

**RICE, REFUGEES, AND  
ROOFTOPS**

**AIR AMERICA, INC.**

**BOOK EIGHT**

**1967**

**BUDDHIST ERA 2510**

**YEAR OF THE SHEEP**

---

Harry Richard Casterlin

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1. JANUARY	6
One of Our Own Returns from Purgatory	9
Houa Phan	20
Engagement at Na Khang	24
A New Road Watch Program Techniques	42
Jim Rhyne	54
Photo Intelligence	55
A Pain in the Back	60
The Event	63
Relief at Last	65
Mike Jarina	69
Trail Watch Logistics	71
Route-110	81
Arc Light	82
CHAPTER 2. ENEMY PROBES	86
Additional Attacks	94
CHAPTER 3. RETURN TO FLIGHT DUTY	97
USG Bombing Interlude	99
Electronic Bombing Aids	103
Pha Thi Mountain	106
Knight	114
Military Region-1	114
Attempts at Standardization	117
Back on the Line	118
A Spy in the Mix	119
Another Moment of Truth	128
Pakse	134
Bolovens Plateau	142
Kong Mi	152
Doug Swanson	155
Military Region-3	159



## CONTENTS

	Mac Alan Thompson	160
	Nam Bac	164
	Commodities	178
	Illicit Drugs	180
CHAPTER 4.	MARCH	185
	Udon	189
	Mail Problems	190
	Nam Bac	192
	Attack	193
	Southern Trails	200
	HASP (HARP)	205
	Frank Bonasinga	210
	Pakse	217
	Special Operating Group	224
	The Demise of the WAPI Project	226
	Military Region-2	231
	The First Bell Arrives in Udon	233
	Udon	238
	The Hot Season Cometh	242
CHAPTER 5.	SPRING	245
	Monsoon Plans	257
	Time Off	260
	The Consequences of Hitler's Revenge	267
	The Burmese Connection	280
	Nam Yu	292
	Jarina	295
	Bingo	303
	Military Region-3	305
	Moung Phalane	306
	Knight	308
	Luang Prabang	310
	SEATO and ANZUS	321

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER 6.	MAY	330
	Intel	330
	Pakse	333
	Kong Mi	338
	Shock	341
	Weather Modification	345
	Knight	348
	Nam Yu	349
	Military Region-2	355
	Bangkok	357
	Embarrassment at Nam Bac	359
CHAPTER 7.	MIDYEAR	365
	Jarina	366
	Thakhet Operations	368
	Ban Na Tan	374
	Team Resupply	378
	On Mark	380
	Operation Samakhi	386
	Pakse	393
	Knight	397
	Captain Jarina	399
CHAPTER 8.	JULY	410
	Thompson	415
	Upcountry	420
	Initial Flight in Bell Helicopter	432
	H-34 Loss	437
	Military Region-4	441
	Missions	443
	Jarina	458
	Luang Prabang	465
	New Digs	470
	Hot Sauce	478
	Military Region-3	483
	Udorn	485
	No Rest for the Weary	491

## CONTENTS

	Battle Plans	493
	Mike	495
	Pakse	497
	Strife in the Golden Triangle	503
CHAPTER 9.	LOSSES	510
	Cooney and Bruce	518
	Upcountry	524
	A Rare Abort	529
	Chuck Taylor's Ordeal	536
	Udorn	543
	Jarina	547
	Military Region-2	551
	Thompson and IVS-AID Projects	554
	Souvanna Phouma in Washington	563
	Jarina's Shuttles	567
	Vichit in Ban Houei Sai	569
	Snake Bitten MR-1	573
CHAPTER 10.	SEPTEMBER	577
	Jarina and Knight- Drug Trafficking	580
	John Ford has Problems	584
	Kuala Lumpur Trip	588
	Stateside Discontent	593
	Upcountry	599
	The Glovers	606
	Jarina's Activity	610
	Big Bells	615
CHAPTER 11.	FALL	630
	Mission Addenda	638
	Jarina	641
	Improvements at Pha Thi	643
	The Frog Eats the Moon	649
	Security at Site-85	654
	Captain Mike	657

## CONTENTS

Larry Taylor	661
Nam Bac	664
Bell Upgrading	667
Knight	669
CHAPTER 12. NOVEMBER	672
Enemy Trail Recapitulation	673
Increasing Mission Requirements	677
Interdiction Controversy	680
Missions	683
Military Region-1	693
Military Region-2	694
Gary Gentz	697
Steve Nichols	698
Upcountry	700
Jane Glover	705
The Wild Weasel	708
Rescues	711
Sequel	715
Air Rescue	717
Home in Udorn	722
Upcountry-Mission Abort	723
Jarina in the Dark	724
Where Are We?	727
Photo Recon and Recovery	736
Down South	746
CHAPTER 13. YEAR END	749
Rumbles Within the Family	756
Pilot Demise	759
Strike	762
Trouble at a TACAN Site	767
Home in Udorn	767
Jarina and RONS	769
Down Country	773
Ramasun Intercept Station	775
Mid-Month Situation Throughout Laos	779
Activity in Northwest MR-1	784
Flipse and Jensen Aftermath	789

## CONTENTS

Action in Military Region-2	793
Jarina Returns to MR-2	796
Trouble in Kuala Lumpur	798
Reversals in the Christmas Season	804
Aftermath	811
Papa Foxtrot Hotel	820
EPILOGUE	828
BIBLIOGRAPHY	x
GLOSSARY	X
Photographs	
Pisidhi Indradat	18
Southeast Face of Phu Pha Thi	21
Marius Burke, Bill Murphy, and Don Sjostrom	29
Air America C-45	51
Air America Volpar	52
Fixed Wing Captain Berl King	57
Club Party showing Beng Bengston	79
Battle Damaged T-28s at Luang Prabang	90
Pat McCarthy and Dan Carson	92
Southeast Pha Thi and Village	108
Author Watching Radio Technician	122
Author during Operations	123
Agency Team with Direction Finding Equipment	126
Gaza Eiler with Recovery Apparatus	130
Hotel-47 Awaiting an Engine Change	131
Hotel-47 North of Udorn	132
Byrne, Potter, DeVito, Goodwin at LP Radio Shack	135
Abadie and Knight at Pattaya	137
Waterfall on the Edge of the Bolovens Plateau	143
PS-22 Airstrip	147
Lave People at Kong Mi	154
Nakhon Phanom USAF Base	161
A-1E Aircraft at Nakhon Phanom	162
Nam Bac Air Strip	166

## CONTENTS

Mac Thompson at Nam Bac	167
Army Chinook Crew Approaching to Sling a 105mm	171
Col. Kamphay and Haffner at Pho Kho	172
Kamphay at Nam Bac	173
Kamphay Inspecting Nam Bac Defenses	174
Fire support Base at Mok Lok	175
Kamphay and Thompson taking a break	176
Kiddie Platoon at Nam Bac	177
Loading wounded FAR on a H-34	196
Fighting Positions at Nam Bac	197
Frank Bonasinga in Udorn	213
Air America Hostel in Savannakhet	215
Ford Cortina	262
Golden Triangle from Chiang Saen	274
Drop Leaflet of Missing Americans	277
Pak Beng	300
Lao Lady Weaving	301
Cottage Industry at Pak Beng	302
Bob Davis	312
Nam Bac Area Seen from a Hill	315
Pho Kou Position Southeast of Nam Bac	316
Ban Houei Ngat Northwest of Nam Bac	317
Tai Dam Village East of Nam Bac	318
Tai Dam Woman	319
Ban Khong Northeast of Nam Bac	320
Machine Gun Position at Kong Mi	342
Kwii Girls at Moung Mounge	353
Phu Cum (LS-50)	356
Lao C-47 with Severed Nose at Nam Bac	360
Hotel-46 after Damaging C-47 Nose	361
Pat McCarthy Inspecting Hotel-49	362
Karst Topography near Lak Sao	401
Wounded FAR Soldiers at Nam Bac	416
First Aid Applied by Lao Medic at Nam Bac	417
Wounded Carried to H-34	418
Wounded Trucked to Medical Tent	419
Air Force CH-3 Crash East of Site-85	426
Pony Express Crash in Den Din Area	427
Dick Elder in the Crashed CH-3	428
Sam Tong Complex	439
Attoupeu	448
French Doctor Photographing Activity at Attoupeu	460
T-28 Pilot Departing Nam Bac for Luang Prabang	468
Closer View of T-28 departing Nam Bac	469
Author's Benjarn Road House	474
Pilot Photos	489

## CONTENTS

Southern Laos	499
Jim Williams	544
Concrete Masonry Factory	591
Plant Manager and Pilot Investors	592
Luang Prabang from Mekong River's West Bank	600
Bell 205	616
XW-PFF Ferried from Don Muang to Udorn	620
Author's Lao Pilot License	622
Air America 205 at Don Muang Airport	623
TSQ-81 Facility at Phu Pha Thi	645
Camouflaged TSQ-81	646
Hotel-52 Parked in Front of Sam Tong Hostel	653
Nam Bac and Phu Kou Fire Support Base	666
205 Internal Rescue Hoist	719
USAF Helicopter Air Refueling	721
Nam Ou Where Burke Landed on a Sand Bar	731
USAF HH-53 Jolly Green	735
Beng Bengston and Mike Jarina	737
John Tarn at Sam Tong Hostel	770

## MAPS AND GRAPHICS

Enemy Activity in Laos	28
Ho Chi Minh Complex	44
Enemy Spy Suspected Area	125
Lower MR-3 and 4 and Enemy Trail System	223
Route-7	248
Road Networks in MR-2	251
April/May Activity East of Nam Bac	332
Attapeu Region	340
Three Country Area	452
UH-1D Bell	617
Sections of the Bell 205	618
Ho Chi Minh Trail System	676
205 Internal Rescue Hoist	718
Udorn	776
Ramasun	778
Moung Phalane TACAN Site	818

*"Alicia, I wish I could tell you about these pilots. They make me sick with envy. They ride their vehicles the way a man controls a fine, well-trained quarter horse. They weave along stream beds, rise like swallows to clear trees, they turn and twist and dip like swifts in the evening. I watch their hands and feet on the controls, the delicacy of the coordination reminds me of the sure and seeming slow hands of (Pablo) Casals on the cello. They are truly musician's hands and they play their controls like music and they dance them like ballerinas and they make me jealous because I want so much to do it.*

*Remember your child night dream of perfect flight free and wonderful? It's like that and sadly I know I never can. My hands are too old and forgetful to take orders from the command center, which speaks of updrafts and side winds, of drift and shift, of ground fire indicated by a tiny puff or flash, or a hit and all these commands must be obeyed by the musicians hands instantly and automatically. I must take my longing out in admiration and the joy of seeing it."*<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Acclaimed author John Steinbeck's letter to Alicia Patterson, editor and publisher of *Newsday* lauding U.S. Army helicopter pilots during his January 1967 experience with Shamrock Flight, D Troop, 10th Cavalry at Pleiku, South Vietnam.



## INTRODUCTION

**N**ineteen Sixty Seven opened in Laos with a modicum of confidence within war councils of the Western camp regarding the military situation. However, none of this optimism could have been possible without substantial and ever escalating American airpower, which tended to equalize the countrywide balance of power; something the FAR could never have achieved on its own. Between four and five hundred U.S. aircraft were staged at seven Royal Thai Air Force Bases across the border (or what was called "the fence"). The mix of aircraft conducted varied missions: The slowly paced Rolling Thunder operation in North Vietnam, calculated to bring North Vietnamese representatives to the negotiating table; Barrel Roll in Military Region Two that attempted to slow the supply of goods to Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army forces in that critical region; and Steel Tiger in the ongoing interdiction of the central and southern Ho Chi Minh Trail systems. To some degree, bombing of enemy logistical supply lines in Laos and South Vietnam had hurt and disrupted the normal seasonal exchange of territory with the Pathet Lao-Vietnamese forces not achieving previous dry season gains, but the long war still continued.

## INTRODUCTION

For the first time in half a dozen years in Military Region One (MR-1), FAR tenuously held much of the Nam Bac Valley and a good portion of the region north of Luang Prabang. This successful operation helped plug traditional North Vietnamese invasion routes south from Dien Bien Phu along trails and the southern flowing Nam Ou, temporarily relieving pressure on the royal capital. Additionally, the area was deemed sufficiently secure that the Crown Prince conducted a visit to the area in January.

In important and strategic Military Region Two there was reason for even greater optimism. After recapturing Na Khang in May 1966, General Vang Pao's mixed ethnic forces slowly regained and expanded territory throughout upper Military Region Two. Moreover, his fighting men no longer appeared terrified of the "dreaded nine-foot-tall" North Vietnamese soldier. Competent road watchers, along with Thai and Meo forward air guides (FAG), directed night interdiction of enemy lines of communication (LOC). Primarily conducted by A-26 pilots, this tended to slow enemy supply vehicles and quell movement south toward the Plain of Jars, Moung Soui, and other points south.

Characteristically, in Military Region Three there was little large unit FAR ground activity. However, indigenous Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) road watch teams continued to be trained and dispatched to the far

## INTRODUCTION

reaches of the Panhandle in the quest to accumulate viable trail targeting intelligence in order to generate unabated and crippling USG bombing.

North of Pakse in Military Region Four, the jointly sponsored WAPI village defense program continued to gain universal respect and reasonable results. To the east, on the spectacular Bolovens Plateau, Agency efforts accelerated to train and enlarge road watch teams for targeting and aggressive action along the generically named, and increasingly important, Sihanouk Trail system.

Because of the war's seasonal tug-of-war and great numbers of extra-territorial enemy forces in-country, generally all who were involved in the conflict were aware that purported Lao Government successes and the lull in action was only temporary and would not endure long.

On the political front, following a devastating hundred-year flood, the loss of a bumper rice crop, and the dissolution of the National Assembly by Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, there was an election scheduled for early January that would likely decide future government power bases and the continued neutral status of the country. On an up-note, several major antagonists, who had disrupted or curtailed progress by incompetence, by fomenting dissention, or by coups, had departed the country. However, Generals Phoumi Nosavan,

## INTRODUCTION

Kong Lee, and Thao Ma were exiled in Thailand and still considered a potential threat to the Royal Lao Government's stability.

As the year continued to unfold, Agency-sponsored indigenous road watch programs, tailored to gather intelligence for United States Government (USG) bombing strikes on the Ho Chi Minh Lines of Communication (LOC), greatly expanded throughout the southern portion of the country. Many teams had previously been trained for dual purposes. This included a change in USG policy tailored to increase pressure on North Vietnamese leaders to cease and desist through aggressive measures against lines of communications in the form of raids and ambushes. Since the five USAF CH-3 Pony Express helicopters staged at the rapidly growing USAF base at Nakhon Phanom were multi-tasked to conduct missions in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, helicopter lift assets were limited in road watch participation. Consequently, Air America personnel and H-34 helicopters were increasingly scheduled to participate and supplement Customer efforts in this activity.

Despite being utilized for casual road watch operations in the past, the UH-34D was deemed by Customers to be abundantly noisy and much too large a target for deep penetrations into the trail systems. Therefore, to increase overall efficiency of large-scale delivery and retrieval of teams dictated by

## INTRODUCTION

increasing Customer demands, "civilian" type Bell turbine engine helicopters were obtained and placed in service by Air America at the Udorn, Thailand base. <sup>1</sup> Naturally, transition to the machines required re-training for us "throttle twisters" who opted for the program, and a substantial adjustment in mind set to a completely different type of helicopter. At first, until sufficient assets were available, Bell crews complemented H-34 and USAF CH-3 helicopter crews, and then we gravitated to missions entirely staffed with our own aircraft and people.

On the home front, the Author bitterly spent much of January in the Bangkok Christian Hospital recovering from a painful and serious bout of sciatica. Despite daily outpatient therapy that included hot packs, whirlpool baths, and massage, recovery was excruciatingly slow, but eventually successful. Thankfully, with exercise and a modicum of care, the condition did not reoccur for about forty years.

HRC

---

<sup>1</sup> These machines had been used by company pilots for more than a year in Southern Vietnam.

***"We have chosen to fight a limited war in Vietnam in an attempt to prevent a larger war--a war almost certain to follow."***

State of the Union: Lyndon Johnson address to a Joint Session of Congress, 10 January 1967.

**W**hile Sarisporn, Dick Conrad, and I skirted inclement weather and terrorized the unfriendly skies of northeastern Laos during the first and second days of January in Hotel-30, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma won a vital election in Vientiane. On 1 January, almost one third of the population judged to be living under Royal Lao Government (RLG) control went to the polls. After the votes were counted, Souvanna emerged politically stronger as the Lao Neutralist leader. Specifically, now the new National Assembly more closely reflected power of a coalition of Laos' preeminent families, their surrogates, and top military leaders throughout the country.

Alliances forged with leading civilian families like the Sananikone cartel in Vientiane, and Prince Boun Oum from the South, loomed large in Souvanna Phouma's victory. With the Neutralist Army taking a back seat in political affairs, FAR military officers

proved the key underlying factor in the election by sponsoring representatives. Top regional Generals Ouane Rathikoun, Vang Pao, and Phasouk Somly gained influence to the detriment of General Kouprasith, whose power and reputation diminished following the General Ma October incident and his subsequent exile to Thailand. However, no one was really sure if the newly elected Assembly representatives would fully unite behind the Prime Minister, or how the FAR Army leaders' current political power would evolve.

Souvanna Phouma's victory afforded him a clear mandate to continue promoting national integration and stability through economic development, education, and administrative reforms.

A National Intelligence Estimate issued in the spring of 1967 aptly described Washington's assessment of neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's position regarding the Southeast Asian conflict as it applied to Laos:

*"...In the past several years the kingdom of Laos has achieved a substantial degree of political stability. This rests, in part, on the international support which the Royal Lao Government has enjoyed since the [Geneva Accords] agreement in 1962...It rests on the understanding of Souvanna Phouma and the military and the conservatives and Neutralists which aim at preserving Lao independence and attributes of*

neutrality and tripartism. For the short term, there will be no diminution of military support for the regime or does a military coup seem likely.

The organization of the Neo Lao Hak Sat is neither strong nor deeply rooted in Laos and is almost a complete creation of North Vietnam on whose support and direction it depends. The organization is reluctant to rock the boat by U.S. attempts to force the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong out of the [South Vietnam] highlands. <sup>3</sup>

Souvanna Phouma has accepted certain United States activities in Laos, such as bombing, as well as hampering the Hanoi war effort in South Vietnam. He has finally taken a position both publicly and privately that he cannot approve of U.S. military operations in Laos. There are no present expectations that Souvanna Phouma will resign either for political or health reasons although he is 66 years old. Should Souvanna Phouma die, there would be considerable jockeying for power which would be likely to continue even after the installation of a new government.

In regard to expanding allied action in the Panhandle, Washington believes Souvanna Phouma would disapprove [any] official coverage involving him. He is predisposed to do so by his whole approach to the war.

---

<sup>3</sup> The NHLs was the political arm of the communist movement in Laos. The Pathet Lao constituted the military wing.



*His resistance would be reinforced by Vietnamese reaction that would enlarge the war in Laos. He would expect that Hanoi would strike back, not only in areas they were being attacked, but also in areas under Lao government control, which would be a much greater concern. He would be inclined to react, not merely to a particular proposal, but to a progression of events that he would envision as likely to follow the first move. Thus, he would be reluctant to authorize a very small scale and deniable action because he would anticipate whatever the original United States action the enemy response would generate retaliation. Because Souvanna Phouma understands the stakes in Laos and the outcome of the war in Vietnam and realizes until it is over, Laos will remain a theater of operations. He had demonstrated some tolerance for action as long as he is not officially informed."* <sup>4</sup>

### **ONE OF OUR OWN RETURNS FROM PURGATORY**

During one of the only successful large-scale prisoner rescues to date, in fact during the entire Second Indochina War, Pisidhi Indradat, an Air America

---

<sup>4</sup> Paul Langer, *Laos: Search for Peace in the Midst of War* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation).

Ambassador Sullivan Cable 3977 to Department of State, 01/05/67, Central Files, POL 15 Laos, Foreign Relations 1964-1968, Volume 28, Laos, #273.

National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), Short Term Political Prospects for Laos, 05/18/67.

kicker who had been onboard the ill-fated C-46 shot down east of Savannakhet in early September 1963,<sup>5</sup> emerged from several years of Pathet Lao incarceration. Following confinement in ten different locations and two daring escapes, the latter in which he roamed the Panhandle jungle for thirty-two days, near death from malaria and malnutrition, Pisith was discovered, recaptured and marched a long distance toward an enemy headquarters in a cave at the base of a mountain. After processing, he was shuffled to another cave in a limestone karst near the abandoned village of Ban Naden, a mile south of Route-12 between Nhommarath and Mugia Pass in Khammouane Province. The prison contained dozens of civilian Lao, Lao Theung, and some wayward former Pathet Lao. Also in the group were three FAR officer candidates and a radio operator from a road watch team captured by Pathet Lao during a July engagement near Mugia Pass.

Isolated from the other prisoners, Pisith was lodged in a separate cell consisting of a mixture of clay and hay walls and a raised split bamboo floor, where movement was limited by foot restraints. By then he was an expert on slipping bonds when necessary. It was September. He continued to suffer from bouts of recurring malaria. However, these were somewhat suppressed by medicinal plants provided by friendly

---

<sup>5</sup> See 1963 Book for a detailed account of this incident.

prisoners after discovering he was Thai. With the aid of vegetables, fruits, and improving health, as was his policy in all the prisons, the determined individual began digging and planning an escape.

Pisith had not been forgotten, and from reports of spies and villagers the Agency had sporadically tracked him over the years. In early December, a Lao farmer and Pathet Lao rallier arrived at Thakhet. Interrogation by a Royal Thai Army officer and northern Military Region Three Case Officer Walter Floyd, initially revealed that the man had recently escaped from a prison camp south of Route-12 near Ban Na Den. Providing excellent intelligence that delineated many facets of prison routine and the disposition of out buildings, he indicated that a large number of prisoners were imprisoned there. They included a Thai Air America employee. With only a handful of guards present, he believed the men could be easily rescued by a few determined men. In addition, to display his good intentions, he offered to lead a team to the camp.

Such rare information was much too important to ignore. Therefore, Tom Fosmire, Chief of Unit (COS) Savannakhet, following an extensive interrogation that included the Agency favorite method-a polygraph test-believed the man's veracity. Consequently, along with Case Officer Walter Floyd, he began planning a rescue operation. For leader of the action team, the men

selected Sergeant Te, a tough and experienced Lao Theung, who they considered their most skilled team leader for such a mission. After Te questioned and received additional details about the area from the farmer, he concluded the mission could be accomplished with minimum losses.

Spending two weeks at the Keng Ka Boa camp (LS-235) north of Lima-39, Te and his nine-man team began training for a helicopter penetration and late-night assault. Te and the Pathet Lao defector were both from the area and would be counted on to help guide the group to the target. Maintaining the highest levels of secrecy, only Te, the former Pathet Lao, and the radio operator were briefed on details of the mission. Additionally, leery that exposing the impending operation to Udorn AB-1 or Vientiane personnel to all the details would result in leaks and compromise mission success, Fosmire kept his counsel and did not divulge anything significant to his immediate bosses Ted Shackley or Pat Landry until the mission was well underway.

The operation commenced on 5 January with the Cobra team inserted by helicopter northeast of the target area within two days walk of the prison. Avoiding populated areas, using Marine Corps "snoop and poop" techniques, the men stealthily crossed Route-12 and intersected the Se Bangfai on the seventh. Then, in the

dark, using the creek bed for cover and concealment, they proceeded west toward the objective. At 2030 hours, with diversionary air strikes and flares illuminating the nearby area, the team emerged from their route of advance firing carbines and throwing hand grenades for shock effect. During the excitement, a small number of guards became casualties, with survivors fleeing the scene. The guards' bamboo and thatched "hooches" were set on fire for added light, and the rescue team began severing chains and locks with bolt cutters to free the prisoners.

Greatly aiding the rescue operation, the area was thinly covered by enemy soldiers. After being pounded by air strikes several times a day over a period of months, in good weather, many enemy soldiers wisely relocated north to safer areas.

Rather than die in prison, Pisith was determined to escape through his hole and evade west toward friendly government forces. Therefore, when the unannounced attack finally commenced, he slipped his bonds and was anxious to evacuate.

Realizing that there was limited time before enemy forces reacted and pursued them, Sergeant Te and his men mustered over fifty prisoners from those who had not already slipped away. He marshaled them and rapidly moved north. They crossed the Bangfai River, the abandoned village of Na Den, and then intersected

Route-12. The original plan was to evade north directly through the jungle during the day to high ground, where helicopters would extract the group. However, Te soon realized his frail charges were incapable of the jungle option. Therefore, switching to plan B, he opted to employ the run-walk-run technique north along an eighteen-kilometer unpopulated section of the road. <sup>6</sup>

At 0300 hours the exhausted group reached a point where the road turned east toward the Mugia Pass junction. Leaving Route-12, they continued north to temporary safety on the 2,500-foot ridgeline of Phou Ak. While the survivors rested, the team radio operator set up his equipment and sent a message to Lima-39 announcing that the mission had been successful thus far, and they would soon proceed to the extraction landing zone.

During the night, roughly half of those in the group opted to leave. Some were criminals who had escaped from RLG prisons and were afraid to return to government held territory. Others lived in the area and were concerned their families would be harmed if they left.

---

<sup>6</sup> This was akin to Boy Scout's pace I learned at Camp Watchung, Glen Gardner, New Jersey. Originally an American Indian technique to cover great distances, running fifty paces, walking fifty paces could be maintained for long periods without undue fatigue.

In the subdued light of false dawn, from his vantage point, Pisith could see enemy to the south moving along the road and broad plain toward the ridgeline. Then U.S. jets arrived and dumped ordnance on the pursuers. T-28 pilots followed with bombs and machine gun fire, which discouraged immediate pursuit.

Crossing streams, low hills, and scrubland, the men cautiously moved further north toward a friendly road watch outpost.

Captain Jerry McEntee had been working in the Pakse area with a Thai Copilot when alerted to reposition to Savannakhet for a mission. He was joined there by Sam Jordon, who also had a Thai Copilot.<sup>7</sup> The H-34 crews continued to Thakhet, where the machines were refueled. After being briefed by Walter Floyd and provided estimated extraction coordinates, they waited. At 1630 hours they launched to the east with Floyd the onboard leader of Jordon's helicopter to coordinate the operation.

After moving for hours, about 1700, Sergeant Te and the group rested while Te radioed another message to base. When helicopters flew overhead the mixed group continued on for a short time until reaching a wide

---

<sup>7</sup> The only two Thai UH-34D helicopter Captains at the time were Sarisporn and Boonrat. CJ Abadie Email, 02/03/99. *"The hiring of locals was always very political. Everyone in the Thai government wanted someone hired and Ben [Moore] did his best to keep peace."*

rocky field where the two H-34 crews and a platoon of Auto-Defense de Choc (ADC) guerrillas living in the area waited.

It was still daylight when the former prisoners began boarding Jordon's aircraft. Fully loaded, he departed the landing zone. The assault team and Pisith climbed onboard McEntee's ship. When an additional two to three prisoners climbed onboard, Jerry was unable to lift the machine off the ground. He radioed Jordon who in turn talked to Floyd to request two of the men to wait for another shuttle. <sup>8</sup> It was about 1730 hours when Jordon, who had a lighter fuel load, returned and landed at the landing zone to retrieve the men.

The remaining prisoners and soldiers did not fare well. They were reputedly overrun thirty minutes after the rescue helicopters departed the area.

The armada reached Savannakhet well after dark. Pisith was welcomed with open arms by two boyhood friends from the Whiskey-3 Agency road watch team training camp and Tom Fosmire, who was his radio instructor at the PARU Hua Hin (Naresuan), Thailand, camp in 1958. In short order he received medical treatment at the FAR headquarters, a welcome bath, and exchanged his tattered rags for new clothing. This was followed by dinner and a lengthy debriefing in which he

---

<sup>8</sup> This was merely a ploy, because the time of day rendered this a virtual impossibility.



disclosed dated information on the escape of Air America kicker Gene Debruin, USAF pilot, Lieutenant Duane Martin, and Navy pilot Dieter Dengler.<sup>9</sup>

Sleep was not easy that night, for after so many years of deprivation and incarceration, it was difficult for Pisith to resolve a comfortable bed free of restraints and insects.

Pisith was flown to Udorn where he spent a night at the Air America compound. Later he entered the Bangkok Christian Hospital, where Doctor Lewis conducted tests and treatment for twenty days.

When physically able, he returned to Air America as the Assistant Manager of Security Operations. He held this position until close of business (COB) in 1974.<sup>10</sup>

As per the Company Personnel Manual policy relating to captured employees, Pisith received all base pay for the years spent in prison. He found readjusting to

---

<sup>9</sup> Debruin was never seen again; Martin was killed after the escape, and Dengler was later rescued. He was only the second American military flyer to escape captivity in Laos.

<sup>10</sup> As all rescue missions were still highly classified, I was not privy to Pisith's history, incarcerations, and ultimate escape. However, I did see and talk to him briefly at the security building adjoining the flight line. Like most Thai, he was always a friendly and congenial person.

CJ Abadie Email, 02/03/99. *"The Security Department was an especially sensitive area since we needed help for the Thais from time to time and that department was our prime contact with them...Pisith was hired to work in that department, which was a political thing, but he turned out to be a good asset. However, he too had some of his own agendas."*



Pisidhi Indradat several years after his release from communist prisons in Laos. As an Air America Security Department employee, Pisith was tasked to present an Air America plaque to King Bhumiphol during a royal visit to Udorn.

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

normal life difficult, because of flashbacks and bad dreams. But through his many friends, he attempted to relax. When the Author last saw him in Bangkok, he appeared unwell and admitted to lingering liver ailments caused by enduring years of untreated parasite invasion and various endemic diseases.

Sergeant Te, the rescue team's courageous leader, was later killed during a 1967 attack on a communist party provincial meeting in the same area as the rescue.

With the operation considered an overwhelming success, Floyd, Fosmire, and Landry received Agency commendations. <sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Segment Sources Include:

Professor William Leary January 1967 Notes Citing Statements from Tom Fosmire, Jerry McEntee, and Sam Jordon.

CIA Information Memorandum, Freeing of Prisoners held in a Pathet Lao Prison in Khammouane Province 01/10/67.

Author Interview with Pisidhi Indradat March 1965 in Bangkok, Thailand at the C.C.T Building and the Montien Hotel on Suriwongse Road, where he Served as Managing Director of the Erawan Consultant Company, owned by former AB-1 leaders Bill Lair and Pat Landry.

Indradat, Prisoner in Laos: A Story of Survival, *Smokejumpers Magazine* and transcribed to the Air America Website, ([www.air-america.org](http://www.air-america.org)).

Kenneth Conboy with James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 1995) 175-177.

Ted Shackley with Richard Finney, *Spymaster: My Life in the CIA* (Dulles Virginia: Potomac Books, 2005)216, 218.

<sup>12</sup> As with many after-the-fact incident reports, there are discrepancies in accounts regarding the rescue. Conboy reported the group moving west for exfiltration, however, this would have involved movement toward populated and well-travelled areas. Since road watch teams and friendly partisans were scattered throughout the Mugia Pass area, it is more likely that movement was north as described. This is consistent with the CIA report issued two days after the mission. Pisith Indradat's account varied slightly, probably because of his ghost writer's passion to embellish and romanticize the story. Of all the information researched, the Author trusts Bill Leary's account the most, for Bill was meticulous while gathering facts. When able, he attempted to crosscheck stories from at least three sources. Of course, this was not always possible when relying on fading memories.

**HOUA PHAN**

Despite the Lao government's optimistic view regarding territorial gains and status quo in upper Military Region Two, disturbing signs of North Vietnamese Army activity in Houa Phan province surfaced in late December and early January.

Three areas of concern for government forces and General Van Pao were noted in upper Military Region Two: Phou Pha Thi (LS-85), Nong Khang (L-52), and Na Khang (LS-36).

Since mid-1966, Phou Pha Thi, located twenty-one nautical miles west of Sam Neua Town, had been employed tactically for TACAN steers to provide radials to targets in North Vietnam for USAF jets during Rolling Thunder missions. The equipment required only periodic maintenance by USAF personnel. In addition, the site, long considered a sacred place by local Meo people, was used by Thai PARU to intercept enemy radio traffic for intelligence gathering. Moreover, it was a fueling station for SAR work and a forward launching site for delivery of guerrilla road watch and harassing ambush teams. The sheer heights of the large mountain mass and presence of fierce Meo warriors in the area presented a substantial degree of difficulty for an enemy to assault. Any attack would have afforded a distinct

---

<sup>13</sup> Duane Keel Email, 01/23/2015. On January 22, 2015, Charge d'affairs W. Patrick Murphy honored Pisidi Indradat...in a ceremony hosted by the U.S. Embassy.



The southeastern face of Phu Pha Thi. The narrow ridge to the right contained the Site-85 landing strip, located below the village.

John Tarn Collection.

challenge by a determined force to seize and hold the site.

Except for a brief period in 1961, over the years, Pha Thi and the surrounding area had mostly been under government control. During the First Indochina War, French commandos occupied the heights to monitor enemy activity. Since 1962, a Meo FAR captain, Gia Too, ran the show there. Like many chieftains of his ilk, he was a squat, pudgy individual with a face that reminded one of a barnyard pig. Always affable, I had met the man on a number of occasions. Offering food and drink, he had been especially gracious at Houei Ma after my crew and I returned from North Vietnam on 20 June 1965 with a severely battle-damaged ship.

Other enemy activity was recorded around Nong Khang, located on high ground overlooking a mountainous trail crossroads seventeen miles north of Sam Neua Town. Like Pha Thi, this site was of some historical significance as a guerrilla Marquis resistance area against Pathet Lao and Vietnamese forces since the First Indochina War. The fortunes of Nong Khang's inhabitants waxed and waned over the years, but the staunch defenders usually managed to offer stiff resistance to enemy incursions. However, if superior odds and lack of supplies were against them, they would temporarily withdraw and then return later.

Helping to relieve pressure on Lima-52, in late 1966, mixed Vang Pao troops seized Mounng Het fifteen miles further north on the Song Ma, and only a few miles from the Lao-North Vietnamese border.

Further south, lower terrain and the relatively open upland valley of Na Khang were more exposed to attack than the other two higher northern sites. Serving several functions to impede enemy progress in Houa Phan Province, the site was considered a plum ripe for picking. Since retaking the site in May 1966 at the cost of UH-34D Captain Bill Wilmot's life, Site-36 had resumed much of its former status as the prime forward USAF helicopter daytime launching pad for cross border North Vietnam (NVN) SAR missions.

At Udorn, ten HH-3Es were authorized for search and rescue alert. Never approaching that number, two HH-3Es were dedicated for operations in North Vietnam; two were located at Nakhon Phanom (NKP) to cover the Ho Chi Minh Trail system and western South Vietnam; and one remained at Udorn as a backup ship. Two other HH-3E helicopters were generally undergoing maintenance work.

Because of enemy probes and periodic security problems at the site, USAF HH-3E Jolly Green helicopters and crews rarely RON at Na Khang, as formerly had been the case. Instead, depending on the situation, two ships were flown early from Udorn to Long Tieng, and, weather permitting, to LS-36 for

standby purposes. The northern site was about 150 miles from Hanoi. When heavy strikes were programmed in North Vietnam, the rescue ships first positioned and then orbited at 10,000 feet on the border, closer to target areas. Time on station was two and a half hours, after which they returned to Na Khang for fuel. When inflight refueling became a reality in the Southeast Asian Theater after June 1967, orbit time was doubled. Following a day of standby, or actual SAR missions they either returned to Udorn to be out of the neutral country and not risk capture, or they RON at Long Tieng. The cycle resumed the following morning, and if remaining overnight at 20-Alternate, crews were relieved every four days with fresh souls flown up by Air America aircraft. Depending on maintenance requirements, ships rotated to Udorn.

### **ENGAGEMENT AT NA KHANG**

Bracketed to the east by the defensive base at Houei Thom (LS-27) and perimeter outposts, Na Khang provided the means to interdict Route Six using special guerrilla unit (SGU) ground units and daytime O-1E FAC surveillance of the immediate area for targeting. It also served as a regional weather reporting station and jump-off position for road watch teams monitoring enemy movement south from Sam Neua toward Ban Ban and the Plain of Jars (PDJ).



Supplied by large fixed wing aircraft, smaller short takeoff and landing (STOL) planes and H-34 pilots delivered supplies to forward sites and units that proliferated in the region.

Despite winning the February 1966 battle for Na Khang, Vietnamese army units had taken a dreadful thrashing by allied ground and air forces. Consequently, top communist generals likely thirsted for revenge and wanted to impart a bloody object lesson on the garrison. Moreover, the May 1966 loss of the site represented a stain on the reputation (the Asian face) of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) leaders, who perceived their army without equal as the finest and most experienced military force in the world. Therefore, in addition to presenting a formidable challenge to friendly forces in upper Military Region Two, concerted planning went forward to join the battle at Na Khang and eject their hated Meo adversaries.

A prolonged period of uncharacteristic bad weather, generated by the annual northwest monsoon from China in late December and early January provided ideal conditions for the enemy to strike a blow for the Democratic Vietnamese Republic (DVR).<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Except for often persistent morning fog in the upland valleys, usually the winter monsoon involved fair weather, but also high winds and clear air turbulence aloft.

During the transition period from the end of 1966 through early 1967, AID representative Ernie Kuhn arrived at Site-36 to spend a few days with his good friend and counterpart, Don Sjostrom. The weather was very bad. For days, fog clung to the deck preventing cargo planes from landing. Lacking air for supply and reconnaissance, Don, Ernie, and Case Officer Jerry Daniels conducted area walkabouts to assess the current situation. They covered several miles surrounding the site, including burned Phuan villages, like Ban Na Kout, without uncovering evidence of an enemy presence. When the weather improved, Ernie returned to Sam Tong.

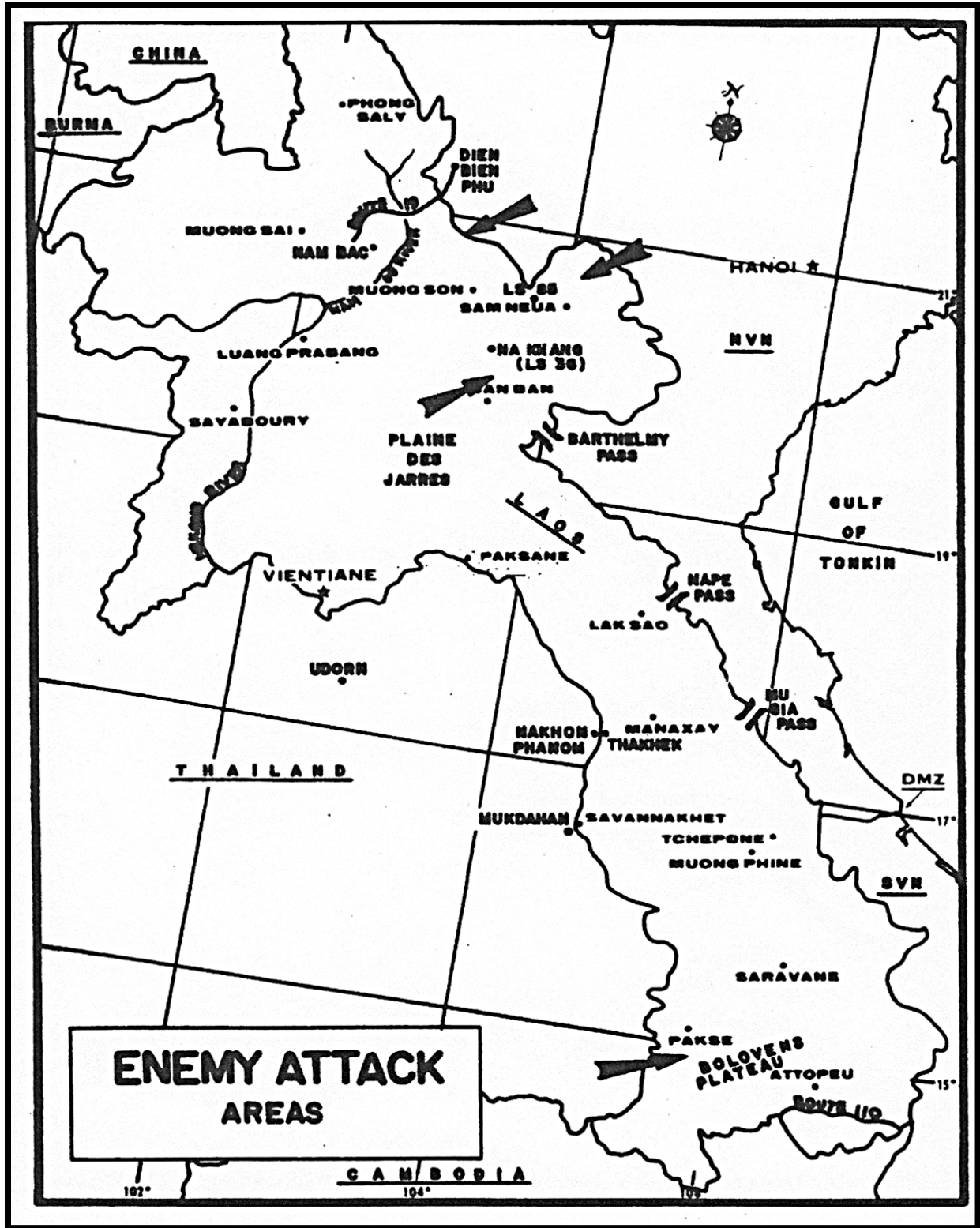
Elements from the 174th Regiment entered Laos from the Northwest Military Region on 28 December. They travelled south along Route-6 by vehicle at night under overcast skies to avoid detection by airborne surveillance aircraft, and sought concealment during the day. Offloading eight miles from the objective, and outnumbering the defenders, an estimated three battalions moved toward the specified target and final departure point using local guides and rough maps. Early morning of 6 January, lead elements and attacking columns had infiltrated northwest, south, and southwest, placing them fairly close to Site-36's outer defense perimeter and sealing off potential avenues of escape for the defenders.

From civilian reports, a sizeable attack on the base in some form was expected. Since enemy patrols were known to be circulating in the area, occasionally conducting probes of Meo outposts, number Six Special Guerrilla Unit Battalion had been reinforced, and defense positions, strengthened over the previous few weeks. By 6 January, Site-36 garrison totaled 500 defenders consisting of mixed Meo, Lao, other tribal ethnicity, and two Americans: Case Officer Mike Lynch and Don Sjostrom, area USAID refugee coordinator. An additional Case Officer, Jerry "Hog" Daniels, weary from waiting for an attack, departed on the third for time off in Bangkok. <sup>15</sup>

Good fortune was on the invaders' side. Under two to five hundred-foot overcast conditions, perfect for shielding the attack force from air strikes, the lightning three-pronged assault was planned to occur at daylight on the base command post. However, despite "snooping and pooping" close to the garrison without detection, at dawn, the lead enemy unit from the north was taken under fire by alert defenders manning a forward outpost. At this critical juncture, only the northern enemy battalion held a favorable battle assault position. Therefore, a coordinated attack failed to materialize and achieve the desired shock

---

<sup>15</sup> Jerry returned the day following the attack.



Areas of enemy activity in Laos during the spring of 1967.  
Edward Vallentyne *CHECO* Report 1967.



Assistant Chief Pilot helicopters, Captain Marius Burke-left, Flight Mechanic Bill Murphy-center, and USAID employee Don Sjostrom-right at an upcountry Lao site. Sjostrom was killed by North Vietnamese soldiers at Na Khang on 6 January 1967 during an early morning attack.

Frank Stergar Collection.

effect and quick success envisioned during the planning stage. With their positions and intent revealed, the northern column commenced engagement with mortar and 122mm rocket fire on the hilltop containing the command post, 75 pack howitzer, .50 caliber machine gun, and heart of the kidney-shaped garrison defenders. Agency bunkers were located down slope. Following their northern positioned comrades, but delayed, southern columns moved into the attack phase.

By 0630 hours, the battle was closely joined with trench warfare and vicious hand-to-hand combat erupting on the outer defenses. As attackers closed on the fortified ridge line to take possession of the machine gun to use on the airstrip and Agency bunkers, friendly troops counterattacked with flanking units, which cleared the ridge of enemy. While this action was occurring, enemy units were beginning to cross the runway. <sup>16</sup>

While Mike Lynch attempted to solicit air support over the single-sideband and VHF radios, Don Sjostrom stepped outside the bunker to see if he could assist in quelling the enemy advance. By 0650 hours, Mike

---

<sup>16</sup> After action speculation concluded that had all enemy units attacked simultaneously, the base would certainly have been overrun and lost with grievous loss of life. However, anything but perfect, minutely planned battles elicit many variables and intangibles and do not always proceed according to plan. That is why individual initiative is so highly prized in modern armies.

established contact with Vientiane requesting immediate emergency air. Then Mike departed the bunker to inform Don and the base commanding officer that air support was imminent. Through the fog and smoke, he saw Don fall with a mortal wound to the head.

Fortuitously, two flights of F-105s had been conducting early morning armed reconnaissance in the Steel Tiger Panhandle area. Diverted to Na Khang, they arrived about 0730 hours. However, after establishing contact with Lynch, despite attempts, the four-thousand-foot-thick overcast initially precluded the pilots' participation in the shooting match. Then Venom leader, at great risk to himself and aircraft, discovering a small hole in the clouds, made his way underneath, and threaded his machine between mountains into the Site-36 valley. However, once underneath in marginal visual flight rules (VFR) conditions, the 200-foot ceiling prevented him from observing or targeting the enemy. Instead, he conducted a few minutes of heroic ear-splitting high-speed afterburner passes over both friend and foe. Then, approaching bingo fuel, he rejoined his flight for a return to base (RTB).<sup>17</sup>

Although wholesale destruction of enemy forces was not possible, the mere presence and threat of friendly air was sufficient to temporarily slow the enemy's main

---

<sup>17</sup> Bingo: A predetermined minimum fuel state calculated as necessary to return to base.

force advance until the arrival of two USAF A-1E Udorn-based pilots who had also been working the Steel Tiger area.

By then, the fortress' situation was critical. Only a quarter of the compound was still occupied by friendlies. Lynch was desperate and despaired of timely help. Using TACAN radials from Site-85, intermittent signals from the weak nondirectional beacon at Na Khang, and Lynch's advice over his hand-held radio, the Skyraider flight leader conducted a circling penetration until breaking out over the camp. From his cramped and restricted vantage point the pilot observed troops in the open along both sides of the runway, in the fort on the elevated north slope, in the POL area, and in the trees. Anything but the operations building was considered a viable target. Although not fully weaponized following strikes in the Steel Tiger area, he determined to do what he could to discourage the enemy from completely overrunning the friendly position.

Conserving precious munitions, he began working toward the most critical spot on the hill: the command post. Conducting numerous passes with 20 mike-mike cannon fire, a deadly mix of high explosive and "willy-pete" rockets, and a couple of small bombs, he expended only a small amount at a time, while attempting to chase the enemy off the hill. This went on until



Winchester (out of ordnance), he ascended through the murky weather and joined his orbiting wingman on top. Then the flight leader led number two back into the valley where the wingman continued to conduct firing passes while the leader executed dry runs. During more than an hour on station, the two A-1E pilots' efforts saved the day by driving the enemy away from their immediate target and across the fallow rice paddies into the cover of the eastern tree line. The outstanding effort allowed government forces sufficient breathing room to regroup and counterattack.

From the number of bodies visible in the perimeter wire, a cursory estimate of enemy dead in the immediate area was high. This was attributed largely to the fine work of the A-1E pilots. <sup>18</sup> Not unscathed, the Site-36 garrison suffered about fifteen percent casualties.

As the first A-1 pilots departed south at 0900 hours, a fresh A-1E section arrived from Udorn carrying a full complement of proper anti-personnel ordnance. By this time, the northern area forward air controller (FAC) from Long Tieng arrived to coordinate and direct arriving air assets. By then, the sun had risen sufficiently to begin heating, burning through the

---

<sup>18</sup> Similar to the U.S. Marine Corps policy of never leaving anyone behind on the battlefield, the Vietnamese normally retrieved their dead and weapons. The A-1E contribution was a glowing testament to the carnage inflicted during the offensive, and how rapidly the enemy departed the target area.

overcast, and slightly lifting the ceiling. "Loaded for bear," the pilots received the latest situation report from Lynch. During thirty minutes on station, the pilots concentrated strikes on drainage ditches and tree lines adjacent to the strip. They were aided by Thai B Team T-28 pilots flying out of Wattay Airport.

The enemy had been subdued and discouraged, but not completely silenced. They continued to fire on the fort from protected areas. Improved weather allowed USAF F-104 pilots to participate in the action. However, with close support out of the question for fast movers, the jet pilots were directed to strike suspected staging areas, routes of advance, and rally points with napalm and iron bombs.

The Long Tieng Customer informed American workers at Sam Tong of the action and that Don Sjostrom had been killed. Ernie Kuhn departed in a Helio Courier for Na Khang intent on retrieving his friend's body and delivering it to Vientiane. However, adverse weather and continuing hostilities precluded landing at the site, so Ernie's pilot landed southwest at Phu Cum (LS-50). After several hours on the ground, Kuhn received a message stating General Vang Pao was concerned that news of the Vietnamese attack and Don's death would panic villagers throughout Sam Neua Province. Therefore, Ernie spent the remainder of the day landing

at airstrips in the region to calm and assure leaders the situation was under control.

Reports reaching Vientiane prompted Ambassador Sullivan to update Washington with current information and a somewhat positive spin regarding early stages of the Na Khang action:

*"...defenders probably outnumber the enemy and should be able to hold out with air support until reinforcements arrive. They are currently receiving rapid air support from 7th Air Force. They are still somewhat handicapped due to the poor weather. If weather continues to improve, we hope to break the back of today's attack by a combination of USAF and T-28 air strikes plus defensive tactics by ground forces at the site. However, we assume the current attack will be followed by others mounted by NVA forces which have been building up for some time..*

*We have deployed STOL aircraft and helicopters to nearby position..*

*As of yet, there is no pressure on Site-85. But we are alerting U.S. personnel at the site for extraction if necessary."*

Holding Na Khang at all costs was not sacrosanct to Vang Pao and his advisors, but preferable to a disorganized evacuation. As weather continued to improve and the LS-36 situation stabilized in the immediate area, at Long Tieng, Vang Pao and Case

Officers planned site reinforcement. However, evacuation of numerous wounded took priority. When able, UH-34D pilots performed this duty, and the Sam Tong hospital quickly filled to the brim. After this was accomplished, C-123 crews later shuttled troops and supplies to the strip. Arrival of reinforcements allowed defense perimeters to be manned and reestablished.

By late afternoon, three other Americans and Vang Pao moved in by Caribou to take charge of defenses. The Caribou crew departed with Don's body. Kuhn also wanted to join the other Americans for the night, but was advised to RON at the Phou Cum site. Should Na Khang be attacked again and communications disrupted, he would be in position to coordinate operations.

With the day waning, by 1600 hours the situation was deemed calm, but not sufficiently contained to dispatch reconnaissance patrols from the fort. As per Agency and U.S. Embassy policy, Vientiane Chief of Station (COS) Ted Shackley insisted that his Americans not overnight at Na Khang. But when he received convincing appeals from upcountry personnel that their departure would adversely affect defender morale, he assented and bucked the decision upward to Ambassador Sullivan. The men were allowed to remain at the camp.

Since enemy forces still ringed the area, and the disposition of reinforcements and their intent was

unknown, a USAF C-130 Lamplighter flare and control ship was dispatched to illuminate the area and coordinate Nakhon Phanom-based Nimrod A-26 activity. These assets discouraged enemy movement and the site survived the night.

Early the following morning, a pilot heading for Site-36 mistook a light colored CASI C-47 for an ICC plane flying north. Further information speculated that ICC representatives were inbound to investigate the fighting at the behest of the Lao government. This unlikely development, later determined erroneous, caused a considerable stir at AB-1 and the Vientiane embassy. Evidence of CIA men and sophisticated radios at the government site would certainly prove detrimental in political world opinion and create a possible violation of the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos. Therefore, to preclude such a scenario should the ICC arrive at the site, Hog and Mike were ordered out. Since AID was sanctioned in Laos, in the interim, Kuhn was asked if he would fill in to cover the radios.

Both Jerry and Mike were still at Na Khang when Ernie arrived. After providing a condensed five-minute brief on the Agency radio net day and night radio calibration, something with which Ernie was totally unfamiliar, they departed.

Existing without sleep for the following two nights and three days, Kuhn left the radios on the day

frequency. Then, with the assistance of Thai Forward Ground Controller (FAG) and road watch team leader, Blue Boy, he coordinated most air strike and flare ship activity, which illuminated the area for the next two nights. Minor probes of the defensive perimeter were noted, but no general attack occurred.

Performing the work of two separate organizations, during the day Ernie coordinated both refugee and air activity. He also dispatched helicopters with ammunition to outposts.

Vang Pao arrived in an aircraft to direct A-1E strikes on suspected enemy sites. Later, ground forces discovered a detailed battle map on one of the bodies. The chart delineated the Vietnamese routes of approach and general attack plan. Using this information, hoping to uncover enemy concentrations, the general directed Butterfly-44 to troll infiltration routes with one of his men. That afternoon, about a half mile from Na Khang, a large group of enemy troops were discovered bottled up in a heavily wooded canyon not far from the primary infiltration route. Two A-1E pilots were assigned to the strike. Conducting several passes, they unloaded devastating amounts of anti-personnel ordinance on the troops. Receiving heavy automatic weapons fire, but incurring no hits, after saturating the target for thirty-five minutes they left the area burning. Patrols that ultimately entered the area

reported appalling carnage. The Vietnamese had once again suffered substantial casualties while attempting to capture Na Khang.

Examination of Na Khang's perimeter and immediate areas around the airstrip and fueling area revealed no bodies, but, attesting to enemy losses, considerable debris, consisting of hats, belts, mail pouches, personal effects, and the sort, littered the scene.

The attack on Na Khang concluded the enemy's initial dry season assault of any consequence in upper Military Region Two, at least for the near term. The government victory was bittersweet. Friendly forces had suffered heavy casualties, including one American's death. Furthermore, there was no guarantee of permanently securing this remote site should the Vietnamese elect to commit adequate resources necessary to overrun the position. In the final analysis, it would realistically require continued daily air support to preserve the site in the government camp.

After conducting "business as usual," as weather permitted, CPH Knight journeyed upcountry to Sam Tong on the ninth with Captain Ed Rudolfs to administer an abbreviated line check.

Continuing line checks the following day, Wayne and newly upgraded former U.S. Army pilot Captain Gene Rainville (DOH 09/09/66) flew to Na Khang to conduct shuttles of men and munitions to new outposts. During

the day they flew to Houei Thom (LS-27) east of Site-36, where defenders were on the highest alert. Trips to Moung Son (L-59) and Moung Heim (LS-48A) followed. After a stop at Phu Cum (LS-50), they returned to Sam Tong for the night.

Wednesday the same crew worked to the east of Long Tieng at Padong (LS-05) and Khang Khao (LS-204). Later in the day, before returning to Tango-08, they were assigned missions to the west at Pha Langmou (LS-170); northeast of the Sala Phu Khoun 7/13 road junction; Moung Soui (L-108), and to Moung Yu (LS-261), located ten miles north of Vang Vieng on a bend in the Nam Khan.

Despite the severe mauling received at Na Khang, the Vietnamese were not finished assaulting prime targets. Under the cover of darkness, when most people were sleeping, a mortar bombardment heralded an attack on Nong Khang. Following the barrage, elements of two Vietnamese battalions surged toward the FAR-Meo defenses. The attack joined in close contact fighting. The engagement continued until dawn when T-28 and A-1 pilots arrived. Four hours later the last of the enemy departed the area, leaving the battlefield littered with dozens of dead. Once more enemy units failed to achieve their objective, and the costs were very high. But that was General Giap's battle worn technique: Casualties were not considered, only the ultimate goal.



Don Sjostrom's death created a void at Sam Tong that was filled by Ernie Kuhn, a former Thailand Peace Corps Volunteer who had been working for Pop Buell since mid-1965. To replace Ernie at Sam Tong, Ron Rickenbach, another former Peace Corps volunteer was relocated from Thakhet to Site-20. Ron initially had a lot to learn, for Military Region Three work requirements were quite different.

Rickenbach was at Sam Tong less than a month when he experienced a "Moment of Truth" on 21 February with Captain Al Rich in Helio Courier 166 at Boum Long. Despite windy conditions, landing at Site-88's high, narrow strip was normal. However, a left quartering tail wind during takeoff caused the ship to drift to the right of the strip. Al hauled back on the yoke, but not enough lift had been generated and the tail wheel contacted a stump. The aircraft tobogganed down the slope. After coming to rest, Ron discovered that he was pinned in the cockpit by the collapsed instrument panel. As there was always a danger of fire in such an accident, Rich hastily pried Rickenbach loose. He, Ron, and his Meo assistant, Hertou, vacated the immediate area. The plane did not burn, and like the Harvey Gulick, and Mike LaDue crash on Phu Bia, their survival was attributed to the cockpit's exceptional structural integrity engineered by the Helio Courier manufacturer.

Despite the plane being demolished, injuries were considered minimal. However, Rich developed a leg infection from his wounds, resulting in his grounding for six months. <sup>19</sup>

## **A NEW ROAD WATCH PROGRAM AND TECHNIQUES**

In Military Region Three, as reported by road watch teams, vehicle traffic was heavy during early to mid-

---

### <sup>19</sup> Segment Sources:

Project Contemporary, Historical, Examination of Current Operations (CHECO) Report, Melvin Porter, *Second Defense of Lima Site 36* (Headquarters Pacific Air Force, Directorate, Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division, 04/28/67), 1-12.

Project CHECO Report, Major John Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970* (Headquarters PACAF, Directorate Tactical Evaluation CHECO Division, 04/94), 43, Reprinted by Dalley Book Service, Christiansburg, Virginia.

Conboy, *Shadow War*, 168.

Victor Anthony and Richard Sexton, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The War in Northern Laos* (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1993) 212-214.

Thomas Ahern, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 2006) 216, 277-284.

Earl Tilford, *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia: USAF in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1980) 82-83.

Professor William Leary January 1967 Notes, Including Information from Mike Lynch.

Two Ambassador Sullivan Messages to State, 01/06/67.

Wayne Knight Email, 08/05/00-to Include January 1967 Logbook Entries.

*Air America Log* Volume 11, #2, April-June 1994.

Rickenbach's Letter to Roger Warner.

Joe Leeker-Helio Courier 166.

Arthur Dommen, Ernest Kuhn Interview, 37-39, 03/25/95,

Washington D.C. Library of Congress, 2006,

(webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:pfi198VSi).

January. Between the third and seventeenth 340 vehicles were observed moving through Mugia Pass.

*"Farther south, a group of approximately 225 trucks was seen on Route-23 during a five-day period in mid-January suggesting that, as in past years, the communists are moving supplies to the south in large, sporadic convoys.*

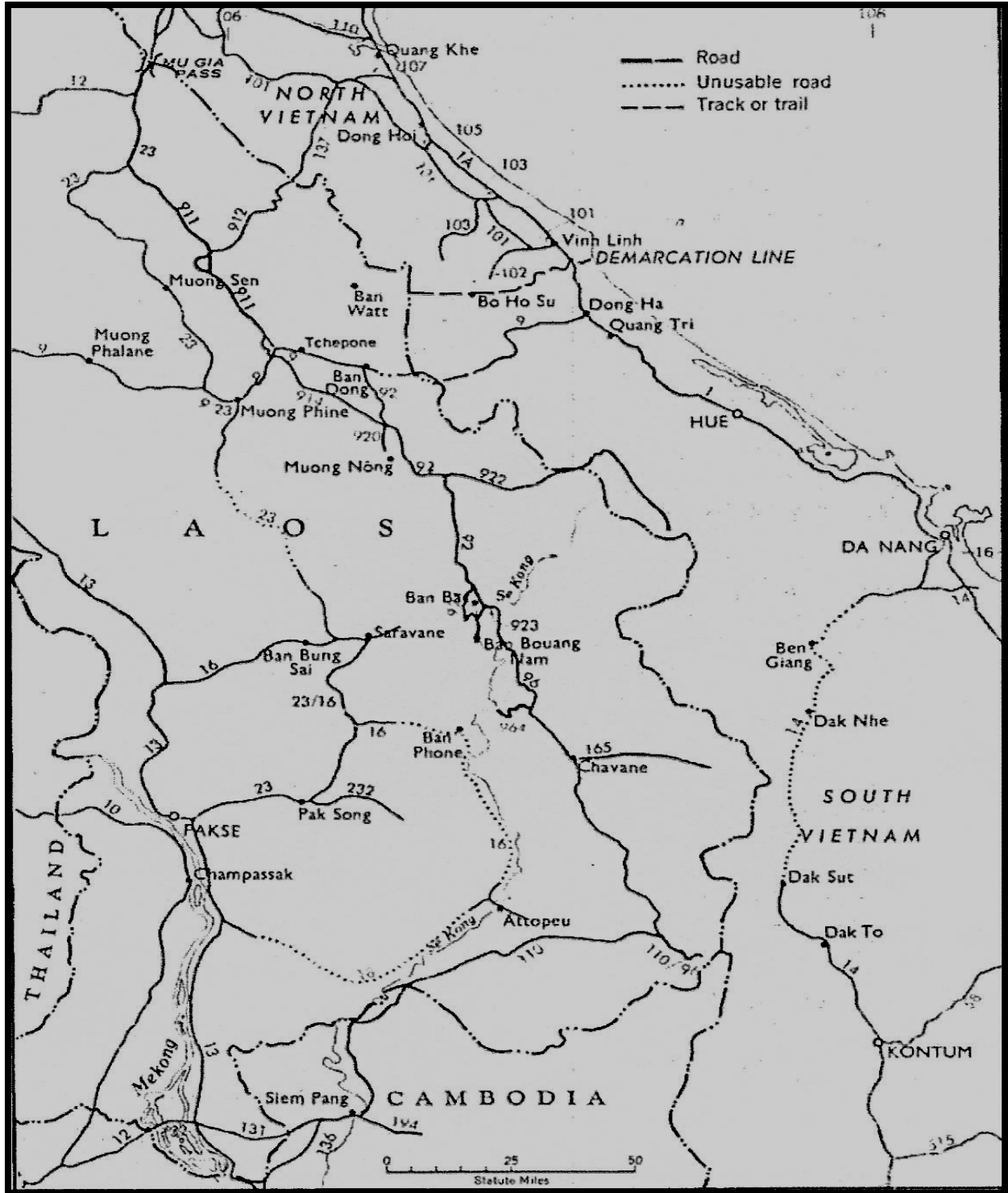
*The movement on Route-23 represents the first heavy use of that road in two years. During the 1965-1966 dry season the communists relied almost exclusively on the parallel Route-911. The reactivation of Route-23 provides the enemy with an alternate road south from the Mugia Pass, thus making this portion of the infiltration system less vulnerable to U.S. air strikes."* <sup>20</sup>

Even before the revelation of increased enemy traffic, and an increase in the number of road watch teams became directly proportional to this movement, new procedures and equipment for reporting were being augmented and implemented.

With the benefit of Agency funds and U.S. paramilitary experts, stringent training of Special Guerrilla Units (SGU) and expanding road watch operatives continued at outlying camps. As conditions

---

<sup>20</sup> CIA Daily Brief, 01/25/67. Heavy Truck Traffic in Laos: Large numbers of southbound trucks have been observed recently by road watch teams located near the Mugia Pass and along Route-23 in the Laotian panhandle.



CIA Map showing the disposition of the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex, consisting of roads, trails, and rivers through eastern Military Region Three and Military Region Four.

and requirements dictated, training varied. By January 1967, it eventually encompassed a comprehensive eight-week course staffed by professional instructors. Utilizing Lao, Kha, and other ethnics (to include some Thai Special Forces troops), clandestine operations were planned and tailored to harass enemy units using the Ho Chi Minh Trails to South Vietnam, and to gather and disseminate information for aircraft strikes and local enemy buildups that might affect FAR or paramilitary forces. Operations had slowly developed during the previous twelve months, employing 3,500 by January. Recruitment was underway to increase the total to 4,000 men. In 1966 special emphasis was accorded the Route-7 LOC thrusting through Barthelemy Pass, North Vietnam, to the Plain of Jars in Military Region Two.

In Military Region Three, Nape Pass and Route-8, Mugia Pass, Routes 12 and 23, and Ban Karai Pass were areas of concern.

Military Region Four, Route-110 was monitored, but not largely understood as the important Cambodian artery it would soon become.

Operations were constantly refined and utilized by both USAF and Air America helicopters for team delivery; and advanced communications equipment was introduced. Success of the program was attributed by U.S. Embassy personnel to centralized Savannakhet station operational control.

To alleviate major problems lugging heavy radios to observation posts, and to forward timely information, in the spring of 1966, a few road watch teams were issued light hand-held HT-1 and HT-2 radio sets capable of reporting real nighttime enemy sightings directly to USAF O-1E or AC-47 FAC aircraft when available, and if a Lao translator was onboard. Depending on the equipment employed, this was called HARK One for sending communications or HARK Two for receiving information. There were initial growing pains regarding usage of correct frequencies, valid and reliable team reporting, and availability of sufficient night airborne receiving platforms.

By fall, with many voice code reporting problems resolved, the system proved a little more efficient. However, information still moved slowly through several Agency and military conduits before strikes commenced. Normally, a forward team member radioed trail info to another member at an elevated rear site, who in turn relayed the findings to the pertinent Air Operations Center (AOC) using Delco 5300 medium speed carrier wave (CW) equipment. Then, after collation of information targeting and deliberation at the communications center, available assets were requested and dispatched on missions.

Agency personnel constantly sought improved relay equipment and resources to perform road watch

operations. It was recognized that acquiring and reporting enemy targets on Panhandle trails was often a problem because of lag time in obtaining timely air strikes on the target. Lucrative sightings from trail watchers could often take eighteen hours to channel through the convoluted military system. Moreover, airborne USAF FACs often only had an indigenous back seater to rely on for actual sightings, and this could present unacceptable hazards.

An initial experiment to either replace road watch teams, or supplement the men with buried or disguised electronic sensors, was attempted on a limited basis. Tests were not particularly impressive, for these devices proved far too sensitive to glean pertinent information. In addition, batteries were subject to extreme heat and humidity, and often malfunctioned. Instead, to limit communication relying on human voice that generally required translators for target acquisition, Agency "Skunk Works" Technical Services Department magicians devised a more efficient and easier method of transmitting signals to airborne platforms by even the most illiterate or mentally challenged individual. This innovation was incorporated into a standard UHF military survival radio that was modified and equipped with push buttons depicting vehicles, infantry, time, and location. When rolling traffic was spotted, even an unsophisticated road watch

person employing the device could intermittently press a button corresponding to what he observed. Coded micro-electronics would then store this information, the date and time, and transmission location. In turn, at his leisure, the team member could press a master button to relay the stored material to an orbiting aircraft, which in turn was equipped to relay information to the interested party. This technique would theoretically provide timely real time targets for intelligence analysts or for strikes. To a limited extent, on a test basis during the late fall, a few radio counters were deployed to teams in the Mugia Pass area. A military ABCC RC-47 based at Udorn, code named Alley Cat and crammed with electronic equipment, was utilized as the nighttime airborne relay platform. Correcting some of the previous flaws and delays, the system directly bypassed ground relay sites, providing the Savannakhet Air Operations Center (AOC) office information, which it in turn sent to the Udorn 7/13 Air Force for mission assignments. Except for limited range, the device proved generally effective, with strike response time often reduced from hours to minutes. Over time the new HARK-1 system proved an ingenious system if the individual using the box was completely honest. Verification of Usefulness could be ascertained by polygraph tests administered by Agency



personnel following a normal two-week road watch field mission.

Another upside to HARK-1 was the device's light weight compared to the heavier and bulky Morse code radio sets. This allowed teams to infiltrate closer to an objective, haul more supplies, and arrive at their posts in reasonably good condition. In addition, with this new found freedom of action, the men could remain in the area for several more weeks.

The HARK program's initial success prompted team expansion during early 1967 and throughout the year. From a few teams providing intermittent coverage, by mid-year there was almost continuous surveillance and intelligence gathering provided by experienced teams for all key routes through Laos to South Vietnam. The timely information led to considerable damage to the enemy logistic system. For example:

*"On the night of 7 July, [in southern Laos] when a road watch team reported the passage of 37 trucks, the information was flashed through communication channels to an Air Force command plane in the area, which diverted jets to arrive at the target seven minutes after original sighting to produce a total of 50 secondary explosions..."*

Because of the relatively short line-of-sight range of the new device, full time high flying receiving-relay platforms for Military Region Three and Military

Region Four were required at night. As the U.S. military was overwhelmed with other programs, to cover all areas at all times, both Air America and Boun Oum Airways (BOA) were solicited to propose suitable aircraft for the mission and "bid" on the project.

Ostensibly "owned" by Prince Boun Oum, BOA was based in Savannakhet. The small BOA organization initially formed in 1964 as another viable "competitor" to Air America and Bird and Son (then Continental Air Services, Inc.), and as a publicity ploy for public consumption, used Asian pilots in lieu of "round eyes" as a means to perform resupply and occasional plausibly deniable "dark" work. Both aircraft and maintenance were seconded from Air America and Bird and Son. After Bird was purchased by Continental, BOA was actively managed and monitored by CASI personnel. In the beginning planes were exclusively flown by Thai pilots until a majority were lost in crashes. Thereafter, "round eye" CASI pilots supplemented empty slots. As losses mounted, the tiny organization was folded into CASI and ceased to operate as an "independent" company.

Within the Air America camp, plans moved ahead for the Volpar relay program under the auspices of Chief Pilot Udorn fixed wing and Special Projects Manager, Jim Rhyne. Beside his other accomplishments, now in conjunction with the Agency and Taipei Management he

planned to offer a Turbo-18 program flown by Air America pilots.

The Beechcraft 18 model was a converted twin Beech C-45. In February 1966, the Volpar Company received certification on turboprop and tricycle landing gear kits for the aircraft. With the assistance of Volpar tech-rep, mechanics at Air America's subsidiary, Air Asia Limited Tainan, Taiwan, commenced work installing twin turboprop Garrett Air Research engines and retrofitting C-45 and Ten-Two aircraft from existing "tail draggers" to easier-to-land tricycle landing gear. Starting life as an auxiliary power unit (APU), the 331 Garrett engine initially revealed problems and had to be modified. The end result was a handsome blue and silver plane with improvements over the C-45 that included: full feathering propellers, short field take-off ability, better rate of climb, higher cruise speed, good single engine capability, and better ground handling. The ship eventually required larger fuel tanks for extensive loiter capability.

While bugs, common to all new aircraft and retrofits, were being worked out of the Volpar, Air America offered the durable C-45, a Navy-designated SNB ("Secret Navy Bomber") like the one we used for multiengine and radio instrument training in NAS Pensacola, Florida. As a testament to its success,



The C-45 Twin Beechcraft, also known as the SNB "tail-dragger" in the U.S. Navy, precursor to the Volpar.  
*Air America Log*, Volume 5, #2, 1971.



A blue and silver Air America Volpar. In 1966, a few Air America C-45 Beechcraft were converted into tricycle landing gear Volpar, VTB-18s. The aircraft were used for varied functions: to monitor and relay trail watch team signals, denied area photograph reconnaissance missions, and passenger transport.

*Air American Log, Volume 5, #6, 1971.*

versions of the airplane had remained in worldwide inventories since 1937.

Air America failed to win the initial contract. Instead, it was awarded to a politically-preferred BOA, which employed the German manufactured Dornier, DO-28, a plane many Customers and others referred to as "Hitler's Revenge" because of its dismal single engine performance. Despite the contract disappointment, Air America forged ahead, preparing the Volpar for envisioned high-altitude photo work along the Lao-Vietnam borders and denied areas.

### **JIM RHYNE**

Jim, a former U.S. Air Force pilot originally from Georgia, was hired in August 1962. He initially flew the Helio Courier out of Bangkok, servicing newly developed Thai police border patrol posts (BPP) along the northeastern Thai-Lao border. Since this was an agency-sponsored project, he eventually became acquainted with principals Bill Lair and Pat Landry. Within a short time, he went to work for them at their Nong Khai base. When AB-1 operations transferred to Udorn in 1963, Rhyne accompanied the unit. Along with Bird and Son Beech Baron pilot Bob Hamblin, a good friend and confident of the AB-1 team, Rhyne, was a closed-mouth, fair haired mystery man, who was frequently consulted regarding upcountry air support

and became closely associated with Agency operations and missions. Without knowing it, joining a select few like CJ Abadie, he went through the "Witting" process in Taipei at the same time as Wayne Knight.<sup>21</sup>

In 1964 Jim joined the T-28 Alpha program, eventually becoming the project manager. I worked with him on at least two hairy missions that involved T-28 escort and SAR support. The first was in the Sam Neua Valley in conjunction with the Colonel Charles Shelton downing, and the second during the Ernie Brace SAR in the Beng Valley.

## **PHOTO INTELLIGENCE**

Despite the presence of an Air Force photo van at the airfield, and personnel processing the product of RF-101 Voodoos and high flying U2 recon planes, AB-1 was experiencing problems obtaining high-quality photographic coverage in specific areas of interest along the enemy logistic Trail system.

Rhyne established himself early in the airborne Agency photo intelligence business. To rectify a shortage of intelligence so necessary to placement of early road watch teams, Lair requested that Jim

---

<sup>21</sup> Witting was the euphemism used by some Company employees for "need to know" individuals being appraised of Air America's true role as a propriety of the CIA. Not many individuals were selected for this category, and those that were witting maintained silence.

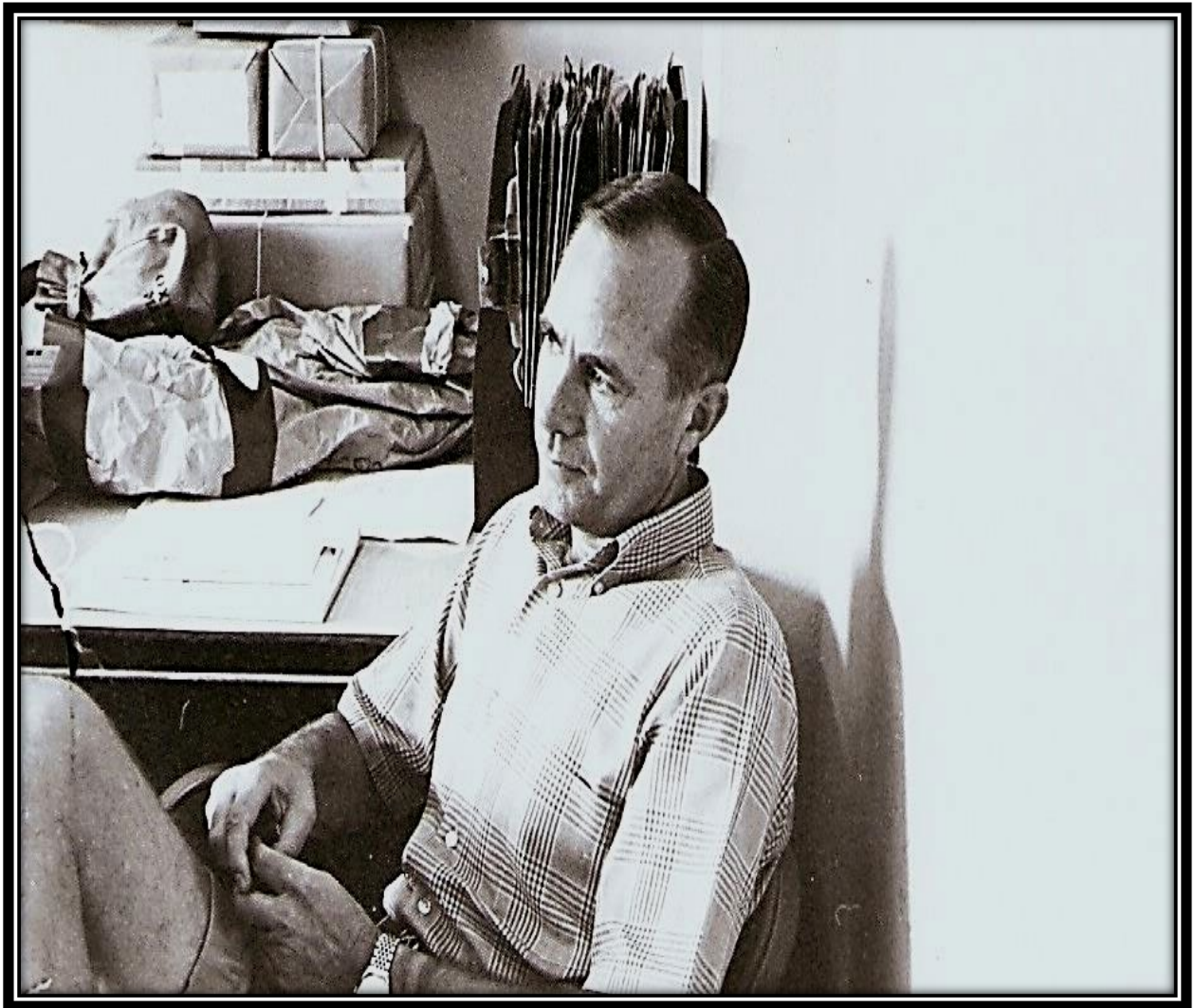
photograph reported activity in the Mugia Pass area. Along with a Lair assistant, while flying a slow Helio Courier along a considerable stretch of the Mugia-Tchepone road at low level, the duo discovered and photographed evidence of activity and the presence of heavy construction equipment.

After COS Vientiane Ted Shackley ordered greatly expanded road watch activity throughout Laos in 1966, the requirements for exceptional photo intelligence escalated. This was a task the Air Force could not, or would not, provide. Part of this deficiency stemmed from the fact that one-year tour military pilots lacked the area familiarization of Air America pilots.

Photo intelligence was not the only method of generating necessary information for developing team insertion locations. Tips from spies, radio intercepts, and boots on the ground were all instrumental in decision making. However, photo intel was at the top of Case Officer planners' list.

The introduction of the Volpar to the Lao Theater in 1966 provided a stable airborne platform for Agency-sponsored photo intelligence. Naturally, Jim Rhyne was the foremost choice to manage the fledgling program and develop reliable techniques. Assigned 42 Zulu and eventually 71 Charlie, Jim initially checked out his close, dependable, and trusted friends: Captains Berl King and Bob Main.





Captain Berl King during a moment of quiet reflection.  
Knight Collection.

In order to implement the program, the air conditioning unit was removed and a high-resolution camera installed in the deck. The Udorn facility Air Force photo unit provided film cassettes, developed the pictures, and interpreted the results. Later, onsite outstanding Agency photo interpreter (PI) specialists were employed. Over time the PIs became so proficient at their job that eventually Air Force pilots requested to be briefed by them.

The Air America photo recon program continued for years. It was successful because of the pilots' ability to find assigned targets and obtain superior photos. Until AAA fire became more deadly in the Panhandle area, the pilots flew at 7,000 feet AGL and 140 knots. However, the most AAA was encountered in Sam Neua Province and along the Chinese Road in the Beng Valley.

Little remained secret within our immediate organization for any period of time, and in this case, especially when it became common knowledge that several pilots were required for a Volpar program. Like the 1964 T-28 agenda, word of this new fixed wing program out of Savannakhet quietly circulated among pilot groups. Since many of us former Marines had flown the C-45 in the training command, or at the Quantico, Virginia, Marine Air Facility, sufficient experience in type was available. Moreover, the program provided a means of exiting helicopters for a breathing spell and

less exciting life in Laos. Now, with family responsibilities, like the proposed operation in Songkla with Jansky and Bailey that Marius offered me when on home leave, I also considered a temporary slack period from combat flying.

Therefore, after encountering Rhyne on the flight line one day, I inquired about the program. I respected Jim for his frankness, honesty, and excellent work with the T-28 at Sam Neua and Bouam Lao when I required assistance. Details he provided were necessarily sparse, but Jim indicated that the proposed program would require high altitude night flying by a dual cockpit crew. A hostel would be rented at Savannakhet for crews to eat, rest, and sleep during the day. After I informed him of my hundred hours multiengine time in the C-45, he indicated that was acceptable, but in keeping with Air America management's requirements to adhere closely to FAA regulations for "N" registered aircraft, he mentioned that multi-engine fixed wing credentials were a firm prerequisite to joining the program. Unfortunately, only helicopter oriented, I had not obtained such a license while I had the chance. I had not counted on

that requirement, and had to reconsider the situation.<sup>22</sup>

### **A PAIN IN THE...BACK**

After the recent RON at Sam Tong with Sarisporn I attempted to rest my back and seek advice from our doctors. However, unable to deal with an intangible medical item like back problems and without adequate facilities to diagnose or offer necessary treatment for the condition, I despaired of relief. The condition, likely sciatica, felt like a nerve pinch in the vicinity of the sacroiliac portion of my left lower back. Ever since a bruiser twice my size had doubled me up during a left end run my sophomore year in high school, I had had periodic trouble in this area. However, the condition never lasted long and never achieved the current magnitude of stress. The pain

---

#### <sup>22</sup> Segment Sources:

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, 110-111, 176-177, 216.  
Telegram Embassy Laos to State, 01/21/67.  
Ken Conboy, 145-146.  
Wikipedia (Internet), Boun Oum Airways.  
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 257-258.  
Steve Stevens Email, 12/08/98.  
Ted Shackley, 140, 148, 150-151.  
*Air America Log*, Volume 5, #2, 1971, pg. 2.  
CIA Memorandum (Colby) to the President, 07/31/67.  
Bill Leary 1966 Notes of Interviews with Jim Rhyne, Jim Glerum, and Tom Fosmire  
Frank Bonasinga, Steve Maxner Interview, Texas Tex University (TTU), 04/16/01.

began and was stimulated by sitting in the bucket seat of the Ford Mustang after the extended trip to North Carolina with a wallet in my left trouser pocket. Evidently, this caused undue pressure on an already-challenged skeletal-nervous system. <sup>23</sup>

As the sciatic nerve pain advanced to my knee and then to my ankle, mobility became seriously impaired. Limping badly, it was obvious that because of greed, the desire to please superiors, and a liberal dose of stupidity, I had procrastinated entirely too long in seeking competent medical help. Already on STO, I informed Wayne of my decision to journey to Bangkok for help. Entirely sympathetic, he assured me that any bookkeeping issues associated with sick leave would not constitute a pay issue.

Dragging my left leg, barely able to walk, on the eighth, I was allowed to ride on a USAF Caribou to the military side of Don Muang airport. It was none too soon, for I was depressed and very concerned that I would never properly walk or fly again.

I was initially an outpatient for a day while Doctor Wells attempted to determine the problem, ordering X-rays and other tests. However, electronic

---

<sup>23</sup> Preferring a left side pocket for both security and potential nerve pinch problems, I have never placed a wallet in my back pocket since.

state of the art was lacking at the time, and nothing was revealed that might have caused the condition.

Because of my obvious infirmity, I was admitted to the Bangkok Christian Hospital on the tenth. After seeing the advanced state and deterioration in my mobility, my physiotherapist, a short, dumpy, largely unattractive Thai female doctor, showed concern and ordered first steps for my recovery. Hospital handlers began by the time-honored technique of placing a bed board under the mattress. Therapy continued with bed rest and burlap dry heat packs and heat lamps to the affected area. After a few days of little improvement, during which it hurt to cough or sneeze, or other everyday items we normally do not consider, I was bussed daily in the afternoon to the doctor's clinic across town, where I received more advanced treatment in the form of diathermy, ultrasonic, heat packs, and whirlpool baths. I looked forward to the daily sessions as a means to escape the aggravating boredom and inactivity of hospital routine. One item helping to maintain my sanity, for a hospital the food was actually quite good.

During daily visits to the clinic, the reality of life in Asia confronted me. Although Sabin and Salk polio vaccines had been developed and were on world markets for some time, and little children no longer had to suffer from the disease, most Thai parents,

either through sheer ignorance or poverty, failed to have their children inoculated. As a result of this negligence, I was exposed to heart rendering, pitiful scenes of little children lying on raised pallets being "treated" by manual manipulation of their twisted and withered limbs. Other than helping to maintain whatever muscle tone was left, the damage had been done. Like those from my Father's generation who contracted the polio virus (his brother George and sister's husband), many Thai boys and girls would never enjoy running and playing with those not similarly affected. It was pathetic, and I mentally cursed the stupid Thai parents.

One afternoon I met fellow American, Air America Bell pilot Claude James at the clinic. Claude, in his early forties and already prematurely gray, was on medical leave from Saigon. Having injured his back the previous January during a Company employee SAR operation, he was seeking therapy on an outpatient basis for a condition that never entirely healed.

## **THE EVENT**

Carrying cargo from Saigon, Air America C-47 pilot Bill R. Pruner attempted to land at Vi Thanh (V-175) in the Mekong Delta at 0740 hours on 14 January 1966. After commencing a missed approach, the pilot flew north over Vietcong positions. About eleven miles from

the field, Bravo-929 encountered ground fire and the pilot was wounded in the leg. With one engine sputtering, and the plane no longer airworthy, Copilot Johnny YH Chang conducted a crash landing in a rice paddy area. For ten minutes, Pruner radioed his predicament and requested assistance in the blind. After indicating that someone was entering the rear cargo door, radio transmissions ceased.

Pruner's pleas for help were received by the crew of another cargo plane at altitude, who in turn issued a blanket call for Huey assistance. Jack Barnheisel responded, but was forced to depart the area when heavy ground fire commenced and tore through Copilot Janick's watch band.

While F-4 pilots bombed and rocketed the area, PIC Art Check and Copilot Claude James landed some distance from the crashed plane. A USAF dust-off Huey crew moved in, cautiously circling the C-47 in stages. Then, close enough to look through the windscreen into the cockpit, they declared that the pilots were apparently pinned in their seats. The military pilots then departed without accomplishing anything.

Claude and the Flight Mechanic proceeded to the front of the Douglas C-47A. Grabbing a twisted propeller, he pulled himself onto the left wing. Peering in the side window, he observed that both pilots, perforated Mafia style with numerous bullet



holes, were obviously dead, murdered by the Viet Cong. There was no sign of the Vietnamese kicker, Thai Van Nguyen.

The flight mechanic extracted Pruner from the cockpit and dragged him through the cargo compartment to the door. Then he dropped the Captain's dead weight on James. Too heavy and unwieldy, Claude was unable to hold Pruner. Instead, he plunged into a wet rice paddy, sinking to his thighs in muck and goo, covered with blood and slime. After reestablishing composure and extracting himself, James managed to lug the body to the Huey by rolling up the man's shirt and using the wad as a hand hold. While carrying Pruner to the helicopter, he injured his back.

Claude later learned that the enemy had been firing at them the entire time they were engaged in the recovery.

Destroyed, B-929 was officially declared a strike.<sup>24</sup>

## **RELIEF AT LAST**

Following two weeks of daily inpatient and outpatient therapy, I felt considerably better, but

---

<sup>24</sup> Claude James Interview with the Author at Flight Safety Bell Training Facility Hurst, Texas, 11/90.

Christopher Robbins, *Air America* (New York: Avon Books, 1979)133-134.

Doctor Joe F. Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*, Files of Individual Aircraft Types, Douglas C-47s, 06/01/09, Official Website for Air America.

still experienced twinges of pain in my left lower calf. For exercise, I was able to walk the hallway and encountered Doctor Reed, a tall Englishman who had resided with his family in Udorn for many years, while working with lepers at outlying villages. He had been taking Aralen (generic chloroquine) an anti-malarial pill and recently suffered a severe reaction to the drug. This was not uncommon in older persons, for many drugs had human side effects. This particular one required two and a half pages of warnings.<sup>25</sup> Reed's wife, a tall, strikingly beautiful blond Englishwoman, was liberal with her affections, and quite popular with some pilots who escorted her around when the good doctor was out of town. One or both were suspected of being British MI-6 agents. Still, I enjoyed conversing with him, but was perplexed when he used the unfamiliar term, naturist. For a while I was naive and had no idea that he was referring to nudist activities.

At the time I did not personally know, and never saw Pisith, the Thai PARU-Air America kicker recently rescued from a POW camp in Laos and now recovering at the Bangkok Christian. Perhaps he was lodged on a different floor, or not yet in the hospital. In addition, SAR activity was classified. Details of SAR

---

<sup>25</sup> Former Air America Operations Manager Tom Penniman's, mother died in early 1966 while visiting Thailand. An adverse reaction to the anti-malarial drug was suspected for her demise.

missions were not readily divulged out of concern that an innovative enemy would take actions to thwart our techniques.

My wife arrived and spent three days visiting me. The visit was multi-purpose: to see me, obtain some money for expenses, and to wean Ricky from her breast. In the meantime, Khun Yai, Bung Orn, and the maid were taking care of the little fellow. The process worked and he transitioned easily to the bottle. We had previously explored buying a car without a great deal of success. They were expensive and not particularly enticing as to looks and durability. Now, with the advent of my back problems and the uncertainty of the length of my hospital stay, I placed this on the back burner. As she had many times since returning to Thailand, Tuie mentioned that we should go back to America. She thought it was so clean. With all my current troubles, I was almost convinced that she was right.

After my slow progress in recovering, my doctor indicated that I would eventually require an operation. At the time such surgery cost 5,000 dollars in Bangkok. As we gained rapport, one afternoon she mentioned that a job opening in the northeast had just been proffered. However, horror stories circulating regarding the insurgency in Isan gave her pause to further investigate what she considered a negative situation.

Strictly a big city girl, she had never been out of the Bangkok area, and was apprehensive and curious about the upcountry Thai and Lao people. Even though the northeast Thai-Lao conversed in a much different dialect than those living in Krung Thep and the central Thailand region, I attempted to convince her that in my estimation they were decent and friendly people.

Since my condition was only improving slowly, and crusty Doctor Wells was complaining about the expense of keeping me in the hospital, on the 27th my female doctor offered me a cortisone injection. She claimed using it to advantage in other patients. I had never taken the drug before. However, I recalled the market introduction of first tablets while working as a stock boy in Sam Swerdloff's ice-cream-pharmacy store in 1951. The tablets were large and Sam indicated that at one dollar each, they were the latest prescription item to treat arthritis. Because of side effects, not everyone could tolerate the medicine.

This is what my doctor indicated, but since I was fed up with lying on my back and wanted to go home to my family, I assented to an injection. She left the room for a time and returned with a large syringe filled with liquid and a needle that appeared several inches long. Seeing her approach me with that device made me wonder if I was a human or a horse. She was familiar with the affected area, but using mostly

intuition, she inserted the needle into my left sacroiliac area. Then it was progressively pushed deeper and worked around the entire area. The process was quite uncomfortable and I was happy when the procedure was complete.

I had no adverse reaction to the injection. Free of most crippling pain for the first time in many weeks, I was released from the hospital the following day. I had to pay a small bill (all of forty baht a day) for fairly decent hospital food, and remain in Bangkok for examination regarding my daily progress. Continued rest and minimum exertion were prescribed, with monthly visits to the hospital recommended to monitor and evaluate the condition. I returned to Udorn on the last day of the month.

### **MIKE JARINA**

Late on the sixteenth, Mike and Flight Mechanic Peterson took Hotel-22 to Long Tieng (logged as LS-98) where they were shortly redirected to Luang Prabang to RON. Supporting Nam Bac (LS-203) was generally the focus of the next four days. Despite the cold gripping much of Southeast Asia with mornings that ranged from forty-two to fifty-two degrees, maximum flying occurred with between thirty-four to forty-seven landings per day. Besides shuttling to Site-203 from Luang Prabang, he delivered ammunition and troops from Nam Bac to a

northeast mountain outpost. Other stops were conducted to an outpost twenty-five miles northeast of Luang Prabang in the river valley near Ban Na Pho, and ten miles north of the royal capitol on the north side of a bend in the Mekong at Ban Lat Han. On Thursday the 19th, Mike was directed west to a valley area east of a large mountain group overlooking the Beng Valley. The following day, after a few shuttles at Nam Bac, Mike was sent far afield to retrieve a passenger and deliver him to Vientiane. Mike consequently RON at Sam Tong.

The final upcountry day he returned to Luang Prabang to move Lao security forces around in conjunction with the Crown Prince's visit to Xieng Ngeun east of LP on the Route-13 road to Vientiane. Mike then went to Moung Nane south of Luang Prabang, and to a point near the King's farm at the junction of the Mekong and Ou Rivers. After a long day, he returned to Tango-08. <sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews: Over a four-year period from 1996 to 2000, the Author conducted numerous enjoyable interviews with Jarina, at his Milton (Bagdad), Florida home, or at the Author's home. After the flight recording system moved to Hong Kong and became computerized, Air America clerks in Taipei ceased recording pilot logbook entries mostly logging time, aircraft number, shutdowns, and fueling stops. Mike entered much of his flight activity in personal logs. We all generally worked in the same areas and serviced identical landing zones. To provide the reader a more comprehensive overview of where we worked, and details of the Lao situation, to fill in gaps, the Author has liberally inserted Jarina's flight records and recollections.

As part of the government's people-to-people program, the Crown Prince arrived at Moung Nane on a Lao helicopter at 1000 hours. I had participated in one of his forays in the fall of 1964 after Operation Triangle and recapture of territory in the Vang Vang-Moung Kassy-Moung Met areas. With adverse weather and no one taking care of us, the experience was not pleasant for Air America helicopter crews. The Prince addressed the people and provincial politicians, ate, viewed the irrigation dam, and attended a reception at Ban Don Mo. <sup>27</sup>

### **TRAIL WATCH LOGISTICS**

During the spring of 1966, Department of Defense (DOD) and the United States Government (USG) State Department allowed U.S. Air Force helicopters to be staged in Thailand to help train the Thai military in counterinsurgency methods in Isan. The number increased, and by the fall, ten UH-1F Hueys and fifteen CH-3s had been transferred from South Vietnam and located either at Nakhon Phanom or Udorn. Since Thai training was envisioned to be completed within ten

---

<sup>27</sup> Robert and Jane Grover-International Voluntary Service representatives (IVS), *Laos: An Autobiographical History of Laos During the Period from September 1966 to June 1968* (Bound and published by Bob and Jane Grover, circa 1999) 29-30, 33. Soon after the crown prince visit, the possibility of the Glover's move to Moung Nane was considered. However, because of Pathet Lao activity in the area, the move was temporarily scrubbed.

months, the helicopters and TDY (temporary duty) crews would be withdrawn by the end of January 1967.

In addition to the training, like most air assets in demand, before long several other missions were assigned helicopter crews. At first, the ships and American crews participated in Thai counterinsurgency operations. Then, assigned a Pony Express call sign, they infiltrated and exfiltrated road watch teams in Laos from a secure compound at NKP, conducted SAR missions in the country, and performed clandestine operations in North Vietnam.

In a quandary over the purported loss of their delivery system, those military and civilian operatives associated with the various programs lobbied for their continued presence. Ambassador Sullivan entered the mix, insisting that withdrawal of the helicopters would cause damage to the trail watch activity that had greatly expanded. After give and take diplomacy, Secretary McNamara elected to retain four UH-1F Hueys for Lao and North Vietnam missions only. The other twenty-one helicopters would revert to military units in SVN as scheduled. <sup>28</sup>

Agency Chief of Station Ted Shackley's transfer to Vientiane in 1966 was noteworthy, particularly for the almost immediate changes in Lao policy. Shackley was

---

<sup>28</sup> By year's end a dozen CH-3s and crews returned to Nakhon Phanom to participate in newly implemented programs.



armed with an official Washington mandate to implement and achieve definitive activity more responsive and closely related to the parent war in South Vietnam. This agenda created a requirement for greatly expanded road watch teams to collect border intelligence for targeting and to assess the "big picture." This task, in turn, demanded additional delivery assets. The Agency, aware of the impending loss of the USAF helicopters and severe consequences on trail watching operations, employing foresight, ordered their proprietary Air America organization to purchase and arrange delivery of several Bell helicopters to Udorn. However, there was a substantial void between the departure of the Pony Express and arrival of the Bells. Therefore, in the interim, H-34 crews were tasked to continue performing even deeper road watch penetration missions into enemy territory.

On the afternoon of Sunday, 29 January, Captain Mike Jarina and Flight Mechanic "Champy" Champanil ferried Hotel-21 to the U.S. Air Force Nakhon Phanom base (NKP). There, in the special containment area reserved for clandestine Agency operations, Mike was briefed and a rotating road watch team loaded. Mike crossed the river and headed northeast to a location forty-six miles to a flatland drop point where the team would walk north toward the Route-12/8 junction south of Nhommarath. Capping the coordinated operation, the

team being relieved waited for exfiltration. Mike delivered them to Thakhet for debriefing, then stopped at Nakhon Phanom for fuel, and returned to Tango-08.

From the inception of Mike Duel's early intelligence gathering operations from Thakhet, coded Hardnose, H-34 helicopters were only occasionally used. Because a large and noisy H-34 presented the maximum opportunity for enemy detection, walking to an objective was considered the safer method and became a standard method of team movement in the field. However, this process had a down side. Normally time spent in the field was about two weeks. Because of the days involved reaching a target area and requirement to carry heavy radios and supplies, the period on station was substantially reduced. Therefore, as additional road watch teams were trained and added to the Customer inventory, and watch areas expanded toward the LOCs, it became necessary to explore other avenues of delivery. The only viable means available were helicopters.

According to Agency and Company principals, road watch missions were still considered routine work, but embedded deep in the line pilot's mind set, they were distinctly removed from what we jokingly called "normal work."<sup>29</sup> Anyone with half a brain and who had experienced the abundant joys of search and rescue

---

<sup>29</sup> In retrospect, some would call even normal work a misnomer.

(SAR) work could project the direction road watch missions were evolving. Had we not performed at least one SAR in North Vietnam during that rapidly expanding period until the USAF took over most of the long-range SAR work? Potentially hazardous, they were unlike later SAR missions, in which standard operating procedures (SOP) required two pilots, armed escort aircraft, and other essential factors. But, like any on-the-job-training (OJT) situations, those realistic SOPs did not evolve overnight. They developed gradually with considerable difficulty over time, between civilian and military principals after semi-tragic and tragic incidents. Then SOPs morphed into more cohesive and coordinated operational missions.

Although most early road watch team base camps were located some distance from enemy LOCs, drop zones were still situated in what military jargon specified "denied area." It was judged that within this area pilots could encounter battle damage during hairy situations. In addition, other than the standard ten dollars per hour hazard pay, like SAR work, there was no extra remuneration provided for such mandatory missions. Since we were all aware that the T-28 Alpha program pilots received respectable mission pay for "clandestine" activities, the blatant lack of compensation became a bone of contention with more than a few disgruntled helicopter pilots. Therefore,

sometime previously, a non-threatening joint pilot letter regarding this "oversight" and specifying hazards involved in such activities, had been composed and supposedly forwarded through Company channels for upper management's edification and consideration. If the letter was actually sent, received, and perused by interested parties, we never received any feedback. It was the last anyone heard regarding the subject. Since no one was willing to quit the Company over the increasingly grating road watch work, management disregard of the letter was not unexpected. Based at Taipei, Taiwan, callused Company personnel were far removed from our environs, and largely disinterested regarding any real action and hazards to which helicopter crews were subjected in Laos. Indeed, current Taipei management was nothing like former VPFO Bob Rousselot (currently a honcho with CASI), who used to conduct monthly inspections to his Southeast Asia stations to gather information about his charges and "press the flesh." Even Bob, probably narrowly focused on his agenda, got it wrong at times. <sup>30</sup>

In all fairness, as a disclaimer to the above, there were no detailed written job descriptions

---

<sup>30</sup> Management inattention to pressing pilot requirements and honest recommendations fell on upper management deaf ears. In later years this culminated in serious problems that resulted in formation of a union, and in an era of political correctness, later became known as industrial action.

available for Air America helicopter or fixed wing pilots in the Company Personnel Manual. We were largely unaware of the "Catch-22 provisions contained in the USAF-Air America contract that covered nearly all facets involved in the job pertaining to the Lao conflict. The initial interview, our original employment contract with Air Asia, and briefing in Taipei certainly did not specify anything tangible regarding the job. In my case that information was mostly learned through "scuttlebutt" and those who had been there-done that. Some recently hired pilots were extremely shocked after discovering the true nature of the job and the character and danger involved when participating in our "small" war. Other men arriving from the South Vietnam conflict, who had previously been exposed to combat, easily assimilated and rolled with the punches. Since I arrived in Thailand during 1962, flight operations and Customer demands on pilots had increasingly become more hazardous, especially since Ted Shackley had assumed the COS billet with a clear mandate to crank up the Lao war to help relieve conditions within South Vietnam. For years, management's general attitude was an unsympathetic-"if you do not like it, quit." Several good men did leave during the stressful SAR era from 1964 to 1965. So far, not many pilots had been wounded or killed in the line of duty, but this was certain to change over time and

would present negative implications on future operations. <sup>31</sup>

Wayne Knight did not recall any earlier letter complaining about inequities in aircraft programs and lack of remuneration for "difficult" work. He doubted if anything like I mentioned was sent to Taipei. <sup>32</sup>

*"All hell would have broken loose if such a letter reached top echelons. If it came to Ab's attention, it would have certainly stopped there. A paper of this magnitude would have been construed as a petition of sorts and never would have been forwarded to Taipei. Reflecting on local management, it would have been handled in-house."* Moreover, if Ab were involved, Wayne believed the letter originators might have lost their jobs.

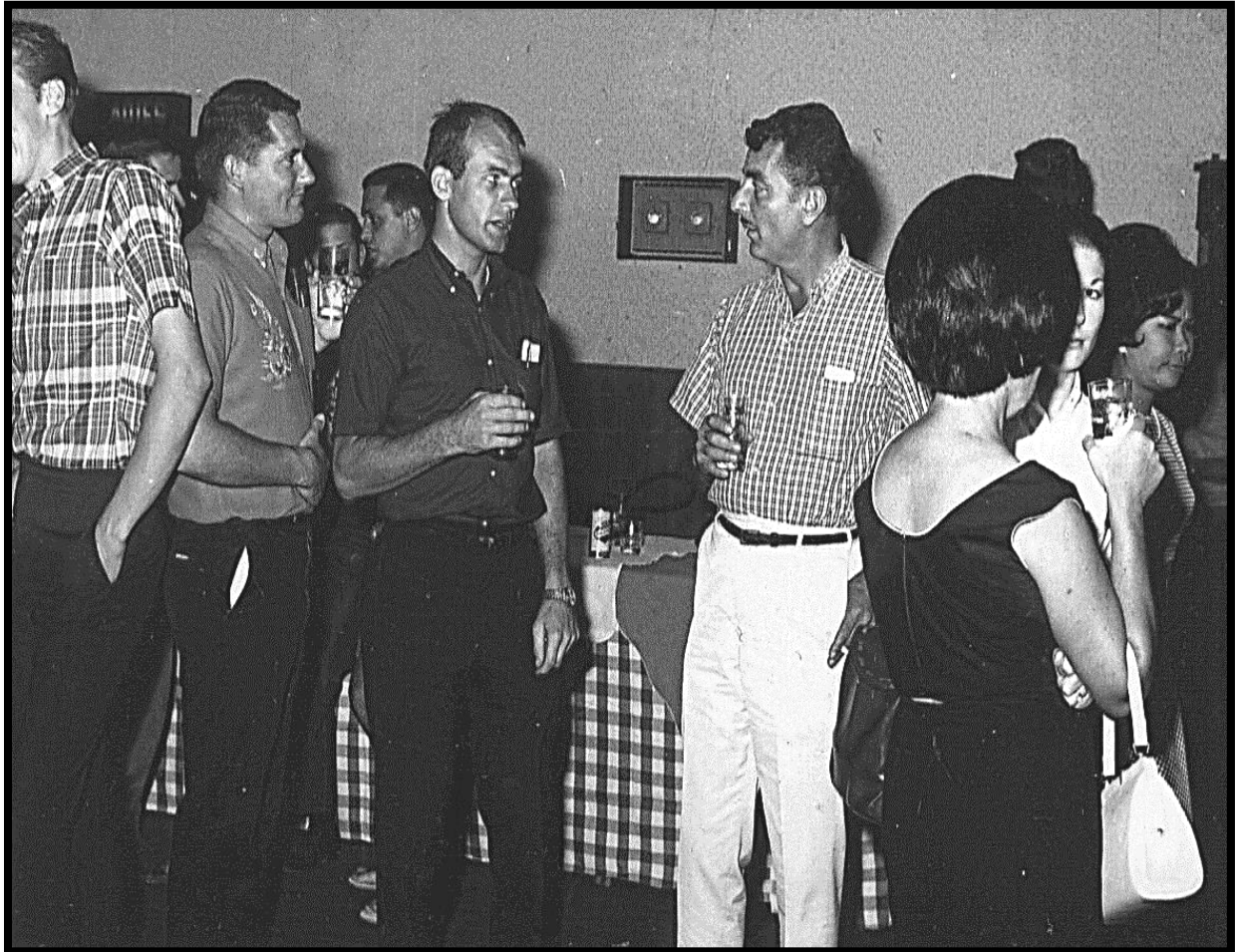
Mike Jarina also did not recall a specific letter relating to our grievances, but he was a fairly new hire at the time and likely not included in any attempt to achieve change. He did recall dissatisfaction regarding SAR standby missions and was involved in some of these himself. <sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> The Author wrote a letter to his parents on 08/14/67 mentioning the pilot letter, but specified no details. Also relayed: **"We are doing more dangerous work lately, not like 1965, but potentially bad."**

<sup>32</sup> Any letter was likely hand carried to Taipei by a fixed wing advocate.

<sup>33</sup> EW Knight Email, 08/26/00.  
Mike Jarina Interviews.



"Bing" Bengston (center) talking to Captain John Grassi (right) and Flight Mechanic "Rusty" Irons at an Air America party in the Club Rendezvous movie room. Flight Mechanic Hal Augustine to "Rusty's" left. Air America wives to right side of photo.

Steve Nichols Collection.

Rounding out his monthly flying, Jarina was scheduled on the last two days of the month in Hotel-44. On Monday, he conducted a local night flying session with "Beng" Bengston. "Beng," a genial pipe smoker, was known by close friends as "Shaky," an endearing nickname derived from a tremor condition displayed by "Beng's" shaking hands. I originally thought his shakes were a symptom of excessive drinking, but this was largely disputed by others who knew him well. When lighting his pipe, he held the heel of his hand holding the lighter against his cheek to stabilize it enough to create a steady flame over the bowl. Bengston was knowledgeable regarding electronics. His hands shook when holding a screwdriver, but were steady while inserting a screw.

"Beng" also suffered from diverticulitis, an intestinal disease of the colon affecting many older people. He kept Wayne Knight up-to-date on his condition and the CPH learned all he ever needed to know regarding the disease. Wayne considered "Beng" a very personable fellow, and except for suspecting a bit of malingering, he got along with Bengston well.

The next day Mike flew to Pakse in Hotel-44 with Bob Nunez to work in the Saravane area. With the mission complete, they returned to Pakse where Mike was relieved and recalled to Udorn. Since nothing was returning directly to Tango-08, he caught a ride on



Dornier-389, which first made a stop at PS-22 on the eastern central Bolovens. By then, the mid-month flap at the site had dissipated and the special guerrilla unit (SGU) trainees and case officers had returned to conduct business as usual. From PS-22, Mike deadheaded to Vientiane, where due to the lateness of the hour, he remained overnight.<sup>34</sup>

### **ROUTE-110**

As Agency Case Officers prepared their Kha and Lao charges at PS-22 (Ban La Tee, LS-190) and Chinese Nungs at LS-165 (Ban Nam Tieng) for initial or more aggressive easterly road watch activity, during the fourth week in January, intelligence information from South Vietnam-based Special Operations Group (SOG) teams reported the Route-110 portion of the Sihanouk Trail system had achieved major LOC status to South Vietnam. Largely ignored in favor of Panhandle operations and proximity to neutral Cambodia, the east-west trail system had been connected to the north-south Route-96 artery passing east of the Bolovens and Kong River.

With such a lucrative target believed concentrated within Laos not far from South Vietnam, planning went forward for a third massive SLAM (select, locate,

---

<sup>34</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.  
EW Knight Email, 08/05/00.

annihilate, and monitor) strike. Two waves of B-52 bombers and other air assets battered the area with massive strikes on the final two days of the month. Over the following two weeks, bomb damage assessment (BDA) was conducted by SOG teams. This resulted in the discovery of a sizable enemy supply complex well outside normal Lao road watch team coverage. Additional strikes destroyed numerous enemy supplies and reputedly temporarily slowed movements along Route-110.

### **ARC LIGHT**

Hundreds of B-52 sorties were being flown monthly in the Southeast Asian Theater. Therefore, to more efficiently and cost effectively fulfill growing Arc Light requirements, large bases nearer the targets were deemed essential to position strike aircraft. For security reasons, Kadena, Okinawa and Clark, Philippine Islands U.S. Air Force bases were first considered; then South Vietnam and lastly Thailand. All but U-Tapao in Thailand were rejected for either political or military reasons.

Half a billion dollars had been expended on military construction projects in Thailand: six 10,000-foot airfields were built or rebuilt; <sup>35</sup> all weather highways connected most regions of the country;

---

<sup>35</sup> The Udorn airfield always seemed to be undergoing some form of construction.

military facilities were scattered throughout the nation; and major improvements were made to the naval port at Sattahip.

After Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's December 1965 visit to Southeast Asia, construction projects accelerated into high gear. Millions of dollars were devoted to building U-Tapao RTAFB, located to the south of the resort town of Pattaya on the tip of Thailand's eastern peninsula. During a multi-year construction project, the largest and longest airfield in Southeast Asia was built. Dillingham, Zachry, and Kaiser (DZK) contractors formed a cohesive construction unit responsible for the port and air facility. Labor was provided by Thai nationals. American, Filipino, Korean, Canadian, and Europeans supervised the job.

Thai government officials approved staging B-52s at U-Tapao in early March, and the first three of fifteen Guam-based B-52 crews landed there at the end of April.

In China the Thai government announcement that B-52s would be launched from Thai bases was met by a comment in the *People's Daily* Newspaper. It warned that such an action, "*will inevitably add fuel to the flames of the armed struggle of the Thai people.*"

More threats emanated from Chinese leaders to the effect that China would enter the war if the U.S. invaded North Vietnam.

By June the last of the RTG-authorized B-52s arrived in Thailand. However, because Laos and Cambodia were "neutral" countries, Lao over flights were prohibited and the planes routed around Cambodia to targets in South Vietnam, the demilitarized zone (DMZ), and southern North Vietnam. Although better utilization was achieved out of U-Tapao, circumnavigation required a six-hour roundtrip as opposed to the projected three to four hours required for direct flights to the DMZ or other targets in South Vietnam or Laos. Restrictions needed to be lifted to comply with requests to strike targets of opportunity in a timely fashion. To further enhance the Arc Light program and eliminate a refueling requirement from Guam, it was believed desirable to increase the number of B-52s at U-Tapao to a total of thirty.

By September, Thai and Lao leaders allowed Lao targeting, but because of a Soviet objection to direct flight in neutral Laos, and talk involving combat operations in Laos, flights were still inefficiently shunted around Cambodia for the next three months.

In November General Wheeler, making the case for up to 1,200 sorties a month and lowering operational costs, was still lobbying to eliminate the day and night Laos overfly restriction. Ambassador Sullivan agreed to discuss the Arc Light issue with Souvanna Phouma.

Because of substantial traffic along Trail LOCs, early in December, LBJ ordered the cancellation of the Lao overflight ban on Thai-based B-52 aircraft. Ambassador Sullivan did his part, and by 20 December obtained Souvanna Phouma's approval for the overflights. Limitations included specified corridors, high altitude flights, and avoidance of major towns.

By the end of the month, sorties were conducted from U-Tapao directly to Lao and South Vietnamese targets.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup>Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 180-181, 197-198, 240, 247-248, 251-252.

Tregaskis, *Southeast Asia: Building the Bases*.

Memorandum Westmoreland to McNamara, Arc Light Restrictions, 07/11/67.

Memorandum Meeting with President Johnson, 11/29/67.

Telegram Sullivan to State, 11/30/67.

Telegram Sullivan to State, 12/20/67.

Article from the (Chinese) *People's Daily*, 03/25/67.

**D**uring February, enemy movements and attacks continued January's attempts to penalize and discourage FAR activity in the North. Highly trained and motivated North Vietnamese commando sappers were nearly the best in the business of infiltrating and instituting surprise attacks. Always using latest intelligence sources, the group's sandbox planning, tenaciousness, courage, and generally successful execution of missions was well respected and admired by opponents. Of course, often lax Lao security measures contributed to much of their success.

Luang Prabang was the site of the historical and traditional Royal Lao Capital and supposedly a neutral town that in the past allowed some Pathet Lao access for rest and relaxation (R&R) and resupply purposes under Geneva Accords protocols and the facade of neutrality. Additionally, it was also the primary base, aircraft asset, and logistical focal point for government action against northern enemy areas in Military Region One, which had contributed to the August 1966 capture of Nam Bac. Consequently, the airfield provided an important launching platform for RLAFF T-28 strikes, and support by both Air America and

Lao H-34 pilots. Add to this a kicker of parked H-34s, it was indeed a target deemed ripe for picking.

According to AIRA advisor Don Moody, Luang Prabang's defenses had been probed by enemy units in late 1966 and early 1967. Concerned, Don queried Lao army commanders regarding the security of the T-28s and H-34s. He was assured that perimeter defenses had been strengthened and there was adequate protection for the aircraft and safety for the aviation personnel.

Even though intelligence revealed T-28 strikes from Luang Prabang were taking a toll on the enemy to the north, no one remotely considered the enemy would be so bold as to attack the airfield. Therefore, before retiring on the afternoon of the first, hoping to expedite strike missions the following day, nine T-28s were preloaded with ordnance.

On the second, during a lightning thrust about an hour after midnight, a well-schooled enemy raider unit of less than three dozen men successfully penetrated and attacked the Luang Prabang airfield for the first time.

In the AIRA compound, eyewitness Moody was awakened by the sound of automatic weapons fire and explosions from the house rear and the direction of the airfield. Moreover, a fire was observed reflected into the night sky.

Along with an ARMA colonel, Don Jeoped toward the Nam Khan Bridge, where they were temporarily delayed by troops ordered to not allow anyone across. Finally gaining access, they proceeded along the fire illuminated road toward the airfield. As firing increased, they encountered FAR troops randomly shooting at phantoms to the south. Then Colonel Bounchanh appeared with an early report of what he knew regarding the situation. Employing B-40 rocket launchers, AK-47 rifles, and satchel charges, a small enemy strike force had penetrated airfield defenses. Within an estimated fifteen minutes, they destroyed six T-28s and damaged three others. The sappers also damaged two additional Lao H-34s parked near the T-28s. Fires from the T-28s detonated attached bombs, resulting in secondary explosions.

The fun was not over. While they were talking, an enormous explosion occurred in the bomb dump at the east side of the airfield, producing a gigantic and spectacular fireball. In close proximity to the dump, the air operations center (AOC) was mostly destroyed, with windows blown out and the roof torn off.

Not knowing what to expect next, Don, et. al. wisely elected to return to the AIRA compound and prepare for the worst-case scenario.

After briefing confused individuals at the house regarding what he had observed and been told, Moody

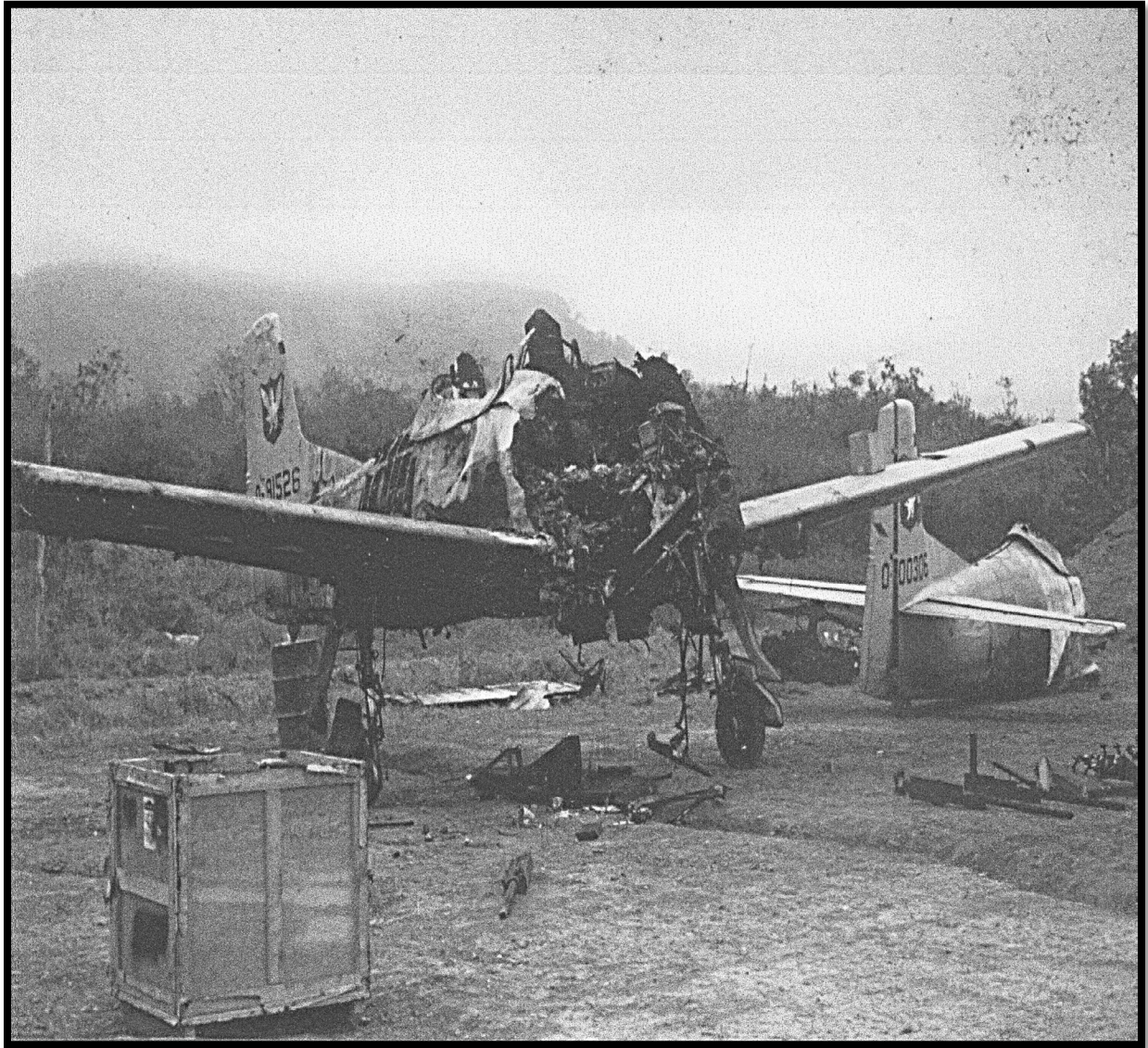


repaired to his bunkered room. Soon afterward, he heard running sounds outside followed by shooting. Then his door was smashed open and a concussion grenade hurled against the wall. The explosion dazed and deafened him, but did not prevent him from firing in the direction of the interloper. Don then remained hunkered down until morning, when during the light of day, things could be better sorted out.

