creek bottoms, where holes did not have to be as deep as in other spots. Minerals also washed down from hills into streams feeding into the Mekong. Many stones were of superior quality, without the fine, thin cracks found in Burmese stones. Houei Sai later became known as Mung Mung Khao or Stone Town.

As the air operation continued to assume a more normal routine, while examining bills that progressed from desk to desk, rear echelon AID paperwork people in Vientiane concluded that a few rules had been broken. One day Joe saw a stranger standing by the radio shack. Joe asked Blaine Jensen, who had come up to help him, who the person was and the nature of his business. Blaine indicated he was not supposed to say anything, but that the guy was there trying to gather facts regarding 20,000 dollars of empty fuel drums Joe stole. After checking records, someone discovered problems dating back to 1963. Joe saw Doctor Pat McCreedy during the next few days and told her the head shed was after him again, but he had done nothing wrong

this time. Naturally. she told "Jiggs," who went to COS Blaufarb, saying that it would not look good if it was disclosed that upcountry AID workers were not receiving sufficient support and were reduced to stretching the rules. Joe never heard another word about the purported theft. This reinforced his opinion that there were some outstanding individuals in USAID Laos, but not many. Some individuals, like Doctor Weldon, understood the necessity to occasionally bend rules to keep an operation going, and were in a high enough position to cover for the men in the trenches.

With Piak and Sam performing well at T-516, and McLatchey still working on the access road to the airstrip, Joe felt comfortable permanently returning to Ban Houei Sai by February 1967. ⁴

THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE MATING HELICOPTERS

In September, a series of authentic incidents occurred that, if published as fiction, could only be considered a writer's fantasy. Regardless of poor conditions in Laos, helicopter pilots continued working upcountry in some capacity. Therefore, with the flood still impinging Vientiane, on 7 September, Captain J.J. McCauley flew Hotel-43, the newest UD-34D, on missions from Luang Prabang. Roger "hair-piece" Burdwood performed in the capacity of Flight Mechanic. That day J.J. was assigned to work government landing zones in and around the Beng Valley west of Luang Prabang. During the afternoon, while

⁴ Joe Flipse Emails, 04/06/97, 04/07/97, 05/04/97, 05/14/97, 05/17/97, 06/14/97.

Blaine Jensen Letters.

Vichit Mingrachata, Author Interviews at TJ's restaurant Udorn Thailand, 11/30/96, 11/31/96.

Mac Thompson via Flipse, 04/10/97.

returning to Luang Prabang with a Lao lieutenant and sergeant, he attempted to remain south of enemy-held Bouam Lao (LS-174) in the Beng Valley, where Ernie Brace was shot down and captured the previous May. Heading toward the Mekong, dodging low ceilings, he elected to fly over a high ridgeline on the 6,358-foot Phou Dong Ngon massif, and was bounced around by turbulent winds. Unable to negotiate a cut on the ridge, he turned to parallel the hillside, but strong downdrafts continued forcing him down toward the mountain. (Natives called this area "the valley of the winds.") Seeing that he could not climb any higher, he attempted to turn, "pedal out" at low air speed.

Realizing that a crash was imminent, and hoping to prevent a roll over, J.J. turned into the hill and crashed at the 4,400-foot level on a thirty-degree slope. Like a gyrating ball in a pinball machine, Hotel-43 surged downhill a hundred feet, coming to rest against a tree, which punctured the left side of the cabin section. Damage was substantial. During the toboggan ride, the aircraft lost the tail cone and pylon. In addition, the main rotor blades were shattered or bent beyond repair.

Fortunately, no one was badly injured. Therefore, because they considered their location somewhere between the good and bad guys, with only the lieutenant's .38 caliber pistol for protection, they clawed up the steep hill, where they found a suitable flat spot that might fulfill the requirement for a helicopter landing zone. Since it was already late and recovery was improbable that day, they erected a lean-to for the night. More than three hours after the crash, J.J. heard the sound of a helicopter in the distance. Using his emergency radio, he directed the pilot to the crash site. When J.J. had failed to radio an operations normal report, Tom Hoppe was dispatched to



Overhead view of the crashed Hotel-43 in the hills east of the Beng Valley.

McCauley Collection.

Luang Prabang from his flood relief duties at Vientiane. As the crew of Hotel-43 was last reported around the Beng Valley, he decided to head that way. After he landed, an elated McCauley climbed the right side to the cockpit and planted a wet, sloppy kiss on Hoppe's cheek.

Acting Chief Pilot Marius Burke departed Udorn the following morning in Hotel-22 with "Toothpick" Tom Pitkin and five mechanics for the Hotel-43 crash site to investigate, assess damage, and begin recovery operations if feasible. After discharging the crew at the small, sloped pad that dropped abruptly away on all sides except directly upslope, Pitkin departed to work for the Luang Prabang Customer.

Late that afternoon, he returned to ferry all hands to the royal capitol for the night. Having trouble contacting anyone with an operations normal for two hours, he was a bit concerned and anxious to become airborne ASAP and depart the area. While the recovery crew loaded the aircraft, Marius climbed into the left seat. Then, instead of lifting to a hover, and slowly turning to the right to access takeoff power, Pitkin rapidly spun the helicopter around. In the process he drifted off the pad, and simultaneously began losing RPM. The reckless maneuver caused the ship to lose the ground cushion and critical lift for takeoff. There was still enough room below to descend and salvage the situation but, instead of nosing the helicopter over to obtain translational lift and flying speed, Pitkin elected to stop. With the ship positioned 180 degrees from the landing zone, downhill, losing precious RPM, Marius seized the controls. While desperately attempting to get the main gear on the ground and RPM up to an operational level to stop the settling, he stomped the tail rotor control pedal, and managed to reverse the aircraft direction. Just as the main gear touched the ground on

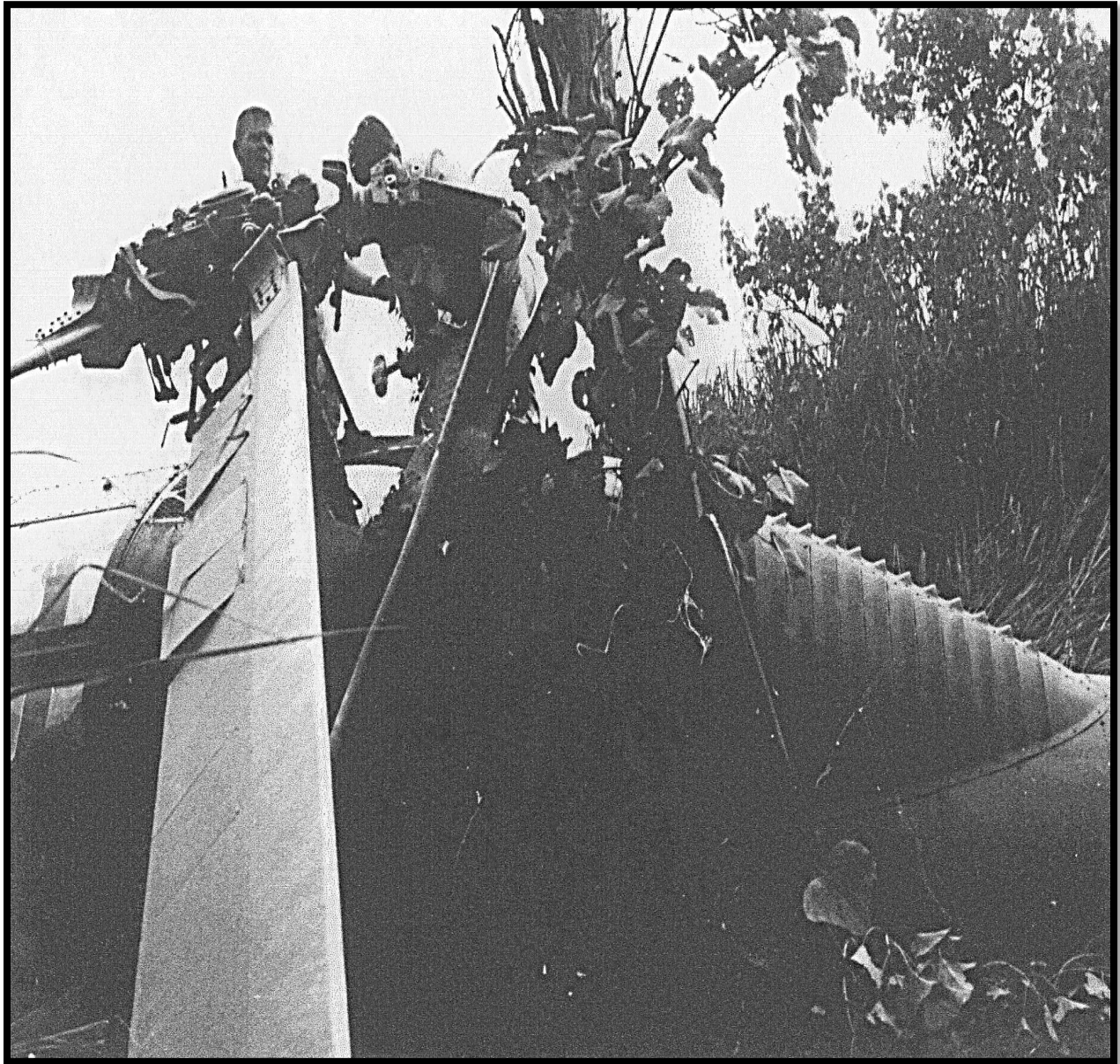


Before the recovery team began work on 09/08/66, the Air America investigation team took pictures of Hotel-43 for an accident report.

Burke Collection.



The right side of Hotel-43 immersed in tall elephant grass.
Burke Collection.



Udorn ground mechanics in the process of dismantling blades and main rotor head parts from Hotel-43 in preparation for a fuselage extraction.

Burke Collection.

the lip of the pad, Pitkin inexplicably yanked the cyclic back into his lap, slicing off the fuselage cone and pylon, while at the same time raising the collective. Hotel-22 pitched up and over. During the crash, flip-flop, and aftermath, unhappy camper Burke wondered how Pitkin had possibly managed to generate such chaos.

Penning a humorous understatement, Scratch Kanach quaintly related to the Author in a letter:

*"The aircraft flipped completely over and came to rest on the rotor head with its **paws sticking straight up into the air.** It actually was a pretty comical situation, since the aircraft were practically on top of each other."* ⁵

As the shaken pilots struggled from the cockpit, gasoline poured down on them, over the instrument panel, and onto the hot engine. Later, everyone remarked and marveled at how sometimes a magnesium skinned UH-34D could crash and not burn, but on other occasions instantly incinerate.

After crew and passengers cleared the aircraft and a head count was taken, Marius discovered no one had been injured. With two serious crashes in two days, and no major injuries, that was truly amazing. ⁶

Friendly forces physically controlled little territory in the area, and when it became apparent that no rescue aircraft would arrive that day, for added security the survivors elected to climb the hill to spend the night. Two twelve-year-old

⁵ After reading reports and later viewing photos of the crashes, the episode reminded me of two cars in a passing situation on a multi-lane highway. Almost invariably, the vehicle in the left lane, like influenced by the force of a magnet, will move toward the one in the right lane. Think about it the next time you drive.

⁶ The two incidents tended to reconfirm the helicopter pilot's concept that airspeed kills.



Hotel-22 thrusting heavenward like a monolith and sleeping beauty Hotel-43 vegetating on a hillside east of the Beng Valley.

J.J. McCauley Collection.



Another view of two crashed UH-34Ds at UMT coordinates QC5210. Nose of Hotel-43 visible, while Hotel-22 is belly up.

McCauley Collection.

soldiers, carrying M-1 rifles taller than their stature, "provided security." Sleep was difficult to achieve, for there seemed to be bad guys throughout the area, who called out to each other all night. Evidently, they were not there in force, as no attack materialized. However, as with most SAR activity in denied areas, hoping for a political coup, enemy units tended to converge on the scene. Therefore, even given the remoteness and elevation, it was incumbent that the work be concluded ASAP.

Marius spent considerable time Friday investigating the second accident before another H-34 arrived and they all RTB Udorn.

Within a short time, arrangements were made to have TDY U.S. Army Chinook pilots from South Vietnam, fortuitously based in Udorn, to lift electronic equipment to the top of Phu Pha Thi, recover the H-34 hulks. The Chinook engines provided more than sufficient power to accomplish the lifts. However, since the military pilots knew little about the area, they were naturally anxious. And rightly so, for the crews received some battle damage on the way out of the crash area. After the Army pilots were shepherded to and from the crash site by H-34 pilots, the wrecks were successfully hooked up, slung to LP, and flown to Udorn several days later by C-123 crews.

Courtesy of the outstanding rebuild unit developed by the Maintenance Department, both ships were eventually repaired and returned to service-Hotel-43 as early as December 1966.

Chief Pilot EW Knight received an earful regarding the unprofessional accidents when he returned from home leave in early October. He recalled that probes and grilling from the VPFO office were almost intolerable. He was happy that he was absent for both these accidents and the flood.

Two helicopters had never crashed like that before. Although accidents were inevitable because of hazardous field



While an Air America UH-34D pilot orbits overhead for security, a U.S. Army CH-47 Chinook crew approaches a crashed helicopter for extraction to Luang Prabang.

Burke Collection.



With Hotel-22 already extracted, a U.S. Army Chinook pilot hovers while two Air America mechanics prepare to hook up Hotel-43.

Burke Collection.



With a secure lift, the U.S Army Ch-47 pilot prepares to depart the crash site with Hotel-43 streaming elephant grass caught on the main right gear.

Burke Collection.



Slung from the crash site, a UH-34D en route to Luang Prabang courtesy of the U.S. Army.

Burke collection.

operating conditions, such an incident was rare and never occurred again. ⁷

POLITICS

LAOS

Likely because of the flood, during early September there was a temporary cessation in the political confrontation between the Prime Minister and some members of the National Assembly. During the crisis, an anti-Souvanna Phouma attitude and desire to change the present government increased. However, dissenters provided no clear alternative for change. Moreover, the King wanted to continue the Geneva Accord-fostered Neutralist government. Senior Vientiane generals elected to support Souvanna, but admitted it was nearing time for a change. In the interim, the RLA sent officers to persuade Assembly deputies to moderate their opinions.

By mid-month, the political crisis came to a head, with members of the National Assembly rejecting the fiscal year 1967 national budget. Souvanna interpreted the rejection as a vote of no confidence for his government. Therefore, he obtained approval for the National Assembly's disbanding, with a fresh election scheduled for 1 January.

There were a number of reasons for the September crisis. They included: well off Assembly members desiring to protect their financial interests, a shortage of ministerial positions for new ambitious deputies, and a nationalist mood that objected

⁷JJMcCauley Letter,
Burke Interview, 01/20/91.
Scratch Kanach Letter, 09/19/66.
Joe Leeker Aircraft of Air America-Hotel-43.
EW Knight Email, 08/02/00.

to USG meddling in Lao fiscal policies, and even extended to bomber missions over Lao territory. Also exacerbating the situation, the U.S restricted imported commodities to maintain kip parity, the RLG announced higher taxes on income and luxury goods that impacted the middle class, twenty-five percent of a bumper rice crop was destroyed by flood waters, and commercial air traffic was nonexistent, which halted incoming gold shipments.

Toward month's end, since defeat of the budget on the 16th, and the subsidence of flood water without serious disease or starvation, the most concentrated political maneuvering occurred since the 1965 elections. The RLA did not attempt to influence National Assembly members in favor of Souvanna's government, and the political situation appeared calmer than during previous crisis.⁸

THAILAND

A joint memorandum emanated from State and Defense Departments to President Johnson justifying a substantial increase in the Thai military assistance program. Despite Ambassador Martin's desire for seventy million dollars, the Thai military assistance program was established at sixty million dollars, a sizeable increase from the previous year's forty-four million. The funds were allocated for additional helicopters, POL, equipment for military units, more training and fighter planes, and airfield construction.

Because of the political aspects relating to USG's close relationship with Thailand, the country's present role, and

⁸ CIA Information Report, Appraisal of the Political Situation in Laos as of 09/04/66, 09/06/66, 247.
CIA Information Cable, Prelude to Political Situation in Laos, 09/27/66, 253.

importance in Southeast Asia, the increase was deemed warranted. For instance, Thai leaders, under increased communist pressure, continued to fear a conventional threat to the country and required an increase in funds to cope with this possible danger. As allies in the attempt to forestall communist aggression, they dispatched small combat units to South Vietnam, and continued clandestine military operations in support of the Lao government in the form of PARU, T-28 pilots, 105mm artillery units at Moung Soui, and other operations. Additionally, they agreed to nearly all USG requests regarding USAF air operations against Laos and Vietnam. They were working to increase efforts and broaden a comprehensive in-country counterinsurgency program, which included subversion, insurgency, economic, social, and improved police and armed forces. Moreover, the Thai were touting USG Vietnam policy in SEATO, the United Nations, and other international forums.

However, there was some indication of impatience among Thai leaders regarding the USG delay in stating a MAP figure. There were critical articles in the American newspapers regarding the escalating cost of the Southeast Asian War. To define USG-Thai relations, Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman suggested formation of a new bilateral security treaty.

Soon after the above memorandum was issued, in New York City, the Thai Foreign Minister discussed the current Thai situation and danger to the country with Secretary of State Dean Rusk. He pushed for a reasonable U.S. guarantee of assistance if Thailand incurred retaliation for help in the Vietnamese war, but this did not require a formal treaty.

He indicated that pressure among young people attending U.S. colleges and universities was increasing against American policy and he was worried about survival of the present government. Contributing to the problem recently, Senator

William Fulbright and his cronies publicly indicated in poorly veiled terms that Thailand was not worth protecting or defending. Senator Wayne Morse said that Southeast Asia was not worth the life of a single American soldier. However, the entire U.S. Congress did not agree with these senators' irrational statements that sounded much like election year rhetoric. Still, their unthinking verbiage caused considerable "loss of face" in Thailand.

Furthermore, a few uneducated people in Thailand made overtures to remove the U.S. presence from the country. In addition to other problems, Thailand appeared like a U.S. satellite. Many of the people failed to understand the geopolitical ramifications of U.S. presence there, that because the Thai cooperated with USG and agreed with the same objectives, the country could still maintain an independent status.

In reply to Thanat's concerns, Rusk stated the obvious: USG had initiated a huge commitment of power and resources to Southeast Asia security. Thailand had also signed the SEATO treaty which provided some guarantees of help in case of aggression, and U.S. promises were still golden.

After listening to Thanat, Rusk indicated that he needed to further consider what had been said. ⁹

⁹ FRUS Thailand, Draft Memorandum Rusk-McNamara to the President, MAP Thailand for 1967, 09/16/66.
Memorandum of Conversation, Dean Rusk-Thanat Khoman, et al. Thai Desire for Security from the U.S., 09/22/66.

Since graduating from Duke University, I had maintained contact with Pat and Bob Whitacre, who lived in Florham Park, New Jersey, a lovely community tucked away in the hills just beyond the Watchung Mountain foothills. They both had been good friends at Duke and Bob was my Kappa Sigma fraternity brother. While I was driving back from their house after a pleasurable visit, Tuie made a remark that greatly pleased me, indicating she liked America. Obviously impressed, she said that everything appeared so clean.

At their wedding shortly after graduation in 1957, I had met Pat Valentine's parents and brother at the reception held at the family house in Martinsville, New Jersey, also located in the Watchung Mountains close to Washington Rock, where the Revolutionary War general reportedly surveyed the lower eastern plains, while forming battle plans against British forces. Old crusty Scotsman, Adam Valentine lived up the road from his son Doug, and attended the same Presbyterian Church on Front Street in Plainfield as Mom and I had during my high school days.

Doug, a tough but likable person, was successful in the building contractor business and some of this rubbed off on his son Don. I liked Doug for his forthrightness and work ethic, and maintained contact with him. When home at the end of 1965, I learned from Doug that his son had engaged in a small land development project, Sunray Land Corporation, in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Doug had invested in it and persuaded me to also do so.

Because of its location in the Yampa Valley and proximity to excellent downhill skiing, the small town of Steamboat Springs had long been a favorite, relatively undeveloped, low

key location for family winter sports. And it had its share of champion skiers, like native son Buddy Werner to prove it. Buddy had been killed in a European avalanche, and the mountain was fittingly named Mount Werner. There were some facilities already erected at the foot of the mountain, but few Steamboat people reputedly possessed the insight, funds, or inspiration to develop the area into to a first-class resort like entrepreneurs had accomplished at Vail and Aspen. It took easterners like Don, his father and a chap from North Plainfield, New Jersey to blaze the way.

June reports regarding Sunray and the area were encouraging. Because the U.S. Olympic Ski Team was going to train at Steamboat, building projects accelerated commensurately. In addition, some locals were finally waking up to the realization that the area had a tremendous resort potential, and had been investing some money in the area. Land at the mountain was selling slowly and prices were adjusted according to supply and demand. This provided scarce capital for additional land purchases.

Jim Temple and others had begun the Sunray development. For one reason or another, all other investors had pulled out of the project, leaving a restless Temple, who was interested in selling his shares in Sunray, to finance and develop another ski area in which he was involved. I was interested in purchasing his shares, but wanted to first conduct a first-hand evaluation of Steamboat, Sunray and meet all the principals. This I planned to do during home leave.