Government casualties were relatively high, with five FAR guards killed and six wounded, several in the hooches behind the AIRA compound. Likely carrying any dead or wounded with them while disappearing into the jungle, there were no indications of enemy casualties. Subsequent pursuit of the intruders proved fruitless.

Fires were still burning at the airfield. A hasty inventory revealed the devastation. At the time, Bounchanh had been fairly accurate in assessing damaged or destroyed Lao aircraft. In addition, Hotel-31, an Air America H-34 was destroyed. Aircraft parts and unexploded bombs littered the scene. The entire complement of flight line equipment was damaged or destroyed. The AOC building would have to be rebuilt. It appeared the LP Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) operation was out of business while an area clean-up was conducted and the runway repaired.

Then a mini-miracle occurred. Within two days, six T-28s were delivered from Udorn stocks of confiscated



The aftermath of an enemy sapper attack depicting damage or destruction of Royal Lao Government T-28 aircraft at the airport west parking ramp, Luang Prabang, Laos, 02/02/67.

Author Collection.

aircraft obtained from the General Ma coup episode. The Requirements Office (RO) in Vientiane delivered munitions and replacement equipment for nearly all lost assets during the night attack. It was sufficient enough that on the third day after the attack, T-28 pilots were again in the air terrorizing enemy forces in the north.

Still, previous Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) sortie rates from Luang Prabang diminished for the next three months until all damaged T-28s were either repaired at the Udorn maintenance facility or replaced from Thai "Firefly" stocks. By May, sorties increased appreciably.

Air America Captains Ivar Gram and Dan Carson and their Flight Mechanics were safely billeted in town during the attack. Apprised of his aircraft's destruction the following morning, Gram was reputedly quite upset over the loss of his ship and particularly of his navigational maps depicting friendly work sites and hostile areas that he had laboriously plotted.

During his next RON at Luang Prabang, Mike Jarina learned from a Customer that airfield security guards were afraid, and some were doubled up in single man foxholes. To lessen the potential of future overnight losses, H-34 pilots were prohibited from parking in areas near the T-28 ramp. Therefore, after work, the



Flight Mechanic Pat McCarthy and Captain Dan Carson.  
Author Collection.

ships were randomly spaced along both sides of the runway. <sup>1</sup>

As Captain Larry Wilderom had unfortunately discovered the previous year, on five February, fixed wing Captain "Willy" Utterback also found that Luang Prabang continued to present a very hazardous work environment. Working there was becoming what we sarcastically called, "A bag of worms."

Flying Helio Courier XW-PBS, "Willy" was assigned to work for the public health section of the Luang Prabang U.S. Information Service (USIS). During the course of the day, the 713 (Agency contract) Customer convinced the USIS Customer to relinquish Papa Bravo Sierra for a northern pyc-warfare drop of good conduct passes.

Utterback departed with a Lao lieutenant and several cartons of leaflets. Commencing fifteen to twenty-five miles northeast of the Royal Capital, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Segment Sources:  
 Victor Anthony, 216.  
 Edward Vallentiny, *Project CHECO, USAF Operations from Thailand, 1 January to 1 July 1968* (HQ PACAF, Directorate Tactical Evaluation, CHECO Division) 23.  
 Bill Leary, 1967 Notes.  
 John Pratt, 44, 45.  
 Mike Jarina Interviews.  
 Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America, Fate of Hotel-31*, Air America Website.  
 Don Moody, *The Great Adventures of Bob & Don: Short Stories from Laos 1966-1967*, Episode 2, Nightmare at LP-The Night the Frog Ate the Moon, 1-4, 6-7, (<http://www.aircommandos.org/BobAndDon/Episode002.htm>).

lieutenant began shoving leaflets out the side window from a low level. The duck hunters were improving leading their targets. On the third pass, the plane received a single round aft of the cowl flap. The missile continued through the instrument panel, shattering the windscreen. Flying Plexiglas and bullet fragments seriously wounded the Lao in the left neck and he began bleeding profusely. "Willy" was also badly injured in the forehead and began losing blood. Despite nearly blacking out, he landed safely at Luang Prabang. A Special Forces medic attended to Utterback's wounds. The lieutenant was not as fortunate.

There would be additional Air America crew casualties during the year. Yes, working at the royal capitol was indeed a "bag of worms" and required extreme caution while participating in "Southeastern Asian war games." <sup>2</sup>

### **ADDITIONAL ATTACKS**

Military Region Two early morning fog and overcast conditions often inundated river valleys and the Plain of Jars during the cool season. In 1967, these conditions impacted the area and persisted longer than previous years. During these periods visual air reconnaissance and strikes decreased to a minimum.

---

<sup>2</sup> Professor William Leary February 1967 Notes.

Therefore, on the same day that Utterback was having fun at Luang Prabang, Vietnamese troops attacked Moun Soui's Thai 155mm artillery unit with light mortar, rocket, and automatic weapons fire. Only minimal damage was effected. Having elicited a firm statement as to their ability to attack at will in small numbers, the Vietnamese temporarily withdrew. The attack later continued for a short period with PT-76 tanks shelling Lima-108, and enemy infantry probing FAN outposts.

Such attacks were not unreasonable or unexpected, as deduced from intelligence reports received by road watch teams and spies in December. Trucks carrying infantry from the direction of Khang Khay had been spotted moving through Phong Savan (L-21) on the eastern Plain of Jars, turning west toward Phou Kheng, twelve miles east of Moun Soui. Armored cars, tanks, and large numbers of Vietnamese troops were reported south of Phou Kheng as were many guns installed on area hillside positions. <sup>3</sup>

Southern Laos in Military Region Four, as evidenced by activity at PS-22 on the Bolovens Plateau in January, was not immune from enemy probes. Also, there was some concern regarding enemy movement and buildup

---

<sup>3</sup> Victor Anthony, 217.  
Agency Information Cable, A Count of Troop Concentration and Heavy Guns in the Location of Khang Khay Area in Xieng Khouang Province, 02/11/67.

around the critical Attapeu region. Therefore, in addition to SLAM operations along parts of Route-110, on the fifth and sixth, additional strikes targeted suspected positions in the vicinity of the Bolovens.<sup>4</sup>

Just prior to mid-month, with unseasonal, adverse weather still impacting upper Military Region Two, under the cover of a thick overcast the enemy again took the opportunity to probe Na Khang's defenses. A week later, recoilless rifle rounds impacted the garrison until an A-26 bomber crew arrived from Nakhon Phanom to illuminate the night with flares and drop bombs. No Meo casualties were reported, but new buildings were destroyed.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Edward Vallentiny, *CHECO*, 23.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 217.



**S**ince returning home from the hospital, I attempted to favor my back and exercise caution against sudden movements, but this was difficult to achieve given normal family demands. In addition, there was no physical therapy available in Udorn, like the soothing Whirlpool bath in the Bangkok outpatient clinic. Happily, except for occasional twinges of pain in the lower leg, most of the excruciating back pain had disappeared from the nerve damaging sciatica's effects. Should the condition persist or worsen to the point that I could not fulfill my flight duties, the loss of license insurance that I had purchased would not be available for a long time.

Although still not in the best condition, after consultation with Wayne, as a test, on Monday the sixth, I flew a local night training flight with Captain Boonrat in Hotel-15. After that I waited an additional eleven days before being released by the doctor for upcountry work.

My son Rick was so cute that I had to show him off to people at the airfield. Flight Mechanic Rick Decosta referred to him as my duplicate. Apparently the "witch hunt" had evaporated during our home leave, and many normal groceries and household supplies were again flowing through our small supermarket that was slated

to move soon into a larger facility. I never purchased much, for we generally lived off the local economy, but found this was becoming more expensive because of the steadily developing inflation caused by the continuing influx of USAF personnel. However, I was able to purchase baby cereal at the Air America store, whereas it was only available in town for outrageous prices.

The new fixed wing program was still in the mill and discussed among curious pilots. Although the contract had not been awarded (CASI was being considered) and not a lot was known, some helicopter pilots, including me were interested. However, I did not possess either a single engine or multi-engine fixed wing rating, and had no intention of obtaining one. Although I had a choice opportunity to obtain these while in the service, as opposed to rotorcraft, I did not particularly like flying airplanes, and never anticipated a future need for the certificates. Apparently, one could obtain the necessary Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) ratings in Manila, Philippine Islands (PI). Because of our sizable number, at one time when flight time was low, some of us former Marines envisioned forming a U.S. Marine Corps reserve unit in Udorn. Obligatory summer training would be conducted in Manila. After further consideration, it was considered that such an organization would impose undue problems on flight scheduling and Company policy,

and was discouraged by management. Consequently, a local U.S. Marine Corps Reserve unit was never formed, but Marius Burke somehow maintained his Marine reserve status.

### **USG BOMBING INTERLUDE**

Since introducing troops to South Vietnam and instituting air operations against North Vietnam, hoping to generate some dialogue for peace, USG had previously halted bombing North Vietnam on several occasions. The longest periods were conducted for five days in May 1965 and thirty-six days during December 1965 to January 1966. Minor pauses were observed over Christmas and New Year 1966. Nothing tangible was achieved diplomatically and, ignoring USG overtures to talk or negotiate, the communists blatantly continued to improve their trail system through Laos, while moving troops and supplies to South Vietnam. This activity was particularly rife in the Military Region Three Panhandle region.

To counter enemy infiltration through Laos, over the previous two years a gradual liberalization of rules of engagement (ROE) pertaining to air strikes and reduction of restrictions on cross border operations had been instituted. However, these efforts were generally too little, too late to offset increased enemy infiltration. New roads and trails were pushed

toward completion, expert concealment and camouflage improved, and repair crews enlarged.

In January, a multi-day truce period was proposed during the February Tet Vietnamese lunar holiday period. Because of past enemy opposition to negotiations, and latest violations during bombing pauses, MACV (Saigon) General Westmoreland and Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC-Hawaii) Sharp realistically refused to sanction any air operational stand-down. However, since tenets of the Founding Fathers U.S. Constitution provided that civilians, not the military, rule the Washington nest, Department of Defense opposition was disregarded; the truce was initiated and even extended to slightly more than five days.

Peace feelers by USG and other Western leaders had been ongoing for months without success. North Vietnamese leaders always refused to consider anything substantial without preconditions leading to a cessation of hostilities. During the latest bombing halt, British and Russian representatives sought to initiate peace talks. During the period, President Johnson forwarded letters of proposals for negotiations to Ho Chi Minh through Moscow. Responding late, Ho again refused to talks without an unconditional halt to bombing and all acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DVR).

The North's leaders were supreme masters at stalling while talking and fighting. Consequently, instead of serious dialogue, during a round-the-clock operation, the Vietnamese military took advantage of the situation to safely funnel substantial amounts of men and munitions to South Vietnam. This was confirmed by area road watch teams and air reconnaissance of roads, trails, rail lines, waterways, and through the critical Mugia Pass.

With this information in hand, Rolling Thunder and associated bombing programs resumed, prompting calls by CINCPAC and the Joint Chiefs of Staff for even greater pressure on enemy lines of communication (LOCs). Because of Lao neutrality and Ambassador Sullivan's problem keeping Souvanna Phouma in USG's pocket, military leaders recognized the requirement for political restraints, but they were aware that more effective utilization of military assets, mostly ground operations, were necessary to reduce infiltration to South Vietnam.

The President issued a public announcement stating the reasons for resuming bombing:

*"It had been our hope that the truce periods connected with Christmas, New Year's and Tet might lead to some abatement of hostilities and to moves toward peace. Unfortunately, the only response we have had from the Hanoi government was to use the periods for*

*major resupply efforts of their troops in South Vietnam. Despite our efforts and those of third parties, no other response has as yet come from Hanoi.*

*...We had no alternative but to resume full-scale hostilities after the cease-fire. But the door to peace is, and will remain open.."*

Shortly afterward, thoroughly convinced of enemy capability to move men and supplies over the trails during the absence of interdiction, LBJ sanctioned deeper cross border penetration by larger air-delivered ground reconnaissance units. He also authorized additional Rolling Thunder targets in North Vietnam.

After deliberation and delay, Sullivan reluctantly acquiesced to the call for expanded Shining Brass cross border operations in the Panhandle. However, because of the long-time presence of FAR Lao Bao Battalion BV-33 at Ban Houei Sane near the border, he knew that Souvanna Phouma would not agree to operations there. Therefore, operations would have to be conducted clandestinely and silence strictly maintained.

A short time after resumption of Rolling Thunder and Lao interdiction, the government town of Moung Phalane (L-61) was accidentally bombed, causing several casualties and destruction. Located well east of Savannakhet on the edge of the Steel Tiger area, the town had previously been attacked several times. It was

also the site of a manned Air America radio relay station.

### **ELECTRONIC BOMBING AIDS**

Because of various factors, such as an absence of forward air controllers (FAC) control and pilot inexperience in the area, bombing errors continued to be a problem in Laos. <sup>1</sup> This led to Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's acceptance and installation of passive in-country TACAN navigation units in the north and south. However, despite the presence of electronic navigation aids, errant bombing continued. The latest incident was particularly flagrant since both TACAN (Channel-89) capability and Invert Control radar coverage (MSQ-77), ground operated target tracking equipment were available from the Nakhon Phanom (NKP) USAF base.

Lao government officials were justly upset, and requested increased measures to curtail such incidents. Therefore, as investigations proceeded, to placate roiled politicians, Ambassador Sullivan instituted restrictions for a ten-mile radius around Moung Phalane, and a minimum overfly altitude of 15,000 feet.

Only a month following the Moung Phalane bombing error, despite precautions and admonitions to all

---

<sup>1</sup> Although other factors were certainly involved, yearly personnel rotation was deemed a prime causative.

pilots from Seventh Air Force's commanding officer to exercise care, three additional incidents occurred with some collateral damage. One civilian village was forty miles from any assigned target. <sup>2</sup>

Complaints previously emanated from Nakhon Phanom that existing TACAN units at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, Dong Ha, South Vietnam (Channel-109), and Saravane, Laos (Channel-72 on top of Phu Kate in Military Region Four) stated that TACAN coverage was not adequate to prevent egregious bombing errors. These incidents occurred usually at night, when high altitude was the only method of obtaining radial and distance acquisition. Unfortunately, cruising at altitude negated a surprise factor and other operational facets for rapid strikes. Therefore, an additional TACAN unit with crew was proposed for forward placement at the Moung Phalane airfield. This was implemented and the unit installed during late March. Designated Channel-77, it commenced operational Panhandle coverage in early April. Thereafter, prior to commencing bombing runs, pilot SOP requirements necessitated knowledge of their exact locations using the intersection of two TACAN radials for a majority of the Steel Tiger area.

With political heat raging at a high level from both Souvanna Phouma and Ambassador Sullivan following

---

<sup>2</sup> Let the reader recall the Author's forty-mile thumb rule developed by trial and error to explain USAF navigation errors.



the late March bombing errors, CINCPAC Admiral Sharp mandated the use of total USAF FAC or MSQ-77 control for all Lao air strikes. Sullivan went a step further, requesting tactical air commanders to place areas harboring Lao troops and no enemy activity off limits and an overfly restriction of 15,000 feet. He also reiterated former rules of engagement requiring pilots to avoid major Lao towns of Thakhet, Savannakhet, Moung Phalane, Pakse, Saravane, and Attapeu by twenty-five miles or 15,000 feet. Since Laos was still a "neutral" country in theory, Military Region Two's Khang Khay and Sam Neua, considered seats of a Pathet Lao third faction government, continued to be off limits to American air strikes. <sup>3</sup>

During April, eager to decrease vehicle losses, the Vietnamese introduced mobile dual 23mm AAA guns with some radar capability on their LOCs. The addition of more lethal AAA weapons caused problems for slow moving propeller aircraft. No longer could pilots loiter and troll for trucks with impunity, as tactics were modified and one pass salvo bombing became the norm. Moreover, not long after the military and civilian directives were issued, rules of engagement (ROE) were

---

<sup>3</sup> The reader should understand that the Royal Lao Air Force, except for advice from AIRA representatives, was more or less autonomous, and under no similar rules of engagement (ROE) restraints from either the Embassy or the U.S. military.

modified to allow uncontrolled strikes on obvious AAA and searchlight activity.

Prompted by a high volume of traffic in the Mugia Pass area, further changes in ROE were issued by early May when it was determined that FAC and MSQ-77 requirements were seriously hampering aircraft strikes and surveillance. ROE also slowed quick response and diversions to hot areas in Military Region Two. Consequently, except for maintaining an electronic fix requirement, Admiral Sharp abrogated the FAC and MSQ-77 stipulations for alternate feeder roads from Routes 911 and 23 to the border.

### **PHA THI MOUNTAIN**

While addressing the subject of electronic directional assistance for tactical U.S. Air Force bombing, Admiral Sharp discussed installation of a stripped down, air transportable version of MSQ-77 radar to an appropriate and strategic location in northern Laos calculated to enhance the Rolling Thunder operation in North Vietnam. A TACAN unit was already in place and fully operational at Phu Pha Thi (LS-85), but the superior MSQ radar equipment was considered significantly more accurate and reliable at night and when coping with foul weather conditions that prevailed over the north during much of the October through April

northwest monsoon season in North Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> The system, consisting of modified bomb scoring radar, was first introduced to South Vietnam during April 1966, and two months afterward to the Nakhon Phanom base.

Sullivan was initially concerned and not enthusiastic regarding retrofitting Site-85 with any high visibility radar equipment that might stimulate enemy interest in the site and potentially foster negative political ramifications for the RLG. In addition to violating Lao neutrality, the addition of USAF equipment, requiring the presence of increased air activity, several high visibility buildings, and ten American technicians on top of the mountain, would cause substantial security problems.

By May, Air Force requests continued through higher echelon channels to install a MSQ-77 system on top of Pha Thi. The request was not new. In fact, Ambassador Sullivan had been briefed on the concept during a December meeting in Udorn. In February, CINCPAC outlined the positive features of the MSQ-77 for site-85 deployment to Joint Chiefs of Staff. The following month this agenda was bumped to the Secretary of Defense. A ranking Combat Skyspot colonel from Saigon visited the distinctive 5,500-foot limestone mountain

---

<sup>4</sup> Severely limiting success rates in reaching and bombing enemy targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong areas, weather had proven a distinct problem.



The ever-expanding southeastern Phou Pha Thi complex showing the upper portion of the Site-85 strip, trails leading to the Meo village, and mountain top where USAF TACAN and TSQ-81 electronic equipment was co-located.

John Tarn Collection.

by helicopter and blessed it as a logical and suitable location for the radar. The TACAN area would have to be enlarged to accommodate and co-locate additional equipment and crew quarter vans delivered by U.S. Army CH-47s and USAF CH-3 Pony Express helicopter crews.

While top echelon leaders wrangled over the navigation-radar location, in April the USAF awarded a contract to the Reeves Instrument Corporation of New York to develop a mobile, lightweight, air lift-capable model of the MSQ-77 that would become known in the trade as the TSQ-81 radar bombing control system. Following the retrofit, the unit was delivered to an airfield in Texas for advanced testing and feasibility of helicopter transport. With another unit already in the system, a prototype was then sent to the Nakhon Phanom air base. The second unit was manufactured so that heavy lift helicopters could deliver the gear to difficult places-i.e. a 5,000-foot mountain.

When dealing with military-civilian matters involving Lao political sensitivity, nothing was easy. Discussions relating to the delicate subject continued, for Sullivan was still concerned regarding political risks, other liabilities, and Souvanna Phouma's almost certain objections to such a thorny project. The ambassador believed that proceeding without the Prime Minister's consent might negate his approval for other

important clandestine plans and he could resign as the Neutralist Prime Minister.

Despite Washington restrictions on bombing in the North, there was urgency among USAF leaders to attain maximum efficiency of permissible Rolling Thunder operations. A decision had to be made and implementation accomplished soon, for significant lead time was required to install and bring the sophisticated equipment on line before the annual monsoons commenced in the North. Sufficient equipment and personnel were available for movement to Phu Pha Thi; all that was required was high level approval.

At a 7/13 Udorn headquarters meeting during June, pressure continued to supplement the Site-85 TACAN unit with a MSQ-77, then upgraded to a refined and even more precise bomb delivery radar system named TSQ-81. Stripped of all identifiable markings, the total prototype equipment weighed less than 5,000 pounds and could be transported by U.S. Army Chinook helicopters.

In response to JCS requests concerning installation of the improved radar, State twixed Ambassador Sullivan to pursue the subject with Souvanna Phouma and elaborate on the system's positive benefits to the overall war effort, adding that if Souvanna and the ambassador did not object, the project could go forward.

By 14 June, Sullivan had his answer. After discussions with the Prime Minister regarding the possibility of installing a MSQ-77 at Pha Thi, as always with something of this magnitude, Souvanna's attitude was quite cautious, but Sullivan deemed the discussion positive. For plausible deniability, like all other clandestine operations, the Prime Minister insisted on having no knowledge of the radar installation. Souvanna also stipulated that personnel manning the site be bona fide civilians or "sheep dipped" military types wearing civilian clothes. Maximum camouflage would have to be employed to adequately conceal the operation from the air and a means available to readily destroy all evidence.

After additional deliberation on the subject, State personnel were pleased that Souvanna Phouma was somewhat positive regarding the MSQ-77 installation in northeastern Laos. From a technical standpoint of line of sight, range into North Vietnam, security, and low visibility requirements, Pha Thi was still judged the solitary viable location for a unit in upper Military Region Two. Furthermore, military requirements warranted the increased risks and potential political liabilities.

Taking into consideration Souvanna's concerns, State indicated that if the facility was exposed, acknowledgement of the navigation gear would be

forthcoming. Working under civilian cover, USAF personnel would operate the equipment. Critical hardware would be prepared for emergency destruction at the time of installation. Physical and electronic camouflage would be implemented. Should the mountain be attacked, it was hoped Meo forces would defend the site until all Americans were evacuated.

By month's end, pending no objections from the Vientiane embassy, Washington flashed the green light to the Joint Chiefs of Staff for installation of the command radar at Pha Thi. In turn, Sullivan received a twix from LBJ directing him to authorize the code-named Commando Club. It appeared the die was cast.

Shortly afterward, reiterating previous stipulations, Souvanna Phouma granted Ambassador Sullivan his final blessing for delivery and use of MSQ-77 equipment at Site-85.

Another meeting at Udorn Air Force 7/13 headquarters regarding the whys and wherefores of the Pha Thi project was convened. The usual high-level principals attending including generals, air liaison support representative Captain Dick Secord, Bill Lair and Pat Landry from AB-1. Chief of Station Ted Shackley, who originally instigated the meeting, was absent because of a last-minute scheduling conflict. With CIC PACAF to Thailand, General Hunter presiding, attendees agreed on details; the joint operation would



rely on the Agency for site intelligence and security. Still lukewarm regarding the enterprise, Lair realistically interjected that the added equipment and activity was certain to be noted and reported to Vietnamese leaders by enemy spies. Eventually there would be a reaction.

Beside Seventh Air Force coordinating with the U.S. Embassy Air Attaché, much needed to be accomplished before the new and improved bomb direction equipment was operational. To make room for the equipment, the TACAN had to be moved, additional terrain had to be hacked out of limestone and leveled, generators, vans and crew quarters lifted and emplaced at the site. Because of their powerful engines and the secrecy factor, CH-3 Pony Express and U.S. Army Chinook crews rotating from Saigon were assigned the heavy lift task.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Segment Sources:

Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 178, 201-203, 218, 220, 223-226.

*The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel Edition, Volume 4, Chapter 1, Section 1 pp 1-58, *The Air War in North Vietnam* 1965-1968.

Edward Vallentiny, 43-44, 53-54.

Edward Vallentiny, *CHECO, The Fall of Site-85*, viii.

Richard Stebbins, *Documents on American Foreign Relation* 1967 Published for the Council on Foreign Relations (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968) 194, 198, 202-203, 206.

Telegram CINCPAC (Sharp) to Chairman JCS (Wheeler), 02/16/67.

Telegram Sullivan to State, 02/25/67.

Telegram CINCPAC (Sharp) to Chairman JCS (Wheeler), Necessity of Installation of MSQ-77 in Northern Laos, 02/25/67.

Tim Castle, *One Day too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 27, 29, 31, 33-36.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 169-170.

Memorandum Sullivan to Bundy, 05/01/67.

**KNIGHT**

Representing a third Thai pilot to join our helicopter fraternity, Boonchoo Na Nakornpanom arrived in Udorn. Boonchoo entered our system equipped with a reputation as the foremost aviator in the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF). Flying training flights with him from the sixth to the eighth, CPH Wayne Knight corroborated his prowess, considering him a more proficient and competent pilot than even Boonrat. Consistent with pilot humor in our organization, Boonrat and Boonchoo became known as "The Boon Boys."

In addition to office duties, Wayne was busy training and evaluating new hires and administering upcountry route checks. On the ninth, he and Ron Dubinsky conducted a mission in Thailand. From Friday through Monday, he flew local training flights with newbies and former Marines, Dick Theriault and Larry Taylor.<sup>6</sup>

---

Telegram State (Kohler) to Embassy Laos, 290, MSQ-77, 06/03/67 with Reference to 05/13/67 Telegram.

William Sullivan to State, 06/14/67; Telegram State to Embassy Laos, MSQ-77, 06/29/67.

Udorn *Royal Thai Air Force Base: Timeline 1967,*  
(<http://udorntalb.tripod.com/id57.html>).

William Sullivan to State, MSQ-77, 07/06/67.

Victor Anthony, 251-252.

Farnsworth, Installation of the TSQ-81 at Phou Pha Thi, Lima Site 85, Laos, ([http://limasite85.us/construction\\_4.htm](http://limasite85.us/construction_4.htm)).

<sup>6</sup> Larry Taylor remained with Air America through August 1968, then returned to the USMC. Largely because of Middle Eastern wars, he later attained the rank of major general.

**MILITARY REGION-1**

With the enemy largely unfettered in areas around Nam Bac, a large amount of H-34 support was concentrated on the region. Initial planning was also underway to retake the former Meo base at Ban Mok Plai (LS-193), close to the site where Larry Wilderom had his November "moment of truth." Seizure of the site was considered necessary to prevent enemy infiltration from the Moung Sai airhead toward Site-203, and to help provide village security for areas leading to the Mekong and Luang Prabang.

Knight went to Luang Prabang on the fourteenth with RL Baker to conduct line checks where there were a number of H-34 pilots and switching aircraft would be easy.<sup>7</sup> While working out of Luang Prabang, a break in the weather allowed the chief pilot and Baker to fly locally and work out of Phu Houei Mouei (LS-67), a site twenty-one miles north of Sayaboury Town (Lima-23). Before RON in the royal capitol, they went to Moung Met, twenty-five miles south.

On Wednesday, "Pogo" Hunter and Knight participated in several missions to reinforce sites in the vicinity of the targeted position at LS-193. Mak Phout (LS-137), located well north of Luang Prabang, northwest of Nam

---

<sup>7</sup> Baker was not recalled by either the Author or Knight. Therefore, he either did not checkout, or left Southeast Asia early on his own accord.

Thuam (LS-176), and twelve miles southwest of Nam Bac was the first. Another site worked from Site-203 was Ban "Y" (LS-187) twenty-one miles north-northwest of Nam Bac. The site was quite far north and well positioned to monitor enemy movement south from Dien Bien Phu. After returning to Luang Prabang, they were sent north twenty-one miles to a FAR staging area on a small tributary emptying into the Ou River and blocking or observing enemy downriver movement or on lower Route-4.

The next day, Knight and Charlie Davis worked local shuttles out of Nam Bac and Nam Thuam (LS-176), where the initial offensive to capture Nam Bac commenced in August 1966. One run took the crew twenty-five miles north-northeast of Site-203. The Route Check would constitute Charlie's last upcountry, as he was already considering terminating his Air America employment to pursue other less hazardous commercial flying options.

Following another night in Luang Prabang town, Wayne departed for home. On the 19th, he flew with Larry Taylor during a progress ride. In June Larry passed his Captain upgrading check ride.

Three days later, exercising his final training billet of the month at the Udorn facility, Wayne conducted a bi-annual proficiency hop with Captain Wayne Webb.

While Knight was completing his stint administering upcountry Route Checks, continuing the daisy chain of pilots rotating through the royal capitol, Mike Jarina deadheaded to Lima-54 on C-123 4576. However, he arrived too late to assume control of Hotel-15, his assigned helicopter.

A combination of adverse weather and maintenance problems prevented a productive RON. Mike and his large, blond Flight Mechanic Bruce began flying on the eighteenth. After a landing at the Nam Thuam strip, they continued on to Nam Bac where they RON for three nights.

By Tuesday, issues with the weather and aircraft were resolved and Jarina returned to Udorn via Luang Prabang.

### **ATTEMPTS AT STANDARDIZATION**

Soon afterward, a contractual agreement allowed the Company to establish its first regional Standard Department in Southeast Asia. Located in Bangkok, the long-needed unit was overseen by Don Kosteff. The department encompassed duties involving both flight proficiency checks and annual recurrent ground training. Largely left to his own devices, affable Drexel Morgan aptly directed the ground portion. With jokes and good will, Drex conducted what was normally a repetitious and boring exercise into an almost

tolerable classroom situation. Largely because of the interaction and narration of pilot real time experiences, we often obtained fresh information regarding the H-34 and operational situations. In addition, Drex was very popular during our bar activities.

Individual instructor-check pilots selected for both fixed wing and helicopters were Rocky Meir-Volpar; Don Kosteff-C46/47; Ed Ulrick-C123; Wayne Webb-H-34, and Bells. Over time, additional pilots participated in all Air America aircraft types. After the Standards Department was established, the chief pilot helicopter personnel at Udorn continued to administer most upcountry route checks, but exercised little input as to standards methods and how the department conducted the program. As a result, there were occasional differences.

Wayne Webb, a former U.S. Army instructor pilot possessed all the credentials and talent necessary to fill such a position. Never a serious upcountry combat pilot, when the opportunity arose in Bangkok, he jumped at the chance to fill the Company-established slot. <sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> EW Knight Email, 08/08/00.  
Mike Jarina Interviews.

## **BACK ON THE LINE**

Deadheading on Hotel-35 to Wattay Airport and by C-46, November 9458Z to Long Tieng, I returned to duty upcountry on Friday the seventeenth. Because of movement delay and the unavailability of Hotel-47, I did not assume control of the helicopter until late in the day. With little daylight left to operate, I ferried the aircraft and Flight Mechanic "Fat" Frank Fee to Sam Tong for the night. It was the first time Frank and I flew together.

Except for the first full day of little flying and gathering smoke, it was a fairly good RON and I managed to log decent flight time. In addition, my back seemed to be holding up well to the inherent H-34 vibrations. Nagging me for the last two days, Hotel-47's available power output did not seem quite right, but with little definitive evidence of impending malfunction to assess, other than a slightly elevated cylinder head temperature (CHT) and only a gut feeling to rely on, I could not consciously ask Udorn for a recall. Therefore, I was quite relieved when Operations requested I RTB on the twentieth.

Because of heavy fixed traffic between Vientiane and Sites-20 and 20A, during the smoky season large fixed wing pilots flew at staggered altitudes outbound and inbound. While shuttling, they radioed headings, altitudes, and known checkpoints like Ritaville Ridge

(at the foothills leading into the mountains), Point Peter (near Long Tieng), and Twin Peaks (in the Vang Vieng Valley). It was reassuring to know the big birds flew much higher than us, and at times we emulated their cautionary procedures by radioing our positions in congested areas.

### **A SPY IN THE MIX**

While still working upcountry I participated in an unusual operation. On Tuesday, 6 February, a team of Agency communications types arrived TDY in Vientiane from Bangkok. Their cover story ostensibly declared that they were to work in Laos for several weeks checking the viability of Air America and USAID electronic equipment.

Although part of the subterfuge may have been accurate, as they learned at a Chief of Station (COS) briefing, the real purpose of their presence was to confirm that an enemy agent transmitting radio signals to an unknown base was purportedly working somewhere in friendly Meo areas. If the agent's location could be pin-pointed, he might be captured and his presence explained.

Tasked to further investigate the finding, two men, Dale Whiteis and Mac, journeyed to Long Tieng on the eighth and ninth to conduct electronic searches from Skyline Ridge. Searches at sites south of The Alternate



continued the following two days. After spending a day at Ban Na, the team returned to Vientiane to discuss their findings with superiors and take a break from the field.

By now reasonably certain that the agent was indeed situated in the Sam Tong area, Mac and Dale returned to Site-20A on the 16th. The next morning they were delivered to Site-20 by a Helio Courier pilot to apprise crusty Pop Buell that he possibly had a bad guy in his area. Naturally, Pop was visibly upset and agreed to help the men confirm this supposition. To justify their presence at Sam Tong and keep their business quiet, they arranged to return that evening by Jeep for supper at Pop's secretary's house. After dinner they would install their equipment in the house, hoping to obtain a bearing from the enemy's signals. To further accredit the Agency men's credentials, Pop assigned his assistant Winn McKeithen to handle public relations work and justify their presence if necessary.

That night the spy transmitted a strong signal for several minutes. Both Dale and Mac agreed that the operator was indeed in the valley and considered very close. Two identical line bearings tended to substantiate this finding. The bearings flowed through an Air America station on Skyline two miles northwest at the location of a Lao military radio station. The agent was certain to be hiding somewhere

along this line. After confirming the finding, they returned to Long Tieng for the night intent on planning their next course of action: to obtain the agent's exact location leading to his capture.

Another member of the radio intercept team arrived on Saturday. Two technicians Jeoped to Skyline to seek direction finding (DF) bearings from the elusive agent's radio signals. They then moved over to Sam Tong, careful to limit contacts with personnel at the hostel and the AID office.

On Monday, without really knowing or understanding all the details involved in the operation, I briefly participated in the electronic search for the interloper. Like clockwork, at 1000 hours transmissions were intercepted. However, compared to previous strong signals, those received were now weaker and emanated from the east. This turn of events was both confusing and frustrating. The signals could have been erroneous, or indicated that the man was on the move or had relocated. At any rate it was not my problem, for I had been recalled to Udorn.

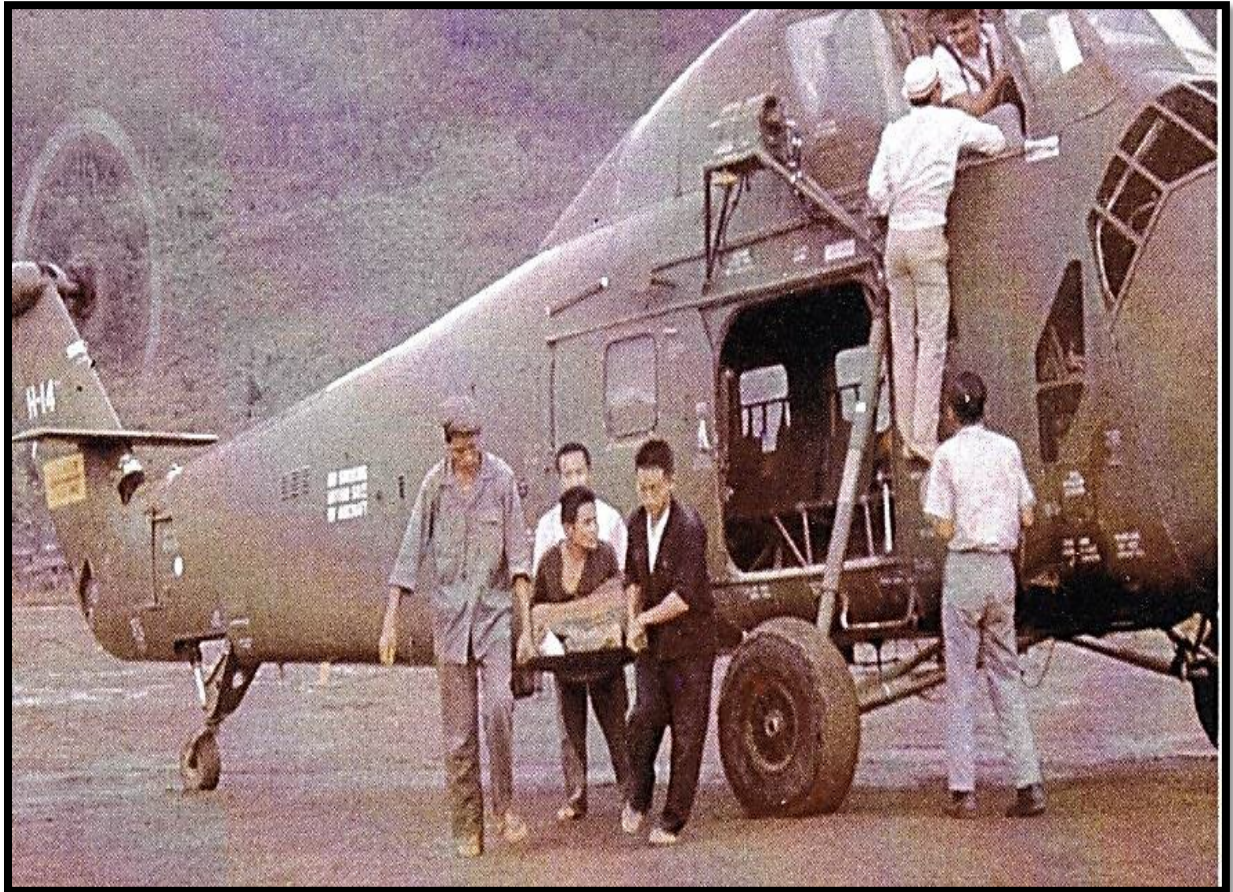
The hunt continued the following morning when another helicopter pilot lifted the radio men to a hilltop several miles from Site-20. At the pre-determined time of morning transmissions, easterly bearings were still detected. The agent had definitely moved away from the immediate Sam Tong area. Since they



The Author intently watching Agency technician Dale Whiteis at work setting up direction finding (DF) equipment, attempting to obtain triangulation bearings to locate and eliminate the enemy agent.

Sent to the Author by former Air America H-34 Captain, Charlie Davis, who received the photo from Dale Whiteis, a principal operator in the spy search. Since teams attempted to travel in pairs, the photo was most likely taken by another electronic expert.





Crewing Hotel-44, as Meo unload the helicopter, the Author is conversing with an air operation type at Sam Thong from the cockpit for the next mission. Flight Mechanic Moon Centeno standing with his back to the ship.

Charlie Davis Collection.

had exerted considerable time and energy to apprehend the spy, time was now critical. Therefore, they hurriedly returned to Long Tieng to muster remaining members of the intelligence team.

Hoping to return to the field in time for the afternoon transmission, following a quick lunch the four men, now loaded for bear, boarded an H-34 bound for Site-20. Once there they consulted with Winn regarding three choice locations east of Sam Tong that were five miles apart and would be conducive to good direction-finding triangulation methods. Danny and Winn McKeithen were deposited a few miles from Site-20; Tom got off in six feet tall saw grass; Frank and Dale were landed on top of a mountain where the pilot could shut down and wait.

The men arrived in time to unpack and install their equipment. A bearing was obtained pointing to the Plain of Jars. After retrieving other members of the team and AID representative Winn, all confirmed that the transmissions were from the unfriendly Plain of Jars. The operation was apparently over. The men returned to Vientiane to report the failure to the COS and file a report.

Not satisfied with the information at hand, headquarters directed the men to return to Sam Tong and continue monitoring the signals. Employing the same process, they staged at Meo outposts on the rim of the

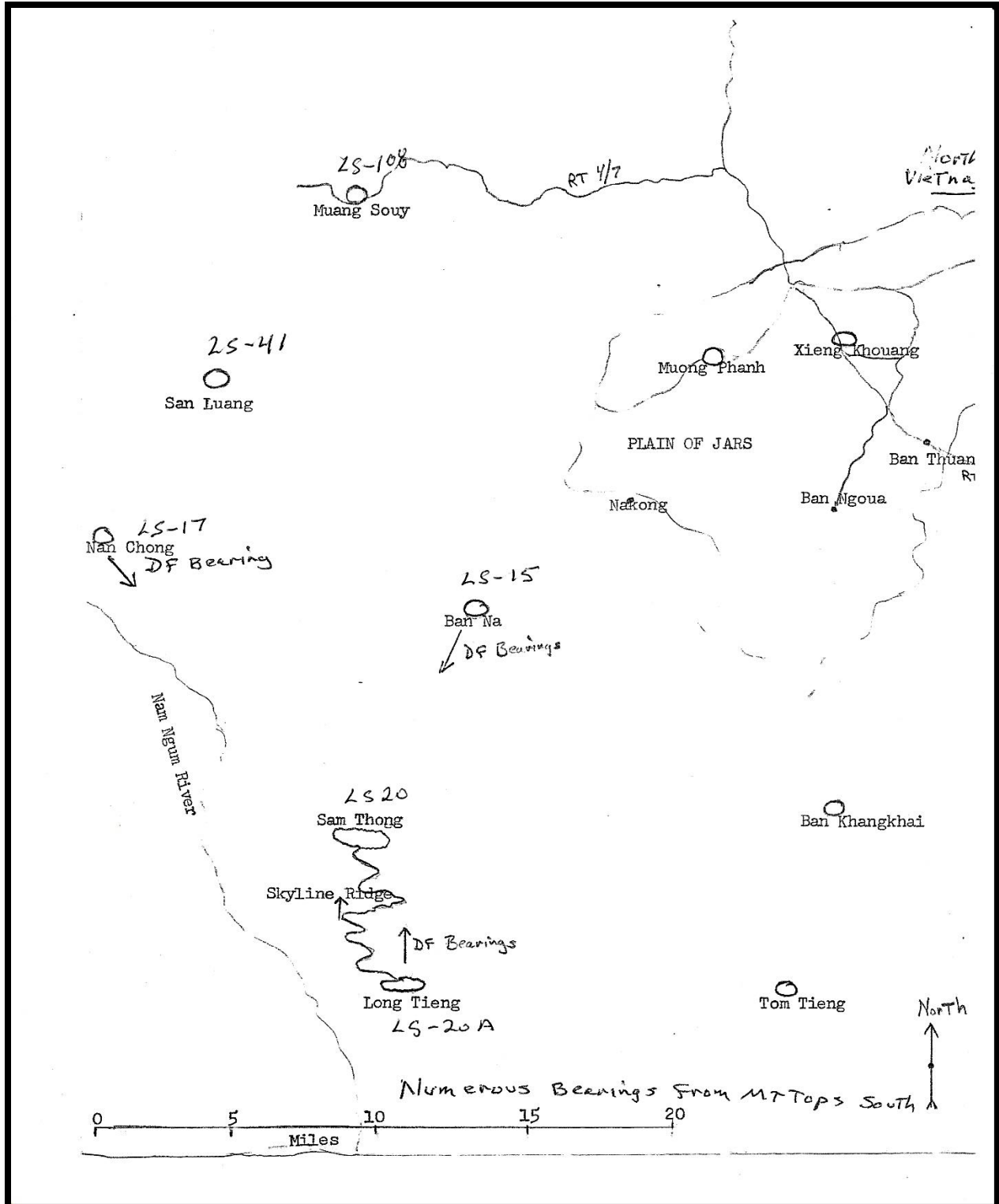
Plain of Jars. Bearings obtained from the afternoon transmission pointed toward Xieng Khouang Ville. All members of the team were recovered just before dark and returned to Sam Tong, where a last flight ferried them to Vientiane. Although the mission to capture the agent or learn his intent failed, much valuable data had been accumulated regarding short range DF operations in mountainous terrain and about the agent's method of operation.

Over several weeks, Vientiane technicians continued to monitor signals that seemed to indicate four station nets were involved. Then one day the previous agent compromised himself by sending his call sign. This specific act confirmed that he was operating two circuits from one location.

The dual net was monitored for two additional months and then it suddenly dropped off the air. One could only speculate regarding the entire episode, for no viable solution was ever determined for the radio work or the nature of the man's reporting.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Information from four pages of Dale Whiteis' work regarding the spy episode at Sam Tong previously sent to Charlie Davis. Charlie was cleaning out his desk drawer and instead of jettisoning the material, kindly forwarded the photo and narrative to the Author.



Employing the triangulation method from high ground around Sam Tong, arrows point to the enemy radio operator's suspected area. Graphic from the Dale Whiteis Collection.





The team of Dale Whiteis and CJ Spears deployed with their direction-finding equipment in the hills around Sam Tong.  
Whiteis Collection.



### **ANOTHER MOMENT OF TRUTH**

On Tuesday, 21 February, during a period of exceptionally bad weather, Al Rich had crashed in Helio Courier B-165 at Bouam Long (LS-88). Al and two of his passengers suffered minor injuries.

The next day Mike Jarina was tasked to fly Hotel-47 upcountry with a recovery rig to recover the wings of 165. Flight Mechanics Bill Goodwin and Gaza Eiler would accompany Mike to accomplish this task.

Since the Udorn Maintenance Department shops were geared up to rebuild aircraft, recovery equipment was assembled in 1966, and lead mechanic Eiler had become quite experienced in fixed wing recovery.

Before departing for upcountry, I talked to Mike and apprised him of my concerns regarding the engine performance and airworthiness of Hotel-47. He queried maintenance and was assured the helicopter was alright for upcountry use.

Soon after takeoff, Mike realized that he was not obtaining the power demanded, and the aircraft began to lose altitude. As he continued to apply even more power, while scanning the instrument panel, he noticed the cylinder head temperature (CHT) needle increasing. By the time he arrived at a 500-foot cruising altitude an explosion occurred in the engine section. While rapidly losing altitude, he radioed a Mayday and began autorotation.



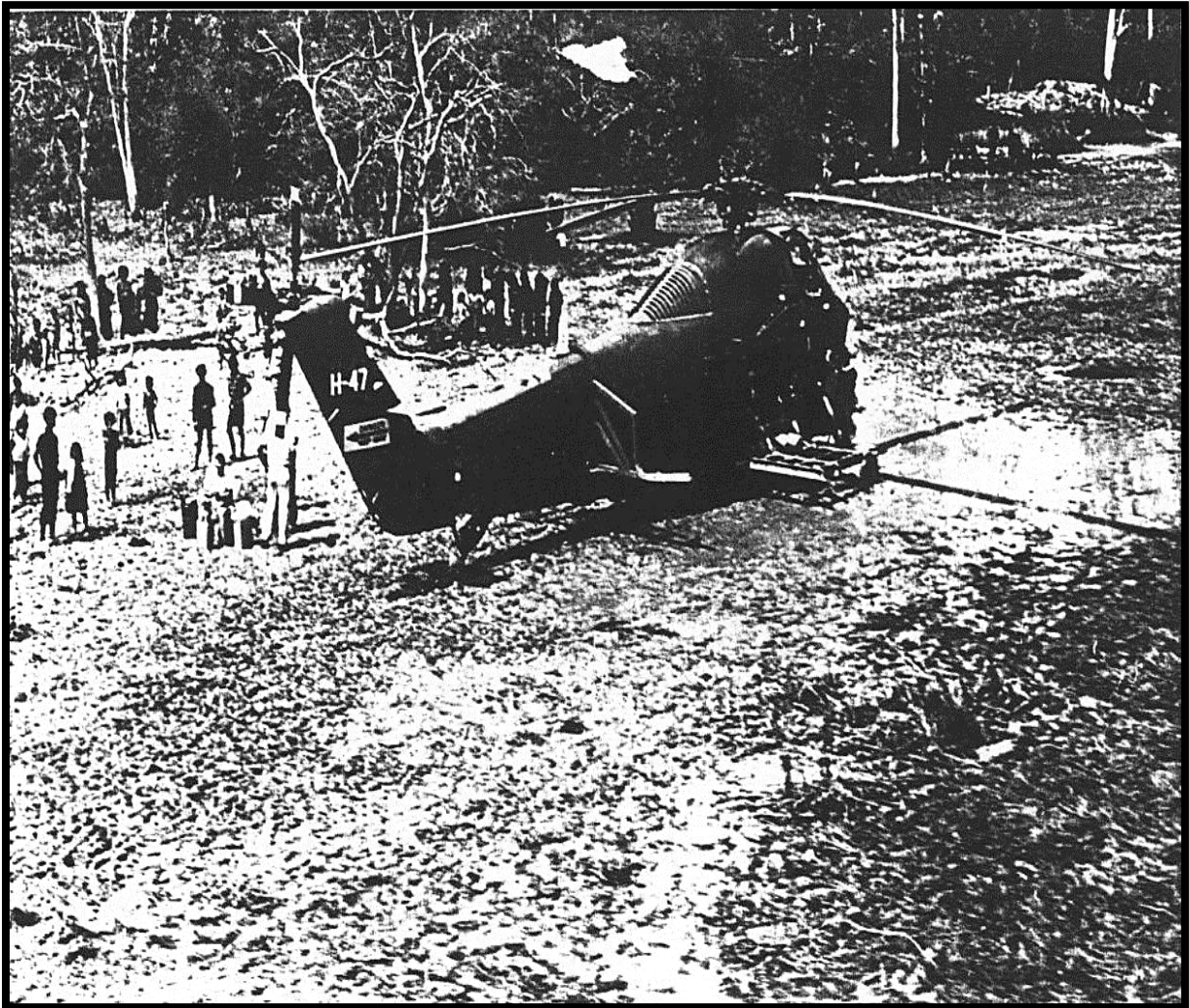
Chief Flight Mechanic Gaza Eiler standing on a portion of the Sikorsky UH-34D small fixed wing recovery apparatus constructed at the Air America Udorn maintenance facility in 1966.

Marius Burke Collection.



Hotel-47 languishing beside a lake north of Udorn following a partial engine failure.

Jarina Collection.



Another photo of Hotel-47 before the new engine was delivered and installed.

Jarina Collection.

The only open area for a successful forced landing was in a swampy area and lake eleven miles north of Udorn. While in descent, he noted that the engine still functioned. Planning to land on one side of the lake, he rolled the throttle on in order to marry the engine and transmission needles, and gingerly added power. This provided sufficient power to make a hard, but safe landing. Later investigation revealed that, like my incident in 1962 while still in the "Crotch," the R-1820 engine had blown a cylinder.

The following day, after the engine was changed, Jarina returned to the site, tested the new engine, and returned Hotel-47 to Udorn. <sup>10</sup>

I had a few days off to rest and prepare for my next RON. No one had journeyed to Kuala Lumpur to confirm the deteriorating situation of the business there or Jim Coble's request for additional funds from Udorn investors to help defray debts on machinery and other escalating costs. Despite being too far away to really understand and assess the business needs, we collectively agreed to assume the option for recapitalization. This would increase our interest in

---

<sup>10</sup> The Author is not aware of whether Jarina accepted the engine failure as a fact of life. Nevertheless, it certainly paid to be cautious with our machinery and what it told us, particularly during the damaging hot season.

Concrete Masonry to seventy-four percent. The thinking was that when the company became listed on the local stock market, we could sell some shares to recoup our addition and still retain controlling interest. Because of questions regarding the operation, there were plans for someone to visit Kuala Lumpur in March.

On the upside, New Era Oil, in which I was a director, was beginning to sell some of its refined waste oil and expand the market. Also, Dad reported in a recent letter:

*"With the pressure of Indonesia off and the Lao situation better (according to reports), it would seem Malaysia could turn into a building boom."*

### **PAKSE**

After Jarina returned Hotel-47 to Udorn on Thursday, he was almost immediately reassigned Hotel-40 with a requirement to position to Savannakhet for a late evening mission. His Flight Mechanic remained Bill Goodwin.

Mike got to know Bill fairly well and considered him a nice person, highly intelligent, and a good mechanic with a lovely wife. A former Marine, Bill was



Air America UH-34D crewmembers resting at the Company radio shack Luang Prabang, Laos, between missions. Left to right: Captains Tony Byrne, Harvey Potter; Flight Mechanics Frank DeVito and Bill Goodwin.

Jarina Collection.

the son of the former U.S. Ambassador to Brazil. <sup>11</sup>

Because his father was a career diplomat, Goodwin was the product of a sheltered and privileged life in Brazil and other areas. Activities revolved around private school and the embassy swimming pool. Therefore, the first time Bill went upcountry as a training Flight Mechanic, it was difficult for him to comprehend how the Meo people lived, using flintlock rifles and rudimentary tools for their livelihood. Upon return to Udorn he was eating in the Club and discussing the primitive state and conditions the mountain people lived. *"Do you realize the longevity of the people cannot be more than forty years?"* Charlie Weitz, eating at a table next to him, overheard the conversation and sarcastically interjected, *"And what do you think yours is about now?"*

Jarina was still a scuba diving adherent and spent much of his scheduled time off (STO) at Pattaya. On one occasion, several couples were at the resort enjoying STO. Those who were not diving, mostly wives, were in the Air America boat fishing. Bill Goodwin, like many Company employees was also a scuba diver.

---

<sup>11</sup> In general, U.S. Marine Corps crew chiefs were quite intelligent people with high GCT scores. It was one reason I preferred to associate with them when off duty overseas. I felt, given the right circumstances, in general, any one of them could have attained a college degree and qualified to become an officer.



Mike speared a small grouper, placed it in a pouch and headed back to the boat. When close to the vessel, he observed activity around a reef. Closer examination revealed a hook caught in the coral being furiously jerked from above. Mike motioned Bill over and together they managed to work the hook free. Then, for fun, Mike attached the grouper. The fishing line happened to belong to Goodwin's wife. Elated, she initially believed she had caught a fish until someone discovered a spear hole behind the grouper's head. Mrs. Goodwin was nonplussed at first, and then became angry at the deception. Thinking it was funny, Mike chuckled, but the woman was not amused, did not forgive him for the joke, and maintained a lingering dislike for Jarina.

After the Lima-39 RON, with road watch missions scrubbed or completed, Mike was reassigned to Pakse, where he worked more than a dozen missions out of PS-22, located on the eastern Bolovens Plateau. The site was only a few miles from the rim and sheer rock cliffs that plunged almost 3,000 feet to the valley floor.<sup>12</sup>

With the discovery of a major line of communication and more traffic on the Sihanouk Trail complex,

---

<sup>12</sup> PS-22 was also listed as LS-190 in the Air America Lao Air Facilities Data book and Ban La Tee; on the Author's 1965 1:250,000 Joint Operations Graphic map it was described as La Ta Sin. A PS pad handout provided by the Customer has PS-22 described as Namhan. Most reference to the site commonly used by pilots at the time was PS-22, therefore, to minimize confusion, the Author will also use this term.



Udorn Management types CJ Abadie and Wayne Knight at Pattaya displaying their day's catch from the Gulf of Siam.

Knight Collection.

targeting was required and activity level at the growing Lao Theung Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) training base had substantially increased. This also satisfied the Washington and Agency mandate to increase measures to aid USG efforts in South Vietnam. In addition, a mid-January attack on the base stimulated the need for additional security and more outlying defensive positions.

After a delay caused by maintenance problems with Hotel-40, the following day Mike returned to PS-22 and Attopeu in Hotel-15.

I departed for Pakse on the 25th in Hotel-30. John Simmons was my Flight Mechanic. The bespectacled young man was very affable, and one of the new hires slated to crew the future Bell program.

By February, hillside farmers in Laos were deep into the process of burning their fields in anticipation of the rice, corn, and poppy planting season. Slash and burn agriculture dated back to the time when wandering humans stopped being hunter-gatherers and switched to growing food. Not only was this a method of clearing fields, but the ash provided fertilizer for the crops. In the past few years, with the advent of enemy movement in northern Laos, thousands of refugees had been relocated to "safer" areas around the Long Tieng region. The burning, coupled with the mostly windy northwest monsoon had the

effect of shunting smoke and haze into neighboring Thailand. This persisted until May or June, when the monsoon shifted to the southeast and rains commenced.

Gathering smoke created an environment in which flying anywhere in a helicopter was difficult and stressful. The only consolation was that, unlike northern Laos, there were few rocks in the skies of southeastern Thailand. Because of the long distance involved and reduced visibility, a trip to Pakse was not my favorite pastime. However, we now had navigation options available to us that had not been established years ago when Nick Burke and I flew to Lima-11 in December 1962. USAF Ground Control Intercept (GCI) units provided radar coverage at Udorn-Brigham, Nakhon Phanom-Invert, and Lion Control at Ubon. As part of our operating policy, we were required to contact these units on designated frequencies while flying in Thailand. Given an assigned code, the identification friend or foe (IFF) equipment provided the Air Force controller a positive fix on the aircraft. I discovered just how effective these units were when, failing to contact Lion Control, the oldest radar unit in the area, I was jumped by two T-28 pilots while repositioning from Pakse to Savannakhet with Jim Hastings in December 1965.

In the rare case that a new H-34 was delivered equipped with TACAN and Distance Measuring Equipment

(DME), channels 86-Udorn, NKP-89, Ubon-93, in the right conditions could be employed to calculate bearing and distance to or from a station. The right conditions normally related to altitude, otherwise twenty miles was usually the extent of coverage. Despite radar separation, in my mind, flying higher in restricted visibility could invite a midair collision with a fast mover or another uncontrolled aircraft. Therefore, I usually opted for a lower cruising altitude where slant range provided me some ground contact.

Most of southeastern Thailand consisted of rice paddy flatland and small villages. Navigational checkpoints were few and far between destinations. Therefore, flying a gross heading of 128 degrees, time and distance, and whatever radar coverage Brigham provided for about twenty miles, I launched. With the help of the Lion controller, who provided me a final vector to Pakse, I arrived at the station.<sup>13</sup>

Logging three hours ersatz instrument time in marginal visibility, I flew the rest of the day and joined Mike that night at Henri's corner drink shop on the main street to relax and debrief regarding events of the day's work. Henri's Chinese-Vietnamese family had relocated to Pakse during the First Indochina War. Marrying local women to assimilate, they obviously had prospered and were reputed to own many buildings and

---

<sup>13</sup> Vector or direction: In the trade called pigeons.

shops on the main drag. Tall, thin Henri, always eager to please, seemed to like Americans, and often shared the latest news from Voice of America broadcasts. Although we limited discussions of operational data around him, I sometimes got the impression that he listened to our conversations too closely. In addition to peanuts and soft drinks, quarts of cold Chinese Tsingtao beer were available. Like all communist goods offered for sale in Pakse, this commodity was boated hundreds of miles north up the Mekong River. I relished the delicious rice beer and eagerly consumed it until political constraints curtailed the supply for a time. Afterward we went to dinner. Mike and I had not been scheduled together in Pakse since we flew during August 1965, when I showed him on the area and at night introduced him to Bam Mi Nam, the area's delicious and renowned Chinese egg noodle soup.

### **BOLOVENS PLATEAU**

To understand and visualize development of the extraordinarily beautiful Bolovens, one must regress to ancient times when Mother Earth's molten innards were in constant turmoil. She periodically vomited, heaving up copious amounts of magma and lava flows that formed gigantic volcanoes and dramatically altered the area's topography. From her bowels Indochina's 700-mile northwest-southeast oriented Annamese Cordillera was

eventually formed, which in modern history humans designated the high, spiny boundary between Laos and Vietnam.

Composition of the lengthy mountain range varied from limestone, sandstone, granite and gneiss in the north to folded crystalline formations topped in places by basaltic lava extrusions in the south. During this geographic development a high plateau was formed between the Annamese Cordilla and the mighty Mekong River, to which French colonists and cartographers assigned the name Plateau des Bolovens. The broad saucer-shaped Plateau averaged about 3,500 feet elevation above sea level (ASL), with a northern mountain peak reaching more than 5,000 feet, and 3,000 feet at the southern rim. The annual southeast monsoon pounded the area each year with abundant rainfall, ultimately weathering the lava and producing rich, fertile soil that supported lush grasses and brush. Eventually, despite endemic diseases, humans moved to its heights for protection, adequate water, and the presence of game animals. Generically called Kha, the people stemmed from the Loven (Lave), Nha Huen Sovei, and Son tribes.

During the hundred-year French era, delicious coffee, pineapples, and various vegetables were grown for the market. With the advent of Indochinese wars, Western settlers departed and, except for some isolated



Accentuating the beauty and charm of the Bolovens Plateau from the air, numerous waterfalls dotted the rims and landscape. This particular waterfall was located to the right flank of Route-23 as it ascended to the Plateau from the direction of Pakse, Laos.

Author Collection.



areas around Paksong town and the western foothills, the amount of produce grown declined.

However, coffee bushes that produced black beans still grew wild around Ban Houei Khong and were harvested annually. The end result provided an enjoyable brew.

We went to work on Sunday. Normally past, Sundays were considered a day of rest for the FAR tigers, but with intelligence requirements steadily increasing, the 713 Customer (Agency) had no such option for paramilitary units. Mike returned to PS-22, where he conducted almost a dozen personnel and supply shuttles to outlying outposts strategically positioned along the eastern rim to protect the training base and observe enemy movement on the Se Kong, and through the Kong River Valley along Route-16.

The river had origins in the central Vietnam highlands. From there, it flowed southwest for 300 miles between the Bolovens and the mountains to the east. Se Kaman, a major tributary, and other smaller ones joined the parent river at Moung May at Attopeu. The Kong continued to take the path of least resistance flowing south into Cambodia and eventually blending into the Mekong near Stoeng Treng.

About four miles north of PS-22 and twelve miles east of Houei Kong, created by numerous streams merging and flowing from the Plateau into the Se (Xe) Kong, the

mouth of a fairly broad "V" shaped valley penetrated and destroyed the natural fortress effect of the eastern cliffs. It was the only break of substantial magnitude in the entire eastern rock wall, and anyone's guess as to how many eons of erosion was required to form the gorge following the final eruptions and southern lava flow from the border that created the Bolovens. Should anyone dispute the area's geology, they only have to assess the Plateau's volcanic soil, and the only small extinct volcano a short distance beyond the Route-23 turn off to Paksong leading to Thateng (LS-210) and Saravane.

The rivers not only created a conduit for paths to exit the Bolovens; they also provided a means for vigorous and motivated humans to ascend the Plateau to settle, or invade. The approach was facilitated by trails paralleling the Nam Noi and other waterways. Unless an enemy unit was already on top and roaming the Plateau, this must have been the route employed to attack and harass PS-22. Hopefully, this route of advance had since been plugged, or at least been better monitored. <sup>14</sup>

Customers Don Stephens and the latest arrival assistant, Mick McGrath, a former Army officer, normally did not conduct a particularly well-organized

---

<sup>14</sup> Online 1999 *Encyclopedia Britannica* (britannica. com), Annamese Cordillera, Bolovens Plateau, Kong River.



Located close to the eastern rim of the Bolovens Plateau, and overlooking the Se Kong Valley at 2,800 feet, the PS-22 special guerrilla unit (SGU) training base eventually accommodated large fixed wing aircraft and was used as an early launching site for numerous SGU helicopter road watch operations.

Author Collection.

program for their aircraft assets at PS-22.<sup>15</sup> The operation was nothing like the smooth one achieved at Long Tieng or Sam Tong, where loads were organized, down time reduced to a minimum, and refueling aided by designated helpers.

Upon arrival at PS-22, one often had to shut down and walk a distance to the large screen-enclosed Customer house lodged under the trees to obtain an assignment. Occasionally Don wandered halfway to the strip with a beer in his hand. He claimed that the water was not fit to drink, hence his high consumption of canned American beer. Admittedly, it was quite hot at the site, but I rarely observed him carrying anything but his favorite sauce. Soon McGrath followed suit, emulating his mentor.

In the early Military Region Four road watch period, FAR had little input with the organization, equipping, or operations of irregular troops. The men were generally trained, supervised, and exclusively paid by Agency Case Officers, who also planned, assigned, and oversaw their missions.

During the course of the day, Mike landed at a fledgling site four miles northeast of Houei Kong (L-56), where battalion special guerrilla unit (SGU)

---

<sup>15</sup> This is purely the Author's observation, at least during the early period and until outstanding Case Officer Will Green arrived at the site.

training was about to commence. The rudimentary base was located along the Se Katam at Ban Tang Hung, later numbered LS-167. Since PS-22 was not tailored for training any but small-scale units, and the site had recently been attacked, the alternate site was not selected for battalion SGU training until May, when PS-22's facilities were sufficiently enlarged to accommodate a larger group.

Case Officer Wayne McNulty was charged with recruiting and training the new unit. He gathered guerrilla volunteers from Bolovens Kha tribes, the lowlands north of Pakse, and from areas north of Saravane. Some of the men had obtained previous military experience from ADC and WAPI projects. With no indigenous officers yet available, Military Region Four FAR Commander, General Phasouk, provided unit leaders.

By May, PS-22 was ready to receive the new battalion. Soon afterward a portion of the unit was deemed ready for an operation. Eventually strictly Lao SGU units were formed and distributed to nine bases (called PS or Pakse Sites) along the Bolovens eastern rim. The bases encompassed training areas, barracks, and communication capability. Mostly using helicopters for insertion and withdrawal, raids were conducted

against enemy convoys and installations located on eastern and southern trails. <sup>16</sup>

Following a stop at the new camp, Jarina landed at Houei Khong. The Reverend John Davis family still conducted their missionary work at Lima-56: John as a minister and his wife as a nurse working with area lepers. As always, Mike and the family shared much good will. Because of considerable down time, he flew less than five hours.

In contrast to Jarina's low time, by staying busy shuttling to northern areas, I managed to log almost nine hours. Regaining the use of Hotel-40, Mike flew considerably more the next day while supporting Nung training operations at Phou Kham Phouk (LS-166) and Ban Nam Tieng (LS-165). Conducting 31 landings, his efforts also included stops at PS-22 and Lima-56.

With great expectations for aggressive action on the Sihanouk Trail system, the first group of just under a hundred ethnic Nungs was sequestered at remote Site-165 in August 1966. <sup>17</sup> Agency advisors former Special Forces Colonel George Morton and Mike LaDue had attempted to train the largely untrained and undisciplined youngsters from Saigon, to acceptable

---

<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, McNulty did not survive the war.

<sup>17</sup> For details of the Nung and their participation in Military Region Four see Book Seven.

fighting standards. <sup>18</sup> A second, more experienced group was later dispatched to the site. However, because of considerable animosity with original trainees, the second group was shifted to nearby Site-166 with additional advisors.

Remaining busy, I continued to log instrument time in the smoky and hazy conditions, ending the day with a little over seven hours.

Winds in the Pakse area could attain high velocities--at times up to thirty knots or more. This was generally the case during the cool season and the prevailing monsoon plunging down from China. <sup>19</sup> One afternoon, while refueling, I observed Helio Courier pilot Don Romes approaching the short laterite-topped crosswind runway that extended through the regular hard-topped strip to the parking-refueling area. Perhaps it was an original runway constructed years ago and was now unused. I had never seen anyone land there before. The pilot conducted a normal approach into the wind from the river. On final approach he hovered to a landing. At first, I thought my eyes had deceived me. I was aware the Helio was an impressive short takeoff and

---

<sup>18</sup> As he had originally planned, LaDue was preparing to rotate to Thakhet to replace an outgoing case officer involved in trail watching activity.

<sup>19</sup> Dumping most of its moisture in Viet Nam before encountering the high Annamite Range, the monsoon was normally dry in Laos.

landing (STOL) machine, but not able to hover just like a helicopter. It was amazing.

I knew the machine possessed leading edge slats built into the wings. These devices extended at about thirty knots and lowered the stall speed. This, coupled with brakes, enabled a pilot to land on very short uphill strips. The explanation to what I observed must have involved at least a thirty-knot headwind that created a zero-ground speed condition that led to a hovering touchdown.

Attesting to occasional and unexpected workplace humor, a wind anecdote occurred late one day while returning from the Bolovens Plateau. As I was tracing Route-23 while descending toward Pakse, I called the Chinese radio operator requesting the wind direction and velocity.

*"Roger Hotel-30, wind stopped."*

The man's answer astounded me, for the normal terminology was wind calm. The reply was so unique and unusual that I requested to hear it again. I also hoped that any others airborne in the area might be in position to overhear, "wind stopped."

Again, *"Wind stopped."*

Although fatigued from the day's work, the man's interpretation of the wind state invigorated me. Since I failed to hear any guffaws over VHF, I assumed no one else was aloft in radio range to share in my amusement.



Mike continued to work the Plateau and environs during the last day in February. After a stop at Houei Kong to deliver bread and other goodies to the Davis family, he continued on to Phou Kham Phouk and then to PS-22. He returned to Site-166 and the Nung sister site at Ban Nam Tieng.

### **KONG MI**

Like several other Case Officers, Doug Swanson, a former U.S. Army Special Forces sergeant major, had previously worked out of PS-22 recruiting and training Lave (Loven), Heuny (Nya Heun), and Brao tribal members for road watch duties. At this time, U.S. military interest was focused on a developing spur along the east-west LOC-Route-110. This was divorced from the sanctioned Special Operating Group (SOG) operations area and within the Agency boundary. Therefore, Doug<sup>20</sup> and his young assistant spent a majority of their time at Attopeu and further south working with the people at Kong Mi (PS-7) and targeting activities along Route-110.

Ban Kong Mi was situated about twenty-one miles south of Attopeu. Separated by ten miles of flat land and mountains, it was located almost equidistant from the Cambodian border to the south and Route-11 to the

---

<sup>20</sup> Although many people called him Dutch, Swanson took the code name Cobra for radio communication.

north. In addition, the site lay in a small valley protected by high mountains to the east, and its relative remoteness. Deep in mountainous no-man's-land, well-watered by a sizable stream, the Houay Laming, the area supported eight diverse ethnic native villages. The site had also long been used as a small FAR listening post to monitor area movements. Except for radios, air drops by short takeoff and landing (STOL) aircraft and helicopters provided the only means of supply and contact with the outside world. We had been landing there occasionally on an ad hoc basis for some time. It was only later that a rudimentary runway was extended to more than 1,000 feet and was numbered Lima Site-407.

Although the people were not exactly living a Stone Age existence, they were not far removed from their calculated tree swinging ancestors. Some of the women wore hollow silver or metal anklets filled with stones to rattle when walking the area to create noise and chase poisonous snakes away. Similar to some African tribes' attempts at cultural beauty, they wore wooden plugs to distend their earlobes. On one occasion, Doug's young partner, Bob Parrot, obtained an elaborate native bronze pipe for me. It looked old. Perhaps the lip portion had been lost. Somewhat diminishing the artisan's artistic flavor, the substitute was an empty shell casing fitted with a small, hollow piece of wood



Lave tribal ladies and a young boy who consented to have their pictures taken at Ban Kong Mi. The lady on the right displays the characteristic distended earlobes for enhanced beauty.

Author Collection, circa 1968.

in the top for insertion into the pipe with a center hole drilled at the bottom to facilitate smoking. I suppose the bespectacled youth did this to compensate me for not being able to bargain for a bronze bowl the day we were standing on the edge of the Plateau's southeast rim welcoming ralliers dribbling in from the lowlands. <sup>21</sup> A family heirloom long in the person's possession, he was unwilling to sell the item to me at any price.

### **DOUG SWANSON**

After World War Two, in late 1946, Frank Stergar encountered Doug Swanson at Fort Bragg, North Carolina while conducting static parachute jumping for fresh 82nd airborne recruits. Sergeant Swanson, a burly, imposing person was a member of an airborne engineer platoon, who erected a thirty-four-foot jump tower to include authenticity in the training. Frank considered the tower sound and well built. In addition, Doug was considered fun to be around. Non-commissioned officer (NCO) Patrick Sharone, who later worked as a Case Officer in the Luang Prabang area, and Colonel Westmoreland obtained jump status during this time frame. In 1948, Sharone relieved Frank in the 11th Airborne Division located at Hachinhoe, Japan.

---

<sup>21</sup> For years, I was not interested in being a pack rat, but now I began to acquire native artifacts.

Years later, when Swanson became an Agency Case Officer in Laos and Stergar flew in the role as an Air America H-34 Captain, Frank's opinion of the man changed. Over time, he classified Doug as being highly aggressive and impulsive, one who failed to plan missions well or thoroughly. Unable to tolerate any questioning, his methods became "his way or the highway." Curiously, Doug performed recons without carrying a weapon and wore shower shoes. Other pilots had issues with the man while working at PS-7. Doug liked to talk on the radio at the wrong time, causing one pilot to complain to the CPH in writing. Most Customers were no-nonsense types who seemed to enjoy what they were doing. They were supposed to plan, organize, and not participate in combat operations. However, Doug would board the aircraft at the last moment and accompany his troops into the field.

Late in the day Mike Jarina stopped at Attopeu to deliver Swanson and his partner to PS-7. After consulting with a tribal leader, Doug presented Mike coordinates nine miles south in the foothills on the backside of a 5,000-foot mountain range. When Mike plotted the location, Jarina exclaimed, "*That is in Cambodia!*"<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Actually, the coordinates were close to the difficult-to-distinguish and nebulous Cambodian border, but still inside Laos.

*"Nobody knows where the border is around here. Just go down there and pick someone up."* Then, as an afterthought, Doug inquired, *"Are you going to go there or not?"*

It took some time to locate the correct landing spot and signal in the smoke and haze, and it was late when Mike returned to PS-7. A primary reason for going to PS-7 that day was retrieval of a faulty generator used to operate the radios. Mike watched as the people struggled to move the heavy, bulky machine from the village to the helicopter. He asked Doug why they did not employ logs to ease friction and roll the article to his ship, similar to the Egyptian method when moving huge stones to erect the pyramids. Doug had a humorous explanation. He laughed and said, *"These people have not learned to use the wheel yet."*

It was already dark and the weather was deteriorating. The generator was still not positioned to be loaded, so, in the interest of safety, they all opted to spend the night, with Swanson and his buddy in the village and the helicopter crew in the Sikorsky Hotel. It could have been the first time a helicopter crew RON at the site.

Most of my day was fairly routine shuttling out of Pakse. However, late in the day I was alerted and launched by a Requirements Office representative for a possible search and rescue (SAR) mission. A T-28 pilot

had incurred problems and was en route to base. He landed safely, and I recovered at twilight. There was still no extra compensation for actual SARs or SAR standby, but, out of habit, I logged thirty minutes SAR. After securing Hotel-30 for the night, I wondered about Jarina's status. The radio operator did not have an inbound on him, but indicated he would keep me informed. I heard no more, and although unusual for the area, assumed all was well and Mike had managed to radio a Company station and RON at an outlying site.

Early Wednesday morning the natives managed to wrestle the generator to Hotel-40's cabin door. Then, using cargo straps, the rescue hoist cable (600 pounds maximum capacity), and with several people lifting, they managed to carefully inch and slide the machine over the plywood floor to a position that would not unduly influence the H-34s center of gravity (CG).

After depositing the two Case Officers at Attopeu, Mike returned to Pakse, where he was reassigned to work at Thakhet.

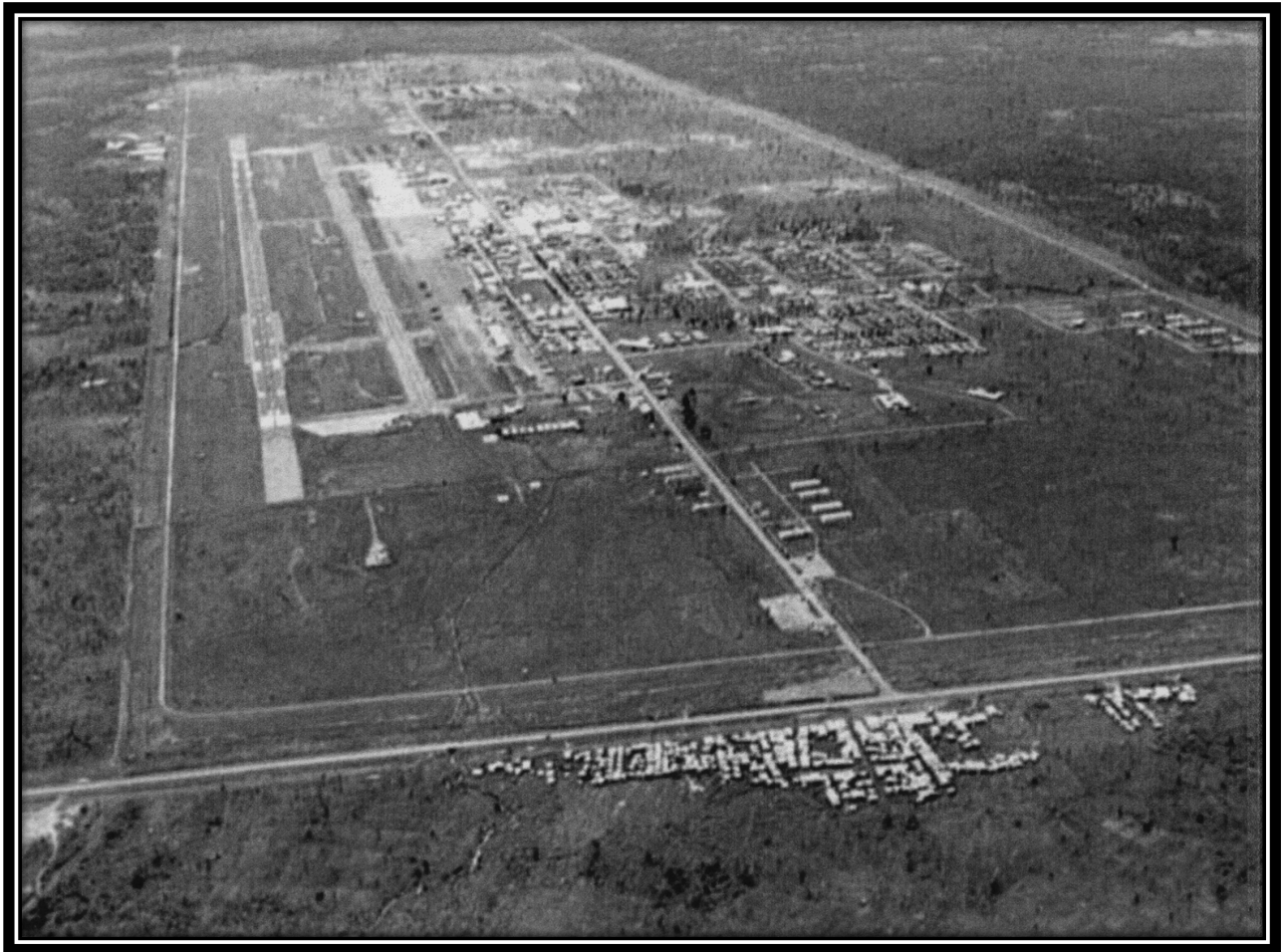
### **MILITARY REGION-3**

Most U.S Air Force helicopters and crews had rotated back to South Vietnam in January. Therefore, at least for the present, the Customer was stuck with unenthusiastic H-34 pilots to perform their trail watch missions. Many pilots, including the Author, were not

receptive to performing single pilot unescorted trail crossings and landings deep in denied areas. From a mortality standpoint and past experience, regardless of what we had previously accomplished, the odds of continuing these forays without eventually incurring serious problems did not seem likely. No one was prepared to die, and since 1964 the job had increasingly evolved into aspects none of us had ever envisioned. Unlike SARs, the entire road watch project in Military Region Three was shaded and lacked sensible standard operating procedures. Therefore, Jarina, who had not voiced any objection in the past, made the management list and was scheduled to conduct more than his share of MR-3's single pilot missions.

In what turned out to be a very long day, Mike began by shuttling SGU troops to Ban Na Tan (LS-237) thirty-nine miles north of Lima-40, a forward base nestled in a valley behind the karsts. Trips to such locations were not unusual; we had been performing similar missions for some time. However, a trip directly northeast to a landing zone near Phou Pouat, twenty miles northwest of Mugia Pass and forty-four miles southwest to Thakhet, was not ordinary. Because of distances, time constraints, and difficulty in obtaining assets from tight Military Region Two, requirements were likely combined. (This was often the case during future road watch missions.) Following





A well-developed USAF base complex at Nakhon Phanom (NKP) in northeast Thailand. Located close to the Thai-Lao border a few miles from the Mekong River, the base supported much of the fixed wing bombing effort against the Ho Chi Minh Trail system; housed SAR units; a ground control intercept unit; and became the recipient of trail watch information which was distilled by super-computers for targeting. Air America helicopter pilot involvement at NKP began with a Seabee unit during the base's construction. Listed as Tango-55 west in the Air America site book, we were allowed access to the base for fuel, meals, an occasional RON, and to conduct sensitive Panhandle road watch missions.

Jarina Collection.



U.S Air Force A-1E Skyraider aircraft parked on pierced steel planking (PSP) ramp at the RTAF base at Nakhon Phanom (NKP), Thailand. For several years, these aircraft served as tank killers on the MR-3 and 4 "Trails," provided escort for search and rescue missions, and our later road watch missions.

Author Collection.

another trip exactly tracing the first, Mike recovered at Nakhon Phanom for fuel and RTB Tango-08.

When Mike departed for Thakhet I was assigned Plateau work, and amassed fairly good flight time. I continued to work at Pakse until the third when, after conducting a mission, I was recalled to Udorn. <sup>23</sup>

### **MACALAN THOMPSON**

By January, Hong Sa (LS-62), had other than for security reasons, been eliminated in AID's forward area concept. Therefore, International Volunteer Service (IVS) Thompson, a former U.S. Army engineer, after spending two days visiting the site and making a trip to the embassy's Vientiane commissary for supplies, was permanently reassigned to Nam Bac in February to replace Chaim Levitt, who, in the five months since the site reverted to government control, helped to build ten school classrooms. During this period, John Steinbeck arrived for a short time and Mac flew down to Vientiane with the writer and his entourage. John was completing the last leg of his journeys around

---

<sup>23</sup> Segment Sources;  
Mike Jarina Interviews.  
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 172, 174.  
Frank Stergar Email, 06/06/96, Mailed Reply to my 06/28/96 Questions.  
Bill Leary, Larry Taylor Interview.  
Soutchay Vongsavanh, *Indochina Monographs, CHECO: Royal Lao Government Operations and Activities in the Laotian Panhandle* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History) 37.

Southeast Asia collecting information for newspaper articles.<sup>24</sup>

Prior to departing Site-62, fellow worker John Van Tine and Mac had poured a concrete floor in the Group Scolaire, and had begun a manually dug well program. They also planned construction of the Hong Sa-Ban Tha Soung road, other new schools, a dispensary, and five Gambion irrigation dams.

The Gambion Dam was a building technique used on small creeks or rivers to back up water flow for irrigation purposes. Relatively easy to build and long lasting, it employed a unique construction technique designed for ease of building and employing hand labor in remote areas. If available, concrete could be used, but it was not necessary. Stout posts were placed on the downstream side of a stream and cyclone fencing anchored to them. Then large rocks, eight inches or more, were placed on the upstream side and sloped upstream to the desired height of the dam. If the Gambion dam was six feet high or greater, the corresponding upstream slope would extend fifteen to twenty feet. Holding the unit together, the cyclone fencing was stretched back over the rock slope, secured to the top, and down the upstream side of the dam. The dam was calculated to slow and back up a sufficient

---

<sup>24</sup> See the Author's 1966 Book for Mac Thompson's initial entry into Laos and subsequent work at Hong Sa.

head of water to allow farmers to draw off liquid for irrigation on small canals. Unrestrictive as to flow, the porous dam allowed precious water to run through the system so individuals living downstream were not denied its use. Should the waterway be required for transportation, the dam could easily be dismantled after the growing season and reassembled the following year.

### **NAM BAC**

The east-west oriented strip at Nam Bac provided C-123 capability. In October 1966 C-123B Captain Watson experienced problems after landing east to west when the right propeller prematurely exited reverse mode. With the left prop still in reverse, the plane torqued to the left and veered off the left side of the runway. It bounced merrily through foxholes, finally slowing to a stop before rolling into the river. In the process, the right landing gear collapsed and the belly was damaged. Maintenance Supervisor Stan Wilson and his repair crew spent two weeks at the site patching the aircraft so it could be ferried south. When Thompson arrived there was still a lot of aluminum scattered about the area.

Continuing his penchant for parachute jumping, Mac made three jumps while at the site.



Looking southeast at Nam Bac's 2,600 by eighty-foot east-west oriented runway. Located forty-five nautical miles north of Luang Prabang, the strategic valley was a crossroads of mostly footpaths and trails from North Vietnam, China, and Phong Saly Province. It was traversed by Route-4 from Phong Saly Province and China, Route-19 from Dien Bien Phu, and Route-44 from Tay Lai Chau Province in North Vietnam. For many centuries, the area had been used as a traditional trading post and invasion route to the south. International Voluntary Service representative Mac Thompson's tent is circled. SGU camp is located to the upper left.

Thompson Collection.



International Voluntary Service (IVS) representative MacAlan Thompson and his Lao field assistant in front of their Nam Bac hotel during the spring of 1967. Thompson is armed with a .22 caliber Hi-Standard pistol and a poor-quality flintlock rifle.  
Thompson Collection.

Mac's tour at Nam Bac was slated to last about six months. He planned to RON there full time and billeted in a general purpose tent located on the northern side toward the western one-third of the strip. He was next to the fuel dump, a large helicopter ramp, and just west of the FAR camp. Former Marine sergeant Charles "Chuck" Campbell and Pat Sharone's <sup>25</sup> SGU training camp was located at the east end of the strip. Since late 1966, the two Agency case officers had been responsible for organizing and training mountain tribes for guerrilla operations (SGU) in northern Military Region One toward Moung Khoua, but not south and west of the Ou River.

Unlike the two Agency Case Officers who rotated back to Luang Prabang at night, Mac was determined to RON at Nam Bac to ensure the maximum amount of time to accomplish his projects. This continued through February and part of early March, until a surprise enemy attack rendered nighttime security and further RONS at the site unfeasible.

Mac's general purpose (GP) tent that he shared with his Lao Field Assistant, Soulivong Siripathan, was adequate. For cooling during the heat of the day, he rolled up the sides to allow breezes to flow through. This worked well until a H-34, Caribou, or RLA C-47

---

<sup>25</sup> Frank Stergar's acquaintance following World War Two.



pilot landed and taxied by or turned around dusting off the immediate area.

The two-story AID building at Luang Prabang had offices downstairs and provided guest quarters on the second floor. After viewing a 16mm movie, AIRA people would pass it on to AID, where it was shown upstairs.

There were no refugees located at Nam Bac, and since no work existed in that field, Mac was supposed to perform regular IVS tasks. Therefore, most of his energy revolved around two to three schools. He helped build two new plywood-sided schools, provided blackboards for fourteen classrooms, created furniture, and at the time he left was attempting to obtain approval for two additional schools. An old French dispensary was rehabilitated, vegetable seeds distributed, and work begun on a Gambion dam when he left for Vientiane in July.

All the IVS-AID projects attempted were small and rapidly implemented. The people had previously been without much support for six years, and were very interested in working for anything they could obtain. Mac considered it a pleasure working with them. After the fact, he later stated:

*"When in an insecure area, Lao military are the best protection and one must be able to work and get along with them."*

*The IVS volunteer need not actively support the army, but an occasional helping hand was not out of order. They are part of the RLG structure that one of our jobs is to support and build confidence. In many, if not most areas, the military is the power and must provide local approval for IVS work."*

For diversion, on some days Mac enjoyed hitching a ride in a helicopter that was shuttling to outlying sites or outposts. Despite so much military activity, he occasionally managed to spend a couple hours at an outpost. One such landing on high ground east of the runway had just received a 105mm howitzer delivered by a U.S. Army Chinook crew to a landing pad eight kilometers west.

No one seemed to converse much in either English or Lao, so Mac spent much of his time coordinating with Colonel Khamphay (Khampai) Sayasith. Khamphay, the delegated field commander at Site-203 and Commanding Officer of GM-11, attempted to expand FAR control around Nam Bac during early 1967. However, stiff enemy resistance and traditional lack of Lao aggressiveness prevented much RLA movement. Therefore, emphasis centered mainly on defensive measures.

Colonel Khamphay possessed a kind heart and later formed the "Kiddie Platoon" from orphans or unaccompanied minors in the area that he gathered and placed in school. The children performed what could be

called junior ROTC work, and were carried on the FAR payroll. Before Nam Bac fell in early 1968, he relocated the kids to Luang Prabang. Later, when transferred to BV-18 at Ban Houei Sai, he took the children with him. One could see them walking down the hill where BV-18 was camped and marching off to school.

FAR maintained a couple of 75mm pack howitzer and mortar positions to the west. Mac occasionally helped load broken pieces of the guns on an H-34 and visited the sites.

Mok Plai (LS-193), the area where Larry Wilderom had his problems, was occupied by the enemy during the spring of 1967. To discourage enemy encroachment on Nam Bac, in the morning, the colonel had H-34 pilots deliver a 75mm pack howitzer, crew, and ammunition to fire a few harassing rounds at the enemy and return the gun in the evening. Mac went there twice with Colonel Khamphay to observe and help fire the gun. An easy weapon to dismantle and move around, other local firebases also employed pack howitzers to discourage enemy movement toward Nam Bac.

From a combination of just the right soil and climate, Nam Bac valley was renowned for its lush orange groves that produced an abundance of delicious fruit. At one time, Khamphay and Thompson briefly discussed jointly purchasing a grove for the equivalent of 300 U.S dollars. AID representative Duane Hammer,



A U.S. Army Chinook heavy lift crew from South Vietnam on loan to the FAR approaching a 105mm howitzer at Nam Bac in order to sling the gun to one of the western sites in the hills surrounding the Site-203 complex to provide a perimeter defense.

Thompson Collection.



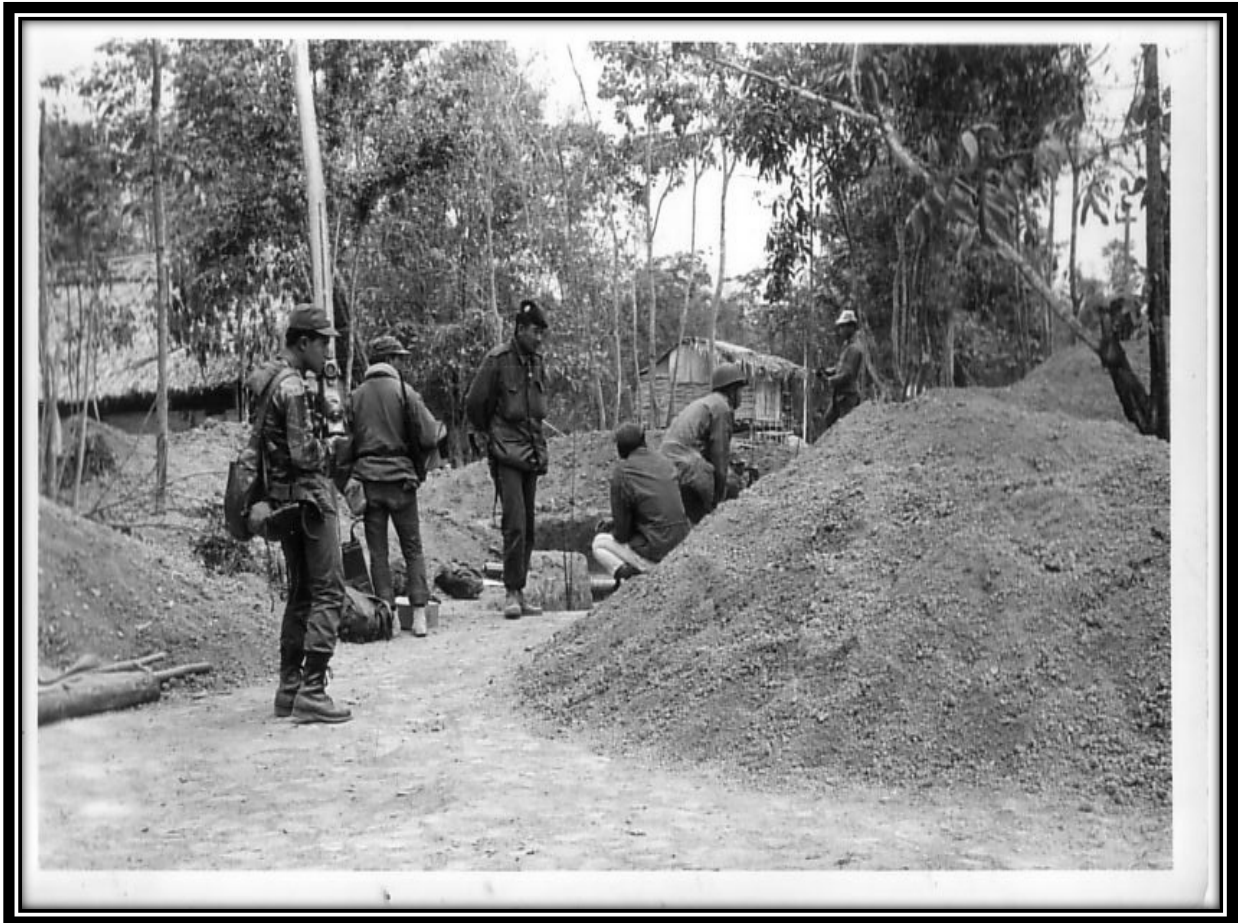
Colonel Khamphay Sayasith, Field Commander of GM-11, and USAID Deputy Director of Rural Affairs, Loren Haffner, inspecting an emplaced 105mm howitzer at the Phu Kho firebase on Hill 3353, three miles southeast of Nam Bac.

Thompson Collection.



Field Commanding Officer, Colonel Khamphay at FAR headquarters among the Nam Bac defenses.

Thompson Collection.



Colonel Khamphay inspecting BV-11 earthworks and crew served weapons at Nam Bac March 1967.

Thompson Collection.



A brace of pack howitzers and stacked ammunition being inspected by FAR officers on a denuded hill at the Mok Lok (LS-131) firebase eight miles south of Nam Bac.

Thompson Collection.





Colonel Khamphay and Mac Thompson resting in front of FAR headquarters at Nam Bac during a lull in enemy probes and assaults on 11 March 1967. Unable to reach his pipe and tobacco, Mac is smoking a detested cigarette. His essential HT-2 radio sits beside his bug-out bag. Most of the action had been concentrated east and northeast, but alert troops scan the southern sector for signs of trouble.

Thompson Collection.



The "Kiddie Platoon" consisting of orphans and other unfortunates of war that Colonel Khamphay formed at Nam Bac.  
Thompson Collection.

whom I first met at Luang Prabang in the early fall of 1962, once gave me a bag of these oranges. Duane also managed to obtain rare brass frog opium weights from a northern area refugee and was flipping them in his hand while approaching me at the Luang Prabang runway.

During the citrus growing season, if there was an empty aircraft going south at the end of the day, Mac purchased sacks of inexpensive oranges and took them to Luang Prabang for distribution among friends.

### **COMMODITIES**

Late one afternoon, Frank Stergar was finished working at Nam Bac and prepared to depart for Luang Prabang, while an arrogant FAR officer supervised loading of burlap sacks filled with fresh oranges for the market. The thought occurred to Frank that someone was going to make a substantial profit from the resale of the commodity and he should divert some sacks to a needy area. When the cargo compartment was filled, he was given "a thumbs up" signal to lift off. On the way back to the Royal Capital, he diverted twenty miles southwest to Tong Too (LS-186) and had his Flight Mechanic offload several sacks to pretty Yao girls who met the helicopter. After arriving at Luang Prabang, the cargo handler was puzzled that the cargo was somewhat less than expected.

Another valuable area commodity was a benzoic compound, derived from a particular tree sap. The rare amber resin was harvested, collected, and shipped in lumps like sap from rubber trees in Southeast Asia. Then it was processed into a toxic white crystalline solid for manufacture of expensive perfumes and medicines. A French businessman living in Vientiane had an associate in Luang Prabang who managed to continue obtaining the product from remote areas regardless of the fighting. The supplies normally arrived by boats floating south on the Nam Ou.

During the busy days at Nam Bac during Chief of Base (COB) Eli Popovich's era, it was getting late and with the weather threatening, Frank Stergar was anxious to leave for Luang Prabang. One of the indigenous air operations persons dispatching him during the day approached saying he had an emergency mission twenty miles north in the vicinity of Ban "Y" (LS-187). Frank objected at first, but agreed to the trip when convinced that the emergency was valid. When he arrived at the destination, the ship was loaded with bulging burlap sacks for the royal capitol. Suspicious that the cargo might be opium, he ordered his Flight Mechanic to provide him with a sample. An amber resin that did not look or smell like the opium product, he delivered the load. He later discovered that he had carried benzoin. He called it butrate, a valuable sap derived from local

trees used as a perfume base in France. He wondered if the villagers who collected the sap profited from the venture.

### **ILLICIT DRUGS**

Over time, conspiracy theorists and some authors accused Air America pilots of willingly transporting illegal narcotics during the Second Indochina War. This subject, although currently not much of an issue, has been hotly disputed by the Customer, the Air America Company, pilots, and many reputable authors like Professor Bill Leary, who in past years thoroughly researched the subject and largely put the issue to rest as a nonevent. Was the opium poppy grown in Laos? Yes. Was there trafficking? Yes. Did we carry the product on occasion? It was highly likely, but never with crew knowledge. Packages, bags, and cartons that individuals carried were not searched. It was not a prerequisite or an issue in the early 1960s. Had it been, we never could have performed our job to the extent required. However, the narcotic issue was addressed before we left Laos, and desultory attempts, mostly eyewash, to quell the centuries old trade were taken. However, as usual, it was too little, too late and authorities addressed the wrong group of people, for it was well known that Lao officers at the top of the heap were the prime offenders--and to harass that

group would have been politically incorrect and detrimental to the war effort.

In 1967 Frank Stergar learned after the fact that he had unknowingly carried opium. He was returning to Site-203 from Luang Prabang with his SGU Customer and some FAR radio operator types who had received permission from Fred Costs to travel with him. While en route, the passengers asked him to land at a site south of Nam Bac to retrieve some unspecified cargo. He complied, and after being loaded he continued toward Nam Bac. While commencing an approach to the field, a passenger requested him to first stop at a FAR encampment one kilometer to the east. Frank, believing he had done enough for them, continued his approach to the mid-field helicopter landing zone near the base headquarters.

The Flight Mechanic related over ICS that when the passengers observed Frank landing in the vicinity of the FAR headquarters, they became highly agitated and began hurriedly transferring the cargo into the electronics compartment. After landing, taxing, and parking, some very serious-looking special guerrilla unit personnel arrived at the cabin door. Consulting the helicopter crew as to stops made, they dragged the passengers off the helicopter, roughed them up, and spirited them away to some unknown fate. Then, with the

Flight Mechanic's help, they retrieved the suspicious cargo.

The issue was so unusual that Frank secured the aircraft and examined the items in question. Wrapped in burlap material, they comprised one-foot square blocks, oozing a black tarry substance. He had seen this material previously and it was identified as an oxidized extract from the pods of beautiful opium poppy flowers. Normally, poppy fields were randomly sown, not weeded or cultivated. There were exceptions. At Phou Phang Sang (LS-142) east of Nam Yu, Stergar was impressed with the manner the beautiful poppy plants were planted in rows and carefully cultivated.

During the same time period, while working for Site-118A, Alex Nadalini spotted a Lao helicopter at dusk. Suspicious, Alex attempted but failed to intercept him at a maximum speed, while proceeding upriver past Ban Houei Sai. Tony went into orbit when Nadalini apprised of the sighting.<sup>26</sup>

When weather permitted, Thompson worked at Nam Bac until July, when he was reassigned to Vientiane and then Xieng Lom in August. In an end-of-tour report covering his early period, he related some interesting information regarding the IVS program:

---

<sup>26</sup> Frank Stergar Emails, 06/06/96, 11/17/96, 04/10/97, 06/04/97; 06/28/10, 07/03/10.

*"...Although it seems to have changed somewhat, the original theme of this IVS program is to impact rural development in newly liberated areas of ones that have received little or no RLG-USSAID help in the past and where the people may be unfriendly. We are trying to win the hearts and minds of the people in a short period of time by working on self-help wells, schools, dams, and dispensaries. Ideally, these projects should be relatively small, easy to do, and fast going so you do not lose the interest and cooperation of the villagers before completion. All too often this rule is violated and the self-help work turns into forced labor.*

*I have had difficulty identifying with IVS Vientiane from the start. The time I was visited here at Hong Sa during November 1966, it seemed IVS had no interest in what I was doing or that my work had any importance to the organization.*

*Some people say that IVS is not working within the volunteer concept and that people are being deceived and disappointed by their service with IVS Laos. What happens to the various AID programs that are being staffed by IVS if we leave? Some will be carried on, but many others will have to be dropped or postponed because of lack of AID funds to hire high paid*



*technicians. I have a feeling we are failing in our job of training our Lao assistants to take over from us..."*<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Mac Thompson Interview with Author at the Lone Star Bar off Sukhumvit Road in Bangkok, Thailand, 12/26/96. Thompson Emails, 10/19/96, 10/26/96, 11/17/96, 05/21/97, End of Tour Report, September 1966 to June 1967, 06/24/97, 02/12/98, 09/25/99, 01/26/00, 03/22/03, 07/05/03. Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 163, 183.

**A**s the years slipped by, media publicity regarding Laos, and ancillary efforts by USG to support what was formerly merely considered the Southeast Asian War's western sideshow in contrast to Vietnam was becoming more prevalent in America. The latest disclosure was a March article in an edition of *Aviation Daily* regarding air operations from the Vientiane, Laos airport.

Still considered a low intensity conflict in Indochina, contesting sides in Laos were currently awaiting the military outcome in South Vietnam. From the beginning USG philosophy was to maintain the country as a buffer zone and keep the communists at bay away from the Mekong River and Thailand. Now Laos was roughly divided in half, with communist forces controlling eastern and northeastern mountainous portions and the RLG forces, the western lowlands and river towns. However, small areas of government resistance existed in the upland regions, and low-level guerrilla warfare continued in the mountains. These operations were supplied by both Air America and CASI aircraft utilizing air drop zones and expanding 225 airstrips hacked from mountainsides and serviced by STOL aircraft.

In general, there had been no major countrywide military action since the spring of 1962 and the subsequent Geneva Accords on Laos signing, but periodic internal friction among Lao factions and regional leaders contributed to less than perfect stability in the country. North Vietnamese leaders had refrained from seeking political control of Laos. They seemed to be mainly content with usurping the eastern Panhandle area encompassing the Ho Chi Minh logistical trail system to South Vietnam.

Marking a perfect country to employ cargo aircraft because of few motorable roads, and remote areas, Air America was the first aviation company to enter the Lao conflict. The Company had the capability to perform the entire job, but for political and competitive reasons, USAID and other U.S agencies desired more than one company operating from Vientiane. Therefore, Bill Bird soon followed with his company, Bird and Son. To manage and operate his company, Bird hired several former Civil Air Transport (CAT) pilots.

Continental Air Services (CASI), a subsidiary of Continental Air Lines, purchased Bird and Son in 1965. As opposed to Air America Vientiane, which performed war work and some "black" operations for the Customer, CASI was reputedly one hundred per cent contractual for the USAID program and the Lao government. The company

operated two C-47 planes for the Lao government, carrying troops and officials on a contract basis. <sup>1</sup>

Local CASI management included Vice President of Southeast Asia, Dutch Brongersma, who started the original Bird and Son aviation company, and Chief Pilot Tom Nowling. The CASI cargo operation was administered by AID officials who determined loads and destinations of rice and supplies. Air America's Air Transportation Operations Group (ATOG) provided supplies from a warehouse, and CASI aircraft were scheduled by the Air America Operations Department. The CASI aircraft inventory included a diverse collection of planes: five C-46s, six C-47s, two Twin Pioneers, twelve Pilatus Porters, six equipped with Pratt and Whitney PT-6 turbine engines, the remainder with Astazou engines. Unfit for the job, the Astazou engine had been plagued with problems. The PT6 engine was considered more reliable. Air America was in the process of retrofitting all its Porter and C-45 fleet to Garrett engines. The list of aircraft continued with six DO-28 twin engine Dorniers, jokingly referred to as Hitler's revenge, one Piper Apache, one Wren, one Musketeer, three Helio Couriers, two Cessna 180s, one Piper Super Cub, and one helicopter, a Fairchild-Hiller 1100.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nothing was revealed regarding Boun Oum Airlines, which received maintenance and some pilot support from CASI.

CASI was not earning or reporting a profit. The company received bad advice during the early stages of the takeover, and was experiencing continued management problems. Additionally, costs were high and the company was receiving negative input from U.S. officials. A major mistake was an attempt to employ three C-130 aircraft on loan from the military. The effort was not profitable and lost substantial money.

Air America also experienced early growing pains, but currently provided excellent aircraft maintenance, an efficient operating base, and conducted a smooth operation flying 4,500 hours a month. The operation was overseen by Base Manager, Frank Dunn, a retired U.S. Air Force Colonel, and Regional Chief Pilot, Fred Walker. They had thirty-two aircraft at their disposal for air supply: eight C-123s, two C-47s, four C-46s, six Caribous, one C-45, and eight Helio Couriers.<sup>2</sup>

The two companies combined to deliver 5,000 to 7,000 tons of supplies per month and 15,000 to 22,000 passengers. Pilots hired from various areas earned high pay.

By 1967, Vientiane had grown to 60,000 individuals. There was some modernization, but the open sewers in town were offensive to Westerners. Opium and gold smuggling was in vogue. No tax imposed on cigarettes

---

<sup>2</sup> Not mentioned in the article were Pilatus Porters and other aircraft based at Udorn.

and other items offered less expensive products than available in the USA, and liquor was a bargain. In general, lifestyle was considered good, with a large protected USAID compound and commissary. CASI offered a hundred-person compound with a swimming pool, but the majority of pilots preferred the freedom of living in town. <sup>3</sup>

## **UDORN**

When I returned from Pakse little Ricky was experiencing his first bad cold. It was the beginning of health problems that would plague the little fellow for several years. We thought the heat and his teething might have had some influence, for aside from normal cold symptoms, he would not smile and was generally miserable. Orn's husband, Charlie Carlson, who worked for Philco Ford as facility power plant manager, knew everybody who was anybody at the Air Force base, and arranged for me to take the baby to the doctor. After an injection, Rick recovered within two days.

Because of our growing family, a squirrely landlady, and jealous, backbiting, and pecking order status conscious wives in the compound, we considered moving to another area and a larger house. However,

---

<sup>3</sup> Article Regarding Continental Air Services in the March 1967 Issue of *Aviation Daily*. Abridged and additional Information added by the Author for clarity.

because ever increasing Air Force personnel had inflated everything, there were no rental houses on the market meeting our specifications available for less than 150 dollars a month. This was considerably more than what we were presently paying in the Godnoma compound. The alternative was to build a house. A few Air America people had done this, but unaware of the war's future direction and longevity, or my plans to remain in Udorn, I was reluctant to assent to any large financial or long-term commitment.

As another option, Khun Tha took us to visit an old friend, an Udorn Thani province senator, who owned rental bungalows adjacent to a portion of the town reservoir. They were nice places, but all were occupied or rented at the time.

### **MAIL PROBLEMS**

Asian American investor pilots had previously and collectively agreed to advance Jim Coble funds to help restructure Concrete Masonry in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. On the fifth, I wrote a check number drawn on my account at the Plainfield Trust State National Bank to Asian American Investment Corporation, Ltd. for 1,000 dollars. The check represented a first installment of 3,000 dollars I agreed to forward. As insurance that it would be directed to the right party, on the back I wrote "for deposit only to the payee."

Doing business at Thai post offices, particularly during peak periods, was always a study in chaos. The patrons were not very disciplined, and usually a single line evolved into two or three. Then there was always the individual who attempted to sneak in the front of the line. Although I was a guest in the country, sometimes I was quite vocal regarding these infractions. I am sure the extreme heat had something to do with the discord. In Thailand, thievery took all kinds of shapes and forms. Because there were individuals, likely in the employ of the government post office system, who pilfered un-canceled postage stamps from envelopes, we were advised to take advantage of a glue pot on the counter to coat the back of our stamps. This did not guarantee that a valuable stamp would not be steamed off, but it was a precaution against this activity.

I paid for delivery of the check to Kuala Lumpur by Thai registered airmail. Eleven days later, as of 17 March, it had not arrived in the hands of the Managing Director. I registered a complaint with post office officials, and was assured that a search would be conducted. Knowing the Thai proclivity for procrastination and hyperbole, the number of people who likely handled the letter, and distances involved, I doubted it would ever be found. Since Jerry McEntee was travelling to Kuala Lumpur, I gave him an identical



check with instructions to let me know immediately if the other check had arrived. Five days later, I received a telegram from Jerry stating the check still had not arrived. Therefore, I scribbled a hasty letter to Dad to place a stop order on the first check. This was accomplished.

Not long afterward the check was returned to me. I had placed the company's old address on the envelope and the local post office had failed to forward it to the new one.

## **NAM BAC**

Since Nam Bac's capture by RLG forces in August, the site was utilized as a government forward depot to reinforce and deliver supplies to outlying tribal sites. Site-203 was also employed to train mixed ethnic, but mostly Lao Theung, road watch teams and launch them on hazardous missions to the northern Route-19 area to monitor road development and any movement from Dien Bien Phu toward Nam Bac or Luang Prabang.

Early in the decade, Dien Bien Phu had been transformed into a large supply depot and rear echelon headquarters for the northwest North Vietnamese 316 Division. Some penetration of North Vietnam was attempted, but mixed cross border teams were always quickly detected by enemy patrols and were captured,

killed, or ejected. Because of special recognition signals or other means of identification, these government forays were never successful. <sup>4</sup>

Ideas were proposed to expand FAR influence westward toward Moung Sai and east toward the Nam Ou and Moung Ngoi (Ban Na Tai, L-50). During early March, FAR's plans to assault, expel enemy, and liberate the Ban Mok Plai (LS-193) area, were well underway. Several Meo and ADC <sup>5</sup> battalions and two 105mm howitzers had been positioned to jump-off positions northwest of Nam Bac. Previous attempts to gain this objective had failed. Deemed a viable purpose, seizing this site would help interdict and protect the western flank of Site-203 and provide a forward base to encroach on Moung Sai, eighteen miles to the west, a major enemy stronghold and regional logistical base located toward the northern end of the Beng Valley.

## **ATTACK**

As often occurred in the porous, spy ridden region north of Luang Prabang, enemy forces struck first. At 0100 hours on Saturday 11 March, a large group

---

<sup>4</sup> The Author participated in several border insertions over the years and cannot ever recall retrieving an intact team. Usually, teams just disappeared. However, efforts continued. Chief of Base (COB) Eli Popovich, later COBs, and his superiors deemed such cross border efforts necessary and critical to preservation of the area.

<sup>5</sup> A hold over from the French-inspired Auto Defense Choc local forces and not officially a part of the FAR.

infiltrated and attacked Nam Bac's government defense positions to the north, and artillery sites to the southeast.

Eyewitness Mac Thompson observed:

*"Got caught in one good shoot out in March. Baddies were hitting the east end of the strip and around the north side. NVA troops attacked and worked their way within 100 yards to the north...They did not have mortars or they could have blown the hell out of us. I will never know why they did not bring even one with them.*

[Case Officer] Chuck Campbell's SGU troops [located] on the east end of the airstrip broke and came through the FAR (located toward the west end). Colonel Khamphay's troops held [stopped the potential rout] and things quieted down. For a time, I was nervous and buried my Udorn PX card, USG driver's license, and Army dogtags. I dug them up later [in the morning].

About 0900 [hours] we finally got some air support-T-28s and a small spotter plane. I gave them the bombing and strafing coordinates with my radio...along toward 1500 [hours], after about 40 bombing missions, Colonel Khamphay sent a company up to take the hill and about two minutes afterward it was ours...At 1530 [hours], I called a chopper down to take me, my assistant Soulivang, and some wounded to Luang Prabang.

*Talk about contrasts. I spent 14 hours Saturday sitting in a foxhole and worrying a bit and that night went to a birthday party in Luang Prabang where everybody else was in tuxedos and formals. I was in my normal sport shirt and jeans...*

*If Nam Bac is secure enough, I will go back in and work during the day and return to LP at night. Even in the bush we have our commuters, except in the states I do not think most people go one way by chopper..."*

Although Mac continued to work at Nam Bac during the day, the incident marked his final RON there. Furthermore, because of the man's nature and ability, he maintained a soft spot in his heart for Khamphay after the attack. Commuting to Nam Bac on a daily basis, Mac either stayed overnight at the USAID office or the Phu Si Hotel, located across the road from the mountain and wat bearing the same name. Phu Si was yet another name for what we collectively called the Bungalow or Government Hotel. In the small town, the hotel was close to the main market, just west of the hospital compound, and post office down the hill toward the Mekong.

Several small enemy units remained in the Nam Bac area restricting the airfield access to helicopters and STOL aircraft. Contending with hot days and a bright red sun boring through smoke and haze, helicopters evacuated dead and wounded from Nam Bac and the Site-

193 area. This effort continued through the fourteenth. There were forty-four enemy KIAs, and an unconfirmed number of casualties inflicted by numerous T-28 and F-105 strikes.<sup>6</sup>

By Sunday the area was deemed secure enough to resume large fixed wing traffic. GMs 25 and 27 were subsequently delivered to the site to provide reinforcement.

On the same day as the attack on Nam Bac, the operation to capture Mok Plai went forward. Enemy resistance initially thwarted the attackers. Until encircled, and Pathet Lao defenders were forced to retreat, Site-193 was again in the government camp. The taste of victory did not last. On Monday 20 March, reinforced Vietnamese units struck from the north. Numerous friendly air sorties struck suspected enemy positions, but Meo defenders, fearing the dreaded Vietnamese, abandoned the site and retreated toward Nam Bac. Always looking for choice opportunities to decimate their hated enemy, Vietnamese ambushes inflicted over a hundred casualties.

The enemy continued to probe Nam Bac's defenses. On 23 March Thompson wrote a letter to his parents:

*"Thanks for the .45. I hope I won't have to use it, but it makes me feel better than the .22.*

---

<sup>6</sup> Chief of Station Ted Shackley's people recorded 110 enemy and thirty-one friendly KIA.



Lao soldiers loading wounded onto an Air America UH-34D helicopter for evacuation south to Luang Prabang.  
Thompson Collection.



From a trench and shallow foxholes behind the entrance to FAR headquarters located adjacent to the west portion of the Nam Bac runway, government troops observe bombing to the north on 11 March 1967. An 81mm "4 deuce" mortar tube sits between the trench and foxhole complex.

Thompson Collection.

*The situation at Nam Bac has regressed somewhat in that the 105mm howitzer position we had eight kilometers to the west was abandoned and the two guns destroyed. Nam Bac itself has not been attacked, except for small raids for two weeks, but the prospects do not look good.*

*I am presently in Vientiane awaiting transportation to Luang Prabang to look the situation over. I don't think I can go back to Nam Bac before 1 April at the earliest and maybe never. I do want to go back. It is a very beautiful area and the people are quite interested in development. The biggest thing that surprised me when I arrived was that they wanted schools for their kids before the personal and perhaps more economic projects like irrigation dams, canals, and the standard giveaway program..."*

In the spring, when Mac was returning from Nam Bac in a Porter, there was considerable chatter over the Air America radio net regarding a potential coup going on at Luang Prabang. Someone had dropped a bomb in town in General Ouane's front yard, just behind the USAID building. Pilots were wondering what was happening and concerned as to what action to take, for LP was the nearest refueling station. There was talk of diverting to Sam Tong or Ban Houei Sai. Mac switched to the USAID frequency to obtain the latest "skinny" regarding the situation. The person he talked to indicated that



everything was quiet at the airport and it was alright to land.

Later, when all reports were collated, it was revealed that an unwitting T-28 pilot returned from the north with a hung 250-pound bomb under a wing. While making a long downwind over town in order to land on Runway-06, he dropped his landing gear and the bomb jarred loose, dropping into Ouane's yard. Ouane was not at home, but the incident had the town in shock, and for a time in anticipation of the worst possible scenario.<sup>7</sup>

## **SOUTHERN TRAILS**

For South Vietnam-based cross border Special Operating Groups (SOG), originally code-named Shining Brass, and renamed Prairie Fire in March, the noose was tightening in southern Laos. In addition to enemy troops traversing logistical arteries into South Vietnam, some 25,000 individuals were devoted to either monitoring major trails or potential helicopter landing zones. Before 1967, mixed SOG teams operating in Laos

---

<sup>7</sup> Victor Anthony, 217, 218.  
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 163.  
Ted Shackley, *Spymaster*, 166-167, 170.  
Mac Thompson Interview, 12/26/96.  
Mac Thompson Emails, 09/10/96, 06/08/97, 09/25/99, 12/02/98, The Thompson's Emails Include Segments of Letters to his parents depicting the excitement on the night of 11 March 1967.  
Bob Glover, 41.

to obtain intelligence information were countered by either inexperienced or seasoned North Vietnamese Army infantry. The enemy also employed counter trail watchers and indigenous trackers familiar with the area. Usually if enemy trail watchers spotted a helicopter in the process of landing, they forwarded the information by gong, phone, runner, or fired shots. They also employed direction-finding equipment and road guards at night.

By the third week of March, the Vietnamese greatly increased their own unique brand of trail watching capability by forming Special Operating Force counter reconnaissance battalions from highly trained and motivated sapper units. Employing trackers and dogs, one unit was assigned to patrol west of Khe Sanh, South Vietnam, to Tchepone. Another unit operated from the Ashau Valley, South Vietnam, and bases twenty miles west. Yet another one searched terrain in southern Laos and northern Cambodia.

To rectify and enhance cross border operations in southeast Laos, discussions continued throughout April and May and succeeding months among Department of Defense and the Administration officials to initiate an enlarged SOG guerrilla program of up to 3,000 Kha tribals. This was conceived and proposed in January by General Westmoreland to locate and destroy enemy personnel, supplies, and equipment.

An April memorandum from the Joint Chiefs to the Secretary of Defense addressed this same issue in the hope of pursuing such a program:

*"Area of Laos between the Tchepone-Se Kong River line and the Lao-Vietnamese border continues to be dominated by NVA forces and to serve as the principal infiltration route and support area for enemy operations in Southern Vietnam. There is limited friendly activity in the area including Prairie Fire reconnaissance and exploitation missions, air operations, and some CAS road watch teams. Although expanding, they are not capable of stemming the infiltrations or denying the use of the area. Need new or improved concepts to deal with the problem without a drastic shift in policy toward Laos and without upsetting that country's political and military balance.*

*Past few months SOG had identified and assessed a potential for the establishment of a friendly guerrilla force in the Anamite Mountain Region of southern Laos; a Kha tribal group which inhabits the area and is being exploited by the enemy. These people will respond to Caucasian influence and can be developed into guerrilla forces. Such a program could provide an important supplement to the existing counter-infiltration effort at low cost in men and material and with a low risk of embarrassing the Royal Lao Government (RLG).*

*The concept of the operations is that SOG [personnel] develop and direct a guerrilla program in southeast Laos employing 3,000 men and 135 U.S. Army personnel."*

Although air strikes, SGU road watch, and Prairie Fire activity had all expanded and achieved a modicum of success, enemy efforts continued to allow an adequate flow of men and supplies to South Vietnam. Therefore, military attention continued to focus on employing local border tribes to enlarge and supplement Prairie Fire operations. Contact had already been made with tribal leaders, and a potential for indigenous help was deemed feasible.

However, the Agency was skeptical regarding SOG's capability to recruit and develop an effective guerrilla force in any reasonable time frame. The Agency had been in the Trail guerrilla business for several years, resulting in increasingly effective passive road watch teams monitoring the flow of enemy supplies. Now plans included aggressive movements against targets. Even though the area involved was very large, conflicts over expanding areas, and command and control between U.S. Military and Agency operations were envisioned if large numbers of participants performed identical missions.