We visited Martinsville several times in order for Doug and Eleanor to meet Tuie. While there Doug drove my new Mustang. Although a private pilot himself, and owner of several earthmoving machines, he failed to understand my concept of warming a cold engine before applying substantial power. We

talked seriously about the Sunray project and made plans to visit Colorado.

Doug, Eleanor, Tuie, Rick, and I flew into Stapleton Airport in Denver, where Don picked us up in his station wagon and drove to Steamboat on Route-40 through the high passes over the impressive Rocky Mountains. Located on the west side of the Rockies, the Yampa Valley was a beautiful area in the summer, with soaring mountains hugging the northern perimeter. Our bags failed to catch up with us for two days, and as it was quite cold at night, we were obligated to purchase warm clothing for Rick at a Harbor Hotel shop on the eastern outskirts of town. We used what we carried with us and borrowed the rest until our luggage arrived by bus. At the time, airlines were responsible for lost baggage and reimbursed passengers for limited out-of-pocket expenses.

During the week of our visit, we drove to the Sunray project just east of town. At the time there was only a two-story Alpine type building on the Sunray property used as a land office. As funds became available, there were plans to build many more shops, apartments and condominiums. I met co-owner Jim Temple and Charlie Williams, a former North Carolina resident who was working with Don. Temple indeed was anxious to exit the project, and, after wrangling with Doug, agreed to sell me 3,000 shares in Sunray. As a sweetener, he was also deeded several pieces of Sunray land. When we consummated the deal, Jim privately cautioned me to be careful about Don. I took Jim's veiled warning at face value. During our talks in New Jersey, Doug had been entirely candid about Temple's participation and the Valentines' desire to eliminate him from the organization. Wanting instant profit, he was holding back the project's development. Now with only three of us involved in the

corporation, and as I was planning to return to Southeast Asia, there were no restraints on expansion, except adequate funds.

Although a small town, there were many things to occupy one in Steamboat and we managed to visit and enjoy many. A small but excellent town museum contained many artifacts of early development, including photographs of the valley and settlers. In order to survive long, harsh winters, enterprising people dug low, one room soddies into the ground to preserve warmth.

Shops on the short main street reflected a typically western flavor that made one feel comfortable and right at home. There had been volcanic activity when the area was forming in geologic time and several sink holes still existed in and around town. One might call these stink holes, for they smelled strongly of hydrogen sulphide fumes. Derivation of the town name reputedly was when an early traveler heard bubbling and chugging from the holes, and related it to a steamboat sound. Subterranean hydrothermal activity was additionally evident in the town-sponsored indoor pool fed by hot water. There was also an impressive hot springs in the northern mountains at the 7,000 foot level behind the town.

Doug gave Tuie a driving lesson, and we later drove to the top of the mountain to view the sprawling valley.

One evening, we celebrated Doug's birthday with a steak and Champaign dinner. Tuie, not used to strong drink or the taste, politely abstained. After a baby sitter for Don's two girls and Ricky arrived, we drove to a friend's secluded log cabin located deep in the woods on the western outskirts of town. Wanting to experience existence close to nature, the burly man, a college graduate, and his wife had largely dropped out of even the subdued western society. They lived an austere life in a large, sturdy structure of his design that featured few basics or creature comforts: no television, telephone, or indoor bathroom.

Large bunches of dried herbs hung in clusters from hooks above the rustic stove. The upstairs was fashioned as a loft, which he planned to rent during the summer months and attain some income from similarly minded individuals, who chose to spend time in a relatively pristine environment.

Because little money was available, like in early America, much work was conducted by the barter system. Don had performed some earthwork construction for the man in the past, and was paid for some of his work in the form of sauna bath credits. Prearranged, this night was chosen to collect one of the credits. ¹

Housed in a log shed alongside a cold stream, the rustic log sauna was perfectly located. The inside included a wood burning stove surrounded and piled high with rocks. Disregarding convention, we shed our clothes. Except for a modesty towel, all of us piled into the hot shack and sat down on roughhewn benches. It did not take long to begin perspiring, while water was constantly poured on the rocks to produce an abundance of steam and dry heat. Calculated to slake our thirst, Don's wife Peggy had brought along a gallon jug of gin and grapefruit juice. Unknown to me, Tuie drank some of this. I did not realize the state of her first ever inebriation, until we departed the hut to leap in the stream. Since she obviously was really feeling the drink's effects, Peggy remained with her, while we scampered butt naked, with white flesh flashing in the moonlight toward the steam, and plunged into the water. Of course, the night was cold and the rushing stream even colder, but with heat radiating from our bodies and the impact of booze, this was not

¹ Reinforcing it's a small world cliché, I later discovered that my Aunt Doris McFerran Townsend had tutored the man's father, a football player at a Minnesota University, and managed to ease his way through school.

particularly evident. The experience was exactly like what I had at the inn in Kyoto, Japan.

While driving back to Denver, we stopped at the apex of Loveland Pass, so Tuie could examine and handle her first snow.

Doug had previously informed me that there was some land at the base of the mountain available for a relatively low price. Again, for barter, two adjoining lots had been traded to Ron Harris for his work surveying and platting Sunray's land in the subdivision. Harris, needing cash, was willing to sell one or both lots. Since I considered land as good as, or better than, money in the bank, and was aware that land prices, based on supply and demand, were constantly increasing, I wrote Ron a postdated check for one lot. After leaving Ron's office, Doug assured me that I had made a wise decision. He was right, and I later wished that I had purchased both parcels.

Really impressed with Steamboat and that portion of the west, I enjoyed the trip, the hospitality, and looked forward to a long and fruitful association with the Valentines. I also hoped to make some money and perhaps obtain a future position in the Sunray organization.

Many International Service Volunteer (IVS) representatives worked in remote areas devoid of other Americans for perhaps a hundred miles. During Mac Thompson's stint in MR-1, he worked for AID's Field Chief, Lauren Haffner, a retired Marine lieutenant colonel who had conducted an extensive and dangerous clandestine intelligence gathering mission throughout the country many years before.

IVS conducted two programs in Laos: an education program, and the rural development program (RDP). A portion of the RDP involving the forward area team (FAT) concept was tailored to impact rural development in newly liberated areas, or ones that had received little or no government or USAID assistance in the past, and where the people might be unfriendly. The relatively few FAT individuals served in hot areas just recovered by the government. The primary goal of FAT was to work at the village level with small self-help programs to develop schools, wells, dispensaries, bridges, and dams, and to generally show the flag, and change the hearts and minds of the people by example rather than by intimidation or force. ¹

¹ Mac Thompson's eventual attitude about the organization he worked for, and some of the people involved, was reflected in a June 1969 IVS end of tour report, after he had served at several different sites and gained considerable field experience. In a preface to his report regarding June 1968, Mac Thompson stated to the Author and to Joe Flipse in an Email that he had failed to write more about the IVS attitude toward the military and the war. Many people within the IVS organization failed to recognize the hostility against USG. This attitude ultimately contributed to the deaths of four IVS employees.



IVS/USAID bridge project spanning the Nam Ken at Hong Sa Village, Sayaboury Province, Laos. Circa November 1966.
Thompson Collection.

Mac arrived at Hong Sa, Site-62 in a CASI Porter. At this time there were separate AID contracts for Porter and Dornier aircraft. CASI had the MR-1 Porter contract. To maintain an image that Air America was a legitimate operator, every couple of years one or two contracts would revert from one company to the other. Even some C-46s were swapped.

The Swiss-manufactured CASI Porters, with thin fuselage skin, were lighter and could carry larger payloads than the U.S.-built Air America aircraft. CASI planes were X-Ray (XW) registered; Air America Porters mostly N registered. Presenting a disadvantage during operations and with the Customers, Air America pilots were obligated to adhere to FAA regulations, while CASI pilots were not.

FAR BV-17 had been located in Hong Sa for about two years. The battalion was commanded by Aroun Phompan. Aroun, a child living in northern Thailand during the Lao Issara era, acted as a batman for Lao officers. After World War Two, he had nothing to return to in Thailand, so he remained in Vientiane. At the age of eighteen, his mentors entered him in an early officer class north of Savannakhet at Dong Hene in MR-3. Later he joined the FAR as a regular commanding officer. Not a particularly valiant individual, he was assigned to Hong Sa. ²

Hong Sa possessed no forts and few defensive positions. To the west, there was nothing but hills, jungle, and the Moung Nguen Valley almost equidistant between Site-62 and Xieng Lom. ³

While working at Site-62, Mac visited Xieng Lom a couple of times in 1966. Located in a pleasant, isolated valley, Mac

² I had worked Hong Sa low hilltop positions facing the Mekong River the previous year out of Luang Prabang.

³ A runway, listed as LS-310, was later built at Moung Nguen after Mac left.

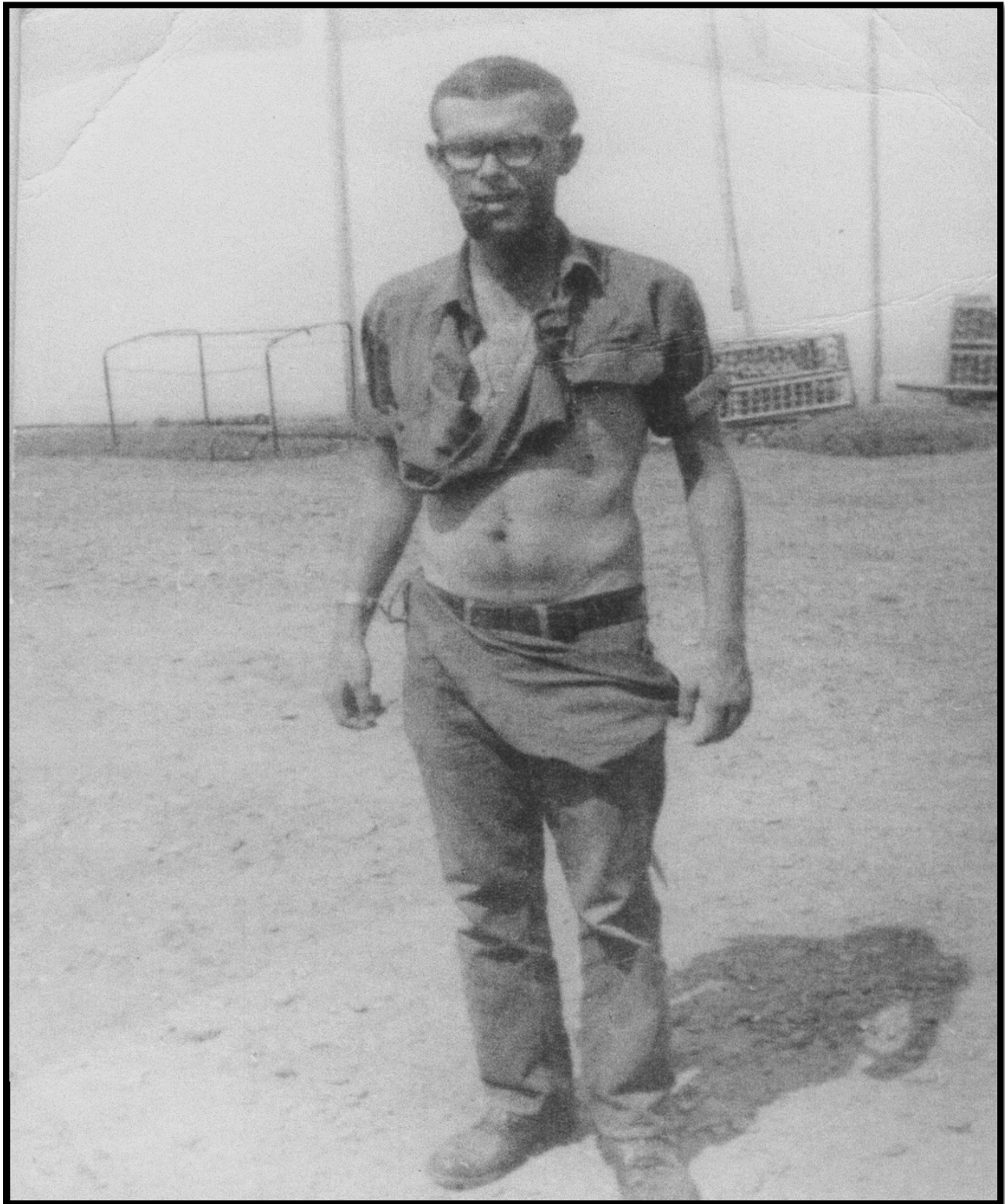
considered the site calm and generally left alone by both sides. He later transferred to Xieng Lom in 1967.

Mac's first trip to the Ban Houei Sai area was in late October. While there, Haffner told him to go to Xieng Lom and prepare a piece of machinery for a C-123 lift. He was supposed to remain there only one night, but because of General Ma's coup attempt and ensuing unrest, he was forgotten in Vientiane and was unable to leave for five days. Exacerbating his problem, for the first and last time during his Lao experience, Mac left his hand-held HT-2 radio with the other IVS person at Hong Sa.

On the fifth day, he heard a Porter pilot landing. After dropping off supplies for the four-man Thai team at the site, the pilot began to taxi for departure when Mac flagged him down. It was his friend Captain Al Adolph. Al had no idea Mac was at Site-69, but said he would deliver him to Chiang Khong as Ban Houei Sai was still closed to air traffic.

While Adolph RON at the Ban Heua Vieng Bungalow on the river, Mac stayed in a two-story hotel-flophouse in Chiang Khong and obtained a ride to Vientiane the following day.

During 1966 and later, Sayaboury Province was considered a non-event in the Lao war. Not much occurred there in the way of hostilities. Mac never heard of any fighting in the area. He assumed there was some kind of agreement, whereby the Pathet Lao were allowed free access to cross between Laos and Thailand along the border areas in Nan Province to conduct training and insurgency operations. There were friendly Meo sites along the border, but by agreement, they did not patrol or fight. A Ban Houei Sai responsibility, the people just accepted the C-46 rice air drops and lived happily on the hillsides. The good will of the Meo was curried, as early in Bill Lair's Xieng Khouang Meo program, Sayaboury Province had been promised to Vang Pao and



Svelte, pipe smoking IVS representative MacAlan Thompson preparing to teach the "sowing of the seeds" to the people of Hong Sa, Laos.
Thompson Collection.

designated as a fall back area should the communists unduly pressure or take Military Region Two.

CASI Porter driver, Al Adolph, helped when Luang Prabang intelligence information indicated problems. At such times, he overflowed Hong Sa to radio Mac that bad guys were reported nearby, but nothing serious ever occurred.

Mac was equipped with a three-kilowatt generator and single sideband radio that he used to call the Vientiane office each morning. However, when anxious about nighttime rumors, he would keep the radio on, as well as his shoes.

From the beginning of his tour at Hong Sa, Mac was assigned an interpreter, who pulled some strings and lied to get the job. The man knew little English and Mac had considerable trouble with him. Therefore, within a few months, he fired the man and never used an interpreter again. After a time, he could communicate well enough to conduct rice drops, contracting, and supply. However, he was not fluent in Lao vocabulary, religion, and philosophy.

Al Adolph periodically airdropped the mail to Mac in late 1966. Prior to going to the area, Al stopped at the USAID office in Vientiane and retrieved the mail. He placed it in a weighted plastic bag and dropped it on the strip. Mac also received some cans of tobacco in this manner.

Mac Thompson customarily remained at Hong Sa four to five weeks and then enjoyed a few days R&R in Vientiane. Sometimes he had to fly to Ban Houei Sai with a pilot and then wait for a return trip to Vientiane. He met AID worker Vichit and learned that Joe Flipse travelled by donkey to remote areas. Although he did not know Tony Poe at the time, he heard one of the many stories about him. Tony happened by at the time a reporter was taking pictures of the flood. Tony, who hated reporters with an unbridled passion, told the man to hand over his camera. The

person refused, at which time Poe un-holstered his revolver and not too gently inserted the weapon into the guy's mouth. Tony received the camera.

Tony knew Mac's name and was generally angry with him for conducting unauthorized parachute jumps. But he was unable to do anything about it, as Mac did not work for him. However, when Mac later went to work at Ban Houei Sai in the fall of 1969, he had a sit down with Poe and Flipse, who both insisted he curtail his jumping practices while there, as they did not want to lose an asset.

Mac had begun parachute jumping while in his first year at Oregon State University. In Laos, he continued his love of jumping out of aircraft. Rarely obtaining permission, he conducted about 200 jumps in Laos. One of his first parachute jumps was out of a Caribou in the fall of 1966 following some time off. The pilot arrived over Hong Sa with Mac and a load of food and commissary goods for the site. The runway was very wet with standing water from nocturnal rain, and the PIC did not want to land. Instead, he opted for the open portion at Ban Houei Sai to wait until the strip dried. Mac said, "*Ok, I will jump in. Make a couple passes.*" A couple days later, the goods were delivered. Sixteen of his jumps were at Site-62 and one at Xieng Lom on 22 November. At that time, he hurled himself from a Helio Courier, repacked the chute, and jumped back into Hong Sa.

Mac received cement and fuel for his projects from Ban Houei Sai. They were barged downriver to a rudimentary port at Ban Tha Soun, seven miles north of Hong Sa. The cement and drummed fuel were then delivered to Hong Sa by the time-honored method of using elephants.

A dormant volcano was located at the west end of the valley. Called Phu Fai Mai or burning mountain, it was mentioned in H. Warrington Smyth's 1895 book, *Notes of a Journey on the*



The broad, placid Mekong River at "Port" Ban Tha Soung, seven miles north of Hong Sa. Millennia of flow from the Tibetan mountains deepened the Mekong waterway in the northern portion of Laos.

Thompson Collection.



A time-honored mode of transportation and reliable work animal used in Sayaboury Province. The elephant was used to haul supplies and materials from the port to Hong Sa.

Thompson Collection.



Meo ladies celebrating during a baci at the Hong Sa village circa 1966.

Thompson Collection.

Upper Mekong. Smyth lived in Thailand as an advisor to the Royal Thai Government when the ministry of mines and rocks was being established. He travelled extensively by elephant to areas which included Xieng Lom, Hong Sa, Ban Houei Sai, and Luang Prabang. Volcanic fumaroles, with a minor sulphur dioxide odor, were in evidence to the southwest along a buffalo trail designated Route-101, a little north of MOUNG HAN and Ban Tasseng areas. Walking to the village from Hong Sa, Mac recalled good parties at MOUNG HAN. He conducted a long hike in the area one day and experienced the unpleasant odor and discolored rocks. He also noted deposits of lignite coal. ⁴ ⁵

THE GLOVERS

International Voluntary Service (IVS) workers Bob and Jane Glover arrived in Luang Prabang on 30 September and remained until June 1968. At the time, IVS Laos consisted of about a hundred mostly young volunteers to teach at the teacher training school. Other volunteers were recruited to direct the building of schools, advanced methods of agriculture, and community development. Working with, and under the supervision of, officials of the host country, these individuals lived and worked in villages for two years. Remuneration and perks were transportation, a small clothing allowance, medical care, a living allowance, and eighty dollars per month. Those more

⁴ As of 1996, a Thai company had an agreement with the Lao government to mine the low-grade lignite, build a power plant at Hong Sa to produce electricity for the area, and sell excess electricity to EGAT Thailand.

⁵ Mac Thompson Interviews Bangkok. Thailand, 12/24, 26/96. Thompson Emails, 10/28/96, 11/01/96, 04//10/97, 05/09/97, 05/21/97, 12/16/99.