During give and take discussions, because programs were complementary, CINCPAC and COMUSMACV ensured that

there was no intent to conflict or compete with the CIA agenda. Although there was some interagency agreement regarding the proposed guerrilla program, lingering concerns persisted about stripping personnel from other projects approved or underway, and exposure of U.S. ground operations programs. Other negative considerations addressed were the lack of necessary SOG and Kha personnel.

There were also political questions and negative implications involved in such a process. Ambassador Sullivan and his staff were not keen about expanding Prairie Fire boundaries or using larger, more visible units; doing so would trigger media exposure and require Souvanna Phouma to take action.

Requiring time to study the proposal, the concept was tabled, but talks continued for months.

As an example of the continuing contention involved between Theater-based military and civilian leaders, on 9 August General Westmoreland informed Ambassador Sullivan:

*"The Prairie Fire boundary should not be considered a limitation to military operations against the enemy."*

Sullivan, referred to by many in Saigon as the Field Marshall, countered by saying:

*"I will send road watch teams anywhere in Laos I feel they are needed, including Prairie Fire zone if that seems the best method of handling the problem. But*

*I feel it best to avoid CAS<sup>8</sup> operations in the Prairie Fire zone because of possible conflicts and confusions.*

*A CAS special guerrilla unit [SGU] is in the area of an enemy force which is well west of the Prairie Fire zone. For Prairie Fire teams to attack in this area would have required their introduction into the vicinity of our CAS unit. This would have brought the Prairie Fire team into potential conflict with the CAS unit. It was decided the CAS unit would undertake the mission and it is currently moving to engage the enemy.*

*This business of coordination requires the closest and most trusting mutual efforts.”<sup>9 10</sup>*

---

<sup>8</sup> CAS: An acronym for CIA that translated into Controlled American Source.

<sup>9</sup> During the period of our numerous trail watch missions, to my knowledge, we never conflicted with SOG operations.

<sup>10</sup> Segment Sources:  
Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 230-231.  
Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to McNamara, Prairie Fire Phase-3, 04/20/67.  
Memorandum from General Wheeler to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Prairie Fire-Phase-3, 06/17/67.  
Helms Memorandum, 06/28/67.  
Information Memorandum Kohler to Katzenbach, Prairie Fire-Phase-3, 07/05/67.  
Memorandum Westmoreland to McNamara, Laos, 07/10/67.  
Telegram from Ambassador Sullivan to General Westmoreland, 08/10/67.

**HASP (HARP)**

Following selection of safe landing sites based on aerial and ground intelligence, continuing a time-honored policy to ensure team survival, road watch units were still inserted by USAF or Air America helicopter crews some distance from the Panhandle Ho Chi Minh Trail system. Then the men walked to one of the numerous elevated mesas where primary base camps were established. From fortress-like camps, small two- to three-man units moved forward to vantage observation points overlooking LOCs. Because of the difficulty of positioning these teams, they usually remained in place for extended periods of time and were originally supplied by small fixed wing aircraft. As teams expanded, Air America C-47s, C-123s, and C-7 aircraft were used for night supply. Later, a B-26 equipped with terrain-following radar was employed for drops.

The Air America Volpar High Altitude Survey Project evolved for several reasons. <sup>11</sup> For a few months, Lao teams reported Trail watch intelligence using non-modified HARK radios to transmit information to various types of overhead USAF aircraft, but only when a Lao translator was onboard. By early March, six teams had been equipped with new Agency-designed pushbutton transmitters called HARK-1. These devices were used to

---

<sup>11</sup> HARK: The program was also called HARP: High Altitude Relay Project.

relay nighttime enemy transit information directly to an orbiting Boun Oum Airways Dornier containing onboard communications gear, which in turn forwarded data to the Savannakhet station for collating and forwarding to targeting facilities.

Likely not intended to endure, the BOA contract was in effect for only a short time. During the second week in March, a landing accident at Lima-39 killed an American CASI pilot substituting for the regular Thai aviator. Since Air America had continued preparing for the project and had properly configured planes and pilots available, the High-Altitude Survey Project contract was immediately reassigned to Air America.

Three Volpar Beechcraft were initially employed for the mission. This number was later increased to six, with twenty-eight crewmembers in the program to allow for dual cockpit coverage, STO, and illness. The expansion was also necessary to establish two orbit locations when an expanding number of road watch teams were issued HARK-1 boxes in Military Region Four. A northern station was established near the Trails to cover Nape Pass, Mugia Pass and Tchepone. Later, a second, but less frequently covered southern station was established over the Bolovens near Saravane to monitor signals from teams covering Routes-92, 96, 165, and 110. Orbits were generally a square configuration and radar vectors were provided by Invert and Lion



control. Mission time within the orbit package was normally seven to eight hours duration seven days a week. This involved two aircraft per orbiting station with one standby plane in reserve. Crews were scheduled to depart Lima-39 at 1630 to be on station by 1700 hours. If a second aircraft and crew were available, the first crew was relieved on station around midnight, but often was required to remain aloft longer until relieved. If another Volpar was unavailable, a mission might require all night coverage of up to fourteen hours in the air. Down time at Savannakhet was between 0700 and 0730 hours, where the aircraft were scrupulously inspected and prepared for the following night's work.

Except for necessities, to increase extended loiter time, planes were stripped to a bare minimum to accommodate an internal fuel tank which supplemented the large wing tanks. This provided a maximum of fourteen hours aloft which provided sufficient fuel for ten to thirteen-hour flights and enough to fly to an alternate landing site in case of adverse weather or an emergency.

The Volpar was rated at a gross weight of 10,460 pounds. Since the excess fuel greatly exceeded this sum, the Company applied to the FAA for a ferry type approval of up to 12,490 pounds. After Berl King and Steve Stevens conducted check rides with an FAA

representative to verify safety, special overweight takeoffs were granted, primarily because no high weight landings were anticipated. The aircraft struggled into the air, requiring the entire Savannakhet runway and then some. After experiencing this excitement, boredom usually followed. This could be tempered by dialing the Voice of America from Manila on the low frequency radio or everyone airborne listening to "Dirty George" relate raunchy jokes "in the clear."

Because the orbiting altitude was 10,000 to 26,000 feet to allow adequate radio coverage and avoid enemy gunfire, a sixteen-hour supply of low-pressure oxygen was carried. Oxygen masks were a necessity for most flights because the 600-gallon internal fuel bladder leaked and toxic fumes often permeated the cabin section. Worn by all pilots, oxygen masks were not individual form fitting ones, therefore, not very good. Steve Stevens had to cover a gash on the bridge of his nose with Band-Aids to cover the abrasions caused by the ill-fitting device.

Nearly all Volpar flying was conducted at night. Therefore, to ensure crew rest, Air America rented a two-story hostel at Savannakhet. Crews slept in air-conditioned blacked out rooms during the day. Chief cook, Mister Lee, provided adequate food to keep the men going. Charlie Griffin was designated Station

Manager. <sup>12</sup> Jim Rhyne ran the program from Udorn, but "Lucky" Waller, then Clyde Morehouse, were principals in charge of onsite crew scheduling. Mechanic Stan Wilson was reassigned from Udorn to Savannakhet in April to oversee Volpar maintenance and ensure aircraft readiness.

Because HASP was considered a Special Project and an unknown quantity, pilots were compensated above the normal hazard and base pay. Despite this, because of the hardships endured, many pilots considered the HASP Volpar program a miserable experience. Disaffected, several opted out of HASP as soon as they could. An alternative was a transfer to the photo reconnaissance Volpar, 42Z or short lived On Mark B-26 Marksman program. Administered by Jim Rhyne, the program was staffed and flown by Frank Bonasinga, Berl King, Bob Main, Lucky Waller, Steve Stevens, and other pilots.

Although really preordained because of my lack of credentials, I had made a good decision to remain in the H-34 program, something I knew and enjoyed. Also, the Bell program was just beginning.

---

<sup>12</sup> Charlie Griffin liked to wear walking shorts and had worked for "Brad" Bradburn in Hong Kong at the Peninsula Hotel. I occasionally met Charlie wandering around the Star Ferry district on my Hong Kong trips.

## **FRANK BONASINGA**

Frank joined Air America during July 1965. After attending ground school in Bangkok, he was assigned to Saigon. Because of his considerable SNB (affectionately called "the secret Navy bomber") flying time in the U.S. Navy, he quickly checked out in the twin Beechcraft ten-two, a modified C-45.

When the Ten-Two Garrett turboprop engine and tricycle landing gear conversion was released for flight and designated the Volpar, the aircraft, Frank, Lucky Waller, and Paul Broussard were dispatched to Tainan toward the end of June 1966 for an abbreviated transition by Chief Pilot, R. Hansen. Then Frank returned to Saigon, where he flew the VTB-18 on countrywide missions.

On 4 March 1967, Bonasinga was tapped to journey to the Tainan facility to help train co-pilots for the prospective HASP program, a project which he knew nothing about at the time. Over a two-week period, he trained twelve individuals, including two former H-34 pilots, Steve Stevens and Bobby Nunez.<sup>13</sup>

Because of the unexpected BOA accident and the contract reversion to Air America, there was a rush to locate VTBs to Udorn. Therefore, Frank and Matt Hoff were scheduled to ferry 9577Z from Tainan to Tango-08.

---

<sup>13</sup> H-34 Captain Sam Jordon later switched to the Volpar program.

After parking, Frank encountered Jim Rhyne on the ramp and, without actually knowing what HASP entailed, but definitely wanting a change from Saigon, commented that he would like to join the program.

Frank was slated to return to Saigon the following morning. He dropped his gear in the pilot transit room and walked to the Rendezvous Club for a beer and then dinner. While relaxing, Rhyne arrived and tapped him on the shoulder saying, "*You are mine.*" Within minutes, Jim had managed to have Bonasinga transferred to HASP.

From 17 March through 30 July, Frank flew thirty-nine HASP missions; four of these were of fourteen-hour duration. Over grossed with fuel, after departing Savannakhet, he would ascend toward 10,000 feet. Radar vectors from Nakhon Phanom controllers directed him to the evening orbit point. After burning off fuel, particularly during all night missions, he cruised or climbed to altitudes that approached 20,000 feet to avoid ground fire and conserve fuel.

A cockpit crew was always aware when a team was sending information. When a ground team activated the transmit button on the HARK-1 device signaling the electronic receiving and relay equipment onboard the Volpar, a musical jingle could be clearly heard through crew headsets. It sounded much like the children's rhyme, "*A hunting we will go, a hunting we will go; heigh ho the dairy-o, a hunting we will go.*" Depending



Frank Bonasinga enjoying a moment of leisure in the Udorn office.

Knight Collection.

on the length and number of messages transmitted, the refrain was repeated. Most of the time during the night there was substantial traffic.

There was no autopilot installed in the Volpar and no cockpit pressurization available. Therefore, crews swapped cockpit duties to relieve incipient fatigue.

Owing to high altitudes flown, it became very cold, so lacking a heater, crews employed blankets to remain warm. During heavy rain storms, water penetrated the ill-fitting and un-repairable windscreens, resulting in soaked crews.

On some nights fireworks along the Trails were spectacular, with AAA fire stroking the night sky, probing toward the A-26 Nimrods attacking the Trails. Many aircraft failed to return to Nakhon Phanom. During this phase of the HASP program, to his knowledge, Frank and his number two were not fired upon, for the radar controllers and altitudes flown kept them out of the shot pattern.

Frank did experience one hairy incident while in the program. Lima-39 exhausted all turbine fuel late one afternoon and called Udorn. Therefore, Pete Parker and Jim Rhyne went looking for a pilot to ferry a full load of fuel to the station. Frank, the only person available, had been drinking in the Club bar. Nevertheless, breaking a cardinal Company rule, he was tapped for the mission. In admittedly Frank's most



Two story concrete Air America hostel at Savannakhet. Originally rented in early 1967 for the HASP Volpar program, it was also utilized to house overnight helicopter crews performing "normal" work and road watch team missions.

Author Collection



difficult flight during forty years of flying, he and Bobby Nunez, who was deadheading to Lima-39, departed Udorn in a VTB 64 Charlie model.

Departure from the Udorn 10,000-foot airstrip proved no problem. However, he was well aware that landing at two tons over maximum allowable gross weight on just half the runway he just departed would constitute a problem with speed and landing gear. Although Air America possessed an FAA waiver for overweight takeoffs specifically for the HASP program, there was no similar waiver for landings. However, this flight was designated an emergency.

Employing his best short field landing technique, the first attempt to land resulted in a go around. With about a one-inch center of gravity margin of error with which to contend, Frank began a second approach to the short runway. This time he carried about twenty knots more airspeed than a normal approach. At that higher speed, he was concerned that while applying brakes and using the reverse feature of the propeller system the aircraft might nose down causing the prop tips to contact the runway. The technique was successful and the pilots managed to keep 64C on the strip and stopped the rollout at the end of the runway.

Upon return to Udorn the following day, while describing the tense landing, Frank insisted that Rhyne or Parker never ask him to do anything similar again.

He was never asked again. <sup>14</sup>

## **PAKSE**

Two days after the enemy attack on Nam Bac, I flew to Pakse in Hotel-37. Accompanying me was "Willy" Parker, a well-liked newly hired Flight Mechanic. The tall, thin Negro was unique in that he was the first individual of his race during my tenure to crew the H-34 since John "Scotty" Scott opted to perform ground maintenance duties. Parker, a terrific person and good Flight Mechanic, with time off for recovery from an accident, lived and worked in Udorn for six years.

Working RO, USAID, and 713 contracts for five days, I struggled through smoke and haze, logging instrument flight up to half the time. There was a 400-watt non-directional beacon (214 PS) located off the

---

### <sup>14</sup> Segment Sources:

Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 216-217.

Memorandum Earl Wheeler to Secretary of Defense McNamara, Prairie Fire-Phase-3, 06/17/67.

Ken Conboy, 146-147.

John L. Plaster, *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997) 80-81, 84-85, 87.

Bill Leary, 1967 Notes-Bonasinga and Wilson Recollections.

Steve Stevens Email, 12/08/98.

Frank Bonasinga Interview with Steven Maxner, Texas Tech University, 04/16/01.

Frank Bonasinga Letter to Doctor Larry Sall, McDermott Library, University of Texas, 07/28/86.

Frank Bonasinga Emails, 07/07/10 (2), 07/08/10, 07/09/10, 07/22/10.

Ted Shackley, 150-151.

northwestern end of Runway-32. I dialed in the frequency on the ADF navigational set and often used it. At the altitude we flew, it was only useful within a few miles of the strip. One had to exercise caution for the bogus NDB in Cambodia was purportedly still in operation. If one was inattentive in the cockpit, this might be a factor in returning from Saravane. Other than the one electronic aid, the wide Mekong River was available for orientation. Even if the visibility was reduced to minimum, the muddy river could be seen looking straight down.

When working for AID, RONs were spent either at the USAID house or the Chinese Hotel. Both were predicated on space available. I liked the AID house because it was clean and provided a hearty breakfast of scrambled eggs and sausages that I slathered with Chinese Pearl River soy sauce.

Flying time during the RON was not consistent, varying from four and a half to over ten hours.

Slow periods provided an excellent opportunity to stroll around Pakse Town's business district and compare tax free prices with goods available in Udorn. I had bought relatively inexpensive items like an alarm clock before. As always, booze continued to be a raging bargain.

Around the noon hour, just before siesta time, another pilot and I strolled east to the local opium

parlor on the right side of the street beyond Henri's drink shop. I had previously heard about this place, and was curious as to its clientele and status. Opium dens were legal in Laos and supposedly licensed by the government. The dingy, wooden shop was unspectacular, much like other business establishments lining the avenue. Except for one item-it was very dark inside. A raised platform, surrounded by a slatted barrier, stood toward the back wall. Within the enclosure sat an emaciated, dissipated old man, looking much like a Chinese rosewood carving of the same description that I purchased years before in Hong Kong.

Before long, a short Lao dressed in casual civilian clothes entered. He reminded me of a typical civil servant. After he proffered a small amount of kip to the shop owner, the old boy began to prepare the pipe. He expertly placed a small amount of a brownish-blackish material on a spoon and proceeded to heat the substance over an alcohol lamp. Just before bubbling, he transferred the cooked opium to the bowl of a long-stemmed pipe. Then he lighted it, took a draw, and passed the device to the patron. What happened next was nothing like I had seen in the movies. The customer simply took two quick puffs and departed the shop to enjoy his two-hour nap. I suppose the presence of us Westerners and the preparation and ingestion of a small amount of the drugged smoke excited the old man.

Obviously, a long-time addict, he commenced to fashion another pipe for himself. It was fascinating to watch. Before long, he lay down on a mat and drifted off into dreamland. With the show over, and somewhat wiser as to adverse effects of the narcotic, we discretely departed the shop.

Fixed wing pilot "Uncle" Milt Olsen visited a den in Vientiane one time. He and another Bird and Son pilot tried a pipe. Milt became sick and heaved mightily; the other man loved his fix. <sup>15</sup>

On Saturday the eighteenth, we departed for Tango-08 in timed out Hotel-15.

Following a test flight at the Air America facility, Mike Jarina and "Rusty" Irons replaced us in Hotel-12. It was a short day in the field. Continuing Plateau work, he was directed to the Nung site at Ban Nam Tieng and then Attopeu to pick up Doug Swanson, who had business at Kong Mi. After returning Doug to Site-10, Mike climbed to PS-26 on the Plateau rim, three miles south of LS-166, a point overlooking Attopeu. From there he returned to Lima-11 to RON.

The next day was active, encompassing sixteen landings. He began by journeying to Phou Lat Sua twenty miles northwest of Pakse and located in the hills adjoining the Mekong. Developed in late 1965,

---

<sup>15</sup> EW Knight Email, 08/08/00.

first as a WAPI ADC training base, and then as a failed Thai road watch experiment, after improvement PS-18 was later numbered LS-418. Following the mid-January attack on PS-22, to avoid further hostilities, American Case Officers and Thai advisors relocated to PS-22.

After returning to Pakse for fuel, Jarina headed for Kong Mi to work. In what would become standard fare for the hard charging former Special Forces man, Swanson was ready with an early road watch mission: single pilot with no escort planes. The pilot was provided coordinates in a hilly area thirteen miles west, with instructions to find a satisfactory spot to offload troops. After landing, he had his Flight Mechanic direct the troops north to intersect a trail that wound toward the western portion of a relatively new east-west portion of Route-110, a portion of the so-called Prince Norodom Sihanouk Trail, still largely undeveloped and under construction. <sup>16</sup>

Depending on successful interdiction, constantly in flux, the enemy logistical road system was modified over time in order to continue moving supplies even in wet weather. This segment was part of a multi-country logistic trail which stretched from the "neutral" Sihanoukville Port in lower Cambodia on Highway-97, and penetrated the Lao border near an imaginary junction of

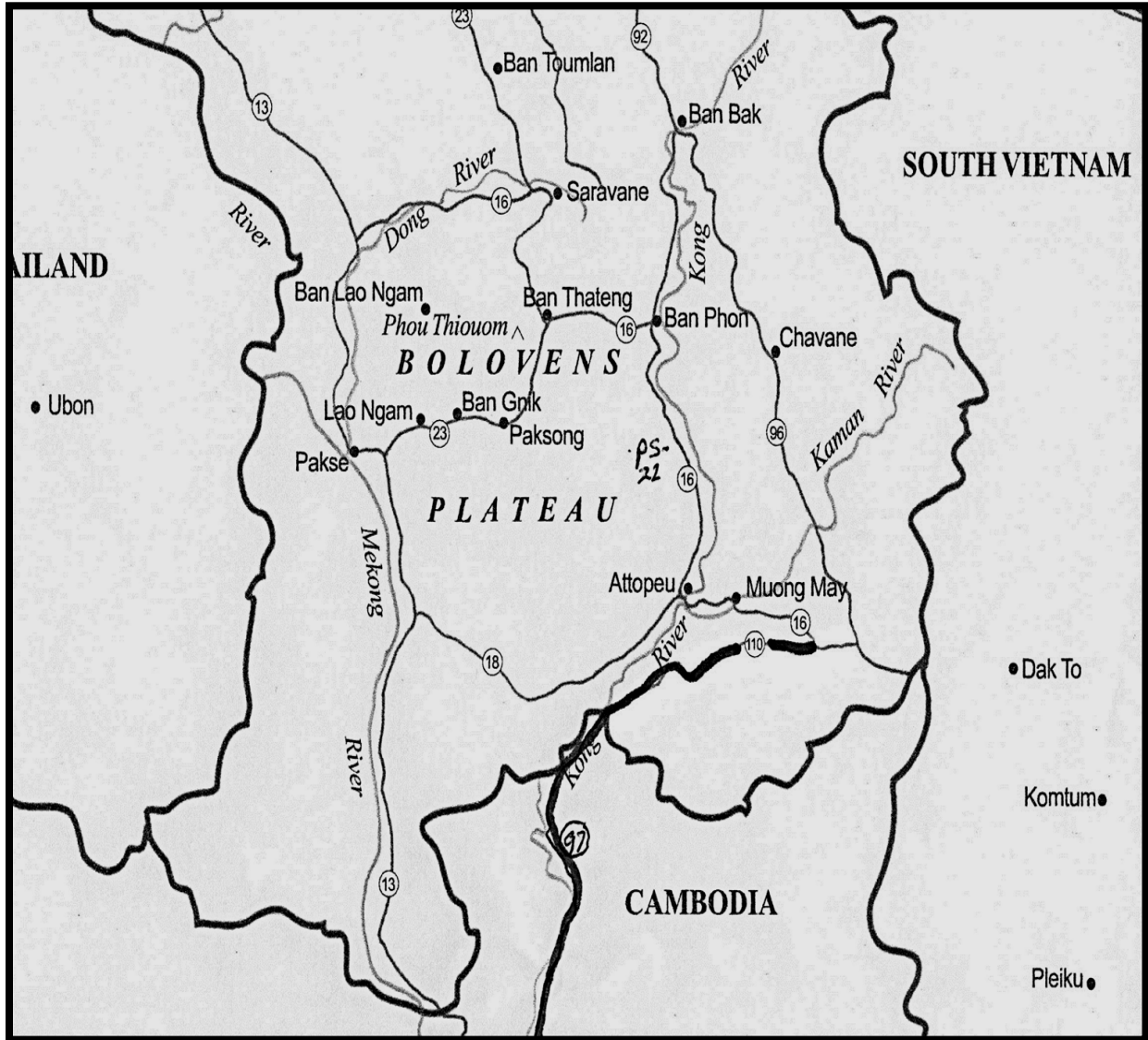
---

<sup>16</sup> Sihanouk Trail: A term believed originally named for the Cambodian leader, by then RLAF Commander Thao Ma.

the two countries. From there, generally paralleling the Se Kong for twelve miles, the largely concealed artery followed foothills east for almost twenty-four air miles before turning north across flatland, joining the Route-16 artery leading to MOUNG MAY and ATTOPEU, and continuing north into the mountains to connect with northern Route-96.

Assuming the same identity southeast for about ten miles, the roads diverged and thrust toward upper northeastern Cambodia and a relatively narrow twelve-mile finger separating Laos from South Vietnam where supplies could be funneled into the Central Highlands around Dak To, CENTUM, and PLEIKU. The trail system employed an added feature in that the Se Kong, and its counterpart Cambodian waterway that adjoined the trail, served as an alternate delivery system during the peak of the rainy season. Depending on the often-changing Rules of Engagement (ROE), SOG teams probed much of this region, generally within twenty miles of the border so as not to overlap or interfere with SOG, our missions centered mostly on Routes-96 and 110.

Not all missions were designed as a several mile walk. For various reasons like carrying heavy mines, cratering shaped charge devices, or a lightning in and out strike, some missions were tailored for infiltrations adjacent to, or directly on the road.



Map of lower Military Region Three and Military Region Four displaying the enemy road systems used to transport supplies to the South Vietnamese highlands. The lower portion depicts west-east flowing Route-110, and the west connection with Route-97 at the Lao-Cambodian border and the east link with Route-96 east of the Bolovens Plateau.

Modified from the Wikipedia Internet site.



Sometimes a mission might inadvertently place a team in harm's way and require immediate evacuation.

Before parts of Route-110 were defoliated, Jarina delivered troops to coordinates Doug proffered. Always well within denied areas, he told his Flight Mechanic not to waste any time unloading. During one infil, the Flight Mechanic pointed and said, *"Take a look back there, Mike."* Mike turned and observed a bamboo matting road in a green area concealed under the trees. Aware that this finding could spell trouble, they departed in a hurry.

After the Trail had been defoliated, it was described as looking like a cow path from the air. On one extraction Mike was searching for a team supposed to display an India signal. Finally, he spied something on the ground that appeared like a white "I". However, no one was in sight. Upon landing, he discovered the "signal" was only an expended flare parachute previously dropped by a USAF recon plane. Returning to PS-7, he told Doug what had transpired and that he had not been able to locate the team. Doug's reaction was, *"What, you landed on the Trail?"*

## **SPECIAL OPERATING GROUP**

With more liberal rules of engagement (ROE) for cross border operations established, an ambitious and aggressive SOG operation took place around 20 March. A

company of mixed ethnic South Vietnamese, advised by three Americans per platoon, was inserted by U.S. helicopters south of the Route-96-110 junction. The goal was to hold and block the road for as long as possible. The target was located in Laos about thirty-two air miles northeast of Kong Mi.

As the area was heavily saturated with Vietnamese forces, the unit was soon attacked and suffered heavy losses. At the same time that numerous casualties were being extracted, a fresh SOG company was inserted. Suffering an identical fate as the first, yet another company-sized unit was introduced to the junction. Consequently, over the twelve-day period, in turn, each company was badly mauled. On the final day of the month, during an emergency exfil, a Huey was downed. It had been a costly, bittersweet operation. Although the junction was interdicted for many days, the excessive casualties were not acceptable to MACV.

By 23 March, corroborating reports from SOG and Agency-sponsored SGU road watch units provided ample evidence that logistical activity along Route-110 was on the increase since the January air pasting. Therefore, based on this information obtained at a high cost, hoping to decimate enemy concentrations, for the next twelve days, USAF planes interdicted the road.

## **THE DEMISE OF THE WAPI PROJECT**

During 1963 and 1964, Pathet Lao units were busy probing the Sedone Valley near Pakse and establishing a foothold on the Bolovens Plateau. <sup>17</sup> Therefore, to counter and eliminate enemy presence in the region, a pacification program called WAPI (also known as the Sedone Valley Project), an acronym for the large province involved, was conceived, planned, and implemented by the Lao Embassy Country Team, and supported by FAR Military Region Four Commander Phasouk Somly. Representing a rare joint effort including the Agency, USIS, and FAR, regular screening forces were organized, self-defense units trained and armed, economic and social programs begun, and a political program of improving local leadership and government commitment carried out.

For two and a half years the Sedone Valley Project appeared to progress satisfactorily. Reaching a peak in 1967, in a program that encompassed parts of three provinces and nearly two thirds of the estimated population. Along with platoons of full-time irregulars (SGU), local militia units were trained. Roads and wells were built, schools erected, vegetable gardens developed, and irrigation improved. Minor enemy

---

<sup>17</sup> Since I had been flying in Laos, except for occasional periods, the entire area, especially the western Plateau foothills, was considered potentially hostile Pathet Lao territory, and we generally overflew it at altitude.

harassment continued, but largely because of villager loyalty to the RLG, failed to influence or adversely affect the overall program.

However, many WAPI achievements came to a screeching halt in 1967 when COS Ted Shackley elected to withdraw Agency support. Mainly, the higher priority accorded the Lao-South Vietnam logistical corridor and developing trail watch programs took precedence over WAPI, and required the Agency to redirect scarce resources. Therefore, as a result of the reduction and elimination of enemy threats on the Plateau, much of Sedone Province, and requirements for SGU road watch team recruitment, a decision was made at COS and ambassadorial level to demobilize the self-defense forces and transfer SGU forces to other duties.

AID personnel involved in WAPI believed such a move was premature, hasty, and represented a withdrawal from a long-term commitment; Agency withdrawal of support could have been somewhat ameliorated by more careful planning and a more gradual execution.

Shortly afterward, enemy forces attacked Lao Ngam and forced the remaining FAR from the area. In like manner, area villagers who supported the government suffered.

Since the Boloven Plateau was becoming increasingly important as an Agency training ground for special guerrilla unit and road watch personnel, more emphasis

was accorded to securing exposed flanks of the Plateau. Therefore, during mid-January two large units of General Phasouk's forces began moving on Ban Lao Ngam, a site located in the Plateau's northwest foothills on Route-231 that emanated as a trail from lower Route-23 to Saravane.

Outnumbered, scattered enemy units did little to resist the FAR advance, and Lao Ngam was again folded into a government-controlled site. Within two months, FAR units were replaced by two new FAN units flown in from Moung Soui. By April the units began conducting area clearing operations. However, the enemy was not finished attempting to restore their historical control, and hostilities continued for months.

Although bolstering efforts against communist movement to South Vietnam on the Trail system, stripping WAPI Province of a tenable defense ability and enemy aggressiveness would produce adverse future effects on the region. A security program was continued on a much smaller scale, but nothing like the original WAPI program was attempted again. Consequently, rural security on the lowlands was performed by police and FAR.

On the twentieth, Mike and Rusty spent much of the day working around Thateng (LS-210), a small town located nine miles north of Paksong (L-05) on Route-23, a mostly paved Pakse to Saravane road that wound over

the Plateau. Thateng was deemed a strategic position, for the area provided yet another way for the enemy to access the Plateau. Since Route-16 tied into Route-23 from the east, several elevated PS sites ringed the site and were staffed with recently trained SGU troops. Some sites were completed; others were in the process of development as observation posts. Flying more than two dozen landings and takeoffs, Mike serviced Ban Tayum (PS-28), five miles north of Paksong on the east side of Route-23; PS-29 on the southern portion of Phou Kate; Ban Paleng Nua (PS-31), on the north side of a ridge west of Site-210 and overlooking the Lao Ngam area. A site located on Route-16 eight miles east of Thateng was reinforced. This position acted as a listening post and buffer from enemy incursion from the Se Long Valley.

After returning to Pakse for fuel, he was dispatched to LS-166 and then to Houei Kong.

On Tuesday, the crew of Hotel-12 was assigned to shuttle troops to Houei Kong. From there, Mike flew northerly across the Plateau to Senammana, seventeen miles north of Saravane, in the hills overlooking Ban Padou (later listed as Site-419). After returning to Lima-44, he went to Phou Pha, an original PS-10 site twelve miles northeast of Saravane and north of Ban

Nong Boua (LS-134). <sup>18</sup> Mike's day was not finished, for upon returning to L-11, he was directed to the PS-18 training site on the river and then to PS-17, the radio relay site on Phou Batiene east of Pakse.

Jarina's most active day was on Wednesday when, flying late, he made thirty-six landings. From Ban Nong Boua east of Saravane, he shuttled men and goods to PS sites like Senammana (PS-19) located at the east end of the Toumlan Valley and Phou Kate, <sup>19</sup> the 5,200 USAF TACAN site a few miles southeast of Lima-44. Defensive units were staged at various locations along the rim. A stop at Thateng and a roundtrip from Pakse to Phou Kate to replace American technicians with fresh personnel ended at dark.

On the final day of his Pakse assignment, Mike returned to work Thateng and PS sites north of Saravane. He was joined by CPH Wayne Knight and John Grassi, who was in the proverbial barrel for a route check. During a very long day, they continued Phou Kate shuttles during which John did not share his self-expressed "expertise" in autorotating from the mountain top to Saravane. Later, both helicopter crews departed

---

<sup>18</sup> PS-10 was where UH-34D Captain Dick Lieberth, Flight Mechanic Smith, and the two Mike Case Officers bought the farm in late 1965.

<sup>19</sup> PS-21, also seen listed as Phou Ka Te. Phou Kate will be used.

for Savannakhet to conduct a late afternoon mission out of Thakhet. Mike recovered at Udorn well after dark.

## **MILITARY REGION-2**

With a couple of days off, Mike and Flight Mechanic Bruce were scheduled to fly in Military Region Two. After stops at Wattay Airport and Sam Tong, they were directed to Na Khang to fulfill 713 missions. Conducting local work around Site-36, they moved north toward the border to Phu Pha Thi and Houei Kha Moun (LS-111). Logging nine hours and forty-five minutes and twenty-six landings, Mike RON at Site-20.

On the 26th, Jarina worked locally west and south for USAID. Missions mostly involved ferrying and supplying refugees. He went west to a site five miles north-northeast of Phou Fa; <sup>20</sup> then south of Sam Tong to Houei Nam Ou (LS-224), three miles south of Ban Nam Mo, where vision-impaired Billy Pearson had hit a stump and the site became known to "old timers" as "Pearson's Pad." New refugee villages were constantly developing in the Sam Tong-Long Tieng area. Other trips took him south to Moung Sao (later numbered 319) that was located nine miles southwest of Moung Phun (LS-37), an old site located on the high ground overlooking the Nam Ngum. Another AID trip was scheduled to an unnumbered

---

<sup>20</sup> LS-16, also called Agony by fixed wing pilots.



site seven mile north of Mounng Sao. After flying almost two fuel loads, Mike was relieved. He deadheaded south on PCS to Wattay Airport, and from there to Udorn on Caribou 851.

Next to the last day of March, since Mike was scheduled for STO and was planning to dive at Pattaya, Wayne arranged to have him ferry 48803 to Tom Moher in Bangkok. Just out of maintenance, the Jansky and Bailey ship checked out in an airworthy condition and Mike launched. As he had done during the period when he had filled in for Tom and flown the road recon in the northeast, he stopped at Korat for fuel as the J&B contract allowed.

Up to that point, the trip had been uneventful, but that quickly changed. Shortly after departing Korat, the copper safety wire on the side window broke. Vibrating badly, the unit popped off the tracks, and glided toward the ground. Since the part was not easily replaced, Mike circled and followed the Plexiglas unit to the ground, where Bob Bedell retrieved it. Then, deciding to save the Customer money, he elected to take a short cut across the mountains instead of following the Friendship Highway. However, his good intentions came to naught. Encountering a thunderstorm, he was forced to back track to the road and follow this to Don Muang. Because of the detours, the trip required a little longer than normal. Since the flight was charged

to the J&B contract, despite claiming that he had experienced weather, the people were not happy. <sup>21</sup>

### **THE FIRST BELL ARRIVES IN UDORN**

Not long after Air America began using Bell helicopter equipment in Saigon, USAID contracts were signed for Thailand operations. In order to service contracts in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Air America leased two Bell 204Bs in April 1966. Each aircraft mounted the Lycoming T-53 dash 1100A model turboshaft engine, capable of developing 1100 shaft horsepower. A civilian version of the military UH-1B Iroquois, the 242-gallon fuel capacity allowed an approximate, and a largely unrealistic, three-hour endurance and 300 nautical mile range at ninety knots. <sup>22</sup> This version contrasted with the Saigon-employed X-ray series manufactured under Bell Helicopter license by Japanese based Kawasaki Heavy Industries. These models possessed smaller fuel tanks and an endurance of only one hour and forty-five minutes. The civilian 204s Air America received

---

<sup>21</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 198.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 145, 170-173.

EW Knight Email, 08/05/00.

CIA Memorandum to the President (most of the information derived from Bill Colby), 07/31/67.

Douglas Blaufarb, *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos 1962-1970*, Rand Studies, 39-40.

Langer, 9.

Ken Conboy, 171.

<sup>22</sup> Such endurance connoted few high-power demands.

contrasted from regular 204s in that the tail boom was extended to accommodate a forty-eight-foot rotor system. The passenger configuration accommodated nine souls and crew.

One aircraft, N1196W, was assigned to Bangkok; another, N8539F, to the Chiang Mai station where Jack Barnheisel worked alongside Jack Kemp. Operations commenced on or about 21 April.

During March 1967, 204B, 39F was "temporarily" assigned to Udorn for pilot transition training, Customer familiarization, and overall field evaluation. After Bell 204B ground school requirements were satisfied, flight training commenced.<sup>23</sup>

Since "Robbie" Robertson, a former Vietnam Huey gunship pilot, had the most turbine engine time logged and was relatively current and proficient in type, he was the de facto choice to serve as the fledgling program's unpaid Bell program instructor pilot. After Robertson, former USAF pilot Dick Elder, with previous HH-43 turbine experience, became one of the first H-34 pilots to transition. Transfer to the new program was voluntary and generally depended on seniority, interest, previous turbine engine experience, and availability, but not necessarily in that order. However, training became catch as catch can when a

---

<sup>23</sup> The Author attended a two-day Bell session with ground school instructor Drexel Morgan in Bangkok.

helicopter was available, usually out of a maintenance inspection. Furthermore, until additional Bells became available, pilots continued to fly the H-34 and the Bell when scheduled.

Most former Marine pilots in my age group possessed no previous turbine engine experience. We did, however, fly the HTL-6 (bubble-nosed reciprocating engine Bell), a U.S. Navy version of the commercial Bell 47 helicopter in training. This initial helicopter training was only about ten hours and was conducted many years before. Scratch Kanach had logged about 200 hours in the Bell during his Army service. I assume Ed Reid did the same. Phil Goddard, who was moving into management duties, checked out early.<sup>24</sup>

My first exposure to the machine occurred during a training flight west from New River in 1961, when we stopped at an Army base for fuel. A friendly safety officer took us in tow and explained some problems with the HU-1A Huey dash 9 engine. He also pulled out a file drawer full of accident reports in his office involving failures or malfunctions of the tail rotor system. He was not overly enthusiastic regarding the first military production models.

---

<sup>24</sup> Because of management's first considerations and pilot seniority, I had to wait, and did not begin Bell checkout until early July.

My next encounter with the HU-1A occurred on Okinawa. Simmons Army airfield, outfitted with early model Hueys, was located not far from our Futema base. Through some exchange of inter-service goodwill and work in the Northern Training Area (NTA), we were invited to fly familiarization flights in their machines. Recalling the safety officer's derision for the machines, I never took advantage of the offer.

Early Bell checkouts in Udorn were casual, necessarily brief, and relied mostly on upcountry on-the-job-training (OJT). Furthermore, upper management, until we proved differently, was dubious that we H-34 throttle twisters could transition and safely handle the machine without encountering serious problems.

After Bangkok ground school, on 19 March, Knight experienced his first local Bell training flight with "Robbie." As Chief Pilot Helicopters, Wayne normally became involved in new helicopter programs ASAP. Although his checkout proceeded sporadically and was not representative of later training, he did not find any difficulty with the transition. In retrospect, he believed it would have been a more efficient process had he remained away from the office and other work, and only concentrated on learning how to fly the new aircraft. Later, when additional Bells were available and checkouts concentrated, transitions normally required a week or so.

Wayne's first upcountry Bell fam flight in Military Region Two occurred on the 26th with Dick Elder, who had been checked out in the machine earlier. Also likely satisfying a loosely followed route check requirement, during a day that encompassed more than ten hours and some logged instrument time, they left Udorn for Sam Tong, refueled, and went north to Moung Heim. After completing Customer requirements there, they moved east to Na Khang. From there they were directed to Meo sites Nhot Phat (LS-179), ten miles north of abandoned Hua Moung and Pha Hang (LS-205), six miles northeast of Site-179. After working sites around Phu Pha Thi, they returned to Site-36 and then Site-20, to RON at the Air America hostel.

The following morning, Wayne joined Mick Prulhiere to administer a route check in Hotel-36. Popping over Skyline Drive into The Alternate, they were loaded for a trip northeast to San Tiau (LS-02) and south of the Ban Ban Valley. This accomplished, the Long Tieng air operations sent them north to Na Khang. They arrived at Moung Son (L-59), where Knight joined Elder in 39-Foxtrot to continue his Huey transition. On the way to LS-36 there was a stop at Pha Bong (LS-76), seven miles south-southeast of Lima-59. After one trip east to Houei Thom (LS-27), Wayne deadheaded home.

Elder, one of the designated public relations men tasked to sell the Huey program, continued to fly 39F

upcountry into April and demonstrate the Huey's capabilities to various Customers.

At first, lacking proper tools, technical knowledge, and expertise in the Bell, the Udorn Maintenance Department was not equipped to perform major 204B inspections or anything but minor repairs. Therefore, when hundred-hour inspections were due, Dick delivered the machine to the Chiang Mai base where Abe Rivero and his crew satisfied the specified Bell work.<sup>25</sup>

## **UDORN**

A letter delivered through the military APO system from Dad awaited me in the Air America mail room. Apparently, information regarding many phases of the Lao war was being reported in the news media:

*"...The papers over here have finally revealed the information of our Thai bases and stated we have been using them for the past two years. Mentioned the Air Commando squadron stationed at Nakhon Phanom, or some such name. They also told about the Air America operations. Some secret when the whole world knows..."*

---

<sup>25</sup> Joe Leeker, The Aircraft of Air America, Bell 204B, N8539F, N1196W.

EW Knight Emails, 08/05/00, 08/08/00, 08/11/00, 04/30/01.

Knight March 67 Flight Logs, 08/24/00, 08/26/00, 09/01/00.

Dick Elder Phone Call, 07/30/10.

Brian Johnson Email.

My back was still bothering me, but I was resigned to the fact that it would take a long time for the damaged sciatic nerve to fully heal.

There was a little excitement one evening at dusk while Tuie was talking to Longmoun between the two bungalows. I was there also and observed a five-foot cobra slither close to or over her foot and into the small pond behind the house. She failed to react, so I assumed she did not see the reptile, else there would have been a fit of hysterics. She did see a baby cobra sunning itself on the front porch one afternoon. Beside using the pond for protection and food gathering, attracted by mice, I believed they lived in the crawl space under our house. We cleaned up the yard in order to see them and the Air America doctor advised that flowers of sulphur would tend to keep snakes away.

Tuie completed another AUA-sponsored English learning course. Always coddled by maids while growing up, she was never exposed to domestic duties; therefore, she was currently attending a cutting and sewing school.

Since Tuie enjoyed television so much while visiting the states, at her request, we purchased a nineteen-inch black and white Phillips television set in town from Song Serm's electrical store. For a baht equivalent of 240 dollars, the negotiated package included an installed towering external antenna. The



set only received one channel from Khon Kaen, and that reception was poor. Since I did not understand much spoken Thai, I rarely watched it. However, Tuie, the one or two maids working for us, a male and female cousin from Pattani, and Ricky enjoyed viewing it. Before long, likely prompted by what he observed watching television, Ricky was dancing, shaking his head and stomping his foot. This was especially the case when Tuie said go-go, watusi, or patty-cake. At one time during the month, not counting the mice and snake population, there were seven people in the small house.

Ricky was fussing from being spoiled by everyone or teething, and we all suffered from various respiratory ailments stemming from colds or allergies. It was a wonder we could breathe at all. Exacerbating the situation, the weather was hot and oppressive, and the smoke was terrible from tribals upcountry slash and burn techniques. It was all made worse by the increased vehicle traffic and Air Force jets spewing effluent from incomplete kerosene combustion into the air. Red dust thickly coated the roofs and only a heavy rain could temporarily alleviate the human misery index.

Our wish was granted on the 21st. During the early evening, following a local test and proficiency flight in Hotel-48, with Wayne Webb, the newly designated helicopter check pilot, to everyone's amazement, we

were blessed with a very heavy "Mango Rain."<sup>26</sup> The violent storm shook the tin roof, exhibiting all the aspects of a very good sound and light show. The rain measurably cooled the air for a short period, and washed away some of the nasty red dust.

My girl's bicycle had been wrecked by a former maid; therefore, my means of transportation was reduced to riding busses, Air America trucks, my thumb, or good old fashion walking. Because of the presence of large trucks and taxi drivers who never should have been issued a license on this planet, it was becoming increasingly difficult and dangerous to negotiate the streets of Udorn in a samlor, and with the rainy season not far off, we once again considered purchasing an automobile. However, this time the choice would not be some used junk proffered by a Udorn salesman of questionable ethics. Instead, I was leaning toward buying a new vehicle in Bangkok. If we effected a

---

<sup>26</sup> Hotel-48 was originally bailed from the U.S. Marine Corps in 1961 and designated Hotel Yankee. Afterward it was painted white and delivered to Vientiane as CIC-2 in order to service the Geneva Accords watchdog commission. The aircraft was downed by enemy fire in 1963. Following many requests, parts of the abandoned ship were returned to Air America during October 1966. With the essential data plate in hand, the maintenance rebuild department worked its magic. The helicopter was stripped to bare essentials, parts were added to the skeleton from the junk inventory, and the "new" product exited the barn in February to become part of our operational fleet of UH-34D aircraft.

purchase, then I considered remaining in Southeast Asia, at least until the Kuala Lumpur and Steamboat Springs projects were profitable.

### **THE HOT SEASON COMETH**

On the 28th, while carrying a load of eight passengers for Na Khang, the PIC of Hotel-36 experienced a power loss and crashed on takeoff from a friendly pad (FF, UH-3838) eight miles north-northeast of Moung Heim and two and a half miles east of Buam Vang (LS-242). The passengers and two crew members scrambled out of the aircraft before it rolled on its side and burned.

The following day Wayne Knight, Bob Peterson from ground maintenance, a regular Flight Mechanic, and I flew Hotel-39 to the crash site. The flight had several purposes: to satisfy the requirement for my six-month route check, for Wayne to investigate the accident, and for Bob to determine if anything was salvageable. I dropped them off at the site and worked local pads until late afternoon. Since smoke and haze still impacted the area, I was on the gages much of the time and logged four hours instrument time during the round trip that day. We recovered at the Air America facility a little after sunset. <sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Joe Leeker, Hotel-36.  
EW Knight Emails, 08/05/00, 08/08/00.

Either the Flight or the Maintenance Department issued a hot season memorandum annually to remind us (particularly new pilots) of the increased danger involved in upcountry helicopter operations from March through May. A week or so before the Hotel-36 crash, CJ Abadie distributed a memorandum dealing with H-34 problems engendered by seasonal conditions:

*"This period has historically proven to be bad news (a favorite Abadie phrase) for helicopter engines. High cylinder head temperatures (200-220 degrees), high engine oil temperatures (75-85 degrees), high carburetor air temperatures (40-50 degrees), and high outside air temperatures (OAT) in the afternoons. High cylinder head and engine oil temperatures make internal engine temperatures higher than normal and could be a causal factor in engine failures. High carburetor air temperatures result in less power developed and high OAT in the loss of blade efficiency-bad news.*

*Plan high altitude work for early morning and save short light shuttles for the afternoon. An attempt to educate Customers on the hot season problems is being made and your help is solicited.*

*Pilot fatigue is another factor during the long hot day. Reflexes and alertness is reduced in proportion to your degree of fatigue. Fatigue factor combined with a*

---

*poor responding helicopter and poor visibility could be fatal. Stop when you feel pooped."* <sup>28</sup>

The memorandum contained excellent information and provided a reminder of what to expect, but the last paragraph was a little surprising and unrealistic. When upcountry, most of us strived to accumulate as much flight time as possible; otherwise, we were destined to spend additional time in the field. At least the Flight Department, in a CYA scenario, could now claim dissemination of hot season information to flight crews, in anticipation of expected maintenance and pilot problems.

---

<sup>28</sup> CJ Abadie (PCO-UDN), Dry-Hot Season Operations, 03/14/67.

**H**aving thwarted FAR efforts to expand government influence and control areas east and west of Nam Bac, the Vietnamese military focused their attention on dry season offensive plans in Houa Phan and upper Xieng Khouang provinces. Major goals formulated in the North Vietnamese headquarters northwest military region late in 1966 continued to include elimination of FAR/Meo redoubts at Na Khang, Nong Khang, Phou Pha Thi, Pha Hang (LS-205), twelve miles northeast of Houa Moung (LS-58), Sam Son Hong (LS-201), eighteen miles east of Route-61 and nine miles southeast of LS-29, Phu Pha Louam (LS-210), east of Route-6 and sixteen miles east-southeast of Site-58, Phu Pha Lang, near the junction of Routes 641/64 and ten miles east of Routes-68/64. Also targeted was the old Momentum site at San Tiau (LS-02), south of Route-7 and the Ban Ban Valley. Some attacks on major sites had already been attempted and failed against the positions because of our valid, reliable, and timely intelligence, good leadership, confidence, and sufficient resources, particularly air support.

Success of all or a majority of these enemy objectives would have thwarted government forces from conducting aggressive activities to disrupt traffic on

important logistical arteries: Routes-7, 6, 61, 68 and 65, logistical arteries (LOCs) that funneled critical amounts of men and supplies from North Vietnam to combat units in Houa Phan (Sam Neua), Ban Ban, and farther south to the Plain of Jars. These gains were particularly important to accomplish before the rains began in earnest and Vang Pao traditionally began his wet season offensive to regain lost territory or expand control utilizing his air assets.

Helping Agency analysts to speculate regarding these yet unknown ambitious enemy plans for operations in upper MR-2, spies or road watch teams inside North Vietnam reported that from:

*"27 March through 4 April more than 820 trucks, or a daily average of 90, moved west on Route-7 at a point just inside North Vietnam [probably at the large storage facility of Moung Sen]. The daily average of westbound traffic on this route from the first of the year through 26 March reportedly was about 30.*

*There are truck parks and storage areas on Route-7 short of the Laos border where some of the observed trucks could stop...A small number of the trucks were reported carrying troops, but the remainder were apparently delivering supplies.*

*...The dry season in northern Laos is due to end in six or seven weeks, and the communists may be stockpiling for the rainy season. Existing communist*

*supply dumps may be running low-possibly because of losses resulting from air attacks. The possibility of a buildup for some communist operations before the rainy season cannot be ruled out..."*<sup>1</sup>

Adding to information regarding enemy movement in Laos, an Agency report relating to Route-7 traffic issued on 24 April stated:

*"Westbound traffic on Route-7 increased substantially during the past week. An average movement of some 20s truck a day was noted in the Ban Ban area-about double the number of westbound vehicles spotted during the first half of April. The communists may be moving in to Laos the supplies which apparently were stockpiled recently in sizeable quantities near the border inside North Vietnam. It is probably that they are getting set for the rainy season which begins soon, but the possibility that they are preparing for some intensive military action in the near future cannot be ruled out."*<sup>2</sup>

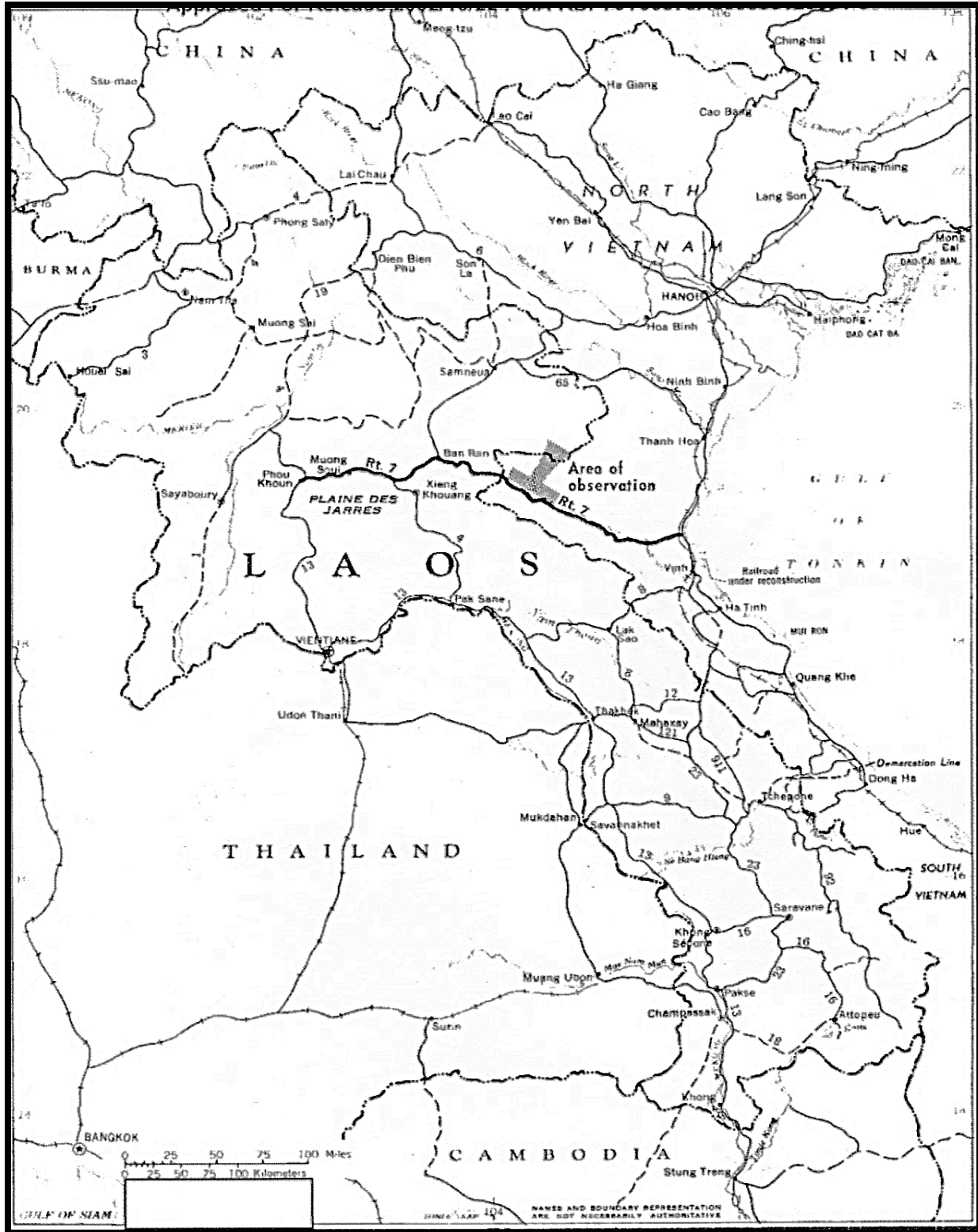
At the same time as enemy supply movement was increasing, unusual adverse weather conditions continued to plague General Vang Pao's dry season

---

<sup>1</sup> CIA Daily Bulletin, 04/06/67. Laos: A sudden and large increase in truck traffic in North Vietnam has been reported heading in the direction of the Plaine des Jarres, in northern Laos.

<sup>2</sup> CIA Daily Bulletin, 04/24/67. Laos.





Map showing Route-7 and the storage areas inside North Vietnam where a buildup of supplies was noted in early April.

CIA Map, 04/06/67.

defensive and offensive operations in upper Military Region Two that were calculated to keep the enemy off balance until the monsoons commenced and he could better employ helicopter-borne missions to regain lost territory. Although early April was fairly active by both enemy and friendly infantry units, some operations proved successful, while others failed. Because of a constant threat of air attack on troop concentrations, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army were generally forced to revert to concealed small unit tactics. This enhanced mobility, but no notable victories greatly influencing the war occurred during the spring of 1967. This was unusual in that annual enemy advances and territorial gains normally occurred during the dry season before rains inundated roads, precluding sufficient resupply of large unit actions.

To disrupt enemy plans and timetable, General Vang Pao was renowned for diversionary tactics and rapid movement of men using versatile H-34 helicopters. This methodology was more prevalent during the rainy season when ground mobility was at a low ebb, but with reports of enemy units forming for mischief in upper Military Region Two, he hoped to establish forward positions that could be held for the period of inclement weather when elements of the 316th North Vietnamese Army Division traditionally withdrew to the northwest region of North Vietnam to rest and refit.

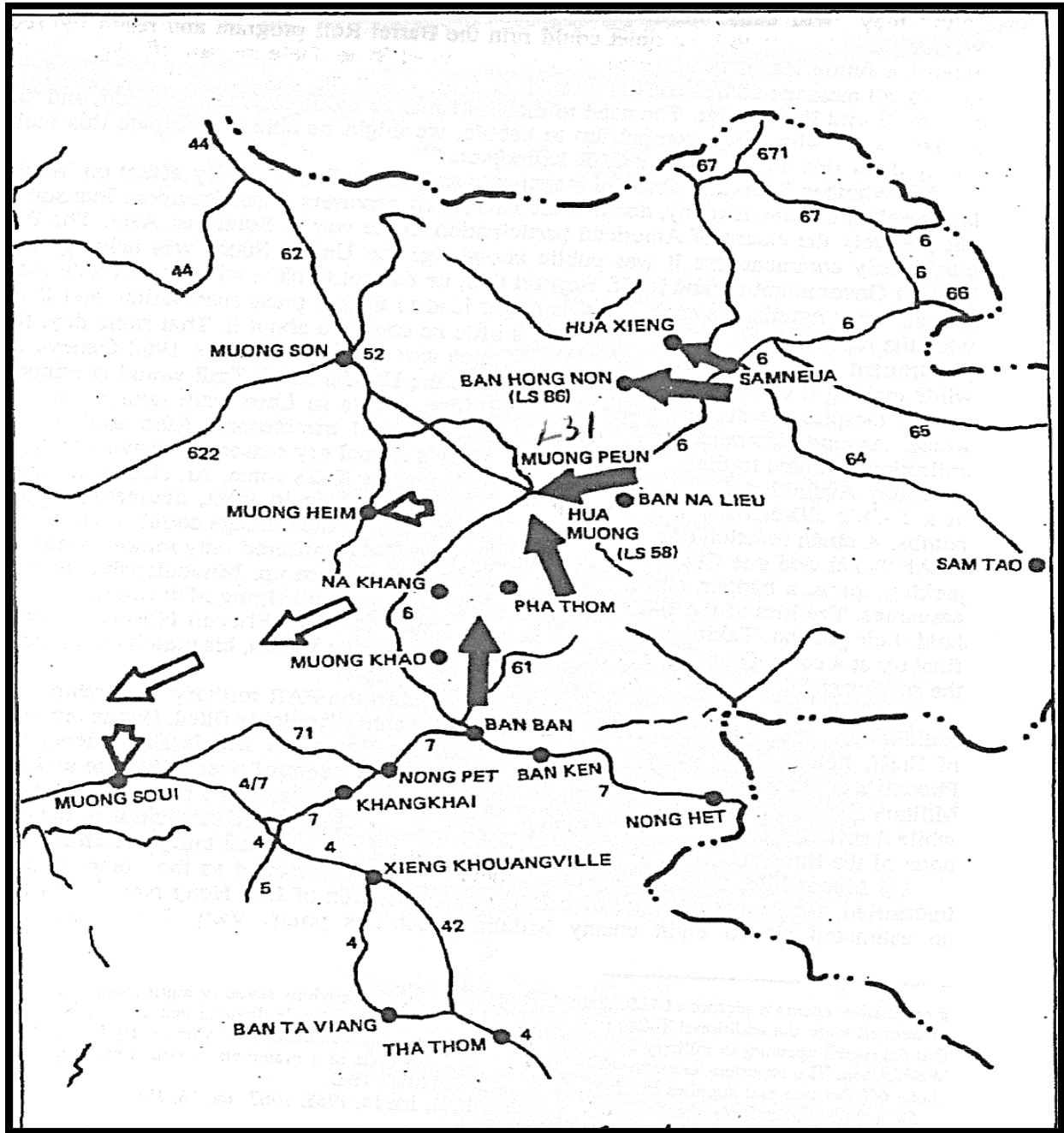
Friendly efforts to obtain a foothold on a high mountain close to Moung Peun (L-31) had begun during March. Moung Peun, located more than twenty miles north of Houa Moung, and tucked in an inverted "V" on Route-6, was fed by a northern trail and alternate Route-68 from Sam Neua. The site, with somewhat historical roots stemming from a battle conducted in the mid-1950s and its strategic location, swapped sides until finally coming under enemy control in recent years.

During mid-March, Vang Pao's initial bid to obtain a forward operating site to observe and harass Route-6 failed when the enemy counterattacked and forced the Meo off the hill. Undeterred by the setback, and motivated by the tactical use of airpower, two additional attempts to take Chik Mok Lok occurred toward the end of March. Both offensives were ultimately unsuccessful.

On Sunday 9 April, supported by twenty-two Skyraider and F-105 aircraft pre-strikes, Meo units fought their way to the top of their objective, a mountain overlooking Moung Peun. While the troops were shaping a hasty perimeter defense, enemy mortar crews began launching accurate rounds onto the position.<sup>3</sup> When air could no longer save the day and the Meo commander was wounded, the discouraged men swallowed

---

<sup>3</sup> As witnessed many times by the Author, enemy mortar crews were uncannily accurate and efficient in their delivery techniques.



Graphic showing road networks in Military Region Two and Mung Peun in relation to Sam Neua in Houa Phan Province.

their losses, withdrew, and the operation was terminated the following day.

Despite January setbacks in Houa Phan Province, Vietnamese leaders, unhappy with their Pathet Lao surrogate's inability to conduct successful assaults, assumed command and control of most major offences. Under pressure to perform before the rains began, they continued to maneuver units north of Sam Neua Town into jump-off points to challenge the tenacious defenders at Nong Khang. Under the cover of foul weather, and unimpeded by allied air that was unable to respond to the situation, a total of three NVA-PL battalions attacked LS-52 from three sides on the night of Monday, 3 April. Anticipating an offensive, the defenders repulsed several assaults, holding the position until Tuesday afternoon. By then, enemy casualties were estimated at 150. Finally, with ammunition largely expended and no resupply or air support forthcoming, the garrison withdrew to the southwest. However, cleverly designed enemy ambushes exacted a serious toll on BV-28 men, and of course, their morale. Once scattered, there was no attempt to rally and regroup the unit. Consequently, the government lost a battalion, and an important base north of Sam Neua that had served as an important launching point to harass and gather intelligence in the region. However, later events proved this enemy victory the only noteworthy

success during the spring dry season, far short of customary expectations.

Because of the danger of enemy forces moving next on Pha Thi, Na Khang, and other forward sites, Vang Pao ordered a seasoned Na Khang SGU battalion shuttled twenty-six miles east to Phou Pha Louom.<sup>4</sup> Calculated to reinforce his eastern flank and divert enemy attention away from the western units' operation to take Chik Mok Lok, the units' mission was to move north toward alternate Route-68, divert enemy attention, and assist the western group in a quasi-pincer action. However, although it did tie up enemy units that could have been employed against Na Khang, their opponents were not asleep, and over a two-month period attacked the unit several times during their route march. Over the same time period, calculated to cut the snake off at the head, multi-company attacks were conducted against Site-220. Each time judicious reporting and intelligence gleaned by patrols regarding enemy intentions and timely forward air ground controller (FAGs) assistance, allowed daytime close air support and B-26 Nimrod night sorties to drop flares and wreak havoc on the assaulting enemy. Many attacks were thwarted, diminished, or cancelled by air strikes on staging areas.

---

<sup>4</sup> LS-220, later designated Site-228 in 1968 was located on the same mountain range.

On 22 May, Porter Captain Hal Griffin's Porter, N193X, received numerous small arms hits while turning final at Phou Pha Loam. In the process Griffin was wounded in the left leg, but managed to RTB to Na Khang, where the PIC of Volpar N9542Z ferried him to a medical facility.

By the end of that month, a battalion of Vietnamese attacked the Site-220 base with a larger force and left the field bloodied.

Similar pressure and attacks were repulsed at Sam Song Hong, Pha Hang, and Kno Knon Yhang. One assault against Phou Pha Lang was broken up by friendly air, and caused the enemy to withdraw after incurring heavy casualties.<sup>5</sup>

Tailored to prevent shooting the messenger, the following analysis could probably be applied to much communication between the Lao embassy and Washington. As was later revealed, it certainly was in South Vietnam:

*"This [cable] was very much a Shackley product, thus typical for the time, and exactly what the source paragraph describes--not finished intel, but rather the 'appraisal' of the COS. The facts in the cable are not*

---

<sup>5</sup> Because the enemy normally made a point to remove their WIA and KIAs from the battlefield, unless bodies were actually left behind, casualties were generally only estimates based on blood trails or discarded equipment.

*necessarily incorrect, but the message is somewhat 'colored.' Although there was legitimate reason for guarded optimism in 1967, the picture was by no means as rosy as the cable painted it. However, in fairness to Ted [Shackley], the use of a certain amount of hyperbole probably was necessary to ensure continued political and financial commitment from Washington to expansion of the Laos program."* <sup>6</sup>

Like most government sites deep inside upper Military Region Two, Na Khang was not exempt from enemy probes. Therefore, to counter January's previously used cover and concealment and avenues of approach toward the site, a U.S. Army Huey equipped with spray booms was employed to distribute the highly toxic chemical Agent Orange defoliant on Site-36's perimeter and other likely infiltration points. This effort reaped generous dividends, when Vietnamese attackers were driven off on

---

<sup>6</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 16, 168-169.

Joe Leeker, the Porter, N193X.

Victor Anthony, 218.

Edward Vallentiny, 23.

Agency Information Cable, 07/29/67.

Bill Leary May 1967 Notes: It is in the reader's interest to understand the thinking of Jim Glerum, an official in AB-1, to Bill Leary in 04/27/93, relating to parts of the 07/29/67 Agency Cable.



4 April. <sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup>

As already noted, during the last week in March and first week in April road watch teams reported substantial increases in vehicle traffic along Route-7 from the logistical center at Moung Sen, through Barthelemy Pass (called the "Fish's Mouth" by U.S. military) west toward the Plain of Jars. Analysts suspected the increase might herald two purposes: an attack on Moung Soui, or merely a buildup of supplies in the numerous depots, caches, and truck parks lining the road and on the PDJ. During the same period, traffic from Ban Ban to Khang Khay was also heavier.

An attack on the FAN Moung Soui garrison was considered the more likely scenario, so an election to conduct air strikes on suspected areas was made. However, as in the case of limited air support for the defenders of Nong Khang because of difficult navigation and visibility problems engendered by the persisting smoke and haze, this stopgap was believed unachievable. However, because of a rare spate of rainy weather,

---

<sup>7</sup> Not readily admitted by USG in later years, beside the Ho Chi Minh Panhandle trail system, other parts of Laos were sprayed with Agent Orange, including the Plain of Jars. No one knows how many people and animals in the region contracted diseases, died from the toxic brew, or are encountering problems today from the chemicals. The Author today has Parkinson's disease which may have resulted from the spraying.

<sup>8</sup> Ken Conboy, 168.

except for a small sapper probe that was repulsed, no large-scale attack on Site-108 developed.

Despite losses and reduction of previously acquired territory, the enemy dry season offensive was not finished. By the end of May, possibly attempting to relieve pressure on its Houa Phan offensives and suppress RLG discussion of the political and military aspects and contemplation of taking control of the Plain of Jars, enemy units began strong attacks and probes against Meo ADC sites on the southern and western edges of the Plain of Jars. Receiving heavy artillery, mortar fire, and assaults, some sites were briefly abandoned.

None of these actions had any lasting consequence to the overall enemy standing in Northern Laos. Therefore, by the end of June, leaving their Pathet Lao flunkies behind to mind the store, a majority of North Vietnamese troops packed their bags and departed for cadre in North Vietnam. Failure of the enemy to capture and retain territory left General Vang Pao's army in control of bases in Xieng Khouang and Houa Phan. With tactical superiority achieved, it was the general's option to strike where and when he chose. <sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Victor Anthony, 218.  
Agency Information Cable, 07/19/67.

## **MONSOON PLANS**

Toward the end of the dry season, with the enemy only capturing Nong Khang and losing control in the extreme north, it appeared that the balance of power temporarily favored Vang Pao's forces in upper Military Region Two. Key to this success was largely credited to excellent intelligence gathering assets that allowed the aggressive general to plan and strike at the heart of enemy forward staging areas.

Furthermore, because of the judicious utilization of airborne artillery and airborne logistical support, a tactical superiority was achieved which significantly improved morale, confidence in the ability to hold positions, and the will to fight the dreaded Vietnamese. With this new attitude imbued in his men, Western adherents expected Vang Pao would seek to attempt regaining lost sites and push to expand in Houa Phan while still harassing enemy LOCs.

Within FAR and the Lao government optimism was rampant. A more stable political situation and increased USAF assets in Thailand heralded increased sorties for rainy season Lao operations. With these factors in mind Souvanna Phouma unrealistically stated that because FAN occupied the Plain of Jars at the time of Geneva Accords signing in July 1962, under agreements in the treaty, Neutralist forces were entitled to reoccupy the territory.

Even after the March whipping FAR suffered at Lima Site-193 west of Nam Bac, General Ouane still ruminated on and made tentative plans to recover Moung Sai, also in government hands at the time of treaty. If successful, this would tend to lessen pressure at Nam Bac and Luang Prabang, and provide security for area villages. General Ouane also had his General Staff design combined air and infantry operation plans to sever and secure northern enemy LOCs, including Route-19 from Dien Bien Phu to Nam Bac in Military Region One; Route-6 from Sam Neua to Na Khang; and Route-7 from the Barthelemy Pass border to Ban Ban in Military Region Two. With the enemy's ability to reinforce in-country troops neutralized, American air would destroy enemy tanks and vehicles on the Plain of Jars. Then FAN and Meo troops would move in and capture the entire plain. After this was accomplished, FAR would establish positions on east and north high ground.

Though a FAR functionary, General Vang Pao disliked Ouane's proposals. There were numerous reasons. FAR plans were considered too grandiose, and relied too much on everyone else's participation and blood except the FAR. Besides, he thoroughly distrusted FAN. Mainly because, during previous combined operations, supporting government forces failed to act at critical junctures, leaving Meo units unprotected to fend for themselves. In addition, although the RLG maintained

representatives at Sam Tong, Vang Pao did not encourage large FAR inroads into Military Region Two. He possessed his own less ambitious plans, which included expansion and a wait and see stance.

In Military Region Three military leaders intended to eliminate the enemy south of Thakhet and secure Route-13.

Further south, after Lao Ngam was captured in Military Region Four, General Phasouk planned to expand his perimeter to relieve pressure on the Saravane and Attapeu regions.

As the year unfolded, none of the projected FAR offenses occurred.<sup>10</sup>

## **TIME OFF**

Just prior to our leaving for Bangkok for Tuie's dental examination and to look for an automobile, Jerry McEntee returned from a trip to Kalua Lumpur with both good and bad news. The concrete block business was heavily in debt, for machinery payments had been previously deferred. However, the re-capitalization was expected to satisfy these immediate debts, and cash flow and receivables should take care of future purchases. Jim indicated that the company was operating

---

<sup>10</sup> FRUS 1964-1968, Volume 28, Laos, #303, 07/29/67, Central Intelligence Agency Information Report. Victor Anthony, 222, 223.

at a profit for the last two months, but customers were slow paying their bills.

New Era Oil was operating better than anyone had expected. If the government awarded a contract, another factory would be erected in Kuala Lumpur with a 100,000-gallon capacity. Predictions were made that by the end of next year both factories would be wholly owned by the investors.

The spin sounded good, but optimism had prevailed from the beginning of the project and mistakes had been costly. We hoped Coble had learned and benefitted from his errors. In the meantime, we would continue to receive monthly statements and reports from Coble, but knowing this information could be subject to the writer's creativity, and because of past problems with the business, we were a little apprehensive.

Constantly looking for a method to acquire wealth and depart the Southeast Asia caldron, the latest craze among pilots was purchasing or investing in silver. Like gold, many were certain that the price would double. Surprisingly, Abadie had touted Lucky Friday Silver shares to me in the past. In looking over listed mining stocks, I became interested in International Mining, a company also diversified into in oil and gas. I had Dad purchase some from Orvis Brothers, but silver never achieved the results envisioned by us "investors."

Leaving Ricky at the house with Tokay, Jin Leed, and the maid during the day, and Khun Yai at night, we departed for Bangkok on the night train.

While in the big city, after driving the Ford salesman half-crazy with my inane questions and scrutiny of the auto, I purchased a light green Ford Cortina Estate Wagon for the baht equivalent of 3,450 dollars. Manufactured in England, parts were shipped to Thailand for assembly in a local plant. This method circumvented the enormously restrictive import tax one would normally incur on a finished vehicle delivered to the country. I sent a check in the amount of sixteen and a half dollars to United Services Automobile Association, the company I had insurance with while in the USMCR. The binder would cover our trip north to Udorn.

When I concluded the deal, took delivery of the four-cylinder vehicle, and entered the hotel compound, the Thai-Chinese Suriwongse Hotel manager indicated that the dealer was a good friend and he could have arranged a tidy discount for us. The manager was a nice person and I had no reason to doubt what he said, but it was a typical after-the-fact-response from the people in that country.

Before we departed for Udorn, we drove the car around Bangkok to begin the engine break in at the



The green Ford Cortina purchased in Bangkok during April 1967. The car is parked in the driveway of a house on Benjarn Road that we rented later in the year.

Author Collection.



proper speed. Traffic was not restrictive like it later became. We were even able to drive to movie theaters in the Chinese section of town and find parking. Another time, we journeyed west to around Nakhon Pathom, a town containing the ancient golden domed wat that I recalled from my former JUSMAAG trips to Kanchanaburi.

Because of the low speed recommended during the engine break in process, the trip on Sunday to Udorn was necessarily long and fatiguing on the bench type front seat that was not kind to my still aching back. Although underpowered, especially when dealing with cowboy truck drivers who enjoyed racing each other on the narrow two-lane highway, the new car operated well. The only downside was there was no air conditioner installed. Therefore, open windows had to suffice.

By the time we arrived in Udorn, legendary Ford rattles developed. Therefore, Plang and I took the vehicle to a dealer he knew (he knew everybody) for an inspection. However, the owner was ill equipped to service the car, and the shop did not even possess a torque wrench. Looking ahead, I made plans to drive to Bangkok in May to attend to rattles and have the machine undercoated for noise suppression and preservation of the metal underside before the rainy season began in earnest.

Ricky enjoyed the car better than anyone. He stood on my lap while holding the steering wheel and fiddled with the turn signals.

The car liberated us from other local transportation, affording us an opportunity to interact more frequently with family members across town and visit new places in Udorn. On my days off, Plang accompanied us to a rice mill on the outskirts of town. Then on another day, we drove to a whiskey factory that manufactured alcohol and bottled low quality whiskey (not Mekong, but another brand). It was not the most sanitary place, as hordes of flies clung thickly to the freshly attached labels. Outside the factory, the smell of alcohol hung heavy on the surrounding area.

With additional flexibility of movement, and the bungalow getting smaller, we continued our quest for a larger, more modern house. Tuie mentioned our tentative plans to her parents, and not long afterward Khun Tha and Khun Yai offered us a raw piece of land outside town limits across the dividing line at Wattana Road. Formerly a rice paddy, the land in question was set back a short distance from a yet-to-be developed section of Adulyadet Road, and would require an access road cut to the property. Although located a short distance from the family compound, that section of Adulyadet was still unpaved, and, except for electricity, no other utilities were yet in the area.

We visited a small brick factory Khun Tha had with a partner in a brick manufacturing venture. Displaying a full set of gold teeth, the diminutive man, who was much shorter than the taller Burmese-born Plang, was cooperative with information. While Tuie translated, I learned that brick manufacturing was basically a simple process. Bricks were molded from local clay, sun dried, and stacked into a hollow rough rectangle. Then a fire was started inside and outside to strengthen the product. <sup>11</sup> The cost of the bricks, five to eighteen satang per brick (pennies in our money), was quite reasonable and probably would have created a sturdy and secure house. However, over the past year cement, like everything else in Udorn had skyrocketed in price.

Weighing the pros and cons of building, I considered the proposition. In the end there were just too many negative variables involved to make such a project viable. Therefore, I rejected all thoughts of building, and politely declined the Nisagonrungsee offer. I was not particularly concerned about the house reverting to the family if we left the country. Under Thai law, that was a given. However, because of the remoteness of a yet-undeveloped area with no neighbors, the unknown costs of building, running a road and electricity to the property, a constant threat of

---

<sup>11</sup> To my knowledge aggregate was not added to the mix as it was in Kuala Lumpur brick manufacture.

Quemoy invasion, and the uncertainty of my future, I opted to remain in our present location, at least near term.

With the decision to remain in the Godnoma bungalow established, planning far ahead of me, Tuie had a tin-roofed carport erected between the two bungalows during my next stint upcountry. This was acceptable, but the builder had not taken into consideration the Cortina's length, therefore, the vehicle's exposed rear protruded slightly. I wondered how long it would be before the sun's ultraviolet rays created a two-toned vehicle. I also wondered if this expenditure had been wise, given our decision to relocate to a new residence should such an opportunity arise.

### **THE CONSEQUENCES OF HITLER'S REVENGE**

We were still in Bangkok on 6 April, when CASI Dornier N9180X disappeared en route from Luang Prabang to Ban Houei Sai with five Americans and two Lao onboard. This incident marked yet another blemish on Dornier operations and Luang Prabang in general. The Luang Prabang factor was something that would continue to plague the region's future operations.

Continental Air Service PIC John B. Preston, 26, from Victoria, Texas, was providing Wayne "Ron" Huffaker, 43, of Lubbock, Texas, an area familiarization.

Chief of the U.S. Information Service (USIS) at Luang Prabang John R. McLean, thirty-two, from Detroit, Michigan, and Martin J. Clish, twenty-seven, of Marquette, Michigan, and Associate Chief of International Voluntary Services Vientiane had business at Lima-25 that day. John, described as a gentle, decent, high type was well liked by all, including the King of Laos, who was appreciative of the time and effort McLean devoted to helping him on his farm north of LP. <sup>12</sup>

Marty Clish and his wife were close to completing their second tour in Laos.

William J. Cross, fifty-five, from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Requirements Officer (RO) for Military Region One, rounded out the five American passengers. Bill, a retired Marine Warrant Officer, had served in the Far East and China during and after World War Two. Single, he was described as quiet, polite, a gentle man--not the stereotype ruff-and-tumble Marine. When Wess Tribble, the Vientiane transportation officer, departed on annual leave, Cross temporarily replaced him. After Tribble completed his leave, Cross returned to his duties in MR-1 only a day or two before 180X disappeared. His reason for the trip was to locate an overdue rice barge from Ban Houei Sai.

---

<sup>12</sup> This was the same farm that Blaine Jensen worked on earlier with the King.

Mac Thompson had ceased his Nam Bac RONs and until trouble there subsided his work locations varied. During early April, he took a break in Vientiane. On the fifth he was assigned a temporary task at Ban Houei Sai and MOUNG MOUNGE (LS-93) working on wells and schools with Terry Collins. Catching a ride via MOUNG KASSY on a DO-28, he arrived at Luang Prabang in the afternoon. He RON there, planning to journey to Houei Sai and Site-93 the following morning on the first available aircraft.

He was scheduled to fly on November 9180X. When the plane arrived, the passengers assembled to board. Having flown to Hong Sa several times with him Mac knew Preston well. He was a very calm pilot. One day at Hong Sa, the local people, wanting a ride out of the town, overloaded his aircraft. Rather than ranting and raving like many other pilots, John exited, shut the doors, and sat under the wing. When the heat inside the plane became unbearable, people began leaving and John returned to his work.

While they were loading baggage, an Air America Chinese radio operator arrived on a motorcycle to advise Mac that his Vientiane AID boss wanted to talk with him. Mac walked to the radio shack and discovered that he was to return to Vientiane for another job. Consequently, he returned to the plane and removed his bags. Two Lao students on break during the two-week Phi

Mai (New Year) holiday, Somchit Soukphaungkham and Charound Nopphakoun boarded. After Cross arrived, Preston departed.

Thompson was in the radio shack waiting for a ride to Vientiane. An hour later word arrived of the overdue aircraft. Radio and initial searches with available assets revealed nothing. A maximum search effort took place on both six and seven April.

AID representatives Tom Ward, Dwayne Hammer, and Area Coordinator John Perry were not present when 180X disappeared. Perry, who had lost one son and another wounded the previous November, was assigned this Dornier once a week and would have most likely been a passenger had not the fates willed his absence in Bangkok. When Perry learned about the incident, he boarded the first available aircraft to Luang Prabang via Vientiane. Upon arrival, he found the search well underway with a control ship coordinating other aircraft.

John established search procedures. The royal capitol was designated the centralized location to collate information. All information was investigated, no matter how small, regarding the possible location of the missing aircraft and personnel.

Each evening, search areas were delineated. Early in the morning aircraft were dispatched with at least two persons onboard fixed wing. Each helicopter carried

a Lao-speaking observer, usually an American, able to converse with area villagers. Crew and observers were briefed prior to departure and debriefed upon return. Crew members and observers had strict instructions to call the radio tower if flight plans were changed or to provide the destination if the aircraft was not recovering at Luang Prabang. Most of the flights were over Pathet Lao areas and aircraft were shot at a number of times. <sup>13</sup>

From Perry's perception, the job entailed around-the-clock operations. It was essential to be ready to receive and send messages, to dispatch search aircraft, and to keep in contact with all aircraft as well as Vientiane and Udorn officials at all times. Dwayne Hammer monitored the AID office radio while Perry spent fourteen hours at the airfield and the remaining ten at the radio. The Perry family and Mrs. Glover provided sandwiches and soft drinks to grateful aircraft crews and observers.

From the beginning of the search, Perry believed the plane was located in the mountainous, enemy-infested areas west of Luang Prabang in the loop in the Mekong River. He had flown with Preston a number of times over the same route to Ban Houei Sai, and Captain Preston had always radioed his position when reaching

---

<sup>13</sup> On the seventh, Jack Houston and Bill Zeitler were hit by gunfire in a Caribou.



6,000 feet. He had not done this on the sixth. For this reason, Perry concentrated SAR efforts in that area without neglecting other possibilities.

Bill Young knew McLean well and was another admirer. A lot of time was spent on the search. Bill had a jet boat which he used to cover an area downriver from Ban Houei Sai. He also employed H-34s filled with his good cross border people to scout up and downriver. Everyone was trying to get the rumored reward. During stops, many people claimed seeing a plane flying low on the day in question and there were many reports as to where the Dornier went down.

One search mission was particularly interesting. After receiving a report regarding the crash location, because of a presence of Pathet Lao in the area, H-34s were loaded with about twenty of Young's best men. The pilots proceeded south down the Mekong to a point just before the pronounced bend to the east. Bill wanted to search the western area, but could not see well, so had the pilots land on the west bank. They offloaded, split into two groups, and fanned out. Bill's unit stumbled onto a recently abandoned Pathet Lao camp with a fire still burning. Apparently, while getting haircuts, the men saw helicopters approaching and thinking it was a large attack force, withdrew to the south. It was just as well, for the larger number of Pathet Lao could have inflicted serious damage on Young's small group.

Blaine Jensen, who had replaced Joe Flipse as the Ban Houei Sai AID coordinator had been working out of the town since shortly after the disastrous 1966 flood. Bill Young's house was a little upriver from Ban Houei Sai, and was constructed much like the Chiang Kong bungalow on the opposite bank across the Mekong. Blaine knew and liked Young, spending a lot of time at his house drinking and talking. Blaine, who Young considered extremely crusty, would get drunk on Lao Lao and refer to Bill as a jungle boy.

Blaine felt sorry for Bill; it had been a difficult period for Young over the past few months. He and his new American bride had not been married long and the couple was already encountering serious communications problems. This was particularly the case after the November Wilmot-Perry incident.

Bill was having issues with the Agency as well. An enigma to those who did not know him well, he was a difficult person for Agency personnel to understand because his outward appearance was typically American, but because of his upbringing, his thought processes and actions were typically Asian. Additionally, there was acrimony between Tony and his Nam Yu subordinates that was not helpful. They conveyed a lot of back-biting dialogue about Young to Bill Lair and Pat Landry at AB-1 Udorn. This had a detrimental result to what

the supposedly harmonious team was attempting to accomplish in northwestern Military Region One.

After a long search and rescue effort, nothing fruitful developed. Young occasionally received visits in Houei Sai from loyal Burmese Shan and Karen tribesmen. They acted as his trusted regional eyes and ears, and were a reliable source of manpower for cross border operations. Since the disappearance of 185X, Bill had regularly inquired if they or anyone they knew had heard or seen a plane fly over the Golden Triangle on the sixth.<sup>14</sup> There were always planes flying around. Therefore, desiring to please their friend, they indicated-yes, a plane had crashed in the Shan States at the time in question. At last he had something relevant to the situation.

Because of Young's latest intelligence, about two weeks after the plane disappeared Jensen went to Vientiane with a firm plan and met with Ambassador Sullivan. That evening, they composed a cable to Rangoon, Burma, requesting the U.S Embassy there seek permission from the Burmese government for over flights of the Shan States to search for a missing American aircraft that may have become lost and penetrated Burmese territory.

---

<sup>14</sup> Up to that time, although aware of the opium trade in the Burma-Lao-Thai border area, I had not heard the term Golden Triangle.



A portion of the so called "The Golden Triangle" as seen across the Mekong River into Laos near Chiang Saen, Thailand.

John Lesnak Collection provided the Author by Frank Stergar.

The following morning, while Blaine attended a Country Team meeting, participants agreed to offer a sizable reward for information relating to the missing plane and passengers. Drop leaflets were to be prepared by the USIS psy-ops officer, who was Jensen's personal friend. These would depict a Dornier, American principals involved, and a reward.

Leaflets were contracted, printed, and dropped in the hinterland after Blaine left Vientiane. First leaflets contained photographs of the principals, a look alike Dornier with the side number N9085X, and a hint of a reward.

Jensen did not participate in drops and had no knowledge of any being delivered in the Shan States. Many were scattered around Luang Prabang because the Agency insisted there was a good possibility that the plane had been shot down in hills close to the royal capitol.

Because of the important principals involved, the search became an "all hands" effort. The Glovers, who knew and worked with the missing men, moved immediately from Xieng Ngeun to the AID house at Luang Prabang to help in the search. Eventually accompanying twenty-five flights, Bob often spent eleven hours on the job and three nights away from Luang Prabang. During small talk, nobody mentioned names of the missing persons, for it was unknown if the families had been notified.

Others who worked long hours and risked their lives during the search were: International Voluntary Service (IVS) representatives MacAlan Thompson and Jean Peacock; USAID personnel Robert Worley, Robert Dakan, and Stacey Lloyd; Requirements Office (RO) man at Luang Prabang Gerald Sylvester; and ARMA Major George Silva.

Every scrap of incoming information had to be examined and checked for veracity. Most information appeared logical as to time and places, but when pursued amounted to nothing. Also, much was not based on fact, but a monk's dream.

As of the nineteenth, distribution of leaflets and searches had revealed nothing tangible. Therefore, a hint of rewards for information leading to the discovery of the plane and men was increased and additional leaflets printed and dropped. They were written in Lao, Thai, and Chinese and contained pictures of the Americans, but specified no names.

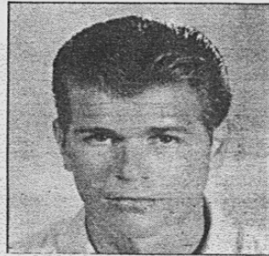
There was also mention of a two million kip, a reward sponsored by the RLG (with monies provided by USG agencies). King Savang Vatthana, who adored McLean and his wife, endorsed the appeal for information about the missing Americans.

A second printing was probably effected after another CASI plane disappeared on the 21st. The second aircraft was mentioned without specifying details. The leaflet provided basic information:





Ron Huffaker-CASI



John Preston-CASI



Bill Cross-RO



John McLean-USIS

ນີ້ຄືຮູບຜູ້ໂດຍສານເຄື່ອງບິນທີ່ຫາຍໄປບາງຄົນ ສ່ວນຮູບຜູ້ໂດຍທີ່ເປັນຄົນລາວຫາບໄດ້

上列为五名失踪人员之相片。其其他两名人员之相片。

ນີ້ຄືຮູບຜູ້ໂດຍສານເຄື່ອງບິນທີ່ຫາຍໄປບາງຄົນ ສ່ວນຮູບຜູ້ໂດຍສານທີ່ເປັນຄົນລາວຫາບໄດ້



Marty Clish

IVS  
ຮູບເຄື່ອງບິນທີ່ຫາຍ ຊຶ່ງຫາສິແດງ ແລະຂາວ

上图为失踪之  
红白两色飞机。



ประกาศใช้รางวัล

ประกาศใช้รางวัล

ສະຖານທູດອະເມຣິກັນທີ່ວຽງຈັນ ຕ້ອງການຊາບຂ່າວ ກ່ຽວກັບເຄື່ອງບິນ ສອງເຄື່ອງບິນທີ່ຫາຍໄປ ລະຫວ່າງທີ່ ບິນຈາກ ຫລວງພະບາງໄປຫ້ວຍຊາຍ ເມື່ອຕອນເຊົ້າ ວັນທີ່ ໖ ເມສານີ້ ບິນ ເຄື່ອງບິນລຳນີ້ ມີພົນບິນແລະຜູ້ໂດຍສານ ຮວມ ໗ ຄົນ ຄູ່າທ່ານພົນບິນແລະຜູ້ ໂດຍສານທີ່ໄດ້ຮັບບາດເຈັບ ໄຜຕິໄຫ ການຊ່ອຍເຫລືອແລ້ວແຈງໄຫເຈົ້າໜ້າທີ່ ປົກຄອງທ້ອງຖິ່ນທີ່ຢູ່ໂກທີ່ສຸດຊາຍ ຜູ້ທີ່ ໄຫຂາວ ຊຶ່ງຈະທຳໄຫສາມາດຊ່ອຍ ເຫລືອຫລືຄົນພົນບິນແລະຜູ້ໂດຍສານ ເຄື່ອງບິນລຳນີ້ ຈະໄດ້ຮາງວັນເປັນ ເງິນສິດກ່ອນໄຫຍ່.

ສະຖານທູດອາເມຣິກັນທີ່ເວີຈອນທັນ ຕ້ອງການຮາງບໍ່ກ່ຽວກັບເຄື່ອງ ບິນສອງເຄື່ອງຍຸດທະສາດທີ່ຫາຍໄປ ຮະຫວ່າງທີ່ບິນຈາກຫລວງພະບາງ ໄປຫ້ວຍຊາຍ ເມື່ອຕອນເຊົ້າວັນທີ່ ໖ ເມສາຍຸດທະສາດ ບິນເຄື່ອງບິນລຳນີ້ ມີພົນບິນແລະຜູ້ໂດຍສານ ໗ ຄົນ ຄູ່າທ່ານພົນບິນແລະຜູ້ ໂດຍສານທີ່ໄດ້ຮັບບາດເຈັບໄປຮັດ ໃຫ້ການຊ່ວຍເຫລືອ ແລ້ວເອົາ ໃຫ້ເອົາທ່ານທີ່ປຶກສາຮອງທີ່ຮາງວັນ ທີ່ອຸປະກອນທີ່ສຸດຮາງ ຜູ້ທີ່ໃຫ້ ຂ່າວຈຶ່ງຈະທຳໃຫ້ເຂົາສາມາດຊ່ວຍ ເຫລືອຫລືຄົນພົນບິນແລະ ຜູ້ໂດຍສານເຄື່ອງບິນລຳນີ້ຈະໄດ້ ຮາງວັນເປັນເງິນສິດກ່ອນໄຫຍ່

รูปเครื่องบินที่หาย ซึ่ง  
ทาสีสีแดงและขาว

懸賞尋求失踪飞机之  
本年四月六日上午二架飞机失踪红白两色飞机自  
即劫掠机后往慧基途中失踪机上有驾驶员  
员两名乘客五人 美国驻寮国大使慧基  
重金寻求此架飞机及乘客其驾驶员之下  
落如有人寻获该劫掠机受援人员并証  
主刻通知附近地方官员 美国大使馆将予  
重賞。

A multi-lingual leaflet in Lao, Thai, and Chinese depicting a typical red and white CASI Dornier with registration Number N9185X and photos of the missing Americans. Names have been added to the photos by the Author to identify the men.  
Ernie Kuhn Collection.

*The plane departed Luang Prabang for Ban Houei Sai on 6 April (no year given). Anyone who has seen the plane or knows any information should contact any authority, including the village Pho Baan immediately. A reward (no amount was mentioned like on the first leaflets) would be awarded after the information led to the discovery of the plane. The reward would be substantial.*

Both USG and Continental offered rewards, although there was some controversy over payment of the reward. Even more issues were broached regarding payment of all the hundreds of hours of aircraft time flown during the search period. Squabbles arose between various factions of USG as well as USG and Air America-CASI.

Joe Flipse's wife Suzie had their baby in early February and returned from Chiang Mai soon afterward. In March Joe and his family were reassigned to Vientiane. Joe had a continuing problem with malaria attacks, and the disease could be more easily monitored and treated in the capital. Doctor Weldon entered the Vientiane AID office late on the afternoon of the fourteenth and addressed Joe. "Jiggs" indicated that they were going to Military Region One the following morning to help in the Dornier SAR, and he wanted Joe to "bring some iron." By then, from previous confrontations with superiors, Flipse was smart enough to conceal his M-1 rifle among rice sacks.



Joe was concerned about those onboard the Dornier, but particularly McClain. Luang Prabang had been ineffective in the past and it was obvious that John was really making an effort to create effective programs. He had been to Ban Houei Sai many times, and Joe thought he was doing a good job. Joe also knew Preston, as the Pioneer pilot who smashed into a stump at T-516 after the flood.

After they arrived at Ban Houei Sai, a meeting was held to determine assignments. One attendee, Bill Young, was thoroughly convinced that the plane went down in Burma. He was so sure that he planned to investigate that very day. <sup>15</sup>

## **THE BURMESE CONNECTION**

After more than two weeks of non-flying, I was scheduled to work and RON at Nam Yu. Perhaps as a result of my perceived landing at the "enemy landing zone," I was not often scheduled to work there. For

---

<sup>15</sup> Segment Sources:

Bob Grover, 45.

Mac Thompson Emails, 10/19/96, 10/20/96, 10/26/96, 12/16/99, 07/05/03, 11/24/05.

Wess Tribble Email to Mac Thompson, 10/25/96.

Blaine Jensen Letters, 03/17/96, 04/03/96, 11/09/96.

Ernest Kuhn Emails, 10/22/96, 10/28/96.

John Perry, Area Coordinator, Luang Prabang Letter Written to Ambassador Sullivan Through Robert A. Burwitch, Deputy Chief of Mission and Mister Joseph A. Mendenhall, Director USAID, 06/09/67.

Bill Young Interview, Chiang Mai.

Joe Flipse Email, 05/13/97, 05/18/97, 06/14/97.

Bill Leary April 1967 Notes.

other reasons, there were also more favored individuals who received the nod. This was of no consequence to me, for I preferred working for Vang Pao and Meo in areas I was well familiar with. Furthermore, the remote site in Houa Kong Province often afforded difficulty obtaining a ride to Udorn after a RON, and sometimes one had to wait a long time for parts if a helicopter was AGP.<sup>16</sup> Although not a particularly hostile region regarding enemy ground fire, because of unfamiliarity, it was difficult to keep up on the situation.

On the fifteenth, Flight Mechanic Tom Hopkins and I were assigned Hotel-39 for a mission involving a Customer at Ban Houei Sai. Before leaving the Udorn facility for the more than three-hour flight, we were instructed to plan our flight to overfly northern Sayaboury Province west of Luang Prabang, south of the Mekong, and to be particularly vigilant for any sign of the lost Dornier. I did as instructed, but because of a constant danger of Pathet Lao ground fire and obscured mountains because of heavy smoke and haze, I chose to cruise at a fairly high altitude. Looking directly down at the ground, I recognized Hong Sa. Then things turned into "a bag of worms." Within fifteen minutes, the land began to look unfamiliar. Unlike that part of the hilly, mostly undeveloped Sayaboury Province, I was looking down at contiguous green fields and orchards.

---

<sup>16</sup> AGP: Aircraft grounded parts.

Suppressing momentary panic at being temporarily disoriented (for an aviator is never lost), I began crosschecking my instruments and quickly discovered a substantial difference between the Radio Magnetic Indicator (RMI) and the wet compass. The RMI had precessed about twenty to thirty degrees, and winds aloft had caused me to fly south of my intended course.<sup>17</sup> Fairly close to the Lao/Thai border, I had inadvertently wandered over a cultivated portion of northern Nan Province, Thailand. Since the error was not great, resolving to be more careful in the future, I turned right ninety degrees to cross over Sayaboury and intersect the Mekong. After this, the rest of the trip to Ban Houei Sai was uneventful.

While refueling, Bill Young and Sam approached me. I had not seen Bill since the time we reconed the Nam Yu area before it became the Long Tieng of the northwestern Military Region One region. Except for the few times I RON at the Chiang Kong bungalow when "Jib" was still alive, I had not seen Sam either.

After leaving Luang Prabang, Bill returned to Ban Houei Sai and the cross-border operations he had started. The project was headed by a man named Whitacre in Vientiane, but Young was left independent in what he wanted to achieve. His upriver camp, not a Lima Site,

---

<sup>17</sup> Precess: Slow movement of the instrument from the correct course.

had a hundred people. The camp was supplied by H-34 pilots conducting brief turnarounds. There were no RONS allowed at the camp. Bill developed northern team sites on the Mekong for the purpose of launching Special Leopard Teams into China. H-34 crews inserted the cross-border teams.

Under Agency auspices, some Chinese KMT agents were involved in cross-border operations. Teams extracted Chinese from Yunnan and persuaded them to return to China to gather information and send it back using secret writing techniques. Since Bill's operation was already in place, he helped insert these individuals. No helicopters were used and it was strictly a walk-in procedure. One of these men was a Yunnanese, Chinese Haw Mandarin trained in Taiwan. Dressed in civvies with his uniform in his bag, he was deposited just inside the border.

Young received an Agency commendation for his cross-border operation. It consisted of a kudo award, one you do not possess and never see.

After initial pleasantries, Bill informed me that, following a long, painstaking search in Laos without credible evidence surfacing of 180X, he recently had obtained reports indicating that the Dornier had crashed in Burma. Requests through diplomatic channels to the socialist Burmese government for permission to fly into the country to search for the plane were

denied. Aside from animosity stemming from disparate ideologies, this was largely predicated on the fact that no plane had recently crashed in Burma. Bill, who grew up in both Burma and Thailand, and was well acquainted with the Asian mentality, was very skeptical regarding the report. Therefore, he arranged a parley and lunch with a few Burmese officials on the Lao side of the river.

Hopkins loaded Bill, Sam, and several Lao officials. The destination, Ban Ton Pheun, was located at the apex of the tri-border where a river crossing and Lao customs post sat by the bank. Flowing south of China, at three borders, the Mekong began a multi-mile modified "S" turn terminating in a large bulge at Ban Nam Nhion (LS-149) on the Lao side. From the descending slope of the bulge to below Ban Houei Sai the river straightened. Looking at the map, a direct flight over Thailand to our destination was a little shorter, but not sanctioned. Therefore, I flew an upriver route to the bulge, flew directly east toward the river, and landed behind the customs post. The trip took about thirty minutes and we arrived before the Burmese. Everyone piled out and headed for the rude shack close to the river. Also, a FAR platoon was stationed nearby.

While I questioned Bill for more information regarding our mission, Sam doled out two tetracycline tablets to Young for what they referred to as his

amoebic dysentery. However, another possibility flashed through my mind. As the instigator of our nighttime "Thai Desert" at the Bungalow, Bill had been a known philander in the old days, and I did not know he was presently married. Consequently, I chose to believe that he had contracted a strain of venereal disease, called in military vernacular, the "clap."

While we were conversing, a contingent of Burmese officials landed on the bank, exited a boat, and began to make their way toward the hut. Desiring a second opinion as to what was said during the meeting, Bill had previously hired some local men fluent in the Burmese language. He positioned them out of sight behind the thatched wall of the hut to listen and report on the proceedings.

A young Burmese lieutenant accompanied the party. As the two groups got down to business, Bill took me aside and said I should take the officer for a ride upriver and show him the country on the Lao side of the river. He requested that I stay away for about an hour. It was obvious that Bill did not want the man around during the meeting. At first, I was not too happy about this task, for I was hungry and the trip would negate any chance of obtaining vittles; also the area near the river was reputedly occupied by aggressive KMT engaged in the opium trade, and as the soldiers were reputed to have 12.7mm guns, one never knew what to expect from

them. On the upside, this would afford some relief from the extreme April heat and what was sure to be a boring wait.

Along with numerous refugees fleeing south from Yunnan Province, China, in the early fifties, were units from Chiang Kai-shek's 93rd Nationalist Chinese Infantry Division. The soldiers were called Kuomintang, or by the acronym KMT. Provided immunity as political refugees, most had settled in Burma. Seeing an opportunity to harass Meo Tse-tung's <sup>18</sup> government, Agency operatives later formed the Chinese into guerilla units for a Yunnan China penetration. They were supplied by Sea Supply, the Agency's logistic center in Thailand, and its proprietary airline Civil Air Transport (CAT). The attempt failed and as a sop to international disapproval, most KMT were flown to Taiwan. However, not all departed. Many had acquired local families and chose to remain and settle along the Lao river bank. <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup>

Although a little effeminate looking, the thin lieutenant typified the stereotype of an Asian lad. Providing a personal touch and to improve his ability to view the countryside, especially Burma, I invited him to sit in the copilot's seat and we launched. I

---

<sup>18</sup> Revisionist transliteration, Meo Zedong.

<sup>19</sup> For additional detail see Author's Book *One-Genesis*.

<sup>20</sup> Mote, 492-493.

climbed to an altitude above small arms range and cruised along the river. There was no headset for my passenger and I could not talk to him anyway so, smiling a lot, as we passed over mountains, hills, valleys, and very few populated areas, I attempted to be an affable host and point out anything I deemed worthwhile.

After twenty-five minutes, I reversed course and started back toward the meeting site. Not far from our destination, I spotted a C-47 on the ground. The plane was parked at the end of a very short grass strip close to a stand of trees. The strip looked abandoned, for there were no sheds or signs of habitation. Thinking this remote site was an unlikely place for the presence of a large fixed wing aircraft, I circled lower to observe if there might be a requirement for assistance. The plane was Lao, as the three headed elephant in a red circle was clearly evident on the fuselage. Three or four crewmembers lounged under the wing seeking shade and to shield their dark skin from the scorching early afternoon sun. Uncharacteristically, no one seemed to look up or wave.

While circling, the thought occurred to me that this secluded spot could be "Ouane's Strip." Ed Reid, quite knowledgeable regarding the Lao and politics through his numerous associations, made past references to Commander in Chief RLA, General Ouane Rathikoun and



Lao generals' opium trade and a small strip in the north where drugs were received, processed, and flown out on government aircraft to be distributed. At one time in the past, the King had granted Phoumi, Ouane, and others rights to the opium trade, and a cartel had developed among higher echelon types. After delivery from suppliers, the product was either flown to Saigon or to the Gulf of Siam where it was dropped for retrieval by ships. *Had I stumbled onto the infamous strip?*

IVS/AID representative, Tony Cattaruci, once asked General Ouane how he got into the opium business. Ouane replied that the Lao officers had to attend a large ceremonial presentation in Thailand. The officers believed the purchase of new uniforms was required. However, General Phoumi, being parsimonious when uniforms were involved, refused to provide a cash allotment for the uniforms. Thereafter, when Phoumi left for exile in Thailand, Ouane took over the opium business.

The whole scenario fostered a sense of excitement and I was curious as to what would develop next. After two more orbits, all was revealed. Several small mountain pack horses like I had seen in Military Region Two began appearing from the woods. Monitored by handlers, the ponies' hauled tarpaulin covered packages on wooden racks that reminded me of my Father's saw

horses. Their arrival stimulated crew activity, and loading of the C-47 commenced. I was fascinated by the scene unfolding below me and realized that we were witnessing a possible illicit operation that few people had ever viewed before. Another more serious consideration occurred to me. We had been scrutinizing the operation too long and presented an easy target for anyone objecting to our presence. Therefore, not wanting to incur the wrath of people on the ground, leaving them to their designs, I departed for our destination.

When we landed, the lieutenant thanked me for the flight and moved off toward the hut where the meeting was breaking up. After our experience with the drug trade, I was sure that he had plenty of talking points upon his return to Burma.

The Lao contingent assembled for the return to Ban Houei Sai. While we walked toward Hotel-39, I privately informed Bill about what I saw occurring a few miles north, but his mind was still on the meeting and what was said. The officials reiterated what the Burmese government indicated that no aircraft had crashed in the country. Bill still did not believe this, but in the end they were proved correct.

After dropping the dignitaries at Ban Houei Sai, I departed for Nam Yu. There was only enough time left in the day for one more trip. <sup>21</sup>

Following seven years with the Agency, Young had become disillusioned, and resigned in the fall of 1967. There were several reasons for the split. Beset with completely different personalities and temperaments, even though their missions were somewhat different, Bill and Tony did not interface well together. Tony was the type of aggressive warrior who demanded to be the overall honcho, completely free to perform his own bidding. Furthermore, as Young was only responsible to the senior area project manager, Tony was discontented with Bill's presence in the area. Tony was also disruptive. He would arrive at Bill's cross-border camp and drag him to Nam Yu for parties. <sup>22</sup>

There was also pressure to leave the disruptive life to be with his pregnant wife, a stewardess he met at the Houei Sai Dooley clinic, who was rapidly nearing delivery time. When Bill informed the Agency people of his plans to leave, he journeyed to Vientiane to talk to the COS and his subordinates. He listed Tony, his

---

<sup>21</sup> That mission marked the final time I encountered Bill Young until meeting with and interviewing him for two days at the Royal Hotel in Chiang Mai.

<sup>22</sup> Bill was not a drinking person and Tony's antics often disgusted him. Opposing sides dominate every story. Unfortunately, the Author has no rebuttal to offer from Tony.

aging parents in Chiang Mai, and his wife as primary reasons. What he failed to articulate was that after his long tenure in Laos, he felt his odds of survival were building up against him. He even carried a cross in the field.

The Agency did not consider the loss of such an experienced, multi-lingual, valuable asset to be a plus. Therefore, Bill was offered a GS-12 rating and opportunity to relocate to Pakse and run southern Trail operations there. Bill considered such a move as one "out of the frying pan into the fire." He consulted with his wife, who frowned on the idea.

They returned to his Chiang Mai roots where Bill worked and lived the good life. Later, with the Lao border area unsettled, he briefly returned to work for the Agency. Chuck Penny, a person he knew quite well in the States, was the COB at Chiang Mai. Over time, Chuck became resentful of Bill's former tenure and status as a local born and bred individual. He also incorrectly believed Young leaned on his laurels. Actually, Bill merely wanted to perform worthwhile work, but Chuck gave him a hard time.

Relations continued to sour. Bill's daughter was diagnosed with an eye problem and the doctor recommended that she go to the States for treatment. Wanting to conserve money, Young asked Penny's permission to let his wife and daughter travel on a

MATS flight using his Air Force cover. Chuck turned this request down.

As time passed, arguing that Young's family actually lived in Chiang Mai, Perry had his overseas allowances reduced. Consequently, Bill was fired for insubordination and resigned about the same time.

I later discovered "Ouane's Strip" was near Ban Do Ya and Chao La's sawmill. The operation there was not particularly successful, for the strip was much too short to enable a C-47s departure with a sufficient opium payload to make the exercise worthwhile. Therefore, smaller planes were employed and the big bird raw opium hauling operation was deferred to the new airfield at Ban Houei Sai.

"Ouane's Strip" eventually became the location of one of the first heroin refineries in Laos.

There were others. One was near Chao La's saw mill, located outside of Ban Nam Kueung (LS-150) among rice paddies and a couple of small villages. Although subject to various sources, Chinese reputedly operated the refinery and Chao La's troops guarded the factory.

23 24

---

<sup>23</sup> For Yao chieftains Chao Mai and Chao La's history see Author's Book 4.

<sup>24</sup> Blaine Jensen Emails, 03/17/96, 04/18/96.

Bill Young Interviews.

Hjorleifur Jonsson, *War's Ontogeny: Militias and Ethnic Boundaries in Laos and Exile* (Article Arizona State University, School of Human Evolution and Social Change) 131.

Joe Flipse Email, 06/20/97.

**NAM YU**

I worked the Nam Yu region for the next six days. Often working beyond sunset, flight time was excellent, with no project time deducted. Agency work could not be sacrificed for a SAR producing nothing. However, I continued vigilant for signs of a downed aircraft.

I had never flown with Hopkins before and was amazed at the young man's enormous strength. A large, well-muscled individual, he lifted hundred kilo (220 pound) rice sacks into the cabin section with apparent ease. I could understand someone doing this once or twice, but several times? Of course, when the locals saw his size and prowess, there was no problem with orderly passenger loading. American Flight Mechanics were a good asset, for they commanded a great deal more respect among the locals than Filipino or Thai Flight Mechanics.

Depending on my fuel quantity, I had air operations handler Somboon's people load what I considered was a decent payload to placate Tony and still remain within a safe envelope should an engine failure occur. We supplied teams twenty miles to the east. Except for the definitive Nam Tha River and diminished smoke, it was no easier navigating over an area devoid of checkpoints than in the past. However, I was comfortable knowing

---

that enemy ground fire in this region was considered marginal. Using the heading, time, and distance method, I managed to find all the sites and satisfy Customer requirements. Also, the field units were very good about displaying correct signals.

Blaine Jensen was cognizant of friendly teams scattered throughout upper Houa Kong and their reason for existence. With Blaine, Tony, and his people at Site-118A there was little or no distinction between 713 and USAID work in the field, or who worked for which agency. Generally lumped together, the cooperation was much the same as Blaine and Pop had accomplished in Military Region Two between the Sam Tong and Long Tieng sites. Usually only one agency had sufficient assets to cover all aspect in an area. Therefore, priorities were assigned, and all means were used to address the most important. Then the remainder was attended to as soon as possible. It was that kind of teamwork, mutual understanding, and respect that enabled the operation to work and make it successful in the short term.

From the early days, principals used to talk and speculate regarding the long-term aspects of the Southeast Asia conflict and it generally ended up as predicted. All believed the war in South Vietnam would terminate with something left for the Meo people, and with some luck, the Meo could hold onto what they

controlled and send some of the excess population to the hills of Sayaboury Province. With the dislocation, some of the people would have to relocate their vocations. <sup>25</sup>

Tony, the Wall Street security guru of the hills, was still touting Disney, but was now interested in an energy stock, Signal Oil and Gas. I made a mental note to inquire about this security upon my return to Udorn.

As reports and rumor arrived regarding the Dornier and missing Americans, they were investigated. One day we flew southwest to Yao villages of Nam Nhion and Nam Kueung on the Mekong to parley with Chao La, the surviving brother of Chao Mai, who had recently died of a myocardial infarction. Chao Mai had previous heart problems and Doc Weldon had sent him to Chiang Mai for prognosis and treatment. Tony, who had experienced frequent confrontations with Chao Mai, and had ceased going to Ban Nam Thouei (LS-118), claimed that he had caused the man's heart attack. <sup>26 27</sup>

Afterward, we flew west into Thailand and along the border of the Burmese Shan States, even making an unauthorized landing in the country. I had not flown with Tony for several years, not since our SAR search

---

<sup>25</sup> Blaine Jensen, Letter.

<sup>26</sup> Tony Poe's claim was never confirmed.

<sup>27</sup> Joe Flipse Email, 06/20/97.



east of Xieng Khouang Ville. Although not free with information, he was a good cockpit mate and no longer resorted to cyclic bumping as a pastime. Furthermore, he did not reek of alcohol.

## **JARINA**

On Wednesday 19 April, Mike Jarina tested Hotel-34 and flew a local semi-annual proficiency check with Wayne Webb in Hotel-30. The following day he was assigned to standby at the field.

Early Friday morning, he was directed to take Hotel-12 to Nam Yu and relieve me. He and Champanil would spend eight days in the field.

I was down with a minor maintenance problem until Mike arrived with parts, and the word that I was to return to Udorn later in the day. While Hopkins repaired Hotel-38, Mike worked a full day conducting forty-one landings and landing an hour after sunset. It was afternoon when I began flying again and there was only time left to work about half a fuel load. By the time we refueled for the long trip to Udorn, word was flashed that yet another CASI Dornier had disappeared while en route from Luang Prabang to Ban Houei Sai, and all airborne crews in that area were advised to be on the lookout for the single piloted aircraft. Because smoke and haze still severely limited visibility, I used the river and its numerous sandbars to navigate as

much as possible and saw no evidence of any downed plane. I chocked in on the ramp well after sunset.

Splitting his RON between 713 and AID missions, Jarina spent part of his RON with Young looking for both missing Dorniers. Leaflets continued to be dropped and Young had a jet boat that was employed to search the river.

On the 22nd, Mike was directed from Nam Yu northwest to Moung Mounge (LS-93) near the Burmese border to gather any information available about missing aircraft. Finding nothing noteworthy, he went to Ban Houei Sai to retrieve Bill, Sam, and security forces. Together with Bill Young, they landed at villages. Bill talked to the people, but did not believe they were obtaining the right information. Instead, Young suspected that as soon as the aircraft went down, people would most likely strip the bodies of all possessions and valuables. Then they would hide the evidence and tell investigators they never saw anything significant.

Returning to Site-118A, he completed the day with a roundtrip to the Phou Phan Sang area, thirty-three nautical miles east of Nam Yu.

Although flight time was lower, Sunday was a heavy work day with forty-one landings. After landing at Houei Sai, Mike went to Moung Mounge again and began

USAID shuttles to Ban Pong, north of Site-25, on the poorly maintained dirt road leading toward Nam Tha.

The next day, he retrieved the pilot of the second missing Dornier at a small strip in the Ban Houay Khu area, ten miles north of Ban Houei Lao (LS-147), between the Mekong and the high mountain ridge dividing Laos and Thailand. Seriously disoriented in smoke and haze while hauling cargo, the pilot had milled around attempting to acquire his bearings. Finally, low on fuel, he headed south, fortunately landing at a friendly unnumbered strip. The SAR had taken so long because most aircraft had searched a likely flight path directly from Luang Prabang to Ban Houei Sai. The villagers took good care of the pilot and some walked for three days to Xieng Lom where they informed AID people there of the pilot and 80X's status. The information was relayed to Vientiane on single side band radio and then passed to Ban Houei Sai. Except for diarrhea derived from eating unaccustomed food, the pilot was in good shape.

On the twenty-fifth, Mike picked up a maintenance team at Site-25 to inspect 80X and clear it for flight. He also delivered a couple of barrels of fuel and a pilot for the ferry flight. After completing the recovery duties, Mike returned to Nam Yu and began supplying outlying Team-17, forty-three miles northeast and Team-28, forty-five miles east. He then went to

refugee centers at Nam Thouei (LS-118) and Ban Nam Kueung, returning to Houei Sai before RON at Site-118A.

The following day Mike continued to divide his time between AID and 713 missions. He flew down to Ban Houei Sai and shuttled between there and Nam Thouei. Later he travelled to Team-42 north of LS-250 and the bend in the Mekong River leading south toward the Xieng Lom area. The final trip of the day went to Ban Vieng thirty miles northeast of Nam Yu in the LS-135 area.

Leads regarding the first missing Dornier continued to filter in to AID officials. Regardless of how farfetched they appeared, none were ignored and all had to be vetted. After working Houei Sai and upriver at Site-150, the Dornier search switched to Sayaboury Province. He was sent to Phu Hua Moui (LS-67), a Meo site located twenty miles southeast of Hong Sa. While returning to Houei Sai along the river, he spotted a Porter on a gravel sandbar. Thinking the pilot may have experienced a maintenance problem, Mike landed next to the plane. The pilot, Bob Main, indicated that all was well. He and his observer just wanted to obtain a better look at the river banks from that location. After fueling, Jarina was directed to a site four miles southeast of Boum Lao in the Beng Valley. On the final day of his RON, Mike generally worked between Nam Yu and Houei Sai. Missions were also flown to Team-6 in the Ban Vieng area and Team-11 forty miles east of Nam

Yu. On the way to Luang Prabang and Udorn, a Customer had him stop at Pak Beng, a small village located on the north bank of the Mekong still under government control. We rarely, if ever, landed at the site. While waiting for the Customer to interrogate the locals, Mike took several interesting photographs of the site and ladies working their magic on rough weaving implements.

In his book, IVS representative Bob Glover offered interesting insights into rural village cloth weaving:

*"The Sen or Lao skirt was woven from cotton grown and processed in the village. The looms were only wide enough to weave a narrow piece of cloth. They made a skirt by making a tube of this narrow cloth. Each village had its own weaving designs that were handed down [from generation to generation]. Usually, but not always a pin stripe was woven into the cloth. A border was woven separately with a definite pattern and included many colors. This was referred to as a Tim Sen. The borders were sewed to the bottom of the skirt. It was worn by folding the left side into a deep pleat then securing it with a knot or belt. The pleat gave room to walk comfortably.*

*Men wear an Ap Nam cloth, eighteen inches wide and four feet long which are woven in the villages. These are either black and white or red and white in a*



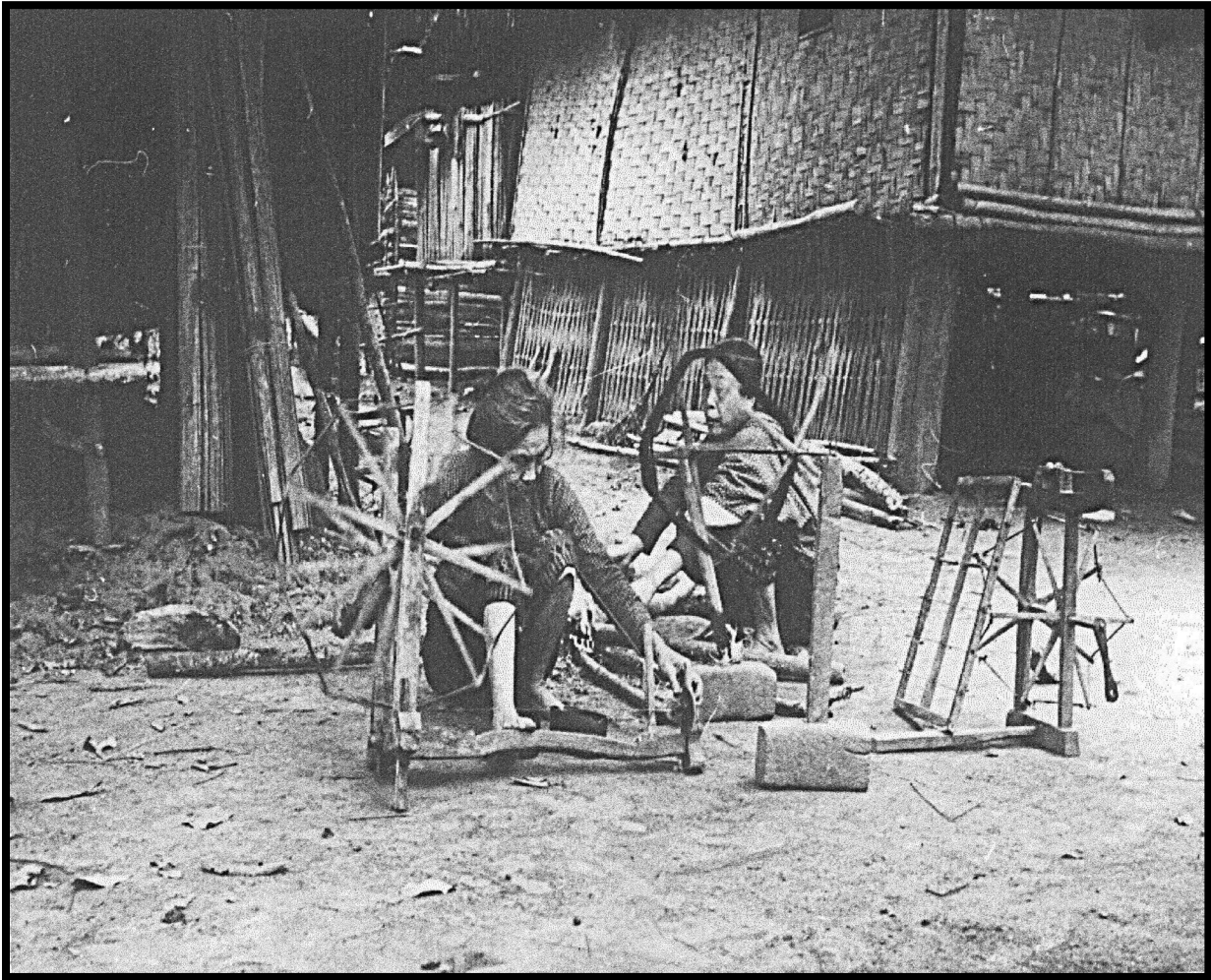
Photograph taken overhead Ban Pak Beng from Hotel-12. Pak Beng was a site where the Beng River entered the Mekong River. A defensive perimeter was located below the conical shaped pinnacle fort that we used as a checkpoint when navigating west or east on the Mekong.

Jarina Collection.



A Lao lady of undetermined age busy weaving cotton material at Pakbeng. Laos.

Jarina Collection.



Cottage industries were the means of survival in remote villages. Against the background of a bamboo and thatched Lao house, ladies are preparing a rude apparatus for ginning and spinning raw cotton at Pak Beng, Laos.

Jarina Collection.



*checkerboard pattern. They wear this around the waist like a skirt."* <sup>28</sup>

## **BINGO**

By four May the fate of 80X was resolved, but the discovery was not a result of the air search.

Long after the Dornier's disappearance, at considerable risk, representatives from a Meo village long believed sympathetic to the Pathet Lao cause arrived at Luang Prabang to conduct informal discussions with Lao government officials and intimating they had knowledge regarding 80X. They had journeyed from one of a few small villages, Ban H Ngat, located on the long southern finger of the Phou Vaysom Gnai mountain area that soared to over 5,900 feet twenty-six miles west of Luang Prabang. They asserted that the low flying plane had been shot down by a few Meo Pathet Lao in the area. Before producing evidence, the men wanted to be absolutely certain there would be no reprisals against the village.

With assurances in hand, they delivered a piece of the aircraft tail displaying the identifying side number. Since the area was considered hostile, FAR troops were introduced to clear the area and provide

---

<sup>28</sup> Mike Jarina Interview.  
Jarina April 1967 Flight Time.  
Jane Glover Impressions of Hand-Woven Cloth, 59, 62.

security. This was accomplished with Meo tribesmen assistance and resulted in some casualties.

There was some confusion as to the disposition of missing passengers and crew of 80X. According to one source, none of the bodies were recovered. Meo villagers related that Pathet Lao soldiers had buried the bodies and were guarding the wreckage until the first leaflet drop. Fearing the consequences of their act, they first exhumed and then vacated the area with the bodies. By the time Bob Glover and other interested parties arrived at the crash site on 6 May, there was little left of the plane. Villagers had scavenged all the metal and other parts to craft knives, bowls, and other items.

The *Pacific Stars and Stripes* later reported:

*"The bodies of five Americans and two Lao were found Thursday by a Royal Lao Army unit in the wreckage of the twin-engine Continental Air Service Dornier reported missing since April 6..*

*The victims were..*

*A recovery party has been flown to the site."*

Of course. some of the motivation for revealing the aircraft location revolved around the two million-kip (about 1,000 dollars) reward offered on the original leaflet and Lao radio for information leading to the aircraft recovery. With information from Luang Prabang Lao regarding the Meo villagers as Pathet Lao

sympathizers, there was opposition from the Lao government for paying a large reward. Instead of a cash award, the villages were asked to provide a list of material items they needed and desired. These items were eventually delivered and amounted to a great deal more than an actual kip payment. <sup>29</sup> <sup>30</sup>

### **MILITARY REGION-3**

On 22 April in a road watch team located in the Mugia Pass area reported eighty trucks moving south. This marked the first significant convoy observed in April, and far exceeded the five per day noted during the preceding three weeks.

Analysis's speculated the spurt in traffic was an attempt to precede the heavy spring rains that appeared

---

<sup>29</sup> Blaine Jensen Letter, 04/18/96.  
Wess Tribble.

John Perry Letter to Ambassador Sullivan.

Bill Young Interview.

Ernie Khun, Article from the *Pacific Stars and Stripes* (page 4)  
Dated 05/08/67.

<sup>30</sup> Since the Author could discover no written record of the incident, possibly because of the ramifications of life insurance and benefits to relatives, the above account was reconstructed from involved principals. There were conflicting accounts of the 80X occupants' eventual disposition, if the aircraft was indeed brought down by unfriendly fire, or merely crashed into the mountain, as was reported at the time. Therefore, regardless of the *Stars and Stripes* article stating the bodies were found, the Author believes the more plausible account of AID worker Blaine Jensen that the bodies were secreted deep in the jungle by the Pathet Lao and never discovered.

early. *"The rainy season [did] not normally hit the panhandle until June but...standing water and deep mud [were] observed along parts of Route-23 and Route-911."*<sup>31</sup>

## **MOUNG PHALANE**

Ever since a TACAN unit had been installed at Site-61 in Military Region Three, nervousness and apprehension increased at the forward base located on Route-9. This came to a head 2300 hours on Saturday 22 April, when Air America radio operator Suwit roused mechanic Torres from a deep sleep with information that 4,000 Pathet Lao troops were three hours march from the station. Nothing happened, but despite the total estimate of enemy being downgraded to 500, this was still cause for alarm. Therefore, by Sunday afternoon, all American AID and TACAN personnel had departed the area.

That evening, Suwit invited the local FAR commanding officer, his subordinate, one of their friends to dinner at the radio station to discuss the enemy situation. Drinks were served. From his quarters, Torres heard a commotion. When he investigated, he saw Suwit and Wonna being pushed and shoved during a fracas. The disgruntled Lao left. They returned with arms demanding more beer, which Suwit stated he could

---

<sup>31</sup> CIA Daily Bulletin, 04/29/67.

not spare. New arguments preceded another scuffle. In the midst of the melee, one of the soldiers attempted to shoot Wanna twice, but his carbine misfired.

Following the incident, now unnerved more by the threat from the FAR garrison than the Pathet Lao, the radio operators and mechanics elected to act. Therefore, in the middle of the night, they moved into the woods and huddled together until daybreak. Then they returned to the station.

There was no attack by the Pathet Lao-this time.

Flying on Hotel-45, Mister Shane Tang returned to Savannakhet in early May to talk about a garbled message from L-39 via L-08 to T-08. Afterward, the PIC of Hotel-45 took Shane to Moung Phalane. Because of problems with the FAR, on 30 April, a new experienced three-man crew replaced the former radio operators and mechanic. There he briefed the senior radio operator and requested that he help relay messages from Saravane station and other weak stations who had difficulty contacting Tango-08. Through some anomaly or wave propagation, Lima-61 and Luang Prabang had stronger transmissions than the remaining five weather net stations.

Upon his return to Lima-39, Tang discovered no flights were scheduled to Udorn, so he checked into a local hotel. Before leaving for town at 1700 hours, he noted Volpar aircraft departing on long night flights.

On Friday Shane visited the Air America hostel, newly leased to accommodate the VTB pilots. Later, he boarded CASI C-47, PDH for Udorn. <sup>32</sup>

## **KNIGHT**

With Wayne Webb preferring to conduct local proficiency checks rather than place himself at risk flying upcountry, CPH Wayne Knight had more time to conduct upcountry route checks. Consistent with his policy to keep his Thai pilots in the lowlands until they were more acclimated to the Lao terrain, on the 13th, he and recently upgraded Captain Boonchoo took a H-34 to Paksane. So far unrestricted by Taipei management, this opportunity afforded Wayne the chance to vacate his office and assess pilot performance in the field, the situation, meet Customers, and possibly look for potential accommodations other than the AID house and local hotels.

Following a briefing, they were directed to PS-11 at Ban Lao Ngam. With the site, seized and controlled by the FAR since January, replacement FAN troops sent from Moung Soui were content to sit there and wait for General Prasouk's orders. Their next stop was at PS-19 (Senammana), fifteen miles north of Saravane. The site

---

<sup>32</sup> Shane Tang, Incident at Moung Phalane as Reported by Torres, 04/22, 23/67.  
Tang Trip Report, 05/06/67.

was later numbered LS-419 and often used for road watch team missions. Plateau work followed their return to L-11. One mission went to PS-27 on the southeastern Bolovens, a couple of miles west of Phou Kham Phouk (LS-166), one of the Nung training sites. Following an interim stop at Houei Kong, the crew RON at Paksane.

On Friday, Wayne flew with Boonchoo to a Special Forces camp at Ban Soukhouma (L-45). The site was located on the Mekong's west bank, twenty-seven miles south of Lima-11 along Route-14.

After returning to Pakse, Knight joined "Pappy" Wright for a return to Udorn.

On the 19th, Bell 39F was in Udorn for a hundred-hour inspection. After the machine was pulled out of the barn for test, monitored by Robbie, Wayne had his second comprehensive session of basic maneuvers before the ship went back upcountry.

Six days later Wayne returned upcountry with Alex Nadalini. After fueling at Sam Tong, they were sent to Moung Soui and then Phu Cum (LS-50) to conduct refugee shuttles.

The next morning the CPH became part of the crew on 39F. They popped across Skyline into the Long Tieng bowl to retrieve Vang Pao's officers for site inspections, current intelligence gathering, and dissemination of near-term plans in northern Military Region Two. Several stops were planned. After flying

"around the horn" to Na Khang, they flew twenty-four miles south to Boum Long (still known as LS-88), west to Phou Vieng (LS-06), and back to Boum Long. After taking on fuel at Site-36, the trip continued twelve miles south to Houei Sa An (LS-127), a site less than four miles east of Route-6, an enemy artery leading to the Ban Ban Valley. The site was an alternate to LS-23 bearing the same name that was lost during a previously engagement. When the business at Site-127 was completed, they flew a considerable distance northwest to Mang Kout (LS-195), thirteen miles north of Moung Heim. It was a full day, and by the time the crew returned to Na Khang it was too late to RTB to Site-20. Therefore, they RON there and Wayne deadheaded back to Udorn the following day. <sup>33</sup>

## **LUANG PRABANG**

I had not quite acquired my targeted April flight time. Therefore, on the 27th, I was scheduled for a Thailand mission with Flight Mechanic Frank Fee in Hotel-38.

The last two days of the month were spent at Luang Prabang in Hotel-49 with Bob Bedell. Hotel-49 was one of three UH-34D aircraft bailed from the Marine Corps and accepted in early April. When "new" helicopters

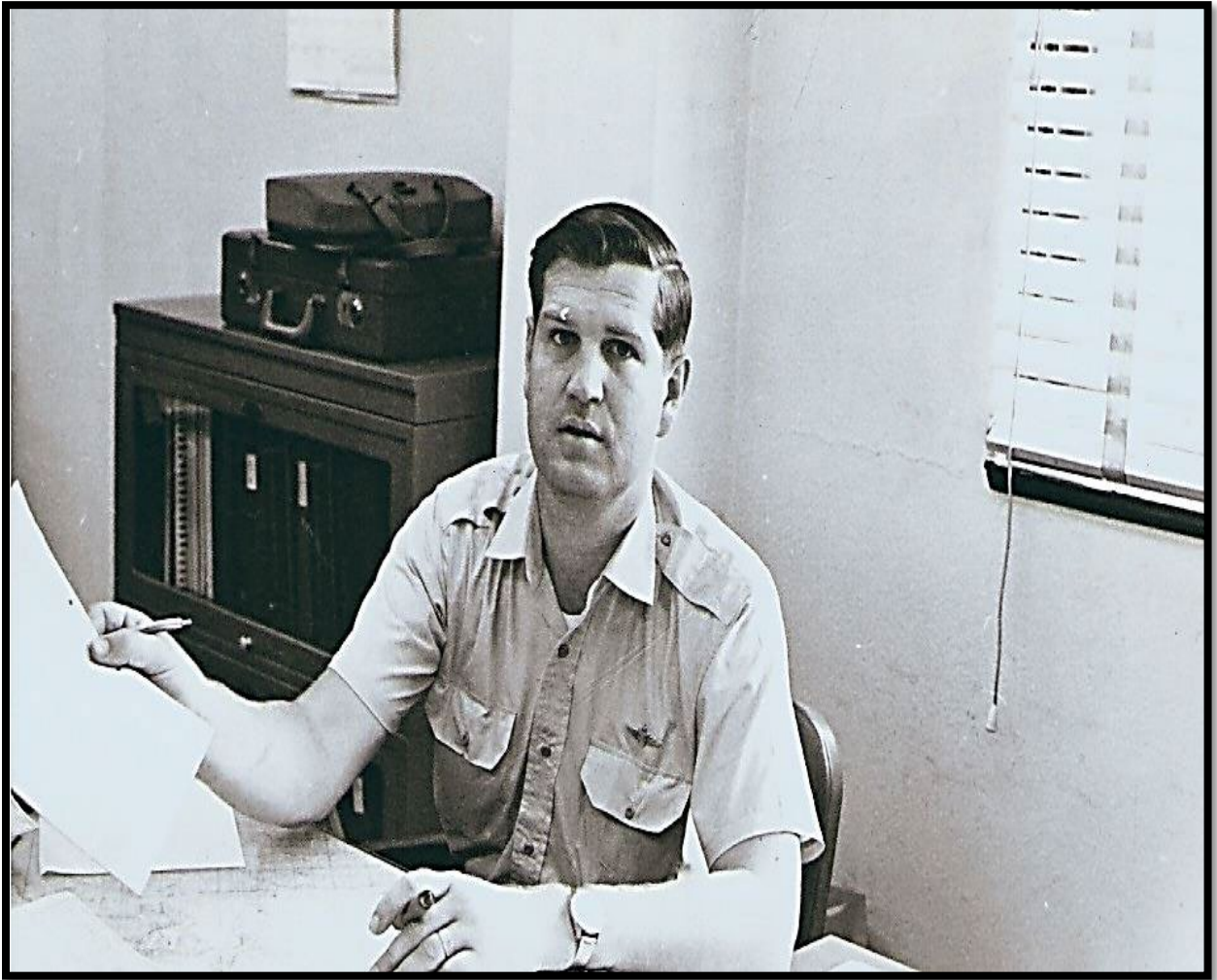
---

<sup>33</sup> EW Knight Email.  
Knight Logbook Entries, 08/08/00.



were first received, Jack Forney's people conducted a comprehensive inspection, followed by a test flight, before clearance for the field.

A common practice during crew changes, deadheading Captain Bob Davis occupied the left seat. A direct 156-mile northwest flight over the mountains was the norm during those days. En route, I noticed one of the two hydraulic gage needles fluctuating more than normal. I considered turning back to base, but there was no feedback felt through the controls, and the aircraft was responding normally to my inputs. I was initially baffled. Then, after cycling the controls, I deduced the answer. The pitch channel of the automatic stabilization feature (ASE) was apparently hooked up to the normally deactivated collective channel. After disengaging the ASE, I turned the controls over to Bob. Then I used my pocket knife to remove the ASE control panel located vertically between the two cockpit seats. One glance told me the conundrum was solved. Some inexperienced ground mechanic, despite color coding that was never Murphy proof, had attached cannon plugs to the wrong jack. Although not serious, this installation error was sending erroneous signals to the primary servo gage. After I was finished reinstalling cannon plugs to the correct position, the black panel, and reengaging the ASE, Bob, who had an engineering degree from college, was amazed that I was able to



Captain Bob Davis in his office during a later management billet.

Author Collection.

analyze and solve this problem, and effect quick repairs while in the air. Although taking satisfaction that I had accomplished something worthwhile, my action was just another way of keeping the helicopter operating.

Following the March attack at Nam Bac, FAR efforts to correct deficiencies became evident. From a morale standpoint as well as a spring board for Agency operations, the area was still considered an important plum in the government's inventory of friendly territory. Therefore, collective emphasis from Luang Prabang agencies to supply and reinforce Nam Bac continued at a brisk pace. This included support from air assets from Air America, CASI, and the RLAF. In addition to fire bases mounted on the high ground, tribal villages dotted the landscape surrounding Site-203. Efforts by AID representatives to supply these people were not all altruistic, for the villes provided a flanking buffer zone and early warning system for FAR units located at Nam Bac.

After 1954, the Thai Dam began moving south away from Ho Chi Minh's repressive collectivization movement patterned after the communist system. The people ranged south of Luang Prabang to Vientiane and even Udorn. Thai Dam were even at Sam Tong. On one occasion, Pop and Blaine Jensen invited me to a small party at a Thai

Dam's house. Although the food was good, I sincerely regretted eating congealed blood sausage.

Tai Dam easily assimilated, and one owned a nightclub near the Seri Udorn Hotel. One settlement around Nam Bac was located at Ban Li, a well-organized Thai Dam village a few miles east of the Nam Bac complex. Mac Thompson recalled a dentist and his wife providing service to a local with an ingenious machine. While the dentist performed the specified work, his wife manually turned a large bicycle type wheel. Reducing RPM, a leather belt was connected to a smaller six-inch wheel, which in turn spun the drill bit.<sup>34</sup>

Because of enemy activity that the FAR could or would not address, the airborne route between Luang Prabang and Site-203 was not particularly safe for a low, slow flying helicopter. To avoid incidents, when weather permitted, using the radar altimeter, I climbed to and cruised at 8,000 ASL to avoid small arms and 12.7mm fire from reputed enemy AAA weapons. If heavily loaded, it required time to achieve this altitude and added time to the round trips. Still, I had never been hit at altitude and I wanted to prolong this successful strategy. When near or overhead Nam Bac in supposedly friendly country, I descended quickly for landing.

---

<sup>34</sup> Mac Thompson Email, 12/11/99.



A view of Nam Bac and surrounding valley from Hill 3353, Phu Kou, located two and a half miles southeast of the strip. A series of such high positions formed perimeter security for Site-203.

Thompson Collection.



An Air America UH-34D pilot landing at the Phu Kou helicopter landing zone (HLZ). Hill 3353 was the location of a firebase protecting the southeastern flank of the Nam Bac complex. Emergency drummed fuel can be seen in two pits at the foot of the HLZ. Workers at the left of the landing zone are seen distributing supplies from a previous shuttle.

Thompson Collection.





Command post at Ban Houei Ngat, located in the hills south of Route-4 and two and a half miles northwest of the Nam Bac airstrip. At the time of the photo, sporadic enemy mortar fire impacts the FAR fortifications.

Thompson Collection, circa April 1967.



The well-organized Tai Dam village of Ban Li, located four miles east of Nam Bac, Laos. Many Tai Dam people settled in the valley following the French-Viet Minh battle at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

Thompson Collection.





Looking similar to a Meo with traditional black clothing and silver necklace, a Tai Dam woman with a baby carried papoose style sits in a village south of Luang Prabang. Like Meo clans, Tai Dam built houses on the ground. To the lower right, a maul is tucked into the base board of a house. A broom rests against the house to the woman's left.

Author Collection.



Ban Khong, a small village located half a mile northeast of the Nam Bac airstrip and south of the Route-4/9 junction. Low hills yielded to higher mountains in the distance.

Thompson Collection.

There were generally several other helicopters working the Nam Bac detail, and I joined them conducting supply missions to outlying defensive positions. Weather permitting, we generally worked right up to twilight, leaving just enough time to return to the Luang Prabang airport at dark.

After a night at Luang Prabang and one fuel load the following morning, I was relieved. Fortunately, within a reasonably short time I managed to obtain a ride on C-123 655 to Vientiane and then to Udorn. The month yielded me almost eighty hours flight time.

### **SEATO and ANZUS**

During a five-day period in April, two meetings occurred in Washington. Chaired by Secretary of State Dean Rusk, all representatives of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), and American-New Zealand-Australia (ANZUS) were present. Participants, except France, included Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Pakistan, Philippines, United Kingdom, and the United States. Among other items they discussed events in Laos and Thailand.

### **Laos**

The council's members were quite concerned over persistent North Vietnamese violations of the 1962 Geneva Accord in Laos. They objected to the Vietnamese

army presence in the country and their blatant participation against the RLG troops, the use of Lao trails to funnel supplies and men into South Vietnam, and the support for insurgency in Thailand.

Although largely ineffective and without adequate teeth to impose their will, the organizations reiterated the desire to administer the Geneva Accords. They also supported Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's government of National Union to seek peace by securing the sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of an independent and neutral Laos.

### **Thailand**

Turning to Thailand, the members noted an increase in communist efforts over the past year to subvert Thai infrastructure and provoke insurgency in the kingdom. In addition, there was positive evidence of Chinese and North Vietnamese support for the movement. All members were heartened by the Thai government's efforts to counter the insidious threat by employing rural development programs to further the peoples' standard of living and to resist communist inroads. <sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Stebbins Editor, Documents on American Foreign Relations 1967 published for the Council on Foreign Relations The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization: Communiqué of the Twelfth Meeting of the SEATO Council, Washington, D.C. 04/18-20/67. The ANZUS Treaty: Communiqué of the Sixteenth Meeting of the ANZUS Council, Washington, 04/21-22/67 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968) 258, 261-262, 265-266.

Another more definitive and detailed report relating to communist insurgency (CI) in Thailand was disseminated to interested parties soon after the SEATO meeting. There had been no major trends in insurgency since the September 1966 report, and a slow growth in the estimated 1,300-armed terrorists in the northeast was noted.

The principal CI methodology had focused on terrorism and armed propaganda. Personnel recruitment and formation of supporting villages were the goals, but were having problems. Insurgents were organized into small units in the extensive Phu Phan Mountain range and in remotely populated areas. At times, they entered villages on the periphery of these areas to cause dissent between the RTG and these people. Then they would strive to set up their own government.

Depending on Thai countermeasures, military and political developments outside Thailand continued and communist pressures were expected. However, China's internal problems seemed to have diminished the radio propaganda from the Voice of the Thai People. Increasing military action against the Viet Cong in South Vietnam and along the Ho Chi Minh Trails could initiate more communist action on the border areas of northeast Thailand.

---

Some terrorism in the mid-South, North, and other parts of the country was expected, especially along the Malaysian-Thai border.

Prior to the withdrawal of CH-3 helicopter lift support from NKP on 31 January, a sizeable counterinsurgency operation had commenced. Most of the seven provinces and 180 villages involved were located in northeast (Isan) with a goal to deny manpower and resources to CI on a continuing basis. This was a radical change from major one-time clearing sweeps to ones of government presence and protection, along with civil activity to gain local populations' confidence and allegiance in the RTG.

Each village was equipped with a team of Volunteer Defense Corps villagers (similar to the ADC units in Laos), a Village Security Organization, Peoples' Assistance Teams, all reinforced by Provincial Police. These specific defense measures were further supported by Border Police Patrol platoons or Royal Thai Army Special Forces commando units. In one particularly disruptive area of Nakhon Phanom, a battalion from UDORN was deployed. Since the current operation began, contact with the enemy had increased and CI activity was thwarted in two critical districts of NKP and Nong Khai provinces.

By late 1964 early 1965, prompted by the USG buildup of bases in Thailand and when communist

strategy increased in Isan, during a coordinated military and civilian effort, military assistance program (MAP) and AID funds increased. This was largely accomplished by efforts of the U.S. Mission Bangkok (USOM). Although encouraged and aided by USG, the joint planning programs were generally Thai in origin.

Sharing a very long border with Laos, Thai leaders were cognizant of future threats to the country. They were sensitive to instability or increased PL-NVA activity in Laos, and assisted in the conflict with artillery units at Moung Soui and combat pilots to fly strike missions in Lao T-28s.

Since the USAF CH-3s were rotated back to South Vietnam, sixteen Thai UH-34D helicopters and crews were deployed to Isan. Five were assigned to Sakon Nakhon (Tango-38). A high priority for added helicopters and pilot-maintenance training was an ongoing process.

The Thai police force and police stations had been expanded. A Joint Security Center was opened at Chiang Mai to gather intelligence in the Northern provinces. Reliable and valid intelligence was only obtainable through good relations with villagers, something the BPP Civic Action program was tailored to perform.

To enhance counterinsurgency measures, Accelerated Rural Development Programs (ARD), aided by U.S. Seabee units, pushed roads into back country areas to open up isolated villages and foster new market opportunities.

Seabee units also advised and assisted Thai border police construction teams in hill tribe areas. In addition, hoping to win the hearts and minds of the people, they provided medical aid to the sick, lame, and lazy.

Under the auspices of USIS, eleven centers were initiated throughout the country to disseminate information relating to the security and development of Thailand and the dangers of communist subversion. Mobile Information Teams were supplemented by Royal Thai Army Psychological Operations Company personnel, who used leaflets, posters, and airborne public address (PA) systems to spread anti-Chinese propaganda.

U.S. military expertise was a key factor in the effort to stem counterinsurgency advances. RTAF, Special Forces, and Thai National Police training proceeded under the auspices of U.S. Army specialists. Royal Thai Army infantry were schooled in CI techniques by joint American-RTA Special Forces teams at Trang, Pak Chong, and Sakon Nakhon. Five Air Commando teams were active at Koke Kathiem (Lopburi), Chiang Mai, Ubon, Udorn, and Don Muang RTAF bases training in CI techniques and tactics.

Despite encouraging advances in combating insurgence, communist pressure was expected to continue. It was deemed essential to USG interests in Southeast Asia to combat CI in Thailand. Therefore, a



good case could be presented for continued assistance for this cause. <sup>36</sup>

To better manage the countrywide situation, by October, the Royal Thai Government-mandated counterinsurgency operations were fully assigned to military control. Headquarters for the northeast was located at Sakon Nakhon. The government also decided to relocate some of the estimated 60,000 Vietnamese refugees living in Isan to South Vietnam. Not many were willing to be repatriated.

With insurgency in Isan diminishing, a new communist front opened in the north. During the remaining months of 1967 not all counterinsurgency programs were successful, and RTA military sweeps were largely unsuccessful. During November, attacks commenced on lowland villages and BPP posts in remote areas of Chiang Rai and Nan Provinces.

Most of the insurgents were drawn from Meo tribes living in the mountains of northern Thailand with communist cadres in control. The Meo were comfortable on their own terrain and able to choose a favorable place and time for battle. It was later revealed that from early 1967, subversive activity had countered a substantial portion of civic action painstakingly

---

<sup>36</sup> United States Foreign Relations, 1967, Thailand. Thai Counterinsurgency Effort-CSC/CPM.

gained by Border Police Patrol (BPP) teams over the years. It had increased tension and fear in the area.

Mountain people were considered very independent types, only loyal to immediate villages or tribes. With little or no input in the Thai central government, they simply preferred to live their way of life unfettered from Thai government controls. They took umbrage at restrictive government laws prohibiting opium cultivation and slash and burn agriculture that was inherent in their culture. Like Meo living in Laos, they mistrusted Thai motives and considered BPP and RTA units intruders. Theft and destruction of property by government patrols had been counterproductive to CI goals. Threats and penalties that included bombing and burning villages suspected of harboring insurgents had further alienated the hill people.

Insurgents were quick to take advantage of these grievances by offering to establish a Meo Kingdom where the people would be free to grow opium and perform their agricultural practices. The Meo were encouraged to arm themselves against the Thai foreign devils. Several hundred Meo were reputedly influenced over the years to leave their homes for subversion training in Laos and North Vietnam.

The situation in Sayaboury, Laos, was somewhat different for the Meo people. There, Meo leaders occupied all national administration posts in their

villages and shared higher provincial duties with Lao officials. In Thailand, no leaders like General Vang Pao existed in the mountainous provinces. Not much cross-border unity existed between Meo villages, and tribal leaders exercised no authority over Meo living in Thailand. In the northwest portion of Sayaboury Province, mainly because of RLG inability to protect them from Pathet Lao, some enemy success was achieved recruiting Meo men to fight against the RLG. Although villages were sometimes employed for provisions and shelter by insurgents moving through to assigned areas in Thailand, other ethnic tribes on either side of the border were not greatly involved in subversive activity.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> CIA Directorate of Intelligence, December 1968. Geographic Brief on North Thailand and Northwest Laos Border area. (The brief is mostly oriented to Thailand, but a similar brief exists regarding Laos that is dated February 1967.) ([foia.usia.gov/scrips/cgiserv](http://foia.usia.gov/scrips/cgiserv)). John Henderson and Co-Authors, *Area Handbook for Thailand*, (Washington: USG Printing Office, 1971)207. Sayed Kurdpol, Counterinsurgency.

**G**reatly aided by USAF Nimrod A-26 attacks, directed by Thai Forward Air Guides (FAG) who controlled effective night strikes against vehicles on Routes-6 and 68, and otherwise relatively light enemy action in upper Military Region Two, General Vang Pao's Meo forces were on the march in Houa Phan. With fewer enemy units moving out of Sam Neua and north from the Ban Ban Valley, he had sufficient time to develop ADC resources from the Phou Pha Thi and Houei Kah Moun (LS-111) areas. After mustering two battalions, a rainy season operation commenced that would take units east across the Phou Den Din crescent to elevated terrain north of the old Momentum site at Hong Nong (LS-86), where Tony Poe received his second comeuppance during January 1965. The ultimate goal of the operation was to keep the enemy off balance and away from principal bases, provide intelligence, and harass and interdict Route-6 and alternate LOCs in the vicinity of Sam Neua town. <sup>1</sup>

## **INTEL**

*"Supplies brought to the North Vietnamese border during late March and April are continuing to filter*

---

<sup>1</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 169.

into Laos toward the Plaine des Jarres. Trained observers inside Laos report that about 36 trucks a day, the highest rate in recent months moved west between 6 and 10 May. This activity along the principal route from North Vietnam appears to be a stockpiling operation before the rainy season begins..."<sup>2</sup>

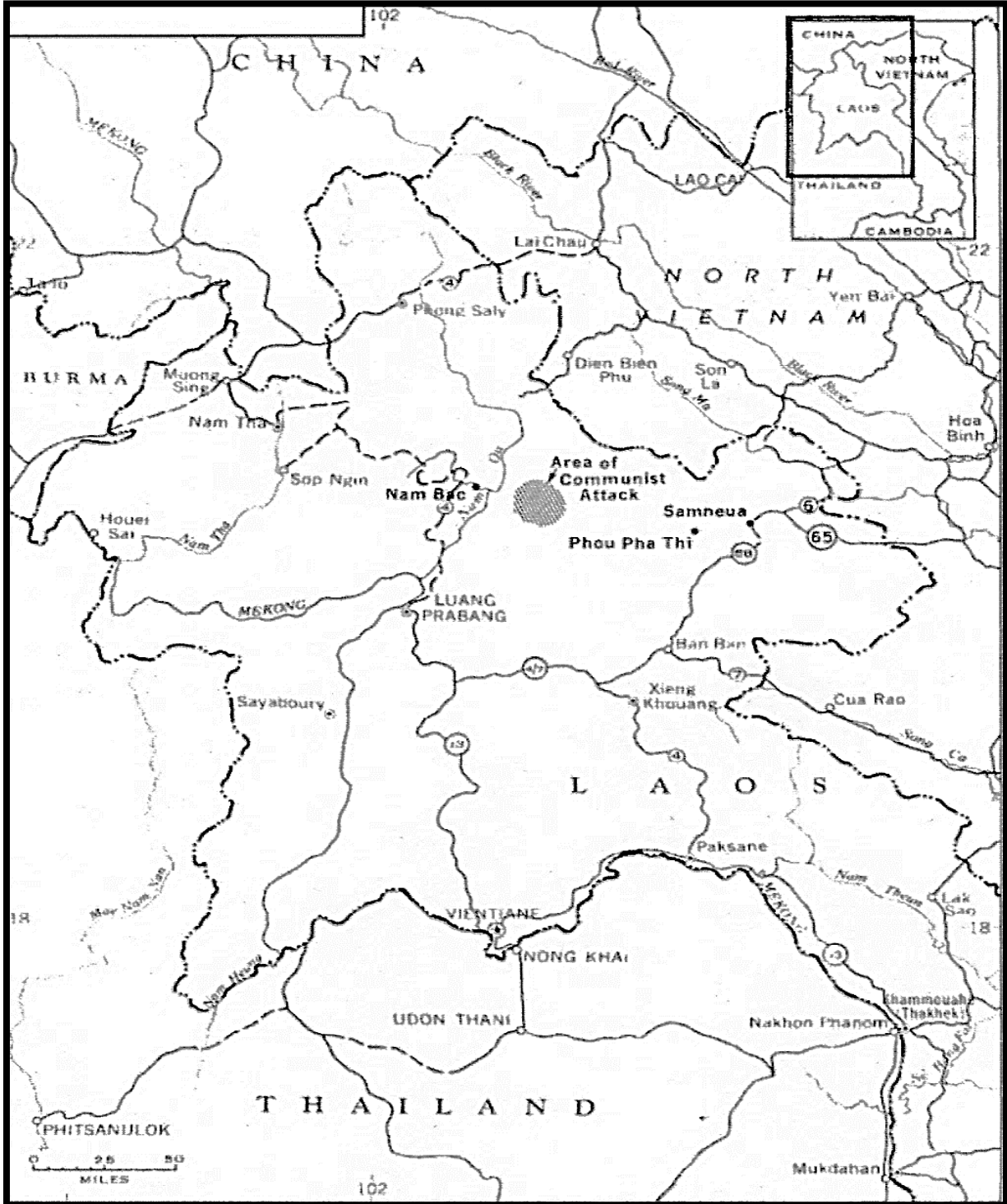
"In late April and early May, two communist battalions captured several guerrilla positions east of Nam Bac. The attacks are probably in response to recent government efforts to link elements east of the Nam Hou [Ou] River with positions near Nam Bac. They may also be a prelude to a communist attempt to recapture Nam Bac itself, which the government seized last summer and has built into a key forward base. There have been unconfirmed reports of a North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao build-up near Nam Bac.

Farther east, communist forces were reported early this month [May] to be moving toward a progovernment outpost with access to Route 6 and 65 and the town of [Sam Neua]. In early May, government troops pushed back enemy forces threatening a key government base at Phou Pha Thi.

Although the communists are reacting to the increased aggressiveness of government forces in the area, they may also be attempting to weaken the government's ability to monitor their movements from

---

<sup>2</sup> CIA Daily Bulletin, 05/16/67. Laos.



April and May activity east of Nam Bac and west of Site-85.  
CIA Map, 05/17/67.

*advanced outposts, some of which are behind communist lines."* <sup>3</sup>

On Thursday 4 May, Larry Wilderom and I conducted periodic night training. While flying in Hotel-32, in addition to the required five landings, I squeezed in an Automatic Direction Finding (ADF) and Radar Ground Control approach (GCA). Night training was not like the old days. Because of USAF twenty-four-hour launch and recovery flights, one had to be especially vigilant for the unexpected emergency or returning aircraft.

Five days later I was scheduled upcountry, but Hotel-34 did not meet the airworthiness criteria during my test flights, so I was delayed.

## **PAKSE**

The next day, after additional maintenance delay, Flight Mechanic Earl Bruce and I crewed Hotel-44 to Pakse, arriving shortly after twilight. I would spend six more days in the field.

I did not fly at all on the first full day at Lima-11. Although requiring additional time away from home, these lulls afforded me the opportunity to conduct leisurely walk-about in town to observe and inhale local color like at the previously described opium den.

---

<sup>3</sup> CIA Daily Bulletin, 05/17/67. Laos: Communist forces appear to be making a renewed effort to counter recent government initiatives in isolated areas of northern Laos.

I resumed flying in earnest on Friday and for the remainder of the RON. Missions included those supporting SGU, Nung, and road watch operations. Aided by additional Agency advisors, May operations were at a high intensity level on the Bolovens, in anticipation of large unit forays planned east to Route-96 and other segments of the enemy Sihanouk supply trails. Also, by May PS-22 had been enlarged and more adequately staffed to train battalion-sized units in basic and more advanced aspects of warfare. This included training classes and field work in discipline, weapons, and small unit tactics. Later training included larger unit defensive and offensive maneuvers.

By late May elements of Battalion Commander Major Khamthai's One Special Guerrilla Unit were judged ready to be tested by their handlers. Similar to the "proof is in eating the pudding" parlance, an actual mission was the only way to judge the success of training and enemy reaction against a larger-than-normal force. Therefore, a hundred-man company was formed to maneuver and interdict Route-96 south of the abandoned Chavane strip. The first operation of this kind from the Bolovens was tailored to produce multifaceted results. Previously limited to small unit incursions, in addition to evaluating the unit's air lift viability to deploy and operate in the field, the Agency also desired to assess the Vietnamese response to a large



force penetrating their logistical area. Lastly, and always an Agency goal, as had proved quite successful in Military Region Two, planners were confident that the SGU movement would expose, concentrate, and subject enemy forces to punishing T-28 air strikes.

Early one morning in June, marking the first large SGU infiltration attempted from PS-22 involving ten Air America H-34s, a gaggle of pilots successfully lifted the SGU Company twenty-four miles northeast to a selected landing zone south of Chavane. Following the successful insertion, the pilots returned to PS-22 to await developments or anticipate work elsewhere. Soon after landing, they were informed that before moving north toward the objective, as the assault had anticipated, the unit had radioed that they had almost immediately come under fire at the landing site, with enemy forces striking a devastating blow on the inexperienced group. Therefore, Khamthai, concerned all the aircraft would depart and leave him without air support, ordered guards placed on each ship. Crews were not allowed to approach the helicopters and Flight Mechanics could not refuel or inspect their ships.

Within a couple of hours, the operation dissolved completely. Khamthai was livid. One of the operation's planners, American-trained Lieutenant Colonel Soutchay Vongsavanh, who had ostensibly been dispatched to PS-22 to interpret for and monitor the operation for General

Phasouk, was seen to display no command ability. Instead, he appeared flustered, embarrassed, like he wanted to crawl into the nearest hole.

One of the participants, Captain Frank Stergar, recommended to the Customer that a recon be conducted to ascertain what the situation actually required and where the force should move if an emergency exfil was necessary. Therefore, with Khamthai onboard, two H-34s piloted by Scratch Kanach and Frank launched for the area. Once overhead, they were unable to discern any activity around the landing zone. Marking this, they selected a viable and potential extraction point some distance south.

While the SGU were supposedly taking a pasting and incurring serious casualties, Major Khamthai, monitoring the situation by radio from an airborne H-34 pilot, forcefully requested Agency advisors at PS-22 to launch the H-34 crews and withdraw his people. <sup>4</sup>

Because of Customer Stephens' stubborn reluctance to commit aircraft to a lost cause, a heated argument

---

<sup>4</sup> In the Author's estimation, association with, and knowledge of Don Stephens' sloppy methods, Don weighed the risks of an exfiltration of uncertain proportions from a different perspective. Except for only panicked requests from the troops, a current and accurate analysis of the ground situation was not available. In addition, a major part of an operation's objective was to assess how newly trained SGU would fare under combat pressure. Without further reliable intelligence, or T-28 air support, he could not consciously subject H-34 crews to almost certain battle damage and potential losses.

arose between the airborne battalion commander and the CIA Case Officer. The dispute was only resolved later when Generals Phasouk and Ouane arrived to mediate at the Attopeu neutral ground.

Lacking T-28 air support, whatever defenses, if any, attempted by the group crumbled, and by afternoon the unit no longer existed as a viable fighting force. Only a little over ten percent of the beleaguered company eventually escaped and returned to friendly lines.

Frank Stergar had previously worked with and helped train Khamthai's people. The pilot and major interfaced well and Frank's constructive suggestions on military matters were readily accepted. However, he discovered that Khamthai also possessed a violent nature. He told Frank that Captain Herb Baker had preceded him at PS-22 and he had found Herb difficult to work with; and if he ever returned to PS-22, he would kill him. In all fairness, Baker was indeed a very opinionated individual and sometimes a very difficult person with whom to cope.

Stergar later recalled Colonel Soutchay as a large, strikingly handsome person who appeared very impressive in uniform. He spoke excellent English, but conducted himself with a smile on his face, and never seemed to exert any command presence.

By all accounts, results of the first large assault attempted from PS-22 ended in a complete disaster. Therefore, with the difficult lesson learned from the operation, similar ambitious plans were placed on hold for several months pending further assessment, and near term infil-exfils were limited to small unit operations. <sup>5</sup>

## **KONG MI**

Following a very long day on Monday, we RON at PS-22 for an early morning mission staged out of Kong Mi on the 16th. Don Stephens' people were not equipped to accommodate more than a couple of crews at a time, so we slept on cots on the large screened porch of the living-dining facility.

Early the next morning, we flew south to PS-7, where Doug Swanson and his young assistant (the same person who graciously presented me with a brass native pipe) waited to brief us for a trail watch mission. By then several teams had been formed for the work. Out of the eighteen eventually trained, some were programmed for aggressive action. Doug's humor prevailed, and

---

<sup>5</sup> Ken Conboy, 174.

Soutchay, 38.

Bill Leary May 1967 Notes.

Frank Stergar Email.

Stergar, who was an active participant in the operation, discounts Soutchay's recollections as "whitewash," self-serving, and substantially skewing the facts. In like manner, Conboy, who relied entirely on Soutchay's account, recorded the same errors.

individual teams were designated with alcoholic beverage call signs. <sup>6</sup>

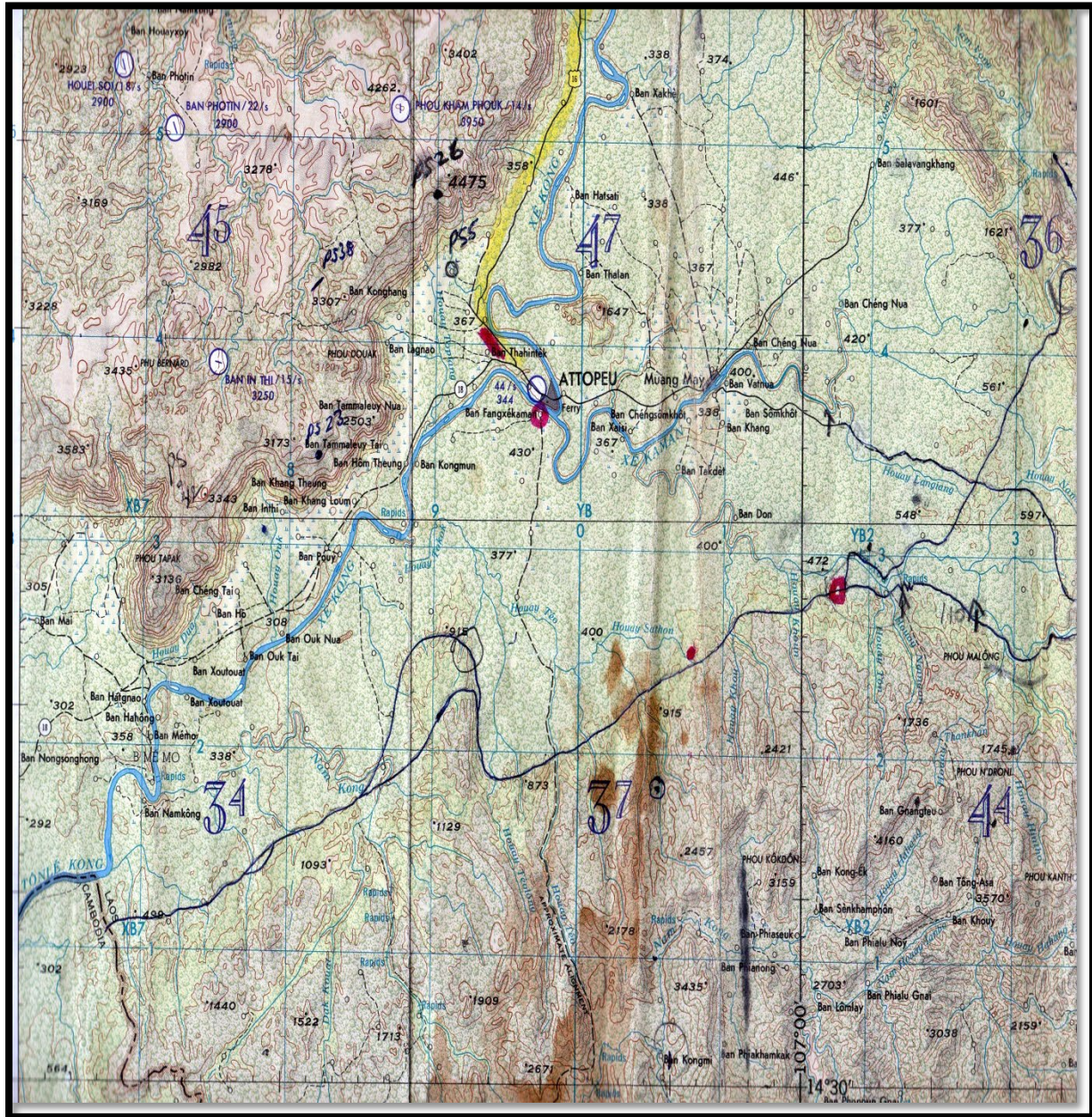
There were two missions scheduled. The first involved retrieving Doug's local trail watch men from a landing zone twenty-one miles west. The pickup spot was located on a hilly finger three miles south of Route-110 that wound through relatively open scrub lowlands at its western-most section. The area in question was not far from the ill-defined Cambodian border, where the Se Kong penetrated the country and the supply trail assumed the identity of Route-97 in that country. Discovery was what these early road watch missions initially entailed. Recently unearthed rice supplied evidence that supplies were moving into Laos from Cambodia and being stored in western caches along this long artery, pending completion of sections of Route-110 to Route-96. It was assumed that the supplies were slated to be funneled to Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army troops in Laos and South Vietnam. Planning was in the mill to interdict the route and destroy any and all means to conduct war in this region. <sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Ken Conboy, 172.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 233.





The Attopeu region in Military Region Four, an area where many Agency road watch team missions were conducted by both H-34 and Bell crews. Most missions launched from Pakse sites on the southeastern Bolovens Plateau (upper left corner) or from Kong Mi-PS-7 (circle) to various areas along Route-110 (black line), part of the communist logistical Sihanouk Trail system.

Author's 1-250,000 chart.

Mick Prulhiere joined me for the double-crewed mission. We departed at 0705 hours and after identifying the team's signal, landed, retrieved the men, and within an hour were back at Kong Mi. Another shorter mission kicked off at 0910. Both missions were accomplished without incident. <sup>8</sup>

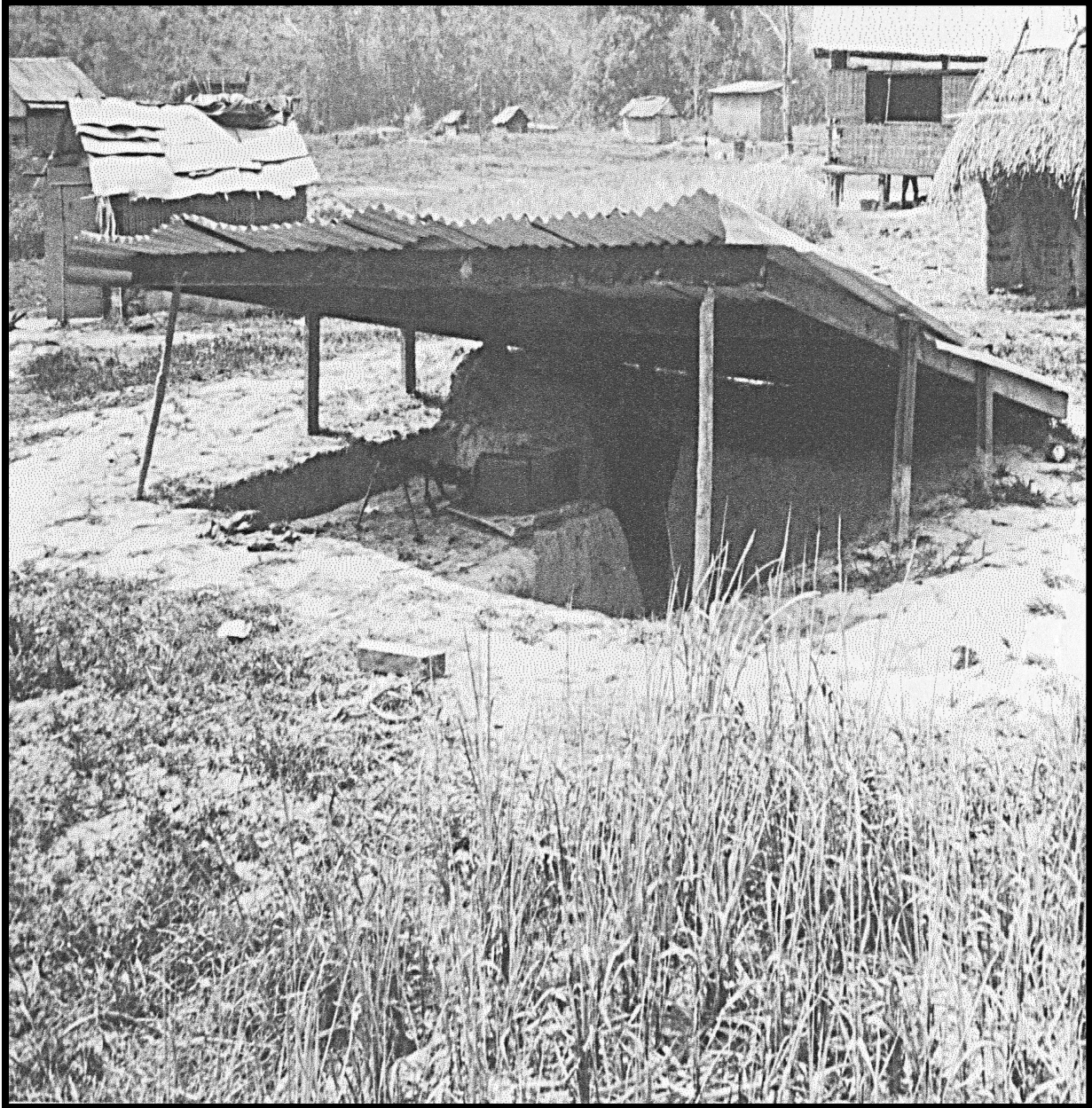
Before leaving PS-7 for work in other areas, I noted that the site was developing defensively. It was more heavily fortified with concertina wire, machine gun nests, and I was told that mine fields were liberally seeded along likely avenues of approach. 1,500 men were being organized into the local security network. Even though Kong Mi was fairly remote, with the advent of more ambitious missions, it appeared that Swanson was taking no chances defending his garrison against potential enemy intruders.

I returned to Udorn with Hotel-44. After a slow start, the RON had been fruitful, but not outstanding as to total flight time.

---

<sup>8</sup> Although participating in several Military Region Three troop movements toward the trails over the years, this was the first mission where I actually logged landing zone coordinates, and takeoff and landing times. Like SAR work, this was probably done against theoretical future compensation for the special work. It was also my first mission from Kong Mi.





A defensive light machine gun emplacement at Kong Mi, Laos.  
Author Collection.



**SHOCK**

Dutch Swanson's people had been performing their job well. For almost three months prior to April, road watch teams from Kong Mi and other areas had been sighting and reporting enemy truck traffic on Route-110, supply boats plying the Se Kong, and the presence of POL drums cached along the river. After a captured Vietnamese officer corroborated several of these reports, planning accelerated to eliminate these items.

Similar to USAF SLAM operations, but lacking the punch of B-52 strikes, the U.S. Embassy Country Team conceived SHOCK. The plan would employ twenty-four-hour tactical air, which included RLAf T-28s against targets generated by the road watch teams. In contrast to SLAM, the sizable operation would be of short duration, utilizing C-130 flare ships, additional O-1 FAC pilots staged at Pakse, and a controlling unit at Attopeu.

To ensure disparate aircraft separation during air attacks, Route-110 was sectioned into three areas. From west to east, the first portion next to the Cambodian border (Cambodia was still off limits at this time) was programmed for RLAf T-28 pilots; the next part for USAF propeller planes; and the final section for fast movers (jets).

The first four-day SHOCK operation began on 27 April. Results were deemed acceptable, with several

downsides. Less than twenty percent of the strikes were conducted at night, and, because of a SNAFU at the top Military Region Four level, RLAFF pilots did not participate. It was also believed that time delay bombs and a longer period of strikes would have been beneficial for the FACs to learn the area and for the road watch teams to collect battle damage assessment (BDA) intelligence.

Hoping to rectify the errors, during a period of increased monsoon activity, a second eight-day operation began on 20 May. Coordination was improved and RLAFF T-28 pilots participated, flying twenty-five percent of the sorties. The joint operation included artillery fire on the Se Kong from a FAR unit located on the Bolovens southern rim.

Confirmed later during road watch team field observations, the heavy rains and SHOCK-2 air strikes tended to close Route-110 for a time.

On the 17th a C-130 crew dropped chemicals on two interdiction points along Routes-96 and 110. When the chemicals mixed with rain water the soil created copious super liquid mud that would not support or permit the passage of vehicles. This first test also may have had some impact on cessation of heavy traffic. The rainy season experiment, called Commando Lava, was an extension of cloud seeding operations started the previous year during Operation Popeye. The initial

success led Ambassador Sullivan to look forward to producing mud on other arteries throughout the country: Route-19 in Military Region One; Routes-6, 7, and 4 in Military Region Two; and the entire Ho Chi Minh and Sihanouk Trail systems.

## **WEATHER MODIFICATION**

Seeding clouds to produce rain, although an old concept, being too expensive and largely unproductive, the method was rarely utilized in the world. During early August 1966, based on experiments conducted by the U.S. Navy and the Environmental Sciences and Services Administration in tweaking Mother Nature and producing rain for interdiction in Southeast Asia, the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved field trials and informed CINCPAC and COMUSMACV of such a program's potential. The plan was considered feasible and inexpensive in the total concept of interdiction. In recognition of the waning rainy season crew dispensing crew training went forward in Western USA.

During early October 1966 seeding clouds with nontoxic silver iodide smoke to produce rain along LOCs was approved and implemented by Department of Defense assets; the object being to sufficiently interdict logistical routes during the dry season. A portion of the Se Kong Valley east of the Bolovens was selected for testing. A majority of the fifty-six Project Popeye

tests were deemed satisfactory with the capability of raising and maintaining rain under controlled conditions whereby both foot and vehicle traffic was hampered. Aircraft requirements to perform the job were deemed small. They consisted of a weather reconnaissance bird and two modified C-130 planes.

As positive results from the October tests were collated and assimilated by top commanders, confidence developed that Trail flooding could be extended well past the normal monsoon period. Most leaders seemed to agree by December.

By January, with a period of maximum movement through Laos at hand, Department of Defense leaders requested State's immediate approval to begin an operational phase of rain making along passes and logistical routes in North Vietnam and Laos. Many trails passing through Laos involved low lying areas, hillsides, and stream fords that were conducive to the results of Popeye. Thinking was that vehicular traffic would be diminished or would provide targets of opportunity for air strikes of backed-up trucks.

Seeing merit in Popeye, Ambassador Sullivan previously approved the project. However, it would be conducted in secrecy and Souvanna Phouma would not be initially informed of the operation, for after the devastating flood in 1966, he would never believe induced flooding could be adequately controlled.

During early February, Secretary Rusk, leery of the potential of widespread flooding, issued a memorandum to continue the program on an experimental basis only until more data was produced regarding the overall results.

Largely based on Rusk's objections, by March McNamara withheld approval for Project Popeye. Because of President Johnson's interest, aspects of the project continued for five more years.

The slowdown in activity prompted Ambassador Sullivan to deliver the following message to Washington in early June:

*"After some delay, the rainy season has begun in earnest throughout Laos. Heavy rain has been falling for the past two weeks in the Panhandle. During the last several days, downpours were so heavy in northern Laos as to make flying almost impossible. The Mekong River Valley, which had already received nearly two feet of water by this time last year, has received several inches over the past few days and the rice cultivation cycle has begun.*

*The result of this seasonal change has been a dramatic reduction in levels of military activity throughout the country. The major difference this year is that the RLG and friendly guerrillas hold considerable territorial advantage, which they feel confident to preserve. They have used the rainy season*

to regain dry season losses. This rainy season they may be able to convert forward activity into positive gains.

On the Ho Chi Minh and Sihanouk Trails, vehicle traffic has ground almost to a halt. There is some shuttle movement on firm, high stretches of road structure, but lowland reaches have become impassable. Road watch team reports in many stretches the ground has already reached a saturation point and standing water has covered roads. This does not mean that enemy use of Lao territory for logistical purposes will cease during the rains. Waterways, bicycle trails, and human porters will still be used. We will shift our road watch teams and our tactics to take this into account.

We do not intend to relax our road watch operations and other vigilance in the Panhandle or elsewhere in Laos. We intend to use this time to extend and improve communications, to work out better liaison and response arrangements with 7th Air Force, but we will be surprised if we encounter much enemy activity in most regions and will report and evaluate what we see.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 203, 206-208, 226-228, 238.

Memorandum Under-Secretary State Political Affairs (Kohler) to Secretary Rusk, Weather Modification in North Vietnam and Laos, 01/13/67.

William Thorndale, *Interdiction in Southeast Asia November 1966-October 1968* (Headquarters Pacific Air Force, Directorate Tactical Evaluation, CHECO Division, 30 June 1968) 77.

Telegram Sullivan to State, 289, Operations Commando Lava, 05/29/67; Telegram Sullivan to State, 06/09/67.

**KNIGHT**

Chief Pilot Knight's training and field flights were somewhat limited in May. On the 14th, he began with a local acceptance ride with Dick Theriault. Dick and his wife Ruth Ann, both personable people were welcome additions to our group.

The following day, while accomplishing a Route Check, Wayne went upcountry on a day mission with Bob Davis. Flying to Vang Vieng (L-16) via Wattay Airport, they loaded some officers for an inspection tour related to support for a clearing operation slated for June. Since Kong Le's ouster as head of the FAN in 1966, the Neutralists had been more reliable as an integral part of the FAR structure.

There were several stops during the low flight time day. The crew flew north to Phou Vieng.<sup>10</sup> The site was located close to the 7/13 road junction at Sala Phu Khoun. From there they took the initial contingent and additional officers to Sam Tong for consultations with VP. After these were completed, the interested parties were returned to Phou Vieng and Vientiane.

The remainder of May was restricted to local flights that included night training with John Ford and Larry Taylor.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> LS-197, not to be confused with the Meo site of the same name across the valley from LS-50.

<sup>11</sup> EW Knight Email, 08/08/00.

**NAM YU**

Two days following a night training session with Thai Captain Boonchoo and Flight Mechanic Bob Peterson in Hotel-30, on the 16th, Mike Jarina returned to Nam Yu. Mike enjoyed working at Site-118A because of the high time generated and rapport he had with Tony. In turn, Tony and his cohorts felt comfortable with pilots like Mike who knew the area well and carried respectable loads to outlying sites.

Mike began the RON with the same ship, Hotel-30. Irish born Pat McCarthy, a blond-haired lad, was his flight mechanic. The popular fellow still conversed with an Irish brogue and his mom lived on the "Emerald Isle." After stopping at Wattay Airport to load passengers for Ban Houei Sai, Jarina launched north. Finished refueling at Nam Yu, the crew was directed northeast to Moung Mounge (LS-93) in order to shuttle units to areas near and along the Mekong, that constituted the border between Burma and Laos. The river did not flow in a straight line south above Moung Mounge. Therefore, during flights north of Site-93, a few of us, just to say we had, illegally overflew Burma where a phallic-like bulge in the border protruded deep into Laos. This was generally done at altitude. There was never any problem with this technique and I never

---



heard any feedback regarding a reported violation of international Burmese airspace.

Friday was an active day. Almost eleven hours was logged, along with some night time, and twenty-nine landings. With AID and CIA (713 contract) sharing costs, and mission requirements that frequently overlapped, he returned to LS-93 via Houei Sai. Afterward, he shuttled troops and dependents twenty-five miles southeast of LS-118A, and forty-three miles northeast and only eight miles southwest of Nam Tha Town.

Although not logging as much flight time as the previous day, Saturday was even more active with thirty-nine landings. Mike began the day for AID going from Lima-25 to Pak Beng and the surrounding area. Completing those missions, he returned to Nam Yu for fuel and several team assignments: One was scheduled forty miles east and just west of the Nam Tha to Team-11. Trips followed to Team-2, twelve miles south of Nam Tha Town; Team-8, nineteen miles southeast of 118 Alternate that was also known as Tha Fa (LS-216); Team-9, thirty-nine miles north-northeast of Nam Yu and north of LS-125.

The Nam Tha (river) flowed through both Houa Kong and Luang Prabang Provinces and did not always reflect a definitive dividing line between the provinces. Therefore, without formal written instructions, the

Agency shared responsibilities and book-keeping expenses to maintain sub-regions with sister agencies. Between Blaine, Tony, and his people at Nam Yu there was no distinction as to who worked for whom. The same tacit agreement of sharing assets existed between Agency and AID principals at Nam Yu and Ban Houei Sai as had been the case during Blaine's tenure with Pop Buell in Military Region Two. There were only so many resources available for the overall task at any time. Consequently, priorities and assets were allocated to what was deemed the foremost importance. The remainder of the work was attended to as agencies were able. It could not have worked any other way. From the war's inception, field principals understood that teamwork, mutual understanding, and respect were essential for success (in the short term).

The long term in Southeast Asia was a quagmire of doubt and uncertainty among Americans who speculated regarding the war's outcome for Western-supported forces. Many expected that the South Vietnamese people would be left with something. With luck, the Meo might cling to whatever remained to them in Laos, and then dispatch some of the population that the remaining hills could not support to the Sayaboury area. Of course, some of the people would have to change and seek other vocations.

(Unfortunately, the final result would turn out badly for both the South Vietnam and free Lao participants.)

On the 21st, Mike again worked for AID early. From Houei Sai he went to MOUNG MOUNGE to conduct area shuttles. Another trip took him twenty-five miles southeast of Nam Yu near what would later be numbered Team-201. There was a logged flight forty-five miles east of Site-118A two miles south of Tong Prang (LS-145).

Monday Jarina resumed working Houei Sai and MOUNG MOUNGE. One trip extended almost fifty miles northeast of Site-93 to a position three miles north of old Team Mai. As the situation warranted, teams usually were constantly moving on foot or by helicopter.

Another trip took him far to the north to Ban Bo Mei (LS-194) just three miles from the Mekong. There he picked up a lieutenant and reconnoitered likely spots along the river for good listening posts. After accomplishing troop movements to new posts, the lieutenant wanted to go upriver toward the ill-defined Chinese border. When Mike returned to Nam Yu for the night, Tony was interested in what his pilot had accomplished during the day. After hearing about the river trip, he became furious, indicating that they were not supposed to fly along the river in that area, and the lieutenant should have known this. Border



Young minority tribal K'wii girls dressed in traditional clothing resting against a USAID-supplied circular steel well frame at Moung Mounge, Laos. Circa April 1967.

Thompson Collection.

areas were particularly sensitive in this region, and team activity was supposed to be clandestine, low key with no evidence of a presence. By taking the helicopter upriver, they might have been spotted and photographed.

Mike did not reply, but had trouble resolving what Tony said. Each time he moved teams they left a great deal of trash behind that pointed to a presence.

On Mike's last day in northwestern Military Region One, he returned to conducting Moug Mounge shuttles, and then resumed area team support. One unit, Team-9, was located nine miles west southwest of the Moug Sing Valley.

## **MILITARY REGION-2**

Mike Jarina flew again on the last day of the month taking Hotel-47 upcountry to Site-20. Wednesday included forty-five landings, high flight time, and an unanticipated incident. From Sam Tong he went to Na Khang. After working locally, he was directed to Phu Pha Thi and Pha Hang (LS-205), ten miles southeast of site-85, where he supported continuing operations to seize eastern territory around Hong Nong (LS-86).

Late in the day, desiring to conserve the low fuel supply at Site-36, he instructed Flight Mechanic Tom Nery to add only two drums of gasoline for the trip to Sam Tong. A few minutes after departure, he noticed the



A northeasterly airborne view of Phu Cum-Lima Site-50 displaying the definitive top spike. As a precursor to the monsoon season, low clouds dominate the area.

Jarina Collection.

fuel quantity gage level dropping alarmingly. Thinking there must be a fuel leak, he stopped at Phu Cum (LS-50) to inspect the aircraft. He discovered that neither Nery nor his indigenous helpers had secured the forward gas tank cap properly, which allowed fuel to siphon from the orifice. As it was getting dark and he was low on fuel, Mike elected to RON at Site-50 in the Sikorsky Hotel. Prior to securing for the night, he requested a drum of fuel be delivered to him the following morning. He noted that the people at Phu Cum were very accommodating. Further attesting to the local peoples' concern for the crew's safety, when Mike awoke from a restless sleep, he observed orange firelight outside Hotel-47 and a Meo youngster guarding his H-34. After receiving fuel, Mike left for Sam Tong and then to Udorn. <sup>12</sup>

## **BANGKOK**

A couple of days after my Pakse RON, we drove the Ford Cortina to Bangkok. The trip served a dual purpose: first to attend a two-day Bell 204B ground school conducted by affable Drex Morgan. Because of the hype from former Army people regarding the machine, I

---

<sup>12</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.  
Blaine Jensen Letter, 08/20/97.

had opted for the transition when more ships became available. There were high expectations for the helicopter and rumored more serious work in denied areas. The two-bladed turbine engine helicopter was supposed to be superior to the H-34 in many ways. The Bell had a lot of power at higher altitudes, was faster, and presented a lower profile, which theoretically made it more difficult for the enemy to inflict battle damage.

Secondly, because of the lack of vehicle maintenance facilities in Udorn with proper tools, I was going to have the dealer inspect the Cortina, change the oil, and have the underside coated.

Another reason for the trip involved our son; we missed him during our last STO and did not like to leave him alone. Rick had been sick with tonsillitis toward the end of April and then developed a high fever that was diagnosed by several doctors as bronchitis, measles, scarlet fever, roseola, or whatever else they could think of at the time. Bottom line the medical people did not know the problem. For this reason, he did not have a large first birthday party. Part of his problem may have been incurred from the Air America swimming pool. I introduced him to the water one afternoon and, like many young children, he began swimming naturally. Having him along was no problem. Along with the kind help from the Suriwongse Hotel



manager and our houseboy providing boiled water for the milk powder, and his mother's attention, we managed fine.

Everything planned was completed by Tuesday, so we returned to Udorn on the 24th.

### **EMBARASSMENT AT NAM BAC**

On the afternoon of 29 May, while checking for mail at the Air America facility, I learned that I was on the flight schedule the following morning, deadheading to Luang Prabang on Hotel-50. I was scheduled to crew Hotel-22 with Pat McCarthy. Pat had been upcountry since the much-discussed Saturday Jowers' incident.

On the 27th, Hal Jowers had landed hot on the Nam Bac landing strip. RLAF C-47 374 was parked in the loading area off to the side of the runway between the tent and fueling site. Whether Jowers was showing off or merely incompetent was never determined, but with more than adequate room to maneuver, Hal continued a rapid rollout to retrieve another load for a nearby outpost. In the process, he taxied too close to the C-47, clipping off the upper nose section of 374.

As his Flight Mechanic, Roger Burdwood, recalled:

*"Out of the blue, I heard what I thought was heavy automatic weapons fire, really close. I looked out the door and the air was full of pieces of aluminum..."*



27 May 1967 incident in which Captain Hal Jowers flying Hotel-46 severed the upper nose section of RLAF C-47 374 during a high-speed taxi.

Thompson Collection.



Hal Jowers secured Hotel-46 a few feet from where the main rotor blades delivered a "nasal haircut" to the nose section of the Lao C-47.

Thompson Collection.



Standing on the tail pylon stabilizer and tail cone, Flight Mechanic Pat McCarthy and an unidentified mechanic inspect Hotel-46's main rotor blades for damage incurred 27 May 1967.

Thompson Collection.

*As I started to breathe again, the customer...came running up and screamed to get the hell out of there. The Lao air crew was way past being upset. They were threatening death and the customer said he could not control them...*

*Hal shut down...*

*Then the Lao pilots showed up, backed by a couple dozen Lao soldiers. One guy ran up to Hal's window with his 45 drawn, cocked it, pointed it at Hal's head and pulled the trigger. There was no noise. He had neglected to jack a round into the chamber. He then threw some type of fruit at Hal and hit him in the helmet."*

As storm clouds gathered ominously in the valley, eyewitness Mac Thompson was at Colonel Khamphay's headquarters area when he heard the sound of a loud metal to metal crunch. Investigating the unusual noise, he arrived just as the Lao PIC was beginning to withdraw his sidearm. Mac was very concerned, for the man was beyond cohesive reasoning, a critical juncture Asians arrive at when highly agitated. Still, Mac jabbered at the pilot in Lao, attempting to calm him. He was unsuccessful. Therefore, at the cost of his own safety, Mac pulled the pilot away to a place where he had Khamphay intercede to remove him from the area so he would not create a situation that he might later

regret. Although not completely resolved, the situation quieted. <sup>13</sup>

A new set of main rotor blades was delivered to Nam Bac. After they were installed and tracked, Jowers flew the helicopter out in the dark. <sup>14</sup>

Arriving at Luang Prabang amidst deteriorating weather conditions, I learned that a road watch mission to the Route-19 area was planned. Guerrilla activity and air strikes had disrupted movement on this artery and supplies from northwestern North Vietnam to enemy units in the field. For future planning, Case Officers were particularly interested in the conditions of this important LOC.

Following a night in the "Bungalow," (also called the Phu Si Hotel) the weather continued foul in the target area, so the mission was scrubbed and I ferried the ship to Tango-08.

With the onset of the monsoon season, I did not approach the targeted flight time for the *month*. <sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Mac Thompson did not recall this phase of the incident, but reports we received in Udorn had the incensed C-47 pilot throwing a mango at Hal Jowers.

Long after the war was over, Thompson was drinking beer with some Lao friends in the Oakland-San Pedro, California, area reminiscing, and mentioned this story. One of the men at the table indicated he was the pilot in question.

<sup>14</sup> The CPH office long considered Jowers a weak and unpredictable H-34 pilot, one who had little common sense or respect for management types. Because of the latest incident and others during his short tenure, Hal was terminated.

---

<sup>15</sup> Mac Thompson Emails, 10/28/96, 01/16/98, 01/18/98, 03/22/03.  
Steve Nichols, *Air America in Laos: The Flight Mechanics' Stories*, Publisher Roberta W. Martin, 93, Roger Burdwood's Another Nam Bac Tale.

**T**oward the end of May, bad weather enveloped much of Laos and was predicted to continue for a couple of weeks, severely curtailing upcountry flying. Therefore, more time was required by crews in the field to reach projected flight times. Advised to take STO, we elected to journey to Pattaya beach for a few days at our favorite gulf-side duplex. We had not been to the beach since before Ricky was born and, except for more vehicle traffic, little had changed in the still sleepy area. Ricky probably had the best time of any of us and, along with his mother, browned nicely in the sun. I snapped many photos with a borrowed camera, but unfortunately all were lost for posterity, as no film was installed.

While we were enjoying ourselves, what was later called the Six Day Middle East War commenced between Israel and their Arab neighbors: Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. I had brought the Zenith Transoceanic radio, so while eating enormous amounts of seafood and quaffing cold Singha on the patio after beach activities, I was able to monitor news reports regarding the conflict. I noted with much satisfaction that the Israelis, renown for preemptive strikes, were performing an excellent job of "kicking ass and taking names." Mulling over the



war, I recalled applying for a job as UH-34D instructor pilot in Israel before mustering out of the Corps. I pondered on what direction my life might have taken had I journeyed to White Plains, New York, for the proffered interview and been accepted for the rumored employment, and if I might have still been in that area and involved in the current war. If-If...

Pattaya had been selected as one of the many U.S military R&R spots in Southeast Asia. One day the main road I met and struck up a conversation with a young Marine grunt. Since I knew little about the Nam conflict, except what I read in the major news magazines, I was interested in deriving all the information I could from the fuzzy cheeked boy. When our chat eventually got around to weapons, I was shocked to learn that the M-16 rifle bolt sometimes jammed during combat operations. As with helicopters and any vehicles, sand and dirt caused havoc with the rifles. The lad indicated that he had lost several friends due to sudden stoppages, and most "ground pounders" had lost confidence in the guns. I had never fired the highly vaunted M-16. My primary rifle in training at Quantico was the highly accurate and reliable M-1. However, when we were on the rifle range the M-14 rifle, along with the M-60 machine gun, were being evaluated. A fix was instituted for the M-16

manufacturing process. Thereafter, the gun became a premier and feared weapon for the remainder of the war.

## **JARINA**

Foul weather trapped Mike at Phu Cum during the morning and early afternoon of the first, until clearing conditions allowed another ship to deliver fuel to the site. Before RON at Sam Tong, he managed to log four hours, but had to fly after dark to obtain this.

Tuesday was an active day with thirty landings. From Long Tieng, he flew sixty miles east to Ban Nam Keng.<sup>1</sup> There he worked the area to support a Vang Pao effort to continue raising three SGU battalions in order to move on and eventually regain control of the sizeable Ban Moung Nham Valley (LS-63), located thirteen miles east of Tha Thom. This operation was planned in conjunction with FAR efforts to clear areas northeast of Vientiane. After troops familiar with the objective received their marching orders, Jarina returned to Sam Tong for fuel and another mission to the Nam Keng area.

The following morning Mike was again assigned to work the Nam Keng area. Likely some of the tasks related to Father Bouchard's leper village programs in the area.

---

<sup>1</sup> LS-108; not to be confused with Moung Soui, Lima-108.

Later in the day, he flew fifty-four miles northeast of 20 Alternate to Ban Pha Kha (LS-40), five miles south of San Tiau (LS-02), a former Meo area of influence for Ban Ban Valley Route-7 road watch team activity. Along with Phou Nong (LS-71), other sites had been attacked by Vietnamese clearing units in 1964, and were temporarily abandoned with much loss of life and face. Each of us old timer throttle twisters had participated in moving hundreds of refugees from harm's way. The area terrain--rough, remote, and difficult for an enemy to traverse--had again become important for teams based there to monitor the road so A-26 Nimrod bombers could work their nighttime magic.

While still in that area, during a standard operations normal report, Mike received the word to reposition to Nakhon Phanom for the night. At that point in our operation that meant one thing: road watch missions. <sup>2</sup>

## **THAKHET OPERATIONS**

Agency Case Officer Mike LaDue departed the disappointing and generally failed Chinese Nung program at Site-165 and transitioned to Thakhet in late March 1967. He had originally been trained at the "Farm" at Camp Perry, Virginia, to conduct indigenous road watch operations and assumed he would be assigned to Military

---

<sup>2</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

Region Three. However, when he returned to Southeast Asia, because of pressing requirements in Military Region Four, he was directed to LS-165 on the Bolovens Plateau until another Case Officer became available to replace him. He would have relocated to Thakhet earlier, but he had developed a stomach ulcer from eating poor food, suffering stress from all-night alerts, and the short time as a Nung hostage.<sup>3</sup> The ulcer required treatment in a Bangkok hospital and rest before proceeding to Thakhet.

Upon Mike's arrival, the assigned Case Officer remained about two weeks so he could acclimate to the area and meet some of the local cast of characters. At the time, the area was considered fairly benign militarily, or at the very least neutral. Living in a house near the airport, Mike worked almost exclusively in North Khammouane Province and remained the sole resident area Case Officer there until electing to depart in October 1970 for health reasons. He conducted occasional trips to Savannakhet to obtain supplies, plan infil-exfils with the air operations officer, and discuss other matters with his superiors. For a change of venue, once in a great while, he journeyed to Long Tieng, Vientiane, and Udorn.

---

<sup>3</sup> For additional detail regarding the Chinese Nung mercenaries and Mike LaDue's experience with them, see Author's 1966 book.

LaDue inherited sixteen teams to cover the North Khammouane area (Military Region Three) from his predecessor. The package involved two action teams trained to conduct road mining, ambushes, and additional harassment. However, most units were trained and oriented to perform road watch missions near Nape, Mugia, and Ban Karai Passes. Teams were staffed with between ten and twenty-two men. Largely for security reasons and team survival, pre-selected infil-exfil landing zones were not close to the forward road watch posts, hence, substantial walking was required to and from targeted areas. Mike also had other unspecified intel-related chores to perform in and around Thakhet town.

Conducting missions from Lima-40 and Lima-40A, Mike utilized both USAF Pony Express CH-3s out of Nakhon Phanom and Air America UH-34Ds in his work. However, like Tom Fosmire, who supervised missions out of the Savannakhet area, he preferred to employ Air America pilots, since many of the Air Force pilots appeared quite advanced in years. With the Air Force scratching for helicopter candidates, several of these officers had transitioned either from fixed wing aircraft or sedentary staff desk jobs. Approaching retirement, the oldsters were considerably more conservative than younger pilots. In contrast, Air America pilots were highly experienced in Laos and motivated, and Mike had

gained rapport with many from earlier days with the Company. In addition, there were many "maintenance problems" with CH-3 helicopters and the pilots often aborted missions.

With the Air Force, there was also an overriding issue of lead time. Prior to any mission, lengthy crew briefings (briefing was a misnomer) were required at the large Nakhon Phanom auditorium. These included various subjects and various categories always associated with military missions.

Air America crews were quite amused by the abundance of Air Force rules and regulations that had to be satisfied prior to a mission. In contrast to our response and performance, the briefings were much too detailed and prevented immediate response to a crucial situation. For instance, regional weather frequently changed and could not adequately be judged until actually in a target area. This also applied to enemy movement.

The first briefing the Author attended at the Nakhon Phanom USAF Base clarified much of our confusion and consternation over Air Force delays arriving on station for a SAR. Usually we would perform a timely retrieval, then rightfully balk at an Air Force helicopter pilot's request or insistence that we drop the rescued pilot off at a site so that Jolly crews could return him to Thailand and obtain credit for the

rescue. Naturally, since we had placed our lives on the line, such gross disregard for our talents caused considerable bad feelings among parties. <sup>4</sup>

During Mike's almost four-year tenure at Thakhet, Lima-39 Chief of Base Tom Fosmire and his cohorts allowed Mike to pursue his own designs in northern Khammouane Province, as long as designated passes and LOCs were constantly under observation.

Electronic HARK boxes were employed in his area to relay enemy sightings. <sup>5</sup> Some of Mike's work included double checking team reporting. A few teams were accurate. Others tended to slip information by him or were not actually at their assigned location. To ascertain if a team was indeed at a claimed position, Mike conducted occasional flyovers to spot signal panels he asked the team to display at a certain time. After cross-checking adjacent team reporting and individual team member's stories following exfiltration, should there be a question as to the

---

<sup>4</sup> In the U.S. Marine Corps, planned missions commenced with a five-paragraph order referred to by the acronym SMEAC. The general categories, including sub-categories, included situation, mission, execution, administration to include logistics, and command. In situations where time was of the essence, fragmentary orders were issued.

<sup>5</sup> Even decades after the fact, Agency security requirements and restrictions prevent discussions with the Author regarding HARK functions.

validity and reliability of intel, Mike would request a polygraph expert's help verifying the information. In such cases, "The Box" became the final arbiter. It was difficult work for the operators, for most of the team members in North Khammouane Province were animists, who reacted to the "lie detector" process much differently than Westerners.

Unfortunately, during the period he spent at Thakhet directing teams, Mike was obligated to terminate the services of three teams for inaccurate information. This was quite a challenge for the units were well armed and were very surly when ordered to relinquish their weapons.

Mike had an outboard motorboat moored on the Mekong bank for an emergency evacuation should the enemy attack Thakhet or his small compound. Sometimes he utilized the boat to cross the river to Nakhon Phanom City, where he hired a taxi to Nakhon Phanom in order to shop at the post exchange.

On a lighter note, one time during his stay at Thakhet a group of Trans America Airline or Pan American stewardess on leave to perform medical work for the Dooley Foundation, arrived by boat at "Foreigners Landing." Prior to their arrival, the "Dooley Dollies" overnighted at the river town of Paksane. While there, they performed one day of nursing. That night, they arranged a party for



Americans, British, French, and Lao residents, introducing attendees to an unusual variety of mind-altering Brownies. Once Mike fully understood the intent of the exercise, he departed the party, since he had a full day of work planned the following morning. In later years, he considered the event a strange "Apocalypse Now" moment along the dirt banks of the darkly flowing Mekong River. <sup>6</sup>

### **BAN NA TAN**

Exercising maximum efficiency utilizing scarce helicopters (Military Region Two normally had preference), although having lighter requirements than his Savannakhet counterparts, the Thakhet Customer sometimes planned multiple missions. Then, if his air operations officer could coordinate with AB-1 Udorn and Air America Operations to obtain a helicopter, he could proceed with other planning. This was the case on the fourth when Mike Jarina was tasked to shuttle troops and supplies thirty-nine miles north to Ban Na Tan (LS-237). The site was located on the west side of a valley that was surrounded by typical needlepoint karsts found in the area. A large river, the Nam Hin Boun, flowed through the valley and a trail meandered west across a

---

<sup>6</sup> Mike LaDue Emails, 03/02/10, 03/13/10, 03/19/10, 03/22/10, 06/29/10, 07/04/10, 07/05/10, 09/14/10, 09/23/10.  
Bill Leary Notes: Taped Interview with Tom Fosmire 12/26/92.

narrow neck of the karst to Ban Gnang, a spot designated as a rally or "fall back" point should the team be dislodged from Ban Na Tan. Also connecting the two areas was the large Konglo Cave through which the Hin Boun flowed and was accessible by paddle boat. <sup>7</sup>

Ranging in size from ten to twenty-five individuals, the Ban Na Tan team was somewhat larger than other teams. For this reason, it was more difficult to re-supply. The unit was designated as a "intel team," tasked to patrol the general area and report items of interest, such as enemy troop movements or anything out of the ordinary. On occasion, the site was employed as a launch base for some North Khammouane teams. During Mike's early days at Lima-39, the Case Officer spent the night in the field with the team on a regular basis, to obtain a feel for its collective enthusiasm and spirit for the mission. He quickly discovered that the men were sub-par as opposed to his road watch and action teams.

In 1968, Mike concluded that the team fabricated some of the information it relayed to Thakhet. Consequently, he devoted a considerable effort to cross-checking their veracity with other area teams, eventually believing he was right. Therefore, he returned the team leaders to camp and had "Bob," the

---

<sup>7</sup> We had been flying people from Thakhet into similar open areas in the karsts for several years.

travelling black box expert, question them. "Bob" eventually confirmed Mike's suspicions.

Two months after the leaders were returned to Ban Na Tan with the admonition to clean up their reporting, all radio communication ceased. The following day Thai Helio Courier pilot Arome, a former Boun Oum Airways and now CASI aviator assigned to Military Region Three, flew Mike to Site-237. Conducting several flybys, they observed no ground activity. The site was deserted. Next, they hopped over the karst to Ban Gnang. While they circled the "fall back" area some uniformed people spread out ground panels, which for Ban Na Tan would have been an "XL." However, actually displayed was an "X" with an inverted "L." Obviously something was seriously wrong. A combination of an erroneous signal on the ground and sudden disappearance of the soldiers, who normally remained at the landing area to greet an arrival and off-load supplies from the fixed wing or rotary wing aircraft, alarmed Mike. Therefore, before anything serious happened, he informed Arome to vacate the area--fast.

Later, information reported from other teams verified that both Ban Na Tan and Ban Gnang had been attacked by the enemy and the incorrect signal was displayed that day to lure unsuspecting pilots into a trap. Mike never got a firm feeling as to what really happened to the Ban Na Tan group. They could have been

wiped out as reported. On the other hand, they might have given up their desire to be soldiers, turned their gear over to local Pathet Lao, and departed the area. Lowland Lao were the epitome of "lovers, not fighters." One thing is certain: Mike never saw any members from the Ban Na Tan team again, either in Thakhet or during his forays upcountry. LS-237 was placed on the "closed unfriendly" list in the Air America Air Facilities Data booklet, where it remained until at least October 1970, when Mike's tour ended and he returned to America. <sup>8</sup>

A later trip during the day took Jarina forty-four miles northeast from Lima-40A, crossed portions of Route-8, the Nape Pass road, to the mountainous Phou Pouak area. The flight resulted in a recovery at Nakhon Phanom well after dark.

With the missions complete, Jarina was released and returned to Udorn.

Two days later, on the afternoon of the seventh, Jarina returned to Thakhet in Hotel-40. After transferring to Hotel-48, he and Larry Wilderom delivered additional troops to Ban Na Tan. From there, at sunset, he deposited a team twenty-four miles north northeast in the foothills west of Route-8. The two crews recovered at the Nakhon Phanom air base about 1940 hours.

---

<sup>8</sup> The site was still listed as "unfriendly" in the April 1974 booklet.

After breakfast, Mike deadheaded to T08 via Hotel-48.<sup>9 10</sup>

## **TEAM RESUPPLY**

When the capability to supply teams improved, trail watching morphed from a few days in the field into weeks or even months on location. Team resupply missions by air evolved in many forms. To maintain team location from the enemy secret, air delivery was normally conducted at night. Depending on the time frame and aircraft availability, Helio Couriers, CASI Pilatus Porters, Air America Caribous, and an occasional C-123 crew were used in the resupply role. Using the drop door, Thai Porter pilots delivered 1,000 to 1,500-pound loads to a single team. Loaded with food, batteries, cigarettes, and other "creature comforts," the larger aircraft could deliver supplies to several teams.

Because of implied hazards and challenges involved, Caribou B-851, flown mostly with Captain Gene Hughey as PIC and MacAlister copilot, became the preferred delivery instrument. However, navigation was difficult and required detailed planning. After coordinates were

---

<sup>9</sup> It was generally specified by operations for the lower time pilot to log flight time and higher time pilot to deadhead.

<sup>10</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.  
Mike LaDue Emails, 09/14/10; 09/23/10.

obtained, course lines were plotted, and headings, distances, times, and altitudes were calculated. It was preferable to make deliveries in one drop to avoid exposing a team's position. This was generally performed to a pre-designated light signal. In the case of early drops to mostly Thai Star teams, when ground to air radios were not readily available, the kicker was usually in position to see where the load landed. Later, as additional teams were utilized and hand-held radios issued, planes could be directed to the drop zone in bad weather and drop status reported.

Caribou crews flew without running lights, and the enemy normally fired ineffectively at sound. However, close encounters were recorded. One night a Caribou returned from a mission with dings from an airburst, but no aircraft was ever lost performing night missions.

Kicker (AFS) Miles Lechtman arrived in Vientiane toward the end of the 1966 flooding. Vientiane was considered a paradise, still an untouched provincial town. Miles occasionally rotated to Udorn, where no employee wanted to go because of the abundance of Air Force personnel.

He crewed C-47s, C-123s, and Caribous. He spent considerable time on Caribou night drops out of Savannakhet resupplying teams along the Trail system

and sometimes into China. Missions increased with team expansion and time.

Two kickers participated in Caribou night drops. The payload often amounted to 7,500 pounds of palletized supplies loaded on a single track. Three drops per night was the norm. In the beginning Miles spent three to four nights a month on the project. However, this increased to two-week assignments.

### **ON MARK**

Because of the difficulty fixed wing pilots encountered during night resupply missions, the Agency elected to introduce a specially modified On Mark Marksman B-26 aircraft to minimize danger and enhance success of trail watch resupply missions.

Planning had been underway since early March to transfer two On Mark heavily modified B-26s to Air America from Intermountain Aviation, another Agency proprietary in Arizona, for a swap in kind. Transfer of the first aircraft was accomplished in April with the aircraft re-registered as N46598 on the eleventh. It was programmed to be ferried to Udorn by May for crew transition.

N598 was packed with sophisticated electronic navigation equipment consisting of LORAN, Doppler, true airspeed indicator, dual VOR/ILS, dual ADF, and dual

distance measuring equipment. <sup>11</sup> The primary piece of equipment onboard was an APQ-99 terrain-following radar (TFR) that would theoretically allow penetration and low-level operational capability at night and in adverse weather in high threat denied areas. Other special equipment included both air and ground electronic jamming gear.

Modifications included wingtip fuel tanks, dual instruments and controls, a larger vertical stabilizer, and large anti-skid brakes. With activation of water injection on takeoff, the twin reversible propeller engines developed 2,500 SHP. Similar to the C-123 and Caribou aircraft, the ship incorporated a rear drop ramp. <sup>12</sup>

Although not a senior pilot in the Air America organization, Frank Bonasinga had flown Raytheon company's A-26 and their On Mark version for ten years. In addition, much of his logged time was conducted at night, and Frank had many night carrier landings under his belt while in the U.S. Navy. Therefore, Project Manager Jim Rhyne had an easy choice selecting Frank

---

<sup>11</sup> Since few navigation aids were yet in place in the Theater, some of this equipment was not utilized.

<sup>12</sup> From the Author's personal experience with other new products and programs, Air America was used by aircraft manufacturers and the Agency as a sounding board to test new aircraft and systems. Therefore, in the Author's opinion, terrain following radar (TFR) gear was introduced to Southeast Asia as a test experiment and precursor to later installation on the USAF F-111.



for the billet. Disenchanted with the Volpar HARP program and looking for a way out, Bonasinga readily opted for the transfer. Captain Berl King, also involved in other Special Projects, was tapped for the program. Captain Gene Hughey preferred to fly the Caribou during night supply missions, but agreed to the transition. Rhyne comprised the fourth pilot, but never actually flew night missions. Six copilots and three navigators were selected. Several fixed wing pilots opted to fly in the program because of status and the fifty dollar per mission bonus, but this was not the paramount incentive for most pilots. Like all Special Projects over the years, missions required detailed planning; there were always delays and aborts, and flight time was minimal. All these items coalesced to cost pilots money. Therefore, a person had to be motivated by a greater factor than money--perhaps adventure, challenge, secrecy, even the unknown. These programs could be called performing a labor of love during the act of flying.

The dark blue modified B-26 called "The Blue Goose" arrived in late May with Intermountain personnel. An abbreviated ground school for Air America pilots and mechanics was conducted by individuals representing the aspects of flight, avionics, and maintenance. Consisting of seven hours in the air and a few landings, transition flight training commenced on 31

May. Day practice drops were conducted at the Border Police Camp (BPP) located outside Udorn off to the left of the Sakon Nakhon highway. Frank Bonasinga's upgrading was completed by 12 June. After checkout in the B-26, practice night drop missions followed to teams training in Laos. The first, on the 16<sup>th</sup>, to troops northeast of Savannakhet, was aborted when tracers began soaring by the plane.

Actual trail watch missions began shortly afterward. The pilots and navigator received approximate drop coordinates before the flight. They planned the mission while the aircraft was towed across the parking-taxi ramp to the Q rice warehouse, also called the AB-1 ramp. The kicker supervised loading of palletized supplies that could be dropped on one pass.

The crew launched after dark. After crossing the Mekong, at the initial point (IP) about fifty miles from the drop zone, they descended to 300 feet or just above the jungle canopy. Despite having an autopilot integrated into the TFR, Bonasinga elected to fly the aircraft manually. Closing on the target area, the kicker lowered the aft ramp. Because assigned coordinates might be several miles off, the crew had to scan the terrain for a light signal. This could present problems, for ground observation was difficult from the long-nosed cockpit and light signals were difficult to spot at low level through dense jungle. Because of the

required single engine speed of 140 knots, air drops had to be made quickly and accurately since a second pass was discouraged. After a successful drop, the crew either returned to Udorn or headed to Savannakhet for a second mission. In the case of a negative sighting, the crew RTB.

There were initial radar equipment problems, but some procedures were modified which did not push the envelope too far and some satisfactory operations were achieved.

Without Company authorization, CPH Wayne Knight accompanied one-night mission. He quickly discovered that it required a lot of intestinal fortitude to completely rely on TFR equipment for hill and obstacle clearance when flying in zero-zero visibility. As an observer, not wanting his name to appear in Company records, for obvious reasons, Wayne did not log the flight.

In addition to his other duties, kicker Miles Lechtman flew on twenty B-26 missions. Air drops varied from 500 to 800 feet and from 2,000 feet with very accurate impact parachutes. The chutes dropped partially opened with a seventy-foot leader. When the leader contacted the ground, a blasting cap fully opened the parachutes.

Overall, the night all weather B-26 program was snake bitten from the beginning, and the final trail

watch resupply mission was flown the night of 7 October.

Several problems combined to ensure its termination: During the first month of operation, challenging the Udorn maintenance staff with labor-intensive tasks, navigation equipment problems plagued missions for two weeks and beyond. Because of this, a Caribou crew and aircraft always had to be available for a mission.

Once a signal was sighted, excessive speed required for single engine flight exacerbated drop problems.<sup>13</sup> As mentioned, the aircraft's long nose made it difficult for the crew to see the drop zone from the cockpit. Therefore, a turn was necessary to observe the ground.

Prior to the machine being sent to Southeast Asia, the low-level drop theory had been exhaustibly and successfully tested and implemented in the flat Arizona deserts, but the procedure proved too rushed in the harsh Lao jungle terrain.

With B-26 Nimrod crews from Nakhon Phanom pounding trails from Mugia Pass to Tchepone at night, confused by the engine sounds, some teams were reluctant to flash a light lest they be targeted.

---

<sup>13</sup> There were several engine failures, but none at low level when the loss of an engine would have minimized the cockpit crew's survival chances.

With the demise of the B-26 for Trail supply missions, the Customer returned to using other fixed wing aircraft.

This was not the final use of the blue-black B-26. While working at Nam Yu, Larry Taylor sometimes observed a plane on the runway rigged for airdrop. One time, while heading south from a mission to the border, he saw a B-26 headed north toward China. <sup>14</sup>

### **OPERATION SAMAKHI**

Vang Pao, an ethnic Meo, was the FAR army's commanding general for Military Region Two. His rank had been shaped largely by the AB-1 lobbying of Bill Lair during the Phoumi Nosavan era. After Nosavan's departure from Laos in 1965, there was no face-to-face dialogue, and little if any rapport between Vang Pao and General Kouprasith, who considered the Meo general still loyal to Generals Nosavan and Kham Kong, and was considered the CIA's man in Military Region Two. This

---

<sup>14</sup> Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 147.

Joe Leeker, *The On Marks*.

Wikipedia, *On Mark Marksman*.

William Leary Notes, *Jim Rhyne Recollections of Night Drops*.

Bill Leary Interview with Larry Taylor.

Bill Leary Interview with Thomas Fosmire.

Frank Bonasinga, *The Blue Goose and the Steel Tiger*, Air America Website Feature Stories 08/09/99.

Frank Bonasinga TTU Interview with Steve Maxner 04/16/01, 56-57.

Frank Bonasinga Emails, 07/07/10, 07/08/10, 07/09/10, 07/23/10.

EW Knight Emails, 08/10/00, 08/11/00.

assumption was largely correct, and sometimes led to promised FAR reinforcements never arriving for Vang Pao's operations in upper Military Region. There was also the case of Lao lowlanders' bias against mountain people.

With the enemy accomplishing little during the dry season, General Staff plans went forward in a joint FAR/SGU operation to clear the few PL/NVA still in areas sixty miles northeast of Vientiane. Such an operation would benefit Vientiane's security in Military Region Five, but also ease pressure on Vang Pao's eastern and southern flanks where many tribal refugees lived.

Since Vang Pao seldom journeyed to Vientiane, it was proposed that Kouprasith fly to Long Tieng on a VIP-configured Volpar and work out final battle plans. Although reluctant, coaxed by other high-ranking Lao, Americans, and Thai Colonel DHEP, the general eventually agreed to a meeting. During the visit, Kouprasith was afforded military honors and genuine dignitary status at Site-20A. During a first ever meeting between the two antagonists, the men arrived at an agreement to proceed with the joint operation, which kicked off on 14 June with FAR airlifts staged from Ban Keun (LS-44) forty-eight miles northeast to Phou Lawek. While FAR units probed the Tha Thom area, Vang Pao's battalions either were airlifted or moved on foot

toward Site-63. <sup>15</sup>

Air America H-34 crews, along with the few Lao helicopters in the RLAF inventory, participated in the operation. Starting on Thursday the 17th, I was involved in the undertaking for four days. I had previously worked with Lao helicopter pilots on rare clearing operations in the mountains around Phou Kaonang, west of Phou Khao Kay, or what we generically called Ritaville (LS-53). <sup>16</sup>

I had also participated with them during the Crown Prince's 1964 fall people to people operation around Vang Vieng and Moung Met. At that time the handful of Lao H-34 pilots were formerly aggressive fixed wing drivers. They were quite good as fellow helicopter pilots, and we recognized most of them, if not by name, by face.

To my knowledge, mountains around Ban Lawek were never high priority objects. I never worked there, indeed, except during bad weather when I navigated on

---

<sup>15</sup> Ted Shackley, 160-162, 164-165.  
Ken Conboy, 169.

Author Note: Names of villages were often the same or similar to others. Without coordinates to confirm a location, this could cause confusion when describing an operation. Shackley has Vang Pao's objective Moung Nham (LS-63); Conboy, farther north at Ban Moung Ngam (LS-236). Since the former corresponds more closely with the overall Operation Solidarity, the Author tends to believe Site-63 was Vang Pao's assigned goal and Moung Ngam a primary objective.

<sup>16</sup> This was police General Siho's DNC headquarters prior to his 1965 downfall and ensuing demise.

area river systems to Paksane, I generally avoided the area or overflowed it at altitude so as not to tempt the village duck hunters. The entire area between the Vientiane plain and refugee areas south and east of Long Tieng was a scantily populated no-man's-land with individuals who wanted no part of the war on either side. I cannot recall Vang Pao ever recruiting in areas where the inhabitants just wanted to be left alone. Certainly, it was understandable that if Vang Pao was loath to venture into these areas, then the RLG would not. However, now that attitude had changed. Unfortunately, I was not privy to the reason, and can only speculate that intelligence reports of active Pathet Lao in the area of Operation Solidarity was merely a publicity stunt.<sup>17</sup> Then again, the operation might have been conceived as a step toward cooperation and the reconciliation of Van Pao and Kouprasith, and to stimulate the FAR into performing something worthwhile and tangible.

Flight Mechanic Roger Burdwood and I flew north to Ban Keun in Hotel-41. Site-44 was located on flatlands about thirty miles north of Vientiane on the eastern bank of the Nam Ngum. Only a few miles from the northern mountain ranges, Ban Keun also functioned as a

---

<sup>17</sup> Not in the "need to know" loop, although often participating, we rarely knew the code names or reasons for military operations.



market town serving refugee and quasi-successful government-sponsored village defense programs that had begun before the Military Region-4 WAPI experiment. It also served as a road junction for two secondary roads that stretched only a few miles and then linked with trails. A third road plunged south and tied into Route-13.

Flight Mechanic Burdwood, who wore a gross-looking toupee, was the organization's brunt of many jokes. When helicopter pilots first realized that he was wearing a rag, they used maximum RPM and pitch in an effort to blow it off while he was giving taxi instructions. For this reason, he provided instructions with one hand on his head and the other pointing directions. For any number of reasons, Roger got into a fight one night with Ed Reid at Max's Bar on Patpong road. During the drunken fracas, Ed ripped the wig off and forcefully hurled it into the street. <sup>18</sup>

Although rare, on the first night we were obligated to RON at a Vientiane hotel. Lack of organization, fuel, and adverse weather merged to restrict abundant flying from the laterite-clay strip during the first two days. The RLAF began having problems with their aircraft on Friday, when a Lao Beaver pilot working the

---

<sup>18</sup> EW Knight Email, 08/10/00.

area in 82046 called for assistance. At the end of the day, we were called home.

Between 20 May and the first of June, we received nine UD-34D late model 153 or 154 series helicopters.

Bailed from the U.S. Marine Corps to the Lao MAP, these aircraft were fresh off the Sikorsky factory production line. Jack Forney's Maintenance Department policy was to thoroughly inspect any new aircraft entering the inventory. Depending on the condition at arrival, the new ships could require minimum or several days in the hangar. Then the ship was hauled out of the "barn" by a tug for an airworthiness test flight (s).

Saturday found me flying a day flight in Hotel-55 with Flight Mechanic Bob Bedell. The machine had been cleared for a shakedown flight. I returned to Ban Keun to continue the FAR northeast clearing action. All went well until Lao helicopter 1332, transferred in May 1964 to the RLAF from the Air America inventory, was overdue and declared missing. All available aircraft began a Requirements Office (RO) SAR for the former U.S. Coast Guard ship. It was two hours before the ship and crew were discovered in a riverbed near Ban Houay Podang, seven miles northeast of Phou Lawek.

On the twentieth, I was assigned my third helicopter in four days. Flying Hotel-33,<sup>19</sup> although continuing until September, Bedell and I supported the

---

<sup>19</sup> My savior during the first Na Son-Son La SAR operation.

FAR phase of Operation Solidarity for the final time. It was another day mission that I largely detested. They placed a burden on pilots. One usually did not return to Udorn until dark. After securing the aircraft, completing paperwork, and eating dinner, one had to request a ride home from the Ground Transportation Department (GTD), and this depended on vehicle availability. Depending on many variables, usually this was late and if on the schedule again, bed was the only option. For this reason, anticipating early bus pick-ups, sometimes sound sleep was difficult to obtain. A pilot's stress level also entered the equation. For these reasons, it was far more realistic and preferable to RON upcountry and obtain a full night's sleep for the next day's operations.

In tandem with FAR's efforts to reclaim land for the RLG, by August Vang Pao's movements resulted in recapture of the annually rotating site of Tha Vieng (LS-13), a small hamlet on Route-4 between Xieng Khouang Ville and Tha Thom. Further east, Pathet Lao defectors to the Meo forces indicated that the Moung Ngan Valley had been almost entirely abandoned by their compadres. Utilizing this information, with a combination of air and infantry resources, Vang Pao's people secured the eastern high ground and moved into the valley in time to harvest the annual rice crop,

denying this source of supply to the enemy. <sup>20</sup>

## **PAKSE**

Continuing an unbroken string of days on the flight schedule since the seventeenth, I was sent to Lima-11 on Monday. I was assigned Hotel-48, another recent addition to our growing fleet of H-34s. Earl Bruce served as my Flight Mechanic.

There was some urgency for us to position to PS-22 for unscheduled exfiles. Since the overly ambitious and disastrous SGU mission south of Chavane in late May, sizeable incursions from the Bolovens across the Khon Sedone were downgraded to more realistic team numbers. Depending on problems encountered at insertion sites and nature of the missions, they lasted from a few hours to about a week on location. By design, or because of overlapping RON periods, different crews from two to three H-34s usually inserted and withdraw the teams. Although we were moving fast toward basic standards, double cockpit crews, a designated SAR ship, pre-mission site recons in fixed wing aircraft, and A-1E escort were not common yet or part of the joint Customer-Air America required standard operation

---

<sup>20</sup> Joe Leeker, Sikorsky UH-34Ds (The Second Generation).  
Ken Conboy, 170.  
Victor Anthony, 224.

procedures (SOP). As in the past, we generally did what had to be done with our available assets.

Operations were continually being refined. With a potential for danger, penetrations into enemy territory were seldom dull, if only from an anxiety viewpoint as to the unknown. Despite misgivings about some Customer-directed missions on the Plateau, and there was only one incident, I rarely encountered problems.

Briefings by the PS-22 Customer for exfiles supposedly contained current information, if radios operated properly and team reporting was considered valid and reliable. However, this intel could momentarily change and largely depended on the local situation and the team's incentive to "get out of Dodge."

Infils were somewhat different than exfiles. They required additional planning and more information. Aerial photography and visual recon were the only means of judging a proposed landing zone's viability. Of course, the lead helicopter, usually the senior pilot of the group, was always at risk if an enemy ambush was present. With safeguards in place, this was rare, but did occur at another location in later years. <sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Since the Wilmot disaster in May 1966, we collectively learned a considerable amount about conducting multi-aircraft missions more properly, and vowed to employ better coordination and technique to minimize crew deaths or injury.

Generally, in the same area, the two exfiles on the 21st were combined for efficiency in conserving time and energy. After reaching the eastern Bolovens rim, terrain dropped precipitously 3,000 feet toward the Se Kong valley floor and Route-16 that paralleled the river's west bank. Climbing for altitude to cross higher terrain across the valley, our three ships safely crossed Route-96 at a pre-selected lower elevation. The first exfil was located thirty-eight miles east of PS-22 in a remote area overlooking a river valley well east of Route-96. The chase plane had pushed ahead to scout the area, make contact with the team, and arrange for them to display a recognition signal at the time of our arrival. After positive electronic and visual cues were obtained, and number one was fairly certain all was well on the ground, he landed and conducted the pickup while we orbited at altitude away from the landing zone.

The second mission, only a few miles west of the LOC, was accomplished on the way back to the Plateau. Both missions were conducted without a problem, and we returned twenty miles to home plate content in the fact that our efforts had resulted in a successful operation. Total elapsed time from start to finish, including circling, loading, and flight, was one hour and fifty minutes.

Early road watch operations into denied areas<sup>22</sup> were still not compensated and, like previous SAR and SAR standby missions, actually cost us money in lost flight time. They sometimes required extensive briefings and substantial down time waiting for assets to assemble and the mission to commence. Also, locating through the Thai corridor to the Plateau was mostly non project time. Still, these missions were now an integral part of the job. They were likely to continue and expand, and were expected of us as the complexion of our side show war changed. On the upside, we were informed by superiors to record mission data--dates, times, and coordinates involved--pending future remuneration. This had also been the case for the SAR issue, but we had previously been disappointed, for nothing was ever forthcoming.

However, we still recorded SAR missions as evidenced by the thirty-five minutes I logged as Department of Defense (DOD) for an A-1E pilot who either incurred battle damage or a rough running engine thirteen miles north of PS-22 between the Se Kong and Route-16. The problem was resolved and we returned to Pakse for the night.

---

<sup>22</sup> A gray area in that the word denied in our context connoted areas not merely considered "no-man's-land, but those definitely controlled by enemy forces.

The next six days in the Lima-11 area were uneventful as to missions, but were generally rewarding while accumulating flight time.

## **KNIGHT**

Wayne was away from his office for about two weeks toward the end of May through part of June. He began line checks on the thirteenth, giving his assistant Marius Burke a local proficiency check in Hotel-38.

As long as Taipei management assented to his upcountry flying, Knight flew the line as much as he was allowed. A few days spent in the field aided him in remaining abreast of the situation, and to better understand what his pilots were encountering both in the field and during a RON. A former line pilot, he enjoyed this work and considered these trips in Laos an integral part of his management work. He also was positive that this action enabled him to gain a more comprehensive insight into what we were experiencing on the job than others in similar and senior management positions. One method of legally achieving this perspective was employing the route check.

Five days after flying with Burke, Wayne and Mort Shearer journeyed upcountry in Hotel-58, a U.S. Marine Corps-bailed H-34 recently arrived 1 June. In addition to satisfying a "shake-down" flight, the trip would fulfill the periodic route check requirement for Mort.



In an almost eleven-hour day, after working at Ban Na (LS-15) and stripping the site of able-bodied men, they traveled east to Moung Nham (LS-63) to support Vang Pao's ongoing contribution to FAR operations farther south. Following hot refueling, they popped across Skyline to Long Tieng where they were loaded with troops and supplies for a ninety-mile trip east to an elevated site at Pha Kha (LS-245), only four miles south of the North Vietnamese border. Remote sites like Moung Tiouen (LS-91), four miles south, were generally supported by fixed wing drops and, infrequently, by helicopters.

On Saturday, the crew departed Sam Tong for Ban Na. Trips to Moung Oum in the valley just east of and below Phu Bia (LS-22) and Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72) alerted the village chiefs to provide troops in conjunction with the Operation Solidarity phase intended to recapture Tha Vieng (LS-13), a nondescript site adjoining Route-4 that changed factions yearly.

The next morning Knight transferred to Hotel-50 with Gene Rainville to conduct his route check. The day was spent in upper Military Region Two. The first stop was Na Khang and then further north at Site-85. Following some work there, they journeyed southwest to Muang Kout (LS-195), an elevated site fourteen miles north of Moung Heim. After returning to Pha Thi, local trips followed to Houei Hok (LS-198), located at the

west base of the mountain. Since more sensitive USAF electronic equipment would soon be installed on the mountain top, efforts were underway to increase area security. The short strip at Site-198 provided a logistical launch point for helicopters to haul drummed water and supplies to personnel on top. Later, before returning to Sam Tong for the night, there was a trip to a flanking position at Houei Hin Sa (LS-215), thirteen miles southwest, that had assumed increasing importance.

Wayne's last day upcountry before returning to Tango-08 with Rainville was spent working for the RO Customer at the FAN-controlled site of Moug Soui. One stop was made at Phou Vieng (LS-197), eighteen miles west along Route-7. After working in diverse areas, he was well satisfied with his RON. <sup>23</sup>

### **CAPTAIN JARINA**

Mike Jarina, who seemed to bear more than his share of road watch missions, returned to Military Region Three on the 25th. In the afternoon, he and Flight Mechanic Tom Hopkins moved to Savannakhet in Hotel-58. After special guerrilla (SGU) troops were loaded, Jarina flew fifty-one miles north northeast to a point close to the west bank of the Se Ban Fai. Bracketed by

---

<sup>23</sup> EW Knight Email, 08/10/00.

two unused strips of Ban Tham Lay (L-105) and Ban Keng, the area looked like it may have once been active. The drop point was only eleven miles south of Route-8 and afforded some foot trails through the karsts. Retracing the original flight path, the crew returned to Lima-39 for the night. <sup>24</sup>

Saturday's first mission stretched eighty-seven miles northeast of Savannakhet. At altitude, Mike plodded through the air over heavy karsts, swollen rivers, muddy LOCs like Routes-23 and 12, becoming nearly unusable to vehicular traffic, to a landing zone four miles northwest of Mugia Pass. <sup>25</sup> Obtaining the assigned white Tango-Tango signal, he landed and retrieved Northern MR-3 Case Officer Mike LaDue's team. After a fifty-six-mile flight southwest to Thakhet, he returned to L-39 for a second mission.

Not all Mugia area missions were conducted smoothly. One day, while preparing for a resupply flight north from the Lima-39 Whiskey training camp, loaders distributed 1,500 pounds of rice and supplies on Mike and Larry Egan's helicopter. Mike had previously landed at the landing zone that was located on a large rocky shelf in the Mugia area. Upon arrival,

---

<sup>24</sup> It is likely, but the Author is not certain if helicopter pilots were permitted to stay at the Air America hostel at this time, as was later the case.

<sup>25</sup> Also called Mu Gia Pass. The Vietnamese term was Deo Mugia.



Monsoon season Military Region Three topography near Lak Sao, Laos, depicting karst configuration amidst dense rain forest and flooded cultivated areas. Numerous caves in the karsts provided cover and concealment for enemy units controlling or transiting the area.

Author Collection.

despite the presence of a signal, no one appeared on the pad. <sup>26</sup> Because of rainy conditions, Mike assumed that the men were in their shelters or on patrol, so he elected to land. Adding to his unease, during rice offloading, no one was sighted.

After takeoff, troops were observed walking away from the area. While Egan circled, Jarina landed on the trail beside the team. An inquiry revealed that the area was considered compromised and they were relocating to a safer spot. Since he had deposited the provisions at the landing zone and he did not want the enemy to get them, Mike advised the team leader not to move. Then, with some difficulty because of the small landing zone, he and Larry retrieved the supplies and delivered them to the intended people.

During another resupply mission to the Mugia area an incident occurred with a far greater and negative potential for disaster. This time an indigenous photographer sat in the left seat. All Air America's H-34s were equipped with dual controls. As many unschooled types sat in this seat to observe or guide the pilot, we all knew that sooner or later "Murphy" would surface. Despite past pleas to remove the copilot controls, the Maintenance Department refused. Upon landing, as Mike manipulated the cyclic rearward to

---

<sup>26</sup> Fixed signals were a bane to our operations.

reduce ground speed, the large camera hanging by a long strap from the man's neck in front of his seat impeded aft control movement and speed reduction. It was close. The ship continued across the landing zone toward the trees before Jarina managed to obtain a full stop.

Number two mission was a Savannakhet function. It took the crew seventy miles northeast to Ban Hai and trail areas that encompassed Routes-125 and 911.

During Mike's final day in the road watch patch he moved north to Thakhet, where he conducted sixteen landings, some to X-ray Delta and X-ray Papa landing zones. This was interspersed by a trip to Nakhon Phanom for fuel and lunch. Before recovering to Tango-55 for the night, he worked a landing zone from Ban Na Tan.

Monday Jarina was reassigned to Military Region Five to support Operation Solidarity, which had expanded to clear additional local areas. Typical of FAR field grade officers' reluctance to accompany troops in the field, fourteen days after the operation commenced, he landed at Wattay Airport to pick up FAR officers intent on gathering information as to the operation's progress and the enemy response. Their task was to also share intelligence information and issue orders for movement. This entailed many stops at diverse locations throughout the region, covering hundreds of miles from Paksane to the east, and west to Moung Met near the Mekong.

The task began at Ban Nong Dao, twenty-seven miles north-northeast of Vientiane. Site-83 was located on the flood plain a little south of the mountain range we called Ritaville. From there he flew to Paksane and back to Wattay Airport. Next, he flew thirty miles northwest to a lightly populated valley area adjoining the Phou Pha Nang range. From there, twenty miles northeast to Phong Hong (LS-133) located along Route-13, and not far from where the road departed the flood plain to plunge through a gap on its way north. After recovering at Wattay Airport, he was directed to Moung Met (LS-158) and back. Toward the end of the day Mike flew north to the former police camp at Phou Khao Khay, or what our site books recorded as Ritaville (LS-53). Situated at the 2,400-foot level, the site was just beyond where the mountains begin. It was likely the command center for operations in that area.

I landed there one time with an American on some kind of unspecified Requirements Office (RO) mission. There were a number of other individuals milling around. An ARMA attaché pilot driving an O-1 Birddog was preparing to take off empty from the short grass strip, where tall jungle grass grew at each end. It was unbearably hot and there was no visible wind sock. The pilot taxied to one end, swung around, throttled up, and began a roll. Unable to develop sufficient lift for takeoff, the plane rolled past the end of the runway

and disappeared into the high grass. Some of us started in that direction to help when the O-1 emerged from the jungle. Probably embarrassed in front of his fellow Americans, the PIC did not even bother to shut down and check for propeller damage. He reapplied power and surged down the strip, barely managing to clear the obstacles at the opposite end. I never saw the man again to discuss his questionable technique.

From Site-53, Jarina was assigned to work twenty-two miles north to the Phou Sot range that formed the east cliffs adjoining the Nam Ngum on its way south to flow through a large valley and part of a ridgeline that was slated to be dammed for a hydroelectric project. The mountains were located south of an old and substantially settled refugee area that continued to grow as people were dislocated from their northern homelands.

I had worked in this rough mountain area in the past with Lao helicopter pilots. At the time, toward the end of a month I was not on the flight schedule and believed I was through flying. Therefore, I repaired to the bar for refreshment and conversation. After a long, beery night, Abadie sent a bus driver to the house looking for me to fly. Apparently, in my exuberance at finally being upgraded to exalted Captain status in 1963, I had told him that I would fly anywhere,



anytime. <sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, he remembered that statement and now it had come back to haunt me. I felt terrible, but since he had no one else to fly, agreed to fly a day mission north of Vientiane.

While nursing a monumental hangover, I tentatively followed the two Lao pilots into very rough, undeveloped, and confined pads on the western side of the Phou Houai and Phou Sot massifs. The pilots were the first two former fixed wing Lao chosen for H-34 transition. We all knew them and had utmost confidence in their ability to make proper decisions and fly the machines well. There was no problem there, only with my poor physical condition. I was cautious throughout the day, and with time felt somewhat better. While flying back to Udorn, I swore never to fly with a hangover again. It was a good object lesson and I kept this vow for the remainder of my flying career.

With the Phou Sot mission accomplished, Mike returned to RON at Vientiane via Ban Keun (LS-44).

Early on the 29th, Mike went north. After refueling and obtaining sandwiches at the Sam Tong hostel, he stopped at Long Tieng, loaded a bevy of Vang Pao's officers, and was directed to Na Khang. Wet season planning and operations were progressing and required constant monitoring to evaluate the evolving situation.

---

<sup>27</sup> For additional detail see the Author's book describing the 1962 plight of us First Officers.

Although hostilities were considered fairly static, there were unsettling reports of an atypical increase of enemy forces in the Plain of Jars area. In addition, enemy aircraft were reported flying over the Plain of Jars at night. One was spotted in the vicinity of Moung Kheung (L-109) toward the northwestern corner of the PDJ. It was believed the planes were of Chinese origin, supplying the Chinese Khang Khay mission. Thus far, all attempts to intercept them had resulted in failure. In Military Region One, additional Vietnamese battalions were sighted entering the Nam Bac area.

From Site-36 Jarina flew north to Pha Thi, where POWs were conducted. He retrieved additional passengers for a forty-eight-mile flight south-southwest to Phong Hong (LS-196). Tending to connect Vang Pao's west flank, the remote, elevated site was also located twenty-six miles southwest of Moung Son (L-59), and the trip likely involved issuing marching orders for a slow movement west to assist the FAR in MR-1. The round robin continued from Phong Hong nineteen miles east to Houei Tong Ko (LS-184), another Meo site eight miles southwest of Moung Son, an ancient site north of the Moung Heim Valley that blocked movement from North Vietnam. Following a return to Site-36, while his passengers conferred with Na Khang leaders, he worked locally supplying outlying perimeter outposts.

With the meeting complete, after topping off, reversing his flight path to return village commanders to their original sites, Mike made stops at MOUNG SON, HOUEI TONG KO, and Site-85. Then he returned to Sam Tong thirty minutes after sunset.

While I flew to Sam Tong in Hotel-39 with Rusty Irons to RON, Mike worked both AID and 713 contracts. Shared missions took him to all parts of the compass except the east. One went eighteen miles southwest of Site-20, where new refugee sites were developing. After receiving villager reports of enemy patrol activity, a second mission from Long Tieng conducted troop shuttles to the Ban Pha Deng area twelve miles north of Sam Tong. <sup>28</sup> Although enemy sightings were often blown out of proportion and somewhat dated, a fact-finding mission to gather further area information was conducted to Phou Da Pho (LS-103) in the Long Pot area hills that overlooked a portion of the Nam Ngum and Xieng Dat (LS-26). We rarely ventured into this site, but the 4,300-foot strip possessed a unique feature. Several stone jars, exactly like the ones located on the Plain of Jars, stood like sentinels in the grass. They were not manufactured in the region and no one had a clue where they came from or how they were deposited.

---

<sup>28</sup> General Vang Pao never fully controlled the entire area contiguous to the Sam Tong and Long Tieng complexes. Therefore, constant surveillance was required.

Following a stop at San Louang (LS-41), Mike flew north to Bouam Long (still recorded as LS-88). He returned to Site-20 for the night after a last stop at Pha Khao (LS-14).

On the first, following a brief work period at Vang Vieng, Jarina returned to Tango-08. <sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.  
*CHECO*.  
Telegram William Sullivan to State, 07/06/67.

**F**ollowing a false start in early June, the annual monsoon season made a tardy beginning in July. Lao patriotic forces <sup>1</sup> preferred to arrange an earlier and more traditional halt to the dry season offensive during an 18 May celebration in Sam Neua. They were almost certainly more anxious to welcome the end of activities than previously more successful dry seasons.

Unlike prior years when they obtained significant gains, the North Vietnamese Army, abetted by Lao People's Liberation Army, seemed unable to seize and hold any major objective except Nong Khang in northern Houa Phan Province. Moreover, they lost control over a substantial amount of territory in Military Region Four's Sedone Valley area, land that had been under communist jurisdiction for approximately a decade. This was mainly attributed to the successful WAPI self-defense project and General Phasouk's clearing actions around Lao Ngam. Moreover, despite repeated attacks and harassing probes, government troops were able to retain exposed strategic sites like Na Khang in Xieng Khouang and Nam Bac in Luang Prabang provinces. A steady flow of refugees from communist zones resettled by

---

<sup>1</sup> Former government Neutralist troops who defected to the Pathet Lao in 1963.