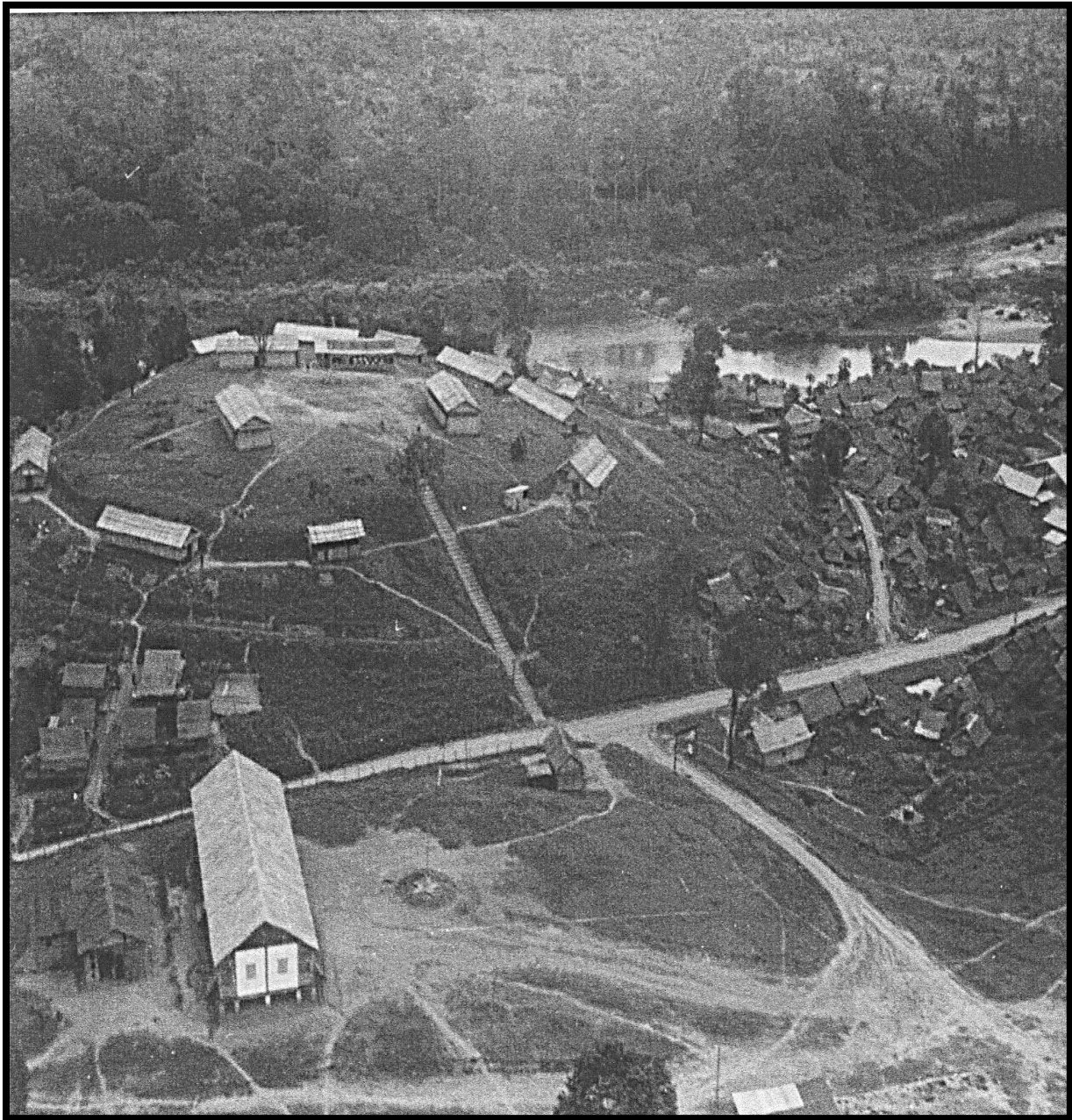
fortunate individuals also enjoyed Army post office (APO) and commissary privileges.

The Glovers were accepted by IVS in June to teach agriculture and home economics. They attended three months of orientation on Lao customs, mores, and taboos, language instruction, and 340 hours of spoken Lao in Washington, D.C. and Virginia. This was followed by a short course in rice culture in the Philippines, after which they flew to Bangkok. From there, they were flown to Nong Khai, where a H-34 pilot ferried them to the That Luang soccer field in Vientiane to board a bus for the USAID office.

After meeting John Perry and Duane Hammer on Friday, the evening of their arrival, the Glovers went with Marty Clish to the cluster village area at Xieng Ngeun to meet the Chao Moung and inspect the site of a future experimental farm in a village, where previous IVS people had accomplished many workable projects. Xieng Ngeun was located about eleven miles south southeast of Luang Prabang on Route-13 adjacent to the Nam Khan. There was no airfield present (LS-354 was later built), but a FAR camp was co-located with the town.

On Sunday, the Prime Minister and his party arrived to inspect the washed-out bridge, site of the experimental farm, the new school, and community building.

Some of the numerous villages in the area were: Ban Baum Aw, Xieng Lom (not Site 69A), Ban Don Mo, Pak Houei Yen, Ban Bon Mo, Ban Mout, Ban Houei Hai, Ba Kokngiou, Ban Mai, Ban Thin, Oukka Suk, Ban Houei Hot, Ban Lemon, Pak Vet, Ban Ene, Ban Sa,



FAR camp at Xieng Ngeun located south southeast of Luang Prabang on the Route-13 road leading to Vientiane, Laos.

MacAlan Thompson Collection.

Ban Souene, Ban Long O, and Ban Na Dou. ⁶

MR-2

Consistent with periodic enemy designs to push Meo road watch and action teams back from the critical logistical Route-7 artery, the forward Meo base at San Tiau was attacked and captured by enemy forces on 17 September. By the 22nd Meo units moved back onto the hill and recaptured LS-02.

On 30 September, Tom Hoppe deadheaded to Na Khang to assume command of Hotel-30 in the field.

The following day Tom was assigned to work the Tha Thom area, and specifically to recover Helio Courier Papa Charlie Gulf (PCG), lying in pieces at the 4,000-foot level on the Na Xieng (LS-181) airstrip. Site-181, located four miles south southeast of Site-02, had been used as a rallying point for troops and refugees during the recent San Tiau fracas, and the PIC of PCG was supporting the effort. After carrying security troops in from Moug Moc (LS-46), Hoppe began ferrying mechanics to Na Xieng for the purpose of dismantling the aircraft. On Tuesday, he began actual salvage work shuttling numerous smaller parts internally and slinging larger components to Tha Thom for Caribou ferry south.

During the final day of his RON, Hoppe flew local missions from Sam Tong. ⁷

⁶ Bob & Jane Glover, *Laos: An Autobiographical History of Laos During the Period from September 1966 to June 1968*. (Maine: Printed, Collated, and Folded by Grassroots Graphics; Bound and Published by the Glover's) 2-4.

Book Received by Author, 04/27/99.

Mac Thompson Email, 12/16/99.

⁷ Victor Anthony, 209.

Tom Hoppe Letter.

At the same time that Tom Hoppe began working upcountry, Mike Jarina and Flight Mechanic Roger Sizelove worked for Requirements Office (RO) around Mounng Soui. During the day, they refueled and took lunch at Sam Tong. Following thirty landings, the crew RON at the hostel.

On Tuesday, Mike flew Hotel-35 to Na Khang and conducted forty-one landings in the local area.

The following day, Jarina returned to Site-36. The weather was fine as he continued to shuttle locally. In the afternoon, he was sent southeast to the Lima India observation post on the west side of Route-6 to retrieve a wounded individual. ⁸ After landing below the living quarters at the LI landing zone, a man exited the hut and waved to him. He apparently knew why Mike had come, so the Captain reduced pitch and rolled the throttle to flight idle. ⁹ Then, while waiting for the man's arrival, he began entering the flight time in the logbook. Suddenly, he heard a loud boom like an explosion. Mike looked up and asked Sizelove the nature of the explosion.

The Flight Mechanic casually replied, "*Oh, they must be working on the road.*"

Unconcerned, Jarina went back to his paperwork. Then another explosion shook the helicopter and caused papers to fly around the cockpit, as dust permeated the area. Realizing a mortar round had just landed close to the aircraft, Mike grabbed a handful of throttle, increased RPM, pulled pitch, and departed the pad.

⁸ This was the same route used during the Father Brouchard anecdote.

⁹ Something I never did unless I was fairly certain the situation was not hostile.

After landing at a pad closest to the LI signal, the cabin door fell off. This caused him to cuss maintenance, for he believed the aircraft were getting old and the Maintenance Department was not adequately caring for them. While failing to reinstall the door, Sizelove discovered holes in it from the mortar round, so he placed it in the cargo compartment.

While he was doing this, Mike called Jerry Daniels at Na Khang to inquire about the problem at LI. Jerry allowed that some air strikes were in progress in the area and the Air Force planes were going to drop napalm to eliminate the bad guys. With the strike completed, Mike returned to LI, retrieved the lightly wounded trooper, and returned to Site-36.

Frank Stergar was waiting to relieve him. Frank asked if there was any problem with the helicopter. Mike replied, *"It flies well, but has a slight vibration. The cabin door also has some holes, but you can fly without a door."* As was his custom, after other pilots had either attempted or turned over aircraft to him with regular or battle damage without mention (specifically Dick Elder and Ed Reid), Stergar inspected Hotel-35 in detail. He discovered holes in the tail rotor blades and tail pylon.

"Are you going to take the aircraft?"

"Frank looked at Mike exclaiming, "Hell no!"

Mike ferried the helicopter to Udorn. While reflecting on the incident, it seemed funny, until realizing that he could have been killed. ¹⁰

Charlie Davis and Flight Mechanic Dave McDonald worked in Military Region Two for five days, four of which included RONS at Site-36. As before the February attack that devastated the

¹⁰Mike Jarina Interviews.
Frank Stergar Reply to Author's 06/28/96 Letter.

camp, there was no respite from a new generation of nocturnal rats. There was a lot of activity in the area with Captains John Ford, new pilot Danny Carson, and Chuck Frady sharing the missions. ¹¹

McENTEE RETURNS

Jerry McEntee returned from his tour in Katmandu, Nepal, which entailed flying a "G" model Bell helicopter for the U.S. Embassy. He was accompanied by his new German bride. Right from the start Jerry was unhappy with his status. Retaining seniority, Jerry unrealistically expected his old job in the Chief Pilot's office, as promised when he departed at the end of 1963. That is exactly what he received: his old job in training and test. However, he believed that he had been wronged, for, during the interim, titles had changed and senior individuals above him no longer worked with Air America. Therefore, he reasoned that he should be allocated a top position. Since Jerry was the only individual to ever make such a fuss, Wayne was somewhat perplexed.

On 7 October, Jarina, McEntee, and Flight Mechanic Bob Bedell, after test flights, flew old Hotel Foxtrot to Nam Yu via Luang Prabang. Away for so long from the Lao theater, Jerry was scheduled to receive an area familiarization in Military Region One. Since so much had changed, it would constitute a task akin to learning sites and hostile situations all over again. Keeping up on the changing scene was even challenging for regular line pilots.

When he first arrived from Nepal, still considering himself an experienced "old timer" from the original 1962 group, Jerry was overheard remarking, *"If you want to know anything about*

¹¹Charlie Davis, *Across the Mekong*, 166, 170.

mountain flying, just ask me." It was a strong, arrogant statement from someone who had missed two and a half years of friendly expansion, stressful SAR duty, and a considerable amount of combat flying in Laos. Therefore, before commencing work at Site-118A, as a former Navy instructor pilot Mike counseled Jerry, *"Just do not let the RPM drop below 2700 on landing."* Despite the caution, McEntee let the RPM decline to 2500 during his first landing on a relatively low landing zone. Mike was a little concerned that a "throttle twister," especially someone who had recently been flying a "G" model Bell, would let that happen.

Monday was an active day with twenty-six landings. They worked around Nam Yu, Moung Mounge (LS-93), and then were sent on a long trip to a valley site east of Phou Dong Ngon, the August crash site of J.J. McCauley and Tom Pitkin. One flight was to Team-5, thirty-one miles north northeast of Nam Yu.

On one landing zone, McEntee took off and was rapidly losing RPM. Seeing a deteriorating situation developing, Mike assumed control, rotated the nose of the aircraft forward, and increased RPM about the time Hotel Foxtrot brushed the tree tops.

Flight Mechanic Bedell, a graying man of about forty, after participating in many upcountry fun and games, had enough of flight risks and wanted to conclude his services with Air America. However, quitting was not the answer, for he required Company termination in order to claim unemployment insurance compensation in the states.

So alarmed by Jerry's actions, Bob told Mike, *"Don't let him fly anymore."*

Hearing the Flight Mechanic, McEntee asked, *"Did I get too low?"*

"Well, if you wish, I will show you a large branch in the right main gear when we arrive at the base."

Until relieved on the 10th, they shared the load with AID at Site-118. At times, the crew worked a site four miles east southeast of Ban Nou Kha Chok (LS-148), north of Xieng Lom and the Mekong River close to the ninety-degree bend in the river. Flights were also conducted to Vien Phu Kha (LS-152), Team 5, and Team 24, eight miles north northwest on the river.

The last day of work AID trips returned to Ban Nou Kha Chok, and dry portions of Ban Houei Sai. Mike RON at Nam Yu and returned to Tango-08 on C-47, Papa Delta Echo (PDE) on Tuesday.¹²

As promised, three new production model UH-34Ds arrived in Udorn on the 15th. Numbered Hotel 44 through 46, they replaced McCauley and Pitkin's "mating" helicopters and increased the H-34 inventory to 30.¹³

After enjoying three days off, on Saturday, Jarina was assigned to test fly Hotel-30 with Danny Carson and Rick DeCosta. The aircraft failed to meet airworthiness specifications, so he was reassigned Hotel-12.

The next day, Mike, Danny, and Bob Bedell launched to conduct a road watch change mission out of Thakhet. After depositing their charges thirty-nine miles north northeast of Lima-40 and east of Route-08, they returned the original team for debriefing and R&R. Following lunch and refueling at Nakhon Phanom, they flew fifteen miles north to a site across the river, southeast of Grove Jones. After dropping individuals at Thakhet, they continued on to Savannakhet. With work in Military Region Three complete, they were redirected to Sam Thong.

¹²Mike Jarina Interviews.

¹³Bill Leary October 1966 Notes.

Monday comprised a full day, including forty-six landings. It began with AID work to MOUNG PHUN (LS-37) overlooking the Nam Khan ten miles southwest of Site-20; then a trip to Phou So (LS-57) in the hills west of MOUNG SOUI. At The Alternate, they were assigned to fly people and supplies to Na Khang. Missions included landings around MOUNG HEIM and PHU PHA THI.

Mike conducted one fuel load for AID out of Sam Tong on the 18th before being relieved. Flights included return trips to MOUNG PHUN and Phou So. Later in the day, he obtained rides on C-123 613 to Vientiane and Caribou 430 to Udorn.

Not finished flying in October, he was scheduled with Wayne Knight and Flight Mechanic Sizelove in Hotel-37 for a local proficiency session. In addition to performing standard maneuvers, a fifty-five-gallon drum filled with concrete had been incorporated into the semi-annual check ride for external lift training. This was permanently staged between the runway and taxiway.

Tom Hoppe flew Hotel-21 to Pakse on the 19th. During four days there, Hoppe worked sites in and around the Bolovens Plateau: PS-7, the south rim, PS-6, PS-22 (Ban La Tee, logged as LS-190), and Hill 1647, northeast of Attopeu.

Although Tom claimed nothing unusual happened during the RON, it marked the period of General Ma's attempted coup against his Vientiane tormentors. ¹⁴

¹⁴Tom Hoppe Letter.

Taking a well-deserved break from politics and derision pervading Vientiane after the devastating flood, rejection of a new budget, and dissolution of the National Assembly, Souvanna Phouma visited New York City, where he headed the Lao delegation for the 21st United Nations General Assembly session. Before commencing his trip to the U.S., he had been invited to Washington D.C. to spend several days discussing Southeast Asian geopolitical issues. Ambassador Sullivan recommended pertinent issues to discuss.

While in New York the Prime Minister met Washington officials and apprised them of the latest effects of the September flood and the elections scheduled for the following year. It was noted that the Prime Minister was not an expert in fiscal affairs, economic development, or regional planning. However, as a prominent and respected leader, he did possess insight and understanding regarding other Southeast Asian principals and their policies. He was interested in interaction between the USSR, China, and North Vietnam, and was fully aware that Vietnamese aggression was the cause for all the problems in Indochina.

At the Nation's capital, during a round of meetings, Souvanna first conferred with Avril Harriman, Leonard Unger, and then later with Secretary of State Dean Rusk. He stated that there was no indication that Vietnamese leaders wanted to initiate talks to end the war, despite problems incurred from U.S bombing raids. He stressed that it was essential to continue attempting to influence Soviet leaders to establish peace in Laos. This was despite his unsuccessful April trip to Moscow, where he presented evidence of Vietnamese presence in Laos and

was told nothing could be done to rectify this violation of the Geneva Accords.

In recent months, with a decline in enemy supplies, Chinese influence and direct aid had measurably increased to the Pathet Lao. North Vietnam was not able to provide the Pathet Lao with required items because of internal problems. Aircraft had been spotted over the Plain of Jars that were believed to be Chinese. Intelligence revealed that Vietnamese troops in the Moung Sing and Nam Tha areas had been replaced by Chinese Lu soldiers. The present concern of the RLG was how to cope with this and extend its zone of operations and influence to areas north of Luang Prabang.

Souvanna's trip culminated in a meeting with President Johnson on the 13th. Reiterating information he previously presented, the Lao Prime Minister indicated the Southeast Asian situation was very complicated. This was further evidenced by North Vietnamese and Chinese leaders' intransigence to discuss matters, and increasing Chinese influence in Laos.

During his last visit to Hanoi in April 1964, the communist leaders were confident of military success like that achieved over the French. General Giap boasted that Vietnamese infantry units were the world's best. With an increasing population, North Vietnam required additional land. This led to the desire to conquer South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. If South Vietnam was effectively overrun, Laos would fall, and the territorial buffer for Thailand lost. Having said this, Souvanna lobbied for tangible evidence of increased USG of strength to counter North Vietnamese confidence.

LBJ, not really understanding Asian history, maintained that North Vietnamese leaders realistically understood they could not win, and that the U.S was ready and willing to proceed from the battlefield to the negotiation table.

Before leaving, in regard to Vientiane politics, Souvanna stated that elections to create a new National Assembly would definitely be held on 1 January 1967. He did not believe there would much change in the government, because the Lao people were influenced by name recognition and known political figures. He planned to remain in office and continue the same government established during the 1962 Geneva Accords. He would maintain the open Pathet Lao portfolios, but was not concerned if they chose not to participate in the government.

In late December, a few days prior to the end of campaigning, the Lao military's role was still dominant. Although military leaders did not want elections to take place on the first, nothing had changed. With them guiding the course of politics, they were satisfied that the conclusion would be favorable.

From Military Region Two, Vang Pao had no direct influence with Souvanna Phouma regarding his choice of candidates. Instead, he liaised through General Ouan Rathikoun, whom he preferred among all the Lao generals, and informed him who he wanted to support. From the start of the campaign, Vang Pao went through several changes in his support for candidates. However, his main contention was with Touby LyFong and his candidate. Vang Pao wanted to defeat those men in Xieng Khouang. The general had come to an agreement with Province Governor Saykham Sayavon, residing at Sam Tong, whereby the Governor would have one seat and Vang Pao another.

The military commanding officers and their candidates were considered strongest in MR-1, MR-2 and MR-4. Within Military Region Three and Military Region Five, elections were not guaranteed. This was particularly the case in Military Region Three, where Deputy Prime Minister Leuam Insisiengmay was attempting to lead a political bloc in opposition to Souvanna.

Souvanna used General Ouan to influence politics in Military Region One and as his liaison for Military Region Two. He worked with Sisouk na Champassak to form an accommodation with General Phasouk Somly in Military Region Four. Additionally, he attempted to split the political right by dealing with Phoui and Ngon Sananikone in Vientiane, Borikhane, and Khammouane Provinces. Consequently, his compromises with FAR and the Sananikones effectively checked Kouprasith Abhay, and possibly diminished Leuam's power. Therefore, Souvanna's candidates would likely win election and form a substantial Assembly majority consisting of individuals who made a deal with the Prime Minister.

Regional leaders compromised with local interests and incorporated anti-Phouma deputies into their lists of candidates. In contrast, Souvanna eliminated several deputies and the French-backed Neutralist faction.

It was believed that military leaders would likely provide a barrier to any illogical behavior of the National Assembly. Still there was sentiment to develop a bloc of political opposition to Souvanna. The movement would be rightist, and could morph into a political organization to challenge Souvanna Phouma's leadership.

There were rumors circulating that the communist adherents intended to disrupt the elections. However, most of the reports stemmed from FAR sources, leading one to infer that hyperbola

was involved in order to retain military options. ¹

LA KHAWN KONG LE

As during past coups and political upheavals in Laos, principals waited until the head of state was absent. While continuing to consolidate their power over the FAR, Vientiane generals, anxious to assimilate the 12,000 Neutralist forces into the RLA, had long searched for ways to oust General Kong Le from his FAN command. Solving the problem, many FAN officers, colonels from the original Second Parachute Battalion, and men were similarly minded. Over the past two years, dismal military failures had occurred during operations to capture the hills of Phou Kout--the latest failure occurred in August--or advance and hold positions on the Plain of Jars. Indeed, at times, subordinate commanding officers refused to follow his battlefield orders. Kong Le, weird by any psychological standards, was a study in contrasts, sometimes domineering, other times unavailable to make critical decisions. Therefore, Kong Le's inability to inspire or adequately command convinced his men, both old and new, that a change was required in the top leadership.

The U.S. Embassy discovered plans and details of the plot to oust Kong Le in early October. Sanctioned by the General

¹Political Sources Segment Include:
Telegram William Sullivan to State, 10/08/66, #255.
Memorandum Walter Rostow to President Lyndon Johnson, Meeting with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma in New York, 10/11/66, #256.
Memorandum of Conversation: Souvanna Phouma Washington Meeting with Averill Harriman, Leonard Unger, 10/12/66, #257.
Memorandum of Conversation: Souvanna Phouma Meeting with Dean Rusk, 10/12/66, #258.
Memorandum of Conversation: Souvanna Phouma Meeting with President Johnson, 10/13/66, #259.
Agency Intelligence Information, Appraisal of National Assembly Election Campaign, 12/30/66.

Staff, they included Kong Le's arrest and the integration of the FAN into the RLA. Coup leaders Colonel Soulivanh Singhavara, Lieutenant Colonel Sing Chanthakouman, Colonel Sompot Sotsavan, and one other person would take charge of four reorganized group mobile units. All participating officers would retain their ranks and Vang Vieng would be maintained as a permanent headquarters.

In a telegram to State, Ambassador Sullivan apprised Rusk of the affair and recommended Souvanna Phouma be notified. In the meantime, in the Prime Minister's absence, the Country Team intended to do nothing to influence the outcome of any coup.²

Secretary Rusk concurred that it was important not to take sides. State was aware of the Neutralist officers' grievances toward Kong Le regarding money, leadership, and their future career prospects. If Kong Le was deemed a definite problem, then USG could not support him. However, to avoid consternation among the Lao, caution should be followed in removing him.

The long-range goal should stress orderly assimilation of FAN into the RLA that would eliminate rivalry, offer security to competent officers and men, and maintain the Neutralist name near term. These steps would avoid political wrangles that could perpetrate a new round of defections to dissent Colonel Deuane Sounnarath or the Pathet Lao.

On 17 October, Kong Le boarded a C-47 at Vang Vieng for Bangkok. Believing he was travelling there on an official mission involving meeting with top leaders, he received a rude awakening upon arrival. His stay there was relatively brief. Following General Ma's attack on Vientiane, he was placed under

²Although disaffected with Kong Le, the Prime Minister failed to initiate any action to prevent a coup.

house arrest. After failing to obtain Thai government support, he moved on to Indonesia and later France. He became yet another Lao military leader to enter exile. ³

THAO MA GOES SOUTH

Dissent among military leaders seethed beneath the surface in Laos for many years. Consequently, with all the corruption, nepotism, regionalism, and bickering still permeating Lao politics and the military, it was amazing that the country remained intact. Such conditions were especially prevalent long after the 1965 coup, and many sympathizers were ongoing actors dancing on the Lao stage. Continually harassed, maligned, and downgraded in status by Vientiane generals, Brigadier General Ma had reached his own personal limit of abuse and elected to act.

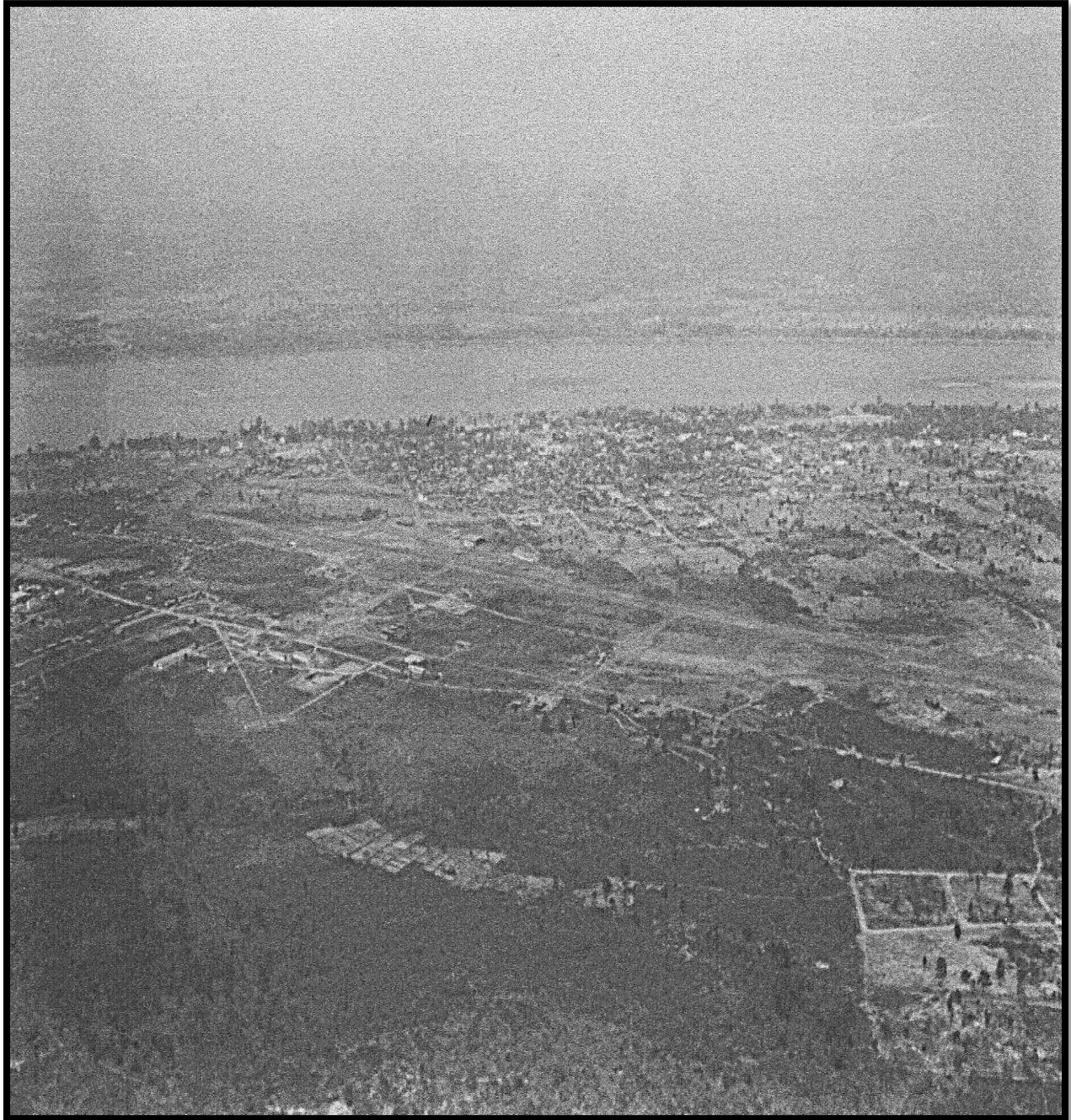
Ma was unwell. Seeing the general every day, covert RLAF advisor at Luang Prabang, Don Moody, noted this fact. During late summer Don was given permission by AIRA chief, Colonel Pettigrew, to fly the general in a T-28 to the Korat U.S. Army hospital in Thailand for a comprehensive examination. The resident flight surgeon conducted a thorough physical, including blood work, x-ray, and other tests. It was determined that Ma had many endemic diseases, to include chronic malaria and intestinal parasites. Mostly, he was highly fatigued from wrangling with Lao leaders, years of command, and steady combat operations.

³ VictorAnthony, 206-207.

Telegram from the Department of State (Rusk) to the Embassy in Laos (in Reply to a Previous Twix from Ambassador Sullivan), 10/15/66, #260.

Ken Conboy, 158-159.

CHECO.



Aerial view of the Lima-39 airstrip and the adjacent town of Savannakhet, Laos, in Military Region 3. The Mekong River is to the rear; beyond that the town of Mukdahan, Thailand.

Author Collection.

Despite extensive T-28 work north of Luang Prabang to support Operation Prasane (Cleveland in "round eye" parlance), General Ma found time to visit Savannakhet and plan rebellion with Colonels Noupheet Daoheuang, Commanding Officer of GM-18 in Military Region Three and Thao Ly, Commanding Officer GM-18 in Military Region Four, long time antagonists against Vientiane Generals Ouane and Kouprasith, et. al., who were gradually stripping his RLAF power.

Late in September, the Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) was divided into a tactical and transport arm, both overseen and controlled by the Vientiane General Staff. As previously announced, General Sourith Don Sasorith returned from schooling in America and assumed command of the C-47 transport unit. As planned, Ma went to Vientiane to assume the office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations. He was also assigned Assistant Director of the Combined Operations Center, responsible for T-28s and the four Air Operations Centers (AOC). Anathema to Ma, the non-flying jobs were mostly sedentary.

Ma was installed in Bill Keeler's AIRA office, where he "fussed and fumed" for a time. While there he requested Keeler to obtain maps of Vientiane and help him plot strategic military locations. Keeler naively believed he was preparing a defensive plan for the city.

By October, Ma decided to act with deadly force to eliminate the "corrupt military leaders." The opportunity arose to strike when FAR Commanding Officer Ouane et. al. was en route to Pakse on a fact-finding mission, and Souvanna Phouma was still out of the country in Paris. Ouane RON near Savannakhet.

First Ma flew north to Long Tieng in his T-28 to discuss matters with Vang Pao. Then he motored over Skyline Drive to Sam Tong to consult with the Air Commando doctor regarding his ongoing medical problems. However, the doctor had left the site

for Thailand to obtain blood plasma. Ernie Kuhn, the only American at Site-20 on 20 October, was in the AID office when the general entered looking "very agitated" and enquiring as to the U.S. doctor's location. Ernie informed Ma the doctor was absent, but would return the next day. Would he like to visit Lao Doctor Kameung, or wait for the American doctor? Claiming he had no time, Ma refused both offers and departed for Site-20A. ⁴

From Alternate Ma flew to Luang Prabang. While there AOC advisor Don Moody observed him conferring over a map with Captains Prayounh and Khamphan. Later that day, Ma informed Moody that his pilots were launching with twelve T-28s "loaded for bear." Moody, who never questioned the powerful general, was a bit confused since it was very late and several aircraft had maintenance and armament types in the rear cockpits. After the time for a normal strike elapsed and the aircraft failed to return to Luang Prabang, Don suspected there was a major problem. A SOP radio search failed to evoke a response from the flight, so Moody called the AIRA headquarters in Vientiane regarding the missing T-28s and crews.

After marshalling his forces at Savannakhet Ma's coup plans were finalized. Local ground tactics involved Noupheet arresting General Ouane, General Bounphone and his entourage, and locking down the Lima-39 airfield. Loyal T-28 pilots would then strike Chinaimo headquarters, the army barracks, the ammunition storage area, the radio station, and Phone Kheng in the Vientiane area. The air raids would be followed by an airlift of GM-18 tasked to capture General Kouprasith. His good friend Kong Le originally was slated to capture Vientiane. Despite Kong Le's ouster and

⁴ Ernie Kuhn later speculated that had the doctor been present, perhaps he might have deduced the general was not physically fit and hospitalized him for fatigue. Given this scenario, the coup never would have occurred.

the partial setback, the plan moved along smartly. Even Vang Pao, whom Ma consulted with that day, reputedly advanced cash to Colonel Bounleut Saycocie as an added incentive for top leaders, and to ensure GM-18 and GM-21's participation in the operation. However, after allegedly giving the funds to General Sourith, the money was never distributed.

After Savannakhet airfield was secured by Bounleut's people, early on 21 October, eight T-28 pilots took off for what was considered a Panhandle bombing raid. Instead, the flight turned northward toward the administrative capitol. Arriving at 0830 hours they began lightning raids, bombing and strafing FAR general staff headquarters at Phone Kheng, Chinaimo barracks, and Wattay Airport. Then the pilots RTB Savannakhet for fuel and munitions to prepare for another strike. General Kouprasith's house was damaged. Two ammunition sites, an artillery position, and communication center at Wattay Airport were heavily damaged. Depending on sources tabulated, there were up to thirty-six killed and sixty-five wounded.

An H-34 Captain and his Flight Mechanic were slightly impacted during the coup. Parked near the Lima-39 radio shack, under gunpoint, they were ordered into the building, told to quietly sit down, and not attempt to go near the helicopter. However, no guard remained on duty and the quasi-restraint did not last long.

That morning Udorn received a message that several crew members were being held hostage at Savannakhet by FAR troops. Further investigation revealed that, while not exactly a hostage situation, crew movement was restricted. Wayne Knight flew to Lima-39 and arrived about the time restrictions were relaxed. After talking to one of Ma's subordinates, Wayne was assured that all was well, that it was all just a misunderstanding.

Wayne assumed Ma was attempting to eliminate any possibility that Air America would interfere with his coup attempt.

Mike Jarina had previously met General Ma at Pakse, and attested to his volatile nature. Mike was attempting to obtain fuel when four T-28 pilots taxied to the parking area and commandeered the tanker. Mike was familiar with Ma, but he was miffed that the pilots wanted fuel before him. Jarina told the general he could fuel quickly and get out of his way.

Ma countered, *"I must go. I have bombing to do to protect the troops."*

"General, I have a load of ammunition. If I don't take it to the troops right away, then it will not be of much use to protect what they are protecting." Much to his surprise, Ma understood this logic and Mike obtained his fuel. Before leaving, Mike said to Ma, *"If we keep working together like this, perhaps we will win this war."*

Despite damage incurred to parts of Vientiane, without full support from ground leaders, the coup had very little chance of succeeding. Unknown at the time of the attack, despite Ma's announcement of General Ouane's arrest, Colonel Noupheut failed to arrest him or even participate in the coup. In addition, Ma confided details of the plot to the local AIRA representative, who phoned Vientiane AIRA, Colonel Pettigrew. Pettigrew in turn alerted FAR headquarters just prior to the attack. Consequently, Oudone and Kouprasith survived and avoided dire consequences. Colonel Ly was dissuaded from participating by Military Region Four's Commanding Officer, General Phasouk. Captain Tom Hoppe recalled Ma's T-28 pilots conducting dry runs on Pakse attempting to gain support for the coup. General Phasouk counseled Tom not to worry, but to continue performing normal work.

By early afternoon, State was free with advice to Ambassador Sullivan. Rusk recommended he inform the King to issue a ceasefire order to Ma et. al. He assumed the ambassador had already ordered AIRA personnel to withhold all stores and remain clear of RLAFF T-28s. After the fracas ceased, he wanted Sullivan to meet with General Ma in Udorn and listen to his grievances. A summary of the coup attempt was being prepared for Francophile Souvanna Phouma, who was still visiting Paris.

After Ma contacted him requesting assistance to persuade the generals to resign, Sullivan deferred to Deputy Prime Minister Leuam Insisiengmay, to Minister of Finance, Sisouk na Champassak, and to President of the National Assembly, Phoui Sananikone. Leuam talked to Ma, who realized a successful outcome to his coup was unwinding. Therefore, he agreed to an afternoon meeting at Savannakhet with a delegation of Prince Boun Oum na Champassak, Ambassador Sullivan, and the British Ambassador, Fred Warner. In the meantime, he agreed not to mount another air strike, and both the Lao and Thai T-28s were grounded until further notice.

Following conversations regarding his impossible military situation, Ma, realizing that the coup had failed, agreed to discuss the situation with Souvanna upon his return in two days. The delegates flew back to Vientiane without persuading Ma to accept voluntary exile, and unsure of his stability or true motives. Therefore, after an "all hands" meeting in Vientiane, Brigadier General La Pathammavong at Military Region Three regimental headquarters was persuaded to assume control of the airfield. This was implemented without opposition.

Just before 2200 hours the Vientiane Agency station was alerted by Chief of Unit (COU) Tom Fosmire that several T-28 pilots were preparing to taxi for takeoff at Savannakhet; and they were "loaded for bear." This information was passed to COS

Shackley, Ambassador Sullivan, AB-1 Udorn, and 7/13 Air Force. No one really believed Ma and his inexperienced pilots would attempt to conduct combat bombing raids in the dark, but as a precaution FAR leaders were apprised of the latest development.

Shortly after 2230 hours Fosmire called again, reporting that nine T-28s had launched and were headed north. The estimated-time-of-arrival (ETA) over Vientiane would likely be in about forty minutes. Most involved believed the flight would ultimately head for Udorn, but would the group drop bombs first? Therefore, to minimize visible targets, it was decided to shut down the city's power plant. After a reasonable time, when no attack developed, the Americans and Lao stood down.

Unknown to the principals, after deliberation, and promise of assistance by 7th Air force, General Ma elected to depart Laos late that night. Consequently, General Ma, Colonel Bounleut, pilots, and ground personnel departed in ten T-28s and a C-47 for Udorn. One T-28 pilot flew to Ubon. Less than ten T-28s remained at the Lima-39 airfield. American officers at the RTAF base turned the Lao over to local Thai officials, who initially jailed the men.

By the morning of the 22nd, it was obvious to cabinet members and military officers alike that all was resolved. Messages attesting to this fact were forwarded to the King in LP and to Paris, where Souvanna Phouma was preparing to return to Southeast Asia. Radio broadcasts relayed the good news to the people. In this manner, the city returned to its normal lethargic pace.

Despite his wayward behavior, Ma was still considered a useful resource. From Udorn reports, Sullivan noted that Ma was a very sick person. Since he had assisted USG policy as much as anybody in Laos, the Ambassador was going to ask the Prime Minister, when he returned the next day, if it was acceptable to

provide Ma hospital treatment at a U.S. facility. In addition, he wanted to arrange a job for him with Air America or other friendly organization in the capacity of a civilian pilot in South Vietnam or Taiwan.

Kouprasith was not as forgiving. Worried that Ma, Kong Le, and Phoumi Nosavan would foment another coup attempt, he lobbied Thai authorities for Ma's extradition. Since refuge was sacrosanct in most societies, at the urging of Ambassadors Sullivan and Martin, Thai Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn eventually refused the requested extradition. Instead, the Lao were released as political refugees.

With General Ma's enforced departure from the Lao war, the RLAF suffered its greatest setback. However, the unit survived despite the loss of esprit de corps engendered by the former hard-charging tactical leader. The T-28s were intact and thirty qualified pilots were available to continue strike missions. The entire RLAF headquarters, organized under Sourith, was relocated to Wattay Airport, where FAR generals had complete control.

Overall, General Kouprasith emerged a big winner. All military regions and the Neutralists favored the General Staff. With both Kong Le and Ma gone, there were almost no dissenting types remaining in the kingdom to challenge General Kouprasith. Although Vang Pao and Phasouk were still present, Phasouk had shown restraint and Vang Pao condemned Ma for his unwise actions. ⁵

⁵ With Ma under house arrest in Bangkok, and the Thai having confiscated all his money, Bill Keeler attempted to obtain his release. He arranged schooling and food for his children from 1967-1970. There were secret meetings between Ma, Leonard Unger, the Thai Ambassador, General Seith, and Colonel Tyrell. Several people solicited Ma's story about how he had been hoodwinked by the Americans. Keeler persuaded him not to write anything, and offered to pay for the story. Keeler's wife took dictation for this over a year.

The October coup fostered considerable contemplation in Washington as to the continued use of indigenous air support in Laos. Early in November, both State and Defense Departments queried Ambassador Sullivan as to Thai T-28 pilot requirements and if they could be eliminated or reduced.

After consulting his Country Team, within a week Sullivan responded that if the war continued at the present level, Thai T-28 support would be required until mid-1968, or until the number of Lao T-28 line pilots reached about sixty.

Citing the recent history of the RLAF, he stated forty-two Lao T-28 pilots had been trained since 1964. However, that number had been reduced to twenty-four due to training accidents, combat losses, and ten pilots recently leaving with General Ma. The new RLAF Commander, General Sourith, who had recently conducted an inspection trip of Savannakhet, Seno, and Pakse, believed seven T-28 pilots leaving for Thailand with Ma might be salvageable. Six pilots currently undergoing Udorn training were slated to graduate in December. A fresh group was set to begin training in January. An optimistic estimate of the number of combat-ready T-28 pilots might reach forty-four by July.

The Ambassador went on to state, complementing T-28 efforts, that USAF planes were interdicting roads in the Barrel Roll section of northern Laos. Because of the ability to communicate with ground controllers, Laos and Thai T-28 pilots mostly performed a close air support function.

Following discussion with Thai and Lao, the leaders maintained that they were ready to recommence T-28 operations

and strikes resumed from Luang Prabang by the 13th. ⁶

AIRCRAFT RECOVERY APPARATUS

For years, Air America helicopters and crews had engaged in recovering crashed aircraft. This entailed returning salvageable parts to Vientiane or Udorn for local redistribution and repair, or, in case of major repair, transfer to Tainan, Taiwan. As what happened with Calhoun's Helio Courier in August 1965 in the Nam Yu area, and almost to my H-34 lift in November 1964 from below Khang Kho, early attempts to sling load fuselages long distances sometimes resulted in dropped loads. Losing repairable aircraft was not popular with maintenance supervisors, so other techniques were sought. Eventually, to preclude losses, a side saddle recovery rig was manufactured locally that would fit the sides of an H-34, and accommodate Helio Courier wings and

⁶Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, 157-158.

Victor Anthony, 203, 207, 208, 209.

Officer & Gallacher, Keeler Interview, 02/05/73, 15-17.

0900 Telegram from the Embassy in Laos (Sullivan) to the Department of State, 10/20/66, #262.

1239 Telegram State (Katzenbach) to Embassy Laos, 10/21/66, #263.

Rostow Memorandum for the President, 10/23//66, #264.

0555 Telegram from the Embassy in Laos (Sullivan) to the Department of State, 10/22/66, #266.

Memorandum from D.W. Ropa of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant (Rostow): Southeast Asia Developments, 11/03/66, #267.

William Sullivan Telegram to State, 11/09/66, #268.

Tom Hoppe Letter.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

EW Knight Emails, 06/28/00, 1/03/01.

CHECO.

Ted Shackley, 127-128, 130, 132, 134-136.

Don Moody, *The Great Adventures of Bob and Don*, Episode 1, *In the Land of a Million Elephants: Short Stories About LP and my Association with General Ma*, 11-12, (aircommandos.org/bobanddon/episode0001.htm).

Ernest C. Kuhn, Interview with Arthur J. Dommen, 03/25/95, 20-21, Contained in The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. Library of Congress.

fuselage. Using this rig, many aircraft were successfully returned to the repair facility over the years. Larger airframes and engines continued to be hauled in the conventional sling load manner. Modifications to the original rigs were made to recover tail cones and other large parts.

From the commencement of Air America's flying in Laos, the Maintenance Department had had a standing rule to obtain manufactures' data plates from aircraft deemed unrecoverable. Then, as enough parts became available, Helio Courier or Pilatus Porters were rebuilt and stocked at Tainan. After a STOL plane mishap, the data plate was transferred to the spare. The crashed ship was recovered and a fresh spare assembled.