USAID personnel testified to the difficulty of life in enemy areas. The government military stance was deemed stronger because of increased devastation from air strikes due to: *"improved intelligence from road watch teams and reconnaissance teams; better exploitation of prisoners particularly NVA and LPLA defectors; improved communications between ground observers and strike aircraft; and night flying aircraft that made a debut 2 November 1966."*

Since that time intelligence revealed that approximately 250 trucks had been judged destroyed in Houa Phan Province, indicating to intelligence people an entire fleet of trucks had to be replaced. Around Routes 6 and 68, ninety-two trucks had been destroyed during the 1 April to 18 July period, limiting enemy capability to move supplies to forward units.

As to prisoners and the state of the North Vietnamese military in Houa Phan, CIA-supported forces recorded average monthly enemy casualties of 300 killed in action (KIA) and 115 wounded in action (WIA). In addition, forty defectors and captives were processed each month. One captured Vietnamese from the vaunted 923 Infantry Battalion indicated that his unit had incurred several defeats during offensives and had virtually become an ineffective fighting unit.

Enemy losses in the Panhandle also stimulated defections, greatly adding to information regarding results of interdiction and morale.

Other factors impacting enemy operations included:

*"increasing North Vietnamese involvement in south Vietnam which has brought greener NVA into Laos; a lowering of enemy morale because of food shortages; labor levies; fear of air strikes; increased cooperation since Kong Le's ouster between FAR and Neutralist troops; and improved morale of government troops due to the successful retention of the Nam Bac Valley and military achievements of the Lao Ngam operation."*

The Lao army still thought in terms of occupying territory rather than winning people to the government's side. While civil-military relations were good in Vang Vieng, Nam Bac, and Lao Ngam, they were inferior in other areas like Moung Kassy, southeast Wapikhamtong Province, Pakkhanya, and Moung Soui. Some of the unfavorable examples permitted enemy exploitation of the civil populace in attacks against both the Lao and Americans.

Although Soviet Ambassador Kirnassovsky indicated that the communists desired to freeze the military position along the present lines, the North Vietnamese Army actually attempted to make advances, but were less successful this time

Although the dry season marked modest gains in the government position, the costly war of attrition was considered far from over. The Vietnamese retained their dual objective of keeping the corridor open to South Vietnam and occupying much of Northern Laos under the façade of the Lao Patriotic Front. There was no indication of North Vietnam's willingness to abandon its ultimate goal in Laos.

In July, substantial government progress in Laos was reported to State, President Johnson, and his advisors. At headquarters Langley, there was considerable optimism regarding the CIA's efforts to fund, support, and direct local defense and area security units, and intelligence teams in Northern Laos. In addition to weather, intelligence, and the actions of road watch teams, constant air strikes caused enemy infiltration of South Vietnam to move operations farther east into the demilitarized zone, where movement continued directly south. However, any diminution of the Ho Chi Minh Trail supply apparatus was thought to be countered by the new logistic system in "neutral" Cambodia and one ignored by Prince Sihanouk.

Despite a glowing report submitted to the Administration, the Agency casually admitted shortfalls and requirements in Lao operations. They included:

*"improved penetration of enemy forces to gain*



*knowledge of activities, capabilities, and vulnerabilities-and advanced intentions."*

Additional action teams and SGU battalions were necessary to exact higher losses on the enemy. With civil war believed imminent in China, intelligence operations into North Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and China needed to be exploited.

During July, the long dispute between the Saigon-based military and the civilian factions in Vientiane (the ambassador) continued over areas of operation, and questioned who would ultimately control Agency sponsored irregular forces involved in Lao Trail activity. General Westmorland wanted total management of these forces to bolster and enlarge his share of the pie at the expense of Ambassador Sullivan.

In turn, Sullivan opined that he had far better troops trained for the job than Westmorland. He reiterated the point that the general's planners possessed no knowledge of Southeast Asian history, had served only one-year tours, and had assumed no responsibility once they departed the Theater. Furthermore, Agency-controlled units in the Panhandle were about to infest the territory MACV Saigon headquarters was intent to acquire. The ambassador maintained that if fifty slow mover aircraft were assigned to work with Panhandle assets, trail usage

would be nullified and logistic base camps eliminated. <sup>2</sup>

## **THOMPSON**

The enemy continued to make their presence known at Nam Bac. During the first week of July, a small enemy unit conducted a five-minute raid on the base. No one was killed, but the enemy attack resulted in some WIAs. In addition, many buildings were damaged by shell fragments including Mac Thompson's general-purpose (GP) tent. Since Mac had not remained overnight there during the major March attack, he was not affected. Instead, he continued to overnight at Luang Prabang and commute to Site-203 during the day.

Despite the brief attack and casualties, Mac did not consider the Nam Bac situation particularly perilous, but the subsequently hyped and inflated reports reaching Vientiane promoted his reassignment to a temporary desk job. <sup>3</sup>

Within a short time, Mac learned that his next work assignment would be at Moung Met (LS-158) complementing another International Volunteer Service person and two

---

<sup>2</sup> Telegram William Sullivan to State, Dry Season Wrap-up, 07/18/67.

Telegram Sullivan to State, 07/29/67.

Agency Information Cable, 07/19/67.

CIA Memorandum (Colby) to the President, 07/31/67.

<sup>3</sup> This move was wise for enemy attacks continued on Nam Bac.



A wounded FAR soldier being consoled at Nam Bac, Laos.  
Thompson Collection.



Lao soldier receiving dressings from an American medic for minor shrapnel wounds incurred at Nam Bac, Laos.

Thompson Collection.



A wounded Lao trooper being carried on a litter from an H-34 to the aid station at Site-203 for medical treatment and eventual evacuation to Luang Prabang, Laos.

Thompson Collection.



FAR wounded being trucked to the medical facility at Nam Bac,  
Laos.

Thompson Collection.

assistants. Since the enemy had been increasingly targeting IVS representatives, in IVS management's view, locating two Americans at a site made far better sense from a security aspect. As a former U.S. Army officer, Mac did not agree with this line of reasoning. First, he considered two men at a location a waste of limited manpower. Second, one person was more advantageous, for in case of trouble, there would not be anyone else to worry about.

Thompson also learned that IVS was in the process of withdrawing from the Forward Area Project-rural development in newly liberated areas. USAID was projected to hire contract people to fill IVS vacancies and continue the program. This billet would pay 9,000 dollars per annum. Because Mac loved field work and the freedom it afforded, he decided to investigate the possibility of breaking his IVS contract and transferring to the more remunerative and flexible AID program.<sup>4</sup>

## **UPCOUNTRY**

On 30 June, while Mike Jarina was conducting his final day in the field, Flight Mechanic "Rusty" Irons and I departed Udorn in Hotel-39 for Sam Tong. Arriving late, we worked locally and RON at the hostel.

---

<sup>4</sup> Mac Thompson Letter Home, 07/24/67.

The next day, after picking up a load at Long Tieng, we launched for Na Khang and then Site-85. Since I had been working other areas in Laos for several months, I was a little unfamiliar with current activity in upper Military Region Two. Through pilot talk and observation, I knew Vang Pao was expanding toward Sam Neua, but not the extent. Moreover, the FIC briefing before leaving Udorn produced little other information. The Site-36 Customer had little to interject regarding the situation and while working in the Pha Thi area common sense reined, and one was basically on his own in language matters.

Although little was evident at the time, work was beginning on top of the mountain preparing a site for buildings and equipment to replace the existing TACAN radar facility. In the absence of Pony Express pilots who shuttled the TACAN crew from Udorn, we were required to resupply workers and security troops stationed on the summit with water and foodstuffs. Therefore, part of my day was allocated to hauling water in fifty-five-gallon drums from the Houei Hok (LS-198) strip located below the mountain to the west. From there, the precious liquid was transferred to a short strip on top of the mountain, in defilade, and a few hundred yards below the existing radar site. Labor intensive and time consuming, the empty gasoline drums had to be purged and filled with water hauled to Houei



Hok from stream beds below the site. This was either accomplished by humans or tiny mountain ponies the Meo employed in the hills. Sometimes, like what we did in the past on the north side of the mountain to supply the villagers at Site-85, we descended to the river and hovered on the riverbank while on-loading barrels. Weighing in excess of 300 pounds,<sup>5</sup> the partially filled barrels had to be carefully hoisted into the H-34 cabin section. Because the mountain apex was at the 5,000-foot level, depending on the fuel load, only two barrels could be transported to the upper strip at one time.

Curious as to what was occurring on the mountain, I circled overhead after one trip. Although not yet time for Meo women to harvest the white sap, fields of beautiful long-stemmed opium poppy plants dotted and saturated fertile areas on the mountain top. Despite the more nefarious aspect of the plant's chemical production and deleterious effect on the human body, one had to marvel at the beauty of bright, radiant colors and a dazzling splendor of solid and variegated petals. Displays were impressive. With white, green, purple, red, and other color combinations, almost all

---

<sup>5</sup> Water weighs a little over eight pounds a gallon.

the color spectrum was represented. <sup>6</sup> Granted, there were a few places I had not visited in the country, but I had seen nothing else approaching that glorious flora in all of Laos.

Because of the increased USAF presence at Pha Thi, measures had to be implemented to stiffen defenses in the eastern quadrant. Therefore, from Sites-198, 85, and 107, I supplied and helped fortify defenses in the Den Din area that protected the east flank of "Fortress Meo." Located a few miles to the east across the Nam Yut Valley, ranging from elevations above 3,000 to 5,000 feet, a string of pads stretched in defilade below the northern and eastern ridge lines. Like others in the game of "musical mountains" in Laos, we had owned this sizeable semicircular cul-de-sac sporadically over the years. Located only fifteen miles west of Sam Neua Town, in addition to providing a forward listening post and modicum of safety for Pha Thi, the increasingly important area provided a springboard for intelligence gathering forays and aggressive movements toward the enemy stronghold. Furthermore, because of villagers, spies, and recon teams, I would wager that our side knew everything occurring within a twenty-mile radius.

---

<sup>6</sup> White light refracted through a prism, is composed of what my high school physics teacher described as "ROY G BIV," red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet colors.

I soon discovered that the eastern landing zones had not been improved much over time. All the pads, although level, were small, high, heavily forested, invariably downwind, and often difficult to negotiate. For safety of operations, I always attempted to have the Customer and troops cut trees, enlarge landing sites, and generally improve landing zones. Sometimes my efforts bore fruit. However, because of the location of pads on the hillsides, there was often a minimum that could be realistically accomplished and still maintain site integrity for the troops. Wind socks or smoke grenades would have helped, but these were nonexistent.

I landed at the first pad to the north of the complex. The familiar landing zone was just large enough to accommodate the length of an H-34 and the width of its rotor blade diameter. The pilot had to arrive at a hover to ensure the wheels would fit on the landing pad.

In December, I heard that a CH-3 pilot had crashed at the same landing zone. After installation of the MSQ-81 radar facility on Pha Thi, in the absence of an Air America H-34, Pony Express pilots were occasionally asked to help resupply some Meo positions to the east. The pilot was seen approaching the pad by H-34 Captain Alex Nadalini working in the same area. A radio exchange ensued between the two men with Alex offering

advice and attempting to convince the Air Force man the landing zone was not large enough for his bird to negotiate. However, the pilot said, *"We can do your job. I can handle it."*

Some Air Force helicopter pilots, despite their short one-year tour and distinct lack of experience working in the mountains, were hardheaded, often displaying a sense of arrogance, and failing to heed sound advice of those who had "been there, done that." This proved such a case on one of the eastern pads. Disregarding the H-34 pilot's warning, the Air Force PIC attempted to land on a pad much too small for his ship. In the process, he lost RPM, and the machine crashed and rolled down the slope. Official USAF records recorded the aircraft as being shot down, resulting in a combat loss. Reputedly in a heavily mined area, no attempts were made to recover the ship and the helicopter was subsequently abandoned by the Air Force. <sup>7</sup>

For obvious reasons, the conflict between "civilian" and military helicopter pilots was inevitable and never abated. Acrimony was especially

---

<sup>7</sup> Sometimes following a foul-up, especially when a U.S. Air Force crew was killed, Silver Stars were awarded to the participants. That was the nature of the system and USAF policy. They were not in Laos anyway.



Like an animal in its death throes, a U.S. Air Force CH-3 helicopter rests upside down on a hillside below a small helicopter landing zone a Pony Express pilot unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate east of Phu Pha Thi.

Farnsworth.



Remains of a December 1967 CH-3 Pony Express helicopter crash in the Den Din region east of Phu Pha Thi, Laos.  
Steve Nichols Collection.





Smiling Air America Captain Dick Elder gives a "thumbs up" while enjoying the view from the inverted cockpit of the wrecked U.S. Air Force CH-3.

Nichols Collection.

apparent when jointly involved in SAR or troop delivery missions. <sup>8</sup>

Because of an insurmountable language barrier, we often employed guides, at least until learning the area and situation. Sometimes the standard verbal interrogatory, "Where the bad guy," elicited a response, but not every time. On this particular day, the site leader provided an unimpressive looking "guide" to point the way. After some difficulty, the trooper was established in the left seat and I launched.

The Meo-controlled forested area covered several miles. I knew my destination was somewhere to the east, but in the process of getting the boy securely strapped into his seat, I realized that I had forgotten to inquire exactly where the pad was located. No problem, I could have him point. That was why, from the early days, we referred to this type of individual as "General Direction." While still in a climb, after obtaining the "guide's" attention, I momentarily removed my hand from the throttle and collective. Then relying on what I considered acceptable sign language, I gestured toward distant trees in the eastern most portion of the cul-de-sac.

---

<sup>8</sup> A prime example of this will appear in a subsequent book.



Human thought processes often follow illogical nerve pathways. I do not know how the troop interpreted my signs. Perhaps he had never been in the cockpit of an H-34 before, and was flustered by the unfamiliar and new experience. Furthermore, I do not believe "poor devil" understood what I was trying to convey. Obviously confused, he squirmed around a little, and then suddenly grabbed the raised copilot collective beside his open window and pulled up smartly. *Whoa!* I was stunned. I had never had anyone do this before. Barely airborne, the aircraft shuddered like a wounded bird. At an already high collective setting for climb configuration, the dull tool had increased the lever without a corresponding addition of throttle to maintain RPM. He had created a condition through the synchronized cam mechanism in the throttle box that would certainly lower RPM. If not immediately corrected, with the condition of low RPM, high altitude and loaded, coning would occur. This would be followed by blade stall and lead to the inevitable, an uncontrollable aircraft. At this point, without instantaneous action, we risked serious implications and were in danger of crashing. Therefore, I reflexively pounded the collective down and reestablished the correct rpm setting.

After stabilizing flight parameters, and out of danger, I took a couple of deep breaths. Then I looked

across the cockpit at the grinning idiot who had almost killed us. Next, I was so angry that, without thinking, I lashed out, smashing him in the face with a strong left backhand. That got his attention. Shocked, probably not fully understanding what had transpired, the pathetic young man looked at me. He reminded me of a small puppy reprimanded for soiling the living room rug.

Realizing that my action had been instinctive, I was regretful that had I lost self-control and hit the soldier. Having vented my anger in aggression, I realized that I had to appease my cockpit mate, so I expressed my most fatherly smile. The effort worked. The guy must have finally realized that he had fouled up and deserved the lick, for he returned the smile. Moreover, he finally got the pointing concept and directed me to the correct landing zone.

The incident occurred too rapidly to scan the tachometer. In the fraction of a second before taking corrective action, I did not know if the engine had been overboosted. Irons was not particularly concerned, so I continued to march. After the RON, I discussed the unusual incident with John Aspinwall. Without definitive power and RPM settings, and only a logbook entry to base judgment, he could not speculate as to any engine damage. Maintenance could only make cursory

inspections by examining chip detector plugs and filter screens. Time would tell.

If there was a moral involved in the incident, it obviously had to be to never remove one's hand from the controls, especially when a local was in the cockpit. It was an excellent learning experience, and no similar incident ever occurred again during my Air America tenure.

During the rainy season, recalling Bill Cook's admonition that there were few gas stations in Laos, I left little to chance in fuel matters. Therefore, I stopped at Na Khang to take on a couple barrels of the precious fluid. I also left the area a little early so as not to be caught out in adverse weather, and to allow circumnavigation or flight to an alternate destination if necessary. As fate would have it, my precautions were well taken. About 1800 hours, when close to Sam Tong and pushing ten hours in the air, I was alerted by the Vientiane Oscar Mike to proceed to Tham Sorn (LS-74) and pick up the Porter pilot of N197X. This could mean only one thing. He had crashed or had experienced maintenance problems. When I landed at the site, I discovered the pilot had damaged the tail wheel assembly while taxiing on the heavily rutted strip. We headed toward Site-20 after one of the easiest SARs I had ever accomplished.

After another day in the field and RON at Sam Tong, I managed to obtain a ride to Long Tieng and board 538 to Udorn.

### **INITIAL FLIGHT IN THE BELL HELICOPTER**

After flying the H-34 for seven years, I was confident with and felt very comfortable manipulating the helicopter. The green machine had never let me down, always bringing me home, sometimes when the odds dictated differently. I wondered if switching to Bell would present a problem, for the only items in common with the H-34 were some flight characteristics like hovering, rotor blades, and most flight instruments. Although accomplished years ago, perhaps my minor training in the small HTL-6 Bell at Ellison Field would prove valuable.

Although we had people in our group from Saigon with considerable Bell experience, transition to the Bell was generally by seniority, and people were lined up for the program, so when offered the opportunity, I thought that I would give it a try. If I did not cut the mustard, I could always return to the UH-34D program. Having absolutely no gas turbine time, the move would herald a major change in my flying career. Still, as a preferred instrument in the future for commercial helicopter aviation, Bell experience would constitute an excellent choice for me if I chose to

remain in aviation after the Air America experience. With continuing peace efforts underway in Southeast Asia, this was a reality that could occur at any time. In the meantime, I asked individuals with previous exposure to the Bell for their opinions regarding the machine's merits. Most touted the bird's increased speed and reliable and powerful engine while carrying similar or even greater loads than the H-34 to altitude.<sup>9</sup> With only two main rotor blades slapping the air, others mentioned a quieter rotor system and a low profile that tended to reduce battle damage incidents. Other positive features were mentioned, but relatively no negatives. These would appear later.

On Sunday I had my initial supervised ride, a one-hour local pattern flight in the right seat of a Bell 204B with "Robbie" Robertson. Maintenance had just completed inspections on 39-Foxtrot, so there was sufficient time for a familiarization flight before the machine returned upcountry, where already transitioned pilots were attempting to better acquaint the Customer with the aircraft's superior qualities.

We could not have had a more competent and understanding individual than Robertson to fly with and transition to the new machine. In my mind, except perhaps for Scratch, "Robbie" was the best aviator in

---

<sup>9</sup> I never experienced a complete R-1820 engine failure encompassing thousands of hours flying the machine.

our group. A consummate helicopter pilot, as a new First Officer, he had flown right seat with me during the May 1965 Brace SAR. Landing next to the downed Porter, he had remained cool, executed my instructions to the letter, and performed an outstanding, excellent, and trouble-free mission.

However, "Robbie" exhibited some psychological problems, probably stemming from a serious crash in Nam, during which both the helicopter and crew were burned. Many of us drank, some more than others, and Robertson was one of the heavy drinkers. While sitting in the corner of the Club bar, he had an annoying habit of snipping dead skin from his hands with a nail clipper. After a snoot full of beer, his eyes became glassy and he spat out numerous Nam stories. His favorite tale involved a charmed Viet Cong soldier who constantly shot at him from a fixed position. Day after day "Robbie" loaded his gunship with high explosive anti-tank (HEAT) and white phosphorus (WP) rounds, and bullets to attack the guy, but after expending all ammunition, the individual casually returned to his machine gun and began shooting again. It became a game. Finally, since it was impossible to eliminate the man, "Robbie" eventually gave up.

Robbie's drinking got him in trouble one night while returning home after a night at the bar. As he approached one of the traffic circles in town, an

aggressive and hated taxi driver cut him off. Instead of giving way, he did what we had all considered at one time or another. He rammed the vehicle full bore. Then, departing the car, he left the scene and returned home. The Udorn police knew Robertson well and apprehended him at his house.

The one hour I spent flying 39F was interesting, and gave me a taste of the Bell and its "idiotsyncrasies." After that short period, I knew that transition to an acceptable proficiency would not take place without difficulty. I liked the concept of not having to manipulate a throttle to maintain an RPM setting, as this eliminated a major portion of the division of attention necessary in the H-34 at critical stages of operation. However, I was unfamiliar with the machine, and with the newness, felt uncomfortable in the cockpit. I had not flown a piston-banger Bell helicopter since the abbreviated HTL-6 training at Ellison Field, and had largely forgotten the aircraft's skid configured characteristics, and how low to the ground the machine sat compared to the H-34. After observing a pattern demonstration and landing, I could perform basic maneuvers, but I was reluctant to attempt autorotations.

The Company, local management, and the Agency wanted quick transitions to the Bell to provide pilots for current and near future line work. While still

flying the H-34, ten hours was generally the maximum time allocated for Bell upgrading. I suppose osmosis was expected in the transition. With only one Bell available and others to train, this time included sporadic flight training at Udorn and upcountry work. Besides flying mostly in cruise flight, the training Co-Captain field work allowed me the opportunity to learn power settings, observe sight picture maneuvers, and acquire other aircraft familiarity.

As good as "Robbie" was considered a line pilot, he was not particularly competent in the role of a Bell instructor pilot.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps intimidated and deferring to my seniority and not fully comprehending that I was a slow learner, he said little, failing to teach, provide adequate explanations, or criticize and critique my performance. Therefore, as a naïve Bell pilot, this did not help to instill confidence, and impaired my transition and checkout.

### **H-34 LOSS**

Three days after my initial Bell flight, Gene Rainville and "Willie" Parker crashed on takeoff in Hotel-51 while working on the joint FAR-Meo Operation Solidarity. The elevated pad at TF6373 was located in

---

<sup>10</sup> There was no Instructor Pilot (IP) designation at this time, and not all of us had been through a military IP school.



the mountains sixteen miles northeast of the proposed dam site, adjoining the west side of the Nam Ngum.

With adverse weather impacting the area and three passengers aboard, Gene lifted to check hover power. The rotor RPM dropped below 2700, so he touched down on one wheel and reduced collective to regain 2800 RPM. He then made a right pedal turn off the landing pad and suddenly began rapidly losing altitude. Fearing a crash, he attempted to cushion the impact on a knoll. The aircraft hit hard, tore off the landing gear, and bounced. As the Captain wrapped on full throttle, the engine RPM decreased to zero. With little rotor blade inertia remaining, forward momentum carried Hotel-51 through a thatched house and down the hillside. The ship terminated at the level base of the slope, rolled on its left side, and caught fire. The crew and a passenger managed to exit the machine, but received burns. Two others perished as fire consumed the recent addition to the Air America H-34 inventory.

Rain and fog prevented Herb Baker from discovering the people for about two hours. Eventually spotting them and relaying the information to the Vientiane operations manager (OM), Herb was informed that the

Ambassador ordered him to defer any pickup to an inbound Jolly Green crew. <sup>11</sup>

Recovery was made and the survivors taken to the Sam Tong hospital where an American doctor provided emergency first aid. Parker received the most severe burns, especially to his hand.

Following his return to Udorn, "Willy" was flown to the military burn center in San Antonio, Texas, to receive expert treatment at the renowned hospital there. Taking a few days off, Mike Jarina volunteered and accompanied "Willy" to the States. Parker was concerned about what Air America was going to do with him if he could not perform as a Flight Mechanic. Mike thought about this and considered that Parker might become an Operations Manager. Upon his return, Jarina talked to Wayne Knight regarding Parker's chances of an operation manager slot. He stressed that "Willy" had done an excellent job and the Company should take care of him, or at the very least provide him with the chance to do what he desired.

While leaving the CPH office, Mike had the distinct impression that Wayne would attempt to help Parker.

---

<sup>11</sup> Author's Note: this was likely because of the altitude, weather conditions, and Baker's previously unsuccessful record while attempting a SAR in the same area.



The Sam Tong refugee and Royal Lao Government political complex for Xieng Khouang Province. In order to avoid dust from taxiing aircraft, the expanded and "modern" hospital lies at the end of the dog leg at the lower portion of the runway. The USAID Quonset type warehouse adjoins the strip and loading area. The Air America hostel and field maintenance facilities are to the left of a definitive karst in the center of valley. An extensive road system inundates the area, with one leading south toward and over Skyline Drive into the Long Tieng Valley.

John Tarn Collection.

After many surgeries, despite the pain and horrible scarring, Parker recovered the use of his hand. He later rejoined his Air America comrades and again flew in the capacity of a Flight Mechanic.

The accident investigation board's finding cited pilot error as the cause of the accident. Based on evidence presented it stated that Rainville had *"failed to properly ascertain the aircraft's operating capability, resulting in an over-loaded takeoff under prevailing conditions."*<sup>12</sup>

Since burn injuries were encountered by Hotel-51's crew, Doug Dreifus's people recommended the Company obtain fire retardant clothing for mandatory use by all helicopter and STOL aircraft crews. Although an excellent suggestion, albeit tardy, several years elapsed before Nomex clothing was introduced to the Air America supply system and flight crew transition was effected.

Sometime before this, Frank Stergar demonstrated how readily the prison-gray Air America uniforms burned

---

<sup>12</sup> The Author was not privy to all the facts, but this finding seems unusual. Hotel-51 was destroyed by fire, possibly consuming relevant evidence of a potential engine problem. On the other hand, because of the metal construction, an engine was rarely totally consumed during a fire. Therefore, perhaps the engine was recovered mostly intact and during a teardown process no obvious failure discovered. Furthermore, still, under the influence of the strict Forney era, as a CYA, the Maintenance Department had a tendency to point fingers at pilots following most accidents.

and would likely adversely exacerbate any flash fire injury. He was quite vocal regarding the subject indicating that U.S. Army pilots already used Nomex.<sup>13, 14</sup>

#### **MILITARY REGION-4**

Despite the monsoon season's abundant rainfall, vehicle activity was still observed by teams along sixty miles of Route-110 and road crews continued attempts to connect Route-110 to northern Route-96. During intelligence forays, Doug Swanson's people discovered several rice caches on the western end of the Sihanouk Trail. In June, aerial reconnaissance and ground teams also revealed increased numbers of men and material moving along the trail and Se Kong toward the Bolovens.

Concerned over developments, the Vientiane Embassy Country Team planned another day-night multi-day strike package-SHOCK-3 and sent a request forward to MACV and Seventh Air Force in Saigon. Planned to commence

---

<sup>13</sup> While I was in USMC aviation, borate impregnated flight suits were standard issue for all crews. The chemicals in these suits became quite odoriferous when soaked with sweat and the protective qualities leached out during repeated washings.

<sup>14</sup> Joe Leeker, UH-34D, H-51.  
Air America Aircraft Accident Review, Hotel-51, 10/05/67.  
*Air America Log*, Volume 10 # 4 Oct-Nov-Dec 93 Issue, 9.  
Gary Gentz Interview with the Author.  
Bill Leary July 1967 Notes.  
Mike Jarina's Sixth Interview, 12/11-12/00.

between 30 June and 4 July, except for the addition of B-52s, the mission would duplicate former SHOCK operations. For separation between slow and fast movers, Royal Lao Air Force T-28 pilots would target areas close to the Cambodian border, with U.S. Air Force aircraft striking the remainder.

During the five-day period, adverse weather curtailed half of the scheduled USAF sorties. However, staging from Pakse's airport, T-28 pilots conducted an excess of their expected number of strikes. Collated post-strike bomb damage assessment (BDA) and other intelligence revealed that SHOCK-3 "probably" was successful in interdicting the road system, destroying material destined for South Vietnam and southern Laos. Soon after the SHOCK activity, SLAM missions impacted the northern trail system. <sup>15</sup>

## **MISSIONS**

While SHOCK-3 was in progress, Customers kept us clear of the area. On Sunday the eleventh, Tom Cournoyer and I departed the Air America ramp for Pakse in Hotel-58. We left fairly late during questionable weather. After a longer than normal trip of dodging thunder bumps, we arrived at the southeastern river town, took on a fuel load, and were redirected to PS-

---

<sup>15</sup> Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 233, 235.

22. Except for a few local supply missions, we did not fly much that day.

Military Region Four was becoming more and more an enigma and the day marked my initial RON at PS-22. By this time the site was geared up to accommodate overnight crews for emergency situations and to ensure adequate helicopters and crews were available to conduct early trail missions. Compared to earlier years, substantially more outlying listening posts dotted the Plateau rim, and security at the site had been beefed up considerably. Following a steak supper, washed down with Olympia Beer, we retired to military style cots on the large screened porch. The porch provided a mosquito free breeze way that was pleasant after the hot day. It also provided a buffer against the nasty mosquito that carried the deadly cerebral malaria parasite.

There was no mission the next day. Many variables contributed to mission delays or aborts. Inclement weather conditions, enemy activity, loss of or no team radio contact, and lack of cover aircraft could all negatively impact infiltration-exfiltration missions. Because of often faulty intelligence, even that derived from several sources, it was fortunate SOPs were tailored to ensure a high percentage of mission success and survival of the teams and helicopter crews. Still, at times, I did not feel overly confident when Don

Stephens briefed a mission and frankly admitted to me that he had little information regarding an area or what we would encounter in the landing zone, but that fun would come later. At least Don did not lie to us, a problem we sometimes encountered with some Customers during future missions.

Delayed or aborted missions perpetrated considerable down time, often halving normal daily flight time. It was something that rarely occurred in Military Region Two. Because there was nothing we could do about the situation, it required considerable patience, understanding, and rethinking on our part. Losing revenue and additional days upcountry in an unproductive status did little to endear us to the Customer. But, except for the occasional Pony Express crew, we were the only assets available to the Customer, and the accelerated road watch missions assumed priority over other work. For this reason, until we left Laos for good, Customer relations waxed and waned. The field Customer, mostly former Special Forces men, had to learn to deal diplomatically with surly crews, and crews had to contain their desire to get cracking.

Tuesday marked another first for me. Following an overnight at Pakse and an abbreviated day flying on the Plateau, after picking up Doug Swanson late at PS-22, I repaired south to Attopeu and secured for the night.



From later developments, I deduced that Doug had received orders to verify or substantiate aerial photograph evidence of damage to enemy supply lines during SHOCK-3 operations, and assess whether the strikes had impacted the flow of men and supplies on Route-110. Therefore, this overnight at the site was in connection with planning and coordination for the following day's mission.

Tucked into a prominent loop in the Se Kong that looked much like a dagger or spear pointing toward Route-110 only ten miles to the southeast, Lima-10 was not an ideal RON site. It had always been a problem area with the potential for disaster, and one never knew the full story when landing there. For this reason, I usually reconnoitered the strip at altitude and slowly descended within the boundaries, while looking for signs of trouble.

Although the Customer often stayed there overnight, the exposed location and the caliber of government troops instilled little trust and confidence in my near-term wellbeing. In addition, I knew too much about past area problems, and my negative attitude had developed over the years. Although not readily admitted by FAR, military leaders posted there had a de facto accommodation with the enemy to exist. They exchanged weapons and supplies, and there was much waffling of loyalty during times of duress. Moreover, our crews had

been detained under house arrest in the past. Lately there was more security in the form of PS Sites 23, 26, and 38 either on or near the Plateau's rim. Possessing crew served weapons, the former two overlooked the strip and town and at least one site sported a 105mm artillery unit. To the northwest, PS-5 backed up against the base of the Plateau. There was a low hill to the northeast with a forward outpost and a 75mm pack howitzer.

Swanson went on ahead to the quarters while I conducted a post flight and Tom began the Flight Mechanic's nightly inspections and greasing of numerous zerk fittings on the main rotor and tail rotor systems.

Although it was late, the area looked deserted as I strolled down the strip from the fueling area toward Doug's quarters. The entire region was crisscrossed with trails, cart paths, and roads that were largely impassable in wet weather. To my right in the gloaming I could see a dirt road, the merging of Route-16 that paralleled the Se Kong's west bank from the north, and Route-18 that hugged the southern Plateau from the southwest. This track passed through the Attopeu complex to a ferry where the majority of the town's houses lay. On the opposite side of the river, the road resumed an easterly course for about eight miles through intermittent scrub and rice paddy land toward populated areas containing native lowlanders indigenous

to the well-watered area. Further on, villages became scattered until reaching the foothills hinterland where they almost disappeared and the trail intersected with developing Route-110. <sup>16</sup>

For some reason the air strip had been built on the west side of the finger, and the eastern unpopulated portion was composed of mostly scrub and forest land. The land spit terminated at the apex where old looking houses and shops were located. I suppose there was no money available or interest in repairing anything.

Doug's place was unspectacular. A barebones wooden structure, it merely provided a place to eat and sleep. One feature that stood out was a clean and neat outdoor privy. Doug called this "the throne room." Probably the only one like it in the entire area, it contained an elevated flush toilet complete with a back and seat.

A large, garrulous type individual, Swanson reminded me somewhat of legendary Customer, Tony Poe, but without the brashness, reputation, and warrior track record. His tour with the CIA was probably his last hurrah capping a long U.S. Army military career. Definitely a hard charging individual, presented with an audience, he was at his best displaying command presence while organizing and conducting field missions. However, he appeared more normal and calmer

---

<sup>16</sup> With a constantly evolving landscape, most of this region could only be viewed from the air or from a chart.



Surrounded on three sides by the Se Kong, Attopeu (L-10) was the last sizeable town of any consequence controlled by the Royal Lao Government in southern Laos. Despite using a Polaroid lens filter, the photo is degraded by altitude, smoke, and haze.

Author Collection.

during one-on-one situations, like while eating. At such times, Doug made sense and exhibited a pleasant personality.<sup>17</sup>

In the morning, after a decent, leisurely breakfast we repositioned to Kong Mi, where the infiltration team assembled with all their equipment and weapons, was briefed, and we waited for other air assets to arrive. Billy Pearson arrived in another double crewed H-34. Senior man on the operation, he would assume command of the mission and fly with me. The insertion was planned for last light and was located in an area where none of us had ever ventured (XA425979). From the chart the infil site was located thirty-seven miles directly west of PS-7 in the corner where the Lao-Cambodian border met. Because a direct track would take us over eighteen miles of Cambodian territory, a dog leg was planned northwest and then southwest to the target. This would add a few miles to our flight, but likely satisfy nervous diplomats and prevent an international incident should one of us be forced down in an area where we were not supposed to be flying.

By then these road watch missions were an accepted and established portion of our work in Laos, and we

---

<sup>17</sup> Later, while working in Military Region One, Swanson acquired a sullied reputation among H-34 pilots. Although the Author is not positive, this loss of trust and aversion to the man likely stemmed from Swanson's peer pressure to perform very dangerous road watch missions.

were entering an expanded phase of our operations only lately implemented: the long-range mission and deep penetration of enemy territory. For this reason, and the increased degree of danger, double cockpit crews, one ship designated as SAR, and USAF A-1E Skyraider escort planes "loaded for bear" were the norm. One fairly new factor (at least to me) had been introduced to the equation: reconnaissance by flight leaders. In lieu of aerial photography, not always available in the field, and incomplete briefings, this added feature was intended to pinpoint the landing zone and familiarize the cockpit crew with a preferred route, terrain, and forced landing areas. <sup>18</sup>

Billy P and I departed on the recon with a Continental Air Services International (CASI) Porter pilot in XW-PCL. <sup>19</sup> With the plane configured for cargo operations, I had to sit on the plywood deck in the rear of the cockpit and peer out a small window. Despite this, I learned a considerable amount about the

---

<sup>18</sup> Team missions were supposedly highly classified. Adhering to the Agency "need to know" policy, we were never fully informed of the goals or intended purposes. However, we were not totally ignorant and could speculate, or generally deduce the goals.

<sup>19</sup> There was really no competitive attitude between flight personnel, and missions crossed company lines. However, it never occurred to me to inquire what the implications were as to survivor benefits should we be shot or forced down in a CASI aircraft, and killed or captured.

region during the sixty-five-minute flight. Flying much faster than an H-34, the circuitous and diversionary route took us well beyond Lao Route-110's western most terminus, some twenty-six miles northwest of Kong Mi. At this point, after passing into Cambodia the LOC assumed a new identity, Route-97. From there, the road paralleled the Tonle Kong southwest for a number of miles until still paralleling the Tonle Kong, plunged south into Cambodia's bowels. <sup>20</sup>

In the spring of 1965 Prince Sihanouk was convinced that the U.S. and South Vietnam would never succeed against North Vietnam's effort to reunite all of Vietnam. Therefore, looking to the future and survival, he severed diplomatic relations with USG. Then, with carte blanche approval, enemy engineers and laborers began construction of new supply routes to connect other LOCs that travelled through southern Laos and Cambodia. By 1966, U.S. intelligence discovered a road in Cambodia that linked with those in Laos. Named Route-110, but to distinguish it from the more generically known Ho Chi Minh, the southern system was called the Sihanouk Trail. The logistical land operation was directed from Phnom Penh by undercover North Vietnamese (Unit K-20) posing as legitimate commercial businessmen.

---

<sup>20</sup> From a map assessment, this part of the River was considered the border and called the Se Kong on the Lao side.



Map showing a portion of eastern Thailand, southern Laos and northern Cambodia. From Port Stung Treng on the Mekong River communist supplies moved north on the Tonle Kong into Laos, where they were transferred to trucks on Route-110, the west-east road structure (Sihanouk Trail), and were delivered to Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces in Laos and South Vietnam.

Bernard Nalty.



The supply segments in both countries involved roads and waterways to allow for seasonal weather. In upper Cambodia, after arriving at the Stung Treng port on the Mekong, supplies were transferred to motorized boats and directed north up the Kong River to a point inside Laos. Once there they were again moved to vehicles for movement along Route-110.

To further enhance the supply operation, a large base was located on the right bank of the Mekong under triple canopy jungle. In addition, small airstrips dotted the area. <sup>21</sup>

Our remote, unpopulated infil point lay a half mile north of the border in flat, open scrub land just below and west of a convergence of the Xe (Se) Khamphu and Priam Rivers, tributaries that intersected the larger Se Kong. The area provided little cover and concealment, but afforded excellent mobility for the team to monitor the river, the road on the opposite side for traffic, and just to the east, a rudimentary trail designated 181 that led north to the east-west Route-18 on its way to connect with Route-13 twenty miles south of Pakse. The broad, flat area that stretched from the Plateau's southern edge to the Mekong and Cambodian border was certainly not a

---

<sup>21</sup> Wikipedia, Sihanouk Trail, 2.  
Arthur Dommen, Description of the Sihanouk Trail.  
Map Bernard Nalty, *War Against Trucks: Aerial Interdiction in Southern Laos 1968-72*, 101.

government-controlled area. In recent years, no one in his right mind would attempt to traverse this land route to Attopeu. Perhaps during the French era, but since I had been working in Laos, the artery was considered degraded, reputedly replete with bad guys. That is the reason all personnel and supplies were flown into and out of Lima-10. If unable to traverse the Bolovens while returning to Pakse, I normally either hugged the Plateau rim or overflew this area at sufficient altitude to avoid small arms fire. However, as a newly upgraded Captain in 1965, Charlie Davis had received no initial briefing from Customer Flynn Perry, and received his "welcome aboard" from this area after returning from working the Attopeu area. Charlie always believed this incident hastened the formation of the Flight Information Center (FIC) Udorn.

Always looking for potential areas of concern, I noted an airfield at Ban San Keo that bordered or was incorporated into Route-67 about four miles east of the landing zone. We had never been cautioned regarding air activity from this area, but it was a strange place to have an airfield. In addition, there was a bogus non-directional beacon (NDB) reputedly located just inside the Cambodian border that emitted the same Papa Sierra signal on the Pakse 240 kilocycle frequency. San Keo had to be the beacon's location. Also, late one day I had observed a green C-47 type aircraft dropping in the

vicinity of Route-96 east of the Bolovens. Although I never discovered its identity, it was likely that the plane was not one of ours, and had come from somewhere in supposedly neutral Cambodia. <sup>22</sup>

Senior Captain Billy Pearson led the mission from the right seat, and as a designated Co-Captain, I navigated, monitored instruments, and handled anything out of the ordinary. I did not particularly like not being the PIC, but that was the nature of the seniority beast. After loading the team, we cranked up and departed shortly after 1700 hours for a pre-determined orbit point to await our escort. Monitoring the operation, Swanson rode in Papa Charlie Lima, but at a considerable distance from our flight so as not to compromise the mission. After join up, radio silence was observed and we proceeded to the infil point and deposited the troops without incident at 1846 hours. Then we climbed to a respectable altitude in the dark, turned northwest to fly the sixty-six miles to Pakse. As customary, after thanking the A-1 pilots for their

---

<sup>22</sup> There was a lot of clandestine military activity in the two-county region that was calculated to disrupt and thwart the communist supply systems. Years later, while working for the Southern Natural Gas Company out of Toca, Louisiana, I met a former Navy Seal, Steve Call, at the Shell producing platform in the Gulf of Mexico's Mississippi Canyon-311. Steve indicated that he had been part of a five-man team inserted in the Elephant Mountains of southern Cambodia that abutted a large rice growing area. Supplied by air, over a four-month period, the team's mission was to interdict and harass the area.

assistance, we released our cover aircraft for whatever else they had planned that night.

Like all missions into the unknown, I was relieved when the insertion portion was complete. Navigation to Pakse would not constitute a problem, for the Mekong lay to our west, and even if we drifted a little in that direction, intersection with the river would provide a positive fix. Furthermore, the Pakse NDB was available, as were the town's lights. In general, the only problem confronting us on this leg would be an engine failure over unfamiliar terrain in the dark and a "hairy" autorotation into the "tullies."

I burned up considerable adrenaline during these missions. My stress level peaked, particularly following a launch and during the en route period, when there was excess time to contemplate all the negative factors that could emerge to hamper the mission. At such times demons swirled inside my brain to haunt conscious thoughts. However, at the point of actual execution, training and Marine Corps discipline invariably surfaced, and there were too many other duties on which to focus.

A couple of items annoyed me. I only logged two hours and fifty minutes during an entire day in the field, one that began early and did not terminate until well after 2000 hours, with very little sustenance. The loss of normal revenue and project pay could never be

restored and it appeared that we were going to be subjected to a steady diet of this form of work in Military Region Four.

Overnight clouds and rain moved into the Pakse area and, there was little flying the following morning. Toward afternoon, I was directed to the hills west of Lima-11 to the Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) and road watch training base at Phou Lat Sua (PS-18). There I boarded a CASI Porter for a recon in the northern Saravane sector. In over an hour and a half of diversionary dipping and diving, we scouted XC775310 five miles east of Ban Nongboua (LS-134). These coordinates skirted the periphery of Vietnamese logistical Base Area-612, a sizeable region located between the towns of Saravane and Ban Bac, and included upper Route-16. Supporting enemy operations in the central highlands of South Vietnam, the sizeable area was one of seven major bases strategically placed along the Trail system in eastern Military Region Three and Military Region Four used to funnel supplies into South Vietnam. Camouflaged and closely guarded by elite troops, this particular base was an important depot for supplying enemy B-3 front troops in the South Vietnamese Central Highlands. It stored POL, vehicle spare parts, ammunition, weapons, food, and medicine. SOG units gathered intelligence close to the border and

Agency special guerrilla unit (SGU) people attempted to glean information from our side. <sup>23</sup>

Whatever the Customer had planned failed to materialize, and I returned to Pakse for the night.

We were recalled to Udorn on the 16th. Except for one successful mission, the RON had been unproductive in respect to flight time.

## **JARINA**

The day after I returned from Pakse, Mike and Bob Peterson departed Udorn for Savannakhet in Hotel-43. Impeded by maintenance problems and weather, the short day resulted in only eight landings. Working the Route-13 corridor, these missions included a trip to Seno airfield (L-46) where a new SGU battalion was obtaining parachute training capping four-month Agency training. From there Mike bounced between Dong Hene (LS-54), site of the FAR officers' training school, and MOUNG PHALANE (L-61), where an Air America radio station and a USAF TACAN navigation system were located.

Switching ships to Hotel-50 in the morning, the crew proceeded south to Pakse. Following a trip twenty miles northwest to the Agency's SGU training camp at PS-18, Mike was assigned to work at Kong Mi where he back shuttled troops and their kin to PS-22 from Site-7

---

<sup>23</sup> Soutchay Vongsavanh, 9, 12.

and Attopeu for training. While at Site-10, a French-Chinese doctor visiting the Operation Brotherhood clinic took photos of the H-34 and the natives. There were several youngsters in the group carrying M-1 Garand rifles that looked almost as tall as the kids. The doctor was appalled and said to Mike, *"This is horrible, you taking these children away. Why do they send these little kids to war?"*

The protracted war of attrition had removed many men of military age from their homes, many who would never return. Therefore, with dislocation and casualties, the bottom of the barrel was fast approaching, and pickings were slim for obtaining new recruits. The only solution was conscription of both the young and old. Mike was used to seeing young teenage Meo children in Vang Pao's army. Many felt compelled to take the place of older brothers or fathers who failed to survive; some excelled in battle, most died. Therefore, Mike was well equipped to deal with the doctor's gross naivete.

*"Well, Doc you know it only takes a person two pounds of pressure to pull the trigger of a rifle."* Unable to comprehend the situation or appreciate Jarina's attempt at American dry humor, the doctor looked at Mike, slowly shook his head, and walked away.

To enhance his road watch team's survival chances, Swanson continued to plan late insertions out of Kong



French doctor snapping photos of Jarina's UH-34D and the trainees with their dependents at Attopeu, Laos. Although newer weapons were being introduced to counter the enemy's superior AK-47s, the M-1 Garand rifle was still used by SGU troops. The girls from this particular tribe have their ears pierced and wooden plugs inserted as beauty symbols.

Jarina Collection.



Mi. As per mission SOPs, Mike went northeast with Larry Egan, his cockpit mate for the mission, to recon the area with the Porter pilot of PDC. With weather marginal in the target area, they were only able to get within six miles of the projected landing zone. Mike did not have a weapon, so Swanson's assistant, a tall, thin individual with glasses, left and returned with a snub-nosed .38 caliber pistol. Mike frowned and rejected the handgun as ineffective for personal protection. Therefore, the assistant departed the loading area again. Upon return he presented Mike with a nine-millimeter automatic pistol that Jarina indicated was the perfect weapon for his purposes.

The weather had cleared substantially by mission time. The team drop was made twenty miles northeast in the hills close to Houay Loumphan, a river that flowed through a mountainous valley to the flatlands, and was intersected by one major trail. To require minimum walking, but still remote enough to avoid enemy detection, Doug's missions were planned reasonably close to enemy lines of communication (LOC). Since road work was underway on the Route-110/16 junction only a few miles north, and the high terrain overlooking the road afforded observation, this was an ideal location to obtain intelligence.

Since Swanson and his assistant were still not overnighing at Kong Mi, Jarina and Egan recovered at Attopeu.

When weather permitted on Wednesday the 19th, Mike returned to Pakse, where the Customer directed him to retrieve a team four miles east of the prominent landmark at Phou Kate and return them to PS-18. After fueling at Site-11, he flew north to Senammana (PS-19), in the Toumlan Valley fifteen miles north of Saravane. The site was close to and collocated with Ban Padou that later became Lima Site-419. Road watch activity was conducted not only on the Plateau and at Kong Mi, but also on the northern sector of Military Region Four. Some of the first PS sites had originated there.

As mission leader for the team rotation, Mike boarded CASI Porter Papa Charlie November (PCN) to recon a mountainous area twenty-four miles east of PS-19. The landing zone was located to the north of a five-mile east-west portion of Route-96 paralleling the Se Kong. Strategically located, the area also included an important way point supply base area that, in addition to Route-96, included Routes-92 and 923. To prevent revealing to the enemy the team's location, once radio and visual contact were established to everyone's satisfaction, recon time was kept to a minimum and an alternate route used to PS-19. The infil-exfil mission was conducted without incident and

after returning to PS-19, Mike and his cohorts RTB Pakse. It had been a short day with less than ten landings.

Without the mission delays waiting for escort aircraft, Mike's flight time production measurably increased the following day. After landing at Saravane (L-44), he shuttled troops east to defensive positions on the elevated western rim of Phou Kate, to protect the critical U.S. Air Force TACAN site. Leaving Site-44, he was directed to PS-28 at Ban Tayum, close to Thateng, a small town and FAR position on Route-23. After returning to Pakse to obtain refueling, he went to PS-28 with supplies and personnel. Constituting a threat to the Plateau, enemy activity had been noted to the east. Therefore, Jarina was tasked to deliver troops and supplies to a hilly position twelve miles northeast of Thateng overlooking Route-16. Then, after conducting a passenger pickup for Pakse at Paksong Town (PS-1), he returned there for the night.

Attesting to the concern regarding the area, on Friday the Customer again directed Mike to Ban Tayum. From there and from Saravane he conducted twenty shuttles to a point fourteen miles east, and again to the point north of Route-16.

On the last day of his RON, Mike flew to PS-27, three miles west of Phou Kham Phouk (LS-166) on the southeastern portion of the Bolovens. Upon landing at

PS-22, Mike was surprised to see CJ Abadie and several Americans waiting to board his helicopter. Jarina was especially surprised, for Ab rarely ventured upcountry, much less to Military Region Four. Ab climbed into the cockpit and told Mike the group wanted to go down into the Se Kong Valley. Heretofore, because of the unknown, and possibility of encountering enemy patrols, we never went into the no man's area. However, the Customer maintained listening posts on the Plateau rim and below on cliff outcroppings. In addition, patrols occasionally ventured into the valley.

Although curious, as a fairly new guy, Jarina did not ask for the whys and wherefores, but merely assumed the trip was an Agency-sponsored area survey. They flew up and down the river, obviously looking for something. At one point the Captain hovered into the wind facing north over the surging river. The water rushing under the helicopter gave Mike a funny sensation akin to vertigo. <sup>24</sup> Abadie showed Mike a confined area in the trees where the passengers wanted to land. When asked if he could safely land there, Jarina answered in the affirmative, but would only be able to depart with three people at a time. Not wanting to be left on the ground while Mike took the others back to PS-22, this idea was rejected.

---

<sup>24</sup> Similar to what Bobby Nunez might have encountered before crashing into the Mekong River in 1965.

After returning his charges to PS-22, Mike returned to work shuttling between PS-20 (Ban Sok). Aware that Hotel-50 was due for a maintenance inspection, he reserved sufficient time to return to Pakse and the long trip to Udorn. <sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup>

## **LUANG PRABANG**

*Shame on you if you fool me once, shame on me if you fool me twice.*

Anonymous

Despite a highly effective sapper attack on the Luang Prabang airfield in February that devastated the T-28 fleet, FAR was still considered reasonably equipped and well positioned, particularly around Nam Bac where ongoing defensive measures were underway. With the RLAF T-28 inventory back to normal at Luang

---

<sup>25</sup> Curious as to the nature of the Se Kong Valley mission, the Author queried Abadie. Because of faulty and fading memories, Ab replied that he had little recall of such a trip. He did mention an accident in the area that required the efforts of several people to investigate and conduct a quick recovery of the aircraft. Mike believed that Ab would have mentioned this to him, and that the passengers were not dressed or equipped for an aircraft recovery. Therefore, although the interesting mission did occur, details of its purpose shall remain secret.

<sup>26</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews. Second Interview at his House in Milton Florida, 09/13-15/97.  
Mike Jarina Fifth Interview at the Author's House, 05/18-20/00.  
Mike Jarina Email, 05/08/00.  
CJ Abadie Email, 05/03/00.

Prabang, Lao pilots, using intelligence derived from Agency sponsored road watch teams, were effectively pounding enemy movements and interdicting Route-19 in upper Military Region One. The strikes were thought to seriously curtail construction and repair of the rudimentary and largely degraded road system leading from Dien Bien Phu. <sup>27</sup>

The enemy was not asleep. Attesting to the RLAF effectiveness, they elected to strike the airfield again. Before I departed southern Laos for home on Friday, under the cover and concealment of darkness and foul weather, undetected, Vietnamese sappers easily penetrated Luang Prabang's airfield defenses. Expertly employing hand grenades and satchel charges, during a lightning strike, a twelve-man team destroyed nine combat loaded T-28s and one UH-34D helicopter. Additionally, another T-28 was damaged. Part of the bomb storage area containing fuses and napalm was hit, but the main bomb dump survived. Topping off the attack, the joint American-Lao Air Operations building was damaged. Lax security resulted in three Lao killed

---

<sup>27</sup> American air was also used to interdict roads in Military Region One. While working the northern area one day, I observed an F-4 pilot during a bombing run. The jet screamed into a dive and disappeared behind a hill. Seconds passed and before emerging, I had anxious thoughts of a SAR in unknown and hostile territory.

and eight wounded. Identical to the previous January attack, the enemy unit faded into the darkness.

Ironically, DEPCHIEF Thailand had just twixed CINCPAC:

*"RLAF has remained relatively stable during this period. T-28 sorties this year have averaged more than 400 per month for RLAF and 250 for Thai. [The] more favorable RLAF rate [is] because of increase in pilots and available aircraft."*

IVS representative Bob Glover and his wife were living at Moung Nane south of Luang Prabang when local police informed them of the attack. Concerned regarding security in his area, Bob attempted to obtain more information from Vientiane on his single side band radio, but most of the report was transmitted in code.

Ambassador Sullivan promised Souvanna Phouma replacement T-28s would be forthcoming from MAP resources, with the caveat that all aircraft could work out of Luang Prabang during the day, but remain at Vientiane overnight until the airport security problem was solved. Sullivan's admonition and the second attack on the airfield and severe loss of air assets was enough for the Prime Minister. He fired the regional commander for incompetence and ineffectiveness in providing adequate base security, particularly following the February attack. However, since generally



A battle-damaged T-28 departing Nam Bac, Laos, for Luang Prabang following an emergency landing and temporary repairs.  
Thompson Collection.





A Lao T-28 pilot departs the Nam Bac airstrip for Luang Prabang  
with empty stores.  
Thompson Collection.

all high-level appointments in the country were political, another general with top drawer connections received the job. Like a bad penny, the sacked general was rotated to Military Region Four and became General Phasouk's deputy.

Replacement T-28s arrived in dribbles; and the Luang Prabang force was not back to full strength until October. <sup>28</sup>

## **NEW DIGS**

After arriving at the Soi Mahamit house in the Company Volkswagen bus, I found a note pinned to the front door stating that Tuie, Ricky, et cetera had relocated to the Benjarn Road house. For some time, conditions and life in the Godnoma Compound had become increasingly intolerable for us because of deteriorating interpersonal relationships with neighbors, and other disagreeable factors. I had not moved earlier because of my inability to resolve my intention to continue long term employment with Air America, the excellent affordability of the rent, the location close to the airfield, and the inability to find another suitable place. However, of late, Rick was

---

<sup>28</sup> John Pratt-CHECO, 45.  
Edward Vallentiny-CHECO, 24.  
Victor Anthony, 223-224.  
Ken Conboy, 164.  
Bob Glover, 64-65.

more mobile and the playpen had outlived a reliable means for his welfare. Furthermore, the maids and Tokay carrying him around the house all the time was galling me, and definitely not conducive to his physical development. Our wide-open screened living room was also impossible to keep clean. Despite my experiment with spreading waste oil on the adjacent road, the open room was still subject to dust incursion. For this reason, we did not want the baby crawling on the floor or playing outside where snakes or other unseen dangers lurked. <sup>29</sup> Unseasoned clap boards continued to shrink and warp, and despite my attempts to line the cracks with wallpaper, keeping mosquitoes and other insects out of the bedroom was very difficult. A mosquito net strung over the baby's cot helped, but was also very warm for such a device this time of year.

For these reasons, we had been searching for an ideal place to live, thus far unsuccessfully. Then one day we learned that John Tarn was relocating his family to a stilt house formerly occupied by the recently departed Reverend Cash family. His reasoning was to save money and reconsider his Air America employment. Despite this decision, John indicated that Sandy and the children were quite happy living on Benjarn Road. There was a lack of dust, power was adequate, and the

---

<sup>29</sup> Tom and Kathy Moher had previously lost a child to a suspected ingestion of rat poison.

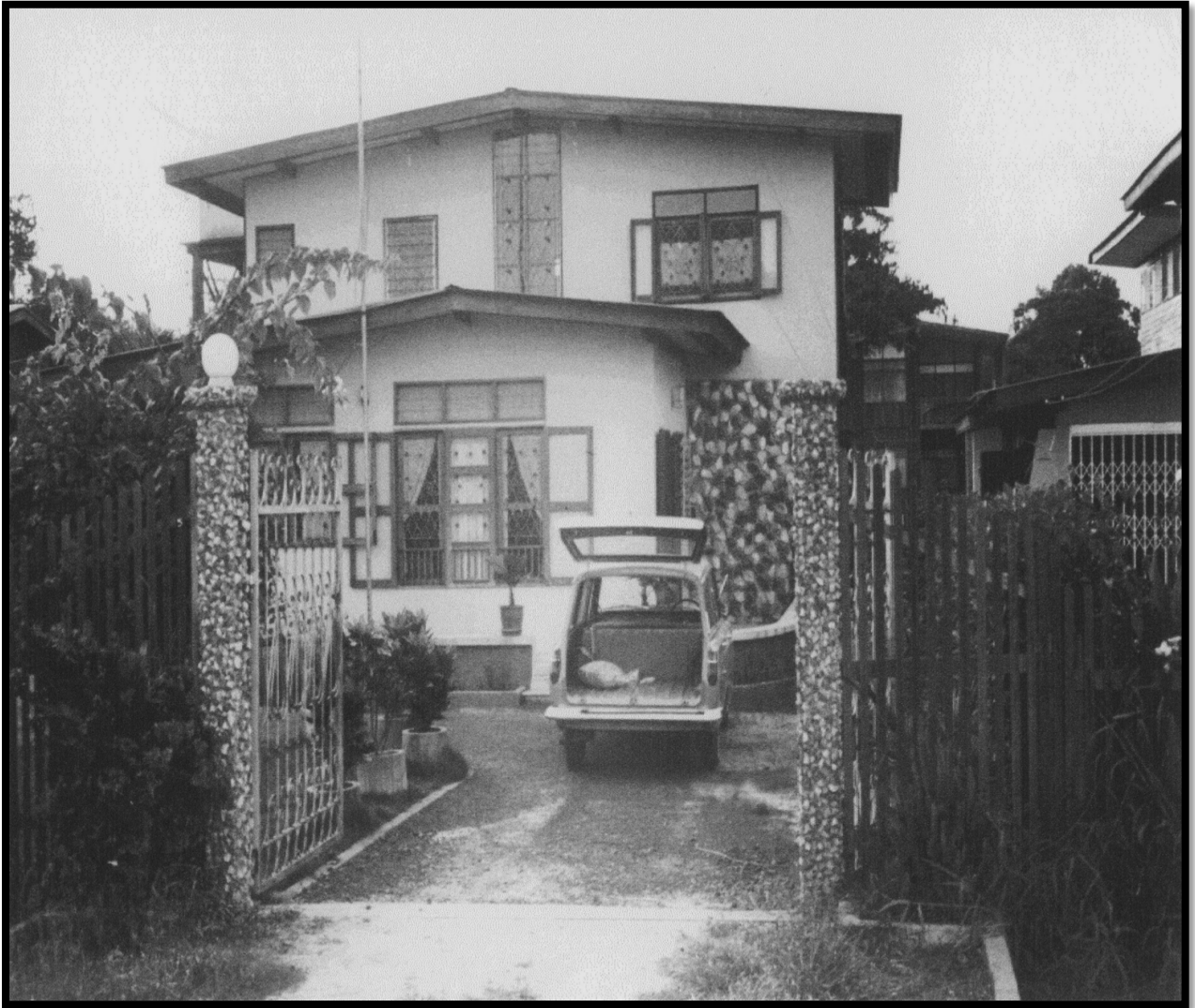
landlord considered a fair and pleasant person. Aware that such houses did not remain on the market long, we ventured to the northern part of town in the Cortina to examine the house, the area, and talk with the landlord regarding terms.

Benjarn Road was flanked by deep klongs and a macadam road angled into the Nong Khai Highway. In addition to this structure, several two-story houses dotted both sides of the road. Far removed from the airport, there was no apparent jet noise on this side of town. Although a fair distance from the Company facility, we had the Ford and Company bus to afford mobility.

A short laterite drive crossed a concrete tube culvert and entered the small front yard. Except for two pebble-studded concrete columns supporting an iron gate bordered with pink and red bougainvillea shrubs, the yard was fenced with wooden slats, with low fruit trees and bushes lining the boundary. Ten concrete tubes containing various plants bordered a small patch of grass and defined the semicircular driveway, which led to a carport on the left side and an adjoining maid's quarters. A water tower stood to the rear supporting the standard 400-gallon galvanized metal tank. Inside city limits, the gravity water system was fed by city water from the reservoir.

The landlady, Khun Nong, also a school teacher, lived next door in a typical Thai, large raised wooden house. Her husband, Meit, a high level postal civil service employee, was at work. She seemed very pleasant and provided us a tour of the house. From the outside, the house appeared to have many windows that would allow plenty of light to enter proper areas and afford cross ventilation for cooling. The painted exterior was constructed with some kind of asbestos sheeting that was enhanced by a rock façade to the right side of the front door. The roof was formed from standard galvanized tin, commonly used in Asia. In order to enter the abode, one had to step up to an uncovered terrace that surrounded the front.

Once inside I realized that the house appeared a lot larger from outside, but would provide sufficient room for our needs. Wall to wall varnished floors covered the downstairs area. The sitting room was separated from a small kitchen and eating area by walls and a bar. A rear door opened to a narrow concrete walkway and wooden fence. With land at a premium, only fences separated the houses. Scrolled iron anti-theft Quemoy bars adorned all the screened windows. A steep wooden staircase led upstairs to two bedrooms separated by a large open area that had the potential of being utilized as a play area or even another bedroom.



The rented house on Benjarn Road Udorn, Thailand.  
Author Collection.

We mutually liked what we saw, and it reminded me a little of Khun Singwa's "modern" house on the Airport Road the short time I had resided there in 1962 with the Howard Estes family and Jim Spillis. There were several positive aspects and just as likely unknown negatives to living there. But whatever the ultimate consequences, the area and house would provide a major step upward to our present living style, providing more modern housing amenities, more reliable utilities, and none of the stress involved in living in the jealously fueled Godnoma compound. I did not particularly like the inflated price John Tarn had paid for rent, but given her talents, thought Tuie might be able to negotiate a more reasonable sum.

Apparently, Tuie struck an amicable deal with Khun Nong and had most of our furniture transferred to the new house while I was working. As I later discovered, the move did not occur without some cost in human interpersonal relationships. Always acquisitive, and an inherently dishonest person, the pernicious Longmoun, who coveted and had been after my household goods for some time, wanted everything remotely attached to the house. Many of these items, cabinets, furniture, and the sort, originally belonged to and were installed by Tom Moher, and I had purchased these from him when he departed for Bangkok. Fortunately, when previously confronted by the old hag regarding Tom's furniture, I

had displayed a canceled check proving my ownership. Thai law favored landlords. It stipulated that anything attached to the house belonged to them and had to remain when a tenant departed. In our case, this only amounted to a few wall cabinets, the outside fence, and carport. However, there was a television antenna and associated hardware involved, which we had recently purchased in a package deal with the TV set. According to the law, this item was removable. However, when Tuie attempted to have this accessory removed, there was such a hue and cry from Godnoma that my wife sought other help.

Fortunately, the Nisagonrungsee family had friends or relatives that were members of or associated with the border or local police forces. The police were more than willing to assist my wife, for they recalled Godnoma from recent raids on her illegal card playing activities. They were also in the process of prosecuting the greedy woman for rental tax evasion.

When Tuie arrived in the compound with two policemen and two workers from Songserm's electric shop, intent on removing the TV antenna and metal poles, antagonists Longmoun, Marius Burke's wife Vinetra, and Sam Jordon's wife Wasaana were already waiting in the driveway, itching for a confrontation. Following heated words, Wasaana advanced aggressively toward Tuie in order to slap her face, and gain status



with her childish cohorts. Tuie was standing near a pile of sand, and although a petite and non-pugnacious sort, was ready to hurl a handful of sand in her opponent's eyes. Before anything physical occurred, a policeman stepped forward and ordered Wasaana to leave the area. Steve Stevens heard the fracas from his house and ventured outside to inquire if everything was alright. With the stand-down at the OK Corral resolved in our favor, the antenna and poles were removed and relocated to the new house. However, unpleasantness regarding the pecking order and the petty jealousies of Thai women continued throughout my tour. Although it took a toll on us men, those of us involved did not talk about it and we managed to work around the problem, but it had the tendency to fracture old friendships.<sup>30</sup>

The never-ending construction projects at the sizeable Air America facility were about to receive new life in the form of a two-story wing on the administration-operations building. In addition, because of the increasing number of school children matriculating the coming year, Ben Moore was attempting

---

<sup>30</sup> Longmoun Godnoma continued her errant ways, which ultimately caused her demise. In later years our former bungalow caught fire. The current occupant escaped and was safely outside, but Longmoun suddenly dashed into the flames in an attempt to retrieve jewelry. She was overcome by smoke and foolishly perished, a victim of her own greed.

to obtain approval and funding to double the school's size. Also, a new training building was in the mill.

Despite the absence of a long-awaited new water treatment plant, there was no lack of liquid available provided by heavy rains and contained in the newly constructed reservoir to the southwest--at least temporarily. <sup>31</sup>

## **HOT SAUCE**

For various reasons, Tony Poe had developed a taste for hot chili sauce, the hotter the better. When a Marine, Tony likely used a few drops of Tabasco sauce to enhance the flavor of the normally bland military "C" field rations. Provided by Porter pilot Lloyd Zimmerman and others, he generally kept a Mason jar or two of homemade hots at locations where he worked. On one occasion, Steve Stevens, himself a Tabasco aficionado, heard Tony utter a statement that the **real** hot food came from Indonesia, where he had previously advised rebel forces. The food was so hot there that it felt better to simply cut off your tongue than endure the pain.

Reacting to the challenge, Steve began preparing a dynamite chili to send to Nam Yu. He stuffed an empty whiskey bottle with dried Thai hot peppers, filled it

---

<sup>31</sup> Ben Moore July 1967 Monthly Report.

with vinegar, and then let the mixture mature. After aging for a time, he added the potent vinegar to his blender along with the hottest chili peppers he could find rated at the top on the Scoville heat scale, and created a red puree. Just short of fuming, toxic fumes from the resulting brew were almost overpowering and the kitchen unlivable. <sup>32</sup> This concoction was poured into an empty Johnnie Walker Black bottle and stashed for additional aging to be sent to 118 Alternate at the appropriate time.

While Steve and Charlie Weitz were still best friends, before Steve and Michico split, there was a dinner party at the Stevens house <sup>33</sup> Wayne and Charlie attended. During the course of the evening, Steve learned that Wayne was going to depart Udorn soon to give Charlie a line check at Nam Yu. He showed Wayne the chili bottle, touted its content's quality, and fiery potency, and asked him to deliver it to Tony.

The H-34 Charlie and Wayne were going to ferry upcountry had a mild, but definite one per vibration. <sup>34</sup> Wayne expected Charlie to object to the aircraft on that basis, for he was often very critical of machines recently cleared from maintenance. The two discussed

---

<sup>32</sup> Fuming: A point where a liquid changes to a gas.

<sup>33</sup> Steve was still flying H-34s.

<sup>34</sup> All helicopters produce inherent vibrations, the UH-34D more than others. It normally was the pilot's decision how much vibration he could tolerate.

the whys and wherefores of accepting or not accepting an aircraft with such a discrepancy. Charlie surprised Wayne by indicating that in his opinion, the helicopter was very acceptable.

Arriving late at the remote northwestern site and finding work almost completed for the day, Wayne presented the chili to Tony. Poe was ecstatic. Anxious to sample Steve's juice, with Wayne and Charlie in tow, he dropped everything and carried the jar to the Thai/officer mess.

This was during a period that AID attempted to persuade people to eat peanuts as a supplement to deal with an inherent protein deficiency. Recipes were provided with different methods to cook the legumes. Going along with the program, Tony had prepared a peanut soup. To this he liberally added several spoons of Steve's mixture and commenced eating. There was an almost immediate reaction. He leaped up, began screaming, swearing, spitting, and scraping his tongue with a knife blade. Then he consumed a jug of water and a Pepsi, which was not his favorite non-adult drink. After finally cooling down, he admitted the sauce was the hottest he had ever tasted. Wayne was amazed. He did not believe there would ever be anything too hot for him, as he had once seen Tony chug an entire bottle of Tabasco sauce at Long Tieng with no apparent ill effects.

Lloyd Zimmerman was also working at Nam Yu, but had not yet returned from a mission. Tony considered Steve's chili so excellent that his buddy, who also prepared and loved the hot stuff, had to sample some. Poe, wanting to have some fun, was convinced that a few dollops would blow Zim's head off. Therefore, to ensure Zim chose the exact sauce, Tony removed all the other bottles from the refrigerator and hid them. Then he inserted the Black Label bottle on the top shelf in plain view.

Tony, although still nursing a burnt tongue and damaged taste buds was beside himself with anticipation. When Zim entered the building, to mask his almost uncontrollable giggling, Tony hid behind a newspaper that Wayne had brought from Udorn. Zim went to the fridge, opened the door and looked in. Not satisfied with what he saw, he shut the door and went to the cupboard where Tony had hidden the other chili bottles. He retrieved one and began preparing something to eat.

Thwarted in his quest to create the prank, sure Zim had been forewarned, Tony dropped the newspaper and began calling the Porter pilot every foul name he could utter. Wayne was not convinced that Zim had been tipped off, but merely wanted his own homemade chili sauce.

Tony later consumed all the chili, but in much smaller doses. <sup>35</sup> <sup>36</sup>

On the eighteenth, Wayne found time from his more mundane office duties to return to northwestern Military Region One. He and his neighbor and good friend Ed Reid, with whom he was to conduct a Route Check, left Udorn in Hotel-55 to RON at Nam Yu. During the high time day, while working out of Xieng Lom, they landed at Ban Nou Kha Chok (Team-233 at LS-148) located on the east bank of the large bend in the Mekong north of Site-69A. After returning to Xieng Lom they were directed to a position fourteen miles northwest. A final flight took them to Team-214, thirteen miles west of Xieng Lom and three miles southeast of Lima Site-177.

Later work was assigned out of Site-118A thirty miles northeast to Ban Vieng, where Team-6 monitored a crossroad from Nam Tha and Moung Sing. Then they delivered troops ten miles farther northeast before returning to Nam Yu for a night in the hillside hut.

On Monday morning Ed and Wayne departed for Ban Houei Sai to work for USAID reps Blaine Jensen and Tony Cattaruci. The first trip involved a flight twenty-

---

<sup>35</sup> Author's Note: None of the principals could determine the exact date for this humorous incident, but it did occur.

<sup>36</sup> EW Knight Emails, 04/28/01, 05/03/01.  
Steve Stevens Email, 07/13/00.

seven miles north of Moung Mounge (LS-93), then to a site fourteen miles north-northeast and north of the "Burma-bulge." A long trip a little east of Pak Beng followed.

Trips proceeded north from Nam Yu. One was fourteen miles north of Moung Sing to a very remote area near the Mekong and close to the Chinese border. We were not landing across the border in Yunnan Province at the time, but recon teams occasionally crossed over to conduct reconnaissance and tap phone lines. Just to say they had done so, before returning to Site-118A via Ban Na Woua (LS-109), with no threats from Chinese jets, they overflew the Chinese-Lao border.

Wayne returned to Tango-08 on Hotel-33 with Dick Theriault the following day. En route they stopped at Moung Met (LS-158) and Pak Lay (L-09) on the Mekong west bank.<sup>37</sup>

### **MILITARY REGION-3**

Requests from the field for road watch mission assets were channeled through the AB-1 office, where Dick Secord and Pat Landry (who was in charge of southern Laos) approved missions and forwarded requirements across the taxiway to the CPH office for aircraft and crew scheduling. Except for emergency

---

<sup>37</sup> EW Knight Emails, 07/11/00, 08/26/00 (2).

exfiles, Military Region Two having priority, assets for Military Region Three missions were generally handled on an "as available" basis. Day missions were increasingly creeping into our monthly tasks.

On Monday, the nineteenth, Flight Mechanic Tom Hopkins and I crewed Hotel-38 116 miles east to Thakhet in order to conduct a road watch mission. Arriving before nine o'clock, we were briefed by Customer Mike LaDue for an infil-exfil mission sixty-three miles north-northeast from Site-40. Depending on the mission, teams composed of five to twelve men were generally dressed in communist clothing and carried Soviet bloc weapons.

The established base was located on the edge of the Phou Xangle Mountain range, nine miles south of Nape Pass and twelve miles east of Route-8 and the town of Lak Sao. We landed at 1035 hours without incident and rotated the team to Nakhon Phanom for debriefing and intelligence dissemination for a planned operation. Following refueling and a decent lunch, we worked late for LaDue until recovering to the Nakhon Phanom Air Force Base for the night.

We returned to Udorn the following morning.

After George "Mick" McGrath relocated to Savannakhet during March from PS-22, the former U.S. Army major was charged with raising and training a three-company SGU battalion of 300 men. Four months



training took place at Keng Ka Boa (later numbered LS-235), sixteen miles north of Lima-39, Phitscamp, Thailand, and FAR airborne training at Seno. With training complete on 20 July, supported by information gleaned from the team we delivered to Nakhon Phanom, the strike unit was charged with a mission to raid the Route-8/81 junction near Lak Sao. A gaggle of U.S. Air Force Pony Express and Air America helicopters lifted the untested battalion from Ka Boa to the objective. The operation soon became a disaster. Like the smaller unit previously lifted from PS-22 to Chavane, they were immediately intercepted and vigorously challenged by communist forces. Adverse weather at Savannakhet precluded T-28 support, so the battalion withdrew from the field in untidy fashion. Some of the failure was attributed to the unit's size. <sup>38</sup>

## **UDORN**

In early 1963 I was informed by Scratch Kanach that obtaining a Chinese Airline Transport Rating (ATR) license would be mandatory for continued employment with the Company; we would not have a job unless the

---

<sup>38</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 177. Conboy Records the Training Base being located at Site-235 Nong Saphong.

ticket was obtained before the end of the year.<sup>39</sup>

Against this end, we attended a week of comprehensive ground school in the new wing of the Club conducted by a highly competent Taiwanese instructor from Taipei. The war in Laos soon heated up and those few of us remaining in the H-34 program were pressed into service. Consequently, the Chinese license requirement was shelved and forgotten. Also contributing to a change in the policy, Bob Rousselot had resigned and a new VPFO was installed at Air America headquarters.

Gone were the days when we were considered by many aviation aficionados as mere bush pilots. In 1967 someone in management had an inspiration and resurrected the idea that it would be an excellent plan for helicopter pilots to acquire FAA Airline Transport Rating (ATR) credentials.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, considerable effort was expended to schedule a valid ground school and FAA-monitored tests in Udorn. With no pressure or

---

<sup>39</sup> Normally, a Chinese ATR license was only required by pilots who flew "B" Chinese registered aircraft. Since our UH-34D aircraft were bailed from the U.S. Marine Corps, this license requirement previously only included fixed wing pilots and less than a handful of helicopter pilots who flew the 47G model Bell.

<sup>40</sup> Wayne Knight believes that he was the driving force behind this concept, but the Author opines the idea was more likely conceived by the fledgling Bangkok training department attempting to protect their rice bowl.

Customer requirement to obtain the rating, and it not being compulsory for continued Company employment, local management still strongly recommended that all hands attend the school.

The school commenced in the Rendezvous Club movie room with the same Chinese instructor who had conducted the Chinese ATR classes in 1963. An FAA ATR rating consisted of two categories: visual flight rules (VFR) and instrument flight rules (IFR). Since the FAA administrator would arrive on the 26<sup>th</sup>, and there was an abundance of material to present, the instructor waded through his teaching notes. The FAA possessed a number of tests that were frequently rotated, so no one could predict exactly what questions would be asked. Our teacher had been in the business for so long that he did his best to cover general items appearing on every test. I had been out of the rules and regulations, E-6B computer, and chart business for so long that I appreciated every tip he presented. One factor that did concern me was that FAA ATR tests were strongly oriented toward fixed wing operations. Helicopters were like poor relatives without status. Hence, weight and balance center of gravity problems would be predicated on fixed wing center of gravity. Moreover, not many test questions would relate to helicopters. The instructor attempted to prepare us for this.

On the first day of ATP school, six fresh faces appeared on scene and trooped into the movie room. They were not exactly holding hands, but seemed to move together in lock step as one unit. Later inquiry revealed that these people--Don Leach, Nick Fillipi, Ellis Emery, Ted Moore, Glen Wood, and Norm Grammer--were former U.S. Army Bell Huey helicopter pilots with some Vietnam combat experience. All had arrived in Taipei on 21 June, their official date of hire, to process in and attend various ground schools for new hires. Only recently arrived in Udorn, they would be relegated to H-34 First Officer status and transition to those machines until sufficient Bell equipment arrived and were incorporated into the system. Then they would be transferred to Bells to perform as what we jokingly referred to as our "safety pilots." Until then, depending on prior experience, their H-34 training was protracted. Wayne flew with several newbies during acceptance and progress checks in conjunction with local test flights.

Evidently, some unnamed souls in the management chain of command (perhaps George Doole), not convinced of our ability, considered us old timer H-34 pilots not up to the task of transitioning to and functioning



Don Leach



Ellis Emery



Ken Wood



Nikki Fillipi

Four of six U.S. Army "safety pilots" hired by the Company to ease our way in the Bell program.

True to form, the tests were oriented toward fixed safely in the Bell, and would destroy the machines. <sup>41</sup> <sup>42</sup>

After cramming us for the tests, two FAA representatives arrived from the Philippines on the 26th. The four-hour multiple-choice tests were as difficult as I had imagined they would be. Therefore, since we were time limited, I answered only those questions I could and left others for later contemplation or an educated guess. <sup>43</sup> wing operations, especially weight and balance problems, but our Taipei instructor had prepared us well for most of these questions. Something he failed to do, however, was clue us about the recently added helicopter phase, tailored for commercial Bell equipment and not military H-34s. I had flown a Bell HTL-6 in the training command, but since I knew very little about Bell helicopter operations and possessed an H-34 mentality, I blew several of these questions. One I recall dealt with slope landing techniques, which was completely

---

<sup>41</sup> Crashes did eventually occur, but ironically, the initial ones only involved the new pilots, who might have been more proficient flying Bells, but certainly had not "paid their dues," and were not as talented or experienced as us in high altitude mountain techniques.

<sup>42</sup> EW Knight Emails, 08/11/00, 08/24/00.

<sup>43</sup> I had sufficient experience taking multiple "guess" tests in college and some answers to questions were blatantly obvious to even those individuals with half a brain.

different from an H-34. Equipped with a magnifying glass, ruler, and divider, we were pre-warned and well prepared for the chart portion of the test. However, the small and difficult-to-interpret charts were a real challenge. Comprising a major weighting on the test, I was initially unable to figure them out. Not wanting to waste time on them, I left them for last. When the FAA man announced that time had nearly expired, I returned to the charts. They still were beyond my ken. Then, when the allotted time was almost finished, the man fortunately allowed extra time for those of us remaining in the room. With ten chart questions remaining to answer, and pressure almost unbearable, I nearly panicked. Not wanting to guess at the answers, I stood up, closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. After taking several deep breaths and programming my thoughts, I sat down and focused on my task. Like a key turned in a lock opening a door, the methodology of solving and interpreting the charts flooded my mind. Then, soaring to new heights and with new found confidence, within a short time, I whipped out ten answers, which I considered correct.

I left the room exhausted, not overly confident I that had passed either of the tests. I certainly did not expect to pass the instrument flight rules (IFR) portion, but the visual flight rules (VFR)...? Sometime later the results arrived at my parents' home. I barely

passed the VFR test with a score in the low seventies. The test results would not expire for two years. Obviously, solving the charts at the last minute had tipped the scale in my favor.

### **NO REST FOR THE WEARY**

On 24 July, two days after returning from Pakse, Mike Jarina and Flight Mechanic Bob Peterson crewed Hotel-49 to Luang Prabang. During a ten plus hour day that included thirty landings, work was almost exclusively at or around Nam Bac, where reliable helicopter support was urgently required. The site and immediate areas were holding despite losing a number of T-28s in the earlier sapper attack on the airfield, a desultory performance by Lao H-34 crews, and reports of many additional Vietnamese troops moving into the area. To counter the added enemy numbers infiltrating down trails from the north, numerous shuttles were conducted to Ban Pha Thong (LS-169), sixteen miles north of Site-203 on a mountain adjacent to Route-19, the trail from Dien Bien Phu that the commies were trying to improve.

As we had done for many years, the crew RON in the "Bungalow" located across the street from Phu Si Mountain. Although seemingly a nice person, the manager was reputed to be a Pathet Lao sympathizer. Conditions had not changed appreciably since our first RON. One still used a mosquito net at night and a houseboy



brought hot water to the room in a five gallon can to bathe if you arrived before 2100 hours when the electricity was cut off. Mike, as all of us, wondered when Air America would sponsor a crew hostel at LP similar to ones at Sam Tong and Savannakhet.

After the early morning fog lifted, Mike returned to Nam Bac where he continued supporting Case Officers Chuck Campbell and Pat Sharone's Yao and Meo guerrilla units. There was a lot of coordination working with mountain people in the region, not only for supply purposes, but to gather the latest intelligence regarding enemy movement and to issue orders. The first trip was conducted to Tong Too (LS-186) at the 4,000-foot level, twenty miles southwest of Site-203. Next, he went north for twenty-four miles to Yung Tuia (LS-217); from there to Ban "Y," five miles south-southeast of Yung Tuia, and close to Route-19. After returning to Yung Tuia, he was directed to Ban Pha Thong. After refueling and picking up a load of passengers at Nam Bac, Jarina returned to Luang Prabang just after dark.

The next day, a monsoon weather system moved through the area causing Mike to abort two trips to Nam Bac.

On the 27th, Mike worked around lingering weather to shuttle to and work locally at Site-203. When the

weather improved, he was sent to Site-217 to perform a little work.

Mike's last day upcountry was spent shuttling troops to Site-169 with a final trip to Site-217. The PIC of Bell 39F also worked the area to familiarize the Customer with the machine and its superior capabilities compared to the H-34. After returning to Luang Prabang, Mike ferried Hotel-49 to Tango-08.

## **BATTLE PLANS**

While Mike was working at Nam Bac, the first of twelve reinforcing FAR battalions to arrive from other regions of Laos began dribbling into Site-203 to prepare for a much-vaunted August offensive, and to counter entry of a reputed three fresh North Vietnamese battalions. When all army units arrived and were in place, General Staff and Tactical Headquarters North Laos plans called for a joint infantry-T-28 clearing push east toward the Nam Ou to connect with Vang Pao's Military Region Two forces projected to arrive from the east. Once the pincer was complete and enemy movement along the Ou Valley from the north was contained by Meo controlling the high ground, FAR planned to wheel to the south and clear the valley leading to the gates of the Royal Capital. It was an ambitious plan for perhaps the world's most poorly led and least aggressive army (many called it the worst); and one destined to fail

while attempting to execute most endeavors. For example: Two units previously introduced from Sayaboury Province and the south had not fared well during minor probing engagements effected to clear eastern territory.

Since Nam Bac's capture in 1966, the perimeter defense of the site had been poorly conceived and implemented, and it remained so. Except for a few artillery fire bases located on surrounding high ground that provided little or no interlocking fields of fire, there were no overall comprehensive defense plans in place for the garrison's survival during any concerted enemy attack. In addition, artillery range was limited and could only provide infantry support within range of the guns. Moreover, a serious lack of command and control from top echelon leaders to field officers, depleted T-28 assets, and only occasional patrolling outside the perimeter portended future problems.

For these reasons and the advent of the monsoons, the proposed FAR offensive never commenced.

During the same time period, Vang Pao, beset by many requests for action, encountered his own problems. By the third week of July, the general had sufficient units staged at Na Khang to commence a route march and airlift north with the intent to recapture Houa Moun (LS-58). The operation came up short when two enemy battalions thought to have returned to North Vietnam

for a wet season break, unexpectedly materialized to challenge the movement. Taking advantage of the disruption, the enemy attacked Na Khang on the 29th. However, USAF A-1E and F-105 close air support arrived in time to save the day. <sup>44</sup>

## **MIKE**

Infils and exfils were not the only consideration in Military Region Three. Like SARs, emergency exfiltration requirements took precedence over all other work.

Just after noon on 30 July, Mike Jarina was summoned to the airfield. After an abbreviated briefing at FIC and gathering his flight gear, he boarded Porter Papa Foxtrot Bravo (PFB) and deadheaded to Savannakhet to fly double crew with Boonrat in Hotel-44. Since being upgraded to Captain, Boonrat and Sarisporn, at the Customer's request, had been working in MR-3 and 4. As opposed to American pilots, their non "round eye" exterior and ability to communicate with the troops dovetailed with the Customer's clandestine operations in the area.

Apparently, a Thai Star team member had reported significant sickness or injury requiring an emergency

---

<sup>44</sup> Ken Conboy, 170, 183.  
Victor Anthony, 224, 228.  
John Pratt, *CHECO*, 46.

exfil. Since the landing zone was located far to the east in denied area, Mike and Boonrat climbed aboard CASI Beech Baron 76 Golf to recon the area.

It was quite late by the time they finally launched, reached the area, and established radio contact. Since landing in the rough forested area was not feasible, efforts were made to retrieve the man using the hoist and horse collar. However, the hundred-foot hoist cable proved too short in the tall trees, and after several attempts, the mission was aborted and the crew RTB in the dark to Lima-39, landing well after 2000 hours. <sup>45</sup>

The following day, after consultation with the Whiskey-Three Customer, Mike scrounged a length of nylon rope to lash onto the cable hook. The extension proved sufficient to extract the Thai agent. However, inexplicably, when they reached the airfield, the man jumped out and dashed toward his compound. When the Customer arrived at the ship with a stretcher and learned what happened, he was surprised, perplexed, and angry, for he had been informed the man was almost incapacitated. Mike pointed out where the man had gone, adding that he looked fine. Having been told the man was sick or hurt, the Customer was not happy. Like the

---

<sup>45</sup> Despite similar problems with cable pickups during SAR missions, all UD-34Ds had not yet been equipped with longer hoist cables.

boy crying wolf in the children's story, incidents such as these had a tendency to create a generalized skepticism among us pilots who placed everything on the line to conduct these "emergency" exfil missions.

With Hotel-44 almost timed out before a mandatory inspection, Mike deadheaded to T-08 with Boonrat. <sup>46</sup>

## **PAKSE**

*"North Vietnamese troops in estimated battalion strength destroyed a Royal Laotian Army (FAR) command post at Thateng on 27 July and inflicted heavy casualties on the defenders before withdrawing [redacted]...The FAR's tactical position at Thateng was further weakened by the loss of a key heavy weapons position a few miles northeast on 28 July.*

*These attacks are the most intense the enemy has made in the Bolovens Plateau area since friendly troops were driven out of Ban Phone on 19 July. They may presage a concerted effort to push government forces from the eastern rim of the plateau.*

*The government has moved reinforcements into Thateng and another key position at Lao Ngam, but its defensive capability has been hampered in recent weeks by poor weather which has limited tactical air support. The enemy, moreover, has increased pressure against*

---

<sup>46</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

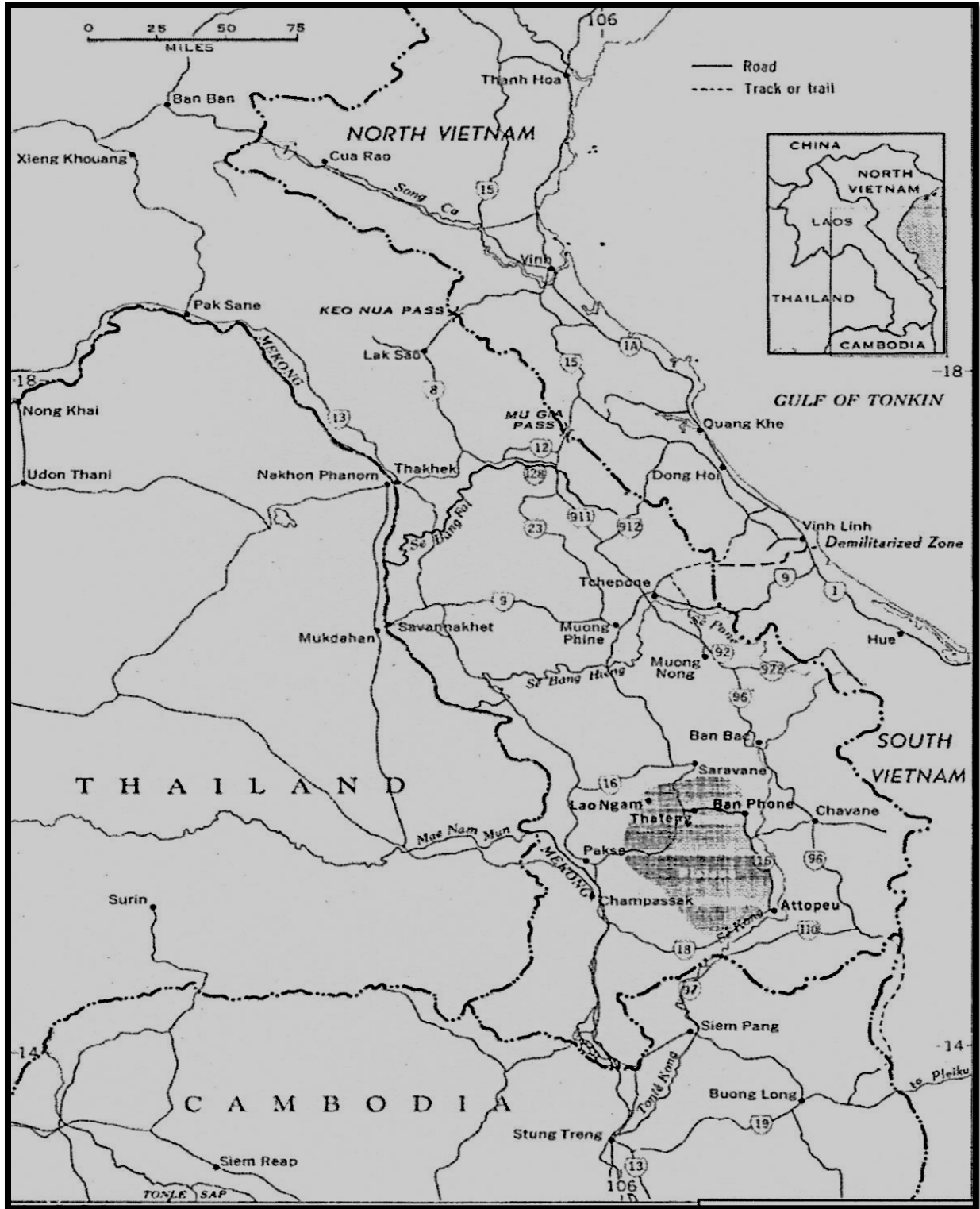
*government positions farther south near Attopeu, in what appears to be an effort to draw off government reinforcements from other contested areas.*

*The renewed communist military effort is probably designed to regain rice-growing territory which has come under government control in the past six months. It is probably also intended to counter increased government intelligence and harassment operations into the vital infiltration corridor. The government's operations have been staged from advanced bases on the eastern fringe of the Bolovens Plateau."* <sup>47</sup>

On Wednesday the 28th, I travelled south in Hotel-32 with Rusty Irons. I was at Pakse for six days and, for a person normally used to working in Military Region Two, it seemed to me that I was spending an inordinate amount of time in Military Region Four. Of course, the war in Military Region Two was fairly stable, as opposed to road watch and recent enemy activity in the south, which required additional H-34 assets and the availability of senior pilots for emergency exfils. I did not complain, for in a low intensity war environment, the work was normally not difficult, and Pakse RONs afforded decent food and accommodations.

---

<sup>47</sup> CIA Daily Brief, 07/31/67. Laos: The communists have made several sharp attacks against government positions in southern Laos.



Lower portion of the map and bold print shows Military Region Four towns involved in the recent enemy hostilities.

CIA Map, 07/31/67.



In response to my query regarding possibly being on someone's "Sierra List" at the time, Wayne Knight replied that this was not the case. The Bell was co-opting some of the H-34 work in Military Region Two. *"If a pilot was good enough for one area, he was good enough for all [areas]. Udorn scheduling never honored Customer requests to exclude certain pilots from their operations area. Jim Glerum went along with this policy and everyone learned to work with it. The only minor exception was the positioning of Thai pilots in the lower elevations to gain experience before transitioning to the mountains."* <sup>48</sup>

Because of current enemy activity and rumored threats to various areas, there was an abundance of work both on and off the Plateau. When weather permitted, flight time was high and I worked right up to dark, generally supporting the same landing zones as Jarina. Thateng was a priority issue.

Despite FAR retaking Lao Ngam in January, then later seconding defense to FAN troops in March, enemy units still roamed the large, adjacent area creating problems when and where opportunity presented. During the last week in July a platoon-sized enemy detachment moved toward Thateng, a small town on Route-23 leading to Saravane. Beefed up earlier, Thateng boasted a force of at least battalion strength. When word of an attack

---

<sup>48</sup> EW Knight Email, 08/24/00.

reached the town, in a move unusual for FAR officers, the commanding officer launched a preemptive strike on the smaller Vietnamese unit. In the process one trooper was captured. <sup>49</sup>

As part of keeping current on the situation in Military Region Four and to enhance the pilot bond, some of us enjoyed pilot banter and a cool, refreshing drink after work. Weather permitting, we usually gathered at a wooden, schoolroom type table outside Henri's establishment located on the corner of the business district near restaurants, noodle shops, and the Chinese hotel. The small concrete "patio" outside the shop was actually part of the sidewalk. It was slightly recessed below the street, a product of subsidence or perhaps the street was raised at one time to eliminate flooding after the building was constructed. At any rate, one had to look up slightly to observe street scenes and watch the sweet young things propel their bicycles and motor scooters up and down the street.

We followed this pattern on Thursday.

In addition to munching on Henri's salted peanuts and quaffing quarts of ice-cold Tsingtao beer to unwind, we could quietly discuss the day's events occurring in our different work sectors. Not knowing

---

<sup>49</sup> Ken Conboy, 180, fn-30.

Henri's loyalty (he was a Vietnamese), we were semi-careful to talk about confidential war matters only while Henri was attending to something else.

Along with alcoholic beverages, Henri also sold various kinds of soft drinks and had substantial walk-in walk-out clientele. When not working at the drink counter, he was in the back room listening to the Voice of America (VOA) or British Broadcasting Company (BBC) broadcasts on his transoceanic radio. A friendly person, he spoke excellent English and would often share tidbits of information he thought would be of interest to us. On this particular evening, he rushed out of the back with a sierra-eating grin on his face to report a disaster on the *USS Forrestal*. Earlier in the day, while preparing to launch strike aircraft at Yankee Station in the Tonkin Gulf, the ship had caught fire. Casualties and loss of planes were high, with 134 sailors killed, sixty-two injured, twenty-one aircraft destroyed, and forty-three badly damaged. The *Forrestal* returned to the States for repairs and never rotated to the Southeast Theater again.

Tom Nery replaced Irons for the remainder of the RON. We worked the Saravane sector shuttling to various northern outposts and Thateng. I never did complete all the work and had to RON at Site-44 because of worsening weather and the onset of darkness. It was a first for me, but no problem since we had the one-star Sikorsky

Hotel, and Air America maintained a radio station at the site where we could obtain rice and weeds to supplement our canned goods.

Following three additional days of grinding around the area in semi-foul weather, we RTB Udorn on 2 August.

### **STRIFE IN THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE**

As if there were not enough problems to plague the Kingdom of Laos, at the end of the month, a little publicized or reported military action occurred on the Lao side of the tri-border area. Principals involved Burmese Shan States opium runners, Chinese KMT, and portions of General Ouane's FAR and RLAF.

Since demand for the product was obvious, and money excellent for all involved, the opium trade was sanctioned by high-ranking members of the FAR General Staff, who received a cut of the profits (wink-wink). Traditionally, the Shan annual opium crop was delivered to upper northwestern Laos by a large, heavily armed pack mule train travelling over established routes. Now, in 1967, greedy bandits deviated slightly through northern Thailand, attempting to avoid paying Chinese inhabitants the normal fee for transit through the KMT-controlled border areas.

The Shan contingent crossed the Mekong on 26 July and assumed positions around a sawmill near the

riverside village of Ban Nam Kueung (LS-150). Contact was relayed to General Ouane's interests and negotiations commenced to sell the opium. However, when KMT generals discovered the Burmese chicanery, Chinese units also crossed the Mekong and surrounded the pack train, demanding all the opium. As the situation spun out of control and escalated toward conflict, Ouane saw a choice opportunity to obtain the drugs at no cost. Taking advantage of the situation, he ordered both parties to immediately depart Laos, leaving the opium shipment and arms in place. The Burmese assented to this demand, but still demanded payment for the drugs. The KMT refused, insisting on retaining both their weapons and the opium.

A shooting war commenced on the 29th. The odds favored Ouane. His justification for entering the fray was that his country had been "invaded" by two illegal parties intent on committing acts of violence. Therefore, while employing H-34s, C-47s, T-28s, and two infantry battalions, and with a reputed authorization from Souvanna Phouma, Ouane's forces struck on the 30th. Six T-28 pilots attacked the engaged Burmese and Chinese with bombs and strafing techniques.<sup>50</sup> It became a "turkey shoot," with the eventual outcome never in doubt. During the two-day action, the exposed

---

<sup>50</sup> The Prime Minister later denied giving approval for the "war."

"invaders" suffered hundreds of men killed or drowned while attempting to escape across the Mekong. During the mopping up process, many weapons and sixteen tons of raw opium became Ouane's property. The "spoils" were delivered to Ban Houei Sai for further distribution. Profits derived from the opium sale were allocated to those who participated in the battle. As icing on the cake, in addition to becoming top man in the opium trade, General Ouane later received the nation's highest award for saving the Kingdom from foreign invasion.

The incident did not become general knowledge until reporters became involved.

After the action, one of the irate KMT generals--Tuan, Ma, or Ly--ventured to Houei Sai with the intent to retaliate. He informed USAID representative, Blaine Jensen, that he was going to surround the town and bring it under fire, but Americans living there had nothing to fear. General Ouane soon became involved and had Chao MOUNG POW mediate the situation.

Blaine Jensen was present at Ban Houei Sai during the fracas. After relocating to Houei Sai for the operation, the RLAF T-28 pilots operated off the Lima-25 strip. Crews loaded the munitions for the action. Blaine was concerned about the use of AID-supplied equipment and men to support what he considered an illegal private conflict. The U.S. Embassy had

previously indicated that if he experienced problems with which he could not deal, call Vientiane. However, when he attempted to make radio contact with superiors, no one was available. In addition, the Nam Yu Customer was reluctant to talk about the activity.

From the beginning of the T-28 program in western Military Region One, Flipse's AID rice crews had often been used to load iron bombs. The first time the mobile bomb buggy became stuck in the mud and the Lao crew was going to quit for the day and leave for town, Joe's men showed the air force crews how to load the weapons. Four men were employed to carry a bomb to the plane and attach it to hooks provided under the T-28 wings. The .50 caliber ammo belts were rarely loaded, for the Lao pilots disliked flying low enough to warrant its usage.

When Joe read after action reports regarding the Opium War, he was convinced that the Lao pilots had obtained assistance, for the damage assessment exceeded anything of a normal nature. Although unsubstantiated, he speculated that Udorn might have had a hand in the festivities.

About a week after the conflict was resolved, Lao C-47 pilots were flying loads of the captured opium from the new strip. Ouane had sent a personal message to Americans working at Ban Houei Sai and Nam Yu strongly suggesting that no one was observing any military aircraft activity at the airport. Therefore,

no one bothered the C-47 operation and the loading area at the top of the strip was left open for their use. However, Jensen did refuse to provide AID fuel for the Lao aircraft. Consequently, the pilots and crew had to RON while fuel was delivered from Luang Prabang.

During the two-week period of the airlift Ouane stopped by Jensen's house several times for a drink of scotch just to ensure that all the Americans were properly "playing the game." The meetings were friendly and amenable, but Jensen was very clear that he would never provide fuel for the operation.

Following their departure from Ban Houei Sai, and using information through backchannel assets, the C-47s were tracked as closely as possible. Accordingly, one plane was forced to land at Saigon Airport and two others were shot down over southern Laos. As a result, Jensen came very close to not living to a ripe old age over the loss of the RLAF planes soon after a young embassy political officer divulged too much information regarding the aircraft at a cocktail party one evening. Not long afterward, General Ouane arrived at his house displaying an Asian implied threat. He sat with his pistol on his lap, drank two scotch and waters, while discussing the losses of the three RLAF aircraft. Then he vigorously stated there would be no further incidents of that nature. Jensen clearly understood the message, assuring the general that there would



certainly be no further incidents. However, he interjected that if something did occur again, the general could rest assured that none of the information originated from Houei Sai. Satisfied, Ouane finished his drink, thanked Jensen, and inquired if he was welcome to stop by again when in Ban Houei Sai. Of course, Jensen insisted that he was welcome any time. He saw the general occasionally afterward, but he never visited Jensen's house again.

While the anti-opium activity was underway, Ouane arrived at Ban Houei Sai and attempted to discourage other Americans in providing intelligence regarding his illegal activities.

*"You know we love you Americas here. We like the work you do. We like the money, but there is something you should not get involved in; telling the Thai Air Force we have an opium plane departing so they will shadow it and try to shoot it down in Thailand."*

Launching T-28s from Ban Houei Sai was not unique during periods requiring strikes on area targets. Thai pilots were used initially. When they failed to meet

the standards, Lao were used. 51 52 53

---

<sup>51</sup> The first Thai flew a considerable distance into Yunnan Province.

<sup>52</sup> For personal reasons, Blaine Jensen elected not to discuss his knowledge of the actual battle events at Ban Nam Kueung with the Author, but had talked to Joe Flipse in Vientiane about certain aspects of the curious conflict.

<sup>53</sup> Segment Sources:  
Alfred McCoy, *Opium War*, 322-328.  
Victor Anthony, 224.  
Ken Conboy, 183.  
John Pratt-*CHECO*, 47.  
Blaine Jensen Letters, 04/03/96, 04/08/97.  
Joe Flipse Emails, 04/06/97, 06/07/97.  
Mac Thompson Interview, 12/26/96.

**D**uring early August, veteran UH-34D pilot Captain Charlie Weitz, new First Officer Cy Asta, and Flight Mechanic Lowell Pirkle crewed Hotel-38 to Luang Prabang. Charlie had never flown with Asta or Pirkle. Lowell was scheduled for a final RON before terminating his employment.

With the enemy feeding soldiers into the area, and the FAR loath to patrol aggressively, hostilities were steadily increasing in the Route-4 valley south of Nam Bac. This was poignantly evidenced on the second.

While Charlie worked out of Mok Lok, he retrieved ten wounded from a site located six miles southwest of the Site-131 fire base. The pad was situated on a high promontory, more than a thousand feet above and overlooking Nam Thuam (LS-176) in the Nam Kham Valley. Customary during tense situations, loading was restricted to only a few seconds on the ground at high RPM and "light on the skids." Shortly after takeoff, the pad was impacted by heavy mortar fire. During the trip to LP Asta inquired, "*Does this happen all the time?*" Charlie merely laughed.

Late Tuesday afternoon, just prior to returning to LP for the night, the crew of Hotel-38 was dispatched to a landing zone to conduct another medevac. Under pressure, it was in close proximity to one they had

previous serviced. While commencing an approach, Charlie noticed an identical signal panel displayed as on the previous day. Since the situation was quite muddled with hostiles in close proximity, signals were supposed to be changed daily. Therefore, as per established SOP, the conscientious pilot aborted the approach and returned to Mok Lok for consultation and further guidance. The concerned commanding officer established radio contact with the site and the signal issue was resolved. Weitz began another approach at 1745 hours.

Unknown to anyone, enemy forces had moved closer to the site than expected. Thirty seconds after touching down on the sloped landing zone, a 57 mm recoilless rifle (RR) or rifle propelled grenade (RPG) round impacted the helicopter fuselage mid-ship on the starboard side. Charlie attempted to takeoff, but immediately realized Hotel-38 was too badly damaged to fly.

Adrenalin flowed, and fight or flight survival reigned supreme. Both men were slightly wounded by flying shrapnel. After pulling the mixture lever back to the cut-off position and switching the magnetos off, they scrambled out the left cockpit window and quickly entered a perimeter foxhole. Following the first round, Flight Mechanic Pirkle was initially observed at the cabin door by troops hunkering in perimeter foxholes,

and then falling back on the floor. Not long afterward, a second round hit, exploded, and ignited the ship. As fire consumed the magnesium ship, turning it into gray and white ash, neither Pirkle nor the Lao lieutenant, who was caging a ride to Luang Prabang, exited the aircraft.

With their rapid departure, the cockpit crew left their survival radios in the helicopter, and as FAR radio equipment was unreliable, little was known by others regarding events at the site. As darkness enveloped the area, only illuminated by the burning H-34, the enemy commenced an aggressive attack that temporarily stalled. Besieged, with the viability of the position in doubt and the two Americans influencing his decision, at 2130 hours, the commanding officer elected to withdraw north toward Mok Lok with sixty men and his charges.

Placing a substantial distance between themselves and the enemy, they walked and limped (Asta was wounded in the leg) until 0245 hours, then stopped to rest. Asta, who was still in a highly excitable state, asked Charlie if he trusted the accompanying troops well enough to sleep. Charlie, a "laid-back" individual, never a stranger to adverse situations and wholly resigned to his fate, replied, *"What does it matter?"*

At 0500 hours, the group resumed its trek toward Site-131.

Near dark the Air America radio operator at Luang Prabang realized that Hotel-38 was significantly overdue for an operations normal report or an RTB Luang Prabang, and he began an area radio search. As sunset occurred at 1842, all aircraft had departed the Nam Bac area for Luang Prabang or Vientiane, and no one was immediately available for a physical search. Consequently, Vientiane, Udorn, and the Customer were alerted. Contact with Nam Bac, and eventually Mok Lok, revealed that the crew had last participated in a medevac, with no further contact received. Since there was no communication with the position, assumptions were made that the site had been lost. All this convoluted communication took time, and as a night search in hostile area might have resulted in further problems, especially for single engine little birds, a SAR was planned for early the following morning.

Billy Zeitler was contacted and selected to head the SAR mission, using a Caribou as command ship. Usually using the Victor Control call sign, Bill and his crew departed Vientiane at 0400 hours to arrive on station before sunrise, which in August occurred before 0600. <sup>1</sup> In addition to helicopters, Bill's assets included USAF planes and a Jolly Green.

---

<sup>1</sup> Similar to twilight, false dawn provided some daylight prior to official sunrise.

With the popular pilot's disposition unknown, there was quite a stir in the Club bar, management, and the Udorn community in general. Wayne Knight and John Ford departed Udorn in Hotel-56 about the same time as Zeitler. They flew directly to Nam Bac to refuel and conduct a search with other H-34 pilots in the area. After that he moved to the Mok Lok fire base to obtain the latest information and apply it to the search. Within limits of the weather, they remained to work and help shore up the hostile area. After an almost seven-hour day and nine landings, they RON in a general-purpose tent at Nam Bac and Wayne deadheaded to Udorn the following day.

As the armada assembled in the Nam Bac area for the SAR, thinking the crew was most likely captured, Zeitler established a time to begin expending ordnance around the area should two-way communication not be established. After several hours of fruitless search and negative radio contact, the Air Force pilots reported that they were nearing a bingo state. Zeitler was not familiar with this terminology until it was explained. Then he described the location he wanted bombed. Such action would have terminated military participation in the SAR. Just as Zeitler was preparing to have the Air Force expend, someone observed a small wisp of smoke rising from a section of trees. Within

minutes of the sighting, Charlie established radio contact. <sup>2</sup>

Throughout the morning, Charlie had attempted to establish radio contact with overhead aircraft, but the thick jungle canopy and unreliable equipment prevented vertical radio wave propagation. Then, while transiting a tiny clearing where a lack of overhead cover permitted a direct line of sight, he established contact with an aircraft. However, so much time had elapsed during the search that the military forces suspected an enemy trap. But Billy Z knew the distinctive nuances associated with Charlie's voice and positively identified him. <sup>3</sup> Since the confined area was not conducive for a safe recovery, Billy directed Weitz and Asta to a large clearing where a CH-3 would await the pickup. <sup>4</sup>

At 1245, while recovery was in progress, Billy overheard a pilot report an estimated time of arrival (ETA) to Nam Bac. He asked the PIC the nature of his load.

---

<sup>2</sup> Charlie Weitz later indicated that the smoke was not generated by him, but perhaps by an incoming round.

<sup>3</sup> We also had code words recorded with the Company, like one's mother's maiden name, to verify identities if beset with such a situation. Mine was Marietta.

<sup>4</sup> Official reports indicate that the crew was recovered by an H-34 pilot and Charlie recalls Wayne Knight as the pilot. Oddly enough, Knight did not recall performing the pickup.



*"Commissary items."*

*"Do you have beer onboard?"*

*"Roger."*

*"Can you spare some for the survivors?"*

*"Affirmative."*

Then Bill landed at Site-203 to ferry the H-34 crew to Udorn. After a long and stressful episode in the weeds and very dehydrated, Charlie was quite happy quaffing the warm beer.

At Udorn the men were cleaned up and fed. A small piece of metal was removed from Charlie's left elbow, but Asta's left ankle wounds were considerably deeper and required more expertise than the Air America doctor could provide. Pirkle's wife and mother were still in Udorn and were apprised of Lowell's demise and the present inability to recover his remains. As the policy for all fatalities, Air America soon repatriated them to the U.S. Their situation was similar to that of Bill Wilmot's wife, Hazy, the previous year: the husband's last upcountry RON. <sup>5</sup>

Apprised of the nasty incident from the Washington office, Asta's wife threatened to divorce him if he did not immediately terminate his Air America employment. Therefore, according to Company folklore, after

---

<sup>5</sup> Pirkle's remains were recovered and identified by DNA analysis in 1998. They were interred in Arlington Cemetery, Washington, D.C., 08/03/98.

recovering from surgery, he did not return to Udorn. Instead, Asta journeyed directly to Taipei, entered the briefing manager's office, slapped his wings on the desk, and loudly shouted, "You lying SOB." <sup>6</sup>

Whenever there was an SAR involving Air America or military personnel, all normal work ceased and upcountry aircraft potentially became available for the operation; the more assets available, the better to deal with the situation. In this context, on the fourth, I departed Udorn on a day flight in Hotel-48 for Military Region Five. I worked with FAR on Operation Solidarity helping to clear residual enemy pockets from hilly areas north and east of Vientiane.

The next day followed an identical pattern. Only the machine was different-Hotel-40-with old Punzalan as Flight Mechanic. "Punz" had previously been working on the ground, but with a large family to support in the Philippines, had recently elected to resume flight duties.

---

<sup>6</sup> Segment Sources:

Bill Leary, August 1967 Notes Obtained from an 03/28/92) Interview with Charlie Weitz.

EW Knight Emails, 09/13/00, 10/31/10.

Bill Zeitler Interview in Which Bill Stated that Weitz's Version of the Story Changed Somewhat over the Years.

Telegram Received in Washington 08/07/67 from Air America President Hugh Grundy.

Aircraft Accident Investigation Hotel-38, Local Board Report, 08/13/67, CIA Corporate Files, Box 59 UDT.

itel, Volume-15, #2, June 1998.

Problems in the Mok Lok area did not abate, and Thai "B" Team pilots had been performing a yeoman's job in Military Region One since the night attack at Luang Prabang and loss of so many Lao T-28s. However, unlike their Lao counterparts, most Thai pilots lacked a good sense of friendly locations. Therefore, with enemy units moving steadily toward Site-131, the inevitable happened on the last day of the month. Flying missions from Luang Prabang, Thai pilots accidentally hit friendly troops at Mok Lok. The error fomented general panic, with the FAR abandoning the firebase and fleeing to Nam Bac. This left the sector without fire support to cover patrols, and created a substantial gap in the southern defense perimeter. Disheartened, the FAR failed to reoccupy the position. Later, when the enemy realized that FAR had abandoned the site for good, they took over. Moreover, FAR soldiers refused to permit further "B" Team assistance. Events like this, and the shellacking a FAR unit had received mid-month while maneuvering northeast, tended to set the tone for ultimate disaster.<sup>7</sup>

### **COONEY AND BRUCE**

On Sunday, 8 August, Captain John J. Cooney and Flight Mechanic Earl E. Bruce departed Pakse in UH-34D

---

<sup>7</sup> Ken Conboy, 183.  
Victor Anthony, 225.

Hotel-43 for Thateng with 1,000 pounds of supplies. The weather was poor and other helicopter pilots elected to remain on the ground until improved conditions prevailed. Thirty minutes after Cooney's departure, the Air America radio operator at Lima-11 received an operations normal report from Hotel-43. No location was specified. Eight minutes later, a Thai CASI Porter pilot heard the PIC of Hotel-43 radioing in the blind that he was climbing on instruments (IMC) through 3,500 feet. Nothing further was heard from the pilot. The machine and crew merely disappeared, marking the second such occurrence within five days.

John Cooney, a former U.S Army helicopter instructor pilot, came to us around mid-year 1966. Well liked, John was known by many of our former Army people who attested to his superior credentials as an instrument instructor. Cooney's entry into our group stimulated instrument flying discussions in the bar. All former Marine H-34 pilots had mandatory instrument tickets derived during fixed wing training at Pensacola, Florida. However, none of us were still proficient, and we used our knowledge of the flying techniques cautiously. Unless they had fixed wing time, or had graduated from a newer training syllabus, few Army pilots possessed an instrument rating. At the time, the rating was not offered or deemed necessary for strictly helicopter pilots. Most of us experienced

mountain pilots were adamant about not conducting this type of flying in Laos unless it was absolutely necessary to avoid a bad situation, such as entering inadvertent IMC or evading enemy fire. Because of the uncharted or erroneous height of mountains, dearth of navigation aids, operating under positive radar control, and piloting a single engine helicopter, we maintained that because of "rocks in them clouds," instrument flying in much of Laos was highly risky and quite unwise.

Cooney, recently retired from the U.S. Army, and claiming proficiency in all aspects of instrument flying, disagreed. Confident and aggressive, he maintained--even bragged--that he could handle all aspects of visual (VFR) and instrument (IFR) situations. No matter how intensely we pressed our point, he would not be convinced or dissuaded from a fixed mind set about flying IMC. We left the Club shaking our heads and wondering..

During his initial training period, I had flown with John for a couple of hours on a local familiarization flight in Hotel-43 and found him a competent H-34 pilot. Therefore, except for required area familiarizations in each Lao military region, and management policy regarding new hire upgrading, I did not think John would have any problems, or that it would be long before he became a Captain.

After being upgraded to Captain, likely because of his inordinate confidence as a former instrument instructor and his desire to be accepted as one of the boys, Cooney earned a reputation as one who took unnecessary chances. One day, while en route from Luang Prabang to Sam Tong, he encountered adverse weather conditions. Rather than circumnavigating or returning to the royal capitol, without benefit of navigations aids, he elected to punch through the clouds. Once on top, he turned to a southeast heading. After a time, he became concerned about his location and began radioing for assistance. Believing he was over Moung Soui, Cooney described a long dirt strip and surrounding terrain. In actuality, he had either taken a wrong heading, or had been blown sixty degrees off course by a strong southerly wind and was eventually discovered to be over Na Khang. Unfortunately, John did not learn from that episode.

Because of potential injuries incurred during a crash and the threat of capture, it was essential that helicopter discovery and crew recovery be implemented immediately. At high elevations, and above the clouds, as in the case of Hotel-43, searches were not possible, and those that were lacked coordination and planning. When weather finally permitted, air and ground searches commenced for Hotel-43 and crew. A friendly patrol in the Lao Ngam area reported seeing a helicopter fly over

their location below the clouds at tree top level on the morning of the eighth.

Mid-afternoon on the tenth, the crash site was located by Caribou crew 430. Apparently, while attempting to climb through the clouds, John had impacted a sheer cliff on the south side of Phou Thiouom, a mountain in excess of 4,000 feet located a few miles southwest of Thateng.

Five days later, after considerable security efforts, a USAF CH-3C pilot lowered an Air America representative to the cliff face. A large burned area was evident seventy-five feet from the base. Unburned H-34 components like the engine, main gear box, and tail pylon were scattered at various points down slope. Remains of the crew were discovered upslope from the engine.

The accident shook our group considerably. We were aware of the adverse conditions that day, and judged that the incident never should have occurred, but we commented little regarding this. Death of a peer was not something to dwell on and there was too much else occupying us at the time.

After any fatality or serious accident, a person's pilot file (P file) was perused for information that might provide clues to causes of an incident. Contained in Cooney's file was Chuck Frady's October 1966 statement. It read in part:

*"This man will get lost due to lack of attention to maps. Depends on Captain to point out way; tends to be lazy."*

Not mentioned in any file, but well known to his peers, was Cooney's proclivity to take unwarranted chances. We all took chances at times (called a calculated risk) to perform an acceptable job for the Customer, but this practice was fairly rare, and if continued with abandon would eventually result in problems. A pilot owed a responsibility to the safety of those onboard his aircraft, and to the aircraft itself. Furthermore, it was important to learn from one's mistakes and never repeat them. Some individuals learned; others failed.

An Aircraft Accident Review Board's finding reiterated that of the earlier investigating team. Cooney violated common-sense flight practices by flying in instrument flight conditions at an altitude below the surrounding terrain.

I did not fly out of Pakse for several months, but I conducted a flyby of southeastern Phou Thiouom the next time I worked at Thateng. A close inspection of the cliff revealed a burned portion and a few



helicopter parts protruding from the rocks. <sup>8</sup>

## **UPCOUNTRY**

On the seventh, I flew Hotel-50 to Sam Tong with Baccay as my Flight Mechanic. For two days, we pumped out a lot of flight time supporting mop-up and consolidation operations after Vang Pao's successful troop movement into the Moung Ngan Valley.

I flew half a fuel load on Wednesday, then received a call from Udorn directing me to proceed to Na Khang and fly in 39F with Robertson. This would mark my first taste of the Bell 204 operating in the field. There was some delay while I obtained a deadhead flight on Helio Courier 169.

After arriving at Site-36 about noon, I had to wait until Robbie returned from a mission. When he did land for fuel, even though I only had one-hour previous cockpit time, Robbie put me in the right seat. I had done the same for him in 1965 when he first entered the H-34 program. However, the difference now was, except for the one-hour pattern flight, I had no experience in turbine engine helicopters, and did not really understand how to operate them in a safe and efficient

---

<sup>8</sup> Bill Leary August 1967 Notes.  
Investigating Team Report UH-34D Hotel-43, 08/24/67, CIA  
Corporate Files Box 59 UDT.  
Air America Aircraft Accident Review, 10/09/67.  
Mike Jarina Interview.

manner. Still, it was a helicopter, and we were supposed to be helicopter pilots.