The impetus for assembling aircraft out of salvaged remains was driven by President Hugh Grundy's insistence that it was not right to litter the landscape with crashed aircraft. No truly professional outfit would allow that to occur if the means to recover the remains could be arranged. In addition, Hugh did not enjoy asking CEO George Doole for replacements.

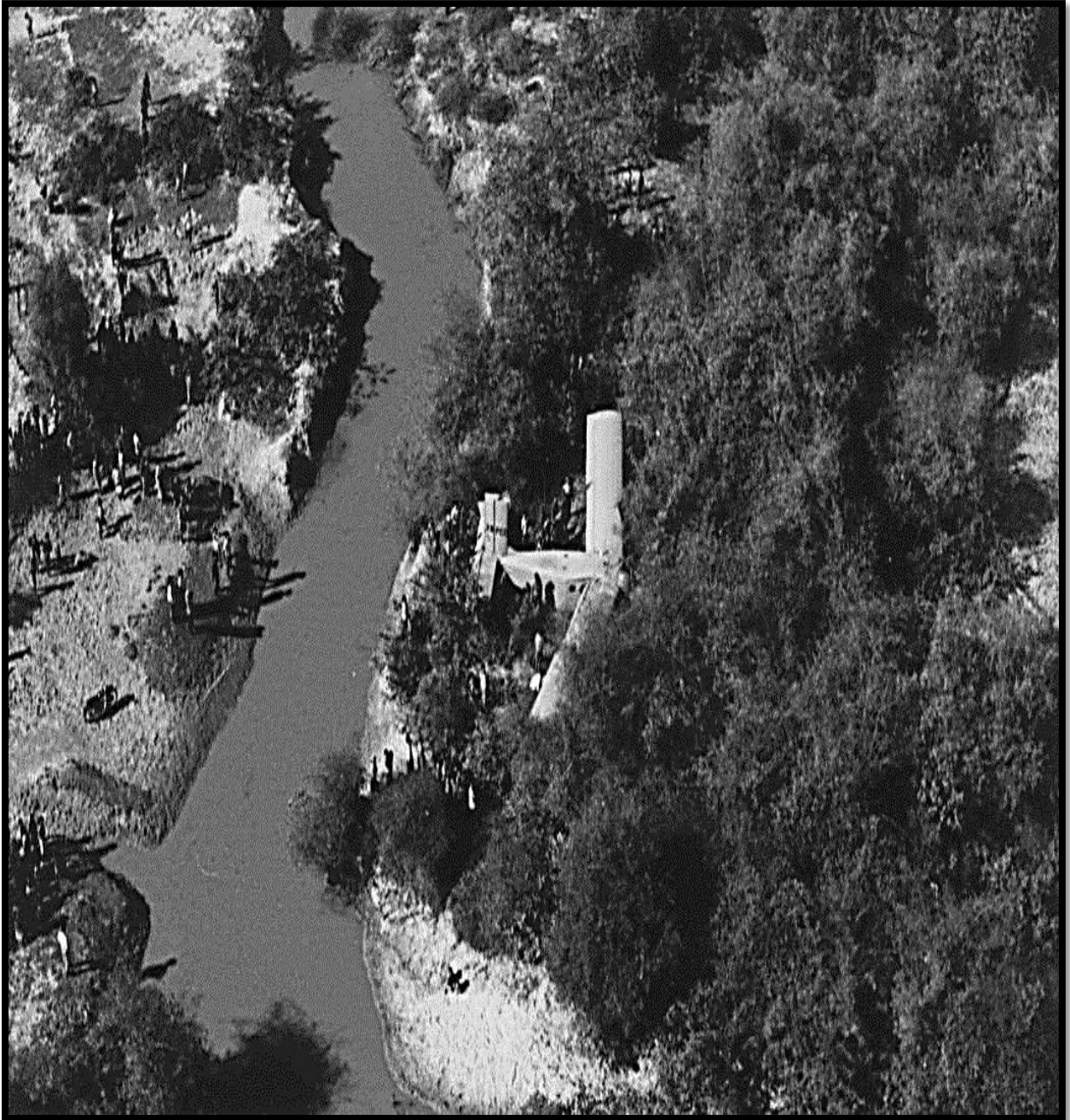
George Doole was known to be critical, testy and long-winded in replies to such requests. The man always had to be the center of attention at social functions, but he could be an enormous bore. Wayne heard him relate a story about conducting a low-level flight in bad weather on the Orinocco River in South America while Chief Pilot for PAA South America division. Doole was nastiest during board room meetings. He gloried in abusing, shaming, and embarrassing lower-level managers.

When the rebuild of their aircraft was discovered at Tainan, considering this a threat to their livelihood, Helio Courier and Pilatus Porter manufacturing executives took a negative view. Air America was not purchasing new planes or airframe parts. Therefore, when solicited for aircraft blue prints, they refused to provide plans and threatened the Company



Chief Flight Mechanic Gaza Eiler standing on a locally manufactured apparatus designed to recover crashed aircraft from the field.

Marius Burke Collection.



An example of a crashed Continental aircraft being recovered from the field.

Burke Collection.



Wings of the crashed Porter prior to mounting on an H-34 for shipment to Vientiane. Gaza Eiler in foreground.

Burke Collection.



The mounting apparatus on a H-34 for recovered aircraft wings.
Burke Collection.



A stripped Continental Air Porter fuselage prior to being mounted on an H-34 for delivery to Vientiane.

Burke Collection.



A number of willing helpers and onlookers during the Porter engine and fuselage recovery.

Burke Collection.



The H-34 crew about to depart with the Porter firmly strapped to the recovery device.

Burke Collection.



An example of an H-34 pilot returning a Porter fuselage from the field for rebuild.

Burke Collection.

with litigation.

Part of a long-range plan to create a first-class overhaul and repair facility in Udorn, a mechanics training school commenced in 1965, but it was not completed until 1967. Building and shop development continued through 1971 and 1972. Over the years, Udorn became a first-class repair facility, with entire shops capable of overhauling many components, including airframes. Much to Al Weste's chagrin, who believed heavy overhaul and major repair should all be performed in Tainan, remanufacturing jigs for various aircraft were assembled in Udorn. At one point, there were over 1,000 technical services personnel supporting thirteen different aircraft.

In October, Air America maintenance was provided with a portion of an H-34 fuselage, long abandoned by the CIC owner. Within a few months of rebuild, the helicopter emerged from the hangar as Hotel-48 (Bureau #148805, this H-34 was originally Hotel Yankee, CIC-2). Using Company employee labor, the total expenditure for the machine was under sixteen percent of a new Sikorsky helicopter. ⁷

SOUTHERN TREK

Before returning to Southeast Asia, I decided to expose Tuie to some of America's mid-south. An ambitious undertaking, we stopped in Washington, D.C., the USMC base at Quantico, Jamestown, Virginia and Durham, North Carolina. We viewed standard sights at Washington like the Lincoln Memorial, the Capital Building, and such attractions. Constrained as to time, others were seen from the car. We also visited Dick "Wheels"

⁷Jack Forney Email, 02/05/99.
Ben Moore Monthly Reports.
EW Knight Email, 11/05/00.

Rowe, a Marine Corps friend, who had lived with me in the east Pensacola house, and who flunked out of the Navy flight training program. He was an air controller at New River when I was stationed there. After leaving the service, Dick became an attorney, taking up a vocation with the Security and Exchange Commission (SEC). It was good to visit old friends.

Not much had changed at Quantico, except for a large, impressive statue of the Iwo Jima flag raising at the intersection of the main highway and access road to the Mainside base. I made inquiries regarding my former HMM-261 squadron skipper, Fred "Bud" Steele and discovered that he had achieved a brigadier general rank, and then sadly succumbed to a heart attack. We did manage a drive by the parade grounds at Training and Test Regiment, where I spent ten weeks of brutal training in 1957. We followed this by driving west to Camp Barrett, where I attended the Officer Basic School. Roads had appreciably improved throughout the area.

Although not much was present except a small reconstructed stockade, Jamestown was interesting from a historical viewpoint. Replicas of the three ships on which the original settlers arrived from England lined the shoreline. I was particularly impressed with how small the vessels were for such a hazardous Atlantic crossing.

Part of the trip to the States was to observe how my wife fared in this new environment, eating different foods, and interacting with different people. So far, she acclimated and was totally accepted. I was generally well pleased and observed nothing to worry me. In Durham, I was interested to see if the appalling prejudices present, when I attended Duke University were still prevalent, and if there was lingering bias, how Tuie would react. Racial issues had changed considerably since matriculating in 1953. Jim Crow was no longer king. The

waitresses at the restaurant in town, where we ate smothered pan-fried pork chops were very nice to us both and they adored Ricky. At my insistence, Tuie even managed to choke down her first hush puppy.

Duke had expanded appreciably since I graduated, especially toward the west in the direction of the large Duke Forest. In addition to observing university landmarks, we visited a Kappa Sigma fraternity brother Ron Krueger, who, after graduating with an electrical engineering degree, chose to pursue the medical profession. Then a pediatrician, he worked at the Duke University Hospital. Ron's family had formerly manufactured Krueger Beer before selling the business to a larger corporation, so I suppose Ron had all the intellectual and financial assets to engage in higher education as long as he desired. When Ricky rolled off the motel bed onto the floor, we rushed to the hospital to have Ron examine him.

With aspirations for my son to pursue an occupation which I failed to achieve, I attempted to pre-register Ricky at the university admissions office. Through other alumni who had attended various universities, I had been led to believe one could do this, even if merely a token gesture for the future. However, the idiot female at the registration counter did not seem to understand what I proposed. Refusing to do anything, she inquired how I was positive he could qualify for college. Gag.

No trip to Durham, North Carolina was complete without visiting the Chesterfield cigarette factory, originated and run by the James Duke family. We observed the cigarette manufacturing process and experienced the heavy, sweet smell of tobacco.

We stopped at a few places on the way back to New Jersey and by the time we arrived at the Dorsey Place house, I was favoring a sore lower left back. I had owned a number of Ford

cars, but never one with bucket seats. The long trip and unaccustomed bucket seat, combined with a wallet in my rear left pocket had pressed on my sciatic nerve to cause the problem.⁸ For the time being, I shrugged this off and began to plan our return to Southeast Asia.

⁸I drove the Mustang 5,000 miles during the time we were home.

After recovering from jet lag, Wayne Knight, back from home leave began catching up on regional upcountry situations by conducting line checks. From 5 to 7 November, RONing at Sam Tong, he flew with Larry Egan, John Cooney, Ted Cash, and Herb Baker in Military Region Two. Baker was the only "old timer;" the rest were relatively new upgraded Captains. Most of the work consisted of AID missions out of Sam Tong to Khang Kho, Ban Nam Moh, and Phou So. Another day was spent shuttling around Na Khang, MOUNG HEIM, and Houei Thom.

Before returning to Udorn, further line checks were conducted on the 15th to positions forty miles north of Luang Prabang with Verne Clarkson, "Bing" Bengston, and Charlie Weitz.¹

UNFORTUNATE INCIDENT

John Perry was the senior Luang Prabang USAID coordinator. During World War Two he worked with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in Europe, where he met and married a French woman. Offspring from the marriage included sons Alain, Steve, and daughter Marie. On vacation from school, the boys were visiting their mom and dad.

Assigned Hotel-41, Larry Wilderom along with Flight Mechanic Dennis Griffith was one of the only H-34 pilots working in the Nam Bac area on the 8th. Since the August recapture of Site-203, a number of old sites either had been recovered or new ones developed to the north and east. One unnumbered site,

¹ EWKnight Emails, 08/01/00, 08/03/00.

sixteen miles west of Nam Bac, overlooked the Nam Bak, a river that flowed north and then south to merge with other rivers in the fertile Nam Bac Valley. This site was slated for resupply that morning.

Outlying areas were still unsettled since Nam Bac fell to Lao government troops, and enemy patrols roamed the western area. USAID delivered supplies for the elementary school at the site in question. Blaine Jensen, familiar with the village and Mok Plai (LS-193) ten miles to the west, could attest to the occasional danger involved there. Considering the place "really spooky," during his first visit, he had been pinned down during a three-day, two-night firefight. Then, when Sam Tong could not dispatch a Helio Courier to retrieve him, he twice slept in the hills away from the site.

During an en route stop at Luang Prabang in October, Jensen advised Perry that he did not consider the area safe. Apparently, Howie Freeman, in charge of the site, also advised Perry not to let anyone conduct a trip there.

The Chao Moung responsible for the area lived in Luang Prabang. On the seventh, the nominal leader departed for a special celebration and asked the Perry boys to join him at the festivities the following day. Based on the Chao Moung's visit, and as part of their education, Perry wanted his sons to view the countryside from an aircraft. Therefore, as the influential senior AID man at Luang Prabang, he solicited and gained permission from air operations to allow his boys go along on a flight that was considered a "milk run."

Since marrying a former "Dooley Dolly" he met at Ban Houei Sai, Bill Young and his new wife had been living at the Phu Si

Hotel. ² Respecting Bill's knowledge of the countryside and people, both Perry and his wife begged Young to accompany their children.

After taking an early lunch, Bill and Larry Wilderom arrived at the airport and were approaching Hotel-41 when Bill's Thai radio operator intercepted them saying there was a problem with the communications net to JLD Udorn. Therefore, electing to remain and help fix the radio, Bill told Larry to go on ahead and he would meet him on the second trip. Steven Perry climbed into the left cockpit, while Alain sat in the cabin section with Flight Mechanic Dennis Griffith and a mixed load of mortar rounds and other AID supplies.

The fifty-mile flight proceeded as scheduled until landing. The permanent signal, a white "J" held down by rocks was prominently displayed. Accounts varied to whether people were visible in the area, but none were seen at the immediate landing zone. ³

Apparently enemy soldiers had recently captured the site, or were on the outskirts as Larry commenced his approach. He proceeded slowly toward the landing area, touched down at the far end of the strip, and began taxiing toward the encampment area. Suddenly, heavy ground fire erupted from the left front

² Bill was renowned for crossing the river to attend wild parties with airline stewardess temporarily attached as nurses or aids at the Ban Houei Sai Dooley clinic.

³ Permanent signals were not generally acceptable to conduct operations. We normally required a signal panel to be placed near the landing zone at the time of arrival. This had a dual purpose of observing friendly people displaying a correct Customer-sanctioned signal. However, in the spirit of accomplishing the mission, according to various situations, pilots often violated common sense standard operation procedures. Over time, using all available visual cues when assessing a landing zone, some pilots developed what might be called a "sixth sense, or a gut feeling regarding a site." Unfortunately, not all achieved this ability.

tree line. Had the gunners been patient and waited an additional second, they would have achieved the perfect coup, but timing and reflexes allowed Larry to conduct an immediate departure and right hand turn to the east toward Nam Bac. Still, with the belly of the aircraft exposed, rounds continued to pepper Hotel-41 and plywood decking flew around the cargo compartment. The unexpected and devastating attack took an immediate toll on the aircraft, crew, and passengers. Shot in the back, Steve was mortally wounded, and Alain also incurred serious injuries. Knowing he was being hit, but experiencing no pain, Griffith received shrapnel cuts to his back and right elbow and deep wounds in his left leg. Larry was unhurt, but noticed a tail rotor pedal had been hit and he was missing a boot heel. He further realized how lucky he had been upon seeing bullet holes in the bulkhead to the rear of both sides of his head.

The flight to Site-203 was also eventful, for the engine faltered if he maintained more than a sixty-knot attitude and this was coupled with a heavy fuel odor. Peering out the window, he saw the right tire flapping in the slipstream. ⁴ Moreover, in an unsuccessful attempt to apprise anyone of his predicament, he learned that all radios had been damaged. Unable to communicate with Griffith over ICS Larry stamped his feet on the cockpit decking to let the Flight Mechanic know he was alright. After that Griffith and Wilderom communicated by note.

Captain George Carroll was in the area and heard Larry's Mayday call in the blind. Part way back to Nam Bac, George joined on Hotel-41 to accompany the stricken ship, crew, and passengers to Site-208.

⁴The Author had a similar observation in 1963.

High overhead Nam Bac, people on the ground could see Hotel-41's engine smoking and coughing, but attempts to contact the pilot proved futile.

Larry commenced an approach to landing toward the middle of the long strip. Upon lowering the collective to descend, the engine cut out again. An ensuing autorotation to a landing on flat tires was successful, but not uneventful. Larry had not rolled the throttle to idle. When he flared just before touching down, the nose high attitude allowed the engine to restart. The rapid increase in RPM caused the aircraft to torque to the right and almost turn over.

An initial damage assessment by eyewitnesses revealed considerably more than a hundred holes in the ship. Component battle damage was severe, with little left undamaged. In addition to flat tires and inoperable radios, main rotor blades and rotor head parts were hit. Several hydraulic, engine, and transmission oil lines were damaged or penetrated. The engine compartment was impacted, with the carburetor incurring several rounds, a hole in the number seven intake, and exhaust stacks. All fuel cells were penetrated, with only the forward self-sealing bladder useable. There were various holes in the left cockpit and cabin fuselage. It was generally considered a virtual miracle that the H-34 held together long enough for Larry to return to Nam Bac.⁵

Initial reports relayed to Luang Prabang regarding injuries from the incident were not encouraging. In addition, since he was scheduled to accompany the Perry boys, it was first believed

⁵ CPH, Wayne Knight did not believe that Larry Wilderom was ever the same after the traumatic experience. Larry later requested a transfer to C-123s and Taipei approved the request without objection. Years later in the 1980s, while flying in the Gulf of Mexico, the Author met Larry on an oil producing rig.



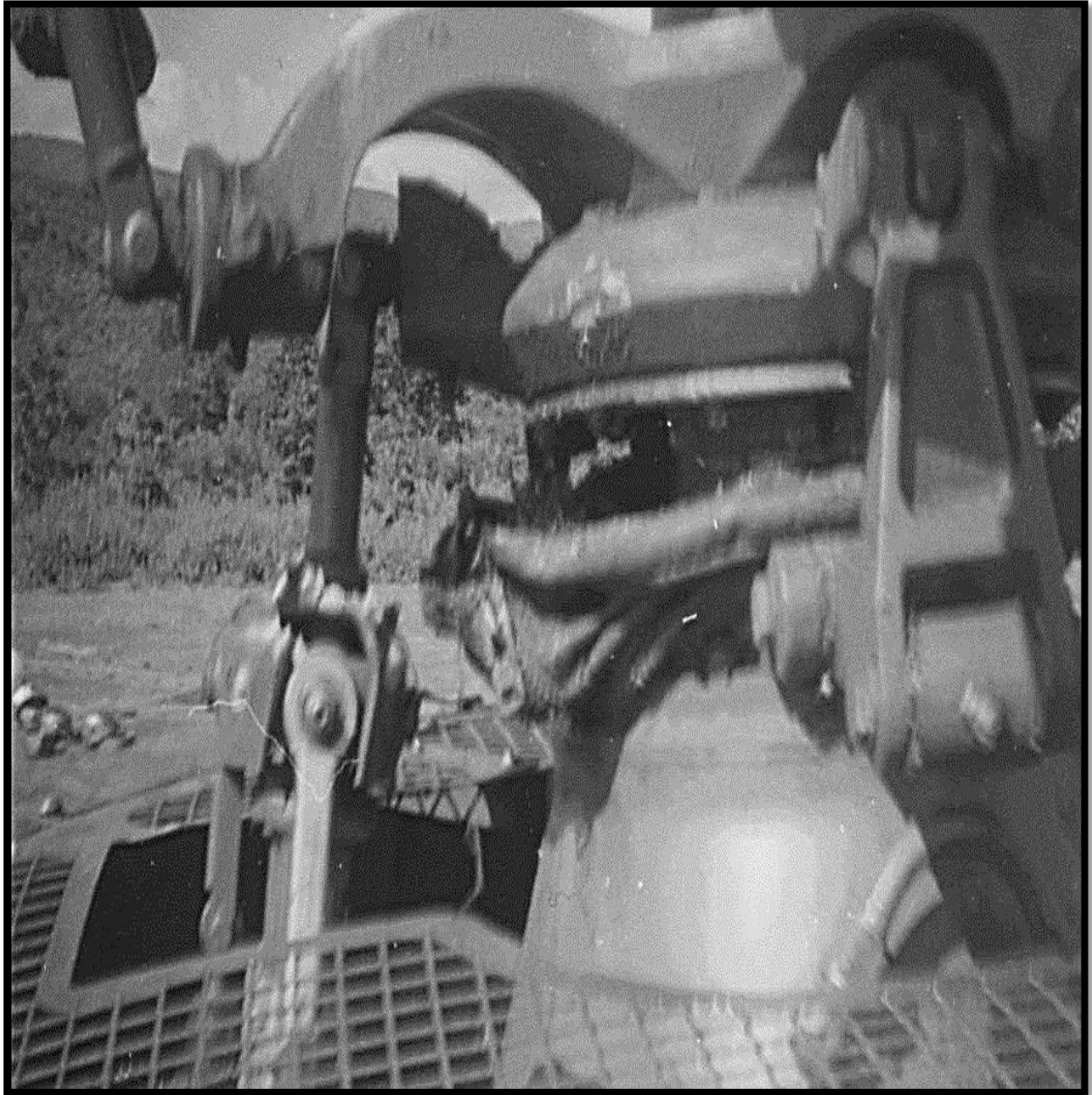
Captain Larry Wilderom's UH-34D parked at Nam Bac while awaiting repair for external battle damage incurred at TG0688 on the morning of 11/08/66.