Therefore, after topping off, I started the engine, increased the throttle to full open, and beeped the RPM switch to a hundred percent. Then, while carefully monitoring the gas producer and torque gages, I lifted to a hover, maneuvered 39F from the fueling area, and turned down strip. Robbie and some of the other senior pilots were still attempting to convince and demonstrate to the Customer that the Bell was superior to the H-34; that it could ascend quicker and carry a comparable load to high elevations at a faster rate.

Robbie told the air operations person to load more troops than I judged sensible for an aircraft with a full fuel load. He had been shuttling troops all morning, so I acceded to his judgment as an experienced Bell pilot. The Site-36 runway was inclined toward the northeast so, unless there was a strong northerly wind, most pilots preferred down strip takeoffs. This was easy for an overloaded wheel-configured H-34, which allowed a rolling takeoff. However, such technique was different for a skid-configured Bell. In the absence of flat terrain where a running takeoff was feasible, a hover takeoff was normally required.

The machine hovered fine, but very low. I was aware of slightly downwind conditions and with the overloaded ship feeling awkward, I had doubts about sufficient

power available for takeoff. After thousands of hours working mountain sites, I was not naive to the dangers resulting from overloaded takeoffs. For that reason, I set the helicopter down and, wanting to offload a couple of troops, voiced my concern to Robbie. Robbie, never a very vocal person except when in his cups, probably attempting to generate a teaching point, encouraged me to try with what we had onboard. Therefore, I lifted and maintained a low hover, hoping to achieve a favorable gust of wind to enhance lift, while trying to decide if I had sufficient power remaining to move forward through translational lift and attain flight. Without a gust, this would require additional power, something I seriously doubted was available.

When I reached the engine governor limitation for that altitude, and continued raising the collective lever, the engine and rotor RPM began to decay to ninety-one percent. As a result, the low RPM warning light illuminated and the audio blasted in our ears. Now I was really concerned that we would not be able to take off, but Robbie still encouraged me. As he was my mentor, I pulled even more collective and stomped on the tail rotor pedal to keep the aircraft aligned with the centerline. However, the machine continued to turn to the right and I began losing directional control.

Fortunately, Robbie, who I thought was asleep in the left seat, finally realized that we were in trouble. He seized the controls and forcefully dumped the collective to regain rotor and engine RPM. The inevitable occurred. The engine surged immediately from seventy percent to one hundred percent or above, with the aircraft yawing violently to the right. At the same time, he managed to slap 39F on the ground without damage, but we were turned toward the hillside. My heart raced from the scary experience. As no one monitored the gages, there was no dialogue regarding overspeed or over temperature limitations.

The episode might have provided an excellent object lesson for a supreme novice like me, who did not yet understand the machine, but it certainly was not a confidence builder. I also thought Robbie had added too much weight for the conditions and allowed me go too far, while encouraging me to continue without any benefit of instruction; something he was definitely not equipped to provide.

There were no recriminations from the soft-spoken Virginia gentleman. Chastened, he agreed to let two soldiers off and we continued the march. With the payload decrease, I was able to depart with no problem. We continued shuttles, and by the end of the day I began to feel more comfortable in the right seat. We recovered at Sam Tong with one hour night time.

The next morning, we were dispatched to Luang Prabang for a long-range mission. En route I asked a few questions about the 204's performance capabilities, so Robbie demonstrated the rapid climb capability by translating speed into altitude. It was impressive, and I began to see distinct advantages in the Bell's more maneuverable two bladed rotor system compared to a lumbering H-34s four bladed rotor system.

We briefed with the Customer while the flight mechanic tended to fueling. Likely a border crossing mission, the drop off point was located deep in Phong Saly Province "Indian" country at TJ5197, fourteen miles south of Route-4 and only four miles west of the North Vietnamese border. Using mixed Bell and Sikorsky equipment, 104 nautical miles north-northeast of Luang Prabang and seventy miles north of Nam Bac in the vicinity of Nam Houn (LS-243), the roundtrip mission would likely require maximum fuel endurance for us. However, like Atlantic convoys to England during World War Two, where crossing speeds were limited by the slowest ships, as a much faster aircraft, we would trail the slower H-34s and act as the SAR ship.

As the troops climbed aboard the H-34s about 0835 hours, I noted they wore Vietnamese Army uniforms and carried AK-47 assault weapons. We passed Ban "Y" (LS187) at altitude and plunged into Phong Saly Province at 0940. At this point we began logging denied

area time for possible future remuneration. (Denied area time was One plus fifteen.) Forty minutes later the H-34 pilots deposited their charges on a ridge just north of abandoned Nam Houn. Wasting no time, we reversed course, passed Site-187 at 1055 hours and, because of a fast diminishing fuel load, went on ahead of the H-34 and reached Luang Prabang forty minutes later. The successful mission had required almost three hours, the limit of our endurance.

We finished the day flying shuttles to Nam Bac and supporting local outposts. 39F was almost timed out, but it was too late to RTB Udorn without a lengthy night flight over mountains, so we spent another night at the Bungalow.

### **A RARE ABORT**

Robbie returned to Military Region Two on Friday. I was retained at Luang Prabang to fly with John Fonburg for a special Requirements Office (RO) mission scheduled out of Nam Bac. This marked one of the few times I flew with John in the H-34. <sup>9</sup> Since I was senior man, I assumed the PIC status of Hotel-33. We flew to Site-203 and shut down. Silence reigned in the area. There was no air activity occurring at the strip or within my range of hearing. A man I had never seen

---

<sup>9</sup> We later flew together in the Bell while John was transitioning.

before, wearing a flowered Hawaiian shirt, awaited us in the loading area. He was about the same height as me with black, slicked back hair.

He was likely Jerry Sylvester, a former Air Force Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO), who Mac Thompson speculated might have been a former quartermaster. Sylvester believed he was a tactical genius, and was rarely present at Nam Bac when Mac was working there. Consequently, Mac was employed to translate mission assignments for Air America pilots, particularly H-34s, for Colonel Khamphay Sayasith's area outpost deliveries. Sylvester should have been at Nam Bac daily performing the liaison work, not the IVS representative. There was bad blood between the two, as Sy did not approve of Thompson's meddling in FAR military work. Consequently, he spread some negative stories calculated to get Mac thrown out of Luang Prabang. <sup>10</sup>

Before Thompson departed Nam Bac in July, there were already troubles in eastern areas close to the Ou River. Although enemy units roamed the woods with impunity, there were none seen in immediate valley areas. The sector was deemed "sort of" friendly in the fall of 1966 and spring of 1967. In July, there were only a couple of villages located six miles east

---

<sup>10</sup> Later, when assigned to Pakse, Sylvester reputedly accidentally shot a Filipino doctor.

requesting community development, but because of security risks, Mac chose not to venture there or conduct work.

A collection of high mountain ranges perched three miles east of Nam Bac and stretched well north. About six square miles of this high ground that abutted the Nam Ou were important to Nam Bac's outer defense. Because Route-44 from Tay Bac Lai Chau Province, North Vietnam, wound over this area and into the Site-203 valley, FAR had occupied the gap (TH4986) between two hill tops to interdict potential enemy movement over this trail system. The position reminded Mac of a two humped camel's back. Royal Lao Air Force pilots conducted an occasional para equipment drop to the landing zone, but it was a hairy mission. Previously, Mac had refused to send an H-34 crew to the landing zone. Colonel Khamphay understood the crew's reluctance and attempted to convince the RLAFF pilots to perform the mission. His briefing revealed that the friendlies were located in the notch and the baddies occupied the two hill tops. He believed that the H-34 might receive minor battle damage while dropping, but the pilots could zip quickly through the notch to evade fire. <sup>11</sup>

Before even launching north, the two-pilot requirement in the cockpit triggered a suspicious feeling in me regarding the viability of the mission.

---

<sup>11</sup> Mac Thompson Email, 06/21/97, 06/23/97.



The one aircraft requirement also puzzled me. If this was indeed classified as a Special Mission, where was the SOP-mandated back-up ship and escort aircraft? Also, from experience working with RO representatives at Mounng Soui, I did not particularly trust Army types, for they generally seemed oblivious to our safety, only focusing on performing the job at our expense.

After our landing there were no introductions or pleasantries exchanged and I discovered that the RO or attaché had just arrived from Vientiane and wanted us to sling load a full net of supplies to a FAR unit situated on a heavily forested hill about three miles to the east. The second red flag waved: *What wasn't the man telling me?* I asked some obvious questions: *Why the need for a net and why didn't RLAFF H-34 pilots conduct the mission? After all, they could talk directly to the troops on the ground.* Unprepared, Sylvester lacked a map and was not forthcoming with a lot of information, but he allowed that all RLAFF pilots had refused to supply the surrounded unit.

Neither John nor I had ever worked in this area. Furthermore, we did not know its history or that the troops were withdrawing west from the gap in the vicinity of Route-44.

The mountain in question was easily visible from our location on the valley floor. From my vantage point I could see no openings on the forward side of the

hill. It consisted of only dense forest and jungle. I calculated that if we could pinpoint the troop's exact location, we would have to arrive at a hover or continue a slow flyby while pickling the net. In either case, if the troops were actually surrounded, then we would be extremely vulnerable during the drop phase, and the odds of being shot out of the air were quite high. I was confident that I could deliver the supplies, but a wise Marine once told me that a mission was never a hundred per cent successful until one returned safely from a mission. I was not sure about the return part. When I broached this subject with RO, he was totally unconcerned. He only wanted the job completed.

I was not pleased with either the man's attitude or the situation. I had almost lost my life twice in the past two years because of a dearth of information or gross stupidity; once in North Vietnam and another time south of Na Khang. Both were during questionable missions for which I harbored bad feelings. Because the proposed operation smacked of an ill-conceived task and made little sense from a longevity standpoint, that old feeling returned. I was becoming less and less enamored with the RO man, his poor attitude, and his questionable mission. Everything about the assignment evidenced poor planning and portended disaster. Irrespective of the nebulous situation at the Landing

zone, the mission violated our SOPs, lacking a SAR backup ship, or escort. Furthermore, it appeared to be a high-risk mission with a low survival rate.

Through his interpreter the RO representative established radio contact with the embattled unit's commanding officer who wanted to be anywhere else but where he was. As a last resort to performing the mission, I requested that the leader establish a wide perimeter and dispatch patrols to determine enemy disposition. I believed this might enhance my chances of dropping the goods and escaping in one piece. However, he excitedly indicated movement would be impossible. The enemy was too close to his position. That was entirely the wrong thing to say. If the enemy was that close, then what chance did my crew and I have? His statement relieved my anxiety about leaving the FAR unit to their own devices and solidified my reluctance to attempt something so foolish.

All this time Fonburg listened, let me talk, and said nothing. A placid man, John was like that—he talked slowly and only when absolutely necessary. Now, as the PIC, I had to make a decision that concerned not only me, but the safety of my crew and machine. I asked John to take a walk with me, well out of RO's hearing. After consulting privately with John, outlining numerous cons, very few pros, and voicing my doubts about a successful outcome regarding the mission, he

remained noncommittal. Perhaps if he were alone, he might have attempted the drop. I never knew.

To support my decision, I decided to obtain help, deferring the situation to higher authority. Therefore, I climbed in the cockpit and called Vientiane on the HF radio, requesting the operations manager. I explained the situation as plainly as I could, voicing concerns over a successful operation and lack of assets available to me. After deliberation and perhaps consultation with a superior, Tom concurred, and we collectively elected to scrub the mission. It was the only mission of this type that I actually refused.

I apprised RO of the abort. Naturally, he was not happy and left. I never saw him again.

With no further tasks at Nam Bac, we returned to Luang Prabang. We conducted a couple of missions to the east. One was assigned to a small ridgeline where I had allowed Dick Lieberth to attempt a landing in 1965. These pads, usually in defilade, could be quite tricky, and Dick's RPM control during the final approach was worse than horrible. Therefore, to avoid a crash I was obligated to "assist" his landing. Fonburg had a reputation of carrying enormous loads. I wanted to see him actually perform this, and perhaps learn a new technique. He landed the heavy load by utilizing additional ground speed and last-minute power applications into the pad. Preferring a more controlled

approach into a landing zone, his method was something I rarely used and I was not sure he would make the pad until we were actually on the ground. I learned absolutely nothing from that display of mountain flying.

After a day of little flight time, and much frustration with a Customer, I deadheaded to Udorn on a Company C-47, B-879.

### **CHUCK TAYLOR'S ORDEAL**

In my mind there was little differentiation between the aviators of Continental Air Services International (CASI) and Air America. Given a hairy situation everyone's fate was similar. During refueling or rainy weather periods, I often conversed with CASI fixed wing pilots, some who had worked for Air America before transferring to earlier "competitor" Bird and Son, which became CASI. Other than the fact that we were all Americans and part of an elite group, all fixed wing pilots were well aware that it would be us H-34 drivers who would come to their assistance if required. Chuck Taylor, who had been in Southeast Asia a long time, was one of the more popular CASI people. He always had time

to talk, share a joke, and divulge the latest intelligence on an area. <sup>12</sup>

On Sunday morning, 13 August, CASI pilot Taylor was flying Curtis-Wright C-46F N9473Z out of Udorn with a rice load for a drop zone about fifty miles north of the four rivers area of Sop Khao. Second in Command, Brian Dennison occupied the right seat. The lead kicker's name was Samphan, with three other assistants.

Weather conditions were mostly overcast, with tops at 7,000 feet mean sea level (MSL). At the four rivers visual navigation fix, where a broken layer of clouds existed, Taylor established a heading and calculated time distance to the target. A few minutes prior to the estimated time of arrival (ETA), a large hole appeared in the undercast, so he spiraled down for a look. Underneath, five miles west of the drop zone, he continued toward the village at approximately 2,500 MSL and 1,000 feet above ground level (AGL). A low recon in the form of a circle was conducted one and a half miles west of the drop zone. This was followed by the correct signal, a white "A" displayed on the ground.

Taylor began the standard process for the first pass. Just prior to ringing the bell to alert the kickers to a drop, the number two engine lost power.

---

<sup>12</sup> The pilots who dropped cargo in remote regions often possessed a special knowledge and insight as to enemy situations and dispositions in areas where I rarely ventured.

Next the kickers ran to the cockpit announcing ground fire. While the kickers discharged the rice load, he feathered number two, turned 180 degrees away from the area, and spiraled up into the overcast. Because of high terrain to the south, at 4,000 feet, he briefly considered a couple more 360-degree circles before proceeding, but elected to depart the hilly terrain while climbing higher.

Taylor then turned toward Sop Khao, a Lao Theung village located in the valley at the foot of Phou Cum. Then he observed the oil pressure needle on the number one engine drop to zero. A frantic examination from a cabin window revealed substantial oil slip-streaming from the engine cowling and running back over the wing. Before the engine oil pressure needle began dropping, the oil quantity gage had registered twenty-nine gallons; now the needle moved south like a minute hand on a clock.

From the beginning of the incident, and while Taylor continued to climb on instruments and was busy trying to salvage what he could, his copilot had been busy radioing blanket reports to anyone who might help. Fortunately, the pleas "in the blind" for assistance were received by two aircraft. One was a C-123 crew en route upcountry, the other was Robbie Robertson and his flight mechanic in 39F. Robbie had been working for RO

representative Dick French at Mounng Soui. Both crews headed for four rivers at maximum speed.

The aircraft slowly continued to climb despite the use of only one engine. Then 73Z broke out on top of the clouds at 7,200 feet MSL. With the oil quantity tank gage reading only twelve gallons remaining, seizure was a foregone conclusion. Clear conditions afforded Taylor a choice opportunity to attempt restart number two engine. It was successful. Although two ran fairly smoothly, the motor would only develop 900 RPM. He cycled the throttle aft and forward, but RPM remained constantly low. This low RPM created a lot of drag and yaw, so he feathered it a second time. Continued flight did not seem promising.

By then the weather seemed to be improving and the PDJ was visible in the distance. Ten miles north of four rivers, the C-123 pilot moved alongside the left wing and Taylor related his problems. Additionally, Robertson was fast approaching the area in the Bell.

Preparing for the inevitable, the four kickers and Dennison donned and secured their back-pack parachutes. The SIC stood behind Taylor's seat in anticipation of bolting to the cargo door. All the kickers were in the cockpit fingering their Buddhist images and giving Chuck the thumbs up. One held Taylor's chute.

Just northwest of Sop Khao, with only seven gallons remaining in number one's tank, at 0930 hours, the



engine seized and earth's gravity took over. At the same time, he feathered the remaining engine propeller, he announced over the VHF radio net that the crew intended to depart the ship. Brian grabbed the yoke from behind the seat to keep the aircraft level while the kickers helped Taylor into his parachute. Then they all dashed to the large rear door with the intention of jumping.

Always preferring to ride a plane to the ground rather than bail out, Taylor had never jumped out of "a perfectly good aircraft." This was an oath many pilots took, but when subjected to an actual "moment of truth," most changed their minds when the critical choice between life and death dictated. Aware of his Captain's reluctance to leave a plane in the air, the last kicker refused to jump until Taylor preceded him. Ensuring a positive departure, he clapped Taylor on the back as he fell into the sky. It was not the first time a kicker had "saved his bacon."

The flannel cargo chute packed at Udorn initially steamed. Because one leg strap had a foot-long slack and the other was tightened like a tourniquet, Taylor was concerned about damaging his testicles. However, his fears were unfounded and the parachute opened gently. Because of the delay in opening, he was able to see other chutes far above him. Following a few large pendulum oscillations, immediately after 73Z hit the

ground and exploded, Taylor swung into a steep, bare hillside, while attempting to kick around facing straight into it. The ensuing ride was not fun. After rolling and sliding down the mountain, he continued the journey on his backside with a broken ankle through dense undergrowth to the Nam Khan River.

The other crewmembers all drifted south of the river. From his resting point, Chuck observed that Robbie had already retrieved the SIC and kickers. The Bell was sitting on a gravel bar across the river facing him with the survivors standing beside the ship., They had not yet spotted Taylor, who still concealed and unable to move easily. To obtain their attention, he began throwing sticks and whatever else was immediately available into the river. The effort initially proved unsuccessful.

As the injured Captain watched, everyone re-boarded the helicopter. Robbie lifted to a hover, turned left, and prepared to proceed down river. At that point, while standing in the door, the eagle-eyed Flight Mechanic spotted Taylor. Robertson landed. Everyone jumped out of the cabin and two kickers ran up the riverbank. Apparently, they soon found help, for within ten minutes a dugout canoe arrived. The two natives assisted and deposited Taylor in the canoe's bottom and paddled across the river to the waiting helicopter.

A C-46 waited at Lima-108 to ferry the CASI crew south to Wattay Airport. Requirements Office Captain Dick French presented Chuck with a bottle of Southern Comfort for the trip. None of the others cared for a drink, so while counting his blessings, Taylor consumed every drop by the time the plane reached Lima-08.

It was about two months before Taylor healed and returned to Vientiane for flight duty. Since he had been wearing "jodhpur" boots at the time of the incident, Ed Dearborn inquired if he had received the word about jump boots. Chuck admitted that he had heard nothing regarding jump boots. Therefore, Ed launched into a monologue about how every crewmember was now required to wear such boots, and if he had been wearing a pair, he would not have broken his ankle. <sup>13</sup>

Although Taylor respected Dearborn for his overall courage and ability to get the job done, he and the gruff manager had never personally gotten along particularly well. Therefore, hoping to make a point, Chuck interjected, "*How about that flannel cargo chute I was forced to jump with?*"

*"Never mind that! From now on everyone wears jump boots."*

---

<sup>13</sup> Air America required flight crews to wear this type boot during the very early years.  
Larry Taylor Email, 03/16/97.  
Mac Thompson Email, 07/12/06.  
C-46 Crash in Laos.  
Hank Bour Email, 02/28/97.

*"Holy cow! It was fortunate that I did not bust my fanny. By now, you would have everyone wearing girdles, corsets, or other such items."*

The transition to jump boots was completed without further rancor. <sup>14</sup>

The same day as Taylor was experiencing his fun and games around Phu Cum, I was scheduled for local night training in Hotel-59. Long after his incident, he related the story to me at Long Tieng. Such remarkable events occurred in Laos and I was amazed by his ability and good fortune to survive under such adverse circumstances. Still, that is why we were paid the big bucks.

## **UDORN**

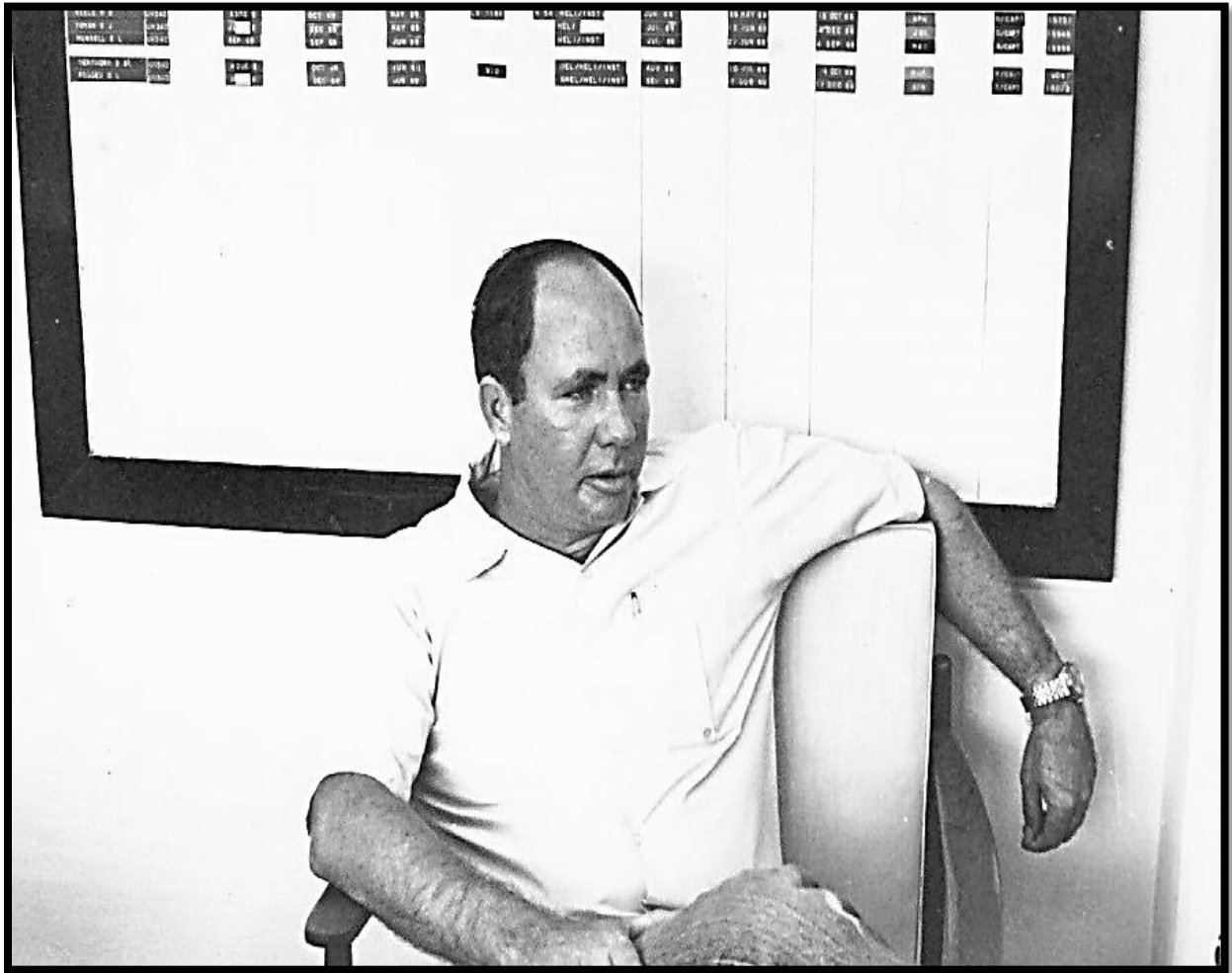
I was off the schedule for four days during which I worked on the new house. Since we were still cooking on the flat propane burner that I had obtained years before, and I heard the Williams family was soon departing for home leave and selling their household items, I contracted to purchase Jim's full-size cook stove. I paid Jim and Iva seventy dollars and the propane stove was delivered on 1 September.

Our regular maid departed for home and we were left in a bind with no household help. We were spoiled.

---

<sup>14</sup> Chuck Taylor Emails.

Given this situation, it was difficult to understand how people managed without a servant. Always helpful, Khun Yai brought a little girl to the house to fill the gap. However, she coughed so frequently that we sent her home, but not before she held Ricky. I recalled what our clinic doctors had said regarding endemic tuberculosis in the northeast, that it proliferated and they highly recommended obtaining a chest X-ray before hiring one, particularly for families with small children. Because of the nature of the culture and the Thai reluctance to have anything to do with doctors, I do not imagine this was done very often. When Khun Yai was informed about the girl's coughing spells, she passed it off as merely a cold. Nevertheless, I gave the girl's brother forty baht for her to obtain an X-ray at the local hospital. He probably pocketed the money, and I seriously doubt that an X-ray was ever taken. If anything, the incident solidified our desire to have Ricky receive a TB vaccine called BCG, which was only obtainable at a hospital a hundred miles south in Khon Kaen. He was old enough for the injection, but we had put it off thus far because the vaccine was reputed to stimulate antibodies that could possibly give a positive indication for TB, especially after administration of the standard TB patch test given to school children in the States. Following my next stint



Captain Jim Williams.  
Author Collection.

upcountry, we did take Rick to Khon Kaen for the TB injection.

The monsoon season was obviously dissimilar from past years, at least thus far. Seasonal rains arrived late to break a previous drought. Then the southeast monsoon largely disappeared during July and August, followed by a previously unheard-of drought that was rapidly diminishing the town's watershed. The price of town water was already increasing and it did not flow as readily through the pipe with the same pressure as in the past. At the Air America facility, with a new reservoir brimming to overflowing southwest of the facility with abundant water, Air America was in fair shape, but with insufficient rain to fill the town reservoir, inhabitants would measurably suffer until the following rainy season. Blame could be accorded the Udorn town fathers, who were noticeably delinquent in planning for increased population levels until recently, and now it was too late. To help alleviate dry season shortages of water, hydro engineers determined that there were numerous area lakes to the west that could be joined and utilized to advantage, but nothing yet had been accomplished toward that end. There was an unsubstantiated rumor circulating that a water pipe would be laid from the Khon Kaen dam to Udorn, but not for two more years. Like electricity, one did not appreciate a precious commodity until it

became scarce or unavailable. Relief rains did arrive later in the month.

At the Air America base seemingly never-ending construction projects continued with the commencement of an Operations-Administration wing addition. Aircraft ramp paving was underway. A new power plant, training building, and a third shop building were to begin soon. To keep pace with new employees, there were also plans to expand the Club. There were always inconveniences involved in these construction projects, but from an employee standpoint, in my mind it heralded job security. As long as USG money continued to be allocated for expansion, it was not likely that we would be seeking other employment any time soon.

It was amazing how much the Air America Udorn organization had expanded in the relatively few years since 1961. There were presently more than seven times the number of employees as compared from the beginning of the operation. Progress was remarkable, particularly in the form of creature comforts and rolling stock. For example, from eight automobiles exhibiting various states of decay, the number of vehicles had escalated to a large, but unknown, amount. <sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Ben Moore August 1967 Udorn Monthly Report to Taipei.



**JARINA**

On 17 August, Mike and Orvil Mock departed Udorn late for Pakse in Hotel-30 and six days in the field. During an abbreviated day, with action heating up around Thateng and Lao Ngam, Mike was directed to PS-28 and had a chance to view John Cooney's crash location.

From there he moved on to Saravane, where he was loaded for a trip twenty-one nautical miles northwest to Ban Don Boung. During the monsoon season, FAR movement was eased in this area simply by the fact that the enemy range of action was greatly diminished. Lima Site-64 was located in the center of what we called the Toumlan Valley. There an old French strip was collocated with Don Boung and Route-23. Although positioned at a low elevation, exposed, and vulnerable to enemy attack, the site served as one of Saravane's forward listening posts, and an interdiction point for unlikely traffic from the north and east.

Returning to Lima-44, Mike received an urgent call to proceed to Thateng, where an H-34 crew was in trouble. When he arrived, he discovered that Boonrat and another Thai pilot had incurred battle damage while dropping propaganda leaflets throughout the area. The pilots managed to conduct an emergency landing on the Thateng strip. Planning to abandon the helicopter, they had called Pakse requesting a backup ship for evacuation. Jarina examined the helicopter and inquired

if they considered the aircraft flyable. They claimed the fuel cells were leaking too badly to fly. Leaving an H-34 at Thateng overnight was not a good idea. Like the destroyed aircraft at Luang Prabang, the H-34 was a large lucrative target and Mike had visions of a pile of gray ashes by morning.

He proposed a solution. He had previous experience ferrying an aircraft with similar problems, so he explained how they could "safely" fly the ship out of the area by filling the fuel cells to the point where fuel began leaking. The men listened politely, but looked at the farang like he was not sane. Still, they took his advice, stopping at Pakse and Savannakhet to top up to the leakage points. Following what we called leapfrogging between fueling stations, they learned a valuable lesson, quite possibly saved an aircraft, and reached Udorn. <sup>16</sup>

Jarina's activity level increased on Friday. Working late and performing eighteen landings, he first went to a position five miles east of Lao Ngam. Then he continued on to Saravane for local work. The Customer directed him to PS-04 (Phou Souk) on the rim of the Plateau, four miles south-southeast of PS-22. He returned to the day's first mission site and then to L-44. Before returning to Pakse for the night, he

---

<sup>16</sup> Phil Goddard had successfully accomplished this after being hit at Na Son, North Vietnam, in June 1965.

completed the day working the heights of Phou Kate (PS-21), shuttling supplies and troops necessary for the defense of the USAF TACAN station located there.

Mike's day began with a trip northwest to PS-18. There he interacted with trainees at the Phou Lat Seua SGU camp, acquainting them with H-34 boarding and debarking procedures in preparation for missions planned for the following day. After the Customer was satisfied with his charge's performance, Jarina returned to Lima-11 for fuel, and passengers then went up the valley to Saravane. FAR movement was still underway north to forward positions and the Captain was tasked to shuttle troops to Senammana (PS-19). A trip to Site-165 on the Plateau preceded his return to Pakse.

On the twentieth, Mike crossed the Plateau at low altitude and shut down at PS-22. Missions had been planned for that day, but a weather system moved through the region, precluding all but a minimum of flying. Therefore, the missions and Air Force escort were scrubbed until the following day and Mike returned to Pakse. When the weather significantly improved, flying Porter XW-PCT, a CASI pilot took the H-34 principals northeast to a hot area seven miles east of Ban Nong Boua on a mission recon. Because of lingering low clouds, he managed to cover one of two mission landing zones. Recons always included not only the

target area, but to prevent advertising intentions, several diversions.

Herb Baker joined Mike in the cockpit for the infil-exfil missions. After picking up a team at PS-18, they proceeded over sixty miles northeast to recon coordinates covered by the Thai Porter pilot the previous day. Then the crew delivered sick, lame, and lazy members to Phou Lat Seu.

After refueling at Lima-11, they returned to PS-18 for a second mission. Located sixteen miles southeast of Nong Boua and east of the Se Kong (XC8325), Mike was somewhat familiar with the site. On the way west they stopped at Site-134 to disseminate the team's latest intelligence regarding enemy river and land movement. Then they returned to PS-18 for further team debriefing.

Apparently, something had transpired overnight at XC7535 that required an emergency exfil. Mort Shearer joined Mike in the capacity of a dual pilot and they accomplished the mission.

Next, they repositioned to Savannakhet, and then to Thakhet, where Case Officer Mike LaDue waited with another mission. After a briefing, they flew fifty-six miles north to a landing zone well west of Route-8 (VF7931). Returning troops to Lima-40 and conducting a fueling stop at Nakhon Phanom, they recovered at Udorn.

## **MILITARY REGION-2**

Except for a proficiency ride with designated check pilot Wayne Webb, and some local training of former Army pilots, Chief Pilot Wayne Knight had not flown upcountry since the Weitz and Asta SAR.

This changed on the seventeenth when he joined Frank Stergar in Hotel-59 at Sam Tong to conduct a route check. They spent the day in the far north supporting efforts to reinforce Phou Pha Thi and the installation of the new USAF operated radar. Local flights were conducted between Site-85 and Houei Kha Moun (LS-111). There was also a trip thirty miles southeast to Houei Tong Ko (LS-184), eight miles southeast of MOUNG SON (L-59), a friendly site in the upper MOUNG HEIM Valley. There was another flight to Lima-59 before recovering at Site-85 for a rare overnight there, likely caused by imminent darkness and foul weather.

When weather allowed, they remained working in the Site-85 area on Friday. After a few shuttles out of Na Khang, they returned to Sam Tong for hot showers and decent food.

The next day, Wayne ferried a Lao H-34 to Udorn. The machine had been involved in a ground accident whereby a bystander had been killed. Very superstitious people, Lao pilots could not be induced to fly the

machine until it had been blessed and purged of bad spirits by monks.

While Stergar and Knight were enjoying their second day at Pha Thi, I dead headed north to Sam Tong with the PIC of Hotel-49. Northeast Thailand's temporary mini-drought did not apply to the mountains of Laos. Adverse weather required some circumnavigation above Vientiane that resulted in a longer trip of one plus fifty hours. Assigned to fly Hotel-45, I waited until the Captain returned for fuel and then joined Flight Mechanic Bob Bedell for an afternoon of local flights.

Despite clouds and heavy rain, the following two days were fruitful from a flight time perspective, especially the effort on Sunday. After a long day working out of Na Khang and farther north, I left for Sam Tong. Because of Nam Bac's requirements and road watch activity in both Military Region three and Four, priorities for H-34s to support Vang Pao's forces in upper Military Region Two were not high, contributing to a lack of aircraft in the area. Weather had been fairly decent that day and visibility good, so I had

the tanks topped off and left quite late. <sup>17</sup>

I had been over this circuitous western route to avoid overflying the Plain of Jars hundreds of times in past years, and could probably fly the track with my eyes closed. Therefore, to forestall boredom, I began to settle into my semi-dream mode state. <sup>18</sup> Overhead Sop Khao, the visual navigation checkpoint at Four Rivers, I received a rude awakening. Both engine and rotor tachometer needles suddenly spun to zero, accompanied by illumination of the red annunciator light at the top of the instrument console. My thoughts churned. Resulting bells and whistles began going off in my head, as my heart figuratively leaped into my mouth. Instantly alert, I scanned the other instruments. The "emergency" proved to be a non-emergency. Nothing adverse was noted and Hotel-45 still chugged along on course. I had seen individual needles, like the engine tachometer needle, drop south before. When this occurred, I usually flew by using the rotor tach needle and sound. This allowed me to ferry the aircraft to the closest base for maintenance. However, I had never

---

<sup>17</sup> Because of the immense need by both civilian and military aircraft, fuel was delivered to Site-36 on a regular basis, and unless the site was socked in for long periods, fuel shortages of past years were rare. In my mind, because of past experiences with late afternoon SARs and en route weather, one never knew what to expect during the one-hour flight. Therefore, harkening back to the Boy Scout motto, it was always good to "be prepared."

<sup>18</sup> Note that I did not indicate sleep.

experienced two needles dropping off the line. It obviously had to be tach generator problems. Since I had not changed my cruise flight settings, I continued with the same throttle position. Flying by sound, I conducted a rolling landing at Sam Tong. After calling Udorn and requesting parts, I secured the wounded beast for the night.

The specified parts arrived the following morning, and after installation, I flew Hotel-45 to Tango-08.

Except for work in Thailand with Rick Decosta in Hotel-47 on the 31st, my flying was finished. Total flight time for the month, including Bell work, was almost 102 hours, with ninety-three qualifying for project pay.

### **THOMPSON AND IVS-AID PROJECTS**

During the period in Vientiane Mac Thompson convinced his immediate superiors that his presence at Moung Met was unnecessary. Therefore, he was assigned to Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69) to perform community projects for three months. Quiet, pleasant living with a nice view, Xieng Lom became his favorite place to work in Laos. His work schedule consisted of three weeks at the site with four to five days R&R in Vientiane. Living on the local economy and occasionally contributing cigarettes and booze as payment, Mac found that he spent less money at the site than while in Vientiane.



Xieng Lom was located south of the Mekong River in a large valley within a few miles of Hong Sa, where he had begun his IVS tour the previous year. Containing roughly 35,000 people, a number of small villages were scattered in and around the broad valley. Of this number, there were only thirty-five ethnic Lao; the rest were Lu (Lieu), originally from Yunnan Province, China, and who constituted the minority group in Nan Province, Thailand, and most of the Xieng Lom area to the Mekong. In addition to their tribal languages, many Lu also spoke Lao or Thai. Most of the time, Thompson was the only American present. Because he had dispensed with an interpreter some time before, interactions with the people consisted of his "bumbling along" with limited language skills and abundant sign language.

The Thai border was between three and four hours walk north of the valley. Therefore, with many desirable items for sale there, commercial traffic to Xieng Lom was accomplished from Thailand, not the Mekong River. As there was no Thai influence or presence in the early days, normal commerce was not conducted by mule or pony. With little money available, the only merchant conducting business in the Xieng Lom Valley was a Thai trader. With no road available, he

hired coolies to backpack items from Thailand for one baht per kilo. <sup>19</sup>

Hill tribes, including Meo, Yao, and Lao Theung, resided on or around border ridgelines. One Meo site, Phia Chan (LS-155), lay in the hills south of Xieng Lom. Many Meo sites existed on the north-south Sayaboury-Nan border. Some dating from the early days of expansion, they included Phu Kong (LS-42), Ban Nam Hin (LS-104), Phu De Me (LS-105), Nong Sakhe (LS106), Happy's Strip (LS-264), and others. Probably because the area was programmed as a fallback region for Vang Pao and his people should military and political fortunes spin drastically downward, by agreement, the Meo did not do anything much to aid the war effort. There was little patrolling and no fighting. The responsibility of Ban Houei Sai AID workers, the villagers were content living on their hillsides and receiving their rice drop allotments. They continued to be serviced by C-46 aircraft into 1972. By then Mac had landed at most of the sites by Porter or helicopter.

The valley contained an old dirt and grass east-west Caribou strip accessible to small fixed wing, Caribou, and C-123 aircraft in dry weather. When Mac

---

<sup>19</sup> After the war, two large refugee camps were built in Nan Province. There Thompson encountered the same merchant who had opened up a shop near a camp. He was serving many of the same Xieng Lom Valley people, the Lu, who had fled the communist regime.

arrived, except for a four-man Royal Thai Army intelligence team assigned from Lopburi, the area was devoid of a military presence, and there were no rumors or signs of Pathet Lao. Mac billeted with the Thai team in a Sky (Agency) semi-stilt house built two years earlier, which sat on a prominent hill fifteen minutes northwest of the strip. Because there was not much decent food available at the local market, the team and Mac were supplied white rice and C-rations from Nam Yu. This was supplemented with locally procured fish and vegetables. The team ate the "Cs" Thai style. They heated ten or more cans of main courses. This allowed them to provide different foods at the table. Mac was not all that fond of white rice, so he had a lady provide him with a fresh basket of glutinous rice every morning that would last all day.

Because of the absence of security troops at his site, Mac asked Major Aroun to send a platoon from Hong Sa. They walked to Xieng Lom within three days, and Mac had them encamp behind his place. Despite the precautions, with bad guys in the neighborhood, he remained anxious and had to debate taking measures for an early morning evacuation. Therefore, for a long time at Nam Bac, Xieng Lom, and later at Moung Met, he slept in his trousers, socks, and unlaced boots. The HT-2 radio and survival walking harness were readily

available. Fortunately, nothing ever occurred to warrant leaving post haste.

When Mac first met Tony Poe and his people toward the end of 1966, he heard that there were plans to move back into the valley and establish a large training camp. When Mac left Xieng Lom in late 1967, Thai troops began arriving. There were no Americans present and no camp started. This was accomplished in early 1968. A north-south Porter strip (LS-274 or 69B) was added close to the complex, and the camp was erected in the flats southwest of the C-123 strip. The big school and remnants of a Japanese air strip were also in this area.

Mac's first task involved repairing a seven-room school that had blown down in May because the original builder had neglected to install sturdy roof braces. This had to wait two weeks because the people were busy tending their rice fields. Unusual for ethnic Lao, but not the Thai Lu and Thai Nuan, a second rice crop planting was considered. Of course, this plan was contingent on USAID building a road to the Mekong for marketing. The people were energetic and deciding that a thatch sided school was not suitable, on their own initiative, they started hand sawing wooden planks. Eventually, 120 units of school furniture were built.

Mac worked part time on a handicrafts program that included weaving cloth for shirts, skirts, and table

mat sets. Finished products were delivered by air to Vientiane for sale in an IVS-Asia Foundation Crafts store. Over several months of exchanges, 900,000 kip was delivered to Xieng Lom and distributed to the people.

Wells, their rehabilitation, and other water projects were on the IVS-AID agenda. During World War Two, as part of an aid program, the Japanese had sent advisors to the villages in an attempt to curry favor. Several original wells were dug by conscripted Burmese labor. These were fittingly called "the Japanese wells." During 1965-1966, working under American advisors, the people dug thirty-seven wells. Two Gambion dams and one concrete dam were also completed to enhance irrigation. In addition, a dispensary was erected.

On Friday, the 13<sup>th</sup>, Mac composed another letter for his parents:

*"Here's another Friday the 13th. Since I convinced the people I'm working with that it's an unlucky day we're staying home drinking Lao Lao and writing letters. Some of the neighbors are sitting around and discussing world affairs and the price of rice in Xieng Lom..*

*I'm still in Xieng Lom, but for how long I don't know. USAID wants to close out operations here, but I don't want to leave. In a real contest of wills I guess*

*I'd come out second best, but this has been going on for a month now and I'm still here. The people here work very well, as opposed to many areas of Laos, including the place they want to send me [Moung Met]. Many of these other areas you have to almost beg to get the people out to work, which is one hell of a way to do 'self-help' work. I'm of the opinion that if they want a school, well, or dispensary, they'll come and work without coercion and if they don't..., move on to an area where they will work. It's a real waste of time and money to not do anything in one place..*

*As for future plans, I don't really know. I've got between 8-10 months with IVS and then I'm free and clear again. Since I'll be broke again when I get out I may sign on a six month USAID contract job at ten to twelve thousand [dollars] a year. That at least would give me some spending money."*

As expected, AID officials had their way with Thompson. During October, he began a Moung Met (LS-158)-Xieng Lom shuttle, lasting until April 1968. He would work one week at Moung Met, two to three weeks in Xieng Lom, and then travel to Vientiane for a week's rest. Then he began the circuit again.

Mac was sent to Moung Met to complete a school project first planned in May and touted as an endeavor the people wanted. The reason rural development was successful at Nam Bac and Xieng Lom was the fact that

people were willing to work on projects they desired, considered worthwhile, and would benefit them. However, at Moung Met over the past two years, villagers had been generally uncooperative with IVS representatives' attempts to encourage self-help projects. One reason given for the apathy was the Chao Moung or other government leader's insistence that the work be accomplished. By February 1968, the Chao Moung was employing the threat of jail to get village people to work on projects.

Moung Met had been under enemy control until recovered by government forces during the successful 1964 Triangle operation.<sup>20</sup> However, Pathet Lao influence still pervaded the area.

When Mac first arrived at Site-158, he was assigned a house next to the air strip. As customary, he conducted a courtesy call on the local military commanding officer, a FAR major. During the discussion, Mac inquired as to the area security. He was assured that there was no problem, and the major said he would post six soldiers to sleep under his elevated house. Not convinced of reliable security, and concerned about his safety, Mac claimed that he did not want to inconvenience the troops and requested to sleep in the major's bunker. Consequently, when at Moung Met, he

---

<sup>20</sup> For details regarding the operation, see Author's 1964 book.

spent the next six months in the bunker at night. There were never any fire fights.

Another village lay four kilometers south. Because of the Pathet Lao area presence, people or relatives did not journey to this ville until after ten in the morning, and generally departed by 1600 hours. Considered a semi-Pathet Lao village, husbands, brothers, and fathers of the residents would return home for R&R. Like other situations in the country, to avoid confrontations, the tacit agreement stipulated that nonresidents would be out of the ville before dark. It was considered a good place for parties and weddings. Sometimes Mac was invited to the festivities.

The Moung Met barber was a local man who had been sent to North Vietnam for medic training. Later he returned to visit his family prior to joining a local Pathet Lao unit. No one informed him about the Triangle operation that had "liberated" the area. While walking into the valley he was apprehended by government troops. At the time FAR did not have a good medic in the area, so he was placed on a work release program as a medic. Additionally, he was a good barber and enjoyed good patronage in this endeavor. Between the two duties, he was quite busy. Mac supplied USAID-provided medicine and was also obtaining RLG medicine from Luang Prabang.



While walking back to his Moung Met digs one day, Mac was surprised to encounter a couple of fairly good-looking Thai girls walking down the strip. On vacation, and looking for adventure, they had journeyed to Vientiane, obtained a ride to Vang Vieng, and then to Moung Kassy. From there they followed established trails to the Moung Met Valley, which was close to the Mekong River. <sup>21</sup>

### **SOUVANNA PHOUMA IN WASHINGTON**

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and his staff journeyed to America to participate in a United Nations General Assembly meeting on 20 October. Visits--it would be his third--were also planned with Washington leaders to discuss the situation in Laos. From Ambassador Sullivan's messages there was a framework of talking points developed, and some speculation as to what the Prime Minister would desire. Some were considered old, some new. One item concerning Souvanna was the American peoples' opposition to the war in Southeast Asia. Therefore, he would require reassurance

---

<sup>21</sup> Mac Thompson Christmas Eve Interview at Jeff Johnson's House, Bangkok, Thailand, 12/24/96.  
Thompson Interview, Lone Star Bar, Bangkok, Thailand, 12/26/96.  
Thompson Emails, 10/26/96, 02/05/97, 05/21/97-IVS End of tour Report circa June 1968, 12/16/99, 09/22/05.  
Thompson Letters to Parents, 08/22/67, 10/13/67.

that USG commitment had not wavered in respect to containing communism in the region.

It was believed that he would seek decisive action on USG's part to end the war. He had developed arguments along this vein in the past, recommending that North Vietnamese dikes along the Red, Black, and other large rivers be destroyed to produce devastating flooding to village infrastructure and prevent rice harvests. Also, other civilian targets should be bombed. <sup>22</sup>

Fearing an increase in North Vietnamese aggression, even though efforts in South Vietnam were underway, the prime minister, had been, and still was wholeheartedly opposed to any physical barrier to cut Laos in two, particularly if this involved introduction of numerous U.S. troops, which would destroy any façade of Geneva Accords neutrality. Dividing Laos would also lead to considerations of a requirement for a southern King.

---

<sup>22</sup> Souvanna Phouma's proposal was not original or new. In war there is no gray area. Winning is essential and all aspects of the means to achieve this should be explored. No "Mister Good Guy" allowed. Since food is the prime means of survival for both civilians and military, denying farmers land to produce rice was seemingly an easy option. Therefore, we often broached the subject and wondered why destroying the dike system was not accomplished. I also harbored the belief that if major rivers were laced with rotenone, fish would be poisoned and an important source of protein eliminated. But USG political agendas prevented all but the most deniable "Sneaky Pete" operations, and the war churned on, endlessly chewing up our precious resources: men, machines, money, and morale.

However, he did agree to allow clandestine measures to air drop electronic detection systems on the Trails. Administration leaders were advised that Souvanna either was not aware of, or refused to discuss, sensitive U.S. operations with his people. This should be avoided in any talks.

Fruitful interfacing developed between leaders over the following two days. The prime minister indicated that the questionable Lao situation was fostered more by war than political or economic causes.

The Lao government had achieved advances in corruption reduction and currency stabilization because of an influx of funds from friendly governments. But the RLG had to wage two wars--one military, the other economic-- and half the annual budget was used for defense.

Six-million-kip equivalent was allocated by USAID projects for small dams, irrigation, seed purchases, and associated planting and growing items. A labor shortage was created by the hundred thousand men in the military, but despite the devastating flood of 1966 and loss of production, Laos would again become a rice exporter.

Taking a hawkish stance, Souvanna indicated that his government would be pleased if USG took more aggressive means against the North Vietnamese. The RLA staff was quite concerned that the enemy would launch a

dry season offensive, something noticeably absent during the past year. <sup>23</sup> He suggested that North Vietnam be subjected to heavy bombing over the next two months, especially roads leading into Laos, and that Rolling Thunder aircraft eliminate all strategic objectives in North Vietnam, followed by a Christmas bombing halt. This should foster a favorable atmosphere for serious negotiations. During this period bombing should continue on LOCs into Laos. Then, if North Vietnamese leaders failed to respond within a week, world leaders should respond. After three weeks of no response, bombing of the North should resume in earnest.

Souvanna realistically did not believe that Soviet diplomats would assist in any negotiation attempts, or that the North Vietnamese would ever respect Geneva Accords protocols prior to a settlement in South Vietnam. In his quest for cooperation, he had outlined to the Soviets that USG aid was required after substantial fighting erupted in Military Region Two.

During 1964, a period of socialist expansion, the prime minister had asked Chinese and North Vietnamese leaders for statements regarding their policies toward Laos. None were forthcoming. North Vietnamese elite were still basking in the Dien Bien Phu victory and considered their army unbeatable. Currently Hanoi leaders were negative and inconsiderate regarding Laos,

---

<sup>23</sup> Souvanna's logical prediction was very prophetic.

and Vietnamese diplomats in Vientiane were largely unresponsive.

The Washington meetings stimulated immediate dialogue between Washington and the Lao Embassy. With nothing really new suggested, proposals included: Increasing air interdiction in Laos and along the North Vietnamese borders, eliminating the operational restrictions on B-52 sorties in Laos, and expanding Prairie Fire operations in the country. <sup>24</sup>

### **JARINA'S SHUTTLES**

Flying Hotel-55, on the 24th, Mike and Flight Mechanic Whiting went northwest to Nam Yu for a week. There was not much enemy pressure, few engagements, and Tony's people were largely holding their own and even expanding in the area. Covering much of the region, including many remote teams, averaging almost twenty landings per day, flight time was outstanding. Tony, a proponent of utilizing a sometimes-scarce H-34 to the maximum, continued unabated.

---

<sup>24</sup> Segment Sources:

Agency Intelligence Cable, Lao Discussion of South Vietnamese Premier Ky's Proposal of a Military Barrier, 04/22/67.

Memorandum from Rostow to President Johnson, 10/19/67.

Memorandum of Conversation: Visit of Souvanna Phouma, 10/20/67.

Memorandum of Conversation: State Department Secretary Dean Rusk Meeting with Souvanna Phouma, 10/21/67.

Telegram U.S State Department to Lao Embassy, Possible Actions to Accelerate War Effort, 10/20/67.

After the long trip to Ban Houei Sai, Jarina went to LS-118A and was loaded for Team-11A, forty-two miles east. Later trips took him fifty-six miles northeast of Nam Yu to a site close to the Nam Tha and twelve miles northeast of Ban Bo Mei (LS-194); a trip to Team-11A; Ban Vieng (LS-135); and Moung Mounge (LS-93). His efforts yielded over ten hours flight time and one-hour night.

On Friday, missions resulted in landings twenty miles upriver from Houei Sai at Ban Nam Kueung, <sup>25</sup> the area encompassing the July Burmese, KMT, and FAR shady "Opium War." While servicing the site, he bounced between Ban Houei Sai and Nam Yu. A Team-17 supply resulted in flying forty-two miles north-northeast of Nam Yu. This was followed by a trip to a refugee village twenty-five miles west-southwest on the Mekong. Shuttles between Houei Sai and Nam Yu were followed by shuttles to Team-11A and Ban Vieng.

With Tony and Blaine sharing Hotel-55, often overlapping missions, Jarina began the morning carrying loads between Houei Sai and the large refugee site at Ban Nam Thouei (LS-118). A trip to a refugee village nine miles upriver from Nam Kueung followed. A long flight emanated from Nam Yu to a site just north of Pak Beng and southwest of Boum Lao. Later efforts were accomplished out of Ban Vieng where he supplied Team-6

---

<sup>25</sup> Lima Site-150 consisted mostly of Meo people.

in the Vieng Phou Kha area; Team-16, south of Team-11; and Team-33, ten miles southwest of Nam Tha Town, where eyes and ears focused on intel for later operations.

Sunday was busy shuttling men and material to Teams-21, 9, and 5 north of Nam Yu. An additional team, eight, was located nineteen miles southeast of Site-118A.

The following day was one of Jarina's busiest, conducting thirty landings. From Houei Sai, he shuttled bullets, beans, and bandages north to Teams-6, 16; then to Team-2 in the hills south of the Nam Tha Valley and on to Team-12, five miles northeast of Tong Prang (LS-145). Working out of Nam Yu, there were return trips to Team-6 and then Team-8.

Tuesday was an even more productive day in which Mike removed refugees from the hills just west of Nam Tha and shuttled them to various areas on or near the eastern Mekong.

On the 30th, after working more than a fuel load, he and Whiting RTB Udorn.

### **VICHIT IN BAN HOU EI SAI**

In August, USAID worker Vichit Mingrachata transferred permanently from Luang Prabang to Ban Houei Sai. Working there until 1974, Vichit lived with his family on the Thai side of the Mekong at Chiang Khong and commuted to Ban Houei Sai daily by boat. His tasks

were basically the same as at Sayaboury and Luang Prabang: administration and radio operations, also helping to load and offload aircraft and tabulate passengers.

There were two USAID workers at Houei Sai when he arrived: Blaine Jensen, who worked with refugees and coordinated rice drops, and Tony Cattaruci, who Tony Poe called Tony number two. Vichit worked with Tony Two on USAID development projects. One task attempted to persuade the people to replace their cash crops from opium poppy production to other types. During these opium hunts there were no incidents at places like Thung Aw, Phu Kha, Van Pak Len, Ban Don Sak, and Ban Do Ye, but while probing for drugs they always had a helicopter and crew standing by for safety.

Another program was development of the river road and a Route-3 dry season dirt track north of Houei Sai to Ban Pong, an area populated by Lao. Vichit was well equipped for this type of activity after previous experience with road building of Route-13 from Thakhet to Paksane. <sup>26</sup>

Bill Young had been the area for a time before leaving the Agency, usually working in the jungle. When not training his cross-border teams, Bill resided in his riverside house. Similar to the one on the Thai

---

<sup>26</sup> Vichit had worked with the Special Forces White Star operation before employment with USAID.



side of the river, the bungalow had been built with AB-1 funds slated for the RLG. It reverted to the government when Bill returned to Chiang Mai. In June when Bill departed Houei Sai for good, he visited Joe Flipse in Vientiane where Joe was recovering from another bout of hepatitis. Young's break with the Agency was not all inclusive. He indicated that the Agency would retain him on a small annual retainer, and he had no future plans yet. Gordon Young, Bill's brother, also lived in Ban Houei Sai and worked for a U.S. agency.

CASI pilot Eldon Walker, the Triple-Tailed Pioneer driver, had just departed Houei Sai with his family when Vichit arrived. In addition to dropping rice and supplies throughout the area, he delivered Pla Buek, an enormous fresh water catfish, to the King at Luang Prabang during the April-May Lao New Year. <sup>27</sup>

Eldon had two daughters: one married a Thai, while the other returned to Thailand to work in the Bangkok refugee program. Eldon's house later became the Air America hostel at Ban Houei Sai.

---

<sup>27</sup> One day, I was invited to a luncheon given by the Crown Prince at the royal capital and noticed a large fish on the table. I inquired as to its size and was informed that such fish lived in deep pools in the Mekong River. They were only accessible during a certain time of year when the river was at a low state. The officer also said the fish could grow to 300 kilos (over 600 pounds). I really did not believe this, but in later years saw photos of nine-foot-long catfish pulled from the Mekong River.

AID workers were generally not supposed to work close to the Thai military or FAR armed forces, but sometimes they gathered for a drink. Vichit met General Ouane a few times, but never knew him well. Like everyone else, he knew the general was a drug dealer, but could not deter him from the dirty activity.

Vichit did not normally socialize with AB-1 types, but occasionally went to Nam Yu to attend Tony's parties. Piak, a Thai Army soldier whose father was a general stationed at Chiang Mai, was in charge of supplies and ran air operations at Nam Yu for a number of years. Somboon was his helper. Piak later transferred to Ban Houei Sai, where as the air operations officer, he operated the large warehouse at the new runway. His crew was half Lao Theung, half Thai/Lao. During off hours Piak would gather sapphire chips off the runway, place them in bags and sell the items to pilots for a hundred baht each. <sup>28</sup> <sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Tragically, Vichit lost two sons in the Mekong River. Devastated with grief, he turned to drink for consolation. At the time I met him at the Udorn U.S. Consulate he appeared fine.

<sup>29</sup> Former USAID worker Vichit Mingrachata, Author Interviews at Udorn, Thailand, 11/30-31/96.  
Mac Thompson Interviews, 12/24/96, 12/26/96.  
Joe Flipse Email, 05/10/97.

**SNAKE BITTEN MR-1**

As if the August loss of Lowell Pirkle and wounding of Cy Asta and Charlie Weitz were not enough to satisfy the gods of war, unpleasant incidents continued in Luang Prabang-Phong Saly Provinces, when Phil Goddard and Bennie Shaffer were both wounded by enemy ground fire almost a hundred miles north of Luang Prabang (TJ10663). Phil had been checked out as PIC in 39-Foxtrot and, like Robbie and others, was rotating work upcountry in the machine.

On the 29th, Captain Larry Taylor, a recent upgrade to the UH-34D, along with Flight Mechanic Bob Bedell, was working a hillside pad at the northern most end of the Nam Bac Valley in Hotel-54. It was a very busy month for Taylor. Not scheduled until the 10th, he flew nineteen of the last twenty-one days of the month for a total of 113 hours.

Phil Goddard, while en route over rough terrain to the mountainous landing zone fifty-four miles north northwest of Nam Bac, spotted Larry. He called, saying that he was proceeding to a remote site near a feeder trail leading to Route-48, an enemy area that LOC Case Officers kept under surveillance. Programmed single pilot to an area with which he was not familiar, he was a little more than uncomfortable going there. Therefore, he asked Larry to remain at altitude to function as a radio relay or backup ship should he

encounter a problem. Of course, Taylor willingly accepted the task.

The flight to the landing zone was uneventful, and Phil radioed that he was landing. Then, after a minute or so of silence, Larry heard Phil exclaim, "I'm hit." There was no further transmission. In the cockpit of 39F, Phil was momentarily stunned when a round struck and penetrated his helmet. Shaffer, who was also wounded, thought Phil was finished when he observed him slump in the right seat with blood copiously flowing down the back of his neck. However, Phil immediately recovered and launched south.

Having no idea what he would find or what he could accomplish, Taylor radioed his and Goddard's location in the blind and added that he was headed in the direction of the landing zone, all the while hoping for the best.

After a few anxious minutes, Shaffer called. Larry thanked God that they had managed to exit the area, but he was confused as to who was actually flying 39F. When he inquired, Shaffer indicated Phil was in full control of the ship, but unable to talk.

Halfway between his orbit point and the northern landing zone, Taylor spotted the 39F. He intercepted the ship, rolled alongside and escorted the crew to Nam Bac.

At Nam Bac, although several holes were noted in the helicopter, 39F was determined airworthy. However, this was not the case for the crew. A small-arms round had made entry and exit holes in the rear of Goddard's helmet, grazing his scalp and creating a bloody mess that looked much worse than it actually was. It was later theorized that a partially expended projectile had creased his skull, deflected, and followed the path of least resistance on its way out of the helmet. Moreover, human scalps are well supplied with blood vessels and tend to bleed copiously when breached.

As for Shaffer's injury, he was holding his lip microphone to his mouth when a round hit the mike and drove a piece of the wire boom frame into his thumb. He removed the wire, but in the process lost part of his thumb.

A large Air America plane was waiting on the strip to evacuate the crew to Udorn, and Phil managed to walk unassisted to the aircraft.

CPH Wayne Knight later looked at the damaged helmet and observed that the two holes in the rear did not line up. This was specifically evident when he was unable to thrust a pencil through the two holes. Therefore, it was obvious that Phil's cranium had

slightly deflected the bullet. This led to jokes in later years regarding his hard head. <sup>30</sup>

While Phil was in Bangkok recovering, Wayne had the Maintenance Department shop clean, patch, and repaint his helmet. Like most of us old timers, this was not Goddard's first ground fire incident, and the recent event made him think long and hard about his mortality and continued viability of the job. <sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> The helmet was a standard issue. We later were obligated to wear a heavier, but more protective military ballistic helmet.

<sup>31</sup> Bill Leary August 1967 Notes Taken from a Larry Taylor Interview.  
Larry Taylor Email 12/27/10.  
Joe Leeker, XW-39F.  
EW Knight Email, 08/26/00, 12/04/00.  
Joe Flipse Email.

**O**n six September, along with a test flight, I was scheduled for my second formal training flight in XW-39F. This was probably the first time the aircraft was used since Phil Goddard and Ben Shaffer were wounded north of Luang Prabang in August. Although I had previously flown upcountry in the same machine, my first local training flight was on 4 July, over two months before. Therefore, in anticipation of the flight, I sat in the cockpit and reviewed the pilot flight manual.

Certificated from a U.S. Army instructor school and now a designated Company instructor pilot, <sup>1</sup> Wayne Webb was a bona fide Standard Department IP, who efficiently took me through basic maneuvers. His demonstrations, vocal and participatory, were efficient and generally by the book. Wayne displayed his method of practicing a combination of governor emergencies. This technique was not in any manual, <sup>2</sup> quite different, and would require time and practice to become proficient. Although we covered most standard approach procedures, and I performed them acceptably, the flight was far too short and I was still uncomfortable in the right seat. Also

---

<sup>1</sup> There were very few of these designees in our outfit.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, at the time, there was little literature pertaining to the Bell.

skid run on landings and autorotations needed work. Because the entire Bell configuration and approach sight pictures were quite different from those of the H-34, they were initially confusing. This was compounded by the fact that I was a slow learner who required repetition. I was not fortunate to have the inherent talents of a natural pilot and flying various aircraft in the Naval Training Command had never been easy for me. I had to work at flying every day to maintain proficiency. In my case, it would have been far better if concentrated 204B transition training and practice had been conducted without interim H-34 flying. However, with only one machine available, and the ship used almost exclusively upcountry, that was not possible. More Bell helicopters were rumored to be on the way to Udorn shortly, but because of Customer pressure to operate the machines in the field, management was not willing to wait for their arrival.

Consistent with local management's policy to schedule a pilot still in transition for double crewed missions, the following day I ventured upcountry with Ed Reid as a second pilot. With some difficulty caused by adverse weather, we proceeded as far as Sam Tong and shut down. I had not flown with Ed since the very early years. Of course, being senior, Ed was the PIC, but even though I was still transitioning, I would be allowed to log flight time as a Co-Captain.



We logged one hour and thirty-seven minutes on that short day. As usual, Ed was contrary and logged flight time to the exact minute, not rounding up or down as in this case would have been one hour and thirty-five minutes. This method of reporting time was sanctioned by management and the Customer; if done honestly, this method tended to average out over the long run.

On Friday, with weather much improved in upper Military Region Two, we worked out of Na Khang and Phu Pha Thi supporting Vang Pao's eastern expansion operations.

During the day, without incurring down time like during southern missions, we conducted a flight to the mountain range of Ban La Ka, five miles northwest of Nong Khang (L-52).<sup>3</sup> After withstanding several withering attacks, Vang Pao's people had maintained positions at Site-52 until early April, when it was abandoned and was now still under enemy control. Located between Mounng Het to the north, Sam Neua to the south, and Route-63 to the east, the infil site was well chosen for either targeting intelligence or harassing operations.

The two-hour Special Mission out of Na Khang proceeded without a problem. Working with a complement of mixed aircraft and a faster ship, we assumed the

---

<sup>3</sup> I could never understand how Customer operations varied so much from one region to another.

role of SAR. The unusual and daring work deeper in to enemy territory did not usually merit escort aircraft-- at least for the present.

Except for deducting ten minutes for the morning departure and evening landing at Sam Tong, all our flight time that day was project pay.

On nine September, Ed remained upcountry to single crew 39F. After being dropped off at Long Tieng, I caught a ride on C-130 479 that was delivering ammunition from Peppergrinder to the ramp at Site-20A. Rides south in C-130s necessarily bypassed Vientiane, were comfortable, and flights were usually under an hour.

### **JARINA AND KNIGHT-DRUG TRAFFICING**

While Ed and I were having fun in the mountains Mike was the recipient of a local proficiency check with Wayne Webb in Hotel-40. This was followed by a test and ferry flight of CIC-5 to Vientiane with recently arrived H-34 pilot Bob Swartz (DOH 08/12/67).

Relieved of many local Proficiency Check requirements by Webb, CPH Knight spent the first nine days of the month testing helicopters and training new pilots. On nine September, after Wayne Knight conducted the finishing touches on Hotel-40 and released it for upcountry work, Mike, First Officer Ted Moore, and Flight Mechanic Tom Cournoyer left for Nam Yu. Moore

was one of the six former Army pilots hired to crew the Bell helicopter program, but as there was only one ship available, all the men were temporarily assigned to the H-34 program. They had to pay their dues. Wayne had recently flown a combination test and training flight with Ted and found him to be a strong pilot.

As usual, the six days working out of Nam Yu were rewarding as to total flight time. They started the day with AID missions, bouncing between Ban Houei Sai, Nam Yu, and well north of Site-25 and Ban Bo Mei (LS-194), located on the north-south portion of the Mekong. Later 713 missions were conducted to Ban Vieng (LS-135) and Team-16.

The trio spent Sunday and Monday working team sites 8-A and 11. Another area worked was south of Phou Pang Sang (LS-142), and Team-138 north of Pang Sang.

On the 10th, flying Hotel-59, Wayne Knight and Harvey Potter arrived late, in time to RON at Ban Houei Sai. It was Potter's route check, which included AID work southeast to the Pak Beng Valley area and Ban Nam Kueung upriver from Ban Houei Sai. From Site-150 they journeyed northwest to the large bend on the Mekong and returned to Nam Kueung. Nam Bu was the next destination, twenty-eight miles northeast of Nam Yu at Team-7. The last flight of the day went forty-two miles east of Site-118A to Tong Prang. Upon return, they

joined Jarina for a repast and an overnight night stay at Nam Yu.

Early Tuesday morning, while Moore temporarily transferred to Hotel-59, Wayne climbed into Hotel-40's cockpit with Mike for Jarina's semi-annual route check. The long day began with a trip to Ban Houei Sai and back to Nam Yu. A flight followed to Ban Vieng and Scope-14, or Mai Teams near Nam Tha. The activity continued a period of expansion; friendlies were moving steadily toward the Nam Tha Valley, which through a fluke, was seized for a short time by default in December. The sites in the hills surrounding Nam Tha were so close that everyone who worked there could easily see into the valley. Following return to Nam Yu, a long trip east was assigned to the Ban Nong Tong (LS-209) area on the north side of the Mekong, then on to Pak Beng and Team-27, located fourteen miles east at the large east-west range of Phou Dong Ngou.

On the 13th, Moore rejoined Jarina for a seventeen-landing day. Since almost fifty total hours would be accrued on the ship by day's end, Wayne elected to switch aircraft with Mike and RTB via Long Tieng to Udorn with Potter.

Tony Poe had some business at 20-Alternate and was a passenger along with some goods and other people from Ban Houei Sai. Vang Pao's Meo liaison representative in the north, Lieutenant Moua Sue, was soon being

transferred from Site-118A to Long Tieng, and sent three bags on Hotel-40. Upon arrival, Tony assisted in the unloading. When he encountered Moua Sue's luggage, a person he detested, he became agitated and attempted to open the locked bags. Unable to break the locks, he began kicking the gear around. As the crew was continuing on to Mounng Cha, Wayne was unable to discuss the problem with Tony until much later. When he did, Poe indicated that the bags contained opium. He never learned if any, or what action Tony took.

When transporting drugs in U.S. aircraft became a paramount State Department issue, end of day searches became standard at Nam Yu. One evening, a poncho containing thirty-five kilos of raw opium was discovered behind the APU unit on Wayne's aircraft. Most certainly, the owner, or recipient, planned to recover the bundle that evening. Gary Erb, a Case Officer at 118A, was concerned about what action to take. Unsure, he indicated that he probably should burn the drugs, but the stash might be needed for evidence. One thing he was sure of, he would not place it under his pillow for safekeeping. The value of the opium was not high, but considered sufficient for a local to slit his throat. Wayne never learned how the issue was resolved.

Mike and crew returned to Tango-08 the next day. <sup>4</sup>

## **JOHN FORD HAS PROBLEMS**

The day after Knight returned to his CPH office duties, loaded with about 2,000 pounds of hundred kilo rice bags, Captain John Ford, working for USAID, departed Thakhet before 0900 hours in Hotel-47. The friendly listening post and village was located fifty miles north of Lima-40 (vicinity of coordinates VE4898) in a valley surrounded by needle point karsts, thirteen miles east of new Grove Jones (LS-141A), where some AID projects were underway. It was also within walking distance of Route-81, which was merely a trail.

Since the weather was bad, John was following the Nam Hin Boun at low level for orientation when, on the last leg to the landing zone, several loud engine backfires commenced...then silence. <sup>5</sup> Since he was already over the river at 500 feet above the ground, and terrain on both sides consisted of high trees and jungle, he elected to autorotate into the swollen river. Once in the water, he rolled the ship to the

---

<sup>4</sup> Jarina Interviews.  
Knight Email, 08/24/00 that includes his September Flight Time Records.

<sup>5</sup> Later examination of the engine components revealed a broken magneto shaft.

left. <sup>6</sup> While Hotel-47 began its "deep six" plunge into twenty-two feet of water, both John and Flight Mechanic Hal Augustine exited and swam a short distance to the north bank. The only item salvaged from the helicopter was a yellow box containing a Very pistol with extra rounds that floated from the ship.

The area was generally considered no man's land, but since enemy units often moved through, the crew decided to remain hidden for a time and observe developments, sure to follow after the noise and crash. An hour later a long boat laden with nine soldiers passed within twenty feet of their position. Wearing Lao army uniforms and carrying American weapons, it appeared that the troops would be friendly. However, the two men were not totally sure of their allegiance. Therefore, so as not to divulge their exact location, they allowed the boat to move around a bend before launching a signal flare.

The boat returned. Still fairly sure that the troops were RLG, John and Hal stepped out of hiding and were greeted by Neutralist Captain Pah, who took them to a village for a meal of boiled chicken and glutinous rice.

---

<sup>6</sup> Ford executed the correct water landing procedure. Depending on how much air is trapped in the cabin section, a UH-34D will normally float for a short time. However, in this case it began sinking after only thirty seconds.

When Ford did not return from the mission or issue a standard operations normal report to the Air America radio operator, as per Company SOP, a search commenced.

Four hours later, John and Hal were able to signal a Helio Courier flown by Captain Lee Mullins. Their position was relayed to Captain Vern Clarkson flying Hotel-58, who retrieved them after spending more than six hours on the ground.

Case Officer Mike LaDue had no knowledge of the incident, and believed he must have been at the Hong Kong Hilton on R&R at the time. Because his people were competent and able to resupply teams from Lima-39 without his presence, he could occasionally slip away in order to take short vacations from the tedious field work.

He never operated as far north as John's accident, and only journeyed to the area to coordinate with area commander, Lieutenant Colonel Vanivong, a very sharp French military academy graduate.

An incident occurred in the later 1960s during which Lieutenant Colonel Vanivong sent a radio message to his Thakhet Commanding Officer, Colonel, and later General, Choumpholphakdy Ratanabanlang. He was under heavy attack and, running low on ammunition, requested resupply. Colonel Banlang, as he was generally called because of his murderous name, very sheepishly replied that all the Lao H-34s at L-39 and elsewhere were



undergoing "repair" and not available. He subsequently asked Mike LaDue if he could help. <sup>7</sup>

LaDue immediately called AB-1 Udorn, explaining the problem. Two H-34 crews arrived. One was loaded with ammunition, and with Mike onboard the primary ship, they launched for the problem area. The second H-34 pilot was assigned SAR to loiter in case of difficulty. While Mike's helicopter was being unloaded in the compound, Colonel Vanivong conducted a rapid tour of the perimeter barbed wire to view dead Pathet Lao and Vietnamese. Other bodies had been removed and tossed into a pit. On the way out of the position, the helicopter was hit by two rounds of small arms fire. One holed the tail cone; the other struck a main tire.

The following day all the Lao H-34s were back in the air.

On the 16th, Wayne Knight delivered an investigating team to the village. Accompanied by troops the team walked to John's crash site to ascertain the viability of a recovery. Except for three feet of a bent rotor blade, nothing of the helicopter was visible in the muddy water. Captain Pah indicated that the fuselage would not be exposed until after the

---

<sup>7</sup> Following the communist takeover of Laos, then General Banlang was sent to a reeducation camp in Sam Neua Province. Either worked or starved to death, he never emerged alive from the camp.

monsoon season ended and the river level dropped. With this advice and the state of the machine, a decision was made to wait until the water level receded to attempt a recovery.

On 20 December, an Army CH-47A crew lifted Hotel-47 out of the Nam Hin Boun, and began carrying it west. However, something happened at 1,500 feet. The load separated and Hotel-47 plunged to the ground. The machine was considered a strike, but the wreck was later recovered and repaired, using salvaged parts stockpiled at the Udorn miracle Maintenance Department rebuild shop. Hotel-47 was assigned field duty in May 1968. <sup>8</sup>

### **KULA LUMPUR TRIP**

Some of the investors in Asian American (AKA Concrete Masonry) were concerned about the Company's state of affairs and the lack of information coming from Coble. Therefore, Wayne pressured me to accompany Elmer Munsell, who had returned from his tour in Nepal,

---

<sup>8</sup> Segment Sources:

Bill Leary 09/14/67 Notes used from the Logbook of John Ford.  
Air America Aircraft Accident Review, 11/11/67, Inflight Powerplant Failure of UH-34D, Hotel-47, 09/14/67.  
EW Knight Email 08/24/00 that Included his Flight Time Record for September 1967.  
Joe Leeker, The Aircraft of Air America, H-34, H-47.  
Mike LaDue Emails, 12/24/10, 05/20/12.  
Steve Nichols Book, 83-84, *A Swim in the Mekong River Tributary-* by Hal Augustine.

on a fact-finding mission to Kuala Lumpur. I was not a director in the company, but since no one had been there for some time, was interested in the operation and the viability of our cornerstone company, Concrete Masonry.

Elmer and I departed Bangkok on a twin-engine high wing Fokker plane on the 13th. While attempting to clear Malaysian immigration, I discovered that my passport had expired. Therefore, I was advised to continue on to Singapore and obtain a new one at the U.S. Embassy there. As it turned out, this was not quite the burden I envisioned. Singapore was a modern city with many laws strictly enforced to protect citizens. It must have had some impact, for the city was clean, and appeared to be well organized.

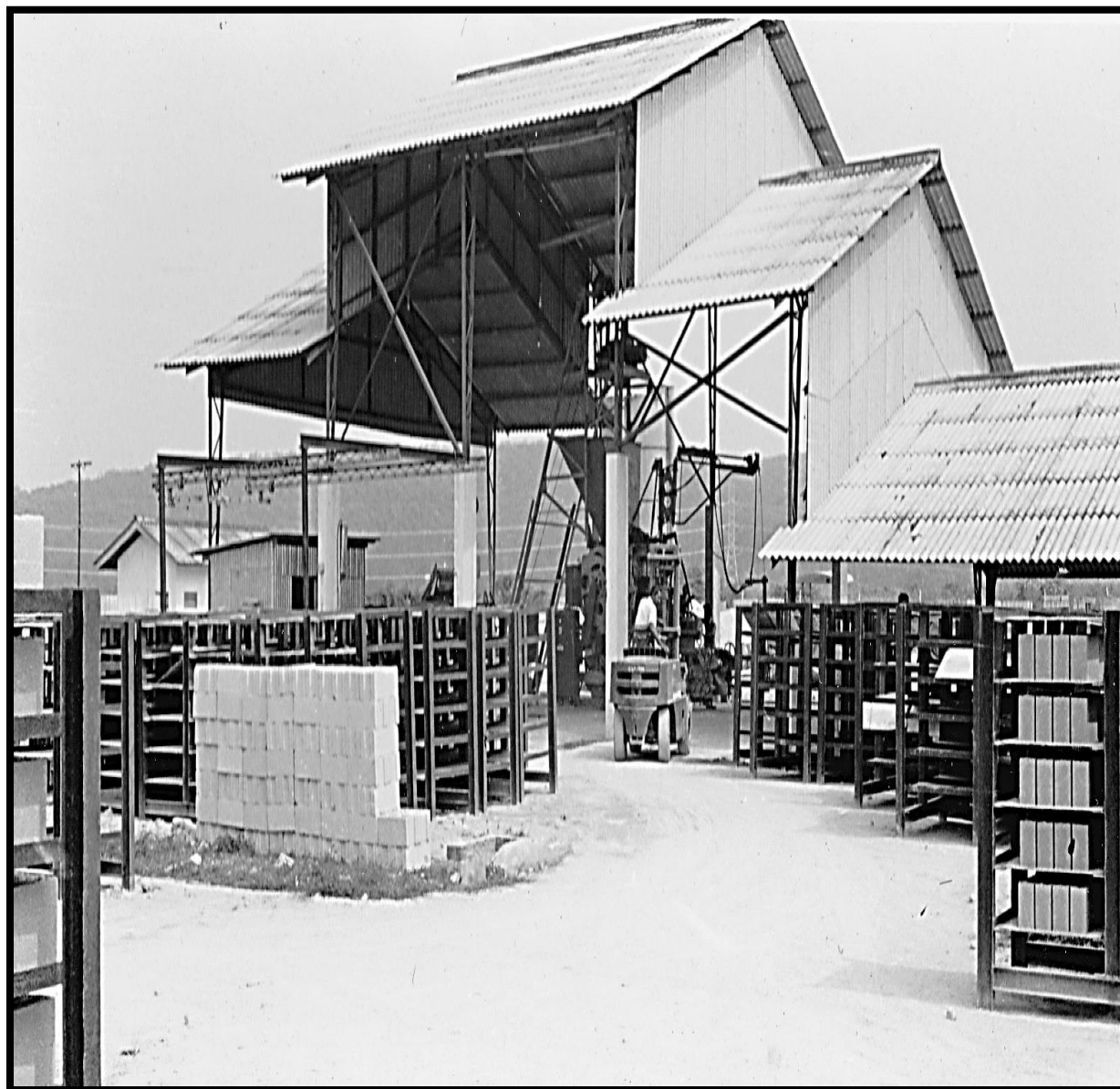
After applying for and receiving a new passport, I saw some of the island, including the old and famous Raffles Hotel, visited by a long list of rich and famous celebrities over the years, including writers Somerset Maugham and Ernest Hemmingway. Its long bar was awesome and put our Club bar to shame. It was also the spot where a bartender supposedly first invented and coined the name "Singapore Sling" in the early 1900s.

Following a night in town, I departed for the airport and my mission in Kuala Lumpur. Like Hong Kong, Singapore was a free port and offered a visitor many

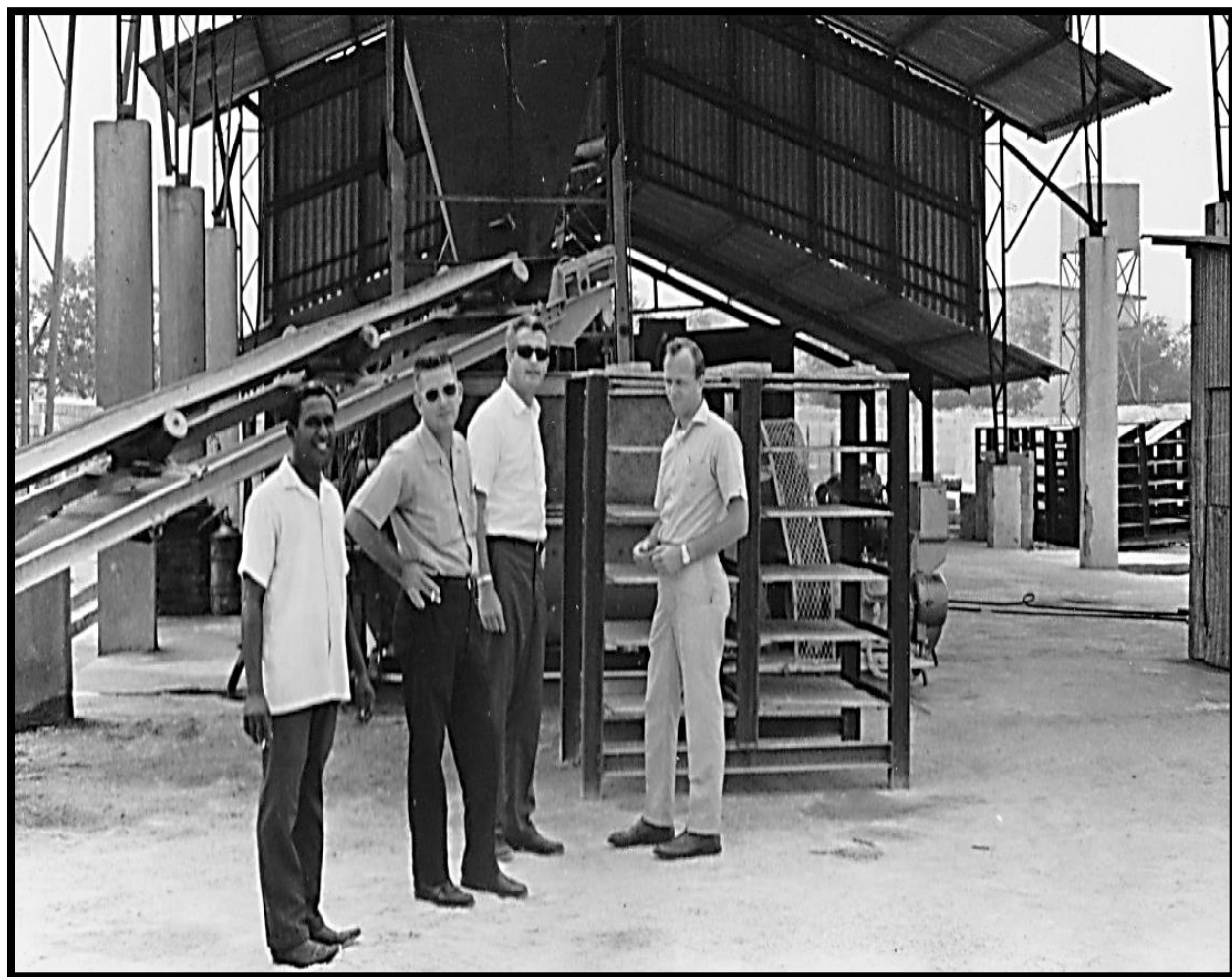
bargains. Therefore, I made a few purchases including a Japanese 35mm Yashica camera with a removable Polaroid filter. Complying with the "spook" game, I had never purchased a 35mm half frame Minolta or Minox "spy" camera some of the pilots used upcountry to record their activities. Moreover, except for my memory and a few letters sent home, I had little to show for posterity regarding my work. It was time for this to change. Besides, I now had a son who might like to see how he looked while a youngster.

Although Singapore was outstanding, I still considered Kuala Lumpur the most impressive place I had visited in Southeast Asia.

After a couple of difficult days attempting to discover how our business prospects were faring, they still appeared marginal. To mollify and bolster our confidence, Jim Coble attempted to put a favorable spin on everything. He indicated that we would definitely see improvements in about six months. This was fine rhetoric. We had heard it all before from his lips, but as usual, Jim provided no hard facts to substantiate his claims. Moreover, he still arrogantly acted like the business was his personal fiefdom. The situation was long past the time for faith or smoke and mirrors. We needed tangible evidence of progress to take back to our peers.



Asian American's subsidiary Concrete Masonry cement block  
factory in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.  
Author Collection.



Asian American Air America investors in front of the cement block factory. L-R Peter the plant manager, Captain Elmer Munsell, Captain Jerry McEntee, and Captain Marius Burke.

Author Collection.

We returned to Thailand with little more knowledge about the business than before the trip. At a gathering in Wayne's office, all concluded that Coble should be replaced as the Managing Director, but that raised a problem—who would replace him? We were in a real bind. Since none of us were willing to move and assume the management burden in Kuala Lumpur, we agreed to wait and hope for a miracle.

While I was away monsoon rains continued to deluge Udorn. The drainage system in our area was poor. Because of the inability of the klongs alongside Benjarn Road to carry off the excess water, our front yard flooded, but the house was not impacted, although the moisture caused the electric meter to burn out. If there was an upside to all the water, it was that water from the town reservoir was flowing properly through the pipes again. I learned this when forced to get out of bed one night to shut a valve to the overflowing water tank.

### **STATESIDE DISCONTENT**

News from the home front was not encouraging for USG's overall effort across the border. Despite Washington's positive reports intended to enhance people's concept of the Vietnam War, an opinion poll indicated that for the first time more Americans, believing there was no progress in the war, opposed

rather than supported the conflict. There were several additional reasons for the discontent. No one really possessed a clear understanding for the war. President Johnson had never adequately explained the geopolitical forces that perpetrated the struggle or why we were actually involved in Southeast Asia. American casualties were increasing as were draft calls. There seemed no common goal or patriotism like what had pervaded the society during World War Two; and pundits and the media organizations did not attempt to foster a perception of cohesiveness. Even U.S. Congressmen were beginning to squirm.

What really roiled the public, whose wallets had not been previously impacted, was the six percent surtax on personal gross income President Johnson proposed to help defray some costs of the war. From the beginning, the Johnson Administration had projected the facade of a "guns and butter" policy, maintaining that the country could easily fight a war and still enjoy economic prosperity. Subsequent events, and with no end seen to the conflict, the plan was revealed to be faulty. The rubber stamp Congress sanctioned the surtax.

Even some individuals in the Administration and Congress were at odds over the war's conduct. This was particularly the case in relation to the seemingly failed strategic air war over North Vietnam. Therefore,



to hash out problems and clear the air, during two weeks in August, the Senate Preparedness Subcommittee, chaired by John Stennis, senior Senator from Mississippi, held closed hearings on the conduct of the air war. The committee was well known for its 'hawkish' views and military sympathies. Testimony was presented by eleven high-ranking military officers, who vigorously lobbied to continue and expand the air war against the North. Furthermore, USAF leaders were continually piqued that their forces had been too restricted regarding targeting in the North, and that politically inspired restrictions that Washington civilians imposed on them had largely thwarted the Rolling Thunder bombing offensive from producing the overall desired effect. The whole 'ball of wax' did not bode well for future military appropriations.

Already disillusioned with what he considered the ineffectiveness of Rolling Thunder and Trail interdiction, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, the sole civilian to attend the meeting, dissented with the Subcommittee's recommendations. He asserted that Rolling Thunder had never appreciably reduced the North's ability to shuttle men and supplies into South Vietnam, or seriously damaged the North's economy, or broken the North Vietnamese peoples' morale. He argued that the amount of supplies enemy forces required in the South was so infinitesimal no bombing campaign

could completely stop all the flow. Also, Chinese and Soviet Union logistical pipelines that included railroads and ships could continue to provide a limitless supply of war materials with or without USG interference.

Robert McNamara's public statements citing his doubts as to the efficacy of Rolling Thunder did not bolster supporters and adherents of air power. Instead, it had the tendency to alienate him from the President, and likely increased Hanoi leaders' confidence and resolve in prosecuting the war to its end. However, by that time, the secretary was on his way out of the Administration. By the end of November he resigned his post to assume the title, President of the World Bank. In March, he was replaced by Clark Clifford.<sup>9</sup>

From my letters home, even my Father, who was anything but a political scientist, although a very intelligent and perceptive man, quite possibly possessed a better appreciation than most Americans of what USG was attempting to accomplish in Southeast Asia and Laos, was asking probing questions. Except for my letters and what I conveyed during visits, like other Americans, he mostly relied on media commentaries and

---

<sup>9</sup> John Bowman, Ed, *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War*, 177.

John Smith, *Rolling Thunder: The Strategic Bombing Campaign, North Vietnam, 1965-1968*, 134, 136, 138-with Author Comments.

what biased newscasters spouted nightly on television. Dad had read an article (possibly contained in the *Newark Star Ledger*) regarding "the south peninsula of Thailand that said the major Communist movement there is threatening trouble as the Thai troops can't get at them. They run across the border to Malaysia." He wondered if we were in that area on vacation in "Pattani.

This erroneous geographical reference to Pattani vs. Pattaya caused me to chuckle, for Dad's knowledge of southern Thailand was a little deficient. A glance at a map of Thailand would have revealed an east and a west peninsula bracketing the Gulf of Siam. Our vacation spot by the sea was on the east side at Pattaya. The lower west portion contained the focal point of article, Pattani, the town where Tuie spent much of her childhood. We had not ventured there yet. Although the feature part of the news article, I doubted if that area was any worse than Isan in the Northeast, where insurgency was rampant. We had prohibited areas over the Phu Phan (mountains) where we could not fly. Flight altitudes in the region were restricted to 7,000 feet and night flying prohibited except on certain monitored routes.

Then he mentioned Takhli. The Manners neighbors, living on the upper corner of Dorsey Place, three houses from my parents, had a friend who had been

seriously wounded and was recuperating in the Takhli hospital. Citing interest from the man's family, Dad wondered if I could find out anything relating to his condition. This was a lot to ask. Because of clandestine activity there, Takhli was still a highly classified base. It was so secret in 1963 that we were cautioned not to mention the name, under threat of termination from Air America. Since the advent of the war, this had moderated somewhat, but we still did not discuss the base. I replied that I would attempt to obtain information regarding Robert Corkwell, but I qualified this by saying I was quite busy.

In addition, for several reasons, I was not currently happy with U.S. Air Force personnel or the system. The primary reason was a young doctor's refusal to treat Ricky when he was very sick with tonsillitis. Apparently, an incoming commanding officer had changed the policy of treating Air America "civilians," and this had added to problems we had in having access to Air Force facilities, and especially medical assistance. The Air America clinic did not possess the quality of medicine or American medical expertise we required. Therefore, we were obliged to deal with either our clinic or town doctors. I was so angry that I complained to Charlie Carlson, who I knew took his child to the Air Force doctor. Charlie knew about Air America's participation in military SAR work and Nunez

and my June 1965 rescue of Curt Briggs. He later took the matter up with senior officers and temporarily, at least for my family, the door was open again to the medical facility. <sup>10</sup>

## **UPCOUNTRY**

Since I had only flown twelve hours in September, I was on the schedule for the rest of the month. Flight Mechanic Moon Centeno and I crewed Hotel-55 to Luang Prabang on the nineteenth. We were flying direct to Luang Prabang these days without incurring enemy ground fire. The 118-mile trip took less than two and a half hours, and allowed all but thirty minutes project pay. Crossing the last set of mountains before the Mekong town, I could see that weather was a problem in the area. Therefore, cognizant of FAR's inability to properly guard or fend off an enemy attack, I landed, hot refueled, and parked my ship in staggered fashion along the right side of the runway, leaving plenty of interval between other aircraft. Then I left for town in the duty Jeep.

The weather was no better on Wednesday, particularly in the planned mission area, so it was scrubbed. As Hotel-55 was not quite right and needed

---

<sup>10</sup> Harry R. Casterlin 09/18/67 Letter to the Author.



The ancient royal city of Luang Prabang and airstrip seen from the west bank of the Mekong River. Mountains to the east tend to shield LP from potential invaders.

Author Collection.

repairs, we left late for Udorn, arriving just about dark.

I was not having much luck with helicopters. The next day, after testing Hotel-32 with Bob Peterson and not finding it airworthy, I returned late to Luang Prabang on C-123K 545 to assume command of Hotel-50 with Flight Mechanic Tom Nery.

Despite continuing attempts to reinforce the Nam Bac salient north of Luang Prabang, the area was under a great deal of enemy pressure and the defense perimeter was steadily contracting. That was one reason our road watch missions became increasingly important. Teams generated intelligence on enemy movement and storage caches along Route-19. From that information targeting was developed for RLAF strikes. Then the teams were required to move into the strike area and assess the battle damage.

However, tactical air was generally lacking, for no control system existed in the north. Exacerbating the situation in Military Region One were several problems in the RLAF. The tendency of T-28 pilots to indiscriminately bomb targets, which included the friendly position at Lok Mok, led to fewer sortie requests from Nam Bac commanding officers, and increased enemy probes. There were also concerns in the RLAF regarding the weak command and control structure. Indeed, low pay and poor discipline caused some ground

crews to stop loading bombs. As Fonburg and I observed in August during the aborted mission to supply a surrounded troop unit, Lao H-34 supply operations in the region had diminished, and were almost nonexistent. Ineffective maintenance and poor leadership all contributed to the problem. Unchanged since the Lao war began, pervading the entire Lao military system from top to bottom, similar problems were essentially the same, and could have been derived from a broken record. This was particularly the case within the RLAF, which never totally recovered from General Ma's failed coup and subsequent departure for Thailand. Consequently, Nam Bac resupply operations, that RLAF helicopter pilots were unable or unwilling to fulfill, were almost totally taken over by Air America.

As Vientiane AIRA Chief Colonel Pettigrew observed in late August:

*"The RLAF is divided into four basic groups which are mutually antagonistic:*

*1. The T-28 pilots who fight and die for their country.*

*2. The transport pilots who steal and traffic and make a great deal of money.*

*3. The base personnel who get next to nothing and resent it.*

*4. The General Staff...of the air force, which merely jabbars and accomplishes nothing.*



[General] *Sourith*, [who was not a pilot] *has really not gotten hold of the problem and has not even begun to think of how to handle these four divergent forces and weld them into an organization which works...*

*Basically, the AIRA Chief saw as one of Sourith's primary weaknesses his inability to select proper subordinates, preferring field grade officers over company grade personnel trained in the U.S.*

*Toward the end of September, the RLG finally agreed to a planned reorganization of the FAR military. The leader of the RLAF would be a general officer who was a pilot. However, if none was available an army general would assume the billet.* <sup>11</sup>

For the next nine days, conducting rolling takeoffs from the Luang Prabang airstrip, Tom and I shuttled heavy loads of bullets, beans, and bandages to Site-203 and the outlying positions and firebases FAR still controlled and maintained. On return trips to land at the Luang Prabang runway, we were especially vigilant, for undisciplined T-28 pilots had a tendency to break into the traffic pattern without calling the tower operator. Possibly low on fuel or arrogant because it was their country, they would land in either direction without regard for anyone else's safety. One day I

---

<sup>11</sup> Edward Vallentyne, *CHECO*.  
*CHECO*.  
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 226-227.

observed a C-123 pilot who was turning on final approach to landing cut off by an anxious T-28 pilot. The C-123 pilot was obliged to "pour the coal" to the engines and go around. To my knowledge this problem continued and was never entirely rectified by the Luang Prabang Air Operations Officer (AOC). It culminated on another occasion when Ted Cash was suddenly cut out of the pattern. Good with his fists and quite hot tempered, Ted was not an individual who tolerated such abuse. In fact, it was rumored that he was passed over for advancement to major in the Corps for striking a senior officer in an "O" Club bar. After landing, in the presence of other crew members, Cash approached the errant T-28 pilot with balled fists with the intent of doing the chap bodily harm. Taking a no-nonsense approach to the situation, the pilot simply took out his .45 caliber pistol and leveled it at Ted's head. That was the end of the confrontation.

Late in the year, the airfield was often socked in by fog and low clouds in the morning. One had to either wait until the sun rose high enough to burn the fog off, or stimulate convection. This usually occurred about 0900 hours. Another option was to burst through the low cloud layer on instruments. Cloud tops at the field and the extent of weather could be ascertained by incoming aircraft from Vientiane or Udorn.

One foggy morning after the helicopter was loaded for Nam Bac, I was impatient to begin work and elected to climb through a thin fog layer. I began a rolling takeoff aligned with the Runway-24 centerline. As the ship shuddered through translational lift, I used forward cyclic to hold the machine on the ground until achieving sixty knots indicated air speed (IAS), the best UH-34D climb speed. Then I added power, eased back on the cyclic while the lumbering beast rose gently into the air. Scanning the gages, I realized that I was far from proficient in instruments and ill prepared to perform all but momentary IFR flight. This became even more evident when I noted the indicated airspeed (IAS) decreasing. A minor cyclic adjustment corrected this error, and I soon broke out on top of the cloud layer. Chastened, realizing my mistake in not closely scanning the instruments, I resolved not to attempt such a maneuver again unless absolutely necessary.

Because enemy patrols freely roamed through the Nam Thuam Valley (LS-176) leading north to Nam Bac, I took no chances at low level, and at the expense of time and fuel, flew north at altitude. This served me well and although I may have been popped at, I never observed or heard any ground fire the entire time I flew in the Military Region One area. Working from early morning up to dark, flight time was excellent. I was tired and as I adjusted to fatigue, I came to appreciate stories I

heard pilots relate about flying high time out of Luang Prabang in 1961 and early 1962.

As an incident attested, while Jeeping from the airfield to town one dark night area security seemed to be somewhat tighter. When we approached the new bridge in the open Jeep, a guard challenged us to stop. Taking umbrage at the youngster's stupidity and inability to recognize us as American crew members, I told the driver to continue. However, the lad was serious and had strict orders. When the guard jacked a round in the chamber of his weapon and leveled it at us, we backed down. Actually, after the two earlier incidents when sappers invaded the airfield and destroyed a number of aircraft, apparent heightening and stiffening of security was refreshing. However, I wondered how brave these troops would be during actual combat conditions.

## **THE GLOVERS**

As part of USAID's Forward Area Team policy, International Volunteer Service representatives Bob and Jane Glover moved thirty-five miles south of Luang Prabang to Moung Nane (LS-254) at the end of May. Because of the deteriorating situation throughout Military Region One, particularly at Nam Bac, rumor, and a sense of pervading doom, caused increasing precautions for American AID representatives. The Glovers and their associates were assigned seven

sentries from 1800 to 0600 hours. During the day, the troops accompanied the Americans everywhere. To effect a blackout, hoping to preclude aiding any enemy attack, Bob went to bed at dark. Similarly, the troops performed all their cooking before dark and, except for the sentries, they also retired early. No one was supposed to appear outside their shelters until 0630 hours. Eventually, Jane failed to cope with the increased security. Very uncomfortable with constant challenging, sound of rifle bolts, and having difficulty sleeping, she returned to the royal capitol. Bob remained, but journeyed into and out of Moung Nane by helicopter as security dictated. Since space on the H-34s was generally limited because of the increase in military activity and refugee movement, Bob often sat in the left cockpit seat, orienting and acquiring knowledge of his immediate area's terrain.

Except for isolated incidents, there had not been recent reports of Americans being harassed by Pathet Lao in his immediate area. During some of his forays to other sites, including Nam Bac, he discovered that Site-203 was still a hot spot, but Ambassador Sullivan was determined to maintain it as the most northern FAR outpost. Top level thinking was that if the site fell, then Luang Prabang would follow. By early October, depending on the situation at Nam Bac, Bob was

concerned that his company of Lao troops would be moved north.

In early October USAID Director Mendenhall, Area Coordinator Duane Hammer, the Provincial Chao Queng, three national ministers, and others arrived at Mounng Nane by helicopter. Among other items of interest, was construction of a new road to the Mekong River. Because of the unstable situation in the Site-203 area, there was some urgency for the project to be approved and commence as it would allow resettlement of four Nam Bac villages.

Toward the end of October, because of an area wide rabies epidemic, all personnel were required to obtain three rabies vaccine injections to partially immunize themselves against the dire hazards of a rabid animal.

Despite an insidious enemy threat from the east, Bob enjoyed his job. When he learned the Chao Muong, police and soldiers were going to conduct an annual visit to Ban Na Muong, located halfway between Mounng Ngan and his previous work site at Ban Xieng Ngeun, he requested to accompany the party. His request was refused, based on the assumption that it was unsafe. The information was correct, for he later was informed the group was attacked while nearing the village. One man was killed and three others wounded. <sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Bob Glover, *Laos*, 48, 71-72, 75, 78-79, 81, 83.

Nam Bac was not without its share of incidents. Late one day while I was working outposts, Air America Porter pilot, "Ozzy" Osborne radioed that he had just experienced an engine failure. He was well north of Site-203 and indicated he would land there. I had visions of him crash landing in the toolies somewhere in enemy territory leading to a very difficult SAR. As "Ozzy" proceeded south, the suspense was almost unbearable, and radio silence deafening. Then, in a fashion that no movie script writer could conceive or pen, he appeared at altitude directly overhead the strip. In fact, he was so high that three complete circles were required before commencing a dead stick landing. I suppose all who had been entranced listening to the event could not believe what I had just observed, and were equally relieved that the episode had ended in a safe landing.

I was amazed until recalling that the Porter's maximum zero flap glide ratio was an outstanding twenty-seven to one.<sup>13</sup> That compared to our UH-34D's almost zero glide ratio and tendency to plunge from the sky like a falling rock.<sup>14</sup> The Porter was an amazing work of engineering and performance-especially this glide ratio. I recalled this feat during a deadhead

---

<sup>13</sup> From 5,280 feet, the Porter's optimum glide was an incredible twenty-seven miles.

<sup>14</sup> Generally, the sight picture of the ground immediately in front of the helicopter's nose was where one was going to land.

from 20-Alternate to Wattay Airport with Captain Bob Mains. At altitude, upon clearing the mountains at the edge of the flood plain, Bob began a shallow power off glide thirty miles to Wattay Airport.

Wayne's word to me about ensuring that I catch up to the rest of the pilots on flight time was good, and on Tuesday I was assigned to fly Hotel-45 while another person rotated Hotel-50 to Udorn. My new Flight Mechanic was Bob Peterson. During the day, I participated in an hour and ten-minute mission to coordinates TJ1264, forty-four miles north-northwest of Nam Bac, close to both Route-48 and the Nam Ou. We were still recording coordinates and elapsed times against the possibility we would eventually be accorded some unspecified mission pay.

I flew maximum time during the remaining five days at Luang Prabang. During the period, and prior to RTB Tango-08, a Thai advisor stationed at Nam Bac presented me with an AK-47 assault rifle and a jute sack full of delicious oranges.

### **JARINA'S ACTIVITY**

On the 23rd, Mike deadheaded to Na Khang to relieve the PIC and assume command of Hotel-54 with Flight Mechanic Punzalan. From a pilot perspective, aircraft field transfers were not always the best means of switching pilots. Mainly, until arriving at the site



the incoming pilot never knew the state of the machine he was assigned. Once there, and discovering a maintenance problem or excessive battle damage, he might have to decide to fly the machine, wait for a replacement, or ferry the ship home. Assigned a helicopter at Udorn, one normally had confidence in a pre-tested aircraft, and the option of refusing what he believed to be a non-airworthy product.

Of course, from a Flight-Operations and Maintenance Department aspect, it was preferable to keep a helicopter upcountry the full time until the scheduled hundred hours inspection. Therefore, knowing most pilots' proclivity to fly regardless of the situation, to a degree, upcountry swaps tended to satisfy this desire. Moreover, it would tend to guarantee a somewhat cohesive flow in scheduled maintenance. However, even discounting operational accidents and battle damage, in dealing with the H-34 with all its moving parts, any one of which could fail at any moment, unscheduled maintenance was the bane of any Maintenance Department.

Another variable to be considered was that individual pilots had a different tolerance for helicopter vibration levels, or a diagnostic aptitude to utilize visual cues to judge or sense impending problems. Many pilots had no prior test pilot experience, and were ill equipped to recognize an impending problem. Others seemed not to care, only

anxious to depart an area without logging or divulging a problem. Over time, more conscientious pilots knew who these individuals were, and were wary of their statements, intentions, and motives.

Fortunately, we were generally blessed with excellent Flight Mechanics. These individuals had to fly with us through thick and thin, and were not going to permit any apparent maintenance glitches to spoil their day. Still, it was still advisable for an incoming pilot to conduct a thorough preflight to eliminate any obvious problems.

Mike discovered some items with which he was not satisfied. After calling Udorn and being assured of receiving another ship the following day, he elected to complete what was left of the shortened day.

He was sent from Site-36 to Ban Nhot Phat (LS-179), ten miles north-northeast of Houa Moung (LS-58), a site Vang Pao was anxious to recover.

Begun in August, work was still progressing on the installation of the modified MSQ-77 (now called a TSQ-81) unit at Phu Pa Thi. Because of the U.S. military project's sensitivity and perception, the enemy would eventually react, and reinforcing the general area was deemed essential. Mike was sent to Site-85, then northeast to Houei Kha Moun (LS-111), where AID representative Ernie Khun maintained a rough

headquarters. He returned to Pha Thi, Nhot Phat, Na Khang, and thence to Sam Tong for the night.

Until a pilot arrived in Hotel-59 with Flight Mechanic Pat McCarthy, Mike flew local AID missions out of Site-20. He completed the day in Hotel-59 flying a total of twenty-eight landings while performing Sam Tong and Long Tieng shuttles.

On Monday, after picking up passengers and goods at Long Tieng, Mike returned to upper Military Region Two. During a very active day that included forty-six sorties, he landed at various sites, some several times. They included: Phu Pha Thi, Na Khang, Nhot Phat area, Houei Hin Sa (LS-215), eleven miles west of Site-85, Houei Kha Moun, and Phu Cum (LS-50).

The next day was short, working a little more than one fuel load before being recalled to Udorn. One stop took place at a refugee site in the Phone Sai (LS-211) area, fifteen miles south-southwest of Sam Tong.

Air America received four additional UH-34Ds from U.S. Marine Corps stocks in late September. As they were inspected and cleared by Maintenance Department mechanics and released by test pilots as airworthy, they were cycled upcountry for "shakedown" flights. Mike took one of the first ships to be released, Hotel-63, to Savannakhet on the 29th with First Officer Ellis Emery and Flight Mechanic "Rusty" Irons. Emery was

still in the process of completing his obligatory area familiarization.

A planned mission from Lima-39 was scrubbed, so they were sent south to Military Region Four. By September, fifteen road watch sites were active. However, enemy Trail security was so tight that team surveillance of the Tchepone area was not possible. Other routes, like those to Mugia Pass, were still viable.

Another mission awaited them at Senammana (PS-19). There, Mike boarded CASI Porter Papa Charlie Lima (PCL) for a recon of XC8762, eighteen miles east and just west of Route-96. Mike had previously worked this general area. Two missions were conducted to the site before returning to Pakse for the night.

The following day involved work and Customer missions on and off the Bolovens. After arriving at PS-22 they were redirected to Attopeu to pick up Doug Swanson and deliver him to Kong Mi, where they conducted shuttle missions to a point eleven miles south of PS-7, very close to the Cambodian border.

Upon completion, they returned to PS-22 to conduct another mission to Ban Sok (PS-20), four miles southeast off the Plateau on Route-19 in the Se Kong Valley. A-1Es were programmed escorts for the mission. However, it was getting late, the weather was deteriorating, and despite several attempts, Don

Stephens had no success in raising the planes. Mission commander Ed Reid indicated that they would fly the mission anyway. About the time the H-34 pilots were approaching the landing zone to infil the team, the A-1E escort pilots called, descended through cloud breaks, and arrived at the exact rendezvous time. Following the insertion, the fighter-bomber pilots departed north to troll and discharge their weaponry on pre-briefed targets.

Stephens had additional assignments left on the docket, one to PS-27, the other to Attopeu. Mike followed Reid during the return to Pakse over the Plateau. Dodging clouds, they flew at low level following compass headings, open spots, and small valleys. Mike was aware of their destination and the way they were going, but not when they would arrive, or if they might stumble across enemy patrols. <sup>15</sup>

## **BIG BELLS**

Sponsored by the Department of Defense and purchased with Agency funds to guarantee them exclusive use of the machines, the Company took possession of five new Bell 205 helicopters. <sup>16</sup> The ships arrived directly off the Bell Helicopter U.S. Army military

---

<sup>15</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

<sup>16</sup> The civilian version of the UH-1D Huey.

manufacturing assembly line. Slightly modified with a dual VHF/UHF avionics package, and later retrofitted with two 150-pound armored seats specially manufactured for the cockpit, they were shipped to Port Klong Toey, Thailand. The crated rubberized covered hulls were offloaded along with other crates containing blades, tail booms, and associated components. The aircraft were hauled from the dock to Don Muang Airport on large trucks and deposited on the north ramp for reassembly. After the fuselages were stripped and parts uncrated by Air America personnel, the helicopters were quickly assembled under the direction of qualified Bell factory representatives, Air America supervisors and mechanics, and people like E.C. Smith, a Bell pilot-engineer assigned to Bangkok. During the process, when Wayne Knight flew with Smith at Don Muang, he considered that Smith's experience level barely qualified him as a pilot, but he satisfied the requirements. <sup>17</sup>

Although Smith did not ferry an aircraft to Udorn, he occasionally journeyed to our base from Bangkok to see how our Bell program was progressing and to offer technical advice. One day I joined him in the Club

---

<sup>17</sup> Like Archie Loper with the UH-34D, technical representative Smith was assigned to assist and monitor the border police (BPP) helicopter program. He later lived in the same apartment building as Mike Jarina's family. One of his duties was to teach Bell ground school to Thai trainees, but he experienced a severe language problem. BPP aircraft maintenance was accomplished in Bangkok in RTAF facilities with Air America personnel advising.

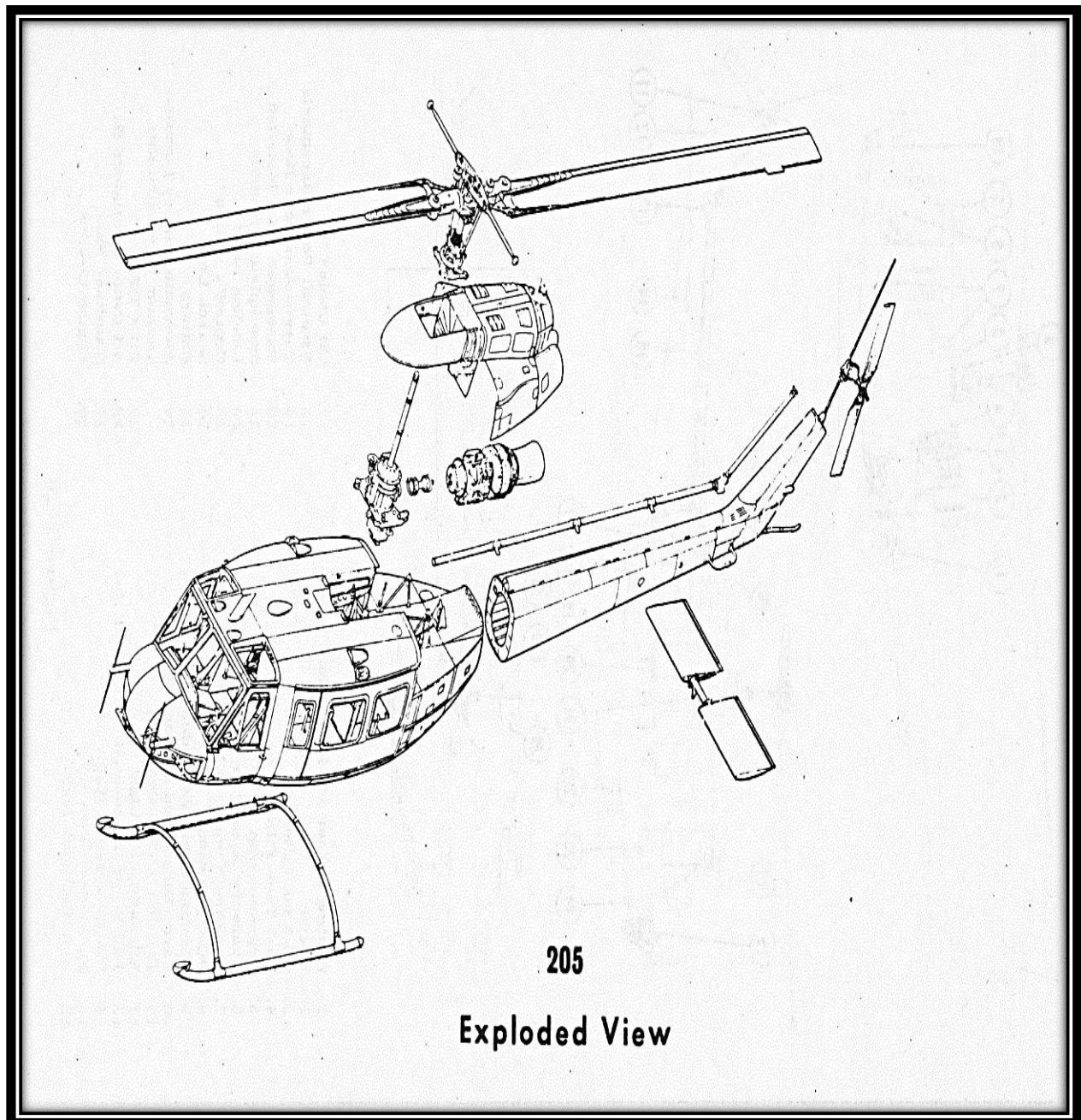


Bell 205 helicopter being prepared to ferry to Udorn.



UH-1D helicopter similar to the Air America 205 Bell.  
Operator's Manual, Army Model UH-1D/H, Headquarters, Department  
of the Army in the Author's possession, 08/25/71.





Various sections and major components of the Bell 205  
helicopter.  
Author's Air America Bell 204/204 flight manual #76, 29.

Rendezvous for lunch. During the repast, the subject of the 205's inherent two per vibration while at ground idle arose. He offered a reasonable solution-raise the collective slightly to dampen the vibe. It worked well, and I was surprised that some of our more "experienced" Bell instructor pilots had not proposed the same fix. Perhaps they thought this would be revealed with experience...but as Wayne was wont to say, *"Great pilots did not necessarily make great instructors."*

Under the auspices of E.C. Smith, Wayne Knight and Bangkok-based Wayne Webb, XW-PFF, XW-PFG, XW-PFH, and XW-PFI were tested and released for ferry north. International flight clearance plans were filed from Don Muang Airport to Wattay Airport. Late on the 30th, the four aircraft were flown north by Knight, Charlie Weitz, "Scratch" Kanach, and Ed Reid. XW-PFJ was not completely reassembled and would not arrive in Udorn until the 14th. Wayne made a technical landing in Udorn for fuel. The next day, Sunday 1 October, he continued on to Wattay Airport to complete the drill and legalize international clearance procedures. At Vientiane Operations he cancelled the flight clearance and RTB Udorn. Already pre-arranged with Lao Air Ministry officials, there was no registration paperwork necessary.

Because the 205 helicopters were bastardized U.S. Army machines, falling somewhat between the categories



Bell 205, XW-PFF during a ferry flight from Don Muang to Udorn.  
Knight Collection.


of military or civilian helicopters, the orphans could not be accorded a standard "N" registration.<sup>18</sup> To solve the thorny certification process, unlike duplication in any other part of the civilized world, special arrangements were made with the Lao Ministry of Aviation to register the ships in Laos. Pilot certification was no problem, for we already had Lao licenses and maintained Lao logbooks.

During the interim between the time 205s arrived in Thailand and their arrival in Udorn, those of us in the program attended an abbreviated ground school. Mounting the same engine, the school was necessarily brief, for the 205 was merely a three-and-a-half-foot stretched version of the B-204. Because of increased fuselage length small doors were installed in front of the sliding doors. These greatly increased the ability to load and unload men and supplies. Rated at a higher gross weight of 9,410 pounds, the larger cabin section could accommodate up to thirteen passengers plus cockpit crew. Internal cargo space was larger and a capacity fuel load of 220 gallons provided two and a half hours of endurance at ninety knots airspeed. Although there were future plans to upgrade to a more powerful dash 13 engine, the Lycoming T53-11A, a 1100

---

<sup>18</sup> This became an even greater problem when the 205 fleet was retrofitted with more powerful dash 13 engines, and while attempting to dispose of them at war's end.

- 2 -
- 3 -



Signature du Titulaire (VII)

ຊື່: Nom (IV) HARRY

ນາມສະກຸນ Prénoms (IV): RICHARD CASTIERLIN

ວັນເດືອນປີເກີດ Né le: 5 juin 1935

ທີ່ຢູ່ a: PLAINFIELD U.S.A

ສັນຊາດ Nationalité (IV): Américaine


ທີ່ຢູ່ປັດຈຸບັນ Domicile (V):  
Air America, Inc -  
Vientiane

ທ້າວ: 95 Septembre 1967

Délivrée à Vientiane le (s) 95 Septembre 1967

**LE DIRECTEUR**  
Signature du fonctionnaire  
**de l'Aviation Civile du Laos**

Cachet ou sceau  
du Service  
délivrante la licence  
(VIII et X)



ROYAUME DU LAOS

SISOUPHANNOUVONG

**QUALIFICATIONS DE TYPES (XII)**  
Pilote commandant de bord

DATE	Type	Visa
7 Septembre 1962	Helicoptère Helicopter Sikorsky S55	Original <b>CONTROLE P/N ATA/DAC</b>

Author's Lao pilot license issued 10/25/67.  
Author Collection.





An unmarked Air America Bell model 205 helicopter, a civilian version of the U.S military UH-1D Huey, on a ramp at Don Muang Airport, Bangkok, Thailand. The aircraft has ground handling wheels installed to facilitate movement into a hanger, or to a parking area.

*Air America Log*, Volume 1 Number 2, December 1967.

shaft horsepower gas turbine engine designed to power the two-bladed rotor system was the same as installed in the 204B models. <sup>19</sup>

Four days after thorough maintenance inspections, plywood decking installation and local test flights, the first ships began dribbling into the field. Unlike overhead rescue hoists installed on some 204 models, the 205 was not yet equipped with a hoist. Not a Customer requirement or immediately deemed a problem, this deficiency soon became evident to us who participated in the forefront of our operations.

There were other deficiencies at first. Despite President Hugh Grundy's entreaties to Washington for a full Bell package, on more than one occasion, aircraft arrived at a Far East base without adequate technical manuals and data to maintain the machines, an important element not considered at the time of acquisition.

This was particularly the case in late September when five Bell 205 models were assigned to Udorn. The Air America Maintenance Department did not receive a full complement of parts, tools, and technical data. Though not unique to the Bell program, the Washington office personnel generally did not appreciate the importance of negotiating support details for new systems before purchasing or acquiring aircraft. And

---

<sup>19</sup> Rated at 1100 SHP for takeoff; 900 SHP continuous operation.

providers were notoriously slow correcting deficiencies. Once an item had been delivered to its destination, Washington's interest waned and employees there did not concern themselves with details. Much of this was because they were purchasing or acquiring something else, which was immeasurably more interesting than addressing mundane tooling, parts, and technical data.