Marius Burke Collection.



Upper left-hand corner displays a battle-damaged fuel line on the R-1820 engine of Hotel-41.

Burke Collection.



Portion of the lower rotor head assembly on Hotel-41 displaying small arms fire damage.

Burke Collection.

that Bill Young had been a passenger on Larry Wilderom's aircraft. Sometime later, Bill's young, pregnant wife learned the truth. Severely traumatized over the incident, she asked him if he seriously wanted to continue to take chances. Afterward, Bill had to compose an after-action report, which he found very difficult to do. Hotel-41 had to be manually pushed off the runway to enable a C-47 to land and retrieve the quick and the dead. At Luang Prabang, wounds were first attended to by a French doctor at the provincial hospital, then at the Korat, Thailand, U.S. military hospital. As a testament to the tragic incident, Alain still retains shrapnel in his body today. ⁶ Dennis Griffith had surgery to remove shrapnel from his leg. He also contracted serum hepatitis incurred from a tetanus injection given by a medic.

The next day, crewing Hotel-32, Mike Jarina and Bob Bedell delivered an inspection team from Udorn to Luang Prabang and then Nam Bac to further assess damage and necessary parts required for a one-shot ferry flight to Tango-08. RONing at Luang Prabang, Mike remained throughout Thursday taking parts and equipment to Nam Bac before relocating to Sam Tong. While at Site-203, he confirmed what others were discovering: there was an enormous amount of battle damage to Hotel-41. He was amazed at the extent of battle damage a H-34 could incur and still limp back to a friendly location. But-that is what pilots who flew one loved about the machine: its survival ability potential.

⁶ Note: During 2000, Mac Thompson was in contact with Marie-Colombe Wright (nee Perry). She was thinking about journeying to Southeast Asia to go up to Nam Bac. Years before Al Cates had forwarded a message to me from Marie, seeking information about the incident in which Steve was killed. I sent what I had at the time, but thinking the mental wounds had not healed did not pursue further contact. Apparently, I had done my homework. She was amazed at what I had sent through Al, and was interested to know, "*How that pilot knew so much?*"



Additional battle damage to Hotel-41 showing holes in the engine exhaust chamber.

Burke Collection.



Hotel-41 battle damage to electronics compartment radio and compass components.

Burke Collection.



Bullet grazed hydraulic damper reservoir mounted on top of Hotel-41's rotor head.

Burke Collection.

Captain Marius Burke and Flight Mechanic Ben Sabino arrived at Nam Bac on the 10th. Hotel-41 was not the only disabled ship there, for 545, a C-123B that had a right landing gear collapse on 18 October, was parked to one side of the runway, where a large group of mechanics was working on it. Since Stan Wilson and his team of mechanics were still replacing H-41's engine and changing damaged components, Marius spent the night at the site. Work continued into the next day. Everything within the airworthiness envelope and that deemed critical to flight was changed for the ferry flight. Tires, oil lines and pumps, rotor blades, and the like were installed. Next, the engine was started to check for engine or transmission chip lights and leaks from replaced lines. After rotor engagement, Marius performed servo checks and attempted to determine if the aircraft was controllable with acceptable vibration levels. At the end of the tests there was not enough fuel remaining in the forward tank to fly anywhere, so he shut down. All the tanks were manually topped off with drummed gasoline. The logic behind this was some of the fuel would feed forward to the self-sealing tank to the engine and not all would be lost.

The full tanks and numerous bullet holes resulted in fuel streaming from the center and aft tanks. Therefore, to lessen fire danger, troops were mustered and encouraged to push the H-34 forward while Burke cranked the engine, engaged the rotors, and rolled off the runway. Taking a calculated risk that the volatile 115/145 high octane fuel would not torch, Marius believed as long as the fuel was streaming behind him in forward flight, he was alright. Not wanting to make the modified takeoff again and strictly on his own without radios, he did not want to stop until reaching Udorn. He did, with Sabino lying on the cabin deck looking out the door to monitor the situation.

Frank Stergar was assigned to sling the old engine from Nam Bac to the Luang Prabang airport for transfer south. After minimizing his fuel load, he managed the lift.

Hotel-41 was in the barn for an extended period undergoing the time-consuming fuel tank change. Sheet metal experts patched fuselage holes and the ship was soon placed back in service. ⁷

UPCOUNTRY

While working and RONing at Sam Tong, Mike Jarina conducted forty-seven landings between 11 through 12 November. Landing at 5,000-foot elevated pads, he went to the old Momentum and White Star advisory site at Phou Chia (LS-25, ten miles south southwest of Khou Cacham (LS-04) on Route-13. Returning to the area, the Air Operations person at 20-Alternate sent him to Phou Langmou (LS-170), located ten miles north of the Sala Phou Koun Route-7/13 road junction, and close to the site of Charlie Jones' death the previous March. There was a flight to Tin Bong (LS-90) refugee village, seventeen miles west of Site-20. ⁸ The last mission on Friday was conducted to Pha Khao (LS-14) training site.

The next day, prior to deadheading to Tango-08 on new factory model Hotel-46, Mike conducted RO missions out of Moung

⁷Segment sources:
Bill Leary November 1966 Notes.
Marius Burke Interview.
EW Knight Email, 08/02/00, 08/03/00.
Bill Young Interview.
Mac Thompson Email, 10/19/96, 11/01/96, 02/23/97, 01/24/00.
Blaine Jensen Letter.
Frank Stergar Email, 04/10/97.
Mike Jarina Interviews.
Steve Nichols, *Air America in Laos: The Flight Mechanics' Stories*, Nam Bac-Operations Cleveland, 48, A Tragic Incident (as related by Dennis Griffith), 159-160.

⁸Fixed wing Captain Mat Daddio crashed a Porter at this site.

Soui in support of the Neutralist 85th Paratroop Battalion's effort to launch an attack on Phou Douak, located seven miles southwest of Lima 108. Overlooking parts of Route-7 leading toward Moung Soui, the site was deemed to have considerable strategic value.

ROAD WATCH

With the rainy season waning and the southeast monsoon in its last stages, by early November the Agency reported that close to forty Military Region Three road watch teams would be ready and operating in the field along eastern Panhandle infiltration routes by year end. An operation first sanctioned by Ambassador Unger in 1963, in contrast to Shining Brass cross border missions, CIA-sponsored teams were considered far more politically feasible than those emanating from South Vietnam. No "round eyes" accompanied the teams, and indigenous personnel were based in Laos. Ambassador Sullivan saw benefits of CAS (Agency) road watch teams, and endorsed continued expansion.

Since the relatively few USAF Pony Express helicopters based in Thailand were multi-tasked with counter insurgency, road watch, and other clandestine tasks, the increase in deployable teams ensured expanded Air America participation. However, the future asset requirements were not known yet by local Air America management, and the operation was still without adequate SOPs requiring dual cockpit crews and compensation for the extra hazardous work in denied areas.

On the 17th, Jarina and Joe Gaculais flew to Thakhet in Hotel-32 to participate in road watch missions. During an almost nine-hour, seventeen landing day, the first assigned mission was to a site nine miles northeast of Lima-40 and north of Route-12. Shuttles then commenced from Nakhon Phanom (Tango-50) to NKP (T-55-on the river), to Ban Done (LS-28), ninety-three miles north.

Additional shuttles were assigned three miles north northwest of Site-28.

The crew flew one fuel load to the same area the following day.⁹

Representative of the road watch work helicopter crews were performing in Military Region Three, before Thanksgiving, Charlie Davis left Udorn to await three other crews' arrival at Thakhet. Their mission was scheduled in the vicinity of the "Boot," a definitive landmark located along the east-west portion of the Bangfai River, and north of a line of mountains. (As we were increasingly assigned road watch responsibility, names like "The Battleship," "The Carrier," and "Boot" became important navigation mountain or river checkpoints for visual operations.) For upper Mugia Pass missions north of the "Boot," flight paths were generally plotted to cross Route-12 at a perpendicular angle to minimize AAA exposure. Then, when over the uninhabited mountains, flights would describe a semicircular pattern south to team landing zones.

Once briefed, and loaded with troops dressed in Vietnamese attire and supplies, flying single pilot and without armed escort, Charlie Davis, the crews of "Bing" Bengston, John Cooney, and Mike Jarina launched for the "Boot" area. Bypass Route-128 crossed the karsts south from Route-12 into the river valley where, running west, it joined with another portion of Route-12 and east into Route-23.

⁹ Memorandum Unger to Under Secretary of State (Katzenbach), Expansion Shining Brass Operations in Laos, 12/02/66, FRUS, #270. Mike Jarina Interviews. Victor Anthony, 212. EW Knight Email, 08/04/00.



Military Region Three topography east and north of Thakhet and Savannakhet in the remote road watch team areas of the Lao Panhandle.
Author Collection.

It was a cloudy, hazy, rainy day with low clouds generally obscuring treetops across the Bangfai River valley. Therefore, the H-34 pilots descended and began spreading out along the ridgeline to search for the landing zone. Suddenly, a division of A-4D jets from a Tonkin Gulf carrier unaccountability appeared. Through a break in the clouds, a jet whizzed through the helicopter formation and between two H-34s. Then another appeared on the opposite side. The Navy pilots were probably disoriented and surprised to see green machines displaying no markings. Taking no hostile action, the flight leader contacted Invert Control requesting a steer out of the area. The ground control intercept (GCI) controller asked him where the flight wanted to go. Lead, said, "*We want to go where you are.*"

Following that bit of fun, the mission continued without further incident. The gaggle of helicopters returned to Lima-40 and departed for other work areas. ¹⁰

MR-2

When Mike Jarina et. al. completed the Thakhet work on Friday, Mike refueled, had something to eat at Nakhon Phanom, and then flew to 20-Alternate. From there, he supplied Meo sites at Phou Pha Langmou (LS-170) and Houei Hong (LS-LS-200) north of Xieng Dat (LS-26), and the portion of Route-7 leading to the 7/13 road junction. Since the Neutralist parachute battalion (BP) captured Phou Douk on the 16th, precautions were taken by Vang Pao's troops to supply and reinforce likely pressure points where the Pathet Lao might react in response to the latest action. Finishing the day for AID, Mike went to MOUNG PHUN (LS-37) and RON at Sam Tong.

¹⁰Charlie Davis, *Across the Mekong*, 192-193.
Mike Jarina Interviews.

Prior to being relieved the following day, Mike returned to Site-170 to work the white Tango India (TI) pad. With this completed, he was directed east of Long Tieng to Padong and Phou Phai (LS-65) sites. From there, he flew further east to a site five miles west of Moung Mo (LS-182), and a point seven miles south-southwest of Tha Thom. Later in the afternoon he deadheaded to Udorn with Captain Tom Hoppe.

On the 18th, Tom Hoppe deadheaded to Sam Tong to Captain Hotel-44. On the day Jarina was relieved, Tom was assigned work at Na Khang. While flying northeast toward Houa Moung with a few monks onboard, the ship was struck by four rounds that neatly punched holes in the center and aft fuel tanks. The high velocity of the AK-47 rounds carried the missiles into the cabin section, and through the overhead bulkhead and honeycomb, nearly severing the tail rotor cables. After landing and assessing the leaks and battle damage, he ascribed his good fortune to the presence of the holy men. When he radioed the battle damage to Udorn, he was told to use the front tank for the remainder of the day and RTB that evening.

During his Air America tenure, all of Tom's battle damage occurred around Site-36, LS-85, or during the push on LS-58. On one occasion, he believed the enemy must have been close and watched him eat lunch, for, later in the day, they hit him several times. Another time, a .30 caliber round glanced off the magneto cover in the engine compartment. His Flight Mechanic, Rudy Serafico, reported over the ICS, *"Oh, it is like popping corn. I am hearing popcorn."*

Tom returned to Sam Tong on the 20th in Hotel-38. Over the next four days, he worked mostly out of Na Khang and Phou Pha Thi performing front line missions. One day he worked RO Moung Soui and other Neutralist positions on the fringes of the Plain of Jars.

Adverse weather plagued the region, greatly hindering interdiction attempts. Taking advantage of the lull in air strikes to move men and equipment forward, on the 24th, Pathet Lao battalions struck GM-17 in western Tha Thom Valley, which ended the day under enemy control. FAR units were flown in and RLAF T-28 pilots struck the unfriendly units. By Monday, after encountering minimum resistance, three FAR battalions moved into the town. Air had won the day with BDA of three dozen KIAs. Leaving the 75mm howitzers intact, it appeared the enemy was content with merely carrying off cases of hand grenades and M-1 ammunition. ¹¹

After rotating through Udorn and picking up Hotel-12, Hoppe spent the 25 and 26th flying out of Paksane. In addition to supporting efforts of the LS-11 aftermath, flights took him to a site 60 miles northeast on the border.

Toward the end of the month, he deadheaded to Pakse. RONing in town, Tom flew missions on the Bolovens for Customer Don Stephens at PS-22 (LS-190) until 1 December. Some flights took him to Attapeu and Site-165 to support the Nung training operation. Other missions were conducted to observations posts on the southern rim and north of Route-23. ¹²

EMBASSY REVIEW

Ambassador Sullivan cautioned his superiors that any prediction as to the future of Laos would necessarily prove unreliable. By midyear, Lao watchers espoused the belief that there had been excellent military and rural development progress

¹¹ Victor Anthony, 211, 212.

¹² Tom Hoppe Letter.

in the kingdom. This had been achieved with political and economic stability.

However, since June several developments had skewed this assessment. The September devastating flood would impact the nation for two years and cost about twenty-five million dollars. On the political front, the National Assembly was dissolved because of irreconcilable differences. There was dissatisfaction among the younger Lao elite. Turmoil in the military forces saw Kong Le ejected as the Neutralist leader and General Ma's exile.

Sullivan believed it was paramount that the Mekong Valley and other terrain currently owned by RLG be retained. Lobbying for continued military and paramilitary support, he pointed out that the 140 million dollars only required administration by a small number of U.S. military personnel.

The war's front lines were mostly located in northern regions. Activity in the south was fluid, but large RLG areas were held, along with increasing enemy military and civilian defections.

Souvanna Phouma was firmly in the Western camp, and it was imperative that he remain in power as the titular head of the neutral nation. In an upside, Soviet leaders also supported him.

As always in the Southeast Asian Theater, the outcome in South Vietnam would influence developments in Laos. Sullivan believed USG should "continue to march" and not change Lao policy. The AID effort needed to continue and other economic programs accelerated. ¹³

¹³ Telegram Ambassador William Sullivan to State, 11/18/66.

RETURN TO THAILAND

My cousin George Casterlin had given us a play pen with nylon side mesh for Rick. It was perfect for the Udorn environment. Since I planned to send it to Udorn along with other items like a jumper-walker device, Dad and I packed and took the large item to the local Netherwood post office. After measuring it, the elderly worker indicated it was an inch or so too large for shipment. My Father, a tall, wiry, imposing individual, could be very intimidating in relations with others. He also had been a salesman in New York City for years, with an innate ability for the gift of gab. Much discussion followed and finally the man agreed to bend the regulations and post the item.

By mid-November, I had received all the necessary paperwork required for the return trip to Thailand. We were ready. After the long vacation in the familiar, warm, and loving environment of my parent's home, sufficient time had elapsed for me to forget much of the stress, mental anxiety, and nasty incidents attached to combat flying. In addition, from all I could deduce, Americans were struggling to survive in the humdrum and mundane society. My job was quite interesting and provided far more satisfaction and income than anything I could hope for in the States. On the other hand, Tuie seemed well acclimated to her new surroundings and was reluctant to leave at first.

After last minute shopping, drawing money from the bank, and goodbyes completed, on the 16th, we journeyed by helicopter from Newark to Kennedy Airport to board Pan American One bound for Thailand over the Pacific route.

We arrived at the Tokyo Haneda Airport on Saturday and spent the night at a hotel close to the airport.

Landing at Kai Tak Airport the next day, we taxied to the Star Ferry terminal and sailed across the bay to the Hong Kong

Hilton. Nearly rejuvenated from jet lag after four nights and sightseeing at the Tiger Balm Garden, Victoria Peak, and other attractions, we moved on to Don Muang Airport outside Bangkok.

Tuie had written a letter to Judge Prasat's family apprising them when we were arriving at Don Muang. Unexpectedly, we were treated royally at the airport. When we exited the cabin door, Khun Yai and Prasat's family were waiting on the tarmac at the bottom of the portable stairs with fragrant jasmine leis and an abundance of good will. After picture taking was completed, a Pan American employee, engaged to the oldest of the three girls, rushed us through customs without the hassle of waiting and other associated annoyances.

Having contracted a cold during our journey, I did not feel well while in Bangkok. ¹⁴ Concerned about my expanding family, on the advice of my school chum Frank Blatz to nominate my parents as executors, I had a simple will prepared at the law firm of Tilleke and Gibbons, located on Suriwongse Road. The Lymans owned and represented the same firm that held the collateral for Jim Moore's transactions.

UDORN

During our absence, some of the wooden flooring in our kitchen area had dry rotted because of a lack of breathing space under the house. I had a discussion with Longmoun, who, envisioning the cash register ringing, wanted to replace the entire floor and charge us additional rent. However, as an alternative, Tuie arranged to have just the affected part repaired for next to nothing. A first impression was that not much else had changed at the Godnoma compound during the months we were gone.

¹⁴ Having to endure smoke and recycled air in the confined 707, it was unusual that all passengers were not sick after long flights.



Judge Prasat's youngest daughter, Nim, greeting us at Don Muang Airport with the traditional wai and fragrant jasmine lei. Tuie is holding a Civil Air Transport bag filled with goodies purchased along the way.

Author Collection.



Nim holding Ricky in the Don Muang terminal. Tuie at left displaying her lovely smile. Author with back turned wearing the obligatory attire for international travel.

Author Collection.

Checking in at the Air America facility I discovered there had been an incident at the Air Force base on Thanksgiving Day. A turkey dinner including all the trimmings was planned. The dressing sat out all night unrefrigerated. Consequently, everyone who ate at the base incurred food poisoning. It was so bad that the hospital was overwhelmed. People were placed in the chapel, theater, and any open, enclosed space that could be found. With insufficient medicine available to combat the organism, an emergency shipment was flown in from the Philippines. The cook was summarily fired.

Airman Morris Williams, who had ventured into town to have dinner with local friends, avoided the ailment. However, he was required to work overtime to take up the slack.¹⁵

Not much had been altered on our side of the runway that I could readily discern.

I considered it a major plus that we had taken the time to rest during various legs of our trip, for shortly after our return to Udorn, on the 28th, I was scheduled for night training in Hotel-15 with John Fonburg. As usual, the work entailed the standard five takeoffs and landings, coupled with an automatic direction finding (ADF) and ground control approach (GCA). Despite the long vacation, I felt "armchair comfortable" in the H-34, at least flying around the Udorn airfield. It was like I had never been away. The challenge of high-altitude mountain flying performance was something that would unfold later.

I did not have long to wait. Two days later I was scheduled for an upcountry RON at Sam Tong with Bob Bedell in Hotel-15. Except for a nagging backache, the cold had mostly dissipated and I was feeling much improved. Surprisingly, the day went well

¹⁵ Former Airman Morris Williams, Email.

and I had no problem conducting assigned missions. From my viewpoint, the situation seemed quiet, but from past experience, I knew this would surely not last.

INCIDENT AT BAN HOUEI SAI

During the late Fall at Lima-25, a typical Lao incident occurred. Two Pathet Lao men entered the small town to purchase supplies. Following an afternoon shopping, they entered one of two available restaurants to eat. The owner of the establishment, recognizing the men as Pathet Lao, contacted the local military, who arrived immediately to arrest them. Providing coordinates and numbers, the two intelligent individuals informed the FAR that Pathet Lao units were just beyond the northern hills, planning to attack the town at first light. The con worked perfectly. Shocked, the military types departed to inform their leaders at headquarters. The Pathet Lao finished their meal and casually walked out of town.

The small town of Ban Houei Sai was constantly besieged with rumors. Therefore, when word of a projected attack circulated, people panicked. A hasty decision to bring in troops was made at Luang Prabang. Seeing through the charade, AID representatives and Agency types at Nam Yu thought the move ridiculous. While Air America aircraft shuttled FAR troops in from near Luang Prabang to beef up the area, the entire town and many military personnel evacuated to Chiang Khong. Blaine Jensen and Tony Cattaruci remained in their homes. Americans with the Dooley Foundation Hospital chose to spend a very uncomfortable night sleeping with soldiers in the old French fort at the top of the hill.

When no attack occurred and the ploy was soon revealed for what it was--absolutely nothing--Tony Poe informed Lao authorities that the RLAF would have to ferry their troops back

to Luang Prabang. He would not authorize any money or scarce assets to do it.

Jose Castellanos, a Costa Rican doctor possessing a Latin temperament, was assigned to the Dooley Hospital. After the Pathet Lao fracas, Jose became excited and crossed the River to Chiang Khong. Since there was no transportation available, he had to walk from the Bungalow landing to the airstrip. Well primed by the combination of factors, upon encountering Flipse, he lit into him shouting, *"You people knew the enemy was going to attack the town and you came over here to hide and left us there to fend for ourselves."* The doctor's tirade continued for ten minutes, at which time, after totally expending his venom, he became silent.

Joe had been on the Thai side the entire time and knew nothing about the purported Pathet Lao attack. Countering Jose, he said, *"Jose, you are full of beans. Where did you hear that I said we would be the first to know of an attack? Remember, I took care of you the last time there was a similar incident. What exactly is going on?"*

That was not the end of the doctor's ill will toward Joe.

Despite taking chloroquine sulphate tablets for three years, Joe had been ill off and on with what was probably malaria. It might have been Falciparum, a serious cerebral malaria condition that missionary John Davis contracted on the Bolovens Plateau, and a type for which there was no viable prophylaxis or cure. At one time, the embassy doctor conducted bone marrow taps and several other tests without discovering a determining factor. Therefore, he would intimate the problem was in Joe's head and prescribe two weeks at the beach. This never did any good. The embassy medico frequently became angry with Flipse because "Jiggs" wife, Doctor McCreedy called to tell him what to do. As a German citizen practicing internal medicine, he

did not appreciate her advice. Joe would hear about this for the doctor normally said, "*Your girlfriend called...*"

Usually Joe would endure the resulting shakes and fevers for three to four days, and then go back to work. However, at the beginning of December, while having another attack "Tony Two" panicked and called the Vientiane office requesting an immediate medevac for Joe. This time he stayed at the Weldons' house for a few days and returned to Chiang Khong by 8 December.

BAMBOO

Marriage to local Southeast Asian women, called "going bamboo" by Westerners, was dealt with in a special way by USAID. When an employee submitted an application for marriage approval, he also completed a resignation form. This was required, pending a purported security background clearance on the woman, which would not be conducted without a resignation. Then, should an employee decide to marry without receiving a required security clearance, the resignation was implemented. Using this backdoor system, AID's hands were clean, and no one was terminated for marrying a local person.

Flipse had filed the specified paper-work almost a year earlier. During that period, the documents were "lost" twice. Additionally, the embassy failed to conduct the security check on Suzie. Furthermore, Joe had been advised that if he went ahead with the marriage without approval, he would spend the rest of his life working for AID in backwater places like Laos. Joe suspected the officials attempted to wear an employee down so they would abandon attempts to marry. ¹⁶

¹⁶ To my knowledge, such chicanery did not exist within the Air America organization. However, there was some bureaucratic difficulty in the American consular section of the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok obtaining American visas for Thai women.

Perhaps adding to Joe's problem, Suzie's uncle was a leading Pathet Lao representative in Vientiane, who later became the Pathet Lao ambassador to the Soviet Union. Joe hoped this communist affiliation would not be discovered and it would slide through the embassy.

Despite Flipse's disaffection with AID, he considered himself fairly independent. As evidenced by his Jeep repair work when first in Laos, he was a talented mechanic and had all his mechanics tools. He knew that if forced to resign from AID that within two days he would be in business fixing cars for the Vientiane foreign community. He considered this trade more valuable than his college engineering degree.

Finally deciding that he was not going to be pushed around by clerks anymore, he elected to act. With Sam (Soomphorn) and the civil official he retrieved from town present to witness and record the marriage, Joe and Suzie signed the marriage certificate the morning of 9 December on Bill Young's Bungalow porch. Because of AID's policy about not marrying locals and the threat to AID careers, he quit the organization at noon. By 1400 hours, with the marriage approved and sanctioned, he was rehired.

Somehow AID chief Phil Gillion worked out the problems. He called Joe saying he had permission to do something he had already accomplished. Many people thought Gillion allowed too many items to slip through the cracks, but when it came to assisting field employees, he excelled--and this was performed without fanfare.

Joe escorted Suzie to Chiang Mai in early January in anticipation of the birth of their first child. Toward the end of the month, when Suzie was in the hospital awaiting delivery,

Joe experienced another malaria attack. Feeling very sick, he left Chiang Khong and went to the mud-block house in Houei Sai. Then he walked up the hill to the Dooley Hospital to see Doctor Castellanos. Jose, still retaining animosity over the Pathet Lao incident, refused to treat Flipse. Therefore, with no alternative, Joe went home to sweat out the illness over a two to three-day period. After recovering and feeling better, he returned to work at Chiang Khong.

He brought his wife and daughter back to Chiang Khong by the middle of February, and remained until March, when he transferred to Vientiane.¹⁷

Xieng Lom was not considered part of Jensen's area of responsibility. Agency activities in that region were conducted from Luang Prabang. However, at Vientiane's request, he occasionally conducted rice drops close to the area. He flew over the area many times, but never touched the ground. Loren Haffner assigned a couple USAID types to conduct rural development work there for a number of years, but they eventually departed after a great deal of frustration, and much suspicion as to where the loyalty of people actually lay. Many AID personnel believed the area was always pro Pathet Lao, but AID workers there were never threatened or injured.

Tony Poe's troops had been expanding after Jensen arrived. Tony, his crew, and Blaine worked very closely together. He travelled a lot with them and spent time at Nam Yu. Tony was drinking heavily. Attempting to smooth out ruffled feathers, Blaine and Tony's men spent a lot of time travelling around the area.

¹⁷ Tom Hoppe Interview.
Blaine Jensen Letter.
Joe Flipse Emails, 05/13/97, 05/17/97, 06/14/97, 06/16/97.

The military situation was considered fairly quiet until the Chinese began to build the Beng Valley road. Everyone overreacted to that, particularly the Thai government. ¹⁸

¹⁸ Blaine Jensen Letter.

Despite nighttime efforts to interdict LOCs in upper Military Region Two by A-26 Nimrod pilots from the Nakhon Phanom air base, Meo road watch teams reported considerable numbers of enemy vehicles continuing to roll through Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang Provinces toward the Plain of Jars. At the time, in addition to the Pathet Lao battalions, 7,500 Vietnamese infantry and 5,000 enemy "advisors" were presumed to be active in Military Region Two. During December, when increased movement was noted toward Phou Pha Thi and Na Khang, after Meo New Year celebrations were over, Vang Pao initiated countermeasures.

The general was renowned for creating diversions when enemy forces began to converge on critical pressure points in Military Region Two. In this case, he directed ADC units from the Nong Khang (LS-52) region north of Sam Neua Town to move toward Moung Het (LS-13). Moung Het was located in a valley at the confluence of the Song Ma and Nam Het rivers. Only seven miles from the border, this site was considered a minor waypoint for traffic, supplies, and men moving south and east from Song La Province on Route-67. ¹

By 18 December, ADC troops north of Sam Neua Town moved into and seized Moung Het (L-13) for a time, without opposition. Although a coup for the government, the limited offensive did little to deter enemy troop unit movement toward major government bases at Sites 85 and 36. ²

¹We used this definitive area as a navigation checkpoint in June 1965 while entering Son La during the two-day Briggs SAR.

² Ken Conboy, 159.
Victor Anthony, 212.

I spent an additional three days working in Military Region Two. Flight time was fair, if one considered allowances for delays waiting for the early morning December fog to lift or dissipate. With each passing day, the constant pounding of even normal aircraft vibrations did nothing to alleviate the nagging pain in my back.

Mike Jarina arrived at Site-20 by C-123 on Friday to assume command of Hotel-39 with Flight Mechanic Willy Parker. Conducting twenty landings, Mike flew to various locations not far from Site-20. They included 20-Alternate, Ban Na, and Houei Ki Nin (LS-38), a few miles east of the Nam Ngum and Nam Pit. Additional missions were to Phou Khao (LS-14) and Moung Cha (LS-113), all east of Sam Tong.

RONs were abbreviated. While I flew one fuel load and was relieved on the third, and deadheaded home on Air America C-123 655, Mike went north to Na Khang, where he worked Moung Heim and the area, then Bouam Long (LS-88), and Phu Cum (LS-50).

After fog delays, he returned to Site-36 on Tuesday for shuttles to Pha Hang (LS-205), thirteen miles north northeast of Houa Moung (LS-58), where Vang Pao's men continued to reclaim territory lost earlier in the year.

With slightly improved weather, flight time doubled on the fifth. Working locally, after hopping over Skyline Drive into Alternate, Jarina went to Moung Oum (LS-22) in the valley northeast of Moung Cha. From Moung Oum he was directed to Khieu Manang (LS-192) further northeast of Site-22, where efforts were underway to ward off anticipated probes from leftover Pathet Lao stragglers from the Tha Thom operation. He likely delivered new recruits from these sites to Bouam Long and Phu Vieng (LS-06). Toward the end of the day, Mike returned to Tango-08. ³

³ Mike Jarina Interviews.

THE BACK PAIN WORSENS

My back bothered me mainly toward evening. This was accompanied by a dull pain in my lower left abdomen. Ill equipped to diagnose or treat such employee problems, Doctor Kao et. al. at the medical clinic attributed my problem to gas pains. Right. Not satisfied, I went across the runway to visit the Air Force doctor. Also puzzled, he ordered simple tests that revealed nothing. Therefore, he suggested I journey to Bangkok and obtain a barium enema and other more comprehensive tests. Although concerned, but embarrassed to ask Wayne for additional time off after such a long home leave and wanting to amass some flight time, I put this advice off too long. After hearing me complain, John Grassi suggested I perform exercises to strengthen the back muscles. Although exactly the right therapy, I did not want to incur any more pain and could not see merit in exercise at the time.

Ironically, my Father suffered from similar symptoms: sciatic nerve damage that required two weeks treatment in the Muhlenberg Hospital. From my description, he theorized the problem might be related to my kidneys and advised me to eliminate or reduce beer drinking.

Beside back problems, the Mustang had utterly spoiled us. Therefore, missing the luxury of an automobile, we began looking around Udorn for a used vehicle. Khun Ta had a friend who was a car dealer. He supposedly offered us a "good deal," a Mazda sedan for 2,500 dollars. I seriously considered purchasing it until discovering that it had formerly been utilized as a taxi and had accrued high mileage. Another time we looked at a new Russian-manufactured vehicle. The fire-engine red machine was solidly built, but parts were not readily available, so I rejected this also. A car purchase would have to wait.

AN EXTRAORDINARY EMPLOYEE

Chief communications specialist in Udorn, Shane Tang, was an interesting study in loyalty, job dedication, and to Western causes. During World War Two, Shane was attached to the Sino-American Cooperative Organization (SACO), a covert joint military effort between Americans and Chinese Nationalist forces working behind Japanese lines. He also served as a clandestine radio operator with the Chinese Expeditionary Forces at various sites in India and then in Chungking, China. Following the war, Shane worked as a radio operator for CNRRA Waterways Transport under the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. The position was actually a front for the Chinese Military Intelligence Bureau (MIB). When Mao's army began marching south in 1948, Shane relocated with his family from Shanghai to Taiwan. There he continued working with MIB radio operator stay-behinds on the mainland.

During the 1950s, Tang worked as a translator for the U.S. Naval Auxiliary Communications (NACC) Center, a CIA-based Taipei front organization.

When an opportunity with Air America arose, he journeyed to Southeast Asia and established the first flight-following radio station at Luang Prabang, Laos, on 1 December 1961.

Working his way to the top of the Company communications system, when many of his peers had been replaced by Thai radio operators, Tang began an inspection trip to established radio stations in Laos. His notes reveal what some of the conditions were like at the outstations in 1966.

On 3 December, he departed for Luang Prabang in Hotel-38. In his after-visit report, he noted that many changes had been effected since the early days. The crew of eight included operators, mechanics, a Jeep driver, and a laborer. All the men were living well in the radio shack and a dormitory equipped

with a refrigerator, toilet, bath, and air conditioning. All the equipment was in working order with backups for the single-side band and GMX radios.

At the end of the day, he departed for Udorn on Hotel-40.

Continuing inspection of Air America Lao radio stations, on the 13th Tang flew to Pakse in Hotel-43. He noted that Lima-11 was bustling with air activities. With Y.C. Lueng in charge, Chinese operators were still working at Pakse. Five men were undergoing training for the job. Considered Jacks-of-all-trades, some of the men engaged in filling parking lot pot holes. In addition to radio tasks, Y.C. procured fruits and vegetables for personnel in Vientiane, arranged transportation for Saravane and Attopeu radio operators, and dealt with Customer and local authorities. Other tasks included gravelling the compound and re-installing a barbed wire barrier.

From Pakse, Tang flew on STOL aircraft Papa Charlie Sierra (PCS) to Attopeu via Houei Kong. A six-minute walk was required from the Lima-10 airstrip to the radio station. Because Company policy did not allow Nationalist Chinese personnel to serve at outstations and front-line locations, radio operators were Filipino, Thai, or Lao ethnics. Two men were present, with the senior radio operator, Paitoon, on STO. The men endured primitive conditions and the area was littered with trash and high weeds. With no taxis or bus service available, the men were obliged to walk to meet aircraft or purchase early morning foodstuffs in town, a twenty-minute walk. Two sets of single-side-band (SSB) radios were available in the shack. Several beds on the front porch were reserved for local security police who slept there at night.

Attesting to the close proximity of enemy logistic trails to the south, at 1418 hours, Tang observed tiny specks diving on



Y.C. Lueng outside the Air America radio facility Pakse, Laos. Electronic weather monitoring equipment is housed in front. Radios are contained in building to left. Personnel barracks to the right.

Author Collection.

enemy positions, followed by discernable thuds and reverberations.

He later walked to town with Nit and Renayuth. Teng was unimpressed with the twenty stores comprising the settlement. While there, they stopped at the Filipino-staffed Operation Brotherhood clinic to visit radio operator Charjrid, who was ill with malaria.

Later, he RTB Lima-11 on Papa Charlie Sierra.

On Thursday, the PIC of Hotel-15 delivered him to Saravane. It took seven minutes to walk to the radio shack. Four men manned the equipment: Filipino Senior Operator Gabriel and three Lao or Thai ethnics. Since there were insufficient funds to hire a coolie, the surroundings were strewn with litter. Like at Attopeu, there was no transportation to the airstrip or town.

Teng departed L-44 on B-169 to spend his third night at Pakse.

He completed his inspection tour with two days in the Savannakhet area. At Lima-39, the three radio operators had no freezer, living quarters, or water tower. They relied on the Customer for water. Despite this, the men kept the station in very good condition.

On Saturday, he arranged a twenty-five-minute trip to MOUNG Phalane (Lima-61) with the Customer on Papa Delta Kilo. Four men manned the station, with Suwit the senior operator. Suwit requested one flight a week to effect personnel change and two URC radios to be used in case emergency evacuation was necessary. He needed funds to hire a coolie, purchase water, and repair the bicycle.

Located four kilometers from the town, the station was clearly a hardship post. The only option to obtain food was to intercept peddlers toting wares early in the morning.

With troops located 200 yards from the station, the local commanding officer was constantly borrowing, but never returning, fuel. Furthermore, when jets circled overhead, the commanding officer called to request the ROs to contact the planes and remind them not to drop bombs on them.

His trip complete, he returned to L-39 on Papa Delta Kilo (PDK) and Udorn on 576. ^{4,5}

UPCOUNTRY

On 4 December, Tom Hoppe tested Hotel-37 several times for a total of forty-two minutes. Within two days, he departed Udorn in Hotel-38 for Luang Prabang. During the day an F-4 went down north of Luang Prabang. Since Hoppe was single crewed, the Customer was reluctant at first to dispatch him to the crash site. Even though the SOPs were not satisfied, he eventually launched toward TJ7285, a point two miles north of Route-192 and thirteen miles northwest of Dien Bien Phu, North Vietnam. While orbiting the area, he spotted two pilots. He reported this finding over the high frequency net, but was informed not to attempt a pickup, but to wait for Jolly Green arrival. ⁶

The rescue was eventually conducted by USAF helicopters without incident, but the experience was bittersweet to us. To my knowledge, this SAR was unique in that for the first time American pilots had been sighted on the ground by an Air America asset and an order issued to the pilot not to retrieve them.

⁴ Within a little more than a year, the facility at Mounng Phalane became a war statistic.

⁵ Shane Tang's report on Company outlying radio stations.

⁶ Tom correctly followed established SOPs, but with American lives at stake, some pilots in our organization would have first attempted a rescue and then accepted whatever consequences management might have dealt.

Despite the advent of USAF rescue capability, we were all aware that minimum pilot time on the ground was the paramount factor in any SAR situation. Namely, in the interim between Hoppe's sighting and the Jolly's arrival, the pilots could have been killed or captured. It was a bone of contention ripe for plucking between local Air America management and Air Force brass, but as other tasks assumed precedence, the episode was not pursued and soon forgotten.

On Tuesday, Tom flew supply missions out of Nam Bac. These included a fire base on the heights of Mok Lok (LS-131), located on high ground about eight miles south, and a site in proximity to the Bak River leading east to the Nam Ou near Ban Na Khon. Another trip took him to the large mountain mass east southeast of Site-203.

During the last day of his RON, before returning to Udorn, Hoppe was directed northwest of the royal capital to the Phou Samphan area. Other flights included trips thirty-three miles west of LP to a large valley ten miles east of Bouam Lao, and one eighteen miles northwest of Lima-54 to the lower end of the Phou Samphan range. ⁷

Prior to his annual leave, Mike Jarina followed Hoppe to Luang Prabang. RONing at Lima-54, flying Hotel-46 with Flight Mechanic Dave McDonald, he conducted missions exclusively out of Nam Bac from 14-17 December. While performing forty-two shuttles on Thursday, he encountered ground fire, but incurred no battle damage. ⁸

⁷Tom Hoppe 1996 Letter.

⁸ Mike Jarina Interviews.



75mm pack howitzer fire base at Mok Lok (LS-131) in the mountains south of Nam Bac.

Thompson Collection.

ROAD WATCH

On the eighth, I deadheaded to Thakhet via Savannakhet on Continental Porter PDK. Arriving at Lima-40, I assumed command of Hotel-40 with "Fat" Frank Fee as my Flight Mechanic. During my extended home leave Air America had hired several American Flight Mechanics. Fee was one. Along with other H-34 crews, we performed a late road watch mission and returned to Lima-39 for the night.

The next day we teamed up with Pony Express pilots to deliver troops to a remote location near the trails and then returned to Udorn.⁹

By December, with additional teams trained and deemed available for Trail work, the Agency station wanted to deploy a minimum of ten teams south of the Panhandle area. Therefore, mission frequency steadily increased for both Air America and USAF helicopter crews.

Except for experimenting with a few landings in denied areas closer to the area of operations, team infiltration remained basically the same. The men would be dropped several miles from an assigned watch area, and then walk to the site, where a command post (CP) would be established in the rear of the target area, and laced with mines and listening devices. A forward observation post was selected overlooking a section of Trail. Two men manned the outpost at night and recorded details of any observed movement. After they returned to the CP in the morning, the team leader collated pertinent information for the radio operator to relay by Morse code over RS-1 or RS-48 radios to the controlling riverside station, and then to AB-1 Udorn. Udorn in turn passed the dated intelligence to 7/13 Air Force for strike consideration.

⁹ Unfortunately, I failed to log the helicopter landing zone coordinates.

By the third week in December, a new, simpler electronic device, HARK, was issued to a team. However, it was not fully deployed and utilized until 1967.

All team reports were condensed for sector analysis by trained Vientiane people, who forwarded the info to interested parties.¹⁰

FUN IN THE NORTH

Charlie Davis and Pat McCarthy were asleep at Na Khang on the 15th. It was their third night RONing at the site, and Charlie was looking forward to relief or a night at Sam Tong. Thus far, the RON had been uneventful, with an O-1 Birdog pilot arriving daily to scout the area and direct occasional air strikes. Jolly Green helicopters and crews were also generally present for a few hours during most days to assume SAR tasks. Because of increased security concerns that had recently been an issue in the area, these assets did not remain overnight at Site-36, but returned to Long Tieng or Udorn. It was not the same for Air America helicopter crews, who were required to RON and evacuate the Customer if the situation warranted.

During early morning the men were jolted awake by an explosion, followed by staccato reports of automatic fire, and people rushing by the hooch. Preparing for the worst possible scenario, the crew quickly dressed and took precautions should it become necessary to vacate the premises toward the Mounng Heim Valley. Charlie strapped on his Smith and Wesson insurance. For personal reasons, Pat objected to carrying a weapon and was one of the only Flight Mechanics to do so.

¹⁰ COS Ted Shackley, 145-146.
Tom Ahern, 258.

Finally, when the hubbub ceased Jerry Daniels arrived speculating that an enemy patrol probing defenses probably was shooting from the tree line across the rice paddies to the east. Such excitement at Na Khang was not particularly unusual, and had previously occurred to many of us. However, it displayed a continuing enemy presence, and marked a harbinger of activity soon to be unveiled at the site. ¹¹

Continuing the latest diet of short upcountry RONs, I left Udorn with new Flight Mechanic John Simmons in Hotel-37. Spending the night with us at Sam Tong, Charlie Davis got his wish for better accommodations and a peaceful night sleep. After two days of fair flight time, I was called home for a required maintenance inspection. Although a short RON, I was not unhappy to leave, for something was not quite right with the engine, which seemed underpowered.