When using the magic word **Washington**, one of course referenced Air America's Chief Executive Officer George Dole, who reigned supreme in the Company hierarchy. According to Air America Maintenance Chief Udorn, Jack Forney:

*"George was the quintessential bureaucrat. Short, rotund, bald with a dark fringe, dapper in his shiny suit way, and arrogant with his importance, he insisted on his prerogatives and was not shy about letting it be known far and wide that the seat of power was occupied by his rather pillow-like hind end. George was articulate, but never more so than when he waxed eloquent on the mistakes made by those charged with carrying out his direction in the field (real or imagined), or in defending the Washington office (he always called it the Washington Headquarters from some imagined slight)...His TWXs were wordy and formidable.*

*The problem was that Dole as CEO, a title he insisted be used in all communications, resided in the*



*Washington office, which also served as a U.S. support office (or should have). [The individuals there] hired people, bought or bailed aircraft, negotiated support deals, had liaison with various agencies, of the USG, and so forth. Since these support people were [part of] George's staff, their shortcomings were invisible to him and direction from the field to this staff regarding requirements rather blunted. If they bought an aircraft without insisting on provision of technical data, parts data, [and] repair specifications, well, that was the field's problem. [The] trouble was, if the field tried to rectify the problem directly with the vendor, that was seen as bypassing Washington 'Headquarters' which resulted in a lot of baggage..*

*Hugh Grundy received [constant] direction from Dole and suffered many unnecessary instructions from him...with consummate grace. [Additionally,] Dole's mandates were generally final, though difficult to swallow at times."*

The Bell program posed an initially hectic period for the Udorn Maintenance Department. Once the helicopters were in place, the Customer and Washington expected operations to commence immediately with sufficient pilots available to fly the Bell. The aircraft were to be supported by Air America without military assistance or parts, so not only did Udorn have to acquire a certain level of parts supply,

technical literature, and competence with training, but Tainan did as well. Because all time constrained engines and component assemblies were supported by Tainan shops, Udorn had a remote pipeline to contend with along with a local learning curve.

In all fairness, to smooth the transition, Washington did arrange to hire Bell factory qualified personnel for the program. However, they were not considered all that helpful in that they had never worked with aircraft in the field. The new hires knew how to change parts, but were deficient at trouble shooting analysis, innovating, or thinking on their feet when it applied to everyday operations. In addition, the new hires' actions and indifference to interaction with local maintenance workers who were attempting to learn the new machinery was significant. They acted like they were still at the factory, only concerned with the lack of air conditioning and wondering when it was time for the next break. The factory men had likely never been out of Texas or previously away from home. Therefore, there were usual morale and homesickness problems, leading to several men terminating shortly after their arrival.

During this difficult phase, Supervisor Jack Forney was approached by a thirty-five-year-old Texan wanting to know how to resign after only two weeks on the job. Requiring people for the program, Jack attempted to

dissuade him from leaving, but he was adamant about terminating. Therefore, Jack told the mechanic to compose and present him with a letter of resignation. After hemming and hawing for a time, the man told Jack to write a letter and he would sign it. Forney, who had enough on his plate with paperwork and supervision duties refused, after which they argued. Eventually, Forney concluded that the man was illiterate, unable to write. Furthermore, Jack could not resolve the issue of how the man had travelled half way around the world while unable to read and write.

Eventually, Air America backfilled the Maintenance Department with well qualified and experienced Bell mechanics from Saigon like Bob Hohmann, Harry Fown, and later Jim Shultze. Jim was perhaps the most knowledgeable of all the Bell mechanics. Harry, who arrived after Bob, was a short, slightly chubby, very pleasant person, who was very good at maintaining Bells. Wayne worked closely with Fown on Bell FCFs and considered him the best he ever worked with. Hawaiian Stanley Shim, and others who possessed both military training and field experience on Bell equipment eventually joined the maintenance team. In addition, and lessening the work load, former H-34 mechs became familiar with working on and maintaining the Bell. Forney made the observation that Air America realized

as much or more time per helicopter as the U.S. Army-at  
a cheaper cost. <sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Segment Sources:

EW Knight Emails, 08/11/00, 08/24/00, 08/26/00, 08/27/00,  
08/28/00, 09/16/00, 09/17/00, 01/08/01.

Jack Forney Emails, 03/26/99, 05/20/99.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

*T*, 12/67.

Bill Siuru, *The Huey and Huey Cobra*, (Blue Ridge Summit, PA: TAB  
Books, 1987) 40.

**M**ike Jarina, Ellis Emery, and Flight Mechanic "Rusty" Irons remained in Pakse three additional days. On the first, after the clouds lifted in the valley to the north, they worked out of Saravane, then ventured farther north to Senammana (PS-19) and Ban Don Boun (LS-64) in the center of the Toumlan Valley. Following a trip to Ban Tayum (PS-28) near Ban Thateng, they returned to Pakse.

After fueling and hydrating with cool water at the Air America radio shack, and loading supplies, the crew ascended the Bolovens Plateau to PS-22. They picked up Customer Duncan Jewell and ferried him sixteen miles south-southwest to PS-38, on a hill slightly removed from the Bolovens rim where a Caribou strip was being hacked out by local labor. Dunc Jewell was one of two Case Officers who replaced George Morton and Mike LaDue in the Chinese Nung program at Ban Nam Tieng (LS-165) during early 1967. If properly motivated and well led, the Nung were not bad fighters, but they were seriously spoiled and contentious individuals, often fighting among themselves, demanding the best food, beer, and women. When the Agency determined the Nung experiment a failure and scrapped the program, Site-165 reverted to

a forward Lao Theung road watch camp. <sup>1</sup>

Before returning to Pakse for the night, Mike landed at PS-22 to conduct outpost resupply missions. Afterward, they landed at Houei Khong where Mike introduced Ellis to the Davis missionary family.

On Monday, when low clouds permitted, the crews of Hotel-63 and another H-34 were sent upriver to PS-18. The Captains boarded CASI Porter Papa Foxtrot Delta (PFD) for a mission recon to WB8742, an area located thirty-eight miles south-southeast of PS-18 on the west side of the Mekong. Tucked into the Phou Kao foothills, during later years the area would support a clandestine Special Forces camp (LS-446), where troops were trained and prepared for long range Cambodian incursions. Although the area was not yet controlled by the RLG, the mission was conducted without incident.

The crew finished the day working out of PS-19 before landing at Lima-11 at dark.

Tuesday found them back on the Bolovens at PS-23 on the southern rim below PS-38. After a landing at PS-22, they flew to Attopeu and then the Kong Mi area; back to Lima-10, LS-165, PS-22, Houei Kong, and Pakse.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ken Conboy, 172.

Tom Ahern, 268.

Author's Observations and Conversations with Individual Case Officers at the Site.

On the fourth, the crew of Hotel-63 was directed north to Savannakhet to help conduct a late long-range mission. First, they went to Moung Phalane loaded with supplies and personnel for the Air America radio operators. They also performed some work for FAR units located there to protect the USAF men administering the radar and TACAN operation.

Later, they repositioned sixteen miles north-northeast from Lima-39 to Keng Ka Boa (later designated LS-235), a clandestine site originally developed by RLAF General Ma to conduct T-28 strikes, but was eventually assimilated by Agency Case Officers for road watch training and a site off the beaten path to launch missions. The CH-3-based Pony Express could use the site unobserved, and the military pilots were no longer required to stage out of Nakhon Phanom for missions. Much of our work emanated from this site, sometimes using only Bells, other times in conjunction with H-34s or CH-3 aircraft. It was a preferred site not only because of its remoteness, but also because the aircraft could line up alongside the long runway for ease of loading large teams and departing as a unit. One day, a Customer showed me a HARK push button transmitter used by the teams to record personnel and vehicles.

The long mission programmed for a last light landing was located ninety-seven miles east-southeast.

The landing zone lay in rough terrain on the side of the Phou Taling range. The remote site was selected for its relative proximity to a southern feeder route out of Tchepone and the wide Banchiang River. The mission was successful, with the flight recovering at Savannakhet well after dark.

The following day the crew returned to Udorn.

On seven October, Jarina deadheaded to Sam Tong via Hotel-56, where he assumed command of Hotel-30 with Thai Flight Mechanic Toomgaym. The main purpose of the trip was to return the ship to Udorn for scheduled maintenance. In the meantime, he was directed north to Moung Heim (LS-48A) for the purpose of moving refugees into the hills of Phu Cum (LS-50) and 50A. Returning to Sam Tong, he continued working for AID with flights south to Phone Sai (LS-211) and Ban Nam Moh (LS-207).

He "chocked in" at Tango-08 about dark.

Earlier on the fourth, Phil Goddard and I had repositioned from Udorn to Luang Prabang in 39-Foxtrot for one of Air America Udorn's first all Bell missions. After testing, tweaking, and minimum pilot transition training, like our former introduction to throttle-boosted H-34G models in 1963, no time was wasted introducing the new 205s into field, as operations and special Agency missions were a priority.



Along with X-ray Whiskey Papa Foxtrot Hotel,<sup>2</sup> flown by Dick Elder, we conducted a long-range insertion to TJ5098 near Nam Houn (LS-243), a site close to the one we accomplished on 10 August. The mission time logged from Nam Bac was one plus ten hours; total round trip from Luang Prabang, two hours and forty minutes.

RLAF T-28 strikes continued on areas of interest around Nam Bac. However, with dense jungle covering much of the area and no active FAR patrolling to assess battle damage, there was little way of knowing the results. In contrast, Agency road watch teams were earning their money. USAF strikes generating secondary explosions on Route-19 during October attested to the accuracy of team road watch reporting and targeting in the north. However, the Air Force effort was desultory, and insufficient to stem the tide of enemy incursion and movement toward Site-203.<sup>3</sup>

Goddard remained at Luang Prabang to work and I accompanied Dick to Udorn in XW-PFH. It was my first ride in a 205. I noted few differences from the 204, but the armored seat was a little uncomfortable, kind of like the bucket seat configuration in the Ford Mustang that caused me the sciatic problem while on

---

<sup>2</sup> XW-PFH-the phonetic letter alphabet was used in aviation.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Anthony, 226-227.

home leave. After I began flying the machine upcountry, to preclude a recurrence of back trouble and another lengthy hospital stay, I filled out the hollow with a towel. Later, I used an air-filled cushion for increased comfort.

The following day I was scheduled for my first formal 205 upgrade training with Robertson in Papa Foxtrot India <sup>4</sup> Just released from maintenance inspections, combined with testing, we practiced approaches, take offs, autorotations, emergency procedures including hydraulic off run-on landings. Although I had more time in the Bells, and tried very hard, I still did not feel comfortable, particularly while conducting emergency procedures.

Management decided that my thirty-eight plus hours logged in Bells was sufficient, and scheduled me in the same ship for a check ride. Actually, most of my previous flight time was in a cruise configuration and exposure to upcountry work; little was actually devoted to normal and emergency training procedures. On time off, I spent time studying the pilot handbook and sat in the cockpit familiarizing and learning instrument arrangement, and going over operating procedures. However, we did not yet have good publications like the superb U.S. Navy NATOPS manual for the UH-34D.

---

<sup>4</sup> For brevity and to conform with aviation standard communication, only the last three letters of the Bells will be used.

Before leaving the CPH office for the parking ramp I told both Knight and Webb that I did not feel comfortable or confident flying the machine yet, and would like additional training time. Perhaps they did not believe me, or were under pressure to produce Captains for Agency missions. In two plus forty hours of part instruction, part check ride, Webb took me through a repertoire of normal and emergency procedures. Except for choking on nasty cigar smoke emanating from Webb's side of the cockpit, I did fine with the normal work, but not with all the emergency procedures. <sup>5</sup> After the flight, as we walked across the hot ramp toward the office, he exhibited his instructor pilot charm, remarking that he really liked me, but he could not conscientiously upgrade me at that time. Well, I was prepared, and this buddy-buddy approach was no surprise to me. Trying to be honest about the situation, I had forewarned them. At least now they might believe me and would either accord me more time, or allow me to continue flying in the H-34 program.

My answer arrived the following day, when I was scheduled to fly PFI to Savannakhet with Knight's assistant Phil Goddard. Phil was assigned to assist me in gaining confidence in the machine. En route, he

---

<sup>5</sup> There was a check pilot at the Ellison Field helicopter facility who also smoked cigars that I considered equally offensive.

displayed his version of a Chinese wingover. At altitude and high airspeed, he abruptly pulled back on the cyclic, which resulted in a vertical climb. Then as the ship approached zero speed, as in a fixed wing hammerhead stall, he rolled the aircraft to one side to descend and regain speed. It was impressive, but I had heard other pilots, dubious about the maneuver, indicate that if the aircraft was not maintained perfectly in trim (ball in the center), overstressing and wrinkling of the airframe could result.

About halfway to Lima-39, while flying straight and level, something did not feel right to me. When I mentioned this to Phil, he took control. Then agreeing that there was an RPM problem, he turned 180 degrees and RTB Udorn. Maintenance trouble shooters looked PFI over. When they removed a large inspection plate covering the transmission tunnel and hydraulic valves, they discovered a shear pin in the collective droop system to the fuel metering system was broken. It did not take long to repair the culprit and we resumed our southeastern flight. The incident was not a particularly good confidence builder, but at least we had correctly determined that something was wrong with the machine.

At Savannakhet, we worked about three hours before retiring to the new Air America hostel.

Over the next three days our flight time was held to a minimum because of weather aborts and stand-downs for scheduled missions. Unlike Luang Prabang, because of special missions there was no normal work scheduled. Therefore, downtime would set an annoying trend for Savannakhet operations. Delays could occur for numerous reasons like weather, lack of team communication or identification, late missions, and late or diverted escort aircraft.

On the 10th, I deadheaded to Udorn via Nong Khai on 617, an Air America C-123K plane. Four days in the field had netted me a paltry twelve hours, but the cockpit exposure and every hour in the air weighed toward my transition. Also, while in the field, I had a choice opportunity to talk to and question other pilots about the machine, and with what information already acquired, I could collate Bell knowledge. I was not at a hundred percent capability, but had acquired some skills and felt much more comfortable in the machine.

### **MISSION ADDENDA**

Although local Case Officers at Savannakhet planned and requested missions, road watch operations required Udorn purview. The more sophisticated a mission requirement, the more Udorn personnel became involved. Each mission was judged on its own merit. It was a matter of general consensus, but working under Pat

Landry, AB-1 people like Tom Lum and Roy Lewis satisfactorily presented the requirements. Because of fluid situations along the Trails, some missions, such as emergency exfils, were necessarily spur of the moment types. Although he became involved in the total picture, USAF Captain Dick Secord was primarily a military liaison type, who coordinated air assets requests between AB-1, Seventh Air Force, and Air America. Detailed photo coverage of area infil sites was provided by Air America Volpar pilots like Frank Bonasinga and Berl King flying 42Z. The photo intelligence shop also interpreted and provided stereoscopic photographs obtained from high-flying U-2 and SR-71 aircraft.

As previously discussed, many road watch SOPs evolved, and were derived through common sense or after painful SAR experiences. Customer briefings, recon, escort, double crew, optional parachutes, and the sort developed over time as conditions warranted. Occasionally, some pilots desired more information regarding a selected area; sometimes this was satisfied by a fixed wing recon. "Need to know" also had to be considered. Overall, there was not much dispute regarding briefings, escort, or double crewed aircraft.

We still awaited the long-promised mission pay. Additional pay was intended to compensate us for the supposedly extra hazardous work we were performing in

"denied areas." However, in actuality, depending on deadhead to a mission site, and how long it took to conduct a mission, in many cases it barely covered the loss of revenue we would have earned performing normal work (whatever that was). In all fairness, the generic term "Greenies" were not intended to substitute for the loss of income. The process was merely instituted to provide extra hazardous pay. Moreover, in the past we had performed similar work gratis. Most of us realized that the missions were important to the overall war effort; hence, there was a minimum of complaining among crewmembers.

With the Huey program up and running, extra pay was eventually initiated. Nothing was retroactive. After Wayne Knight perused Special Mission assignments and forwarded qualifying paperwork to AB-1, there was always a month delay in receiving it. Theoretically, Taipei headquarters was not in this loop. Payment was in dollar denomination that we euphemistically called "Greenies." The money was supposed to be issued without general knowledge, but nothing was secret within our closed society, and there were many loose-lipped individuals in our group. All crew members received fifty dollars per completed mission. Upon invitation by written message, we picked up and signed for the total amount we had earned in Wayne's office. At times Assistant Base Manager, Tex Dew, substituted for Wayne

during disbursement. AB-1 insisted on signatures for the sums distributed, but the CPH had no idea where the receipts were directed. If retained, they were likely employed for internal Agency records. <sup>6</sup> Knight often retained a large amount of money in the office for crew disbursement, and it might have been difficult to prove that he had not dipped into the till had it not been for pilot receipts. <sup>7</sup>

## JARINA

Late on the 10th, Mike repositioned Hotel-50 from T-08 to Wattay Airport with Comola as his Flight Mechanic. <sup>8</sup>

Wednesday morning they flew north to Ban Keun (LS-44) and participated in the ongoing FAR Solidarity operation clearing Pathet Lao from their traditional areas. During an eighteen-landing day, he went to Vang Vieng (L-16), north to Moung Kassy (LS-153), and to the Ban Donge area (LS-163), twenty-three miles southeast of Vang Vieng. After a stop at Vientiane and return to Site-44, he supported FAR in an area thirty miles

---

<sup>6</sup> Suspicious in nature, we were always curious about this requirement.

<sup>7</sup> EW Knight Email, 08/28/00.

<sup>8</sup> A new breed of Filipino Flight Mechanic was entering our system, many I never flew with.



north-northeast and seven miles south of the Meo refugee site at Ban Nam Moh.

The next day Mike was assigned to take officers to Vang Vieng. During a fact-finding trip, he stopped at Mounng Phun (LS-37), the old site along the west side of the Nam Ngum, eleven miles southwest of Sam Tong and Ban Donge. After returning his people to Vientiane, he returned to Ban Keun, where he was directed to a site twenty-three miles north-northeast.

Mike's final day in the field was a little more exciting than usual. He began by going to Phong Hong (LS-133), thirty-two miles north-northeast of Vientiane along Route-13. Then he flew north to LS-163. Returning to Ban Keun, he commenced shuttles eighteen miles north-northeast of Ritaville to Phou Houat, a site east of the Nam Ngum and south of Phu Sot. During approach to the top of the hill, the aircraft was hit by ground fire along the ridge. On the pad, several rounds were found inside the cabin. One AK-47 round was lodged in the cabin door handle, close to where Comola was sitting. Mike considered him lucky.

They returned to Site-44 for another load. No Americans were present and the Lao loader was no help in resolving the hostile action. During the next shuttle another tat-tat-tat rang out. The noise increased and Mike smelled gun powder. He asked Camola over the ICS if he was firing his weapon.

*"Yes. The bad guys down there are shooting at us."*

Mike conducted varied approaches to the Landing zone. During the first and second, they were popped at on approach, and on the third time when departing. Evidently the pacification attempt had fostered some ill will in an area consisting of traditional Pathet Lao or laissez-faire type individuals. After enduring sufficient enjoyment in one day, Mike RTB Udorn for repairs.

On the thirteenth I was scheduled for a local UH-34D proficiency check with ACPH Marius Burke in Hotel-59. It would be my last check ride in an H-34 for a long time.

Following a short period of low visibility in Military Region One and Two, on Tuesday "Fat" Frank Fee and I departed the the base for Sam Tong in Hotel-63. From there we were directed north to work in upper Military Region Two.

For the next four days, Frank and I supported Na Khang and troop efforts to secure and supply areas around Pha Thi. The push was on and flight time was good.

## **IMPROVEMENTS AT PHA THI**

After being tested at Bryan, Texas, and cleared for usage, a second TSQ-81 radar bombing control unit, consisting of two 12X9X40 foot metal structures, was

disassembled and shipped to Udorn along with twenty military personnel from detachments of the First Combat Evaluation Group. The men were briefed and issued Air America identification cards.

With the program previously approved at the highest government levels, in June Caribou crews shuttled disassembled equipment from Udorn to Na Khang. Then, when available, Air Force CH-3 and Army Chinook crews carried men, parts, supplies, and three camouflage vans, delivering them either internally or externally to the southwest side of the mountain. Severe winds and vicious downdrafts presented hazards and some degree of difficulty for both Chinook and ground crews at the site. One box was damaged during the operation.

After establishing quarters on top of Phu Pha Thi and receiving the equipment, high level construction activity commenced, and the TSQ-81 radar installation slowly became a reality.

The project was generically code named "Heavy Green" after other similar operations throughout Southeast Asia. Having expanded and leveled the existing TACAN site to accommodate the new equipment, Air Force technicians then reassembled the unit. Everyday supplies like food and water were shuttled by small fixed wing planes into Houei Hok (LS-198) at the mountain's west base, and then delivered by helicopter



Northwest photograph of the completed TSQ-81 radar bombing control facility installed on top of Phu Pha Thi during the late summer of 1967.

Douglas Farnsworth.



Northeast photo of the TSQ-81 camouflaged radar dish and metal work areas at Phu Pha Thi.

Farnsworth.

crews to the helicopter landing zone (HLZ), a short strip on the top below the radar gear location. At first, only one SGU company was assigned to protect the operation. In addition, one company of Meo guarded the southern approach at the lower LS-85 site.

By September, selected USAF electronic technicians were clandestinely briefed at Barksdale Air Force Base on the "Heavy Green" project. During the second week in October, as the radar unit on Pha Thi approached completion and readiness status, TDY Udorn orders were approved and issued for forty-eight volunteer officers and enlisted TSQ-81 personnel to man the site. After "processing out of the USAF," the men were flown from Andrews Air Force Base to Ontario, California, to establish civilian Lockheed employee identity under the cover of a USAID contract to repair communications facilities in Laos. While on assignment, the men would continue to earn regular Air Force pay, receive government benefits, and accrue seniority. At the end of their assignments, the men would revert to Air Force duty.

Following arrival in Udorn, the detachment was assigned Quonset hut offices inside the Air America compound. Merging with other Americans, the men rented bungalows in town and lived quietly on the local economy. In mid-October plans were prepared for final tweaking of the TSQ-81 capability using airborne

platforms. To implement this, the first twelve-man USAF crew was delivered by helicopter to the Pha Thi site during the final week of October. First rotations were planned every day and no weapons were allowed.

With the equipment already up and running, TSQ-81 operations were officially declared viable on 1 November under the Commando Club designation. The first controlled strike in North Vietnam commenced on the tenth. With the enhanced all-weather bombing system installed, over the next few months, tabulated strikes in North Vietnam increased measurably. Air activity in Barrel Roll also improved, but not to the extent of that across the border. Adverse weather precluded immediate BDA, but after-action photos confirmed satisfactory results.

After arrival of the permanent TSQ-81 technicians, Agency Case Officers Terry Quill (TQ) and John "Woody" Spence began regular overnights on the mountain top. PARU team members supplemented the Agency people to maintain radio communications with interested parties. To preclude surprise attacks on Pha Thi, Meo teams were constantly dispatched north and east to gather intelligence on enemy movement. <sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 188.  
Tim Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 39-40, 43, 46, 50-52, 57.  
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 252-253.  
Douglas Farnsworth. Installation of the TSQ-81 at Phu Pha Thi.

**THE FROG EATS THE MOON** <sup>10</sup>

On Wednesday the 18th, after working north, I returned a little early to Sam Tong. Just prior to dark, while waiting for Ed Reid and another pilot to return from working east, I strolled down the side of the runway. We were not supposed to fly in the mountains at night, and normally a fussy budget, I could not eat or rest until all helicopter crewmembers were safely on the ground.

With the sun having descended well below the mountains to the west, sunset and darkness arrived early in October. <sup>11</sup> About 1730, the moon popped above the horizon to the east, flooding the valley with an eerie light. Moonlight in the clear fall mountain air was beautiful, but this night something was different. The globe looked abnormally close, and a bit strange. A lunar eclipse was in progress.

As other observers of the phenomenon since humans have walked the earth, I watched in fascination while the process proceeded to completion and the moon hurried through the earth's shadow.

Then, unexpectedly, from my rear rifle firing commenced from the elevated portions of the complex.

---

<sup>10</sup> This phrase was chosen to be the original title for the Author's books. However, another author used almost the same words, so the Author deferred to the present title.

<sup>11</sup> Sunset occurred at 1758 hours, but dusk occurred earlier in the mountains.



The few solitary shots gave way to heavier volleys. Confused, I looked around. *Were we under attack?* There was no general panic and as there was no incoming fire, it did not appear this was the case. Besides, no one had informed me that the enemy was near.

As the eclipse neared its final stage, the firing increased. A machine gun opened up with a heavy staccato that resonated throughout the valley. Red tracer bullets pierced the darkness and seemed directed toward the eclipse. I thought all the firing might use up a month's allotment of ammunition.

In the distance, I saw the running lights of two H-34s approaching in trail from the east. Ed was returning. I felt a momentary fear and there was not time to scramble to Hotel-63 and warn him of what was happening in the valley. He would have to take his chances. On came the helicopters, lower now, seemingly flying through the hail of lead thrown in their direction. *Would I have to pick up the pieces?* Miraculously, the pilots managed to fly through the discharges and landed safely.

Retracing my steps toward the hostel, I met Ernie Kuhn. Usually a good source of information, Ernie briefed me regarding the ancient myth of the Frog Eating the Moon during an eclipse. The phenomenon had triggered all the activity. Seated in myths common to

animism-oriented <sup>12</sup> people throughout the world, "the unwashed" believed that a monster, in this case a giant frog, was swallowing the moon. Unless the amphibian was dislodged, the world was doomed. Prior to the evolution of firearms, sticks, stones, and arrows were launched into the sky with the intent of scaring the Frog and restoring the natural balance of nature. To the superstitious this process worked, for in less than two hours, the moon always reverted to its natural grace. Intrepid warriors had won the day. The Frog had once again been frightened away and regurgitated its prey.

The explanation was fine, but there were many FAR troops at Sam Tong who were Buddhists. Therefore, it was just an excuse for the undisciplined troops to fire their weapons, emulating a festival or a party atmosphere. I was not impressed. Much ammunition was wasted and there was danger of people being hurt by falling bullets.

When I confronted Ed with the story, he indicated that he knew the custom. Furthermore, as usual, he was placid and unconcerned about the incident, and claimed that he was not worried about the shooting. It was part of the job. This said, we departed for dinner.

---

<sup>12</sup> Animist: The belief that natural objects, natural phenomena, and the universe possess souls (phi) and consciousness.

The next day I was again assigned to work in northern Military Region Two. I worked late and took on just enough fuel at Na Khang to RTB Sam Tong.

As the wet season waned, Vang Pao's people had achieved substantial gains compared to previous years. In upper Military Region Two, except for areas immediately surrounding Sam Neua Town and Pathet Lao headquarters located in eastern caves near Ban Nakay Neua, much territory had reverted to government hands. In southern Xieng Khouang Province, gains had been registered in areas well east of Long Tieng at Tha Vieng and Moung Ngan.

When I landed just before dark on the eighteenth, I noted 205 Papa Foxtrot India (PFI) parked on the ramp.

After putting Hotel-63 to bed, I entered the hostel and discovered CPH Wayne Knight having dinner. Wayne had come up late from Udorn and was assigned to work Ban Moung Ngan (LS-236) well to the east of Long Tieng. During the shortened day, he also stopped at Tha Vieng (LS-13) and Ban Na (LS-15).

The following morning Wayne and his Copilot stopped at Long Tieng to retrieve passengers for Luang Prabang. The aircraft and crew were to participate in a long-range mission to TJ5098, in the vicinity of Nam Houn. An area of interest to the Agency, located at the far reaches of Laos and near the North Vietnamese border,



A cloudy day at Sam Tong. UH-34D Hotel-52 parked in front of the Air America hostel to receive fuel from the mobile tanker crew.

Author Collection.

we had performed several infil-exfils in this same locale. After the mission, the crew RTB Udorn via Wattay Airport. <sup>13</sup>

### **SECURITY AT SITE-85**

Security issues at Pha Thi area on the 20th reached a crescendo when two Buddhist monks were apprehended at the upper helipad below the TSQ-81 unit. Apparently, they had been attending a festival at the lower-level Site-85 village. Toward the end of the day, a local official had suggested that they ride on a southbound H-34. During an interim stop on top, as per the Case Officers' instructions, they were searched by security forces and a camera was found. They were apprehended and taken to Long Tieng for interrogation. After the film was developed it was obvious that there was no attempt to spy on the site and the men were released. Although innocuous, the incident revealed the level of concern accorded Commando Club's activity, secrecy, and its durability. Another concern revolved around the commanding officer of Meo 1 Company of BV-26, Gia Too, whom Agency personnel called "Pig Fat." <sup>14</sup> Long suspected of enemy collaboration, Too and some of his

---

<sup>13</sup> EW Knight Email, 08/26/00.  
Ken Conboy, 170.

<sup>14</sup> Several stout Meo leaders took on the appearance of our porcine cousins.

underlings had been implicated in the site's loss in the early days.

As the TSQ-81 unit came on line with the capability to direct all-weather strikes in North Vietnam, security was tightened on and around the mountain. A forty-man Thai contingent was added to protect the facility and American technicians against anything but a major attack. This unit supplemented PARU, Agency Case Officers, and numerous guerrillas already deployed around the area and charged to patrol within a four-mile radius.

After the fervor generated by top military leaders during Washington sessions regarding the LBJ Administration's bombing restrictions, Rolling Thunder targets were somewhat relaxed to include the main fighter base at Phuc Yen. Cat Bi airfield was also hit, and the targets were soon eliminated.

The former seven airbases in North Vietnam had been expanded to fifteen. For political reasons, and proximity to Hanoi, fighter bases were only intermittently struck. Of course, the airfields in China were also off limits. Under air boss pressure, the first Rolling Thunder missions against airfields had been conducted in April, when the Air Force planes attacked Hoa Lac and U.S. Navy aircraft struck Kep. Respectable results were claimed.

All fighter plane bases, except Gia Lam, were eventually bombed. Although MiG fighters continued to use this facility, the international airfield was just outside Hanoi and used by Geneva Accord-sponsored International Control Commission planes and visiting Soviet and Chinese dignitaries.

Although an improvement to TACAN, the TSQ all-weather capability was not the ultimate panacea to USAF bombing problems. Despite airborne and radar guidance, target bombing accuracy could not be reduced to less than 400 to 500 feet. This lack of pinpoint bombing capability was satisfactory for gross targets like large storage areas and expansive marshaling yards, but not smaller structures like bridges.

During spates of bad weather, EB-66E aircraft preceded USAF F-105 bombers into enemy airspace. Straight and level bomb runs of thirty miles were required prior to dropping ordnance. During this critical phase, when operating on top on a predetermined course, SA-2 missiles could soar undetected through a cloud cover seeking targets.

Mounting all-weather low-level radar electronics, U.S. Navy A-6 jets achieved better success than their Air Force counterparts. <sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Ken Conboy, 188.  
Tim Castle, 71.  
John Smith, *Rolling Thunder*, 128, 130, 145-146.

On Saturday, after flying one fuel load, I was relieved at Site-20 and caught a ride to Udorn on N392R, a Company Caribou.

### **CAPTAIN MIKE**

Customer work involving road watch missions to the east from Savannakhet and Thakhet was backed up. To satisfy this demand, on 19 October, Jarina and Flight Mechanic Whiting positioned to Savannakhet in Hotel-46 for a scheduled mission the following day.

Not all missions were conducted smoothly. Employing five H-34s, this one was programmed to retrieve twenty-four troopers and the young Customer Mike had helped infil on the fourth. Located about ninety-three miles east-southeast of Site-235, the mission was deemed routine and no escort was planned. The large team was expected to be waiting close to a road twenty miles below Moung Phine. It was in an area where people claimed that elephants could be heard moving along trails. It was also a place where Air Force pilots had incurred battle damage.

Senior pilots Larry Wilderom, Verne Clarkson, and Mike boarded the CASI Beech Baron to recon the landing zone and area, but the weather was poor and it was difficult to obtain proper bearings. Finally, Verne indicated that he had sufficient details, and directed the CASI pilot to return to Site-235. Once on the



ground, senior man Wilderom, claiming that he did not feel qualified enough to lead the flight, deferred to Mike who was next in the seniority chain.

After mustering the crews and conducting a last-minute briefing, the group launched. The landing zone was confined, allowing only one aircraft to land, while the other H-34 pilots orbited over the initial point (IP), a "safe" location, and awaited their turn to land. The IP was also designated as the rally point for the pilots to gather after conducting the exfil. Because the helicopters were spread out, Alex Nadalini, flying the SAR ship, asked them to close up so that he could keep track of everyone.

Verne Clarkson, who was circling wide, shouted over the radio, *"No! No! Don't dual with the AAA. Do not close up, for they are bound to hit someone."*

Annoyed at Clarkson's sudden outburst, Mike told him to shut up. Then, not wanting a response or to cause a "pissing contest" on the air, remained silent.

Number two, Clarkson landed in the landing zone. After he departed, with "Pogo" Hunter and Mike still waiting their turn at the IP, he announced, *"I have mine. Let's get out of here."*

"Pogo" conducted his exfil and departed. Mike, who chose to be the last aircraft to land, so he could monitor the flight and ensure that all the men,

including the sick, lame, and lazy, were accounted for, discovered that Hunter had had picked up the last man.

Instead of waiting at the IP and departing in formation, the pilots straggled west. There was a lot of yelling, especially from "Pogo," who could not catch up with the flight.

Later, back at Udorn, Clarkson mentioned to Wayne that Mike did not lead the flight properly. Mike took umbrage to this and felt like clobbering him. Mike told Knight that he thought he was working with former military people who knew how to receive and implement orders. Then, after learning that Clarkson was a lieutenant colonel and commanding officer of the Seattle, Washington USMCR, he was confused. It made no sense for someone with that experience and responsibility to breach discipline and fail to follow orders, especially at a critical juncture of a mission. If Clarkson had wanted to take over as mission commander, then he should have indicated such. <sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> During the numerous SAR and road watch missions I participated in over the years, I cannot recall any such problems arising. On a rare occasion, I thought one could have been conducted a little differently, but kept my counsel. One reason we experienced no recriminations was because we had worked together for years and generally respected each other's methods.

Verne Clarkson eventually became full time principal of the Air America school.

Saturday Mike moved north to Thakhet to work for Case Officer Mike LaDue. After eighteen landings around the area, he RON at Nakhon Phanom USAF base (T-55).

The next day involved moving teams into and out of Nakhon Phanom. The first trip went to a landing zone (VF3783) eighty-five miles north-northeast, three miles south of Moung Tiouen (LS-91). Another movement was directed forty-five miles north-northeast of NKP (VF4402), and ten miles northeast of Grove Jones. After a relatively long day, the crew of Hotel-53 recovered at the Air Force base for the night.

The 23rd involved missions from both Nakhon Phanom and Lima-39. The first morning mission assigned a flight to a pad thirty-nine miles north (VE4999) to exfil and return a team to Thakhet. From Lima-40 he repositioned to Savannakhet, where Larry Taylor, who had deadheaded with Charlie Weitz to Lima-39 in Papa Foxtrot Hotel (PFH), was waiting to serve as his Co-Captain for a late mission sixty-three miles northeast (WE6522) in the Mugia Pass area, well past the terrain feature called the Battleship and Route-23. The crews involved in the mission recovered at Lima-39 for the night. The following day crews returned to respective work sites, or like Taylor, ferried their ships back to Udorn. <sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.  
Larry Taylor Emails, 12/23/10, 12/25/10.

**LARRY TAYLOR**

Captain Larry Taylor aptly described many helicopter pilots' 1967 sentiments in a letter to a boyhood friend:

*"For the nine months or so that I have been here we've lost seven UH-34s, four in accidents, three to enemy action. We've had three crew members killed, about four [injured] bad enough to have been evacuated and several others hurt to a lesser degree. As of about a week ago, I'm the only Captain here that has yet to bring a bird back with some battle damage of some sort. I guess I've averaged getting shot at least once on each trip upcountry. Never anything more serious than temporary terror and nothing bigger than .50 caliber..*

*I discover that I have trouble sleeping without a tranquilizer the night before I go upcountry and while upcountry after 8-10 hours flying I take one, or else all night I'm re-flying the whole day. When I'm not flying I'm more careful about everyday things like crossing the street. And whenever I approach the end of a period of time off, I get a little morbid and apprehensive. But while working I usually feel pretty good in the head (get tired of course) and I haven't had too much problem keeping cool when the situation*

*called for it. Course like I say, so far I've been lucky."* <sup>18</sup>

Aside from the random generator theory of casino slot-machine gaming, if one participated in enough combat missions, negative odds eventually coalesced and no one was immune from ground fire and battle damage incidents. On the 23rd, Taylor finally experienced his "moment of truth" while participating in a mission off the southern Bolovens in Military Region Four.

An armada of four H-34 and two CH-3 crews gathered at PS-22 for an early morning extraction of a large contingent of SGU action troops. Originally inserted several days previously to mine and harass vehicle and foot traffic on Route-110, the team was gathered at XB8324. The landing zone was located in a relatively open area south of the Plateau's rim, equidistant between the Se Kong and Route-110.

At rendezvous time, the gaggle, escorted by two A-1E Air Force piloted aircraft, launched. Few missions were a great distance from the Bolovens, and within a relatively short time the flight was preparing to land.

Larry was flying Co-Captain with Bill Pearson and an American Flight Mechanic in Hotel-44. Billy P, as

---

<sup>18</sup> Author Note: Taylor's letter is unique and revealing in that it actually expresses a pilot's inner feelings in print regarding the job-something that pilots rarely expressed vocally or ever divulged to each other.

the senior man, was the leader of the pack and would mark the first aircraft in the landing zone. To accommodate the large contingent of dissimilar helicopters and avoid abrupt maneuvering and a low flare, deceleration was begun higher and more gradually than normal. Rounding out between one hundred to 200 feet, ground fire commenced from what appeared like all sides. During those muddled micro-seconds, Billy, with his Co-Captain and Flight Mechanic yelling at him, appeared to be reacting slowly. Therefore, Larry simultaneously "helped" him pull pitch and reversed the nose high attitude to a climb configuration. Aware that Hotel-44 had been hit, but still airborne with no obvious mechanical problems except a minor vibration, they radioed the danger to the flight and escort planes, and turned toward Attopeu, twelve miles northeast. With the mission aborted, the ever-vigilant A-1E pilots rolled in on the bad guys with guns and rockets blazing.

After landing at Site-10, Hotel-44 was surveyed and damage assessed. Battle damage was substantial, the worst to fuel tanks. After determining the forward self-sealing tank would hold sufficient fuel to ferry the helicopter to Pakse, the crew departed.

Later, the pilots speculated the enemy, aware that there would be helicopters arriving soon to extract the friendlies, had quietly followed the team from the

Trail to the landing zone. Masters of concealment and ambush, they waited. However, they struck prematurely. Had they waited another minute or two, they might have damaged or incapacitated not only one but several helicopters.

Five days after the incident, Taylor forwarded a letter to his friend baring his soul:

*"You will recall my pompous mouthings [in the 17 October letter] upon my combined luck/skill in not getting popped as yet? Forget it. Today I got my cherry busted. During the first mission of the morning, while flying between 200 to 300 feet it was [like] Chinese New Year below me. About 10 seconds of solid small arms and automatic fire. As we added power and began to depart post-haste, I felt the bird get hit. Landed at the nearest friendly field about 15 miles away. Had taken six hits, three through the cabin (missed the flight mechanic by 1-2 feet), two in fuel cells, and one in main rotor blade."* <sup>19</sup>

## **NAM BAC**

Enemy attacks on friendly defensive positions in and around Nam Bac continued in October. A mid-month intelligence report stated:

---

<sup>19</sup> Bill Leary October 1967 Notes of 10/17, 21/67.  
Letters Larry Taylor Sent to Murray Siegel.  
Larry Taylor Emails, 12/23/10, 12/25/10.

*"Enemy harassment of the government's outlying defense positions in the Nam Bac area in recent days has resulted in heavy friendly casualties. The communists have hit government artillery positions on Phou [Phu] <sup>20</sup>-a strategic hill overlooking the Nam Bac airstrip-with heavy mortar fire but have not followed up with a ground assault. The loss of Phou Kou would seriously undermine the government's key position in Nam Bac.*

*The enemy also routed elements of two government battalions defending positions southeast of Phou Kou on 12 October. The airstrip at Nam Bac apparently was attacked on 15 October, although it is still open.*

*The enemy's recent attacks have upset plans for a government offensive to relieve the pressure on Nam Bac, but army leaders in Vientiane appear determined to retain control of the base. Reinforcements have been moved into the area from southern Laos and at least nine government battalions are now strung out in the rugged hills around Nam Bac.*

*The army's determination illustrates the importance of the base, which protects the northern approaches to Luang Prabang. Since its capture last year, Nam Bac has become a major staging-point for government harassment and intelligence operations up to the North Vietnam border.*

---

<sup>20</sup> Phou or mountain is synonymous with Phu.





The fire support base at Phou Kou overlooking Nam Bac came under mortar fire in October.

CIA Map, 10/17/67.

*The communists' intentions in the area are not yet clear, but it is doubtful that they are willing at this juncture to take the substantial losses that a direct assault on Nam Bac would entail..."* <sup>21</sup>

## **BELL UPGRADING**

On 25 October, I was scheduled for two local sessions in Papa Foxtrot Gulf (PFG). The first was training with "Robbie." By the end of the flight I felt comfortable and confident in the 205. The second part of the day included my upgrading check ride with Wayne Webb. The normal work went well, but I was still a little behind the aircraft practicing emergency procedures. This was especially so during hydraulic off run on landings. With the PFG boost switch off the controls were so stiff that with me grunting and groaning it was a definite chore to fly a decent pattern and land the machine on the grassy infield between the main runway and taxiway.

While walking back to the office after the flight, Webb indicated that he was going to pass me, but although acknowledging I could fly the machine, he qualified his statement saying he hoped I did not have an emergency anytime soon. I suppose he was under

---

<sup>21</sup> CIA Daily Bulletin, 10/17/67. Laos: The communists are increasing military pressure against government positions in northern Laos.

management pressure to upgrade as many Bell Captains as possible to man the growing fleet. However happy I was to be released on my own, Wayne's disclaimer did nothing to make me feel particularly good. <sup>22</sup>

Four days later I deadheaded to Savannakhet on Papa Charlie Lima (PCL) a CASI Porter where I assumed my first command of a Bell, Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot, with Ted Moore as my second. The mission was aborted and we only flew fifteen minutes that day. <sup>23</sup>

The next day we likely flew a mission, although I did not record one. The senior men usually went on the recons and led the flights. Behind a few pilots on the seniority list, and a newly upgraded Bell Captain, I either followed the pack or was designated SAR duty. It was likely a late mission, for I RON at the Savannakhet hostel again and deadheaded to Udorn the following day in Air America Volpar N770B.

---

<sup>22</sup> I personally acknowledged and resolved my Bell inexperience. However, I was determined to learn quickly and become a proficient and productive pilot in the machine. I suppose others did also. Luckily, the civilian 205s were brand new assembly line models and the unusual and nasty emergencies occurring later caused by wear and tear on parts, which no amount of practice prepared one for, did not surface and plague us for another year or two. Also, turbine engine reliability had a tendency to ensure our operational survival. Fortunately, I was always able to assess a problem and react in time to prevent an accident or tragedy.

<sup>23</sup> As previously mentioned, scrubbed missions could be caused by poor weather in the landing zone, A-1E SAR diverts, extreme pressure from the enemy, aircraft maintenance problems, or various other adverse items.

As I gained valuable experience, sometime around this period I noted an item in the 205 that bothered me. Restraining lap belts were attached to the sides of the armored seats. Nothing secured the heavy seats to the deck except being mounted on the installed rails. In my mind, this gross lack of foresight might present a problem in a rollover type crash: the seat might rip from the moorings and a pilot became a statistic. I reported my concern to management and maintenance as a glaring airworthiness condition. Apparently, others considered the argument logical, but when foot-dragging became evident, I encouraged people to record the problem in the aircraft logbook as an airworthiness item. <sup>24</sup>

## **KNIGHT**

Continuing in his training role of former Army pilots, and consistent with "shake down" flights, while continuing to gain experience in the Bell, and to perform tangible work, on the 26th, Wayne took Papa Foxtrot India (PFI) and Nikki Fillipi to Sam Tong for four days. After landing at Long Tieng the crew was assigned to work at MOUNG NGAN (LS-236). Later they went to Lima Site-212, at Phu Moun, an isolated site located on the east side of the Nam Naiap, a river I

---

<sup>24</sup> After a tragic death of an Air America pilots in Saigon, lap belts were eventually anchored to the floor.

would sometimes follow to Paksane in bad weather when ferrying a questionable ship to Udorn.

On Friday 27 October, air operations at Site-20A again sent them to Moung Ngan. The commanding officer at LS-236 had them conduct shuttles fifteen miles north to Ban Nongla (UG6042, LS-214). Before returning to Long Tieng and Sam Tong for the night, they worked around Phu Moun.

Saturday was spent supporting Na Khang and area operations. One site visited at least twice was Houei Thong (LS-196, TH8750), forty-two miles northwest of Site-36, where Meo efforts were still underway to move into and establish a FAR flank east of Nam Bac at the Nam Ou. With the fast-moving Bell capable of covering a lot of territory in a day, another landing zone serviced was Phu Pha Louom (LS-220, UH9116), thirty-two miles east-northeast.

Wayne's final day in the field was again spent working east of Long Tieng. A stop was made at Ban Phang (LS-239, UG1622) alongside the Nam Pot, five miles east of Khang Kho (LS-204), seven miles northeast of Padong (LS-05), and seven miles north of Pha Phai (LS-65). Action in this area would soon prove disastrous for one of our crewmembers. Before Wayne

deadheaded to Udorn, he and Nikki supported Phu Moun  
and Mounng Ngam. 25

---

<sup>25</sup> EW Knight Email, 08/26/00.

**A**lllocated a few days off for STO, on the second we drove to Bangkok in the Ford Cortina. Rick received a polio booster injection at the Bangkok Christian Hospital. While there I mentioned to Doctor Wells that following a bad cold the boy had mucus visible in his stools. An amoeba test was ordered for all of us. Rick showed evidence of the one-celled animals; we were clean. He was provided medicine and we were advised to have our servants checked for parasites.

We took Rick to the local zoo where he enjoyed seeing the animals, particularly the King's Asian white elephant. <sup>1</sup> Many of the animals did not appear too healthy or well fed. We stayed until Rick became tired and began to bawl.

Tuie was friendly with a large Chinese family who collectively worked and operated a shoe store around the corner from the Suriwongse Hotel. They manufactured cheap cardboard luggage on the second floor and I had purchased one in the past. There were several young girls in the family and one day we motored north to the ancient capital of Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthia. Similar to Angkor Wat, Cambodia, the ruins of what had once been an advanced civilization before being sacked by the

---

<sup>1</sup> The baby pachyderm was actually gray.

Burmese proliferated over a large area. At the time there were no visible attempts underway to restore any of the structures. I took several photos and we let Rick release a few birds for good luck. Before returning to Bangkok, we purchased some Buddhist images and lighted joss sticks in homage to a huge Buddha in the central temple. It was an interesting time, recently afforded by our vehicular mobility. <sup>2</sup>

### **ENEMY TRAIL RECAPITULATION**

All military regions in Laos were supplied by various supply route modes from China and North Vietnam. These included footpaths, ox trails, and actual roads that were subject to seasonal conditions.

In Military Region Two, Routes 6, 7, and bypass offshoots provided the major means of enemy access to supply Pathet Lao units in the Ban Ban and Plain of Jars areas.

Along with utilization of the Ou River, Route-19 was the main artery employed north of Luang Prabang to introduce men and materiel into the region.

In lower Military Region Four, at first, minor amounts of supplies moved across the border from Cambodia into Laos along west-east Route-110, or what became known as the Sihanouk Trail. Supplying units in

---

<sup>2</sup> The ruins at Ayutthaya and Phimai, Korat, now display sound and light shows for tourists.



Laos and South Vietnam, the lines of communication (LOC) merged with a north-south portion to the east of the Bolovens Plateau.

Although important to the overall enemy war effort, previously mentioned LOCs were not as critical to theater operations as the routes in eastern Military Region Three and Military Region Four, generically known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail system, that wound south through Laos to South Vietnam.

Years before Laos was declared an independent country, animals and native travelers traversed jungle trails and footpaths. During the nineteen forties period of conflict in Southeast Asia, guerrilla opposition to Japanese occupation secretly used the trails for movement to areas of contention.

After the war, and France's return to Indochina, Viet Minh units employed Laos for north-south movement. Then, with the French ouster in 1954, and the Geneva Accords division of Vietnam into two parts, the communist North infiltrated people on the same trails to South Vietnam.

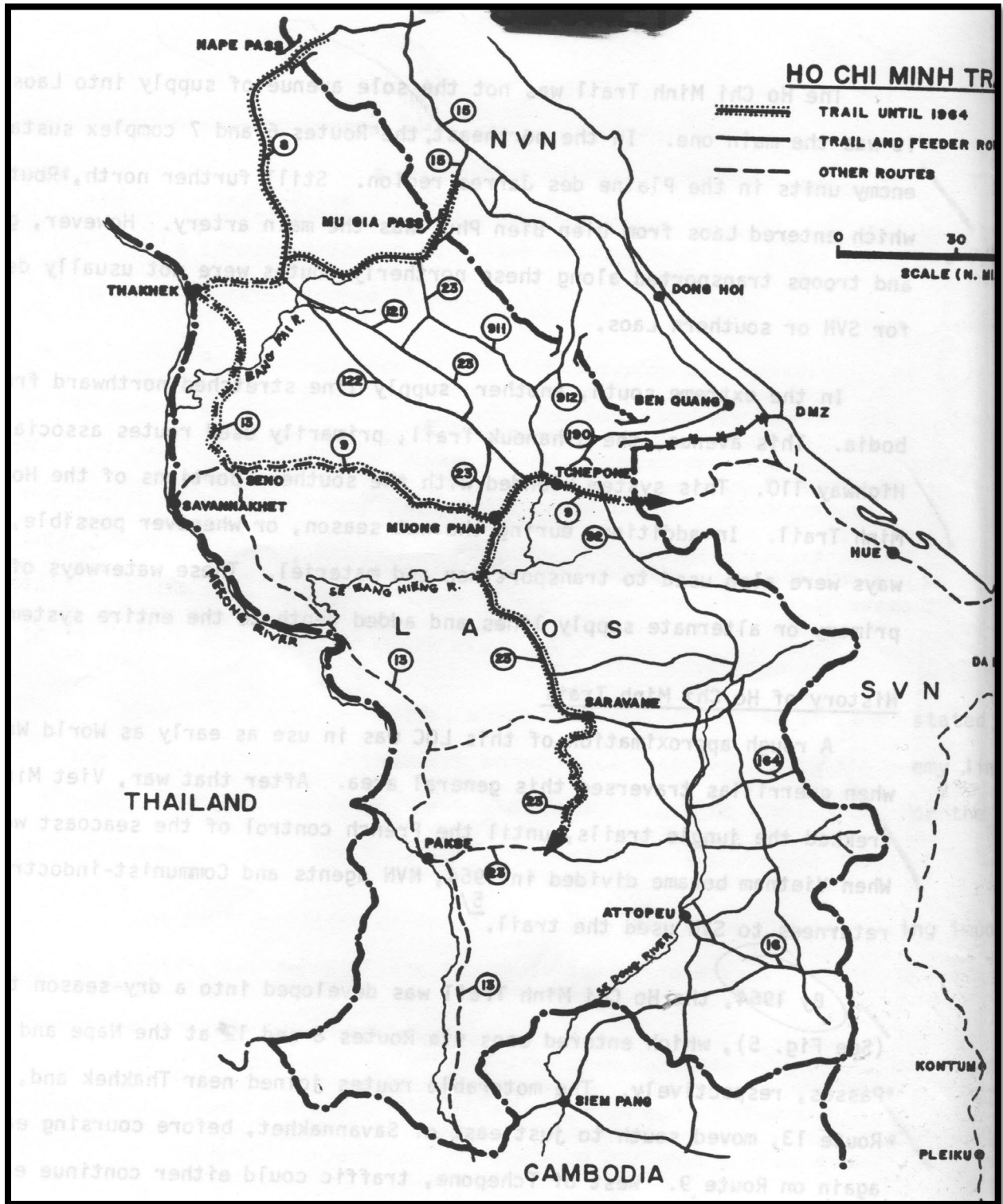
During the spring of 1961, special Viet Minh units trained at camps adjacent to Hanoi were dispatched south via jungle tracks to link with South Vietnam National Liberation Forces (called the Viet Cong or VC). The Lao option became the preferred route because the overall distance was shorter and more clandestine

than the in-country coastal route. Annamite mountain chain passes afforded relatively low elevations, although most mountain cuts involved traversing rough terrain encompassing rivers and heavy jungle conditions. North of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), after conducting repairs and improvements in 1961 and 1962 under aid agreements previously sanctioned by Prince Souvanna Phouma, vehicles and travelers began to utilize old French roads at Nape and Mugia passes.

In 1964, old roads were laboriously reconstructed, or new ones developed, into passable dry season truck routes: Route-8 at Nape Pass, Route-12 at Mugia Pass. Early vehicular routes merged near the Mekong town of Thakhet, then continued south on Route-13 to a point east of Savannakhet and east along Route-9 toward the border or south on Route-23. Depending on the FAR capability to interdict, this system was only minimally used, and then only during the dry season.

The Route-9 pass at Lao Bao that ran across the narrow waist of Laos to the Mekong River was deemed in too close proximity to the DMZ to utilize for viable operations, and one that could be easily monitored. Nevertheless, Tchepone and the corresponding valley became the headquarters and logistical bastion for Trail operations.

By 1965 and onward the Trail system developed into an unbelievably complex system of byways, including



1964 Ho Chi Minh Trail system.  
Edward Vallentiny, *CHECO, USAF Operations from Thailand.*

hundreds of miles of constantly improved roads and hidden bypass routes that became virtually impossible for air and ground teams to detect or interdict.

Many soldiers and agents who began month long treks to South Vietnam never arrived at their destination. Buried in unmarked graves, they succumbed from disease, malnutrition, and later from U.S. bombing. However, those who managed to survive the grueling journey and arrived in the South were deemed extraordinarily hardened troopers. <sup>3</sup>

### **INCREASING MISSION REQUIREMENTS**

Likely because of RLG gains and ability to hold territory during the year, North Vietnamese leaders prepared ambitious plans to intensify Vietnamese-Lao participation. Toward this end, they replaced unproductive Pathet Lao troops with battalions composed of regular North Vietnamese Army troops. In addition to the influx of troops, heralding major offensives, large amounts of Soviet Bloc and Chinese supplies began moving into Laos and South Vietnam. Furthermore, confusing intelligence specialists' analysis, a document delineating an enemy winter-spring offensive was captured. This period was traditionally reserved

---

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: Politics of Neutralization* (New York, 1964), 354, 356. Edward Vallentiny, 38-39.

for enemy offensives, but combined with Trail activity, portended events as yet unforeseen.

During November, almost all enemy LOCs were sufficiently dry. Therefore, with extraordinary efforts of 25,000 Vietnamese troops and 40,000 indigenous corvee laborers, logistic routes were repaired to allow passage by vehicles and troops. The same month, numerous HARK-1-equipped teams scattered throughout the Panhandle and east-west portion of the Sihanouk Trail reported through electronic means to orbiting Air America Volpar relay planes the movement of more than 700 trucks. This information in turn was beamed to Savannakhet or Pakse for analysis and further disposition to Udorn.

The increase in traffic south was somewhat confusing to observers, but duly noted by the Department of Defense, prompted a comment:

*"The level of truck traffic in the Lao Panhandle reported by both ground and air observers was much greater in the period September-November 1967 than in the corresponding three months in 1966. Air-observed traffic was over 15 times higher this year; road watch teams, however, noted only a slight rise. The destroyed and damaged total was nearly nine times greater this year (over 900), with most of the losses recorded in November. The more numerous sightings and losses in*

1967 relate to a real increase in traffic as well as improved detection and strike capabilities.

The 1967 resupply effort started over the Route 911/912 corridor into the Tchepone Base area in late October. Roads clearing Mu Gia [Mugia] Pass were repaired and generally serviceable by early November."

U.S. sorties were augmented in direct proportion to increased enemy Trail movement. Although estimates from various agencies differed, purported success of Panhandle interdiction generated a November message to State from Ambassador William Sullivan:

"Trucks destroyed in November would exceed 600; overwhelming proportion of kills has been on Routes 911 and 912 and as a result practically none of NVN dry season cargo is reaching as far south as Routes 9 and 3.

On November 7 Air Force pilots reported the highest monthly rate of destruction in Laos during the past two years. Ninety-eight percent of the trucks reported destroyed in Laos during November and 95% of those reported damaged were found in the Panhandle (Steel Tiger) area.

Record results were from a combination of factors: exceedingly good weather and highest number of sorties over Laos since April first full month of dry season and an increase in traffic densities; poor convoy discipline from inexperienced drivers."

In Washington, an Agency assessment of the November interdiction differed slightly from that of the U.S. Embassy in Laos:

*"We agree with Sullivan that air operations were especially effective in November, even allowing for inflation in pilot reporting. <sup>4</sup>*

*[We] disagree with Sullivan that practically no traffic is reaching Route-9.*

*[It is] still too early to conclude that a major turning point has been reached in U.S air interdiction campaign in SEA. [We] doubt that the November performance in Laos can be sustained."*

As was usually the case, Agency analysis proved more correct. By late November, the flow of traffic shifted from the Route 911/912 border crossing to the Route 15/12 corridor through Mugia Pass. In addition, traffic on Route-914 south of Tchepone increased in late November.

The true impact of the major enemy rush to supply the south and other regions would soon be revealed throughout the entire Theater by early 1968.

## **INTERDICTION CONTROVERSY**

Debates between adherents of employing reciprocal engine fixed wing vs. jet powered aircraft continued as

---

<sup>4</sup> Destroyed vehicles were often counted several times.

to the safest and best airborne weapon to utilize on the Trails. Because propeller driven A-1E provided superior kill results, Ambassador Sullivan lobbied for two additional squadrons of this type aircraft. But because slower, propeller driven aircraft were several times more vulnerable than fast movers, most USAF leaders preferred jet planes for armed reconnaissance along Trail systems. The Air Force leaders won the argument for more jets. In addition to regular assets employed in Military Region Three and Military Region Four to reduce and deter Trail movement, USAF added F-100F jets for armed reconnaissance. In the south, modified T-37 jet trainers equipped with a nose-mounted minigun and racks to accommodate stores were introduced for evaluation.<sup>5</sup>

Not all additions to the Theater were high performance jets. To replace the more vulnerable AC-47 gunship, a JC-130A turboprop was introduced to Trail work for evaluation. The ship mounted four M-61 Vulcan 20mm cannons, four 7.62mm miniguns, and other state of the art electronic equipment. Although the gunship performed well initial tests and combat situations, the new weapon was not fully employed until 1968.

---

<sup>5</sup> When USAF A-1Es became scarce in our theater because of attrition, we were assigned the A-37 aircraft for Bolovens mission escort. However, the jet proved much too fast for our purposes and was rejected as unsuitable for the escort role.



Military Region Two roads, particularly the Route-7 main artery from North Vietnam to the Plain of Jars, were in somewhat better condition than in the south. Meo road watch teams lining the high ground on both sides of the Ban Ban Valley reported alarming amounts of traffic entering the area. Although not as well covered, Route-19 in upper Military Region One was similarly active.

The introduction of three fresh combat seasoned Vietnamese battalions into upper Military Region Two, and the capability of substantially increasing this number at any time, portended a serious dry season offensive. To implement battle plans, the Vietnamese military leaders had designs on Phou Pha Louom (LS-220), Pha Hang (LS-205), Sam Son Hong (LS-201), Na Khang (LS-36), and Phu Pha Thi (LS-85).

When in place, by early November, with Houa Moung (LS-58) no longer an impediment to movement on Route-6, Vietnamese units launched intense efforts to clear Vang Pao's forces from cluster sites east and southeast of their critical 6, 68, and 61 LOCs winding south from Sam Neua toward Ban Ban and the Plain of Jars.

Additional estimates posited enemy pressure to Vang Pao's southeast defense line in Xieng Khouang Province to discourage him from forwarding reinforcements to

counter activity in upper Military Region Two. <sup>6</sup>

## **MISSIONS**

With a fleet of 204B and 205 Bells and sufficient pilots now available to crew them for double crew requirements, Customer-generated road watch and action team missions increased and assumed priority over normal operations, particularly in Military Region and Four. However, with a plethora of missions on the docket that normally included one infil, one exfil, and perhaps an emergency extraction per day, Air Force CH-3s and Air America H-34s were still required to move increasing numbers of teams to forward positions. Because enemy Trail surveillance increased proportional to this activity, Agency teams seldom in remained in one place very long and our services were in high demand.

---

### <sup>6</sup> Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 189.

Edward Vallentiny, *CHECO*, 28.

Edward Vallentiny, *CHECO, The Fall of Site 85*, 7, 8.

Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction* 241, 243, 287.

Bill Leary 1967 Notes.

Department of Defense, Comparison of Truck Sightings in the Lao Panhandle During the Months of September, October, and November 1966-1967, DDRS 1992/3351.

Victor Anthony, 233.

*CHECO* Report of a December 1967 Agency Message to CINCPAC: An Estimate of Upcoming Enemy Objectives in Northeast Laos.

Intelligence Memorandum Directorate on Intelligence of CIA, Comments on Sullivan's Cable on Air Operations Laos, November 1967.

Despite its positive attributes, the UH-34D was considered a slow, lumbering beast and severely limited at altitude during long range operations. It required a larger landing area, was a high-profile machine, and very noisy, so mixed Bell-H-34 operations were gradually phased out. In cases where the H-34 was still used, like the slowest ship in an ocean convoy, the pilots generally led a flight, with the faster Bell or Bells taking up the rear. However, over the years, H-34 pilots still conducted Special Missions in all military regions. They also assumed much of the work and trash runs out of Sam Tong and Long Tieng during our frequent absence from that region. Sometimes I missed this less invasive, but financially rewarding work.

On the seventh, crewing Bell 205 Papa Foxtrot India, Wayne Knight flew from Savannakhet to Moung Phalane (L-61), then to Delta-9. Returning to Lima-39, he refueled and recovered at Udorn.

The following day, I deadheaded on Hotel-62 to Lima-39 to join Don Leach and Jay Meyers crewing Papa Foxtrot Hotel. Don was another former U.S. Army pilot who joined us to act as our "safety pilot" and teach us the UH-1H ropes. Short, with dark hair and an aggressive temperament, the Maine "Yankee" was an accomplished Bell pilot who knew how to interact well with a senior pilot. Without an obvious agenda, Don was also a person with whom I felt comfortable conversing.

Sometimes crews repositioned to Savannakhet the previous evening and were briefed that night in order to arrive at a Whiskey site early the following morning. This was not a preferred method, for it left a lot of time for a mission to be compromised. Therefore, most mission requirements were briefed in the field.

Unlike the H-34s' greater endurance capability, our missions were limited to approximately two and a half hours. The infil of the day was briefed to take place at WE7204, Phou Khiling, sixty miles northeast of Lima-39. The projected infil site was located in mountainous high ground nearly equidistant between the Route-23 and 911 roads from Mugia Pass. The trip marked my initial Special Mission from Savannakhet as a Bell PIC.

Consistent with tacit senior pilot policy, I accompanied the mission leader on CASI Dornier XW-PCT for a one hour twenty-minute recon of the target area. To confuse enemy trail watchers and villagers, and not divulge the exact landing site, the CASI pilot created a couple diversions and returned to Savannakhet along a different route.

At the appropriate time, we repositioned to the designated launch site. Depending on the mission, boarding teams of eight to ten combat loaded troops, usually dressed in Vietnamese army clothing and carrying Soviet bloc weapons. These men were orderly,

appearing to be experienced in vertical envelopment operations.

Special Mission SOPs were strictly followed in all cases. We did not launch without Skyraider escort. Even though a Customer-programmed mission might previously have been fragged by Seventh Air Force, unscheduled factors like SAR duty or foul weather often caused delays or outright aborts. This was aggravating, and usually involved waiting an extra day or two to accomplish the task.

One of the changes in pay policy included recent guidelines for logging anticipated mission pay. This encompassed an arc outside the Lima-39 area deemed "safe." The north and east side of the arc was considered denied area where mission pay recording was allowed. On this particular mission we logged forty-two minutes toward pay purpose of fifty dollars per hour or mission. Joined up at 10,000 feet or so, we sucked in our breath and generally proceeded to our destination at maximum speed, ninety plus knots, in loose trail formation across established trails. We never consulted pilot handbook performance charts, but common sense alerted me that the speed for the altitude exceeded VNE (never exceed speed) and could be detrimental to the aircraft. I was not flight leader, but even though agreeing that we should not linger within range of large enemy AAA as we bounced and vibrated at altitude

across the enemy road system, I considered the speed much too excessive for our payload and altitude.

The long-range work could foster nervousness as it involved the unknown in unfamiliar regions with unspecified situations. Even though we had previously been covering some of the territory in H-34s, much of the actual cross trail missions were located in virgin areas. Should we be downed, we were never briefed on escape and evasion procedures, and would have relied on whatever expertise we had gained in the military or while flying in Laos over the years. Furthermore, we never considered walking out of an area, for as per SOP, we employed an empty SAR ship that normally accompanied the flight. One problem with this method could occur if the SAR ship went down. In such a case, the other fully loaded aircraft could not have retrieved a crew without landing and dropping off their troops, and this was hardly feasible. Had such a situation developed, we likely would have solved it, for some of us were fairly good at problem solving and snap judgments during demanding situations.

The two A-1E pilots circling our gaggle carrying numerous stores and extra fuel for extended loiter time were comforting. Moreover, we were confident that our escort stimulated ground AAA gun crews to think twice about popping at us while en route or at the landing zone. Since we theoretically flew higher than small

arms and 23/37mm fire could probe, escort was tailored more for our psychological well-being. Of course, the real value of escort could be judged in times of trouble and when going into an unknown landing zone. Also reassuring were the old-timers flying the Skyraiders. One could infer a pilot experience level from the calmness, maturity, and tone of voice impacting the airwaves. This was more prevalent in the early days of road watch work when there were excess planes and these older Air Force types. However, with the advent of losses, yearly rotations, and younger voices, this confidence was changing.

Mission success was generally directly proportional to a comprehensive briefing, recon, and mission secrecy. We rarely encountered problems with remote infiltrations as long as SOPs were followed to the letter and the remote missions were scheduled to land on high ground. It was only when a Case Officer deviated from established norms that trouble erupted.<sup>7</sup>

Some exfiltration missions had the potential to create a problem, especially when the enemy had time to react and position units to inflict harm. Sometimes a team would misrepresent a situation to the Customer, but this was rare. If pressed, special guerrilla unit (SGU) teams would move long distances from a threat or

---

<sup>7</sup> An example of this will divulged in a later book.

their area of operations. This precluded any real problem for exfil units, but depended largely on the area in question, team mobility, and options. If conditions permitted, Porter and Beech Baron pilots tracked teams daily, either visually or by radio to follow their progress, wellbeing, and supply purposes. Also, as much of eastern Laos was a mountainous, jungled no-man's land, I attributed much of our success and survival to good photo, map, and aerial reconnaissance.

There were noticeably more emergency exfils conducted from the Bolovens in Military Region Four. Reasons for this likely stemmed from the nature of terrain and the fact that the enemy logistical system was so close to the Plateau, a dearth of trails,<sup>8</sup> and the scatter-shot missions that seemed to lack serious planning. In addition, PS-22 teams did not appear to be trained or motivated like the ones in Military Region Three, and the Customer often indicated that he was sending them into the field to assess their performance. That definitely was not the Marine Corps school solution.

Bell endurance of about two and a half hours, although limiting the scope of operations, proved sufficient to encompass early long-range missions. An

---

<sup>8</sup> There was only one north-south trail-Route-96.



experiment was conducted on one mission <sup>9</sup> with X-ray models to extend range whereby rectangular fuel tanks were installed under the rear passenger seats. Done at the expense of payload, and with tanks leaking to cause crew discomfort from the fumes, the concept was soon dropped.

Despite Bell's hype and public relations spiel, the wop-wop-wop of the Huey's main rotor blades slapping the thin air proved very noisy and could be heard for many miles. Even though people on the ground might distinguish the noise and think, "Here they come again," the sound was not directional at altitude. It might have blown the element of surprise, but never seemed to hurt us. Although we normally egressed the target area using a slightly different route, I was still a bit concerned the enemy might concentrate AAA in one area with the hopes of taking us out.

Because of the Bell's single engine limitation, all early efforts were performed during daylight hours. Even late insertions were programmed to have us land by sunset. The Bell's noise, range, single engine, and payload limitations later led the Customer and Company to search for a helicopter better suited to fulfill mission requirements. At first the CH-3 was considered, but was eventually rejected because of a limited parts supply system. Next the Bell-212 was briefly

---

<sup>9</sup> Still remaining out of SOG team operational areas.

evaluated.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the Sikorsky S-58T, a twin-engine turbine mated to the UH-34D airframe, was adopted in the early seventies.

During the hot and heavy Air America SAR era, and especially following our high-level sojourns into and out of northwestern Vietnam in June 1965, the subject of the availability of parachutes was broached. These items were obtained and stored at Sam Tong for those who desired to use them. Before the hostel was erected at Site-20, like the sleeping bags that were issued for RON sites at Long Tieng, Sam Tong, and Na Khang and never cleaned, the chutes were never periodically inspected. As the SAR trip into North Vietnam was one of a kind (actually two), and rescue requirements were on the wane because of increased USAF participation, I cannot recall anyone else wearing one.

As our road watch activity in Military Region Three reached ever greater proportions, we began crossing major enemy arteries like Routes 23 and 911 above 10,000 feet and at high airspeed. After several missions, I became concerned that if hit by accurate AAA fire at such altitudes and a conflagration ensued, the Bell might end up a mere cinder before reaching the ground. Therefore, I requested parachutes be available at Savannakhet for those who desired them.

---

<sup>10</sup> Evaluated in Washington by the Author while on home leave.

All Customer and Air America management craved was that a mission be accomplished in the most expeditious manner. Therefore, nearly all decisions related to execution were left to us. On most early Bell missions, senior men usually flew with one of the "sexy six" Army newbies. Naturally, crew coordination was paramount. Unlike a branch of the various military services, an Air America PIC could not order a civilian to do something. He could suggest; as senior man he made decisions that, based on respect, and experience were generally followed by crewmembers. Of course, with little time for foolishness, conflicts were sorted out later. Troublemakers, or those who did not wish to perform missions, had the option to weed themselves out, or a gentle prod would eliminate them.

There were no hard and fast rules regarding most equipment usage, and with some limitation each man was allowed his own opinions regarding a situation. Therefore, use of a parachute was voluntary, and I was probably the only crew member to wear the bulky item. With such reluctance to utilize an article provided for survival, when PIC, I was very careful to pre-brief my crew so they clearly understood that if the ship was ever hit and caught fire at altitude, I was bailing out without hesitation, and they were on their own. They probably considered this a strange attitude, but the

feeling was reciprocal. Fortunately, such a moment of truth never occurred and my crews were always amicable.

We experienced few maintenance problems that caused concern during Special Missions. On the return phase of a long infil northeast of Lima-39, Phil Goddard experienced hydraulic problems at altitude. There were some anxious moments among flight crews until he descended to more dense air and achieved better controllability.

Wayne later recalled that parachutes never became as much of an issue as other mission elements, and I was likely the only one to wear one. He had worn chutes in the USMC flying the H-34 during instrument training at the Yuma base. There were several operations above 10,000 feet and despite pilot objections, it was squadron policy to wear them. <sup>11</sup>

## **MILITARY REGION-1**

Results were not all disappointing in the Nam Bac region, and diversions were implemented attempting to relieve pressure on FAR battalions in and around Site-203. Consequently, despite failed attempts earlier in the year, SGU guerrillas moved west and briefly occupied the Moung Sai airfield (L-27) located in the northern Beng Valley until 3 November. Subsequently, as

---

<sup>11</sup> EW Knight Email, 08/29/00.

a diversion, SGU units were deployed in the Lima-27 area. South of Site-203, other SGU irregulars temporarily recaptured Nam Thuam (LS-176), the original jump off site for the 1966 FAR Nam Bac offensive. Despite these limited and interim gains and much reinforcement, no true effort was attempted to enlarge the defensive perimeter. <sup>12</sup>

With Ted Moore replacing Don Leach as my second pilot, the day after the Lima-39 mission, I relocated several hundred miles to Luang Prabang for a mission in the Nam Houn (LS-243 area (TJ5098)). As previously mentioned, when Special Missions were involved, the Customer bit the bullet and the cost of positioning aircraft was no object. We had been to this formerly dominant Meo area before. Forty minutes was logged in the denied area, but for some reason expected pay was not forthcoming. In all cases the Customer was the final determinant and had to authorize and sanction a mission for pay purposes. Of course, denial could have occurred anywhere along the line, including our own management. Granted, the system was new and there were problems to resolve, but there was some unhappiness among crews when we discovered the deficiency. There was nothing we could do but complain and hope no one else begrudged us special mission pay.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ken Conboy, 184.  
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 288.

## **MILITARY REGION-2**

Following the mission, we flew east to Sam Tong for the night.

Ted went home and I flew Papa Foxtrot Hotel (PFH) solo pilot without the benefit of a more experienced Bell pilot by my side. While exhibiting care, OJT was my preferred method to really gain proficiency in a field environment. Make mistakes, never repeat them, and learn, learn, learn.

Some of the work involved moving troops forward to Houei Thong Ko (LS-184). Although pressed on other fronts, while preparing for traditional Vietnamese dry season offences, as a political gesture to the General Staff, Vang Pao had agreed to help support Nam Bac operations. His people were instructed to march forty-two miles northwest from Site-184 toward the old site of Ban Na Tai (L-50). From there they would cross a ford at the Nam Ou and join with FAR units at Muang Ngoy (Moung Ngoi), who were projected to move west from Site-203. This position was located on the west bank near the Route-44 crossing. Route-44, an ancient track, and traditional invasion route wound great distances south and west through mountains and valleys from North Vietnam, crossed the Nam Ou, and paralleled the river south toward Luang Prabang. The politically motivated

operation was calculated to interdict the LOC and relieve pressure from Nam Bac's eastern flank.<sup>13</sup>

While en route to Sam Tong in Papa Foxtrot India (PFI) to complement and then relieve me, Phil Goddard noted an unusual fluctuation of the engine oil pressure needle. He turned toward Vientiane and a few seconds later both torque and engine oil pressure dropped to zero. Phil immediately conducted a precautionary landing to a farmer's field ten miles east of Wattay Airport and shut down. Gary Gentz investigated the problem. Upon opening the compartment door on the fuselage's right side under the engine, Gary discovered the engine oil cooler drain valve open. The butterfly valve was closed. After oil screens were checked, oil was added to the engine and the machine run for fifteen minutes to determine its status. With pressures and temperatures normal and no chip light illumination, PFI was ferried back to Udorn. Further investigation by mechanics revealed grinding and some turbine bearing binding upon rotation. As a result, the engine was changed.

We were still learning. The valve was probably left open during hangar time when engine oil was changed. Because the critical item was overlooked by all concerned an item was added to the maintenance check

---

<sup>13</sup> Ken Conboy, 184-with the Author's Speculation.  
Ted Shackley, 171.

list ensuring all drain valves be safety wired to the closed position. <sup>14</sup>

Following some cursory work around Site-20, on Saturday I returned to Tango-08. The ten hours plus flown solo in PFH was the best training and confidence builder that I could expect.

Two days later, after required inspections and clearance, along with Flight Mechanic Gary Gentz, I was assigned PFH for upcountry work in Military Region Two. Although Gentz had arrived in Udorn on 21 February 1966 to act as a Flight Mechanic on the H-34, this was the first time we flew together.

## **GARY GENTZ**

Although displaying a somewhat misleading appearance, Gentz was a very intelligent individual. In retrospect, musing on past recollections, he noted that every pilot flew the Bell employing his own style. Old hands had a difficult time getting used to the Huey; they missed the H-34 tail wheel. Individuals who were not the best pilots knew their limitations. The young pilots had not been exposed to landings at high elevations with 600 to 700 pounds payload. Robbie could never read the gas producer N1 gage, the instrument we initially erroneously used to judge power. He flew

---

<sup>14</sup> Air America XOXO Incident Report of 11/10/67.  
Joe Leeker, The Aircraft of Air America, XW-PFI.



hunched over in his seat and thought the gage was graduated in tenths. Most pilots flew too fast at altitude, prompting Bell pilots in Saigon to remark, *"We do not have any problem with pitch links breaking or bearings wearing out."*

While still crewing in the H-34 program at Luang Prabang, Gary and Scratch flew north to Nam Bac. The valley was socked in with a fifty to one-hundred-foot ceiling underneath. A mountain artillery pad was sticking out of the clouds. Scratch knew his location and the amount of clearance underneath, so he began a slow descent into Site-203 using the radar altimeter.

Gentz had great respect for Jack Forney. When he arrived in Udorn, John Aspinwall, and later Steve Nichols, were in charge of helicopter maintenance, but there was never any question that Jack Forney was the boss. One was always apprehensive when he met the incoming aircraft. He demanded the facts, never condoning any excuses. <sup>15</sup>

The first time Gary and I worked upcountry, we produced almost seventy flight hours in seven days.

---

<sup>15</sup> Gary Gentz comments to the Author regarding Bell operations and other observations.

**STEVE NICHOLS**

Steve had been employed with Air America for almost seven years, and had a unique perspective of operations and pilots from both the field and ground maintenance. He first flew the line as a Flight Mechanic for close to 3,000 hours in Laos, and then switched to ground maintenance for five years. He considered these seven years the most interesting of his life. While upcountry, there were a lot of scary moments and a lot of fun. Some of it occurred with me during 20-21 June 1965, while attempting to rescue a downed American pilot in North Vietnam. Another happened in August of the same year when Bobby Nunez "deep sixed" an UH-34D in the Mekong River. <sup>16</sup> He noted a few jerks in the group, but overall, some of the finest aviation people in the world cycled through Air America at one time or another.

He did not realize that the Company was operated from a pilot's point of view until later, when he was working for Frank Carson in Saudi Arabia. During that period S-58T pilots flew 15,000 hours unloading 600,000 tons of cement from barges. Steve recalled tracking main rotor blades only four times. In contrast, at Udorn, blades were tracked each time the aircraft arrived for maintenance. In addition, there were test pilots who would not sign off or release a helicopter

---

<sup>16</sup> For details on these incidents see Book six.

to CYA <sup>17</sup> in case the next pilot did not particularly like it. One standby pilot grounded four to five aircraft that had been released as operational just because it was 1200 hours and he did not feel like going upcountry.

Steve saw it all. Shortly after a machine arrived in Udorn, a management type was running up a Bell 205 on the parking ramp with a quality control (QC) supervisor sitting in the left seat. Nichols had never been in a 205 before. He was curious, so he climbed in to the cabin section to observe. During one of the checks, the pilot switched to the manual fuel control mode without retarding the throttle. The incorrect procedure, and the excess fuel introduced, resulted in immediate and rapid engine acceleration. Steve attempted to see where the RPM and exhaust gas temperature needles went, but this was almost impossible to ascertain. From his position in the rear, he estimated the RPM surged very high, perhaps to the six o'clock position before the pilot had the situation under control. Afterward, the pilot turned to the QC man asking, *"How high did the RPM surge?"*

Having no idea, the OC answered, *"Well, I think it went to 120, didn't it?"*

Steve, fully aware of the overspeed and over temperature implications departed the helicopter. He

---

<sup>17</sup> CYA: Vernacular for cover your six o'clock body position.

was not going to challenge a pilot regarding an aircraft that he was going to have to fly.

## **UPCOUNTRY**

Within a relatively short time after TSQ-81 completion, with Commando Club in full operation, Phu Pha Thi assumed an even more important role than before. With recurring bad weather impacting much of North Vietnam, and despite Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's advice to President Johnson to cease Rolling Thunder activity, Heavy Green TSQ-81 technicians successfully directed U.S. bombers to major targets including airfields, railroads, and storage areas inside North Vietnam. Coping with "Murphy's" omnipresent technical glitches and questionable morale factors at the remote site, Air Force personnel directed 130 sorties over the North in November. As communist pressure increased around Site-85, increased emphasis was accorded strikes around the mountain and other areas in northeastern Military Region Two. Of course, the abundant activity on top of Site-85 was duly noted and reported by spies and Vietnamese patrols.

In November, enemy units at Sam Neua began clearing operations toward Pha Thi. No one in the Western camp was surprised, particularly old Lao hands, who believed there would be serious attempts to attack and destroy

the electronic facility. This prognostication was revealed when aerial reconnaissance of the Sam Neua area hinted at the beginnings of a road thrusting west toward Pha Thi. Additional recons by Air Force and also Air America Volpar pilots flying 42Z revealed some construction progress on what would become Route-602. Although still many miles to the east, laborers began chopping out the jungle, and bulldozer operators leveled dirt paths along terrain contour lines. Calls for interdiction were not readily heeded because of higher priority targets elsewhere. <sup>18</sup>

Taking precautionary measures, friendly sites to the east of Site-85 in the mountainous Ban Den Din area were reinforced and new ones developed. Located on even higher ground in the middle of heavy forests, the latter were considerably more difficult to supply than the original pads to the west. Facing the forward edge of the battle line, there was only one way into and out of all landing zones, and wind socks still had not been installed to assess wind direction and velocity. Therefore, we had to rely on experience and technique to perform the job. The most forward pad was eventually considered so important that Red Hat, an English-

---

<sup>18</sup> Tim Castle, *One Day too Long*.  
Dick Secord.  
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 289-290.  
Victor Anthony, *War in Northern Laos*, 253.

speaking FAG, was posted there to advise and marshal us into the site.

Marginal landing zones located on the semi-circular defense area provided an excellent learning experience for me as a relatively uninitiated Bell pilot. One factor predominated: Because of a constant RPM setting, the Bell did not require the considerable throttle manipulation and as much cockpit division of attention as an H-34 during the critical transition to landing. However, instrument monitoring and minor RPM adjustments depending on the fuel control (FCU) governor's efficiency were still required. Also, to compensate for my inexperience, realizing my limitations, I probably elected to carry less weight than others until more confident in handling the machine. The lighter Bell was considerably more delicate and not as forgiving in adverse wind conditions as the H-34. Because of altitude, wind, and a different sight picture on final approach, at first I had a tendency to conduct a hot approach. One reason for this was the Bell tail skid incorporated to alert the pilot to a low flare and protect the tail rotor system. Unlike the Sikorsky H-34 tail wheel that allowed tail first touchdown landings at high elevations, to preclude banging the skid on the ground, the Bell required a level skid landing attitude. Within

limitations, this normally necessitated a positive controlled high-power approach to touchdown.

Through sheer luck, I managed to survive first landing attempts and learned good object lessons from my initial OJT. Fortunately, my initial approach to the easternmost landing zone was enhanced by power the engine developed, and produced outstanding lift at altitude. While decelerating on final approach, realizing I was a little downwind, I rapidly increased pitch and leveled the machine just prior to termination. This leveling resulted in a "scooting," or accelerating tendency. Obviously too fast, believing I would hit the ground hard and perhaps spread the skids, suddenly the rotor downwash provided an amazingly strong ground cushion, which instantly halted the helicopter's descent at two inches above the ground. I was astounded. It was like the hand of providence had seized the machine, intervening to hold it off the ground at the critical moment. I did not make a habit of this unique feature, but the knowledge did come in handy on occasion. This difficult landing zone was the identical one that had spoiled an Air Force CH-3 pilot's day.

On another occasion, a spate of excitement occurred in the cockpit while approaching Red Hat's position. Again, unsure of the exact wind direction, I arrived over the landing zone too high and hot. Not wanting to

continue father east toward suspected enemy territory, at the last second, I flared and pulled pitch. The governor limited power demand and torque to the transmission, which resulted in the helicopter turning slightly right. In "topping out," I did not lose complete control. The aircraft came to high hover and there was sufficient power to land safely. Once again, another useful lesson had been painfully learned, one hopefully not to be repeated.

It was the time of year when Meo farmers' cultivated opium poppies proliferated and inundated areas on top of Pha Thi. In the strikingly beautiful flowers displaying brilliant hues in the color spectrum, many variegated types were visible. During passes, I wondered how sufficient dirt existed to support such a large crop. I also realized that the combination altitude, climate, and human tender loving care merged to produce the most gorgeous poppies I had seen anywhere in Laos. I later rued the fact that I did not take color pictures of the scene. I carried the Yashica camera and occasionally took photos when I believed it feasible, but it was difficult to fly a new machine in which I was attempting to become proficient and snap pictures.



**JANE GLOVER**

While her husband worked to the south at Moung Nane IVS worker, Jane Glover remained at Luang Prabang:

*"...This week is full of Lao holidays, mainly because of the annual [full moon] celebration of That Luang in Vientiane...The fair was much smaller than the one in Vientiane.*

*...Usually the air in Luang Prabang is full of the sound of planes of one kind or another. I have become quite accustomed to them directly overhead. It is though USAID were the landing strip, but in reality the airport is across the river and the other side of town. In the morning it is the T-28s flying over in the direction of Nam Bac. I notice it more when I hang out the clothes on the back porch. Tonight there is a beautiful sunset out there to watch, or I can sit on the front porch and watch the planes glide into the airport, truly graceful they are. The hospital is in the next block and the choppers come in to bring in the wounded from Ban Nam Bac, almost like landing in one's back yard.*

*There is a full moon tonight, but have not heard any shots yet. The people believe a green frog lives there and they will try to kill it..."* <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Jane was a little confused. Likely only celebratory in nature, this event did not equate to the moon's eclipse.

<sup>20</sup> Jane and Bob Glover's Book Laos, 85, 88-89.

High time days in the north followed Sam Tong RONS.

The nineteenth was the most active day of the RON. Dick Elder accompanied Gary and me in Papa Foxtrot Hotel (PFH) to Pha Thi specifically to crew two missions. Most likely to obtain intelligence information regarding fledgling road work toward Site-85, the first infil mission was directed twenty-one miles east to high ground five miles north of Sam Neua Town and almost equidistant between Route-6 and Route-63. As senior man, Elder conducted the flight. Granted, it was a Special Mission, one that could be hazardous, but I noted that Dick was hard on the machine. <sup>21</sup> Elder wasted no time landing. The approach he initiated into the landing zone was abrupt, and after descending at a high rate, he rapidly pulled pitch at the last-minute, sucking off turns below what I considered safe. Perhaps he miscalculated, but if showing off, I was not impressed with his performance.

The second mission was conducted thirteen miles farther northeast to VH209762, seven miles north of Route-6. Both missions took almost two hours to complete and we ended up back at Pha Thi. Dick exited

---

<sup>21</sup> Not adhering to the "tender loving care philosophy," Elder had a proclivity to push helicopters, flying beyond published parameters at altitude--and he was not the only one. Of course, I had been accused of flying like an old grandmother by an HMM-261 squadron mate in the past.

the Bell and found his way south while Gary and I continued to work the Site-85 area.

That night enemy units commenced one of their first dry season road clearing actions at Ban Nhot Phat, fifteen to twenty miles west of Route-6 and alternate Route-68. Meo troops located ten miles to the south withdrew northwards. After rallying and refitting, within a week, they returned to recapture the site. <sup>22</sup>

As we were supporting road watch operations, Wayne Knight and Norm Grammer, who was still area familiarizing and receiving a route check, worked at Na Khang. Then they moved up to Houei Hok (LS-198), a short strip below Site-85's west cliff, where they shuttled water and other supplies to the summit. Other flights took them six miles north to Houei Kha Moun (LS-111), a site that was becoming increasingly important in tying in that flank and acting as a jump off point for Special Missions. After returning to Site-36 for fuel, they loaded troops for a trip to Huei Thong.

Site-196 was located forty miles northwest, where Vang Pao's troops were assembling and moving toward Nam Bac to counter enemy incursion and support FAR efforts to keep the area.

---

<sup>22</sup> Agency Report Recorded in a *CHECO* publication, *The Fall of Site-85*, Edward Vallentiny, 8.

## **THE WILD WEASEL**

On the way back to Pha Thi the crew heard a Mayday report over UFH guard frequency (243.0). I heard the same radio call, and as we were immediately available, prepared for action.

While preceding a bombing strike in North Vietnam to identify and eliminate ground missile radar sites, two USAF F-105F Wild Weasel jets were impacted by a SAM-2 missile. The lead ship exploded and the wingman's jet was seriously damaged by shrapnel. The pilot flew as far as deemed possible toward Laos, where he and his back seater punched out. Fortunately, they landed about three miles southeast of Site-85.

After the first two American jets were shot down in July 1965 by surface-to-air missiles (SAM) launched in North Vietnam, steps were taken by the USAF and U.S. Navy to equip aircraft with the means to detect, mark, and attack SAM radar guidance installations. Electronic detection and directional equipment were already available and in the military pipeline. Going a separate way from the Navy, the Air Force chose to retrofit a Korean War creation, a two-seat F-100F Super Saber jet for the task. The first Wild Weasels arrived at Korat RTAFB in November 1965. During December, the concept included F-100Fs, accompanied by F-105Ds with iron bombs entering a target area prior to a scheduled

strike, detecting SAM radar signals and directing 105s onto the site.

The Weasel pilot's task became a little easier and more survivable when the Navy Shrike, a supersonic, anti-radiation missile (ARM) designed to detect frequencies and fly down a radar beam into an enemy radar van was introduced. Designed as a stand-off weapon, the weapon could be launched from a twelve-mile distance that provided a modicum of safety for F-100F crews.

Some success was achieved, but like an apple and oranges comparison, mixing faster F-105Ds with slower F-100Fs was eventually not deemed feasible. Therefore, the F-105F Thunderchief (Weasel) was developed. Having greater range, able to carry a heavier load, and employing more sophisticated electronics, second generation Weasels were introduced into the theater for combat operations at Korat, Thailand, by the middle of 1966.

Over time, the exercise became a deadly cat and mouse game with the F-105F pilots deliberately exposing themselves to enemy missile attack. Then, with the initial aircraft of the hunter-killer team evading the SAM with high-speed turns, the second aircraft in the team would deliver a Shrike, Standard ARM, bombs, or cannon on the facility.

Eventually learning through difficult experience, savvy enemy radar operators only activated their radar momentarily to assess enemy intentions and when actually launching missiles. Then when their instruments indicated signals were being monitored, they shut the radar down. Except for lower-level AAA threats, in most cases this effectively reduced higher areas from missile hazards.

Toward the end of 1967, success of the Wild Weasel missions had been abundantly demonstrated by the number of missile sites destroyed or SAM radar emissions neutralized. However, success came at a high cost in the number of planes and pilots lost performing the dangerous work, when it would have been less costly to have destroyed the developing sites in 1965.

Utilized throughout the war, Weasel assets continued to be upgraded and modified with improved electronics, weapons systems, and armor. <sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Segment Sources:

John Smith, *Rolling Thunder*, 278-282.

SA-2 AAA Flak Air Defense System Wild Weasel Missiles, Internet, (<http://www.danshistory.com/aircover.html>).

Republic F-105F Thunderchief, ([http://home.att.net/~jbauger1/f105\\_8.html](http://home.att.net/~jbauger1/f105_8.html)).

Cugini, Necessity is the Mother of Invention, and the Need to Counter North Vietnam's SAMs Brought Forth the Wild Weasel, *Vietnam Magazine*. Arsenal, Internet, 12/96, ([http://www.thehistorynet.com/Vietnam/articles/06962\\_text.htm](http://www.thehistorynet.com/Vietnam/articles/06962_text.htm)).

## RESCUES

My pilot was standing in the midst of scrub trees on hilly, rolling terrain. I made a slow pass just above the treetops and determined that I could not land or hover low enough to enable the man to climb in the cabin. Unfortunately, the 205s had not arrived in Udorn equipped with any form of rescue hoist like a few 204B models with integral overhead devices. Some individuals in the organization resisted sending the machines upcountry until internal hoists were delivered, but CPH Knight, realizing that this could cause substantial delay, lobbied hard and won the argument to have the Bells immediately introduced to the field.

Understanding that a means to lift the pilot and extra assistance were necessary, I returned to the top of Pha Thi and discussed the matter with Agency Case Officer "Howie" Freeman. He quickly obtained and provided me with a stout rope and a soldier to help Gentz. Then, as Gary fashioned a combination cargo strap-rope lifting device, I dove off the cliff and returned to the pilot's location. <sup>24</sup>

Since enemy bands had recently been spotted roaming the area, there was some urgency to hasten the rescue.

---

<sup>24</sup> A minor note: With the passage of time, accounts vary as to who was on which ship. Gentz maintains that Freeman was onboard Knight's aircraft, and a local on ours. Knight indicates no Case Officer was onboard his helicopter, but one was on ours.

Radio traffic also indicated Jolly Green helicopters were on the way north to conduct the rescue. As always, they were generally staged either at Long Tieng or Na Khang, and claimed the sole right to conduct a pick-up. However, as was also always the case, they were late because of the endless briefings required by their SOPs. We had learned through difficult experiences that in all SAR scenarios, time was of the essence in retrieving an aviator. Therefore, although often causing ill will, we normally disregarded such requests from the Jolly pilots.

With Gentz's guidance I hovered over the pilot as low as possible without damaging the ship. After Gary dropped the rope, the sizeable pilot tied the rope around his waist. Then, while maintaining the steadiest hover I was able to achieve, Gary and his assistant began hauling him upward toward the cabin door. With the man halfway to the skids, the local helper froze, unexpectedly deciding to release his grip on the rope. Left holding the pilot's entire dead weight, my Flight Mechanic managed to prevent the rope from slipping from his grasp. Screaming, he managed to get the local back on the rope. Together they raised the pilot high enough for him to grab the skid and pull himself into the cabin section with Gary's help. Once in the ship, Gary estimated the man to be six feet four inches tall and weighing 250 pounds, more like a wrestler than a pilot.



Contacting an inbound Jolly pilot, I relayed that I had an Air Force pilot onboard and was on my way to drop him off at Site-107. Then after depositing the rope and trooper off at Site-85, I went back to "normal" work. Since SARs had been commonplace, it was often this way: perform a SAR, and then continue to march. Since there was no extra incentive to perform this kind of work, we did not make an issue of it. We never talked about them much...so many were forgotten.

The days of a commendation letter from the Air Force and our Base Manager were largely over. Neither Gary nor I received recognition of any kind for this SAR. Furthermore, except for Curt Briggs, I did not record any pilot's name (this would have been valuable for posterity and this writing). The quick and clean SAR was particularly satisfying and a real confidence and morale builder for me as a fairly new Bell pilot. In addition, we had used the initiative to conduct a lifesaving act with spur-of-the-moment tools. If I was still in the U.S. Marine Corps, we would have called it a "field expediency."

While we were still hovering over our target, Wayne and Norm arrived and reported identifying the target. Through a thick vine canopy, Wayne could see that the man in aviator clothing was also huge and that the Meo standing beside him wore standard black. Wayne, flying from the right seat, was able to hover low enough into

the vine tangle for the great behemoth to climb over the right skid into the cabin. <sup>25</sup> Once onboard, the pilot reported that after landing he had encountered problems moving. While attempting to negotiate the vine thicket, his armpits became entangled. The Meo who arrived to help showed him how to reverse his progress, remove the vines, and proceed. On the way to Site-111 for drop-off, the appreciative pilot mentioned providing the crew with a traditional case of whiskey. Against this end he requested crew names and addresses. None ever materialized.

Wayne continued to work at Pha Thi and Na Khang and then RTB Sam Tong to RON. I was relieved at Site-36 and caught a ride to Long Tieng on CASI Porter XW-PCK. As there was nothing immediately available going south, I was obliged to board C-47 XW-PDE for a circuitous two-hour ride back to Site-36 and then to Tango-08. I considered the RON in Papa Foxtrot Hotel (PFH) fruitful, appreciating and always enjoying the opportunity to fly solo pilot for OJT learning. I also valued the machine's purported reliable engine and ability to perform well at high elevations.

Wayne remained upcountry working locally for USAID. One flight involved a trip to Pha Ka (LS-51), eight miles west-southwest of Sam Tong. After about three hours, Wayne deadheaded to Udorn.

---

<sup>25</sup> Air Force pilots must have eaten well.

**SEQUEL**

Years later I learned "the rest of the story" from Wayne Knight:

*Our timely rescue was favorably looked on by all but a couple senior USAF officers at Udorn. [For various reasons] they resented us for our good SAR work. From the beginning, the USAF [and Navy] could not do the job and some [individuals] resented kudos that Air America was receiving. An Air Force colonel made some very loud complaints to AB-1 about our [Weasel] rescue. [AB-1 representative] Tom Lum called saying they were meeting at USAF facilities to hear the complaint. Tom asked Wayne to attend.*

*The colonel knew Wayne as an Air America manager, but was not aware he was [an active participant] in the Wild Weasel mission. By prior agreement, Tom and Wayne let him present his case. He claimed our helicopters were not properly equipped and that we risked further injury to the survivors with our non-professional methods. He may have had a case in [regard to] my rope rescue, but not a very good case in Wayne's effort. He also claimed the USAF relationship with the Meo was damaged because no reward money was distributed to the rescuers. This made Wayne laugh. And he made some other points.*

*To the colonel's surprise, Wayne refuted his allegations when he revealed that he was a participant*

*in the SAR and had first-hand knowledge of events. [As a crowning blow], Wayne suggested the colonel present the case to the two survivors and ask them if they would have preferred to wait another 45 minutes [on the ground] or so until the Jollies arrived. That ended the meeting, but Wayne had made a [bitter] enemy and later had a lot of problems with the [same] colonel.* <sup>26</sup>

Wayne believed this SAR was unique, perhaps the first using ropes to aid the recovery. In addition, the incident may have speeded delivery of the Breeze hoists, for they were received and installed not long after the SAR. <sup>27</sup>

## **AIR RESCUE**

Arriving late as an SAR entity, and almost as an afterthought to the adjunct of an air war, from the pathetic non-beginnings, Air Force air rescue in the Vietnam and Lao arenas reached zenith proportions in 1967. Military rescue machinery for plucking men from the jungle had evolved from the off the shelf Kaman HH-43 helicopter to the Sikorsky-manufactured CH-3, HH-3

---

<sup>26</sup> Knight's confrontation most probably negated any letters of commendation, which relied on rapport between Air America and Air Force leaders. This had existed in the very early days, but faded when new personnel entered the theater.

<sup>27</sup> EW Knight Emails, 05/03/00, 08/26/00, 08/27/00, 08/29/00. Gary Gentz Interview at the Southern Natural Gas Hanger, Toca, Louisiana, 02/16/90.

series, to the largest and most efficient beast of all, the HH-53 series. <sup>28</sup>

When helicopters were initially manufactured specifically for search and rescue operations, little thought was acknowledged to a requirement for air-to-air refueling. However, orbits on border stations and long distances involved in reaching targets required extra fuel and modified this thinking. Even before the obvious was realized, the concept was proven when a fuel probe was installed in an Air Force CH-3 in December 1965. During that month the CH-3 crew received fuel from a Marine KC-130. <sup>29</sup> HC-130H aircraft were retrofitted to HC-130Ps for the refueling task, and testing continued. A year after the theory of air refueling of helicopters had been proven feasible, the first inflight refueling between an HC-130P and a HH-3E was conducted.

June 1967 marked the first combat refueling of an HH-3E, and rescue operations in Southeast Asia had entered a new era. No longer were the crews obliged to return to Na Khang after two and a half hours on station for the time-consuming fueling operation. If

---

<sup>28</sup> Series models aircraft... usually indicated engine upgrades.

<sup>29</sup> Actually, this particular model was called a GV.

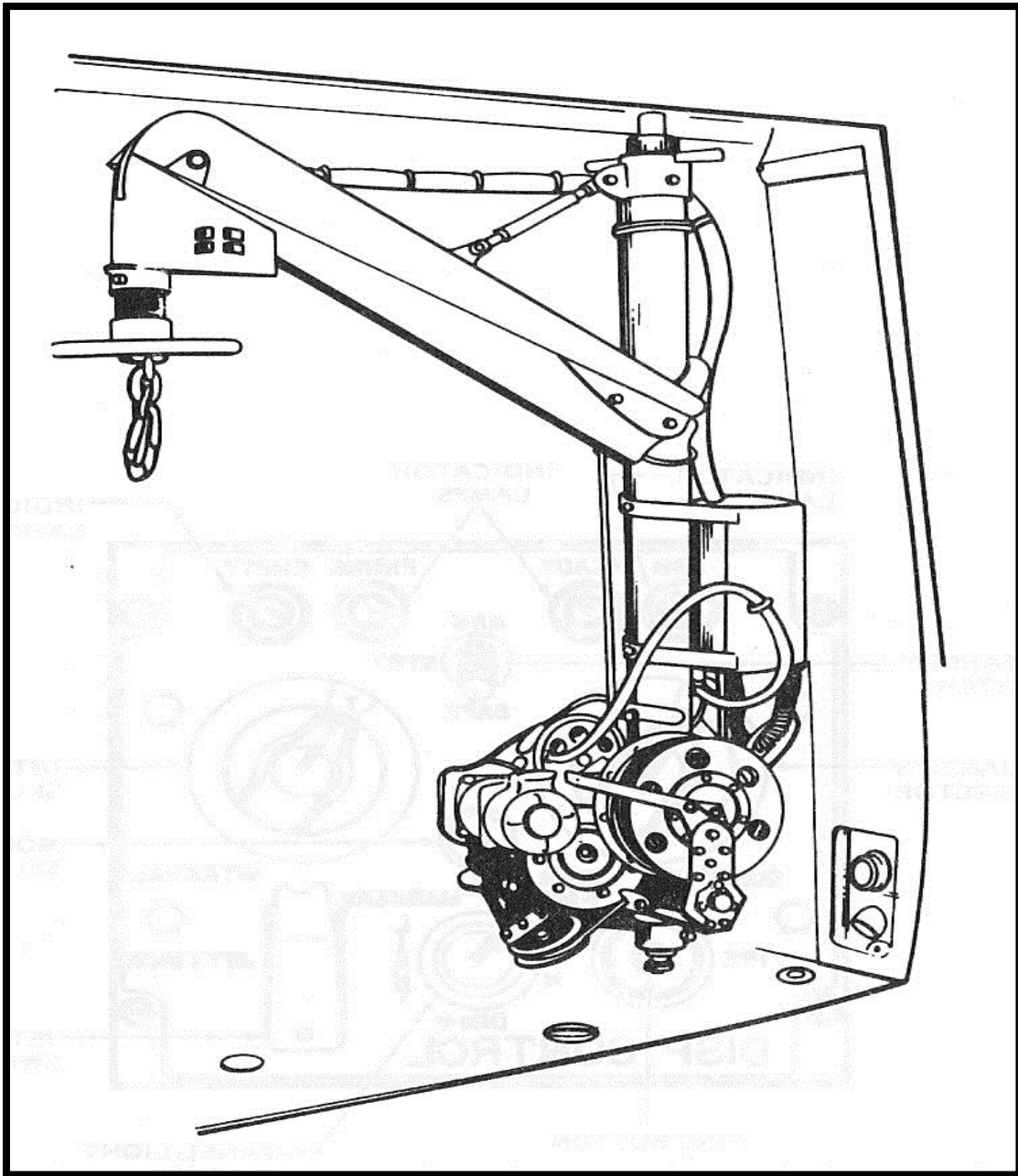
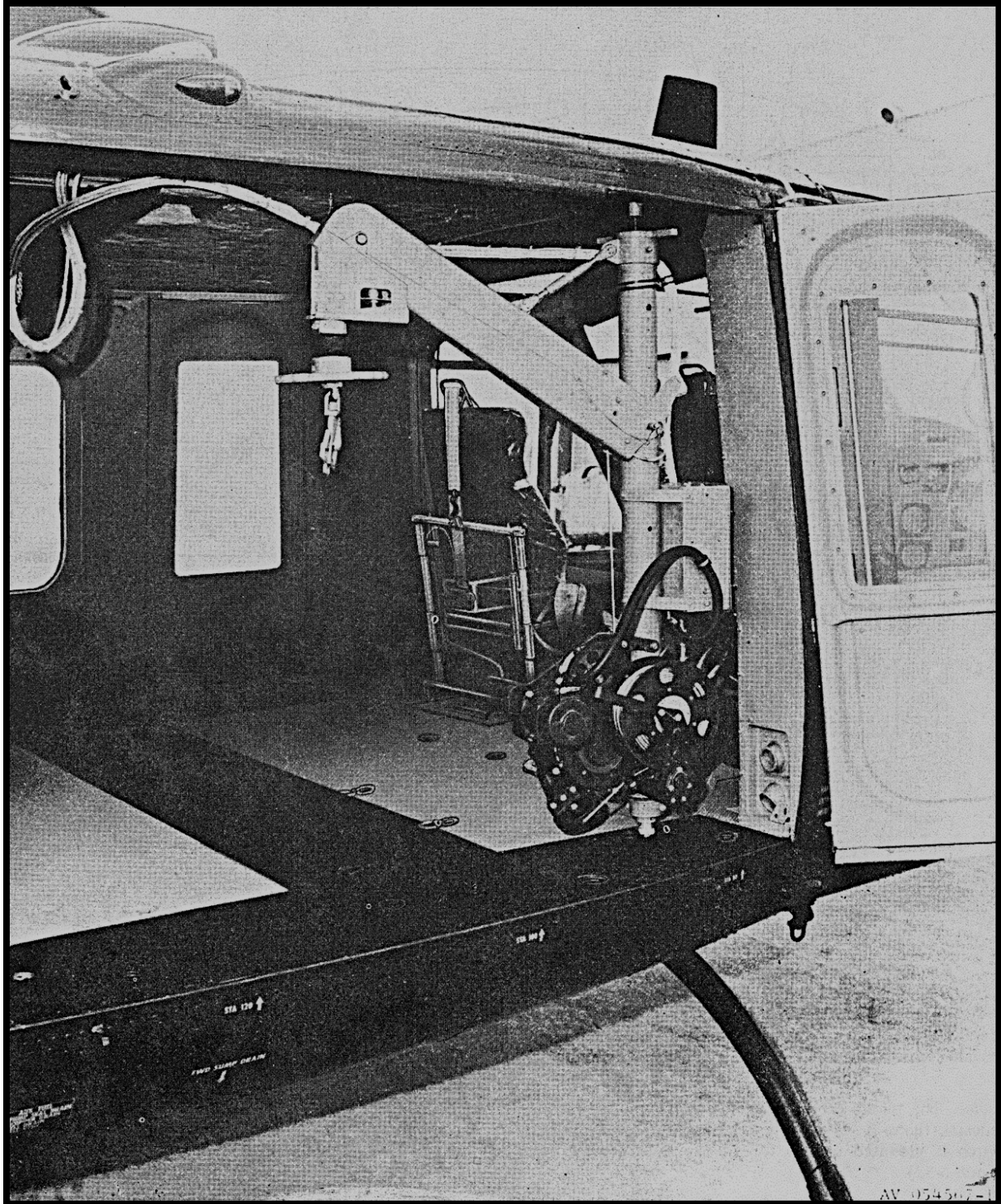


Diagram of a generic 205 internal hoist installation employed on Air America Bells.

*Operators Manual, Army Model, UH-1, Headquarters, Department of the Army, 02/15/88.*



A typical internal hoist employed on Air America 205 Bells. The unit could be quickly installed or removed as missions dictated.  
*Army Operator's Manual, 08/25/71.*



Marking an unparalleled advancement in Southeast Asia air rescue operations, a USAF Jolly Green fueling from a HC-130P tanker.

Author Collection.



alerted for a rescue, they could immediately proceed to the downed area while enhancing hovering capability by dumping fuel. After the SAR, they had the option of refueling while en route to RTB. Inflight refueling no doubt contributed to many more downed airmen being clutched from capture and the distinct disadvantages of spending time in the Hanoi Hilton. <sup>30</sup>

Combat rescue operation machinery reached a maximum level with introduction to the theater of HH-53Bs when two arrived at the Udorn base early in December. The USAF now had in place a rescue mechanism capable of superior lift performance with sufficient armament and the firepower to more effectively shoot its way in and out of hairy situations. Problems abounded initially, which delayed for a time full HH-53 introduction into combat. Mainly, crew members were found not qualified in aerial refueling, and mechanical glitches had to be resolved. Much larger than the HH-3E, the ship was dubbed the Super Jolly Green Giant.

From my Benjarn Road house, I occasionally watched the Air Force helicopters flying formation while

---

<sup>30</sup> The HC-130P served as the airborne SAR command and control platform under the call signs Crown and King. Also orbiting in the same station as the helicopters, the C-130 had the capacity to refuel rescue helicopters.

practicing refueling operations. It was quite impressive.<sup>31</sup>

## **HOME IN UDORN**

Captain Bob Davis was planning to marry a Thai girl and wanted to purchase a house in Udorn. To defray the cost, earlier in the month he asked me for a loan of 5,000 dollars. I liked Bob and considered doing this if he tailored the agreement so I would hold the house title until the loan was paid back.

While I was off for three days, Bob came by and indicated that the greedy landlord wanted too much baht for the house. I agreed with his assessment, and the deal collapsed.

Rick had completed his amoeba treatment, so I took him to the airfield for a visit to the clinic. Afterward I stopped in the CPH office to show him off. Wayne and Marius were out and Phil Goddard had the helm. While we chatted, Rick began pointing to Phil's prominent English nose and began uttering something sounding like ngose in baby talk. At first, his vocalization was not understood, but then the intent dawned on us. The incident was both embarrassing and hilarious at the same time. Remembering the archaic saying, "Out of the mouths of babes oft-times come

---

<sup>31</sup> Earl Tilford, *USAF Search and Rescue*, 82-85, 90-91.  
John Smith, *Rolling Thunder*, 290-291.

gems," I attempted to restrain my laughter and departed before I was going to burst.

### **UPCOUNTRY MISSION ABORT**

On Thursday I deadheaded on Air America C-47 B-879 to Savannakhet to join Ken Wood and Jay Meyers crewing Papa Foxtrot Gulf (PFG). It would mark my first time flying with Ken, another former Army pilot hired with the other five. The road watch mission of the day was a planned exfil to XD286868, eighty miles northeast of Lima-39. The remote spot was twelve miles south of the border and would necessitate crossing Route-911 twice.

We launched, and after nearly reaching our objective, the mission was suddenly cancelled. Having travelled all that distance, the mission's termination was quite surprising and disappointing to all involved. The day was a net zero as we lost in two ways: the mission had to be rescheduled and the Customer would never authorize mission pay for an abort.

I deadheaded home on photo recon Volpar 42Z and logged more deadhead than flight time. Such missions occurred and were tiresome, for they involved relocation, lugging flight equipment and weapons, and flight time was low. Still, we considered it part of the job, even though there was no actual job description for the Huey program.

## **JARINA IN THE DARK**

Mike was assigned to fly to Pitts Camp (Tango-603) with Tom Nery in Hotel-40. Never having been that far west before, he wanted ADF capability for area navigation. Hotel-40's ADF was not working properly, so Mike and Jerry McEntee had a discussion about having one installed. Mike won the argument by grounding the machine.

When the navigation gear was operational Mike launched. Upon landing, he learned that the Customer wanted him to help train a small unit of Lao SGU troops. Conducting multiple day landings, Mike did everything asked of him.

The Customer then wanted to practice night infiltrations. Mike would first pre-position a beacon on a road, and later deliver teams to the spot. Then he would return the troops to the camp and the Customer would direct him using strobe lights. Mike flew the course during the day and noted that the area was located in a valley surrounded by hills. He also spotted many obstacles near the landing zone.

That night was as dark as the inside of an inkwell; no area illumination, no runway lights, no moon or stars, and, with a hundred percent overcast below the mountain tops, certainly no visible horizon.

He launched with the team, but was unable to obtain the signal. He trolled the area low level and realized

that he would eventually get into trouble if he continued to pursue this option. Therefore, he returned to the runway on instruments.

When the Customer arrived at the aircraft, he wanted an explanation as to why Mike had returned with the team. Mike informed him that the beacon was not working and, noticing trees on the approach path, he elected to RTB.

The unhappy Customer stated, *"Yes, but on the runway? This exercise is supposed to be a night infil."*

*"Who is supposed to be getting the practice? You want to obtain practice, then have the troops jump out of a static aircraft in the dark."*

The Customer interjected, *"The last guy who came over here performed the mission."*

Mike queried him as to the time frame and discovered it included a full moon.

*"What difference does that make?"*

Mike countered that things were a little mixed up. He had never performed any night infiltrations; they were simply not done. He suggested extinguishing the runway lights and having the troops practice disembarking the helicopter, signaling, and guiding his helicopter into the landing zone. This could be done in a safer place, especially under the black conditions.

When he returned to Udorn the following day, McEntee met the aircraft and questioned him.

*"Why did you do that? We did this mission before."*

Mike asked if Jerry had flown the mission and learned that Verne Clarkson was the pilot. He pointed to the different conditions he encountered: no horizon and the only two light sources to guide him were a strobe light in the woods and a dimly lighted runway. Consequently, in the interest of safety, he opted for the dimly lighted runway.

Jarina was never again scheduled to work at Pitts Camp. It did not worry him.

## **WHERE ARE WE?**

The area north of Luang Prabang continued to be a "can of worms" for pilots to work. On 25 November ACP Marius Burke was scheduled to give Ellis Emery a route check in Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot (PFF). After arriving at Sam Tong, they flew across Skyline into Long Tieng. There they were fully loaded with ten PARU, a large gun, and ammunition. Included in the group were a Thai he called "Lawyer," and an Agency Customer. Marius referred to the Customer as "Sad Sack" after the comic strip character George Baker created for *Yank Magazine* in 1942 and after the war, and which appeared in the Sunday comics. The "Sack" was a young man who normally

worked at Na Khang and to Burke always looked unkempt and forlorn. <sup>32</sup>

From 20-Alternate they flew to Luang Prabang, and then north toward a position near the border that was most likely a listening post. Supposedly, members of the Thai team had been there a few times and were familiar with the area.

Encountering a lowering cloud layer the farther north they flew, it made no sense to continue underneath in enemy territory and possibly incurring ground fire, so they elected to ascend. Once on top at 8,000 feet, they continued north using heading and time-distance to reach the destination.

After thirty minutes, they encountered a hole in the clouds and descended over a mountainous area where two rivers crossed in north-south, east-west directions. Mountain elevations and the rivers matched those on the chart and corresponded to their time-distance calculations. The PARU nodded approval, so they proceeded north. Weather conditions were not good, but there was fairly decent visibility underneath with mountain tops obscured. At the estimated time a turn northeast was deemed necessary. Now they were not entirely certain, although the Thai believed they needed to fly farther north.

---

<sup>32</sup> Closely fitting Burke's description, this individual was most likely Mike Lynch.

They continued, with the Thai passengers agreeing they were on track. Finally, skirting the eastern mountain sides at low level at about fifty feet, what previously had been dense overgrowth with no visible signs of life suddenly dissolved. Passing the center axis of one mountain, the jungle ceased to exist and the entire north side was either bare or cultivated in terrace like rice paddy fashion. At this point, suspecting that they might be in Yunnan, China, or a remote part of Phong Saly Province, Burke rightly became concerned and began circling to the west with the intention of turning south. Soon, at twenty feet, they flew over significant bunker-like structures that were built into the hillside. That did it. Marius was certain that he was definitely in a location where they should not be. He also assumed that whoever was in the area was equally surprised at their presence, but because of the Bell's speed and altitude, were unable



to react before PFF disappeared south. <sup>33</sup>

While proceeding south against now strong headwinds, attempting to regain accurate bearings, the PARU once again acted as if they knew their exact location and provided additional directions. After so many false starts, Marius was skeptical and continued south. Anticipating that he would most likely have to land somewhere to await a fuel delivery, he called in the blind declaring his estimated location, predicament, and intention to proceed south as far as possible.

In the meantime, the Thai passengers, again gesturing that they knew where they were, and that the outpost was only a few miles away, attempted to get the crew to fly east. As this site was supposedly "safe,"

---

<sup>33</sup> Note: The map shows two almost identical terrain features, terrain and river wise, one due north of the other by thirty to forty miles. Based on the time they were on top of the clouds and the distances between the two areas, Burke believed a tail wind of sixty to seventy knots must have propelled them far to the north. Furthermore, when they descended through the hole and observed the terrain features and two rivers crossing at ninety degrees, they naturally assumed they were at the southern-most position. However, flying underneath in unfamiliar territory, with little other distinguishing navigation features to indicate that they were too far north, greatly exacerbated the situation. In addition, contradictory directions from the Thai, insisting that they knew where they were did nothing to help the pilots.

As to the bunkers, burial tombs located on Okinawa are womb shaped concrete structures built into hillsides. They could appear like storage bunkers. The Author has not only seen this type of burial tomb in Okinawa, but also the the Chinese section of Pattani, Thailand.

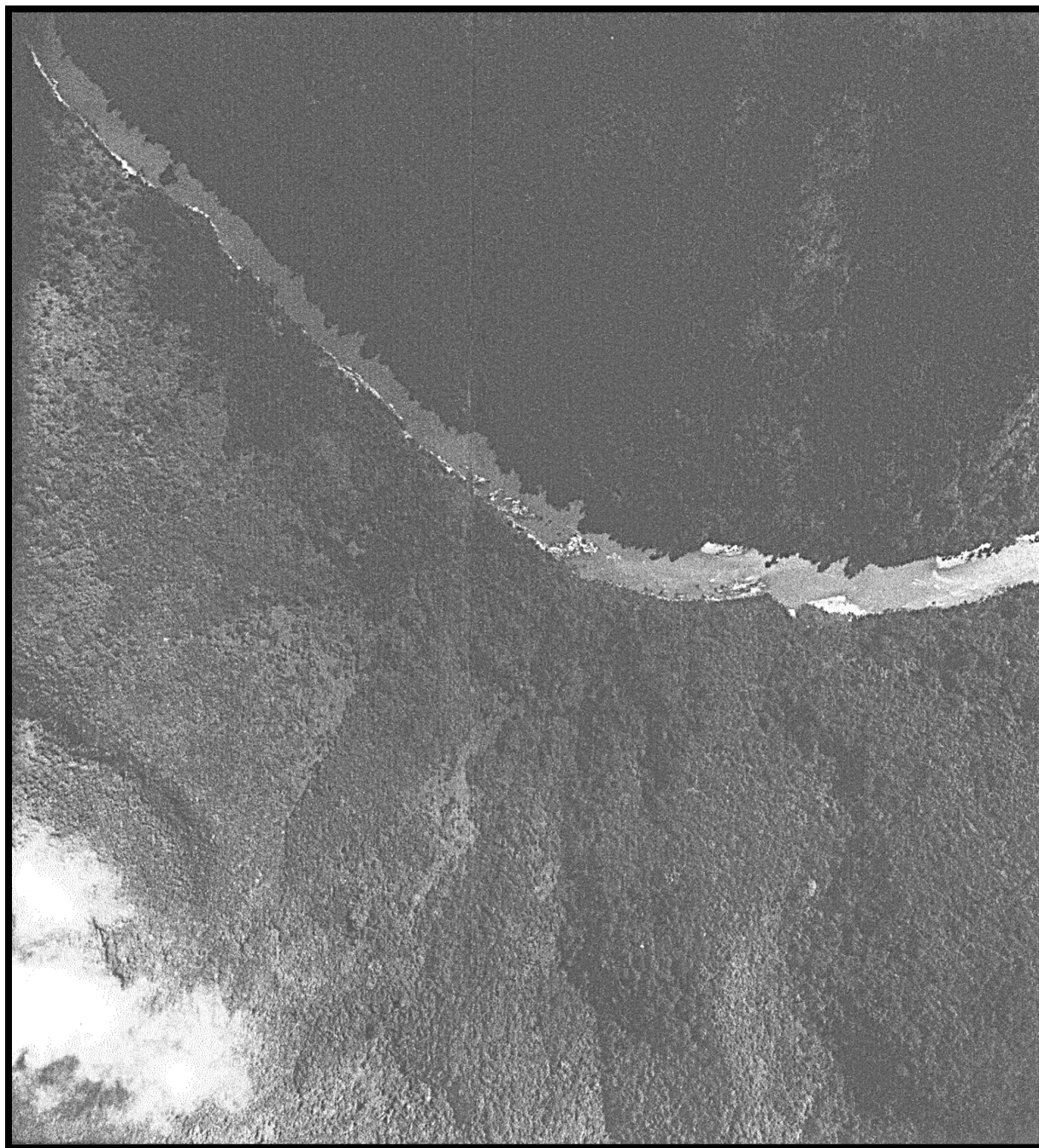
it appeared the most viable solution to an increasingly critical situation. As they approached the mountaintop area, ground fire suddenly erupted, causing an abort to the landing.