KUALA LUMPUR

For us less-than-patient investors involved in the Asian American and Concrete Masonry Kuala Lumpur enterprises, the future outlook did not look promising. Initial delays in receiving equipment, high unforeseen startup costs, and our faith in the Managing Director had waned. From the beginning, violating principals of a new business, a serious mistake had been made by not dedicating an emergency fund to tide the business over for an extended period. Now, after a long period of silence, Jim Coble indicated to us that cash flow was not generating sufficient money to continue to produce cement blocks required for existing contracts. Jim maintained that the current problem required recapitalization to rectify the situation.

¹¹Charlie Davis, 195-197.



Part of the Sam Tong dining room. Flight Mechanic John Simmons left. Center individual believed to be a Flight Mechanic. Author slumped at right is thoroughly enjoying and attempting to consume all the facility's ice cream.

John Tarn Collection.

Until recently, reports from Kuala Lumpur had been rosy, with government contracts in place and production underway. Since Jim had been closed-mouth about this latest predicament, we were skeptical as to the real issues and what was actually occurring in the business. Therefore, Coble made a special visit to Udorn in December to better explain the problem and seek additional funds from the original investors. Jim, as usual, was convincing, but loath to commit new funds and desiring to protect our interests, we collectively elected to visit Kuala Lumpur to view the situation first hand. Therefore, we planned a trip there in late January.

After Jim departed for Kuala Lumpur it was time for deliberation. Those of us available held a meeting in Wayne's office. We agreed that something tangible had to be done to save the business. Any fresh capital from local KL investors would certainly dilute our percentage in Concrete Masonry, the primary holding of Asian American. And we were concerned that local investors outside our group would acquire future profits and we would not enjoy much gain. However, not all our people, including myself, were excited about placing additional funds in the business. We recognized that some sort of control had to be placed on Coble, and we were not as confident in him as in the beginning of the project. His record keeping was horrible, and the job he was doing did not meet our original expectations. Caught "between a rock and a hard place," without a viable replacement, we could not afford to fire Jim.

KNIGHT

Taking a break from tedious office duties Wayne Knight spent several days upcountry in December. Some flights incorporated periodic checks for line pilots and a brief peek at road watch missions in Military Region Three. Beginning with

Captain Ivar Gram, he journeyed to Savannakhet to conduct very important person (VIP) trips to Seno (L-46), Ban Dong Hene (LS-54), and Moung Phalane (LS-61), where Air America maintained a remote radio station.

Thursday was a long day of over twelve hours. Working on road watch missions and shuttles with Steve Stevens, they refueled and briefed and debriefed with the Pony Express pilots at Nakhon Phanom, flew from Thakhet to Ban Done, and RON at Lima-39.

The next day a mission commenced at Moung Phalane. Another was directed to Ban Song Khone (LS-77), twenty-three miles north of Nhommarath, eight miles east of Route-8. After fueling at NKP and conducting a long-range mission to Ban Done, they returned to Udorn well after dark.

On Monday, flying three different H-34s, Wayne and Bobby Nunez flew to Sam Tong and Na Khang to swap aircraft and return a ship for maintenance.

On Christmas morning the PIC of PC-6C Porter, N193X, lost an engine twenty-two miles northeast of Vientiane, on the flood plain extending from the Mekong River to the Ritaville mountain range. ¹² Even though Ritaville was in the hands of the RLG, a wide band of mountainous area, narrow valleys, and ravines to the north had always been a mass of tangled jungle growth, and people considered to be government dissidents. In fact, during the early 1960s a 12.7mm gun was reputedly staged there. No weapon was actually ever discovered, but most of us generally gave the area a wide berth unless sufficient altitude could be achieved. If not, I diverted west where transit could be achieved at a lower altitude. The people in this area never rallied to the government side. They preferred to be left alone

¹²Coordinates TF7708, fifteen miles southeast of LS-53, two miles south of the Nam Ngum, and close to the hamlet of Ban Na Bong.

to their own designs. Except for a few weak attempts to pacify the region, the people were always considered suspect.

Knight was enjoying Christmas with his family when a request from Vientiane maintenance arrived through Udorn Operations to recover all or a large part of the Porter ASAP, for enemy patrols often wandered through the lowlands close to Ritaville. Generally, family members were not scheduled to fly on Christmas and single men took up the slack upcountry. This policy was reversed during New Year. Because Wayne did not want to impose on anyone at home, he decided to take the flight. With help from the recovery team, he managed to salvage most of the plane.

Toward the end of the month, RONing one night at Sam Tong, Wayne provided line checks to Jerry McEntee and Danny Carson. He and Jerry worked close to Site-20 at Khang Kho (LS-204) and Ban Nam Moh (LS-207), an early refugee village twenty miles southeast of Long Tieng. We also referred to this site as "Pearson's Pad." A late flight took them to Bouam Long.

On the 29th, he and Danny worked to the east at Padong (LS-05), Pha Phai (LS-65), and Moung Oum (LS-22).¹³

TOM HOPPE GOES WEST

Tom became increasingly disenchanted with his job and sensed that he would leave Air America sooner than later. Believing USG would not win the war unless North Vietnam was obliterated, he considered anything he attempted to accomplish just prolonged work. Therefore, during a CONUS vacation he began looking for more permanent employment in the airline industry.

¹³ EWKnight Emails, 08/03/00, 08/06/00.

Several other items bothered him about the Air America job. He detected a certain amount of hostility between management and the pilot group. While crews were taking chances with their lives upcountry, blasé management was still attempting to operate the Company like a military organization. One galling axiom was that they could always hire another person to perform the job. He considered this attitude very cold and uncaring, an us-against-you stance. On the other hand, in the case of a serious accident or incident like the Wilderom shooting, management would always inquire as to crew wellbeing.

Tom lived in the Chet compound next to Knight, and considered Wayne an easy going, very likeable person with somewhat limited authority. Abadie, however, never enamored with his dry, warped humor, was quite cold in dealing with him.

Scheduling and coordination of crews was another issue. If not departing with a machine from Udorn, crew exchanges and movement was not always smooth deadheading to a main base or a field location. Depending on where relief was effected, the return sometimes was problematic. Tom recalled spending an entire day at Na Khang waiting for a ride south. He finally obtained a ride to Udorn on a USAF Jolly Green.

Hoppe's unhappiness with scheduling and lack of planning at crew expense came to a head when he deadheaded to Thakhet, where he was supposed to relieve Captain Jim Williams. Upon arrival he discovered that Williams had left for Savannakhet. When he did not return to Lima-40, Tom suspected that Williams had arranged a trip there to avoid being relieved. Once there, Williams continued to work for the Customer. This was a trick some pilots employed to quickly amass the targeted seventy hours, which resulted in spending fewer days upcountry and more time at home. Despite using the emergency radio to call other aircraft

regarding William's disposition or a ride to Lima-39, eight hours elapsed without anyone arriving.

Considerably roiled, toward evening, Tom elected not to spend the night at Thakhet. Instead, he crossed the river on one of the many boats available to ferry a free flow of individuals to either side (Thakhet was a tax-free port for many luxury items). Seeing his survival pack, Thai customs, thinking he had been shot down, passed him through the checkpoint without a problem. Tom went into town, had dinner, and obtained a hotel room.

The next morning, he hired a samlor to the market and boarded an orange Mercedes bus for Udorn. The bus was fully loaded. Seats designed to accommodate only two people had three abreast. The conductor sat on top of the bus with all the chickens and freight. Stopping frequently to discharge people and pick up others, the vehicle took all day getting to Udorn. At one time, the bus driver and a truck raced down the narrow road. The passengers thought this was hilarious. Tom was petrified.

Arriving in Udorn the early evening, he took a samlor to the base and entered the Club, where Jim Williams spotted him and asked what he was doing there. The entire episode had been a comedy of errors. Somehow there had been a mistake. Jim, who thought Hoppe was on the way to Savannakhet, had left the machine parked there and deadheaded to Udorn. ¹⁴

Characteristic of his droll humor, Tom submitted an expense form to Wayne for nine hours deadhead pay and the cost of the bus ticket. The CPH had no intention of approving Hoppe's expense request. Instead, for fun, he bucked the form upstairs

¹⁴ Normally pilots relieved on station face-to-face before departing for home.

to Abadie. Never appreciating humor in such blatant manipulation, Ab came unglued when he saw it. He was in a funk for some time.

Strike three. On 20 to 21 December, Tom worked at Savannakhet and Thakhet. The first day was slow, with few landings. Missions took him to a position eight miles east of Moung Phalane and the hills sixteen miles north of Site-61.

Friday was a little more active. Working out of Nakhon Phanom and Thakhet, he took a road watch team northwest of Grove Jones (LS-141); another thirty miles north of Site-40; and one more to Pha Sangouy, forty miles northeast of Thakhet. Before leaving for Udorn, he was assigned two drop locations near the "Y" pad.

In a quick turnaround, Tom was scheduled on Thursday to return to Thakhet. Maintenance had been feverishly working on Hotel-37, trying to get someone to take the underpowered machine upcountry. Such notable old timers as Charlie Weitz and others had already turned it down. Going down the list of prospective pilots, the aircraft was assigned to Tom. Wayne indicated that whatever was previously wrong had been corrected, but admitted that the helicopter did require more power than most to hover. Tom ran it up, and after performing required checks, rose to a hover and ascertained that in fact it did take about five inches more manifold pressure than other aircraft to maintain a no payload hover. Mechanics checked carburetor screens and engine chip detectors for debris or metal. The magnetos were examined. Finding nothing wrong during the cursory examination, maintenance declared Hotel-37 acceptable to fly. Tom, who admittedly was not the sharpest tack in the box regarding maintenance problems, complained that the machine did not seem right. However, realizing that they had a live one, both

maintenance and operations refused to give Tom another ship and finally persuaded or intimidated him into accepting Hotel-37.¹⁵

Assigned a two-ship mission shuttling refugees, he and Captain Verne Clarkson departed Thakhet for a site twenty-two miles northeast, just north of the Phou Nok Kok range and south of Route-8. Tom could barely carry four people, whereas Verne carried eight back to Site 40A, a strip well removed from town. Concerned, Tom told Verne they should scrub the rest of the mission, for he was returning the helicopter to Udorn. The power plant was too weak and he was not comfortable working it over hostile terrain.

When Verne objected, Tom replied, *"What are you going to do if I have an engine failure? If I go down, you will have to dump your people and pick me up. I wonder why I took this ship in the first place, and why maintenance never changed the engine."*

Tom was airborne, about ready to RTB Udorn via NKP when Verne coaxed, *"Why don't you perform just one more trip, then we will go back to Tango-08?"*

Tom reluctantly agreed to conduct another shuttle, but said, *"What really is the point? I can only carry three to four people."*

In a climb a few miles northeast, the engine began coughing, running rough, and blowing oil. When Tom called below for an assessment, his flight mechanic began cursing and shouting, *"Smoke is pouring out the exhaust stacks! It looks like we swallowed a valve!"*

Marius Burke, working in the area, heard Clarkson screaming at Hoppe that the engine was smoking badly and to land ASAP.

¹⁵ Management kept special fishhooks in their tackle boxes for this purpose.

Calling the GCI unit at Nakhon Phanom with his predicament, Hoppe autorotated Hotel-37 into a rice paddy and shut down. Now, because of management's unwillingness to listen to a line pilot, there was a helicopter unnecessarily on the ground in no man's land and requiring an engine change. Clarkson retrieved the crew and ferried troops to the site for security. While returning to Udorn, Tom noted that the Bob Hope Christmas show was in progress at the air base. If he had left for Udorn when he planned, the engine would probably have quit directly over the base. ¹⁶

Within a short time, a C-123 ferried the mounted quick engine change stand, an "A" frame assembly, and mechanics to NPK. A H-34 pilot slung the engine and team to the site. It was flown back to Udorn, where Wayne thoroughly tested it on the 26th.

Tom was anything but a happy camper. The incident constituted the last straw in his short Air America career. After a short deliberation, he considered that he had performed his part, but felt that management had seriously let him down. It appeared that superiors were willing to unduly risk crew's lives to save a few dollars and man hours, and this incident ended costing far more in the long run than changing an engine at the base. Only a single engine aircraft, in the wrong place it could have been far more costly in injuries and broken machinery. Therefore, in an early New Year resolution, Hoppe resolved to leave the employ of Air America. This he did on 31

¹⁶ The Bob Hope shows rotated from base to base in Thailand. In 1966, Joey Heatherton, Phyllis Diller, Vic Damone, and Anita Bryan along with the Korean Kittens, and the Les Brown Band were in the show. It was one of the few trips Bob Hope's wife and daughter accompanied him.

Courtesy of Morris Williams.



Hotel-37 undergoing a field engine change northeast of Thakhet, Laos. A portable "A" frame and hoist were utilized to effect the change. Stan Wilson supervising a mechanic preparing the tub for the new engine.

Marius Burke Collection.

December 1966. ¹⁷

LOCAL CONCERNS

A probe or outright attack on the strategic Udorn airbase by enemy troops had been expected for some time. Before Christmas there was increased radio traffic from Hanoi Jane that the Udorn base was going to be attacked, that the Air Force men were expendable, and the communists were going to eat Christmas dinner on base. The brass was nervous and ordered guard stations established at one-mile perimeter locations in the jungle around the base. Since Thailand was supposedly neutral and Americans were guests in the country, the men were ordered not to carry firearms on guard duty. Colonel Shook refused to participate in the exercise unless his men were allowed to carry a weapon. Therefore, the men were issued a bayonet and a pouch of M-16 ammunition. Every other outpost maintained a radio to call a truck loaded with M-16s in the event of trouble.

The first night, Morris Williams was standing guard duty on the flight line with his bayonet. Suddenly, another person approached his position. While holding his bayonet behind his leg, despite the dark, Morris could see the man wore a uniform and had a weapon. He said something to the airman, who yelled, "yut!" The stranger made a call over a radio. Soon it was established that the man was a Thai Air America guard who had not been informed that USAF personnel were standing guard during this period.

¹⁷ Tom Hoppe Interview, Landmark Hotel, Metairie, LA, 07/08/96.
Tom Hoppe Notes Written Summer and September 96.
Tom Hoppe Letter, 11/05/96.
EW Knight Email, 06/2400.
Marius Burke Email.

There was no attack at this time; that would occur later. ¹⁸

THE FIRST THAI H-34 PILOTS ENTER THE SYSTEM

Since I had Christmas off the schedule and was low on total flight time for the month, I expected another upcountry RON to extend through New Year's Eve. On the 28th I left Udorn for six days in the field. Accompanying me in Hotel-30 were First Officer Sarisporn (Sariphanh) Bhibalkul and Flight Mechanic Dick Conrad. Sarisporn was the first of two Thai pilots hired by Air America. Boonrat Com-Intra was the second pilot. Long pressured by the Thai host government to employ qualified indigenous people, Air America finally complied with the original agreement to begin fulfilling a quota. Beside RTG requests for employment parity, more likely the primary reason for the hiring was that the AB-1 Customer wanted "non-round eye" pilots in the field, able to communicate with indigenous Lao road watch teams during infiltration-exfiltration missions. It was considered a good idea that training allies to a standard proficiency and attitude would allow integration for joint efforts. Also, it was well known that Thai people were reluctant to say no, therefore, Customer missions would rarely be refused. As additional Thai pilots filtered into the H-34 program there was some trouble with the RTAF over the recruitment, but it was the Agency, not Air America, who was involved in the actual hiring. Potential problems were smoothed over by Bill Lair and JLD's General "THEP," who originally hired the men. Highly experienced pilots, both men were shortly upgraded to Captain and dispatched to Savannakhet to work for Chief of Unit (COU) Tom Fosmire. As they lacked high altitude experience, local management assigned them

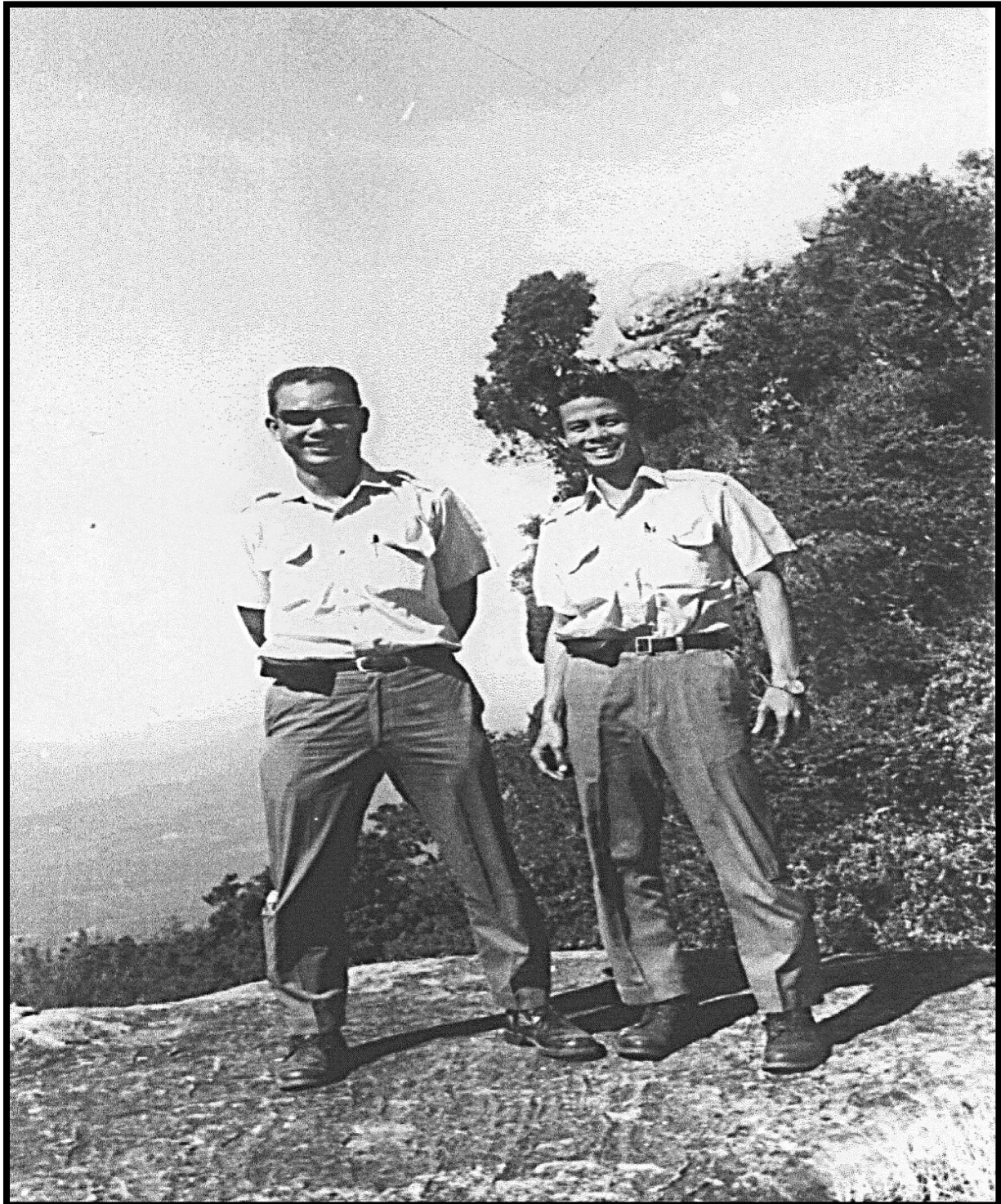
¹⁸ Morris Williams Email.

work at lower elevations before shifting to more difficult mountain terrain.

Formerly Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) pilots, both men possessed a wealth of familiarity in several types of military and civilian aircraft, both fixed wing and rotorcraft. Curiously, Boonrat graduated from the Bangkok Drama School with a major in music. He received flight training at the Korat flying School, and served with the RTAF's 63rd Squadron at Don Muang. He had been on loan to the RLAF in the early days of the Lao war flying clandestine T-6 missions in Laos. He was shot down on one mission at Tha Thom while engaging PL forces. A PARU unit attached to Phoumi's army rescued him north of Paksane. Flying for Bird and Son from 1964 to 1966, he flew transports and the twin-engine Dornier for the now defunct Boun Oum Airways (BOA). Seconded to Bird and Son, Boonrat also trained on and flew the Air America G-model Bell helicopter in the Mugia Pass area, until it crashed during the first mission.¹⁹

Because of his proficiency and ability manipulating the H-34, at the request of management, I allowed Sarisporn to fly in the right seat while I navigated. This decision was not totally unselfish, for I wanted to rest my back as much as possible and considered that not hunching over the cyclic might satisfy that scenario. Flight time varied considerably from day to day. We worked all three contracts, USAID, RO, and 713. Sarisporn was a pleasure to fly with, for he was congenial, spoke good English, and, with my coaxing, he had no major problems with either flying the helicopter or completing assigned missions. As the RON progressed, I increasingly had trouble climbing up the side of Hotel-30 into the cockpit. By the final day, I was ready to

¹⁹ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 178, 181 fn 52.
Bill Leary October 1966 Notes.
EW Knight Emails, 08/04/00, 08/08/00, 08/09/00.



H-34 Captain Boonrat Comintra and Flight Mechanic Tombaiyai standing on the edge of an outlying mountain site.
Jarina Collection.

head south, for I could barely climb eight feet into the left seat; it was just too painful.

Because of my physical problems and transfer out of the H-34 program into Bells the following year, I soon lost contact with Sarisporn. ©

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