Perilously low on fuel, Marius selected a suitable spot a few miles away to land and await help. The PARU initially seemed in agreement, until on short final approach, when they began screaming that they knew where they were and the area was under enemy control.

With few options remaining, Marius headed for another potential landing zone. Time was important, for the twenty-minute low level warning light had illuminated. While decelerating on short final, the engine flamed out because of premature fuel exhaustion.

*Mayday! Mayday!*

Choosing not to autorotate into the trees without power, as the lesser of two evils, Marius opted for a softer, more forgiving water landing so he turned and dove for the river. There was no discernable river bank to land on, for mountains, high trees, and jungle growth extended to the water's edge. Burke maintained extra speed to maneuver at the last moment, as the river had many sharp bends and was fairly narrow, an estimated seventy-five to one hundred feet across in most places. As he neared the water, while rounding a substantial bend, a small sandbar appeared. With little



Area of the Nam Ou where Marius Burke and Ellis Emery planted XW-PFF on a convenient sandbar, 25 November 1967. Photo obtained by Frank Bonasinga and Steve Stevens flying Volpar 42Z.

Marius Burke Collection.

time remaining before impact, Burke flared dramatically, rapidly decelerating to zero ground speed. The tail stinger dug into the sand, but PFF came to rest with no forward motion. <sup>34</sup>

Marius secured the aircraft and everyone exited PFF to assess their plight. Customer "Sad Sack" was very nervous and wanted to move out immediately for the high ground. However, Burke suggested they take a few minutes and decide on the best escape and evasion plan—climb the mountain, go down the river, or remain with the aircraft and hope for a timely rescue. Marius also wanted time to look the helicopter over to see if it might be flyable with minimum work. "Sad Sack" wanted nothing to do with that and ordered the PARU up the mountain with him. "Lawyer" wanted to remain with the ship, but was ordered to leave. The group was soon out of sight.

---

<sup>34</sup> The TJ1594 coordinates Burke recorded placed the ship on the Nam Ou, fifty-five miles north-northwest of Nam Bac. Another river, the southeast flowing Nam Leng, intersects the Ou River a little farther south. The site was seven miles east-southeast of Phong Saly. Route-191, a northern offshoot from Route-19, paralleled the east side of the Nam Ou.

Mike Jarina's coordinates were recorded at TJ1915: eighteen miles northwest of Site-203, near Lao Veng, nine miles northwest of LS-169.

Historian Joe Leeker's coordinates, taken from the incident report and comprised of only five digits, are incomplete.

Because of Burke's first-hand participation, the Author tends to accept his set of coordinates.

Marius, Ellis, and their Filipino Flight Mechanic spent a few minutes talking over the situation, and then decided to link up with the main group. Despite Burke's objections, Ellis insisted on carrying his suitcase. After a hundred feet of difficult progress, he rejected this idea.

Ten minutes later a single gunshot was heard. Concerned, they continued up the mountain. Unable to make visual contact, they could hear the PARU, or "Sack," talking to airborne aircraft. Now Marius also established contact, and provided a location and DF steer on UHF guard frequency. While approaching a clear area on a hill they heard unidentified troops nearby, but concealed in the ten-foot saw grass, were unable to see them.

Late in the day, Mike Jarina and "Beng" Bengston worked the Nam Bac area in separate H-34s. Hearing the Mayday, but unfamiliar with the situation, they started north. It was an immediate reaction, one we did whenever one of us had trouble.

Bengston easily retrieved Emery, but Mike could not find Marius at first. Compounding his difficulty, Mike's helmet had developed a communication glitch and he was temporarily unable to understand anyone. At the downed site his Flight Mechanic Baccay climbed up the right side of Hotel-40, and pointing, said, "He is over there." Mike looked and saw a machete waving in the

grass. When he found Marius, he was walking away from PFF. Mike collected him and headed south toward Site-203.

A USAF Super Jolly Green crew rescued the Flight Mechanic. Recently arrived in Thailand, it was the first HH-53B rescue logged in a reputedly hostile environment.

By the time the two H-34 pilots landed at Nam Bac, it was approaching dark. While Beng and Mike waited for their ships to be refueled, Emery and Burke boarded a Porter for Luang Prabang and then Udorn. "Lawyer's" body was at Luang Prabang. "Sad Sack" explained that the troops were checking their weapons when "Lawyer's" gun accidentally discharged, killing him. This was the shot that Marius and Ellis heard. To this day, Marius has reservations about the explanation of the Thai man's death.

It was black-black when both H-34s were topped off and ready to launch for Luang Prabang. Clearly the deteriorating situation at Nam Bac did not warrant a RON.

Bengston inquired, *"We are really going back at night?"*

Mike answered, *"Sure, we will fly heading-time-distance and use the NDB in close. We do not have to fly formation, just follow me out with your lights on."*



USAF HH-53 "Super Jolly Green rescue helicopter.

*I will cruise at 3,500 to 4,000 feet and you fly 500 feet higher. You can do it, Beng."*

A quarter way south, Bengston elatedly reported, *"I have it; a needle swing."*

*"No, it is not time yet. Just keep going."*

People at the airport were supposed to place lighted cans along the runway for the inbound aircraft. After about an hour, when closing on the airport, "Beng" said, *"What a beautiful job they did. They have the area lighted up just like a runway."*

*"That is not a runway. I think you are looking at a downtown main street. Look a couple miles northeast. You should see an area with no lights--definitely black. Go there."*

Jeeps were positioned at either end of the runway with headlights glaring and pointing the way. After landing and talking to Mike, "Beng" was impressed with the flight; except for the six-month local night training requirements at Udorn, he had never flown at night in Laos.

## **PHOTO RECON AND RECOVERY**

Joining a small elite group of Volpar pilots, Frank Bonasinga began flying photo reconnaissance missions in 42 Zulu during late October. His first Lao mission was with Berl King, who had been performing the AB-1





"Shaky" Bengston, holding his characteristic pipe, and Mike Jarina outside their rental house in Udorn, Thailand.  
Knight Collection.

special assignments for over a year. During a five-and-a-half-year period, flying thousands of hours, Frank conducted 569 missions. Missions generally averaged seven hours in duration. After receiving a briefing at Udorn and receiving a marked chart, the crew would depart for a target at about 0830 hours. It was important to be on station between 0900 and 1500 hours in order to take advantage of the sun's position in the sky for an optimum photographic image. The copilot would change the film canisters and spell the PIC to and from the target areas.

Often flying on the borders of China, Burma, Cambodia, and Vietnam, varied missions included photographing roads, battle damage, prison camps, training sites, poppy fields, and other highly classified items of interest. Photographing roads normally took half an hour; all day for mosaics requiring numerous flights over the same area to obtain overlapping photos for three-dimensional viewing. Sometimes AAA fire was heavy in highly contested areas and a particularly hairy mission near the Chinese border required a 16,000 feet ASL overfly. Despite the extreme altitude that required an hour to reach, abundant AAA littered the sky.

At Udorn, the AB-1 photo interpreter retrieved the film canisters and rushed them to the Air Force processing laboratory. The crew continued to the Agency

photo shop to debrief and view the day's work. As a result, the benefits obtained from debriefing, viewing the photos, and covering the same areas many times, resulted in superior photographs that were often utilized by Air Force and Navy units for targeting.

While Air America management moved heaven and earth to have an Air Force helicopter assigned to lift PFF out of the river bed, Frank Bonasinga and Steve Stevens were scheduled on Sunday the 26th to find and photograph PFF for the AB-1 photo shop. Coordinates provided were one grid square off,<sup>35</sup> so they wasted a lot of time before discovering the Bell. They took some hand-held photos and passed the word that the helicopter had branches placed on it for concealment. This information was rejected and they were generally disbelieved because, "Those heroes were always making things up." AB-1 people contended that no one was at the helicopter.

To confirm the 42 Zulu sighting, Jarina and Bengston went back north to PFF. They found that someone, either locals or an enemy unit, had indeed attempted to conceal the Bell. In addition, they had trashed the helicopter, slashed the seats, smashed cockpit gages, and cut wiring.

When HH-3 crews arrived at the site to retrieve the ship, there was some doubt as to the Sikorsky's

---

<sup>35</sup> A grid square was six miles horizontal and vertical.

capability to lift the Bell. After two tension filled hours while Gaza Eiler and his hook-up crew prepared straps and wires, and attached them to hard points for the lift, the designated HH-3 lumbered into the air with a secure load.

In Udorn, Burke had a difficult time explaining the incident, but he expended a lot of effort in preparing his case for the accident board. One day after the event, Marius and Ellis covered the FIC office floor with maps, while gleaning data. Safety Director Doug Dreyfus was present. A good friend of Marius, he was helpful in assisting the men with the report. In retrospect, Knight thought the biggest mistake the Bell crew made was actually flying to a flame-out condition. Moreover, at the time, it seemed like a "rookie" mistake.

After the incident, in appreciation of Jarina's participation picking him up, Burke invited Mike to his house for dinner in the Godnoma compound. He talked about flying on the red light, and in the few minutes before the incident, desperately looking for a place to land. He figured that seven minutes remained in the

tanks before fuel exhaustion. <sup>36</sup>

Wiring installation and continuity checks required extensive repair work by skilled technicians. Therefore, PFF was in the barn undergoing repair until late January 1968, when Wayne conducted comprehensive airworthiness test flights prior to releasing the machine for upcountry work. Total cost of accident-incident repairs caused by both Air America pilot and enemy activity was 69,919 dollars. <sup>37</sup>

Jarina remained at Luang Prabang five additional days after participating in the successful PFF SAR. Most of the work revolved around supplying outposts surrounding Nam Bac. Flight hours and number of

---

<sup>36</sup> The standard twenty minutes fuel figure judged available after the low-level light illuminated was moot. This depended on several factors: accurate fuel gage system calibration, power demand, and aircraft configuration. In the Author's opinion, deceleration or a high nose attitude with little fuel remaining, what we humorously referred to as flying on fumes, might tend to cause fuel tank pump cavitation and provide insufficient fuel flow to the overhead engine.

<sup>37</sup> Segment Sources:  
Marius Burke Interviews.  
Burke Emails, 01/15/11, 08/29/00.  
Mike Jarina Interviews.  
Steve Sevens Email.  
HH53B History.  
Frank Bonasinga Interview Steven Maxner, Texas Tech University, 04/16/01.  
Frank Bonasinga Letter to Larry Sall University of Texas Curator, Richardson, Texas, 07/28/86.  
Frank Bonasinga Emails to Author, 07/23/10, 01/15/11, 01/19/11, 01/21/11, 01/22/11.

landings were high. One day Mike made an unheard number of fifty-four landings. <sup>38</sup>

It was a time when the area north of Luang Prabang was becoming very active and events were swiftly moving toward a conclusion. Mike was instructed to retrieve only wounded at a landing zone between the royal capital and Site-203. After landing, the troops mobbed Hotel-40 wanting to get out of there. One man in the rear of the crowd had a trooper on his shoulder. Mike, impressed with this effort, said to Baccay, "*Look at those guys trying to board the helicopter before that person in the back.*" He instructed his Flight Mechanic to block the front soldiers and allow the one being carried on first. The others let the two through. Mike was not certain how many valid WIAs he carried on the first trip.

After dropping the passengers, he was instructed to return to the same site. When he landed, he was surprised to see four guys carrying others on their backs. Mike laughed to himself and thought the troops learned fast and did whatever it took to get a ride out of that location.

There were thousands of FAR soldiers positioned in and around Site-203, but they were hemmed in and intimidated by two enemy mortar squads. The weapons

---

<sup>38</sup> This included an equal number of takeoffs.

were generally fixed and the crew fired on command from a forward observer. When pressured, the tubes were moved to new locations where they would cause the heaviest casualties. As a result, FAR morale suffered.

One day, Mike watched a small fixed wing aircraft approaching the runway to land. About the time the pilot was touching down, a mortar round hit. Then another one splashed on the runway, with others following the plane down the length of the strip. The incident tended to slow or temporarily eliminate fixed wing traffic.

While working perimeter defenses at Nam Bac, Mike landed on a small pad behind one of the artillery guns. A uniformed American lieutenant colonel, an embassy attaché, was directing the show and instructing the loader where to send buffalo meat. He wanted Jarina to go to one of the numerous outlying landing zones in the hills encircling and buffering the strip.

*"Do not land, just go there and airdrop the supplies."* When Mike asked why, the colonel told him that the pad was likely surrounded, and if the enemy was close, they would shoot him down.

Inexperienced RO people and some new Agency Case Officers often attempted to have pilots assigned to them perform missions their way. Harking back to the saying, "there are many ways to skin a cat," often there was a better method that pilots had developed

over time using OJT and common sense. Therefore, Mike told the officer that he would handle the mission in his own manner. Peering in the distance toward the hill outpost, Mike indicated that he would rather land; conducting a slow pass and air dropping the load would present greater exposure and foster more danger than landing. Landing, kicking the meat out, and departing would take less or about the same time.

Hotel-40 was loaded and Mike headed in the direction of the landing zone. Finding the pad in the middle of trees, he commenced a confined area approach and landed with no trouble. He safely conducted two loads to the same place.

Afterward at the strip, the colonel was perplexed and asked Mike why he operated like he did. Getting a dig in, Jarina said the enemy only had two mortars in place. Having thousands of troops available and superior numbers, why didn't FAR venture out in force and eliminate the mortar crews?

*"They would never do that."*

*"Yes, and that is exactly the reason why you are losing this war."*

Another factor that soured him regarding the Nam Bac operation, and how futile it all seemed, involved retrieval of "sick" individuals. At sundown, a person directed Mike to a northeast hilltop to pick up sick people. He had learned about "sick" people from earlier



USAID work. Besides involving the validity of illness, it was also necessary to carry any and all relatives. This was confusing to him at first until informed by a Sam Tong representative that if family members did not go along to care for the sick, no one would.

On this mission, there were no sick individuals, only two officers. He carried them back to Luang Prabang, where the old former Navy Chief, Ted, inquired about the sick people. Mike said he did not know where they went, perhaps to the hospital or on liberty. Hearing this, a tall old bald-headed man from Vientiane, likely Loren Haffner, became furious and went looking for them.

Another time an emergency evacuation was requested from a site. It was very cloudy, but Mike believed he could perform the job. He landed, but there were no WIAs, just an officer who wanted out. Stir crazy, he had been promised that he would only be stationed at the position for a week, but had been stuck there a long time. Mike could not blame him for the subterfuge. In such cases, you had to make compassionate judgments. Furthermore, the dispatchers possessed better information than the pilot, and Mike was reasonably certain they knew a situation before assigning a helicopter pilot to a mission.

Jarina returned Hotel-40 to Udorn on the first. <sup>39</sup>

## **DOWN SOUTH**

Including 39F, we were reduced to five operational Bells. We did not have the luxury of back-up ships like those available in the H-34 program. Each Bell involved in an accident, or removed from service for scheduled or unscheduled maintenance, cost every man some monthly flight time and pay.

On the final day of November, I deadheaded to Savannakhet where I boarded XW-PFI for the Pakse river town. Instructed by someone in the CPH office to log deadhead time, I recorded almost three hours during the entire trip. I would spend the next eight days in the field performing almost daily road watch missions. My crew consisted of Co-Captain Norm Grammer and Flight Mechanic Jay Meyers. Norm, another member of the six Army Bell pilots forced on us, was a very low key, soft spoken individual. After refueling at Lima-11, we were directed to Kong Mi (PS-7).

Toward the end of 1967 Doug Swanson had substantial assets at PS-7 that he could deploy along Route-110. Like many SGU, most of his road watch teams had been trained in the art of intelligence gathering, mining, and interdicting roads at Pitt's Camp (T-603) Phitsanulok, Thailand (T-01). Larger units were trained

---

<sup>39</sup> Jarina Interviews.

by Thai Army NCOs and officers in large and small unit tactics, and weaponry that included crew-served 4.2mm mortars and recoilless rifles.<sup>40</sup>

Much of the west-east Sihanouk Trail terrain area, particularly hilly sections not distinguishable by bomb craters, was still concealed by heavy jungle canopy. Therefore, Doug liked to position his people late in the day to allow them flexibility to maneuver into position before dark and avoid any possible enemy engagement. As several missions were planned, we boarded a CASI Porter to recon areas within an eighteen-mile arc northeast of Kong Mi. During this quick peek at the area, contact was also made with teams withdrawing south from the Trail, alerting them to expect an exfil.

The first mission, a team infiltration (YB3021), was conducted sixteen miles northeast of Kong Mi in the hills a little south of, and within walking distance of, the Route-19/110 intersection. Combining missions, on the way back to PS-7 we stopped at YB2917 to retrieve and return troops to Kong Mi.

The final two exfils were generally in the same area (YB3520 & YB2418) and distance. Time allowed in the denied area was forty-five minutes.

Doug's missions were short and the ones I participated in were never challenged by the enemy, but

---

<sup>40</sup> COS Vientiane Ted Shackley's Book, *Spymaster*, 158.

the time of day he chose was subject to criticism because we were obliged to fly directly northwest to Pakse over hostile territory, arriving after dark. Of course, by then we were flying a machine with a more "reliable" engine.

**D**ecember continued to be a very active month for trail watch activity, which involved numerous Special Missions for us in southern Laos. The work lent a touch of spice to otherwise lackluster operations.

Friday was a particularly exciting day. Don Stephens and his cohorts had concocted a large SGU search and destroy mission off the southwestern Bolovens Plateau rim to XB6429 near the hamlet of Ban Mai, which was in the lowlands, located close to a trail junction designated Route-182. Troops were delivered to PS-38, a site south of PS-22 and a few miles from the rim. The remote site had been developed by Duncan Jewell, and later extended for C-123 traffic, was designated LS-438 with no name.

When all the aircraft were assembled, a recon was conducted and we were briefed. The word brief was a misnomer, for Don Stephens, as usual, had no idea what we would encounter in the landing zone. At least he admitted this, but offered no apology. This search and destroy mission, a first for me, connoted something out of the ordinary. It differed from the norm in that it was programmed to low, flat ground, not the usual remote, elevated terrain. It also was in the middle of known enemy territory, or at least people not loyal to

the Lao government. Consequently, as the troops formed and we waited in the heat for our A-1E cover, I had too much time to conjure up unpleasant scenarios.

We had come a long way from our original work supplying refugees and providing bullets, beans, and bandages to Lao and tribal warriors. With missions like this one, it seemed that we were increasingly morphing into an aggressive military combat role, and no longer could be considered unarmed civilian pilots. With the biblical adage of "if you live by the sword, you die by the sword" ringing in my head, I was not sure if this kind of work was for me.

We planned to depart in trail formation to increase maneuvering ability. Charlie Weitz would lead the gaggle. I staged toward the end. Since the target was only fifteen miles from PS-38, the inbound leg flight was short.

After clearing the Plateau's rim, we dropped down several thousand feet to about four hundred feet. While conducting a low-level run in toward the drop point, Charlie announced a man was spotted running, and bunkers were sighted to our left. I thought he might abort, but he continued without incident. While scanning the area, I also observed a person in black clothing hustling through thickets. It reminded me of a saying that when you see one cockroach, you know there are many more. He quickly disappeared without any

hostile behavior. We landed hurriedly, offloaded the troops, and returned to the starting point to await further developments.

We did not have long to wait. Before long the troops reported groundfire and were screaming for an immediate extraction. In addition to clearing the area, part of the exercise was planned to test the unit's ability and aggressiveness reacting to field work, preferably under combat conditions. However, like most newly trained and untested troops, they had little stomach for actual combat.

After the A-1E pilots returned, we randomly launched. The troops had moved a short distance east (XB6529) to a location close to a tree line adjoining a stream. Some pilots initially reported ground fire from this area, but perhaps it had been suppressed when I arrived, for I did not hear or observe any sign of action. While A-1E pilots buzzed the area, I conducted two extractions. We removed all the troops without visible casualties.

I liked Stephens as an individual, but was not impressed with the mission or its results. It was typical of the marginal ones run by Don, and the first in which I personally encountered problems. I received the impression that the missions were hurry-up, let us see what happens, and were not well-planned. Furthermore, what was particularly confusing, he was

far too casual and did not appear concerned with our welfare. However, to be fair, he was attempting to perform his job and expected us to do ours, and he did not have much talent to work with.

The fun was not over. A final infil was conducted to YB304433, a point twenty-seven miles east of PS-38. The drop was close to a northern offshoot of Route-110 that entered a cut in the mountains leading to Route-96. There was no problem with this mission, but like other unknowns, it was exciting nevertheless.

The next day no Special Missions were planned and I performed normal work without Norm.

On the third the Customer was back on track with mission requirements. This particular assignment did not involve Bolovens operations, but northern intelligence gathering in a major enemy base area.

I deadheaded to the SGU training base at PS-18 with Billy P in PFG. We received a briefing from the Case Officer and boarded CASI Porter Papa Delta Charlie (PDC) to recon XC903743 and contact the on-site team. While engaging in this activity, Norm shuttled troops to PS-19, a site north of Saravane.

After a forty-eight-minute round trip, I again rode deadhead with Billy to join the other pilots at PS-19. Upon arrival, I took command of PFI with Norm as my Co-Captain.



PFG and PFI were each loaded with six troops, while the SAR ship remained empty for emergency requirements. With an A-1E rendezvous time, we launched for the landing zone twenty-three miles to the east-northeast. The foreboding looking landing area was located slightly upslope on a rocky shelf close to a tree line. My peripheral vision was very good and on short final approach, I noticed that Grammer was also handling the collective. After landing, I confronted him and learned that he had been increasing RPM to maximum. Depending on the condition of the linear actuator in the governor system, there was usually some droop in RPM with power demand, but controlling this was a function of the PIC. I was very annoyed. My philosophy was that the PIC, or person in control of the aircraft, should be the only one manipulating the controls at any time except during an obvious emergency. Using the analogy of "too many cooks in the kitchen," bad things could happen when one pilot in the cockpit was unaware of the other's activity. I suppose Norm had been taught this procedure in the Army, but since I had no knowledge of this, and we had not briefed accordingly, I took exception to the procedure and told him so.

We retrieved twelve team members and returned them to PS-19 for debriefing. We then returned to Pakse and logged forty-five minutes total denied area time.

Much to my displeasure, the next day I was scheduled to fly Ambassador Sullivan and his staff or VIPs on a Plateau sightseeing mission. I had to wait a considerable time for the entourage to arrive. As the minutes and hours ticked by without their arrival, I rued the assignment as unnecessary, one that cost me flight time that was already very low for the time spent in the field. I was also angry with all bureaucrats regarding the announced loss of our project pay. It seemed the Washington associated people had forgotten one facet of the military adage: do not mess with the men's pay, mail, and liberty.

In addition, I was not particularly fond of the ambassador. I considered that his policies of discontinuing or not allowing napalm strikes, past delays in SAR missions, and other controversial items were obstructing us from winning the Lao war. I also had a distinct negative Tony Poe bias that encompassed most State Department souls. Tony was initially enervated when Bill Sullivan first arrived in Vientiane to replace Leonard Unger, but after seeing no tangible change in USG strategy, and continuing old shopworn policies, he rapidly became disenchanted with Sullivan. An outspoken and admired person among the old-timer pilot group, Tony's perceptions naturally filtered through to the Author. Furthermore, my naiveté regarding political matters, and a comprehensive

knowledge of the total picture as it related to all of the Southeast Asian Theater was sorely lacking. As a former Marine officer, trained in all the traditional military disciplines, my black and white philosophy was that there simply was no alternative to winning. If political negotiations failed and a war was essential to impose one's will on an opponent, then there should be no impediment to winning. Before Korea, this had been America's policy, but seemingly weak-willed politicians in Washington had changed all that, and good men were dying.

We spent a lot of time flying low level over the Bolovens. Toward the end of the flight I was informed that the ambassador desired to land on the Plateau's north side. He wanted to walk the grassy area to obtain a better impression of the terrain. I did not say anything, but was not overjoyed at this request, for I did not have a good feel for that location and there was always the possibility of stepping on an old mine left over from the First Indochina War, or even encountering a stray enemy patrol. Off the beaten path, perhaps Sullivan's handlers knew that the area was cleared of such danger, but I was not apprised of this.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> At times, Bill Sullivan appeared to have more guts than good sense and occasionally had pilots land him in remote areas to obtain a firsthand observation. One time he was landed on one of the enemy logistic Trails east of Savannakhet.

I accompanied the group on the stroll through the weeds. I did not talk to the ambassador, nor did he seek my extensive knowledge of the area, or seem like he wanted to talk to me. I wondered if he was aware that I was one of the pilots who entered North Vietnam in June of 1965 and suffered severe battle damage that necessitated a concerned embassy message to Washington regarding our "shattered rotor blades" and evolving SARs. <sup>2</sup>

As I trailed the main group, I talked to one of his more affable aides. Throughout the walk, not another soul was visible.

Upon discharging my VIP charges at Lima-11, I repaired to the new Air America hostel on the east side of town. This was a far better RON spot, and replaced the USAID house and Chinese hotel. To accommodate the large numbers of crews required for the Special Missions, a sizeable villa had been leased. Constructed of concrete, it sported terrazzo floors. Like other hostels, this one also offered meals.

## **RUMBLES WITHIN THE FAMILY**

Trouble and Air America employee dissension was brewing in the Southeast Asia Theater. Largely because of the LBJ Administration's belt tightening policies,

---

<sup>2</sup> For details, see Book Six.

supposedly austere budget program cuts were demanded across the board. One cut was Senator Albert Gore's annual attack on all overseas workers' tax-free allowance income. As a minute constituency, and because it was easy, Air America employees had been targeted. New guide lines, and an impending loss of project pay in many unfriendly areas, were announced by the Company. For helicopter pilots, based on current yearly revenue, a loss in total wages would average 3,000 dollars, or more than a ten percent reduction. It was even more for fixed wing pilots. The entire scenario was frustrating, for it would involve continuing to operate over some especially hostile areas without extra pay. In addition, adding fuel to the fire, U.S. military personnel, and it seemed every other Tom, Dick, and Harry, were receiving pay raises. This revelation was quite a shock, for after H-34 Captain Tom Moher and other fixed wing individuals discovered a provision for payment of hazardous pay buried in the original contract several years before, such remuneration had previously been considered sacrosanct, but of course, nothing is forever. This and other odious management policies had done nothing to foster

Company loyalty.<sup>3</sup>

When I left for the Pakse RON, management was already hard at work redrawing "safe" corridor lines to Long Tieng and farther north. Consequently, much of Laos north of Vientiane had been declared a "no project" area, and flights logged over this territory rated only straight time pay. Areas five to ten minutes, or five miles outside of Sites LS-20A, LS-20, and LS-32 were declared "safe," i.e. no p-pay. However, we had already been lopping off five minutes in and out of main bases for some time, but not those in upper Military Region Two.

Interestingly, the loss of hazard pay impacted fixed wing crews more than those of us flying helicopters. As opposed to our low-level operations, the big bird "stiff wing jocks" flew established northern routes at altitude, which posed little risk to either aircraft or crew. This disparity between low flying aircraft and the "nose bleed" types had always been a bone of contention between programs.<sup>4</sup> The new rules tended to narrow fixed wing and helicopter crew wages toward parity for the first time. For this

---

<sup>3</sup> There was some speculation as to whether the cuts were government mandated. Agency budgets were still well concealed, and had not yet received Congressional scrutiny. Therefore, the cuts may have been preemptively initiated by the wise men in Taipei.

<sup>4</sup> This did not include our small fixed wing Porter and Helio Courier brothers, who flew equally with us in the trenches.

reason, there was not as much hue and cry from the rotorhead society. Moreover, operations in the south were not as stringent. Enemy lines were close to friendly territory, and we still received our mission denied area pay. Among the more intellectual in the group, there were some individuals who alleged the pay change was effected to finance Special Mission compensation, sort of a "rob Peter to pay Paul" scenario. Perhaps they were correct.

The issue festered and came to a head in Vientiane on the fourth, when several senior fixed wing pilots met in Base Manager Frank Dunn's office. During a heated four-hour discussion nothing tangible was resolved and the pilots left even more disgruntled than before. As a result, to display displeasure, industrial action in Vientiane was planned for the following day. It would mark a unified Air America pilots' first-time job action. <sup>5</sup>

## **PILOT DEMISE**

That same night, Captain Jack Houston was tragically killed in Vientiane. There were two slightly different versions of the story, one from eyewitness,

---

<sup>5</sup> Bill Leary December 1967 Notes.  
EW Knight Email.  
Author's 01/02/68 Letter Home.

Mrs. Eveline Philippe, the other from normal scuttlebutt:

Following popular go-cart races, at 2030 hours, Jack held a small dinner party for race participants at his house. The dinner, which included abundant alcohol, ended at 2130 hours and Houston offered to drive a male guest to his home outside the city. The French lady, Eveline, who had cooked the meal, accompanied them in Houston's white Volkswagen.

On the return trip to town, Eveline dozed and was suddenly awakened by a violent shift in the car's direction. Houston had been cut off by a Lao, and a high-speed chase ensued. Concerned, Eveline asked Jack what he was doing. He answered that he did not like the way they drove.

Both cars eventually stopped beside a wat. Incensed, Jack jumped out and accosted a man in civilian clothes who approached him. After being hit, the man removed a handkerchief from his belt exposing a gun. After Houston struck the man, he pulled the gun. Firing two shots in the air, he indicated that he was going to kill Houston. Jack scoffed at the threat.

Eveline, who was now outside the car shouted, *"Don't shoot! He is drunk."*

*"Why does he fight me first?"*

Following a third discharge, the Air America pilot collapsed to his knees. Several young men on the corner



asked what had happened to the American. Eveline said he had been shot and was dying. They helped move Houston into the back seat and one offered to drive the vehicle to the nearest medical attention.

Bleeding profusely from a head wound, having difficulty breathing, Jack was driven to the Operation Brotherhood hospital at 2330 hours, where efforts to save him failed and he later succumbed.

A modified account, but similar version stated that a Jeep filled with inebriated Lao officers had cut an equally inebriated Houston off at an intersection. Following harsh words, the men drove off. Later, the incident was repeated and Jack confronted one of the officers, who had a .45 caliber pistol strapped to his side. During a heated argument, the man pulled the weapon from his holster. During the sequence the pistol discharged and Jack was critically wounded.

Since all parties had been drinking that night, events were likely somewhat distorted between both accounts. In addition, in the interest of Lao-American relations, the girl's statement might have been somewhat sanitized. The incident never should have happened, but we all got a little wound up and boisterous at times, and this one had backfired. <sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Eveline Philippe's Printed Account of the Shooting to Lao, American authorities and Air America Security, 12/07/67.

**STRIKE**

On the morning of five December, Flight Mechanic Meyers and I flew locally for about an hour. Returning to Lima-11, I noted Charlie Weitz's Bell parked in the fuel pit. Then, in an unusual turn of events, the Chinese radio operator informed me that the CPH wanted to talk to his helicopter pilots flying in the Pakse area. When the RO raised Wayne on the scratchy HF radio, he began with the statement, *"Are you aware that Vientiane pilots were not flying pending positive results regarding their loss of pay."* Knight wanted to know what we were going to do. We were surprised. Having had no idea of the walk-out, we had to make a decision whether to fly or support the fixed wing pilot stand-down.

Unless Knight had been instructed to inform us of the strike, he did not have to call us, and we would have continued to work the entire day. Since he did so, I considered that he might be in favor of the show of force, but I was also concerned about my job. Therefore, after checking with the Air Operations Customer, Flynn Perry, who seemed to sympathize with the movement, Charlie and I elected to support the action. Consequently, awaiting further developments, we flew no more that day.

H-34 pilot John Fonburg, flying in the northern region, either did not receive the word, or chose to ignore it, continued to fly the remainder of the day.

The discussion at the hostel that night centered on the day's events and future implications the strike would have on our jobs. Of course, it would be politically incorrect for the U.S. military to take over our work in a supposedly neutral country, but in lieu of any long-term refusal to fly, it was entirely possible. We retired that night not knowing if we were going to fly the next day.

Although flying moderated, most flight operations resumed on Wednesday.<sup>7</sup> I, for one, did not like the developments in Vientiane and was relieved when operations normalized. Evidently the pilots' short industrial action surprised and made its point with Company management, for President Grundy and Madison were reputedly arriving on the seventh to explain the Company's position regarding the reduction in some project pay. Pending the outcome, this might have stimulated the return to work, but the stand down was evidently not planned for more than a day. Also, a lot was going on at this time and most line pilots were very flexible in the acceptance of high priority missions, especially those described as lifesaving or essential to the war effort.

---

<sup>7</sup> We had not been flying a lot anyway.

The strike generally impacted American workers to some degree throughout the country. As Bob Glover related in his book:

*"...A week ago, Monday [4 December] when I made my afternoon radio check from Mounq Nane, there was a message that said all Air America fixed wing aircraft would be grounded at sundown. It looked as though the chopper would be flying though. Tuesday morning, the usual day for my chopper, the radio operator told me that my chopper was on the ground in Nam Bac. The reason being, its pilot was on strike also. The 20 to 30 thousand a year was not enough money. This sum represented the highest paid to any pilot in the world.*

*Anyway, no plane Tuesday, nor Wednesday either. I was getting a bit edgy as I hadn't been out for more than two weeks. Thursday morning when I made my radio contact at 0730 Hong Sa was on the air. The Army had just driven off an attack by the Viet Minh. The attack came at 0600 [hours]. We had three IVSers and one irrigation engineer there. My chopper <sup>8</sup> had been diverted to Hong Sa to evacuate them to Luang Prabang. The attack was on the Lao Army camp close by the American quarters. One of the IVSers, Jerry Lewis, had*

---

<sup>8</sup> To this day the Author cringes at the slang word "chopper" used by the "great unwashed" for a helicopter. Additionally, annual remuneration of an Air America pilot was certainly higher than that of government or related agency personnel, but rarely factored into the equation were the great risks some of us undertook to perform the job.

*been in an attack in Moung Kassy a few months before..."*<sup>9,10</sup>

Don Leach joined me for a short range three aircraft road watch mission out of PS-22. This assignment entailed delivering nine men and retrieving eight from a hilly landing zone ten miles east northeast across the Se Kong Valley. I logged normal project pay that day and later drastically reduced it to reflect the new polities.

President Gundy and his team arrived in Thailand and were flown to Udorn. From there, the CPH delivered them to Vientiane. Project pay realignment was on the agenda, but Jack Houston's bizarre death was also likely a management item of interest. Talking points at the meeting resolved nothing to allay frayed nerves. Refusing to budge regarding the issue, the leaders won the day and departed for Taiwan with pilot reduction in pay wholly intact.

---

<sup>9</sup> On or about 8 May the enemy blew a hole in the Moung Kassy AID house. No one was killed, but some locals were injured. Villagers in the area were warned by the Pathet Lao not to ride in American vehicles.

At the time, the shift to attacking Americans revealed the impact rural programs were having on marginal areas. However, the failure to establish full security in village cluster and forward areas hindered or terminated AID development programs in the Kassy and other locations.

<sup>10</sup> Bob Glover, *Laos*, 89.  
William Sullivan to State, 05/08/67.

We expected more trouble, and soon after our display of anger, local Vietnamese employees staged a large strike in Saigon over pay. This also diminished and people went back to work.

Overall, line pilots were displeased with Taipei management. The new policy marked the beginning of the end for a long, reasonably smooth-running operation. It was obvious that in their desire to reduce costs, management had forgotten the paramount military adage for troop satisfaction: not to mess with a man's pay, mail, or liberty. One could only wonder what was next in the Company's large bag of nasty tricks. The change most certainly sowed the seeds for a future pilot union. Formation of a pilot association was not possible at the time, and awaited proper germination. Because of previous diverse backgrounds that included age, education, former military ranks, socio-economic factors, and arrogance by some individuals in dissimilar flight programs, personal agendas varied. Moreover, we pilots rarely agreed about anything and everything. Later, as the war evolved, when events and goals eventually merged, this changed. <sup>11</sup>

While President Grundy was visiting, we repositioned to Savannakhet. If a mission was planned,

---

<sup>11</sup> Bill Leary 1967 December Notes.  
EW Knight Email, 08/30/00.

it was not logged or accomplished. Later, I deadheaded to Udorn on Papa Foxtrot Hotel.

### **TROUBLE AT A TACAN SITE**

To thwart air attacks and prepare for upcoming offensives, the enemy set in motion plans to destroy Laos-installed USAF radar and navigation facilities. On 6 December, Saravane and Phou Kate were threatened. Despite the presence of government forces, the high mountain to the southeast containing the TACAN equipment and providing coverage for the region was attacked. There was no damage to the navigation gear or technician casualties. However, there was some down time while the situation was assessed and the problem rectified. <sup>12</sup>

### **HOME IN UDORN**

At home Tuie had finished sewing curtains for the house and was busy planning a pre-Christmas party.

Tragically, Alex Nadalini's toddler son had recently fallen into a fish pond at the Baker house across from the town reservoir and drowned. At the time, Liz and Charlotte were inside the house playing bridge and apparently the maid was negligent watching the child. The infant was buried at the Saint Mary

---

<sup>12</sup> Tim Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 66, 72.

cemetery outside Udorn town. Alex's father had died in Kenya. The Nadalinis and Pennimans were friends, so Alex sent Tom a photograph of his dad's grave marker requesting that he replicate it. Tom had a marble cross manufactured in Taipei and sent it to Udorn on the first available flight. Unfortunately, one arm of the cross was damaged during the transfer. <sup>13</sup>

The incident was a wakeup call for all of us with small children. Therefore, as a precaution against a similar incident, we obtained a young boy from Khun Yai to stay with us full time and help care for Ricky. Pick only had four years of schooling, but was quite intelligent and quick to learn items Tuie taught him. Since his parents could not afford to send him to school, he would have the benefit of a good home and plenty of wholesome food to eat. Pick would remain with us for some time and will be referred to again.

Since servants were not the norm in present day America and only reserved for the very wealthy, I attempted to explain them to my parents:

***"They perform a very necessary function in that they take care of a lot of the nasty menial tasks of life."***

---

<sup>13</sup> Tom Penniman Emails, 04/01/00, 04/02/00 (2).



## JARINA AND RONS

On the ninth, Mike deadheaded to Sam Tong with the PIC of Hotel-54. After assuming command of Hotel-63 with Flight Mechanic Frank DeVito and crossing the ridge to Long Tieng, they were directed to Pha Thi. Since Mike started late and the weather was not particularly good, work was minimal before returning to Site-20 via Na Khang.

When winter fog cleared somewhat in the mountain bowls and over rivers, the first trip Tuesday morning went to Site-36. Unable to proceed farther north, Mike returned to Sam Tong. From there AID requirements sent him to Phone Sai (LS-211), fifteen miles to the southwest. Weather was still a problem and the day was shortened with only five landings conducted during less than three and a half hours operation.

The next day, Mike performed refugee work for AID. During the course of the day, he was called to Pa Ka (LS-51), nine miles west-southwest of Sam Tong to participate in a SAR for CASI Porter XW-PCK. Later he went north to San Ph Ka (LS-33) a little north of Phu Cum (LS-50) and the Four Rivers junction at Sop Kao. He returned with a load of refugees to Ban Na Luang (LS-66), eighteen miles south of Sam Tong and seven miles northwest of one of the original refugee villages at Ban Nam Mo. Mike completed the day with almost nine hours and eighteen landings.



Captain John Tarn leaning on the Air America hostel sign at Sam Tong, displaying the international high sign. Dents in the hostel's lower sides were caused by propeller wash from taxiing fixed wing aircraft.

Author Collection.

When the number of crews staying overnight at Sam Tong increased, a squad bay with six beds. Sometimes it was sometimes difficult to sleep with all the conversations. Pogo often talked in his sleep. Frank DeVito and Frank Stergar were talking to each other while asleep. Stergar said, *"Nick, you can't do that."*

DeVito, *"See. See. I told you Nick."*

One night after a particularly fatiguing day, Mike retired about 2100 hours. The outside generator was still producing electricity while droning-rung-rung-rung. Mike fell asleep dreaming he was flying a UH-34D with the identical repetitive sound as the generator. He was cruising over a thickly vegetated triple canopy jungle with no visible landing sites. Suddenly the engine failed and, in a panic, he wondered where he would autorotate. Usually when he had such dreams, he would subconsciously realize it was only a dream and awake. When he awoke all was quiet. Then he realized that the generator, the initiator of the dream, had been switched off for the night.

We all employed different methods of coping with the long, tedious, and fatiguing hours in the cockpit. I ordered a "sleep" preparation consisting of mostly a combination of B-vitamins from the Hudson Vitamin catalogue. The tablets seemed to help me obtain uninterrupted sleep, but it was probably only a mental psychological crutch. Later, when canned beer was

introduced to the hostels, a couple Olympias before dinner would tend to relax me. We had our fixed drinking rules that most pilots honored, although there were always a few men who violated commonsense.

Bad weather covered the region and Jarina had difficulty repositioning to Luang Prabang on the twelfth.

On Wednesday, Mike was able to support Pak Beng and the Sayaboury area around Hong Sa where enemy units had probed FAR defenses earlier in the month. Toward the end of the day, he RTB Udorn.

Mike had accumulated a lot of flight time over the year, so ACP Marius Burke informed him that he should take leave over the Christmas holidays. Jarina's wife and children lived in the States, and the allotted time off was too short for a trip. Therefore, with nothing to do in Udorn, Mike indicated that he would be available to fly over the holidays.

A young man in the office listening to the conversation sarcastically piped up, *"Boy, I'll bet you would like to fly."*

Puzzled, Mike asked him about the statement.

*"You want to get up there and make all that money."*

*"I don't understand you. I am sure that if I was married, I would want to be home with my family."* <sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

## **DOWNCOUNTRY**

While Jarina relocated to Luang Prabang on Tuesday, I deadheaded south to Pakse on C-123 576. However, I did not fly until Thursday. At that time, I took command of Papa Foxtrot India (PFI) that was back in service after the engine change. Glen Wood and Gary Gentz rounded out the crew for backed up Special Missions. This marked the first time I had flown with Glen.

Friendly clearing operations and surveillance continued in the low land just off the southern Bolovens. All missions were in the same area. To better utilize the escort aircraft and the Bells, the Customer planned a combination infil-exfil (XB767282-XB768292). Located about a mile apart, we took twelve men into the landing zone near Ban Cheng Tai and thirteen out of the second position. After dropping our charges at PS-38, we extracted twelve troops from a point a couple of miles east of the first exfil. Then, conducting two sorties, we extracted additional individuals from the same area around Ban Enthy (PS-6). The latter was questionable as a valid Special Mission.

Following Plateau work, we repositioned to Savannakhet for a team infiltration the next morning.

Like most lengthy Special Missions conducted from Lima-39, this one thrust eighty miles northeast into the foothills abutting the south side of the east-west

Se Bang Fai River Valley. The valley supported numerous trails and roads forming a portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail system. A prime intelligence gathering area, the landing zone was located ten miles south of Route-12 and eight miles west of Route-23. We dropped the team off at one of the Whiskey sites and logged fifty minutes denied area time.

After refueling, we all returned to Pakse to continue our litany of short Special Missions off the Plateau. The infil was conducted to the developing trail system sixteen miles northeast of PS-22 (YB125855). We were unsure about what we would find in the proposed rocky shelf area. However, when Billy P in the lead ship reported seeing a small herd of Gaur on short final, we collectively sighed a breath of relief. I spotted the last of the herd disappearing into a tree line, and instantly knew there could be no human being within miles of our landing site. That was the nature of the elusive beast. <sup>15</sup> On return to PS-22 we retrieved seven men from a landing zone four miles south (YB135825).

---

<sup>15</sup> The Gaur, an enormous animal, which could be compared to an African Cape buffalo, was both feared and cherished by the natives. Feared by its aggressive nature, cherished for its meat and head that brought high prices on the trophy market. I first heard about the rare animal from people in San Jose, Mindoro, PI, while serving on the Philippine island in 1962.

The final mission on that stressful day was conducted again from PS-22, twelve miles to the east to retrieve men we had infiltrated on the sixth. We worked late and recovered at Lima-11 well after dark.

The next day I worked one fuel load and obtained a ride on Caribou 851 to Udorn via Lima-39.

### **RAMASUN INTERCEPT STATION**

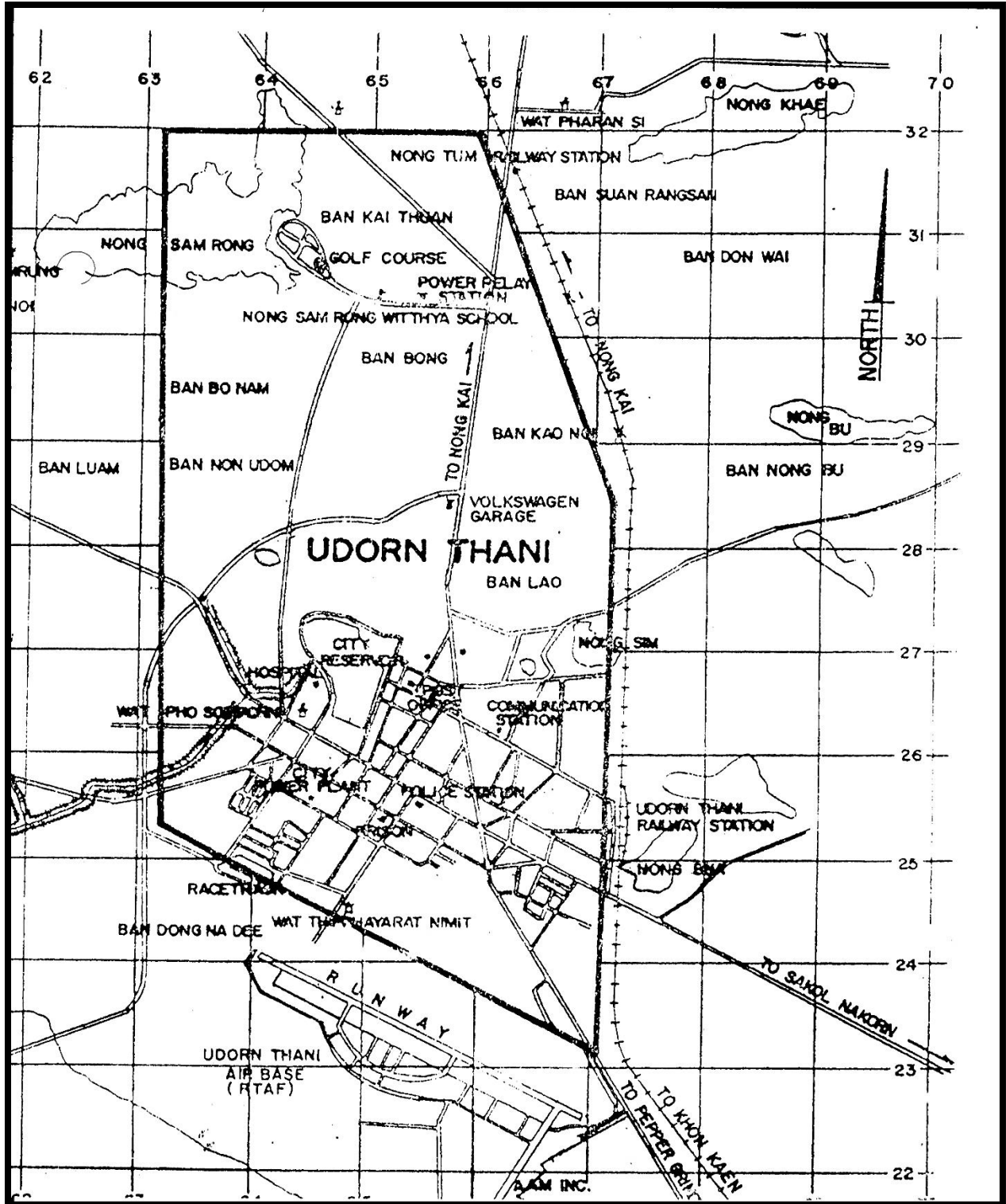
In December, Sergeant Robert Wheatly of the U.S Air Force 6922 Security Wing arrived in Thailand. Orders assigned him to the Ramasun radio intercept post located eighteen kilometers south of Udorn on the east side between the north-south Friendship Highway and the railroad track.<sup>16</sup>

First impressions of the area from a C-130 were red earth, banana plants, and hooches used to house the Air Force troops. Before going to Ramasun, he journeyed into Udorn Town where streets were bustling with samlor pedicabs, bicycles, motor scooters, taxis, and gaily decorated busses with passengers clinging to the rear and hanging out of doors. Stifling hot air buzzed with the sound of numerous insects.

On the bus ride south to Ramasun Station, Wheatley observed many houses built on stilts.

---

<sup>16</sup> This was the same area where the men of the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) were stationed during the May-June 1962 Nam Tha, Laos, flap, one in which the Author participated.



Graphic displaying Udon Town and adjacent areas. The Friendship Highway leads to the Ramasun signal station and the Peppergrinder ammunition storage facility.

Author Collection.



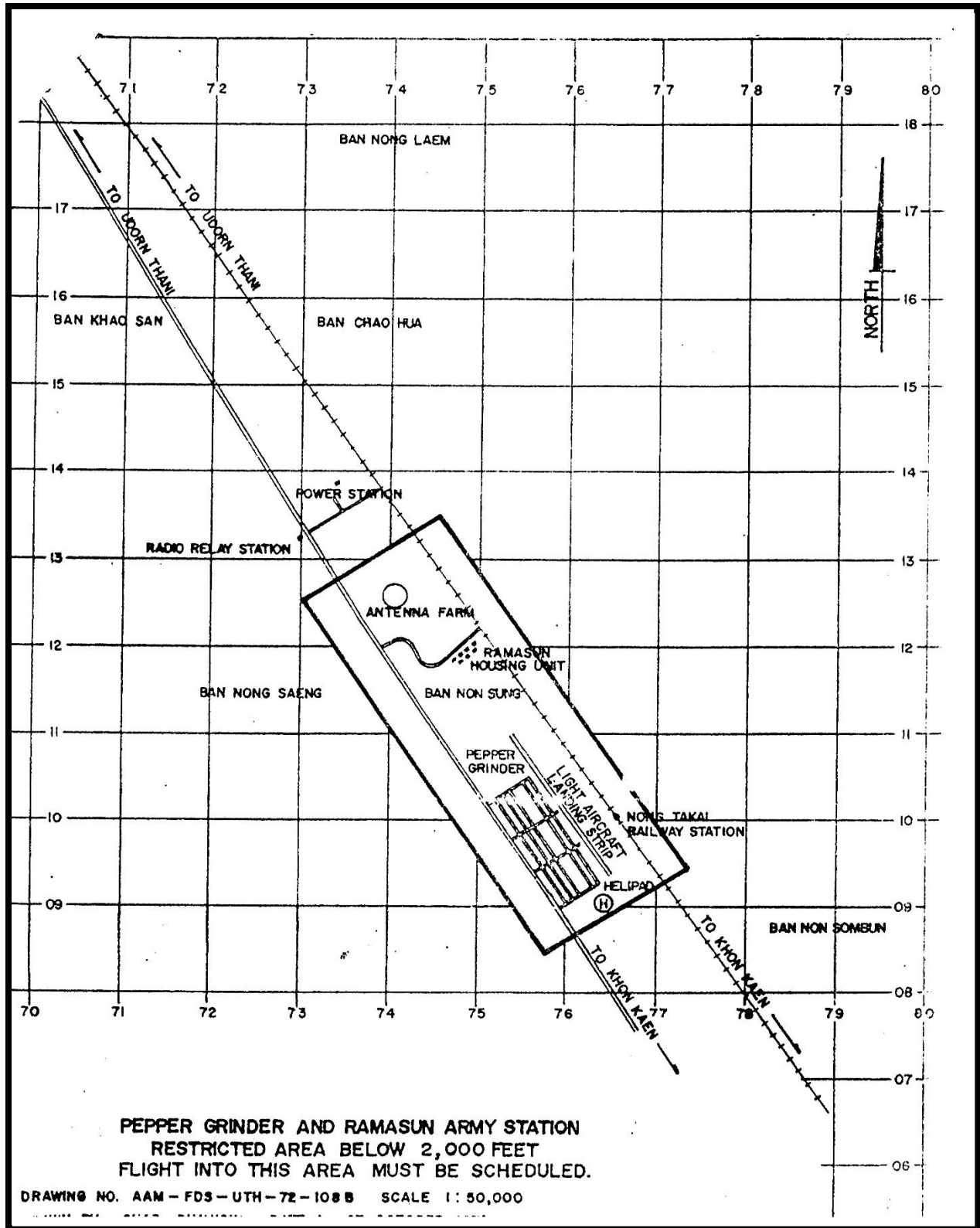
Originally a U.S. Army signal corps post, the station was recently improved to accommodate the radio intercept mission. The base existed alongside Nong Soong, a tiny village consisting of a handful of ramshackle plywood and thatch huts. In contrast, the base looked like an apartment complex in America with concrete streets and street lights. The air-conditioned barracks were built with concrete blocks. Food was good and local housekeeping girls took care of mundane needs. An air-conditioned bowling alley existed for entertainment.

Most of the area included huge antenna arrays.<sup>17</sup> The outside perimeter was protected by a tall chain-link fence that was topped with barbed wire. Security was tight, with armed American military police inside and Thai Army security guards patrolling the perimeter.

The radio compound was inside a chain-link fence enclosure that was inside another chain-linked fence, all topped with barbed wire. There was only one way in and out of the work area past a guard station. Many guard towers dotted the area, making it look like a maximum-security prison. Rooms in the work area were small, crammed with the latest electronic gear and encryption equipment. There were no windows or briefed evacuation plan.

---

<sup>17</sup> Sometimes called the "elephant corral."



High security areas located south of Udorn.  
Author Collection.

Rotating shifts were comprised of fifteen men who listened round the clock to aircraft position reports, high altitude weather conditions, estimated time of arrivals and the sort. A day off followed three shifts; three midnight shifts were followed by four days off. After 2100 hours, the Chinese Air Force, which did not fly at night, went off the air. At 0600 the Chinese would begin establishing contact with units.

A flash priority message could be generated that would be in the President's office within three minutes from any place in the world. <sup>18</sup>

### **MID-MONTH SITUATION THROUGHOUT LAOS**

In contrast to the previous military success and gains enjoyed by the RLG throughout most other parts of Laos, particularly that of General Vang Pao's SGU troops in Military Region Two, the month of December began to evidence increased enemy aggressiveness in some military regions.

### **TROUBLES IN MR-4**

In the south, enemy forces, estimated at as few as one hundred to several hundred, commenced a surprise

---

<sup>18</sup> We occasionally drove south to the base to use the bowling alley facilities. Later, we could call home using the improved phone system. Khun Yai (Cham) owned some land across the road where hot mint bushes grew. When the leaves were added to chopped meat to enhance taste, a delicious meal was produced.

attack on the two FAN companies staged at Lao Ngam. The site, located in the northwestern foothills of the Plateau, was captured by FAR forces in January. During the engagement, FAN troops withdrew a respectable distance, while an enemy contingent briefly seized a portion of the site. Within twenty-four hours the enemy departed, leaving extraordinarily heavy friendly casualties—forty-two men reportedly killed, thirty-three wounded, and numerous supplies lost.

The lack of warning of the impending attack was attributed to Agency withdrawal of support for the highly successful WAPI program, in lieu of conscripting village defense SGU for increased trail watch activity. Consequently, with many villagers left to fend for themselves, less loyalty was directed toward the RLG and little incentive was generated to cooperate any further with the military.

Portending future hostile action, enemy units continued to infiltrate both the Saravane and Bolovens areas. On 12 December, enemy units captured a FAR position ten miles north of Lima-44. Attopeu Town was surrounded by hostiles, but no attempts were made to capture the site. The implied threat displayed an enemy option to seize the provincial capital at a time of their choosing; the town was still considered an asset for obtaining supplies.

**MR-1**

Well north of Luang Prabang, the dreaded Vietnamese 316th Infantry Division continued to tramp down Route-19 and other trails and feeder roads from the Dien Bien Phu Valley into Laos toward objective Nam Bac. Reports from forward teams that Vietnamese forces were beginning to deploy into the Site-203 area indicated imminent attacks on perimeter defenses. Aware of the example set in 1962 at Nam Tha, where panicked and undisciplined government troops threw away their weapons and fled south toward the Mekong, General Ouane Rathikoun was obdurate, refusing to consider any phased withdrawal from a situation that might devastate his army. Instead, at the King's behest, he was determined to hold Nam Bac at whatever cost. Realistically, if he read history, he certainly must have been cognizant that losing defensive firebases and hills surrounding the valley would present a strangle hold and situation akin to the French disastrous and ignominious loss in the Dien Bien Phu Valley.

In order to counter the addition of regular Vietnamese combat troops, starting on 20 December and four days thereafter, air assets frantically began shuttling troops and critical supplies into Nam Bac. By 24 December, the supply operation was appreciably slowed by mortar rounds falling on the strip and a small enemy unit briefly penetrating the airfield.

Mortars also splashed on Phu Kou firebase located to the southeast. The enemy continued closing on the FAR base. On the 27th, while air dropping supplies just southeast of the strip, planes were hit by small arms fire.

Earlier in the year, although far more competent and combat experienced Lao officers existed for the job, General Ouane had promoted Colonel Bounchanh Savathphayphane as his officer in charge of the expanding Nam Bac operation. His superiors charged him to prepare a static defense, and institute area patrolling to generate targets for air strikes to prevent large scale enemy attacks. His appointment was an unpopular political decision with FAR and American embassy personnel, who deemed others more qualified and competent for the task. However, Colonel Khamphai retained his position as field commander at Nam Bac. This changed when pressure greatly increased and Bounchanh arrived at Site-203 to assume the field CO role.

A joint operation, conceived earlier by the General Staff and Colonel Bounchanh for FAR's GM-15, to move east to the Nam Ou and link up with an under strength Meo battalion (the war had taken its toll and few units were at full strength) was tardy commencing. Other GM's would assume the defensive role of GM-15 and sweep enemy units from areas close to Nam Bac.

By 6 November, the 300 Meo guerrillas assembled at Houei Tong (LS-184) prior to November had proceeded slowly overland northwest toward Ban Na Tai (L-50) and Moung Ngoi. However, Vang Pao was distracted by action elsewhere in his northern sector, so he did not assign the highest priority to a join up until the third week in December. Moreover, having been severely burned in the past during joint government operations, the General was not convinced of FAR's conviction to honor their part of the operation. Therefore, before the month was over, the general halted the Meo unit's progress.

With the resupply effort underway at Nam Bac, Bounchanh's 20 December expansion east characteristically lagged behind schedule. Confusing the American AOC commanding officer at Luang Prabang, the Colonel had forwarded no specific plans for implementing Operation Link-Up. He desired air support, but submitted no requirements or firm target information for adequate planning. He only stated that no fighter cover was required during the GM's movement east.

The FAR portion of the operation began on the twenty-third, when helicopters commenced a planned troop lift of 880 Group Mobile-15 to Site-50, where, after joining Vang Pao's advanced units, they would move into Moung Ngoi. The operation was slowed somewhat

the next day by enemy mortar attacks on the airfield, while T-28 strikes attempted to silence the barrage.

### **ACTIVITY IN NORTHWEST MR-1**

During the same time period when government diversionary activity at Nam Bac and Moung Sai was on the upswing, operations around Nam Tha and Moung Sing increased, and possibly distracted or derailed the Vietnamese timetable for a short period. To complement the eastern thrust and delay the enemy advance, by the 26th, SGU and Meo movement was underway toward Moung Sai. Feints commenced on the airhead with raids occurring by early January. The aggressive actions at Moung Sing and Nam Tha tended to temporarily divert and relieve pressure on Nam Bac. However, despite moving some units west to reinforce these towns, sizeable enemy forces remained in the Nam Bac area preparing for the final battle.

Regardless of diversionary measures taken in Military Region One, it was almost too little-too late in the end game, caused by a long-neglected defense solution. Lacking was the FAR will to establish an adequate perimeter defense in depth, and launch of continuous and aggressive patrolling. Before incurring piecemeal casualties, FAR enjoyed ample manpower to accomplish this goal, but inferior leaders preferred to



procrastinate. Now they had to pay the piper, and the men in the ranks knew this.

Toward the third week in October, Frank Stergar had participated in a hasty Moung Sing operation. Perhaps tailored as a dress rehearsal for the upcoming Nam Tha show, or a probe of area enemy strength, the Captain flew troop shuttles into the hills north and east of Moung Sing, interdicting roads and securing Nam Tha's western flank.

Stergar recalled no especially large airlift: *"Everything was fragmentary and not too well organized or supervised-as per operations normal."*

While underway, the Moung Mounge (LS-93) commanding officer in charge of the Moung Sing operation, and later landlord of the Air America hostel at Lima-25 had Frank Stergar fly him into the empty Lima-42 valley.<sup>19</sup> Frank operated into and out of the valley all day without incurring problems. In the evening, over the "rice and weeds" supper, he briefed Tony regarding the day's activity. Poe, likely influenced by a liberal injection of "John Barleycorn," flew into a rage, saying the colonel was told to remain in the hills and out of Moung Sing. Afterward, he used the single side band HF radio to brief AB-1 on the colonel's breach in the plan.

---

<sup>19</sup> The Author later landed his Bell in the valley one day-just to say he had.

In time, as Nam Tha would soon demonstrate, the temporary operation fizzled. Consequently, Stergar delivered troops to their former militia postings in various villages and Site-118A.

The Nam Tha operation could be traced from a realization that most of the population in and around the Nam Tha Valley had Lao roots. Bottled up in the area since FAR's disastrous and ignominious retreat from Nam Tha in May 1962, some individuals were closely related to civilian and military leaders. Therefore, for many years agitation continued for their liberation and resettlement on the Mekong River. There were also military aspects for the operation. Other than merely being relatives, with enemy manpower shortage inherent in northwest Houa Khong Province, the male population could be considered choice pickings for corvee labor or as soldiers.

After Nam Yu forces achieved initial success interdicting and shutting down parts of Route-32 between Moun Sing and Nam Tha, and achieving additional area triumphs during the wet season, consideration turned to retaking Nam Tha. To implement the plan, three SGU battalions were assembled along ethnic lines: Yao and Lu battalions under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Khamphay Vilayphanh, and a Lao Theung battalion under Khamsene Keodara.

By late fall, with the three SGU battalions considered trained and ready for combat, plans for a surprise seizure and control of Nam Tha for six days to evacuate key refugee families were forwarded from Nam Yu to FAR headquarters and the U.S. Embassy, with emphasis on the fact that spies indicated Nam Tha was only weakly defended by Pathet Lao.

The ambitious battle plan sparked dissention and a deep divide among Country Team principals. During discussions, COS Shackley represented the pros, and USAID Joseph Mendenhall the cons. The AID Director maintained that to feed the additional refugees would unduly tax an already severely overloaded supply system. Moderator William Sullivan, who considered bantering healthy to some extent, as usual assumed a neutral stance and permitted the infighting.<sup>20</sup>

After General Ouane promised AID he would supply and feed the refugees army rice that he actually did not possess from his military allotment, Shackley contacted AB-1 (possibly with a wink-wink) authorizing Tony's operation with the stipulation and a sop to AID that a majority of civilians would be left in the

---

<sup>20</sup> USAID worker Joe Flipse always assumed that SKY was running the Lao program and AID was merely a cover organization, but did not want to admit it, nor did the ambassador. This was later confirmed in an AID representative's testimony to Congress.

valley. In turn, Bill Lair and Pat Landry ordered Tony to undertake the operation.

Halfway through December battle plans were finalized for the push on Nam Tha. Overall mission commander Colonel Khamphay's two battalions would be lifted by UH-34D pilots to high ground around MOUNG SING and Route-32. Colonel Khamsene's battalion would be helicoptered southeast of the Nam Tha Valley. Preemptive airstrikes would neutralize strong points, and then the troops would join in the valley.

Movement toward the valley commenced on 24 December.

Once in place, encountering little resistance, Khamphay's men marched southeast down the road toward the objective. Two days later the troops were at the valley perimeter. Delivered closer to Nam Tha, Khamsene's units were first to enter the Lima-100 Valley, overwhelming and chasing the few Pathet Lao out of town. When all battalion units were present and accounted for, the columns joined and fanned out to clear the area and consolidate their gains.

As the troops temporarily secured the area, thousands of elated refugees surged into the valley, desiring to leave the area of former communist control. Learning of the lightning victory, Lao pressure on Tony Poe was so intense that he had no other option than remove all the populace he could to safety. Working

under a strict timetable, he had to muster all available aircraft. Consequently, AID Area Coordinator Blaine Jensen, equally pressured by civilians and in turn by Poe, forwarded every AID plane at his disposal to assist in the evacuation. In addition to commandeering aircraft at the expense of other necessary work, fuel supplies were taxed to the maximum.

Number estimates for the refugee airlift were high, but over a two-day period, while thousands of others walked dozens of miles southeast toward Vien Pou Kha (LS-152), enemy equipment and perhaps 600 refugees were flown out of the valley by H-34 crews and CASI Porter pilots.

By the third day, with reports of enemy rallying in the eastern mountains to retake the valley, Poe ordered a withdrawal of his SGU battalions to Nam Yu.

### **FLIPSE AND JENSEN AFTERMATH**

About a month following the Nam Tha operation, after discovering the enormous numbers of new refugees generated during the evacuation who required expensive relocation and food, and Jensen's involvement in the operation, the AID Director was furious. His ire increased proportionally when it was discovered that Ouane had prevaricated in his promise to release food stocks and FAR lacked sufficient rice to support the

hordes of thousands. Looking for a scapegoat, AID Vientiane unfairly assigned blame to Jensen, who attempted to care for the refugees, even though he had not been consulted prior to the operation. Therefore, Mendenhall summarily "pulled" Blaine out of Ban Houei Sai and ostensibly "fired" him. Actually, Jensen had become a direct AID hire at the end of 1966, so his two-year tour was approaching an end.

However, before Jensen left for the States, Pop Buell informed Ambassador Sullivan that he required help at Sam Tong. Apparently, none of Pop's people would purchase and transport rice seed required for the large number of new refugees for a crop. Since the planting season was well on the way, Jensen was asked to help in this endeavor. Although bitter about the way he had been treated, he went to Sam Tong. Aided by Nai Kongs and pilots, the job was accomplished in record time. Before leaving, he informed Pop, *"Your rice seed is delivered. The next time you get in trouble and need a good man, I will be in Idaho and you have my address."* He remained in the USA about eight months.

Some spin was generated, and rumor circulated through the American community, that the Nam Tha operation was all a grievous error, and only meant to create a diversion. It was never planned to succeed.

Over time, a portion of the estimated 3,000 to 3,500 refugees were relocated to a river village

southeast of Ban Houei Sai. Others were installed north of Pak Tha. When USAID Vientiane failed to authorize food and sustenance for the refugees, AID representative Piak at Ban Houei Sai introduced innovative measures to generate sufficient foodstuffs. Jute bags of rice designated for airborne delivery to sites in Houa Kong were reduced from the standard forty to thirty-three kilograms. The seven-kilo difference was used to feed the new refugees. In this way, the extra rice was accumulated to supply the unauthorized people.

According to Joe Flipse, before a warehouse was erected at the Ban Houei Sai airport, this method had actually been employed earlier at Lima-25 to good advantage on a limited basis. It provided good control of the program inventory. This method also provided Joe with a fudge factor in his rice quota arguments. He once proffered a resignation because of the constant harassment regarding his rice quota. When Joe's superiors backed down rather than proceed with a hearing, he knew he had won the bureaucratic battle.

Assistant Ruoff was in the middle of the controversy, attempting to implement Mendenhall's austerity policy. He argued that the budget had been reduced. To verify this, Joe then visited Program Officer Norman Sweet's office for confirmation. Sweet denied any cut, and in fact allowed that the budget had

just been increased the previous week. This provided all the ammunition Joe needed. The young, feisty man believed in fighting fire with fire, and USG was supposed to be fighting a war. He returned to Ruoff and called him a dirty liar, among other salty profanity.

Phantom numbers of ADC troops and villagers were always some concern to AID representatives. As troop strength at villages was normally inflated by the village leader, a variation of the rice reduction scheme was used by AID representatives, later at Ban Houei Sai, to determine a more realistic evaluation of troop, dependent, and refugee numbers in a village. Normally, if a site received fifty to a hundred sacks of rice per month everyone was satisfied. When assessing total population, a predetermined amount of rice was delivered, then no more until requested. By dividing a load by fifteen kilos per person per month, a reasonable and accurate count could be determined. This worked for a time until more savvy village leaders had the radio operator request monthly drops last, then immediately call for another drop the following day.

In the final analysis, since Tony was obeying his superiors' orders, and Blaine was disobeying them, Blaine's head was on the chopping block. It was not AID policy to terminate an individual for perceived malfeasance. This was difficult to effect as it involved time and paperwork. Instead, after his tour,



and while on home leave, as a non-permanent employee for the first three to five years after direct hire, Jensen likely became a victim of a reduction in force (RIF). Since this was clean, and a way of avoiding a face-to-face confrontation between individuals, the method of not renewing a contract was preferred. It was almost the same as being fired, but gentler on all those involved.

After Mendenhall departed as the AID chief for Laos, short-handed with experienced personnel, with the urging of "Jiggs" Weldon, returning AID Chief Charlie Mann rehired Blaine and he returned to Sam Tong, replacing the ailing Pop Buell. Blaine was the only AID officer who worked at Site-20 with respect from Lao/Meo counterparts, Vang Pao, and all his officers. <sup>21</sup>

## **ACTION IN MR-2**

During early December, enemy activity continued south of Sam Neua in upper Military Region Two.

---

### <sup>21</sup> Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 165-166.

Joe Flipse Email, 04/07/97, 06/17/97, 06/22/97, Flipse was not at Ban Houei Sai during the operation and recalled what Jensen later told him in Vientiane. From the few questions he asked, with a good appreciation for the situation, Joe deduced the rest.

Blaine Jensen Letters, 05/04/96, 04/08/97.

Frank Stergar Email, 05/27/96.

Mac Thompson Interview, 12/26/96.

Mac Thompson, Email, 06/17/97, 06/23/97.

Victor Anthony, 236-237, 264.

Elements of three Vietnamese battalions surged down Route-6, and despite the enormous difficulty of moving large units over mountainous and jungled terrain, they attacked several long-standing Meo ADC sites located a few miles east of the road-sites that I had supported out of Houa Moung in past years. Located within a few miles of each other, they were utilized by Meo units as springboards for harassing operations, intelligence gathering, and targeting enemy LOCs. Ban Khami (LS-39) was lost. Soon afterward, on 6 December, the garrison was forced out of Phou Pha Louom (LS-220). By the second week of the offensive, Ban Keng Sai (LS-84) fell. Twenty miles south, Vang Pao reacted by reinforcing Houei Sang (LS-206) with two battalions, one consisting of Lao Theung. Following this movement, the units, accompanied by ADC companies, moved north to reclaim the cluster lost earlier in the month. The offensive failed. Vang Pao's troops returned to Houei Sang, located thirteen miles south and seven miles east of LS-29. Cutting his losses, in early January the general subsequently recalled his military units to Na Khang to prepare for that site's defense.

Enemy policy not only focused on clearing eastern Meo redoubts close to their supply arteries. To the west of Route-6, by the 15<sup>th</sup>, two enemy companies, now focusing on the Site-85 area, probed Meo defenses across the valley from Pha Thi on the high crescent-

shaped formation near Phou Den Din. Withdrawing after dark, they returned the next morning with increased vigor, assaulting and capturing some outposts. Later, after Meo troops counterattacked and retook the positions, the enemy commenced mortar fire.

These positions, where we risked our bacon, had been in contention from time to time over the years. While RONing on top of the world at Site-85 in 1965, I witnessed a spectacular night sound and light show of battle in the same area.

Two days later, enemy units were discovered moving from Sam Neua west toward the Den Din area. Air attacks targeted the group, and within a week, observers reported enemy troops withdrawing to the east toward Sam Neua Town. However, the fun was not over.

Showing the flag, on New Year's Eve some desultory shelling of Houei Kah Moung (LS-111) commenced. Used as an alternate site for Jolly Green emergency refueling, the garrison had prepared for such aggression, erecting earthworks and dirt forts.

Enemy buildups and evidence of near-term aggressiveness was of some concern to members of the Embassy Country Team. Road watch teams in North Vietnam also reported signs of Vietnamese troops in the thousands moving toward the Lao border along established LOCs. Therefore, representatives cautioned the RLG and FAR against unnecessarily defending Nam Bac

and Lao Ngam. Rather than incur a morale-crushing military defeat and losing precious assets, an orderly withdrawal was deemed the wiser choice. Even though the Lao military had performed fairly well against recent hostile action, there was past evidence and apprehension as to FAR discipline and unit integrity disintegrating under pressure. Should a general retreat occur in a critical area, it would present the enemy with an opportunity to proceed south in force toward populated centers. <sup>22</sup>

## **JARINA RETURNS TO MR-2**

The same day my RON was complete, Mike departed Udorn in Hotel-50 for Sam Tong. His Flight Mechanics were Whiting and Hope. After taking on fuel and obtaining sandwiches, he crossed Skyline Drive into Long Tieng. The day's missions would keep him occupied in areas east of Padong Ridge.

---

### <sup>22</sup> Segment Sources:

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 226, 267, 290.

Edward Vallentyne, *CHECO: The Fall of Site 85*, 8, 9, 11.

Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, #322, 12/16/67.

Telegram from Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson in Texas, #325, 12/26/67.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 184, 189.

Ted Shackley, 170-17.

John Pratt, *CHECO*, Air Operations Center (AOC) Luang Prabang to Air Attaché (AIRA) Vientiane, 49.

Intelligence reports flashed warnings that enemy forces were increasingly moving onto the Plain of Jars and into associated areas. Consequently, Vang Pao, always the consummate and preemptive leader concerned about his flanks, wanted his people cognizant of the threat and prepared to counter any probes and offensives.

Mike's first mission took him to the Ban Moung Ngan Valley (LS-236) fifteen miles east of the 8,500-foot mountain of Phou Sao that had been recovered by Meo forces during midyear. After completing support missions in the area, he proceeded to Ban Phang (LS-239) located on the fringe of the Nam Pot Valley almost equidistant between Padong (LS-05) and Phu Khe (LS-19). Subsequent trips covered long established high elevation sites at Pha Phai (LS-65) and Ban Peung that were in proximity to LOC Routes 4 and 42 plunging south from the Xieng Khouang Valley.

After returning to Long Tieng with passengers, the crew of Hotel-50 repaired to the Sam Tong hostel for rest and sustenance.

Mike was sent east of Padong Ridge again on Sunday. Missions included twenty-one landings and work at Tha Thom (LS-11), and reinforcing troop shuttles from Ban Pounngay (LS-222), seventeen miles east of Site-236 to Moung Ngam.

On the eighteenth, Jarina moved troops to the Ban Phang area, a good distance from Long Tieng and as far afield as Phou So (LS-57), north of Moung Soui. Late in the day he was directed to RON at Luang Prabang.

In the morning, Mike lifted troops twenty-six miles north northeast of Luang Prabang to a point just west of the Nam Ou. The troop placement was likely conducted to maintain surveillance and a first line of defense on a portion of Route-4 and the river leading to Luang Prabang. In December, as the enemy net tightened in the north, a volunteer battalion from Moung Soui was shuttled farther up river from Luang Prabang to where the Nam Nga tributary emptied into the Nam Ou.

Another assignment took Jarina thirty miles southwest to a position near Muang Nang on the Mekong's east bank, and from there to Sayaboury Town (L-23) and other areas. His last stop of the day was to Mount Met (LS-158), where he likely picked up Mac Thompson for Vientiane. After dropping his charge at Wattay Airport, Mike returned to Udorn.

Enemy movement continued toward guerrilla positions and despite the precautions taken, two sites were attacked and lost. <sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.  
Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 288.  
Ken Conboy, 184.

## **TROUBLE IN KUALA LUMPUR**

When I returned from Pakse, I discovered that Ricky was having throat problems and high fevers again so we took him to the Air Force doctor at the airfield. Ever since the issue over medical care was resolved by Orn's husband Charlie Carlson, we generally had access to the Western doctors. Although Thai doctors in town were competent, medicine they prescribed was sometimes suspect as to its efficacy. <sup>24</sup> Rick was better the next day and we planned to take him to Bangkok for an evaluation on the 18th.

While I was at the Air America facility, Wayne relayed some shocking news to me regarding Concrete Masonry. Coble had cabled Wayne regarding an imminent bank foreclosure against the company. There were heavy debt obligations to Malaysian Industrial Development Finance, Ltd., the main government lending institution, and two other commercial banks. In addition, numerous other creditors threatened judgments. The situation required immediate attention.

The sparse information was devastating, problematic, and posed many unanswered questions, especially since I and others had been sending money to KL to shore up the company during the supposedly reorganization process. As recently as September we had

---

<sup>24</sup> Medicine was often out of date or a counterfeit substitute for an authentic pharmaceutical.

been led to believe that the company was about to show promise. Obviously, somewhere between the lines of Coble's hyperbole, we were not privy to the full story as to the actual situation.

Threatening to quit as Managing Director, Coble requested our instant help, but Wayne and others claimed other duties or were simply not interested. Promises had been generated for so long without results, and there was a general apathy and loss of confidence in Coble's ability to manage anything. I was not even a director in Concrete Masonry, and although reluctant to take on the task, Wayne talked me into a quick trip to Kuala Lumpur to investigate and see if there was an alternative to losing the company.

After arrival, Coble drove me to the bank. When we were seated in the British administrator's office, the man began with a history lesson, stating that Concrete Masonry had been undercapitalized from its inception. That was why there was an attempt to recapitalize in the fall and spring of 1966-1967. However, local KL interests had chosen not to participate any further, and our core shareholders were unable to produce sufficient capital. Pointing a finger at the problem, he assigned blame to Kuala Lumpur management and the Concrete Masonry board of directors for lack of timely dissemination of adequate information, and hesitancy to act.



I do not know what Coble had told the administrator beforehand, but after spouting lot of inane verbiage, thinking that I was the designated investor representative equipped to deal with the situation, the Brit asked what we were prepared to do. Apparently, he believed I had arrived with a blanket investor consensus and sufficient funds to maintain the company's viability. What he was asking posed a conundrum, one I was not prepared for or equipped to address. After patiently listening to the man's horror story regarding the sad shape of Concrete Masonry, I indicated that I had merely been dispatched on a fact-finding mission, and that we investors did not have time to collectively discuss the problem or make a decision. He was obviously not pleased, but banks are lenders of capital and are reluctant to actively manage businesses. Consequently, after hemming and hawing for a few more minutes, he offered a solution. In exchange for a suitable partner willing to provide funds to satisfy the debt, we would have to relinquish a majority interest in Concrete Masonry. The company would have to be larger, more stable, and with a sales-oriented concern. Then he offered suggestions to some companies that fit the category. As lagniappe, he said that more time would be allowed for us to accomplish this task. It seemed like the suggestion and

recommendations had already been preordained, and I wondered why I had even made the trip.

Coble, interpreting the banker's suggestions as the only viable method to salvage some of the company, called a couple of cement company combine managers to set up initial interviews the next day. We were hopeful that they would lead toward negotiations that might eventually result in a takeover.

During the short trip from Bangkok to Kuala Lumpur, I had acquired a nasty head cold. Derivation of the virus and its rapid effect on my body was mysterious and took me by surprise. To allow my participation in negotiations to continue I purchased a pack of over-the-counter Contact cold tablets.

The first company manager from the Malaysian Rock Products Company was not particularly interested in acquiring a bankrupt company, but that could have been a ploy to acquire the company cheaply with no outside interests. The second individual at Malaysian Cement, part of the larger Blue Circle cartel, was more amenable. As I sat in front of his large desk feeling miserable with a virulent head cold, sniffing and soaking my handkerchief, I attempted to listen through my considerable embarrassment. The manager, who I assumed was also a Brit, dominated most of the discussion. Then in a shocking revelation, he frankly revealed that his people had been watching us for some

time, and if the enterprise had been successful, his group would have established lower prices and sufficient competition to sink Concrete Masonry. Throughout the spiel, Coble preferred to listen, and contributed little to the conversation. Actually, as a failed manager, what could he possibly offer? Again, my paranoia took over, as the entire scenario smacked of a set up deal.

On that note, we took our leave. The interviews were a starting point and it was now up to Coble as to whom and how much to relinquish to another organization. However, from his ego, proclivity to make poor decisions, and past performance as a manager, I was not too optimistic about a beneficial outcome for the investors.

Between suffering from the devastating cold and the day's developments, I had had enough and asked Coble to drop me at the hotel where I could take the Contact pills and obtain some bed rest.<sup>25</sup> After he had time to consider the offers during the day, he called and sweet talked me with trivial drivel for a long time. I finally tired of his droning and had to excuse myself. Feeling that he had betrayed us, I was not happy with Coble and had not been for some time. This was

---

<sup>25</sup> Jim was likely aware, that pending my report to our stockholders, his job was on the line. This, plus the fact that there had never been camaraderie between us, he had not offered me the comfort of his home.

especially the case after talking to knowledgeable people. They indicated that the company was exactly the right enterprise at the right time, and should have succeeded if we only had the right person at the helm to manage it.

Upon my return to Udorn I composed an unvarnished two-page report regarding Concrete Masonry's tribulations and what I had learned during the trip--mainly that Asian American investors would relinquish controlling interest in Concrete Masonry. (We retained thirty-five percent.) Toward the end of the statement, I admitted that I had little idea what would happen, but we would probably be better off in future years if Concrete Masonry reverted to the right company. The report was circulated to investors and the apathy continued.

Udorn was very cold, one of the coldest seasons that I could recall. People were not used to the frigid weather. Tuie cancelled her plans for a Christmas party. While I was in Kuala Lumpur, she had to make an unscheduled trip to Bangkok because Ricky was diagnosed with lung congestion. The child spent two days in the Bangkok Christian Hospital. He recovered and was home in time to enjoy his Christmas presents. My cold was still bad and I felt horrible, but I eventually recovered.

## **REVERSALS IN THE CHRISTMAS SEASON**

With enemy forces on the move in most military regions, future trouble was preordained. One of our adversary's top priorities was total elimination of Lao-based American air navigation facilities. Consequently, taking advantage of the holiday season and FAR's endemic laxness to guard, patrol and obtain intelligence, a Vietnamese infantry battalion, estimated at 300 men and a special unit of what was equivalent to an elite U.S. Special Forces unit, closed on Moung Phalane (L-61) at 2200 hours on Christmas Eve.

Phalane was the RLG's most forward government site of any size or consequence. It was located east of Savannakhet on the paved Route-9 road prior to entering the mountains leading to Muang Phine and Tchepone. The position was generally immune from enemy encroachment because of a tacit agreement not to conduct offensive operation farther east. Similar to other tacit agreements at Attopeu, Moung Heim, Moung Soui, and other sites over the years, they were only as good as the enemy chose to honor them. <sup>26</sup> For this reason, only one FAR battalion was deemed necessary to maintain an area defense. Despite the obvious danger to life, limb, and equipment, Air America maintained a radio/weather

---

<sup>26</sup> A good example of FAR trust in imprudent agreements tailored to be broken was the loss of Moung Heim during early March 1966.

station in town, manned by Thai operators and a Filipino mechanic. To guide aircraft and aid operations against the Trails, the USAF operated a TACAN facility manned by two technicians three kilometers west of town.

Surprise attacks commenced on 0130 hours, resulting in the FAR headquarters unit and one company being overrun.

An international voluntary service (IVS) representative and his wife were living in Moung Phalane on the 24th:

*"...At 5 O'clock in the afternoon on the day before Christmas 1967, Marge and I made a lucky decision and drove our rickety old USAID Jeep the 102 kilometers from Phalane to Savannakhet to attend Midnight Mass at the Vietnamese Church. (On the way to Lima-39, they visited the two Americans at the TACAN facility.) Sometime during that night a Pathet Lao launched B-40 grenade went through the bedroom window of our little house in Phalane killing the young guard assigned there and injuring several others. The Chao Muang escaped, but many of the buildings we had constructed there after a mistaken bombing earlier in the year were torched..."*

During ensuing attacks, RPG grenades destroyed the TACAN equipment and three buildings. Americans Peter Scott and John Morris were initially reported missing

in action and later discovered killed. The four Thai operators at the radio station were killed and the Filipino mechanic captured. Without benefit of air support, the intrepid FAR defenders offered minimum resistance and the remaining battalion fled west after three hours. They abandoned a vehicle and crew-served weapons. As government troops continued to dribble into Dong Hene, and until results of the battle became clearer, it took several days to sort out FAR losses. A final count ranged to twenty-five killed and thirty-one wounded. Without speculating what actually happened to the men, plus or minus eighty-one were declared missing.

Alerted to the attack, early the following morning the Vientiane U.S. Embassy phoned AB-1 headquarters in Udorn and ordered an on-site investigation activated to learn the disposition of the two American Air Force personnel. In turn the message was forwarded to Tom Fosmire, COS Savannakhet. Until receiving this message, Tom and his station personnel had been aware that the site had been hit, but not cognizant that Americans were present.

Air America H-34 Captain Sarisporn Bhibalkul and his Thai Flight Mechanic arrived at Lima-39. Along with the T-28 pilots assigned to assist in cover and escort, all were briefed at the airport briefing room regarding the mission, the latest information, and the

considerable hazards involved. Following some delay to further assess the situation and assemble the T-28 assets, SGU Case Officer, "Mick" McGrath, along with an SGU captain, boarded Sarisporn's UH-34D helicopter, Hotel-56. They headed north-northeast to Dong Hene to obtain the latest information from FAR troops and refugees scurrying in from the east.

While heading toward Site-61 at 1600 hours, they were joined by an FAC pilot from Nakhon Phanom. At Site-61, the Air Force pilot conducted a low pass over the TACAN facility. He observed no evidence of enemy presence and drew no ground fire. <sup>27</sup> On the basis of the FAC's non sighting report and urging from McGrath, Sarisporn landed close to the burned structures. While McGrath began examining the Heavy Green personnel quarters, incoming mortar and ground fire impacted the area around Hotel-56. Hearing the explosions, "Mick" quickly returned to the ship without actually sighting Americans. While T-28 pilots strafed the area, Sarisporn pulled pitch and lifted off the ground. However, ground fire continued perforating the helicopter during climb out. Within two minutes, the engine oil pressure needle dropped to zero. Lacking lubrication, pistons soon seized in the nine cylinders,

---

<sup>27</sup> Since there was no further information available regarding the FAC, the Author assumes that after determining the site clear of enemy, he departed to the east to conduct trail reconnaissance or control air strikes.



and the R-1820 radial engine ceased running. With the normally noisy, throbbing engine now reduced to silence and controls stiff because the auxiliary servo motor activated by the engine produced no more hydraulic boost assistance, the Captain expertly "split the needles" and autorotated into a small jungle clearing about six miles west of Moung Phalane.

Prior to Sarisporn's incident, the IVS couple returned to Ban Dong Hene (LS-54), seventeen miles west of L-61:

*"...Despite the dicey situation around Phalane, Marge and I assessed security around Dong Hene on Christmas Day and decided (with Sandy Stone's permission) that we could return to a temporary house we maintained inside the military camp. For some reason or other (keeping up our presence in the area?) it seemed important to show we weren't afraid of the bad guys...Anyway, back we went from Savannakhet to Dong Hene with Balai (our Vietnamese house servant) and a nice fat Commissary turkey with the aim of an outing on a Christmas evening feed for Colonel Thao Ly, his officers, and the Chao Muang. About 5 in the afternoon, with the turkey half done, we started receiving messages (from our own net and the local military) which indicated trouble. An hour or two went by. It got dark. More bad reports came in. Finally, a USAF Jolly Green Giant chopper came in, made a spectacular night time landing to extract us*

*(Marge Balai, the half-cooked turkey and myself) to NKP for the night.*

*We returned to Savannakhet the next day (with the turkey)...and the story goes on..."*

Fortunately, Sarisporn landed a substantial distance from enemy troops, who were celebrating victory and busy consolidating their gains. Although concealed in the jungle, the four men were still not out of danger. Except for mental stress, the crew and passengers were in fairly good condition. Sarisporn, slightly wounded in the arm by flying shrapnel during the melee, was patched up by McGrath. Additionally, the Lao captain had a bullet hole punched neatly through his shirt, a talking point, and something he would remember for a long time. Both McGrath and the Thai Flight Mechanic emerged unscathed. While hoping for a quick recovery, for the time being, the four people temporarily remained with the helicopter. Later, T-28 pilots reported people running from the downed H-34. However, because of their unknown plight, lateness of the day, and USAF extensive and complex briefing rule requirements prior to a SAR launch, there would be a considerable time lag before a Jolly Green crew arrived from Nakhon Phanom. Consequently, with a negative sighting and darkness approaching, the rescue attempt was aborted. Under McGrath's tutelage, the four men spent a restless night huddling in the jungle,

wondering if the enemy might soon be breathing down their necks.

Very early on the 26th, Ed Reid was contacted at home for a SAR attempt. He departed Udorn prior to dawn for a briefing at Savannakhet. With the situation still unknown, Ed retrieved the men at 0615 hours without further incident. Ed told me later that McGrath had fired pen flares, enabling him to locate the men and expediting the SAR. I was a little miffed at the time because I was available, and if asked, would have accompanied Reid as his second pilot.

There could have been a logical reason for this. It was still Wayne's policy to keep married pilots with children off the flight schedule on Christmas Day. Then, as a sop to those who flew over Christmas, the ones with families would be scheduled to fly over New Year. Ed had no children in Udorn, and was likely the designated standby pilot over the Christmas holidays.

During the afternoon of the same day, I was called out to fly PFG to Savannakhet. Glenn Woods and training Flight Mechanic, John Melvin rounded out the crew. Arriving late, we worked up to and after dark supporting FAR and SGU movements to forward areas while they prepared to advance toward Phalane and Site-61. We continued this operation the following day.

**AFTERMATH**

Like a majority of first reports generated during "the fog of war," Washington's assessment of the Phalane attack contained initial, but not entirely correct, information from sources in the field:

*"Communist forces are keeping up their pressure against government positions in Laos.*

*An enemy unit estimated about battalion strength raided the government base and airstrip at Moung Phalane on 25 December, and destroyed most of the camp's facilities, including the USAID and Air America buildings. Although government reinforcements apparently have moved into the area, they have not yet reoccupied Moung Phalane.*

*Preliminary reports suggest the attack was specifically aimed against the U.S. presence at Moung Phalane. Two American technicians who manned a navigation station which assists U.S. air operations in southern Laos are missing..* <sup>28</sup>

*The attack on Moung Phalane is the first significant enemy action in this part of the panhandle in over a year. It may be related to recent attacks farther south in the Bolovens Plateau area [and Lao Ngam]. These operations appear to be part of a new*

---

<sup>28</sup> These men were referred to as Lockheed employees in press reports.

*communist campaign to forestall stepped-up allied efforts to interdict infiltration corridor..."*

With the defeat at Moung Phalane and other hostilities occurring throughout the country, the Lao Ministry of National Defense issued a press release on the 26th stating the obvious, **"The military situation in Laos is serious."**

In denial, politico and military spin-meisters were soon at work producing their revised version of the situation in all military regions. The situation had **not** been reported serious. Local positions were lost, but the pattern simply evidenced normal dry season activities. The PL/NVA historically launched scattered offensives. These were conducted to gather rice, resupply units, and effect territorial consolidation. Scare tactics of Lao agencies were released to the media that tended to focus world opinion on the Vietnamese presence in the neutral country.

Both Phalane town and the airstrip were retaken by government forces on 31 December with no resistance. <sup>29</sup> An investigation by the 1st Mobile Communications Group survey team revealed that almost all the TACAN equipment and supporting equipment had been destroyed by lethal B-40 rocket fire.

---

<sup>29</sup> With supply lines disrupted and the raid successful, the recovery was likely the result of an enemy withdrawal rather than any substantial FAR engagement.

Since TACAN coverage was deemed critical for air operations in the region, even before the survey team's investigation of the navigation facility, steps were taken to discover a more secure site for another TACAN unit. After a suitable location was found across the Mekong River, on Phu Mano, a 6,500-foot mountain four miles south of Mukdahan, Thailand, a mobile TACAN unit was helicoptered to and installed on a high point that would provide coverage to Khe Sanh in South Vietnam. The new facility began operating during the second week of January 1968.

The loss of the Phalane TACAN site, one of only three such strategic navigational facilities in the country, focused attention on the existing security of the remaining electronic facilities erected to produce more satisfactory targeting in South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and minimize bombing errors in the Panhandle. The obvious lack of security of the unit at Phou Kate's forward location was duly noted by the Seventh Air Force's commanding general. As continued security at Saravane was suspect, navigation technicians were obliged to RON at Pakse.

Although almost 1,000 government troops contributed to Phu Pha Thi's defense, planners concluded that should the enemy expend the necessary assets, Site-85 would not hold.

Only in the Air America inventory for six months, Hotel-59 was later recovered. Having received substantial damage and over a hundred holes during the fracas, the machine was eventually repaired. Sarisporn resigned from Air America, but later became a CASI fixed wing pilot. Very westernized and much at ease with "round eye" types, Sarisporn often visited Wayne, with whom he had a good relationship, whenever he flew into Udorn in a Dornier.

Even though likely deemed an emergency situation, the nature of the Embassy/McGrath mission was curious, as portions totally violated the concept of our Special Mission SOPs. The McGrath fiasco had been performed single ship and single pilot.<sup>30</sup> It harkened back to the bad-old-days when incidents like this resulted in deaths; i.e. the May 1966 Wilmot debacle. I was surprised at Sarisporn, for I had spent several days with him working out of Sam Tong earlier in the year when he was checking out and obtaining area fams. Because I was suffering from a severe back ailment at the time, I allowed him to fly most of the Customer's missions from the right seat, while I plotted the coordinates, navigated, and advised. Overall, I was well pleased with Sarisporn, for he performed with

---

<sup>30</sup> Given little time to react, we did what was necessary, as in the "Wild Weasel" SAR that Gentz and I performed at the base of Pha Thi. However, the Mounq Phalane incident afforded more time to provide at least a double crew and two aircraft.

proficiency and elicited intelligent decisions; I expected great things from him.

The unfortunate incident emphasized and revealed a dismal reality. Aggressive, unscrupulous Case Officers often seemed able to easily intimidate Thai pilots into performing hazardous missions without adhering to proper SOPs or using standard tools. Also contributing to the problem was cultural, and at least partly due to the Thai proclivity to please and reluctance to convey anything negative--particularly using the no word. One might consider that common sense would take precedence during such circumstances. However, as evidenced during past world wars, other populations are not renowned for individuality and the so called American "Yankee" ingenuity. Like the leopard and his permanent spots, most people do not readily alter mind sets. Consequently, Sarisporn's incident was not an isolated case and would reoccur several times in the future, at least one with tragic consequences to both Western and Asian personnel. Furthermore, no amount of man-to-man counseling by CPH Knight was able to instill Thai



pilots' resistance to unreasonable Customer demands. <sup>31</sup>

On the 28<sup>th</sup>, Site-61 and parts of Phalane were still controlled by the enemy. Dong Hene also received some minor harassing fire. <sup>32</sup>

Following early sundry work supporting the Phalane recovery operation, we returned to our standard diet of road watch activity. The combination in/out mission was preceded by a two-hour roundtrip recon in CASI "Hitler's Revenge" Dornier N9185X. After locating and establishing radio contact with the team, we RTB. Don Leach arrived from Udorn and joined me in the cockpit

---

<sup>31</sup> Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 178, 181.

Bill Leary 1967 Notes and his Tom Fosmire Interviews Regarding the Moung Phalane Incident.

Tim Castle, *One Day Too Long*, 73.

Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 289.

Hotel-56 Aircraft Accident Review, 2/15/68.

Report Sent to USAID Director, Joseph Mendenhall by the IVS Representative Previously Assigned to Moung Phalane, 01/04/68-  
Email Sent to the Author by MacAlan Thompson (who received the information from Jack Huxtable), 06/29/01, 06/30/01.

Mac Thompson Email, 08/27/03-Notation in Sarisporn's Logbook, "25 Dec.67, H-46, Shot Down L-61, ENG Quit. RON in Jungle. Pick up 260600L, Ed Reid.

EW Knight Emails, 08/31/00, 09/01/00.

Marius Burke Email.

Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*, Hotel-56.

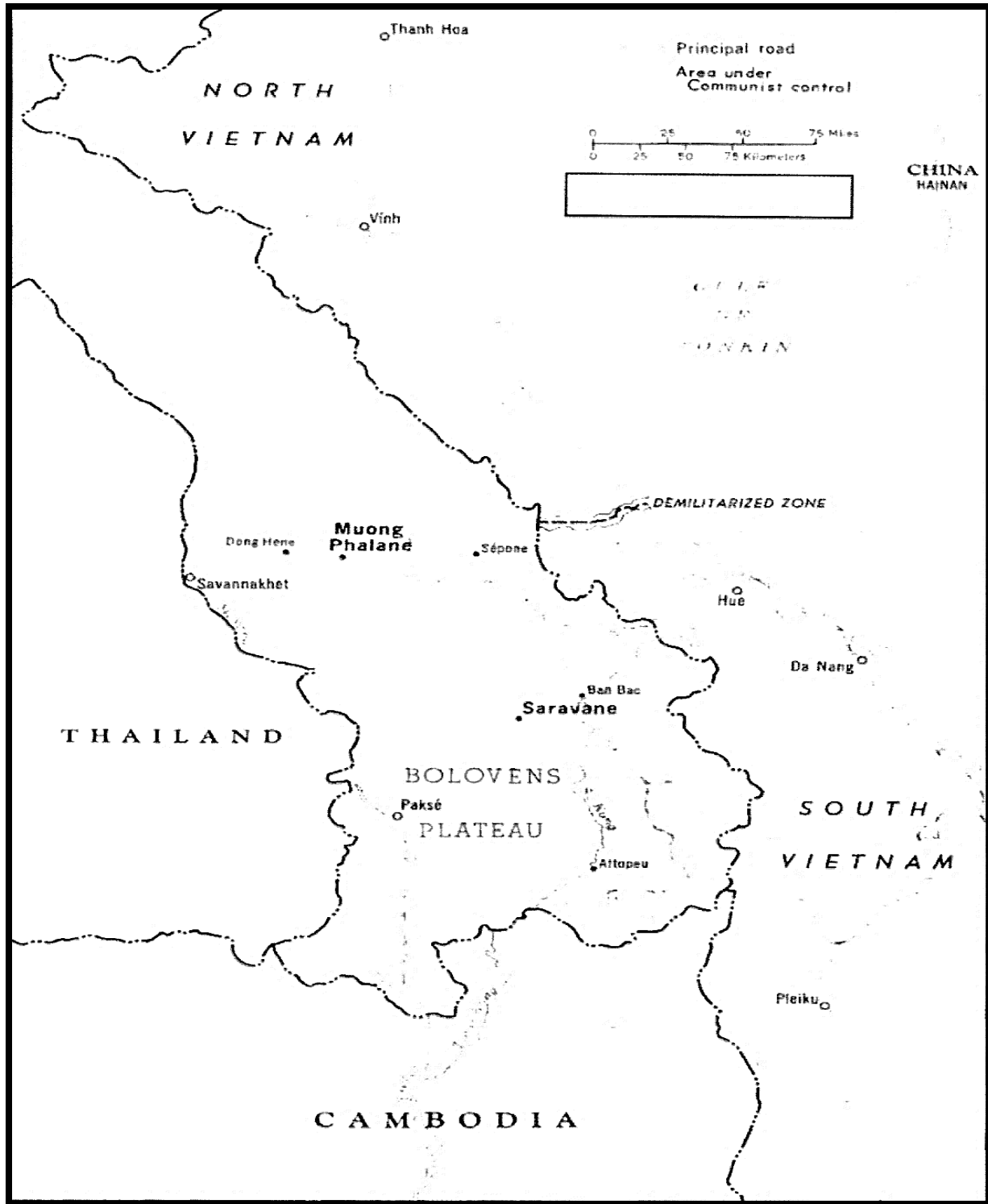
December Version of the Military Situation in Laos.

Telegram from the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson in Texas, #325, Laotian Situation Report as of 1800. circa 12/26/67.

Edward Vallentiny, *CHECO*, 10.

Victor Anthony, 265-265.

<sup>32</sup> CIA Daily Bulletin, 12/29/67 indicated: "Government units recaptured Moung Phalane on 27 December..." Perhaps not all was recovered at this time.



Bold type location of the former TACAN site at Moug Phalane in eastern Military Region Three. To the south, the Provincial capital of Saravane is northwest of Paksé.

CIA Map, 12/29/67.

to satisfy the two pilots SOP. The infiltration of thirteen men was conducted ninety-three miles east (XD2920) to a remote area across the Se Bang Chiang <sup>33</sup> and seventeen miles south of the Tchepone Valley. Exfiltration of eleven men (XD0715) took place fourteen miles west of the infil location. Eight miles south of Muang Phine and less than two miles east of Route-23, the team was likely at the end of their scheduled road watch activity in the field. Pushing our luck, we recovered forty minutes after sunset.

Denied area time allowed for the purpose of Special Mission pay was one hour and twenty minutes. This was fortunate, for the recently instituted project pay policy cut our Military Region Three pay nearly in half and if normal work was not involved, total flight time also suffered. Of course, this was only important if one was logging overtime. There was a slight remuneration for both the recon and night time flown.

With the enemy lingering in the Phalane/Dong Hene area of Route-9, the northern region also required immediate action. While FAR and SGU troops slowly moved in from the south and east to reclaim the area, a few enemy units were forced north. A team was reported under pressure at the forward position at D-9 (WD472626), twelve miles north of the road between

---

<sup>33</sup> Se, the word used for river in southern Laos was synonymous with nam for northern rivers.

Sites-61 and 58. Their previous mission had been to patrol and monitor enemy movement toward government forces. The Customer mounted an exfil to withdraw the nine men. While en route, an Air Force pilot declared an emergency, which we briefly covered until helicopters from Nakhon Phanom arrived to handle the situation. Normally we were not involved in SARs during missions because, whether in or out, it could pose a problem of what to do with the troops onboard. We certainly could not hover over high trees or jungle with a load. Did we take a chance and drop them off in the jungle and then retrieve them later? Fortunately, we were never challenged to make this decision.

We were recalled to Udorn and chocked in after dark.

On the Bolovens Plateau south of Military Region Three, an Agency report noted that the communists were continuing to maintain pressure on government forces.

*"Enemy forces have harassed a government position defending an access road into Saravane, but there does not appear to be any immediate threat against the town. So far the communists appear to be content to tie down government forces in the area in an effort to disrupt*

*any encroachment into the infiltration corridor [redacted]..."* <sup>34</sup>

## **PAPA FOXTROT HOTEL**

Tuesday the 26th also proved an eventful day with Captain Nikki Filippi crashing Papa Foxtrot Hotel on top of rocky Phu Bia. The accident involved a touch of irony. Operational accidents were always expected in extenuating circumstances, but with the advent of the Bell helicopter program, staffed with mostly senior H-34 pilots transitioning to the program, management illogically posited that "the old timers" would be the first to initiate accidents. Refuting this assumption, rear echelon pogues in Taipei and Washington simply forgot that we were immeasurably more experienced in mountain flying techniques, and possessed substantially more overall air sense regarding the numerous existing variables Laos provided than an individual who had never flown in the country before. Naturally, these attributes, learned through often difficult hours of OJT and stress, would translate to handling a new machine.

When the Bell was initially introduced upcountry for evaluation, no one had a clear or realistic idea

---

<sup>34</sup> CIA Daily Bulletin, 12/29/67. Laos: Small-scale skirmishing is continuing in southern Laos, but there is still no indication that major communist offensive is underway.

regarding its true performance. Using a pragmatic approach to sell the program, the 713 Customer was assured by early pilots the Bell was a super machine, one that could handle any and every eventuality and assigned mission--the flight manual parameters be damned. It took painful incidents to reorient this thinking, and for everyone on both sides to understand that the Bell had definite limitations, just like any other machine. Moreover, the ship did not have the Sikorsky UH-34D's qualities of toughness and durability, which allowed most pilots to substantially outperform flight manual charts at altitude. In comparison, the Bell was more like a child's Tinker toy.

Nikki departed Long Tieng loaded with twelve passengers and Flight Mechanic T.J. Werth. His destination was the top of Phu Bia, a perfect location to stage people for radio intercepts or to emplace a navigation beacon. Since the mountain was the highest in Laos at over 9,000 feet ASL, Nikki elected to conduct three trips: four, four, and three, plus a guide. To facilitate his plan, he landed at Padong, where he offloaded all but the first five men.

As Padong was located on the north side of the same large range of mountains as Phu Bia, it was a short climbing distance of several thousand feet to the apex. As taught in the military, Nikki conducted four low

passes while reconnoitering the site and attempting to determine a specific wind direction.

Although the area was strewn with medium sized boulders and no large openings, the motivated and perhaps overconfident Captain Fillipi determined that he could safely land, but was unable to judge an accurate wind direction or velocity. <sup>35</sup>

Fillipi commenced a normal approach to his selected landing spot. At about two feet AGL he applied power

---

<sup>35</sup> In the early days, not many of us had or would ever attempt a landing on top of Laos' highest mountain in an underpowered H-34. Fortunately, there were no early Customer requirements for such a difficult mission. Despite the potential for adverse wind gusts always a problem encountered on ridgelines, mountains of this height with larger areas exposed on top provided a real challenge at times for an uninitiated pilot. In a phenomenon that had to be experienced to be believed and appreciated, upslope winds could be completely absent on the crest. This was called a null, or a no wind condition. Consequently, from utilizing additional lift generated by quartering or winds off the nose to a no wind condition during transition to termination, the drastic decrease of lift would result in a sudden and unexpected plunge toward the ground. This required a timely application of high power; if not, a hard landing or "controlled crash" could result. Without smoke grenades which we were not provided at the time, and in the absence of trees or vegetation on a bald hill, there was virtually no way to predict such a condition. Therefore, I normally used the last known prevailing wind direction as a guide. This situation happened once to the Author on a high hill above Padong, resulting in a truly exciting and excellent learning experience.

and control movements for landing. <sup>36</sup> Just prior to touchdown, severe wind gusts impacted the machine and application of full left pedal and left cyclic failed to prevent a sizeable right yaw. Swinging ninety degrees to the original landing direction in a low tail configuration, the two delicate tail rotor blades turning at very high RPM contacted low bushes and the fragile blades disintegrated. Then, with complete loss of directional control, PFH continued spinning to the right. Nikki, an accomplished Bell pilot proficient in emergency procedures, immediately rolled the throttle to idle and commenced a hovering autorotation while turning. Skids dug into the soft soil, and ground friction stopped the turning moment.

Although considerably shaken, the crew and passengers were not injured. A cursory inspection followed revealing spread skids, a damaged tail rotor assembly, and possible requirement to change both the pylon and tail boom.

The crew was later evacuated to Long Tieng. After losing PFF and PFH, the Udorn Bell inventory was temporarily reduced to four aircraft.

---

<sup>36</sup> Unlike French built aircraft, American helicopters were designed and manufactured with counter-clockwise main rotor blade rotation. Therefore, left anti-torque pedal was required to counteract a right fuselage torqueing effect when applying power.



Wayne Knight and Phil Goddard flew to Long Tieng on the 28th in PFI to provide Phil a line check and conduct whatever accident investigation of PFH was deemed possible. Later in the day, Wayne ferried Hotel-30 to Udorn for maintenance.

Since there was no claim of a mechanical failure, Wayne does not recall Jack Forney being overly excited about the accident. After repair, the CPH flew the machine on extended FCF on 28-29 January. <sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup>

Following a quick inspection and release of PFG, on 30 December, Captain Glen Woods and I were directed north to support Vang Pao's efforts to stabilize and counter Vietnamese movement in upper Military Region Two. Flight time was good and project pay not reduced for a change. On Monday, New Year's morning, leaving Glenn with the machine, I was relieved on site at Na Khang. I caught a ride to Site-20A with the PIC of 393, a C-7 Caribou shuttling between Long Tieng and Site-36. After a long wait, I deadheaded to Udorn with the Captain of Hotel-49.

---

<sup>37</sup> The loss of tail rotor control at altitude Fillipi experienced was addressed in later years when, to increase tail rotor efficiency, the Bell Helicopter manufacturing unit moved the tail rotor from the left to the right side of the tail pylon to create a pusher rather than a puller anti-torque system.

<sup>38</sup> 26 December 67 Air America XOXO Providing Initial Information Regarding the PFH Crash.

Air America Safety Director, Doug Dreifus Aircraft Accident Review, 03/26/68.

EW Knight Emails 08/28/00, 08/30/00, 08/31/00, 02/07/11.

I ended December with almost seventy-nine hours, and eventually received 750 dollars cash, called "greenies," for participating in Agency Special Missions. Until the system changed, I was able to live on this money and not draw on my regular pay. Even allowing for down time from my back problem, 1967 had been a decent year with total earnings of over 28,000 dollars.

As in previous years, additional exciting flying and momentous challenges lay ahead for Air America crewmembers in 1968. ©

Edited 02/17/17, 05/27/20, 07/19/20, 01/15/21, 01/31/21,  
02/218/21, 06/11/21, 07/14/21.

## EPILOGUE

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### BOOKS, MONOLOGUES

- Ahern, Tom, *Undercover Armies: the CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* (Washington, 2006).
- Anthony, Victor and Sexton, Richard, *The U.S. Air Force in Southeast Asia: The War in Northern Laos* (Washington, 1993).
- Blaufarb, Douglas, *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos 1962-1970* (Rand).
- Bowman, John ed., *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War* (New York, 1986).
- Castle, Tim, *One Day Too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York, 1999).
- Conboy, Ken with Morrison, Jim, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, 1995).
- Dommen, Arthur, *Conflict in Laos: Politics of Neutralization* (New York, 1964).
- Glover, Bob and Jane, *An Autobiographical History of Laos During the Period from September 1966-June 1968* (1999).
- Henderson, John, *Area Handbook for Thailand* (Washington, 1971).
- Kurdpol, Sayad, *Counterinsurgency*.
- Langer, Paul, *Laos: The Search for Peace in the Midst of War* (Santa Monica, Rand).
- McCoy, Alfred, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia, Opium War* (Harper, 1972).
- Nalty, Bernard, *War Against Trucks: Aerial Interdiction in Southern Laos 1968-1972* (Washington, 2005).
- Nichols, Steve, *Air America in Laos: The Flight Mechanic's Stories* (Martin, 2013).
- Plaster, John, *The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam* (New York, 1997).
- Project Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations (CHECO) Division, Melvin Porter, *Second Defense of LS-36* (Headquarters Pacific Air Force, 04/26/67).
- Shackley, Ted with Finney, Richard, *Spymaster: My Life in the CIA* (Virginia, 2005).
- Siuru, Bill, *The Huey and Huey Cobra* (Pennsylvania, 1987).
- Smith, John, *Rolling Thunder: The Strategic Bombing Campaign in North Vietnam 1965-1968*. (Saint Paul, 1995).
- Tilford, Earl, *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia: U.S. Air Force in Southeast Asia* (Washington, 1980).
- Tregaskis, Richard, *Southeast Asia: Building the Bases* (1973).
- Thorndale, Bill *CHECO: Interdiction in Southeast Asia November 1966-October 1968* (Headquarters Pacific Air Force, 1968).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Vallentiny, Ed, *CHECO: U.S. Air Force Operations from Thailand 1 January-1 July 1968*.  
\_\_\_\_\_, *CHECO: The Fall of Site-85*.  
Van Staaveren, Jacob, *The U.S Air Force in Southeast Asia: Interdiction in Southern Laos 1960-1968* (Washington, 1993).  
Vongsavanh, Soutchay, *CHECO: Royal Lao Government Operations and Activities in the Laotian Panhandle* (Washington).

## EMAILS, LETTERS, INTERVIEWS, PHONE CALLS

- Abadie, CJ, Emails.  
Bonasinga, Frank, Steve Maxner Interview, Texas Tech University.  
\_\_\_\_\_, Letter Larry Sall University of Texas.  
\_\_\_\_\_, Emails.  
Bour, Hank, Email.  
Burke, Marius, Interviews, Email.  
Dommen, Arthur, Interview with Ernest Kuhn.  
Elder, Dick, Phone Call.  
Flipse, Joe, Emails.  
Forney, Jack, Emails.  
Gentz, Gary, Interviews Author's House and Place of Work.  
Indradat, Pisidhi, Interviews Bangkok, Thailand.  
James, Claude, Interview Hurst, Texas.  
Jarina, Mike, Interviews.  
Jensen, Blaine, letters.  
Johnson, Brian, Email.  
Keele, Duane, Email.  
Knight, Wayne, Emails, Logbook Entries.  
Kuhn, Ernie, Emails.  
LaDue, Mike, Emails.  
Mingrachata, Vichit, Interviews Udorn, Thailand.  
Penniman, Tom, Emails.  
Rickenbach letter to Roger Warner.  
Stergar, Frank, Emails.  
Stevens, Steve, Emails.  
Taylor, Larry, Emails.  
Thompson, MacAlan, Emails, Interview Bangkok, Tour Report, Letter Home.  
Tribble, Wes, Email to Mac Thompson.  
Weitz, Charles, Interview.  
Young, Bill Interviews, Chiang Mai, Thailand.  
Zeitler, Bill, Interview at Author's House.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### BULLETINS, MEMORANDUMS, ARTICLES

- Abadie, CJ, Dry-Hot Season Operations.  
Air America Aircraft Accident Review, Hotel-51, Hotel-47, Hotel-56.  
*Air America Log*, Volume 10, #4, 93; vol.11 #2, 94; vol. 5 #2, 71.  
Air America XOXO Incident Report, Papa Foxtrot Hotel, 11/10/67.  
ANZUS Treaty, Meeting Washington 04/22-23 (New York, 1968).  
Author's 01/02/68 Letter Home.  
*Aviation Daily*, Continental Air Services, 03/67.  
Bonasinga, Frank, The Blue Goose and the Steel Tiger, Air America Website.  
Casterlin, Harry, Letter to Author, 09/18.  
CHECO Report, CIA Message to CINCPAC, 12/67.  
(Chinese) *People's Daily*, 03/25, Article.  
CIA Corporate Files, Aircraft Accident Reports, Hotel-38; Hotel-43, 10/19.  
CIA Daily Brief, 01/25, 07/31.  
CIA Daily Bulletin, 04/06, 04/24, 04/29, 05/16, 05/17, 10/17, 12/29.  
CIA Directorate of Intelligence, 12/68, Geographic Brief North Thailand and Northwest Laos (Internet).  
CIA Information Cable, 02/11, 04/22, 07/19, 07/29.  
CIA Information Memorandum, 01/10; Bill Colby to President, 07/31.  
Cugini, SA-2 AAA Flak Air Defense System Wild Weasel Missiles: Need to Counter North Vietnamese SAMs.  
December Version of the Military Situation in Laos.  
Department of Defense Comparison of Truck Sightings in the Lao Panhandle September-November 1967.  
Dommen, Arthur, Description of the Sihanouk Trail.  
Dreifus, Doug, Air America Safety Director, Air America Accident Review, 03/26/68.  
*Encyclopedia Britannica* (Internet).  
Farnsworth, Doug, Installation of the TSQ-81 at Phou Pha Thi (Internet).  
Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1964-1968, Document 273, 01/05, Laos, Sullivan Cable to State.  
FRUS, #303, 07/29, CIA Information Report.  
\_\_\_\_\_, 1967, Thailand.  
HH-53 History.  
Hjorleifur, Johsson, *War's Ontogeny: Military and Ethnic Boundaries in Laos and Exile* (Article Arizona State University).  
Indradat, Pisith, *Smoke Jumpers Magazine, Story of Survival*.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Information Memorandum, Kohler to Katzenbach, Prairie Fire, 07/15.
- Kuhn, Ernie, Article *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 05/08.
- Leary, William, 1967 Notes and Interviews with Principals.
- Leeker, Joe, Aircraft of Air America, C-47, Hotel-31, XW-39F, 96W, Hotel-36, Hotel-51, Hotel-47, Hotel-56, XW-PFI.
- Memorandum, Kohler to Rusk, 01/13.
- Memorandum, JCS to McNamara, Prairie Fire, 04/20, 06/17.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Sullivan to Bundy, 05/01.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Wheeler to McNamara, Prairie Fire, 06/17, 07/10.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Westmoreland to McNamara, Arc Light Laos, 07/10, 07/11.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Helms, 06/28.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Sullivan Cable on Air Operations, 11/67.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Meeting with President Johnson, 11/29.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Rostow to President Johnson, 10/19.
- \_\_\_\_\_ of Conversation, 10/20 Souvanna Phouma Visit.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 10/21 Rusk Meeting with Souvanna Phouma.
- Moody, Don, *The Great Adventures of Bob and Don: Short Stories from Laos 1966-1967*.
- National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), 05/18.
- Pentagon Papers*, Gravel Edition, Air War in North Vietnam 1965-1968.
- Perry, John, Letter to USAID Director Mendenhall.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Letter to Ambassador Sullivan.
- Philippe, Eveline, Account of Shooting to Lao and American Authorities, 12/07.
- Pratt, John, Air Operations Center (AOC) Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane.
- Report to Mendenhall from IVS Representative at Moung Phalane.
- Secord, Richard.
- Stebbins, Richard, Documents on American Foreign Relations 1967.
- \_\_\_\_\_, FRUS 67, The Southeast Treaty Organization.
- Sullivan Messages to State, 01/06, 05/08.
- Tang Shane, Trip Report, 05/06.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Incident at Moung Phalane.
- Telegram CINCPAC Sharp to JCS Wheeler, 02/16, 02/25.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Sullivan to State, 01/21, 02/25, 05/29, 06/09, 07/06, 07/18, 07/29, 11/30, 12/16, 12/20.
- \_\_\_\_\_, State Kohler to Embassy Laos, MSQ-77, 06/03.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Sullivan to Westmoreland 08/10.
- \_\_\_\_\_, to Washington from Air America President Grundy, 08/07.
- \_\_\_\_\_, State to Lao Embassy, 10/20.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Rostow to President Johnson, 12/26.
- Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, Timeline 1967 (Internet).
- Vietnam Magazine, Arsenal*, 12/96 (Internet).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Washington Library of Congress, (Internet).  
Wikipedia, Boun Oum Airways (Internet).  
\_\_\_\_\_, Sihanouk Trail (Internet).  
\_\_\_\_\_, On Mark Marksman.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY