

**RICE, REFUGEES, AND
ROOFTOPS**

AIR AMERICA, INC.

BOOK TWELVE

1971

BUDDHIST ERA 2514

YEAR OF THE BOAR

Harry R. Casterlin



Air America cap emblem.

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INTRODUCTION

"War makes rattling good history, but peace is poor reading."

British novelist and poet Thomas Hardy.

Nineteen seventy one, marked my ninth year in the Indochina Theater flying helicopters in Laos for Air America, Inc. Under the guise of a commercial operation, the Company operated as a shadowy organization supported by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and charged to implement United States Government (USG) military policy, supporting both surrogate tribal and Royal Lao Army operations.

Under the 1962 Geneva Accord protocols, all foreign military elements were forbidden to establish bases or introduce hostile forces into the country. Not prohibited from participating in the Lao conflict, Air America, the smaller Bird and Son (B&S), and later Continental Air Services (CAS), were responsible for conducting non aggressive humanitarian air support. More than that, these organizations also delivered the bullets, beans, and bandages ¹ necessary to sustain Royal Lao Army and irregular forces striving to ward off or contain the extraterritorial communist elements (the North Vietnamese-NVA) that always denied violating the Accords. Not only limited to war work, this air support was broad based under the aegis of the United States.

Aid for International Development (USAID) also provided relief to thousands of refugees created by the dislocation of war. Requirements for air operations were determined daily by the Air Operations Branch in the administrative capital at

¹ Bullets, beans, and bandages: A military term that encompassed the full spectrum of necessary supplies to wage war.

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Vientiane (VTE) from various agency field requests sent to operations departments in Vientiane and Udorn, Thailand, for aircraft and crew scheduling.

The 1971 period commenced with communist forces intent on continuing to reestablish and improve their supply lines through Laos into South Vietnam in order to implement the North's aims to reunite Vietnam and impose their leader's ideology on the region.

Having conducted inroads deep into Laos' Military Region Two (MR-2) central region encompassing, the strategic Plain of Jars (PDJ), and remaining in place where Meo tribal leader Major General Vang Pao's forces were attempting to hold territory, the enemy, as expected, was poised to resume a major offensive on the important Royal Lao base at Long Tieng (Lima Site 20A). General Vang Pao's defenses, constructed in depth around the coexisting sites of Sam Tong and Long Tieng, were manned by several infantry battalions, including Meo, Special Guerrilla Units (SGU) from other military regions, and "volunteer" Royal Thai Army troops, which included artillery battalions. However anemic, to prevent end runs on the base, the defense line extended east from Padong (LS-05) to the west at Moung Soui (L-108) and beyond to the Nam Khan (River), a demarcation line that separated Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang Provinces (Military Region-2 and 1). Artillery firebases established to support the immediate area were positioned forward on Ban Na (LS-15), in the Sam Tong bowl, on Skyline Ridge overlooking the Long Tieng Valley, and at Romeo Ridge south of Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72).

Military leaders in other regions, particularly in southern provinces, were preparing to counter enemy gains and reclaim lost territory if possible.

A massive cross border operation planned to interdict the Panhandle area east of Savannakhet, Laos, from South Vietnam was

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imminent. Capture of the communist logistical point at the Tchepone crossroads was the eventual goal

If the 1969-1970 dry season was any indication of impending events, then 1971 was shaping up as a battle royal in Military Region Two.

During one of Vang Pao's standard diversionary tactics, his troops moved to the eastern periphery of the Plain of Jars and then back onto the plateau. By the summer, half the Plain of Jars was back in government hands for commencement of the second Plain of Jars campaign. By July, interlocking artillery fire support bases were being established and manned by Thai volunteers. When completed, the defenses were believed to be impenetrable.

The communists were not cowed. By late fall the enemy increased pressure on the bases. Then, introducing heavy artillery guns for the first time, they systematically reduced each fire base. By the third week of December, we had lost the Plain and the Author, for the first time, was shot down in a S58-T, a twin engine gas turbine Sikorsky helicopter, one of five machines the Udorn maintenance department had overhauled and assembled from selected fuselages from U.S boneyards for retired aircraft.

Lao geopolitics was always an evolving conundrum, but certainly not the timeless topography. Much of the landlocked country's interior was beautiful and largely pristine, consisting of verdant, hardwood-forest covered mountains, streams, rivers, and waterfalls. It was a pleasure to observe this scenery from low level flight which the helicopter easily afforded.

Exotic wildlife abounded in these remote areas, tending to provide partial sustenance to tribal units inhabiting these regions. Consisting of mountaineers and lowlanders, the people

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of Laos were as diverse as the lush countryside, settling in preferred terrain developed over years of necessity relating to each groups' requirements for economic wellbeing or security. Had there not been a struggle by extraterritorial entities for land and ideology, the people would have likely continued to exist to pursue their interests in relative peace.

Book twelve of the Author's continuing anthology of the Second Indochina War in Laos contains numerous facets that any author would be severely challenged to address in depth. The account is compiled from part history, part autobiographical memoir, and part reflection. Moreover, it is a continuation of the Author's attempt to produce a factual report on the years of escalating conflict, ones he spent participating in the hazardous skies over Lao airspace as a seasoned combat helicopter pilot.

Since much of the information leading up to 1971 is based on prior years and generally not repeated, it is recommended that the reader consult preceding books for background and specifics.

The seeds of this work were sown while working the friendly skies of Laos for Air America. However, because of Company constraints (threat of termination) regarding taking photographs and maintaining diaries, no attempt was initially made to record day-to-day or eventful episodes. Fortunately, others were not so disposed, or else photos of the era would not be forthcoming.² Since we were cautioned not to converse about the war or what occurred upcountry, as a catharsis to dissipate the emotional aspects of repressing such items, I forwarded semi-detailed

² Video cameras or digital photographs would have constituted a blessing during this period for recording the history of the Second Indochina War in Laos. The only early recording devices available at the time were 8mm movie cameras and miniature 35mm half-frame cameras obtained in Hong Kong that took still photographs.

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letters to my parents. These were necessarily sanitized and largely innocuous, but dealt with generalization and accounts of some momentous and unsettling incidents. As the years passed and I despaired of having reliable information relating to my job for posterity, I began a low-key attempt to detail events and snap photographs.

In 1985 a former Air America friend lent the Author a book published by an English author about Air America. Some of the undocumented "history" appeared well researched, but many personal accounts were obviously gleaned from Johnny-come-lately individuals who had no tenure with the Company or possessed little knowledge of the actual situation. Disappointed at this poor attempt to produce the flavor of the era, and unaware of the enormous task ahead, I resolved to attempt to create a more detailed and accurate account of the entire war.

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

Except for an excellent Duke University education, which required term papers, I had no previous experience writing lengthy tomes. This was largely self-taught. First, I had to research literature available regarding Laos and Thailand to understand the geographical and cultural setting. This was followed by laboriously creating outlines and accounts in unintelligible longhand.

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It was soon evident that an improved, more efficient method was required. A Smith Corona word processor helped, but the state of the art limited the amount of material that could be stored on a disk. Then, when the Author transitioned to computers, the door opened wide to record all the detail required in order to relate the entire story. What had originally intended to be a single book morphed into multiple volumes covering each year of the war. ³

As in previous books, the Author draws heavily on information from letters to parents, log books, photographs, and memory to produce narrative. Photos and maps accumulated from the Author's collection, friends' input, and other documented sources are liberally employed to help explain or expand various situations.

Serving to supplement a linear storyline, particularly when the Author was absent from the battlefield, Internet Email, CIA Bulletins, and peer interviews and principals are liberally included. Sadly, many participants are no longer with us and are becoming fewer each year. In order to fill voids and maintain a cohesive flow of narrative and consistency, other writers' efforts are employed where deemed useful. These are credited where possible.

Crosschecking information regarding events or participants' recall of the conflict is extremely difficult at this late stage of life, but most research was conducted and recorded decades before and filed for later composition. Still, as additional information surfaces pertaining to the war, research rarely ends and continuous editing has been deemed necessary.

³ The Author's wife refers to the work (s) as the "never ending book." Perhaps she is right.

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Finally, the Author would like to acknowledge and applaud the contribution of the multi-national civilian men and women of Air America, Inc., Bird and Son (B&S), and Continental Air Services, International (CASI). This includes members of the Central Intelligence Agency, U.S. military services, associated agencies, and third country nationals who participated as a "face in the crowd" in the Southeast Asia conflict during the long, frustrating Cold War era.

To many individuals who failed to make the cut-RIP.

HRC

"...we must retain our presence in Thailand, and in all Southeast Asia, to include the Philippines, South Vietnam, and Korea."

President Nixon. ¹

Over time, several Second Indochina Theater conflicts, small at the outset, evolved into sizeable and broad Southeast Asian Wars. These quasi-different conflicts, but engagements on the whole with similar goals, consisted of an assortment of various intensity wars in South Vietnam, in Laos, and of late in Cambodia. Each country or regional location exhibited its particular flavor and aims for adversaries, but no more so than in the backwater country of Laos.

To enhance and better manage military and social aspects in the landlocked country of Laos, one beset with deficient communication and transportation infrastructure, and with broad ethnic differences, in the early 1960s Laos was divided into five military regions (MRs), each containing its own military leader and main Royal Lao headquarters, most located in sizeable towns on the Mekong River. From northwest Military Region One, bordering Thailand, Burma, China, and North Vietnam, the five Lao military regions stretched to the extreme south at the Cambodian border.

¹ Washington meeting with advisors explaining the Nixon Doctrine. U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, July 1970-January 1972, Document 104. Memorandum for the President's File by the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig). Washington, January 18, 1971.

Each region, except for Military Region Five, where the administrative capital of Vientiane, the Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and the FAR Army General Staff were located, posed unique requirements for U.S. Agency (CIA) stations charged with conducting regional wars with backwoods or mountain troops recruited, trained, paid, and advised while conducting irregular operations.

In contrast, regular FAR and FAN² soldiers generally remained in garrison and were relegated to static defense of the Mekong River towns.

Northern most Military Region One encompassed a very large area incorporating four provinces: Houa Kong, Phong Saly, Luang Prabang, and Sayaboury. The land sheltered a majority of diverse tribal clans in Laos, with the majority being from Yao clans and tribes. Military Region One's important northwest paramilitary base existed at Nam Yu (Lima Site-118A). The Royal Capital at Luang Prabang (LP or Lima-54) contained the Royal Lao Army headquarters and Agency Chief of Station (COS) along with other United States Government (USG) agencies. The CIA unit there, using tribal teams, was focused on intelligence gathering on the construction of Chinese and Vietnamese logistic roads, developing and protecting forward tribal bases, and the King at Luang Prabang (LP).

Abutting Luang Prabang Province, the most hotly contested area in Laos until 1971 was found in lower Military Region Two-Xieng Khouang Province.³ Responsibility for maintaining government sites in the province lay in the hands of Major

² FAR and FAN; French acronyms. FAR, the Royal Army, FAN, the Neutralist Army, originally independent, but later integrated into the Royal Lao Army.

³ Upper Military Region Two, Houa Phan Province, generally called Sam Neua, had been almost entirely lost to communist forces, and was abandoned by Vang Pao's people during 1968.

General Vang Pao, who also oversaw the Meo home bases at Sam Tong (LS-20) and Long Tieng (LS-20A). It was in this area of Military Region Two that the Author spent the majority of his upcountry work since commencing flying in Laos.

Xieng Khouang Province was unique in that the region contained the strategic Plain of Jars, a former area of market towns and large highland plateau, where many rudimentary roads and trails intertwined, eventually leading west and south toward Royal Lao Government (RLG) towns. Over the years the conflict, originally of low intensity, morphed from successful guerrilla warfare tactics, employing small hit and run Meo teams into unwieldy battalion and regimental sized units anathema to aggressive hill tribe troops. Furthermore, the diminishing and irreplaceable Meo assets were never able to adapt to static, defensive warfare.

In the south-central area, sometimes called the Panhandle region of Military Region Three, the easterly located Ho Chi Minh Trail logistic system proliferated into thousands of miles of twisting and camouflaged roads and byways. The main Agency base at Savannakhet (Lima-39) sponsored operations centered on intelligence gathering to produce targeting for U.S air strikes and interdiction by Special Guerrilla Units (SGU). SGU in this Panhandle area were largely recruited from lowland Lao Theung tribals, who were largely underrated in place of their more highly publicized Meo counterparts. Guided by experienced Agency Case Officers from the Mekong River towns of Savannakhet and Thakhet (Lima-40), SGU units were often in the field probing, harassing, and engaging sizable Vietnamese troop units that could otherwise have been assigned to the South Vietnamese conflict. Their efforts also allowed allied air forces to fix and inflict a disproportionate toll on Vietnamese forces.

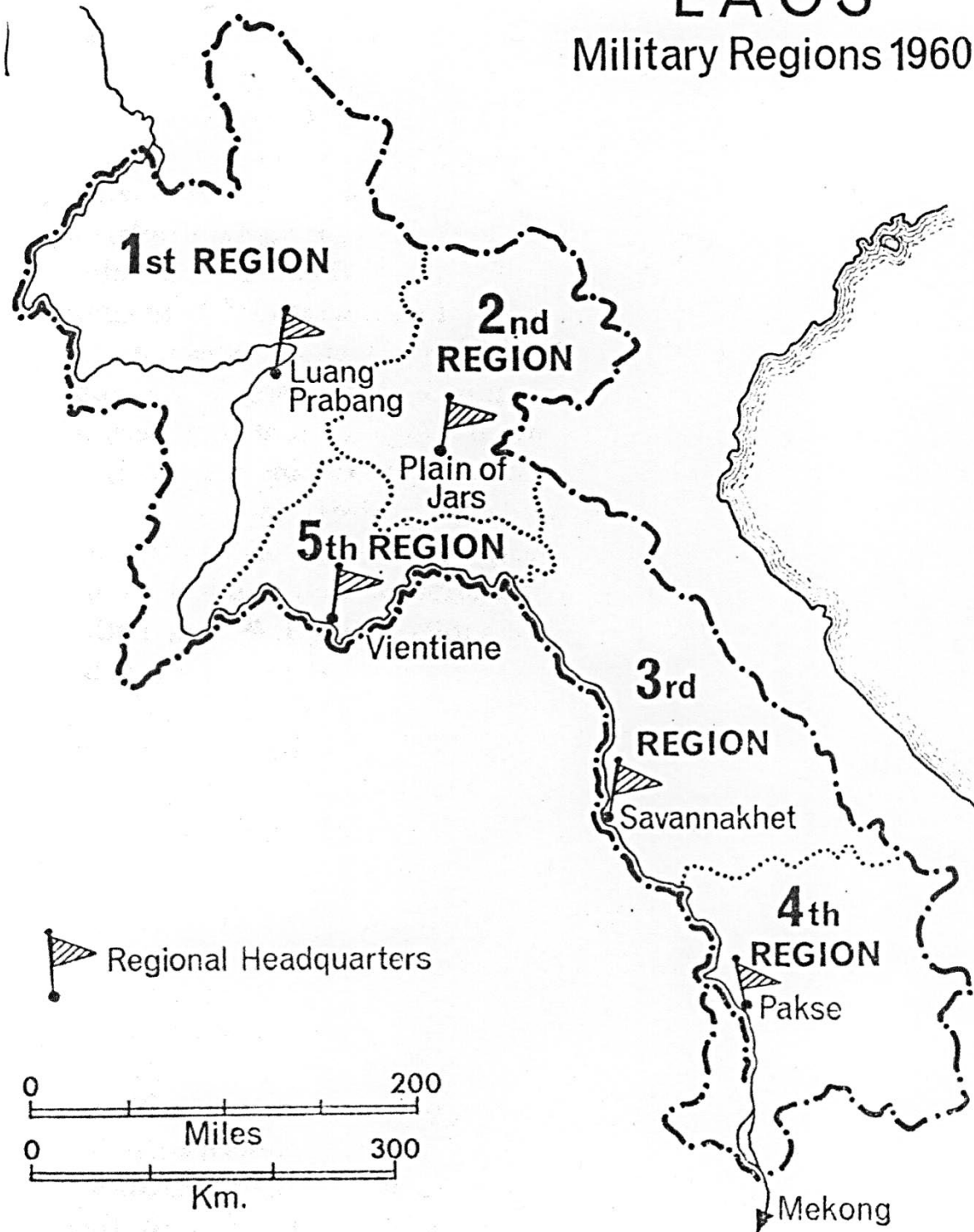
During the early 1960s, the Pakse (Lima-11) region in southern Laos, often called the country club by our helicopter pilots, was considered the prime place to work and remain overnight (RON) in the country. Usually only senior pilots were scheduled there. Food and lodging were plentiful, satisfactory, and one did not have to undergo the privations encountered in Military Region Two. Much of our Military Region Four flying was generally over flat terrain, devoid of high mountains or concentrated enemy with which to contend--at least initially. Of course, nothing is forever, and the quiescent nature in the hostility arena was contingent on FAR and FAN's adherence to the tacit agreement not to meddle too much in the enemy's ability to move troops and supplies to surrogate forces in South Vietnam. However, in 1970, with the inclusion of Cambodia in USG's grand plan to choke off North Vietnam supply to South Vietnam, the war and both communist and Western policy drastically changed in Military Region Four.

The Military Region Four area contained its share of SGU troops formed from Bolovens Plateau tribals (generically called Kha) and low land Lao Theung from the Khong Se Done Valley. Trained by Agency Case Officers, at Pakse Site-22 (PS-22, LS-190), a large camp on the eastern rim of the Bolovens, Lima Site-171 (LS-171), a site north of Saravane, and other isolated areas, these young men were often employed to good advantage in the form of road watch and action teams on various enemy road systems to the north and east.

Before long, the Pakse area developed into a mid-intensity conflict that in 1971 reverted to a conventional type war employing Thai, RLA, and SGU assets.

LAOS

Military Regions 1960



Major provinces divided along geographical lines were combined to form five military regions.

Dommen, 140

AGENCY ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE IN LAOS

It is generally common knowledge that Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officials are embedded in United States embassies around the world. Unlike normal career politicians who normally press the flesh and attempt to maintain civility between nations, cultural attaches or other agents are necessary elements trained and charged to quietly ferret out information often critical to the wellbeing of U.S national interests. This intelligence is then forward to CIA Langley headquarters outside Washington. Then, at "desks" ⁴ devoted to a particular country, the information is analyzed for validity and reliability, distilled, and disseminated to appropriate "need to know" principals.

Termination of World War Two created a void in international intelligence gathering in an increasingly dangerous world. In 1957, to rectify this situation, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) ⁵ was established by President Truman. Former Office of Strategic Services (OSS) personnel were employed to function as an elite and clandestine government intelligence agency and to counter devious Soviet intentions that eventually led to what was called the long enduring Cold War.

The original CIA charter mandated intelligence gathering, collating data, and disseminating this information through proper channels. However, since overt government policy often failed to achieve its goals, the need to influence geopolitical events soon required the formation of a special clandestine

⁴ Desk: A term created to indicate a specific interest, such as the Iran desk, devoted to a particular country.

⁵ Sometimes called the Company by individuals, the Author prefers to refer to the CIA as the Agency, or Agency.

branch able to work outside normal legal channels. It was such a service that brought us the Cuban Bay of Pigs operation and Air America, Inc. Since the beginning, Agency policy dictated that successes remain buried in the bowels of the Langley headquarters complex; hence, the only operations normally publicized or reported by the press are failures.

A previously untested CIA operation resulting in a resounding success over a protracted period was the Lao War. At the end of the First Indochina War, Laos was formed by world powers as a sovereign country and declared a neutral country under the Geneva Accords of 1954. A portion of the Accords stipulated that no foreign military interests were permitted to base troops in Laos.⁶ Although it is more complicated, basically the French withdrawal created a void for the fledgling Lao nation in respect to politics and balance of military power. Therefore, seeking to fill the empty spaces, depending on their ideologies and goals, other nations entered the arena. The Soviets and North Vietnamese sponsored and supported the Pathet Lao (PL), a militant wing of the leftist political faction, with advisors, arms, supplies, and men. The Western camp sponsored the Rightist element and Centrists called the Neutralists. In addition to political support, the United States Government (USG) also provided military advisors, supplies, funding, and just about everything else to shore up the struggling government. Appearing much like a civil war, the conflict waxed and waned until it appeared that communist forces would seize Military Region Two in late 1960 when administrations were changing in Washington.

⁶ The United States never signed the 1954 Accords.

In order to thwart enemy advances, a relatively new and largely untested clandestine USG process was implemented in Laos: that of employing CIA agents with the assistance of U.S. Special Forces Teams, and Thai commando police (PARU) units to recruit, equip, train, advise, and support indigenous mountain people (mostly Meo) in conducting a holding war against a superior and battle-hardened enemy. Similar guerrilla operations had been undertaken to some extent in Europe and Asia during World War Two by courageous Office of Strategic Services (OSS) agents working with resistance groups. The experience was not forgotten, knowledge not abandoned, and such techniques were taught to aspiring Agency Case Officers for many years at "The Farm."⁷ French special units had employed tribal Marquis warriors (Meo, Tai Dam, and Lao Theung) successfully against the Vietminh during the First Indochina War, and generously offered USG their services when they departed the Lao Theater. Unfortunately, the proposition to assimilate and support the guerrilla Marquis in an attempt to quell communist infiltration, one that would have allowed USG far more flexibility in political and military matters early in Laos, was not implemented and the seasoned mountain troops returned to farming. Because of this lapse, considerable retraining and refitting was necessary, which allowed the enemy inroads to areas that might have been maintained in government hands.⁸

Although not inconceivable, but constrained by a fresh set of Geneva Accords signed in 1962, introducing scarce U.S. troops into a country, one of harsh terrain, few airports or all-weather roads, and difficult to supply was always a last resort

⁷ The Farm: An Agency training base located at Camp Peary, Virginia.

⁸ Much of this early history is recorded in the Author's Book *One-Genesis: The Air America Inc. Helicopter Program-Laos*.

for the U.S. Government (USG).⁹ Therefore, conducting a war using civilian assets was considered the lesser evil, vastly more palatable, and viable under the Geneva Accords. In order to counter an aggressive enemy, one that always denied a presence in Laos, the Eisenhower Administration concept developed to counter a feared communist takeover of all of Southeast Asia. This policy was reinforced by President Kennedy, a recent adherent to irregular warfare. Supported by Air America et. al. for air support, the containment policy using indigenous surrogates succeeded to a large degree. The strategy requiring more funding and tools of war, was greatly expanded, and persisted throughout the long war. Moreover, besides providing a cushion to allow Thailand time to develop its military and defense network, the policy engaged entire divisions of enemy troops that would have otherwise been deployed in South Vietnam and undoubtedly taken a greater toll on U.S. troops.

Choosing not to introduce U.S. military ground forces in Laos created a problem as to the command-and-control mechanism necessary to prosecute a quiet and low-key conflict. This was solved early by allowing the U.S. Ambassador in Vientiane the authority to dictate military action in Laos. He was not alone in this endeavor and at daily embassy meetings sought advice and consensus from his Country Team comprised of the Central Intelligence Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development representatives, and U.S. Army and Air Force military attaches, all attached to and working out of embassy offices.

The U.S. Ambassador assigned to Laos (Len Unger, Bill Sullivan, and Mac Godley during the Author's tenure) did not have carte blanche to conduct military operations, but in most

⁹ USG: Acronym for the United States Government.

cases deferred to the Secretary of State and others in the Washington administration who in turn generally shared the President's decisions.

For years, U.S. military advisors attached to the American Embassy under the cover of the Requirements Office (RO) attempted to train, equip, and motivate the Royal Lao Army. Despite one hundred percent funding and major efforts, nepotism and corruption prevailed throughout the upper ranks of the Royal Lao Army (RLA). Consequently, the FAR and FAN army was poorly led and grossly unreliable, often abandoning the battlefield when pressured. Indeed, some individuals considered the RLA the world's worst army. Of course, there were a few exceptions and commanders who excelled, but usually these men died. The majority of ground forces were never in position to face the dreaded North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Therefore, these units were normally relegated to defending major towns, airfields, and installations and rarely fought unless absolutely necessary.

In contrast, irregular forces, who conducted the vast majority of fighting, were assembled and monitored by Agency Case Officers. These operations required considerable support infrastructure in both Vientiane and Udorn, Thailand.

At Agency level, the Chief of Station (COS) Vientiane, Laos, was responsible for all Agency activity in Laos and was subordinate to the Chief of Far East Division, who oversaw the entire region. The activity included the paramilitary use and wellbeing of Lao irregular units (called Special Guerrilla Units or SGU).

Implementing COS policy in a region was a Chief of Unit located at Luang Prabang (Nam Yu and Xieng Lom were subordinate to the Luang Prabang unit), Long Tieng, Savannakhet, and Pakse. Each unit included a Deputy Chief, a Chief of Operations, a Chief of Support, Secretaries, Foreign Intelligence Case

Officers, and paramilitary Case Officers, who planned and fulfilled field work. These Case Officers, supervised by the Chief of Operations, were supported by unit staff members. Each military region had different personnel requirements, ranging from three to twenty officers at a base, plus indigenous support personnel.

All outlying field units were fairly autonomous, which enabled them to prepare and elect to conduct pertinent operations in their respective areas. However, their independence depended on the amount of support (usually air) required from either Vientiane or Udorn to accomplish an operation.

The Udorn, Thailand, base (originally called AB-1), also subordinate to the Vientiane station, started small, but in response to increasing needs of the Lao war escalated in number of personnel and infrastructure. Originally sandwiched in unpretentious offices between the Air America and USAF facilities, this base allowed the paramilitary-action portion of the Vientiane station the space and privacy to accomplish what it was charged to accomplish. Chief of Station Vientiane technically was responsible for Udorn, but exercised his authority very sparingly, either because he did not want to fail, or because he was not interested in the more covert part of the operation.

From the program's inception, part of the Udorn operation centered on Thai participation in the conflict. Co-located with AB-1 at the Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thai Headquarters 333 was responsible for supplying Thai assets (PARU) to assist Case Officers in training and managing Meo guerrillas. Later requirements involved the introduction of Royal Thai Army (RTA) and irregular units to the Laos battlefield. When a two-story structure was built adjacent to the Air America parking ramp,

Headquarters 333 merged with AB-1 and the operation was generically called the Joint Liaison Department (commonly known as JLD).

The Udorn base was essentially inviolate as one chief of station (COS) Vientiane discovered when trying to interfere with one of Pat Landry and his cohorts' projects. Taking exception, the Thai unit made quite clear that they would not tolerate any meddling in AB-1 business and threatened to evict the entire unit unless the problem ceased.

Similar to any U.S. government bureaucratic organization, personalities and interpersonal relationships were of considerable importance. Granted, even before Bill Lair departed Udorn, his successor, rough and tumble Pat Landry, was often a difficult person with whom to deal. Depending on individuals, Vientiane and Udorn station personnel did not always like or interact well with each other.

One problem creating animosity, was that Vientiane COS established countrywide priorities, with General Vang Pao and Military Region Two usually at the top of the list. Often this favoritism correlated with information senior Agency people in Washington disseminated and exaggerated to privileged Congress members regarding the role of the Meo forces. Because of the funding required, Congressional types enjoyed hearing about the happenings in the Lao mountains.

Beginning in 1969, the preferential treatment accorded Military Region Two was not popular among Savannakhet Case Officers, because their special guerrilla unit (SGU) assets were often held in abeyance by senior leaders against requirements to send units to Military Region Two for operations there.¹⁰ As a

¹⁰ The Plain of Jars operation and the defense of Long Tieng.

result, efficiency and operations in Military Region Three were greatly affected. Having little stroke in the chain of command, field Case Officers could only observe, complain, and attempt to accomplish their duties with what was available to them. Senior types demanded this because furtherance of their future careers depended on proper compliance. Naturally, this fostered tensions in all directions within the mass of individuals, places, and egos. The end result: things worked out, or did not, depending on personalities involved. ¹¹

UPCOUNTRY

Friday, the first day of the New Year, became my third day upcountry working out of Long Tieng (Lima Site-20A) in Military Region Two. Captain John Fonburg, Flight Mechanic (F/M) Ben Shaffer, and I were flying Bell 205 XW-PFG ¹² in support of General Vang Pao's troops, who were in the final week of a search and destroy operation in the Ban Ban Valley region. Counterpunch Three, the late November multi-battalion operation, had commenced at San Tiau (Lima Site-02) in Zone Steel. In addition to clearing and interdicting enemy supply Route-7, the operation was intended to destroy supply caches, and delay movement of provisions and men into the Plain of Jars area,

¹¹ Ian Courtney (Don Courtney's son), *Four Secret Wars: CIA Involvement in Paramilitary Operations in Laos* (Quantico, Virginia: United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, A Manuscript Submitted for a Degree of Master of Military Studies) 15-17. Don Courtney, Emails 04/28/20 (2), Courtney served as an Agency Case Officer in Udorn and Laos for many years. Don provided his son Ian with information for the treatise.

¹² Aircraft side number used for identification, XW-PFG: Military phonetic alphabet X-ray Whiskey Papa Foxtrot Gulf. Flight Mechanic: Like Captain Flight Mechanic (FM) was capitalized to show respect for the men we flew with.

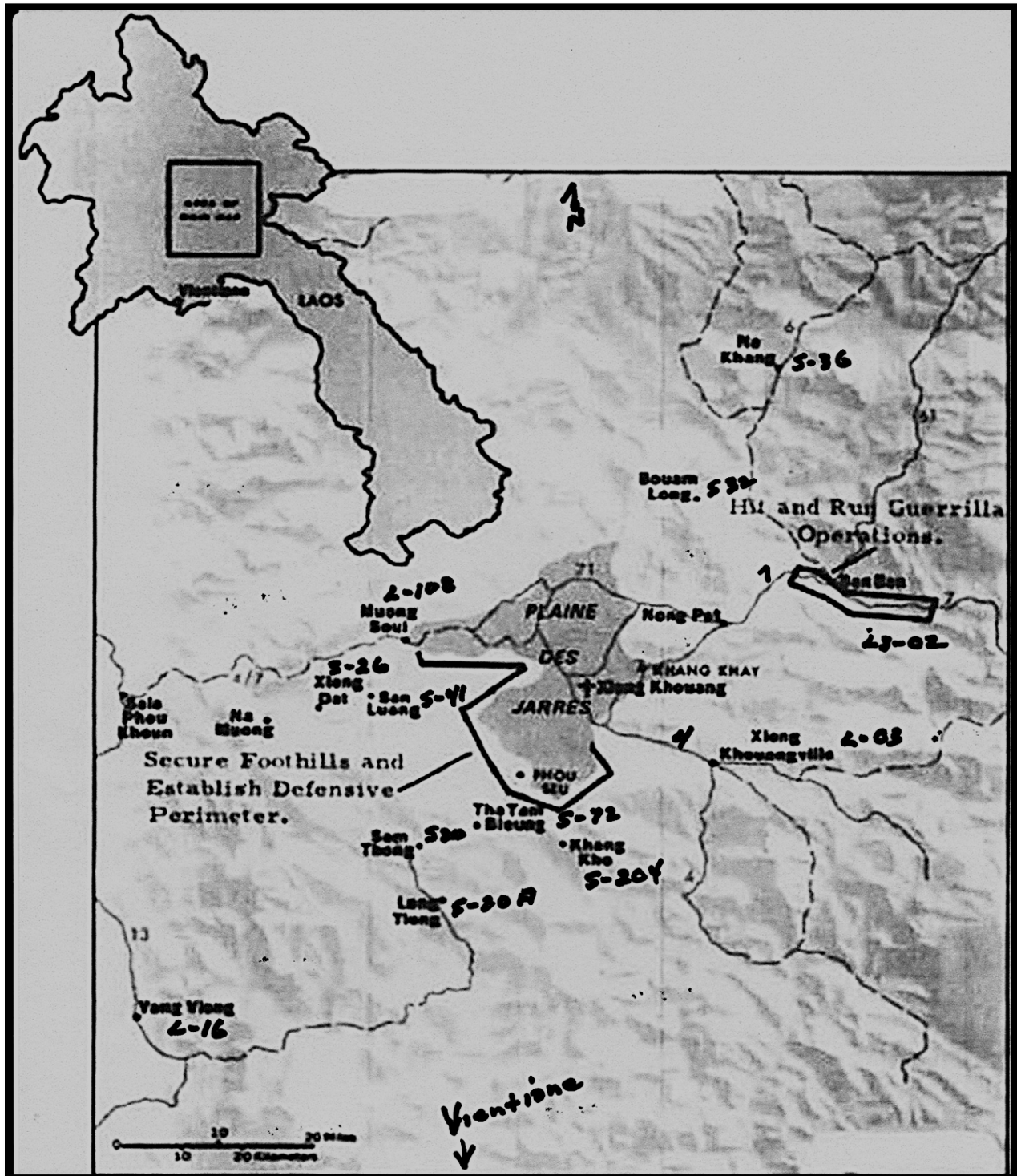
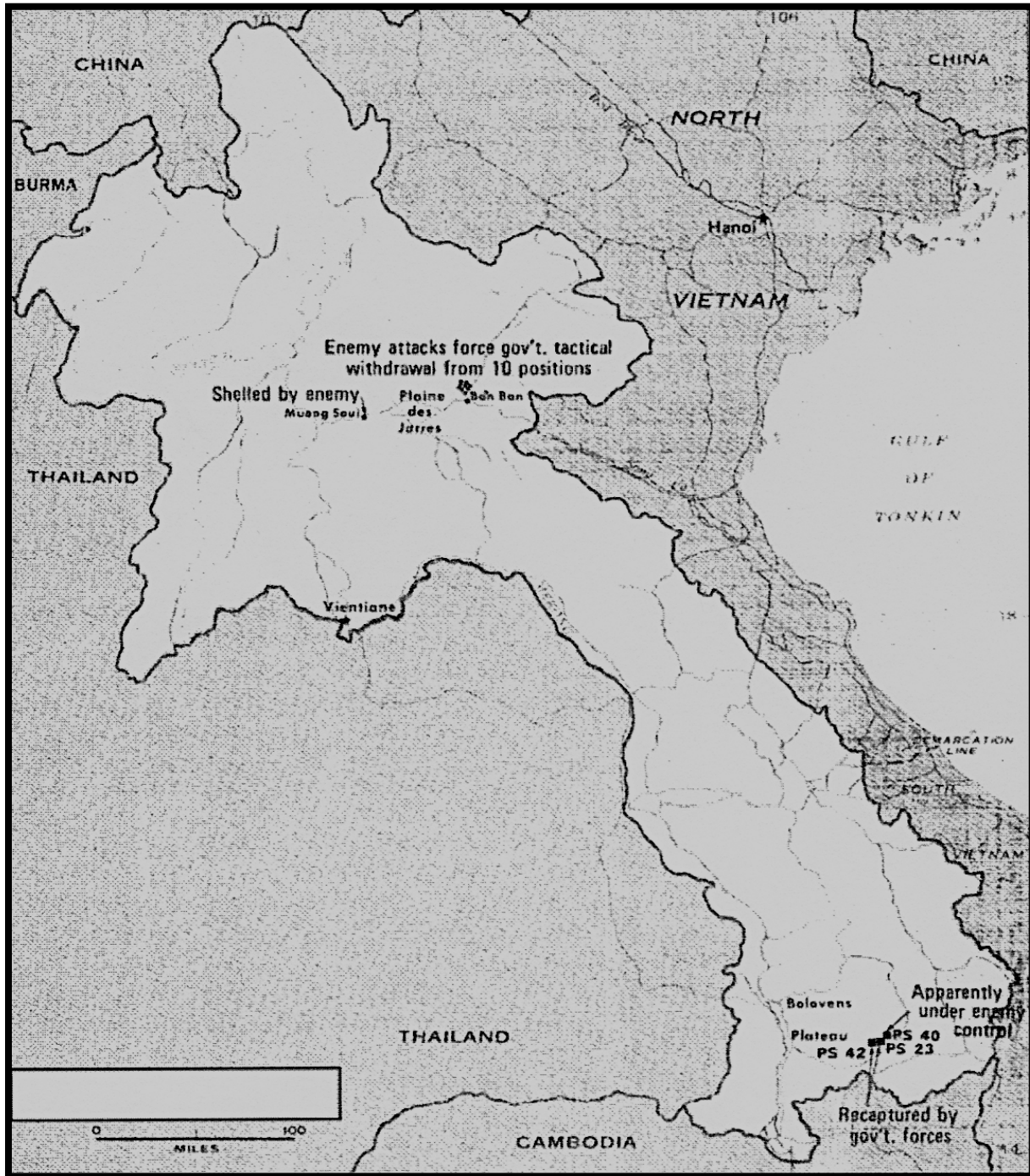


Diagram depicting the Counterpunch Three area of operations in the Ban Ban Valley from November to early January (far right). It also depicts a portion of the Royal Lao Government defense line north of Sam Tong and Long Tieng.
Thomas Ahern.



Early 1971 map showing the tactical situation in Military Region Two and Military Region Four.

CIA Map, 01/04/71.

something Allied air strikes often found difficult to achieve. It was also tailored to create a diversion away from Vang Pao's defenses around Long Tieng (LS-20A). Thus far the operation had not been hugely successful, largely due to adverse weather and troop reluctance to move about the area without the assistance of close air support.

Restricted by typical early fog conditions, we conducted one Special Mission ¹³ out of San Tiau that consumed an hour and forty minutes.

"Between 31 December and 2 January, the communists ¹⁴ attacked a total of ten government positions northwest and northeast of Ban Ban. In each case the irregulars withdrew the north rather than risk unacceptably high casualties. Although the positions fell into enemy hands, only two irregulars out of a force that included element of several battalions were wounded.

Except for a ten-round rocket attack against the irregular-neutralist base at Moung Soui, which caused no casualties or damage, there was little tactical activity on the western flank of the Plaine during the weekend." ¹⁵

At the end of the day, we returned to Udorn (UTH, with the ship.

¹³ Special Mission: Operations considered extra hazardous, that required two pilots in the cockpit and armed escort for safety and success of the mission.

¹⁴ Consistent with prior books, hating the communist ideology and fighting the system most of his working life, the Author refuses to capitalize the word communist.

¹⁵ Central Intelligence Daily Bulletin, 01/04/71. Laos: Stiff communist resistance to Vang Pao's harassing operation against Ban Ban continued throughout the New Year's weekend.

The Author relies heavily on Agency information for timely tactical information and maps, however, some errors can reasonably be expected.

Captain Mike Jarina, flying Papa Foxtrot Hotel (PFH), participated in the same mission and returned to Udorn the same afternoon to prepare for his impending two-month home leave in Milton, Florida.

Before departing, Mike was having a soda in the Rendezvous Club bar one night, talking to Scratch Kanach, when a newly hired First Officer entered saying, "Mike, you are retired military drawing all those retirement payments and have been around here a long time. *Why don't you quit and go home?*"

"Why?"

"You are an old man and you have your money. What are you doing here?"

"Is that why you are here, for the money?"

"Yes."

"Then I feel sorry for you. Boy, you better get out of here as quick as you can. Most people are not here for the money. You are either going to kill yourself or get killed. Why don't you ask Scratch what he is doing here?"

Scratch Kanach had a reputation of being a very frugal person. He had saved all his money and had several investments. Moreover, he had been in Udorn for years.

Primed by his conversation with Jarina, the individual asked Kanach, *"What are you doing here?"*

Scratch answered in his normal logical way, *"I can't think of a better thing to do."* ¹⁶

¹⁶ Mike Jarina Multi-Interviews at both our houses. Over time Mike provided the Author with considerable valuable information pertaining to his participation in the war. By recalling anecdotes, incidents, in various parts of Laos from logbooks and memory, Mike helped fill in voids when the Author was not present upcountry.

Mike departed Southeast Asia with sixty thousand dollars in the bank. Additionally, he had purchased and had no mortgage on a pleasant farm in Milton, Florida.

TIGER 02

"Weather was unworkable during the early hours of 2 January but it improved in the PDJ area by early afternoon. Tiger 02 went down near the highway 7/71 split...Raven-26 and the reconnaissance aircraft Bullwhip established contact with both crewmembers. [Over three hours later] the on-scene commander King [SAR control aloft] told both men to remain hidden until morning...

The SAR operation to recover Tiger 02 began early [on 3 January]. King made Raven-26 the on-scene commander. The Raven worked Miller (F-4) under a low deck of clouds...The Raven worked Ram, Papa, and Dandy 3 and 4 before returning to base for fuel. Raven-22 and Nail-33 secured the area with Cobra, Gasser Sandy, and Lotto. Jolly [HH-53] picked up both crewmembers at [UMT map coordinates] UG352661." ¹⁷

Despite designated self-contained U.S. Air Force (USAF) units devoted to search and rescue (SAR) missions, depending on the situation, and out of necessity, Air America crews still participated in primary or back-up roles. ¹⁸

Although USAF combat assets had significantly diminished, and sortie strikes and reconnaissance were reduced to some extent in Military Region Two, there was still emphasis on interdicting Route-7 to reduce the flow of enemy supplies to the Plain of Jars (PDJ), and to support the Counterpunch operation withdrawal from the Ban Ban Valley. Although bypass roads were

¹⁷ Raven Store, Ravens, Extracts from ABCCC (Airborne Command and Control Center), Cricket and Hillsboro, 19, (ravenfac.com/ravens/articles/extracts-from-abccc).
UMT: Universal Transverse Mercator.

¹⁸ For the inception of, and a comprehensive history of, Air America personnel's outstanding participation in U.S. military SAR work, see Author's Books 5 and 6.

either in existence or under construction, the Route-7 Line of Communication (LOC) network was still the primary supply link through Barthelemy Pass, North Vietnam, for North Vietnamese Army and Pathet Lao troops who remained in place on the doorstep of Long Tieng during the monsoon season.

Since the enemy had positioned anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) guns at various intervals along the logistic route, genuine risks and perils existed for airmen venturing into that area. The aircraft crew shot down on 2 January was flying an F-4 Phantom jet, designated a Fast FAC, employed to control air strikes. Because of the heightened AAA threat, jet aircraft were in use in lieu of the slower more vulnerable reciprocating engine O-1 Birdog or T-28s that Raven FACs based at Long Tieng operated in Military Region Two.

The Tiger crew ejected three miles north-northeast of the Nong Pet road junction leading toward the Ban Ban Valley.¹⁹ The area was not the most conducive to survival.

The men punched through the overcast, landing just north of Route-7 in foothills comprised of two fingers. They were pursued by enemy patrols. As instructed in survival and escape and evasion courses, the men scrambled to the top of the ridges where trees provided camouflage and the elevation somewhat increased their chances of survival.

Raven-26 pilot Chuck Engle, the same individual who had participated in the June SAR on the southern Plain of Jars (PDJ) near Phou Seu with John Fonburg and me, heard the Mayday call and headed for the area. He soon established radio contact with the men and began marshalling assets to suppress AAA and discourage the enemy from moving closer to the downed pilots. To

¹⁹ Nong Pet: Called the 7/71 split by airmen for easy identification.

accomplish this, Engle worked a mix of Skyraiders and Phantom aircraft. Despite the cloud cover and constricted area that limited maneuvering, bullets, iron bombs, cluster bomb units (CBU), and napalm rained down on the immediate area. One A-1 pilot, receiving ground fire that damaged his engine, had to depart for the Nakhon Phanom base (NKP). Over time, Engle wove the noose of ordnance closer to the Air Force pilots to form a protective ring of fire around them. Finally, after discharging all his smoke rockets and at a bingo (low fuel) state, Chuck RTB (returned to base).

Air America Bell Captains JJ McCauley and Jack Knotts had been conducting missions to the north around Bouam Long (LS-32) when they heard the ensuing action over ultra-high frequency (UHF) guard channel. Prepared to provide assistance in any way possible should the Jolly Greens (Sikorsky H-53 helicopters) en route to Long Tieng fail to perform the job, they closely monitored their radios until the SAR ceased at dark. Since a night extraction in such a hot area was considered highly dangerous and virtually impossible, the downed pilots were advised to seek shelter for the night.

As the SAR was ordered to resume the following day, Udorn instructed JJ and Jack to RON (remain overnight) at the Site-20 Alternate hostel.²⁰

Both Air America civilians were awakened about 0430 hours and instructed to attend a SAR briefing. After proceeding up the SKY hill road to the Raven hooch, they entered a sparsely appointed room, where the meeting was already in progress. Knotts gazed around at the coffee table, wall maps, and also noted several individuals in military clothing. This included

²⁰ Twenty Alternate (LS-20A, The Alternate): All referred to Long Tieng.

two USAF colonels and the two Jolly Green crews. Others present wore civilian clothing. Beside Customers, there was a distinguished person wearing a Cardigan sweater. Attesting to the high level of emphasis accorded the rescue, this person was Ambassador Godley.

Noting the Air America arrivals, one arrogant colonel pointed to them and uttered sternly, *"And who are these guys?"*

Raven pilot Engle glanced at him quizzically and answered the question, *"Well, I'll tell you who they are colonel, they are **my** SAR people."*

The room became silent.

Consistent with Raven standard operation procedures (SOP), Engle launched early to arrive on station at first light (false dawn) to assess weather conditions and the enemy situation in the immediate target area. Checking in with King, the airborne SAR control ship, he was informed that the pilots were still in place. The FAC soon discovered that the location was still enveloped by overcast conditions that would require strike aircraft to penetrate a cloud layer. Support aircraft were either en route from Nakhon Phanom or inbound from other bases and would arrive at dawn. Phantoms "loaded for bear"²¹ arrived first. After guiding the pilots underneath the overcast, Engle began working the aircraft near the weary pilots, who were still under pressure.

It became a huge operation that included fast movers (jets), Sandys (A-1s), and Jolly Greens orbiting overhead. Pilot in Command (PIC) McCauley elected not to fly low and possibly converge with planes in the constricted area. Therefore, he orbited high above the clouds. As predicted by those familiar

²¹ Loaded for Bear: Military slang pertaining to strike aircraft heavily loaded with assorted munitions.

with enemy operations, additional AAA guns had been brought forward and emplaced during the night. This was evident when Jack observed three black flak puffs on their port side. It was inconsequential, but perhaps they had strayed over the same six fixed 37mm guns sunk in deep holes in the Ban Ban Valley that Al Cates, Tim Woosley, and I had encountered during the exciting Bullwhip-01 SAR the previous year. JJ, wisely moved to another area.

The SAR continued. Employing the same techniques as the previous day, Engle systematically instructed his assets to deliver ordnance around the pilots to discourage enemy from entering the designated kill circle.

Strikes were nonstop. At the appropriate time, the two F-4 pilots were extracted by a Jolly Green crew. As was normally the case following a SAR, the Bell pilots continued on to Site-32 for daily work assignments. ²²

That morning I was scheduled to conduct a local proficiency flight with Emmet Sullivan in Bell 204 8512 Foxtrot with Casio the Flight Mechanic. The flight lasted forty-five minutes. I was next assigned to test fly ²³ Papa Foxtrot Hotel (PFH) and launch for Long Tieng with Dave Crowell as my Flight Mechanic. As the SAR was still underway in Military Region Two, Sullivan was to be the second pilot should we be needed for the rescue attempt.

When we arrived at Long Tieng, the difficult SAR was entering its final stages. We were dispatched north toward the

²² Christopher Robbins, *The Ravens: The Men who Flew in America's Secret War in Laos* (New York, New York: Crown Publishers, 1967) 258-260.

Former Air America Captain Jack Knotts Interview.

²³ Test fly: An original term for assessing an aircraft's operational status. It was later called a functional check flight, or FCF in the trade, to assess the airworthiness of a helicopter prior to releasing the machine for upcountry work.

area, the same hilly terrain we had worked during the 1969-early 1970 Plain of Jars operation, to complement JJ and Jack. However, before we had progressed very far, the operation was over and all parties departed for their various bases or secondary targets. I heard that sleep gas had been employed as a last resort to achieve the rescue. Naturally, this was never confirmed, but the U.S. military did stock both tear and CS gas in our military weapons inventory. ²⁴ ²⁵

Returning to work I conducted ten landings, before securing at Long Tieng for the night.

On the fourth, Emmet and I switched to Bell 204 96 Whiskey with Flight Mechanic Ortillo (DOH 04/03/61). ²⁶ I continued Sullivan's upcountry training, landing at several local pads in and around the Sam Tong-Long Tieng complex. During the day, we participated in a Special Mission in the San Tiau area, where Group Mobile 21 (GM-21) troops were still being withdrawn from the Ban Ban operation and repositioned to Padong to rest and refit. Toward the end of the day, I left Emmet in 96W and deadheaded to Udorn with the PIC of XW-PFG.

I was then off the schedule for two days. During that time, I talked to Bob Davis, Project Manager for the S-58T program,

²⁴ The CS preparation was a choking, vomiting gas I had been introduced to at Quantico, Virginia during chemical, biological, and radioactive (ABC) training. Persisting longer than a lighter gas, it was particularly effective. Use of such gas was rumored from time to time in Laos, but might have been confused with smoke canisters, white phosphorous bombs, or rockets that produced copious amounts of smoke. At any rate, it was understandable that the matter was not discussed, for after World War One gas was declared politically unacceptable and, if discovered, could have constituted a source of contention. This despite the fact that gas of this consistency was far more humane than simply slaughtering people with explosives.

²⁵ Wayne Knight Email, 11/08/00.

²⁶ Many Filipino Flight Mechanics had worked for Air America in various ground capacities before assuming flight duties.

about the details and the overhaul progress on the first ship that was tentatively expected to fly in March. The first engines and conversion kit from Sikorsky were expected at our facility any day. Bob and I had previously talked about this machine when I journeyed to Washington in June to help evaluate the Bell 212. Now, in addition to scrambling to assemble his program, he was soliciting senior pilots to crew the Twinpac. As I was interested in the program, Bob informed me that he was attempting to arrange an engine school at United Aircraft in Canada and an airframe school at Sikorsky in Connecticut ASAP. Although I had not yet committed to the program, the thought of a trip to the States in the winter with no warm clothes was not particularly appealing, but the stateside trip was apparently not a done deal.

After lunch the following day, to produce an airworthy helicopter for upcountry work, I spent the entire Thursday afternoon on the parking ramp testing and tracking blades on Bell 204 8512F.

MR-2

Early the next morning Captain Julian "Scratch" Kanach, Flight Mechanic Ortillo, training Flight Mechanic Israel (DOH 09/23/67), and I crewed 12F. Before leaving for Long Tieng, I conducted a short proficiency check with Scratch. Such assignments shared by two instructor pilots) could prove interesting, as we often compared and attempted to standardize and improve techniques for managing the most efficient check rides for other pilots. We both voiced the philosophy that semi-annual check rides should not only test a man's proficiency in the machine, but also provide teaching points on any weakness and address new emergency procedures. Knowing that I had

experienced my share of written and unwritten emergencies, Scratch respected my input.

In addition to working a number of defensive positions in and around Sam Tong and Long Tieng, we were sent further north to conduct two Special Missions at UMT coordinates UG4897. Staged out of Bouam Long (LS-32), we flew fifteen miles northeast to remote hills equidistant between enemy parallel LOCs, Route-6 to the west and Route-61 to the east. Both these arteries provided the means to funnel enemy troops and supplies south from Sam Neua toward either Site-32 or the Ban Ban Valley. Now that Counterpunch Three was terminating, speculation was rife that movement along all vehicle passable LOCs would redouble in intensity. Since sites to accommodate the needs of road watch teams near Route-61, like at Ban Tha (LS-52), had been largely eliminated and refugees relocated the previous year, we had often delivered teams into this general area.

It was a relatively full day of flying. Scratch left late for Udorn, while I retained 12F and RON at The Alternate hostel.

Current enemy dispositions and movement dictated the requirement for dual crews. Therefore, Captain John Fonburg joined me on the ninth for a routine route check. Since resupply missions at Ban Na were not clandestine and could incur enemy response, we were often double crewed while working the Puncher Thai Fire Support Base (FSB) at Site-15.²⁷ Other than normal operating challenges involved in mountain flying, supply of Puncher had been relatively innocuous in the beginning. We were able to land at any designated landing zone, offload cargo and passengers, and depart without incident. However, as the situation grew more tenuous, the job became increasingly

²⁷ Ken Conboy with Jim Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, 1995) 294.

dangerous and we began hauling supplies using sling procedures. While we hooked up loads on Shep Johnson's loading area, personnel held up a placard containing the pad signal.

In addition to adjacent fire base landing zones, alternate pads were constantly being developed along adjoining mountain slopes and trails to provide a maximum number of potential landing sites to confuse enemy gunners secreted in the hills to the north. This technique had been worked out by trial and error, with troops only too willing to satisfy our demands. Whenever clearing the northern Sam Tong hills en route to Site-15 and prior to landing, it was recommended that we call either Hilltop or Homerun Forward Air Guides (FAG) to obtain current information regarding enemy dispositions or outgoing artillery fire. Realistically, we all knew that when the enemy cinched the noose tighter on the site, there would be problems delivering the bullets, beans, and bandages required for continued operations and missions evacuating the wounded, sick, lame and lazy types. So far there was no overriding problem for small fixed wing pilots air dropping supplies on the main drop zone. That would come later.

The Long Tieng bowl was socked in with fog and low clouds on Sunday when Dick Elder arrived to fly with me. Dick was seemingly fine after his crash and nearly career ending back injury in 1969. Because of the weather conditions and the fluid situation, we could only muster three hours and twenty minutes that day.

We did considerably better the following morning supplying pads and rotating personnel. That afternoon we were directed to return to Udorn, as enemy patrols were spotted in the vicinity and considered too close to the base to warrant a RON.

The tenuous situation dictated that Long Tieng commutes (LTC) begin again. This had a positive aspect in that flight

returns to Udorn, little time with the family, hasty meals, and time was high and we were not constrained by local weather conditions. The negative side included early departures, late sleep deprivation: dark thirty to dark thirty.

I blocked in at 0540 hours after the blue Company Volkswagen (a German-manufactured passenger vehicle we called the B-bus) delivered me to the airfield. I was in the air flying north to Long Tieng shortly after loading and a preflight of 12F. Since I was flying single pilot, I assumed the situation had calmed somewhat. I had a very good day conducting fifty landings that included many sling loads to local perimeter pads in and around Sam Tong and Skyline Drive.

After touching down and securing the aircraft on the ramp, I recorded ten hours in the logbook.

Following a welcome day off, Dave Crowell and I were back in the air in XW-PFJ headed north for another fun-filled day in the field. It was almost an exact repeat of the 12th as I logged fifty landings and over ten hours while supplying local pads. Obviously, Vang Pao and the Customer were getting ready for a rumble. I RTB at almost dark.

Two days later, Raven-51, while working east of That Thom, experienced a loss of oil pressure followed by an engine failure. After issuing a Mayday in the blind, the pilot conducted an emergency "dead stick" landing in an open field ten miles east of Borikhane. The panic call was heard by an airborne ABCCC ship and relayed to the appropriate channels. Air America was notified and within forty-five minutes the rescued pilot was headed back to Long Tieng. Our helicopter unit had another

"pluckee" to its credit. ²⁹

UDORN

Scheduled time off (STO) consumed the following seven days. Except for exceptional circumstances, this break from flying had had been mandated almost from the beginning of the Madriver contract. Seven days off were accorded on thirty-one-day calendar months, six on thirty-day months. During some instances of diminished flying or home leave, back-to-back STO could be scheduled on succeeding months to increase the number of days of an employee's vacation. It was a good policy for it helped compensate for delays and the time involved obtaining tickets, visas, and other incidentals always necessary when traveling to the States.

Since abandoning a trip to southern Thailand to visit relatives, and disinterested in going to Bangkok, we elected to remain at home. The time off provided me an opportunity to catch up on letter writing, play with my sons, and consider moving to a new house. When at the Company facility to check the mail and purchase food from the Country Store, I had the opportunity to talk to folks regarding the Twinpac program and observe the current overhaul process and conversion of the first machine.

During my STO I encountered Scratch Kanach who reported that he was going to be the senior instructor pilot (SIP) for the S-58T program and wanted me as his assistant instructor pilot. The offer surprised and flattered me, for I thought he would have chosen Wayne Webb, a U.S. Army-trained instructor pilot who was the Air America systems check pilot for

²⁹ ABCCC Abstracts, 19. Despite efforts to establish and conduct good maintenance at Long Tieng, O-1E reciprocating engines could present a problem. The Author retrieved one Raven at Padong who had landed there with a rough running engine.

helicopters. But Webb was experiencing trouble with John Barleycorn at the time, and it was rumored that he had abused his Australian wife. Besides, because Webb was definitely not a field person, he despised working upcountry. Moreover, neither of us particularly cared for the man and his brash demeanor, while Scratch and I had flown together or in proximity over the years, and had formed a mutual respect for each other. One time he had remarked that he liked the way I maintained engine and rotor RPM in the Huey, and that I had a good feel for helicopters. He did not mention any negative aspects.

Now our recent excursion upcountry together made more sense to me. Scratch wanted to assess my work both as a Bell IP, and in a line pilot role once more before making a final decision. Since it would not affect my line work, his proposal was a decision I did not have to consider long, and I readily accepted the offer. All we had to do then was await the start of the S-58T program.

I had flown the H-34 for years before the Bell. Except for learning a new power plant system, and new emergency procedures relating to twin engines, I considered that transition to the Twinpac would not be much of a challenge. Also, it would mark a vast improvement in machinery, and a change of equipment every so often was refreshing. But despite his revelations, something in Kanach's demeanor made me suspect that he was not divulging everything. Had I known what he knew at that time, I might have reconsidered entering the program.

Kudos were rare in our organization, but occasionally appeared to brighten our days. A small group of us hired prior to 1963, with substantial accident-free helicopter work, were photographed by the side of Papa Foxtrot Juliet. The photo later appeared in a small article in the Air America Log. Stretching a point, Billy P was curiously included, but had crashed Hotel-16,



A rogue's gallery of accident-free helicopter pilots taken at the Air America facility parking. L-R: Tom Moher. Bill Pearson, Julian "Scratch" Kanach, Jerry McEntee, and Harry R. (Dick) Casterlin.

AAM Log.

a former H-34G model Coast Guard ship, during October 1963. Minor operational dings, like mine in the hills of Long Pot, that did not cost much to repair, were not counted for purposes of the photo shoot. Still attending school, Wayne Knight, who was not included, but was acknowledged in the caption. ³⁰

PERSONNEL CHANGES

Changes in personnel were accelerating. Apparently, Udorn management was in flux in the Chief Pilot's office. In addition to Scratch's instructor pilot proposal to me in the S-58T, I was surprised to learn that I was also being considered for an Assistant Chief Pilot job. First Phil Goddard asked me to spend some time in the office to judge if we could develop a good working relationship. I had previously told him that I had never been particularly interested in office work. With the formation of the Far East Pilot Association (FEPA), whining pilots who never could understand what we endured in the early days, pressure from the Taipei head office to contend with, and given my temperament, the job was just not worth it, and I had not changed my mind. Besides, I was happy flying the line, drawing my IP pay, and enjoying a little more time off with the family. Actually, as an instructor pilot, I was really a semi-part of management, sandwiched between the union and management. This position allowed me to create judgments without being too biased one way or another. Moreover, and paramount in my thinking, I had originally accepted the job with Air America to save money against future challenges. This goal remained unchanged over the

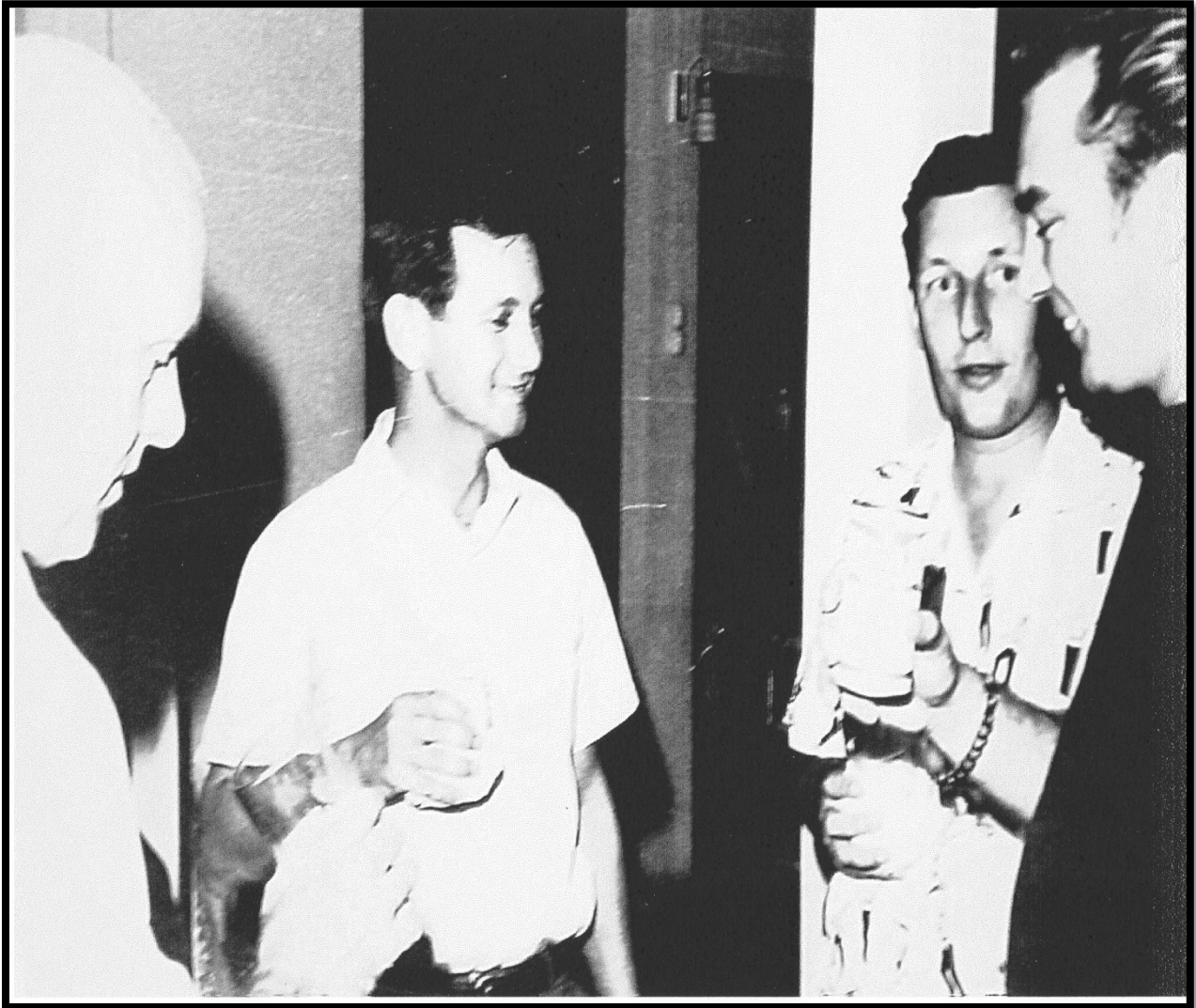
³⁰ The Author concluded a thirty-five-year helicopter flying career with 19,000 accident-free flight hours (not to include battle damage and minor dings). During this period, there were no complete engine failures experienced and no one was injured onboard his aircraft.

years and even increased with the advent of family responsibilities.

Former CPH Wayne Knight and ACP Marius Burke were both still attending school in California. Now it came to light that CPH Phil Goddard was also leaving Air America for a leave of absence to reputedly assume duties in the family airline catering business at Christ Church, Barbados. Wayne heard about Phil's departure while still at school, and had no former inkling that Goddard was planning to leave Southeast Asia when he selected Phil for the CPH billet in August. Although not positive, he believed Phil was under some family pressure to return to his homeland.

Captain John Ford was tapped as a leading candidate for the soon to be vacant CPH slot. John had been flying with Air America as an H-34 pilot for a number of years, and had encountered several hairy events-that included two crewmember fatalities. He had also previously gained management experience running his own aviation business in Texas. What was unknown about John at the time, or for many years afterward, was that he was also either an employee of, or closely associated with the CIA. Therefore, already "witted," within reason and except for highly compartmentalized activities, Ford did not require further clearance for special black operations planned for the S-58T helicopter program. When cover stories for intelligence types were required, one could only suspect and deduce, but never actually know who these people were. ³¹

³¹ Witting: An Agency and Company term used for a vetted individual who had been apprised of the more secret aspects of Air America, mainly who owned the organization. After learning this, the individual was elevated to a security clearance most employees never attained.



L-R: Assistant Base Manager Dick Ford, Captains John Ford, CPH Phil Goddard, and Captain Charlie Weitz enjoying a libation.
Author's Collection.

After being offered the Chief Pilot Helicopter job, John was ordered to Washington to meet and receive George Doole's blessing. He spent two weeks sitting across the desk from the CEO, watching him open his mail. Every day Doole retrieved him from the hotel, and during the entire period, they ate lunch and dinner together. Following the scrutiny period, Doole forwarded a cable to Air America headquarters in Taipei, Taiwan, strongly endorsing Ford's appointment to CPH. While John was transiting through the island capital, President Hugh Grundy intercepted him, wanting to know everything that had transpired in Washington. Ford was puzzled and thought this unusual, for Goddard had not experienced a similar process when he became Chief Pilot. ³²

S-58T CONVERSIONS

I sent two letters to the States delineating the current news:

"I understand that AAM pilot Larry Frazer, who lives in or around Deadwood, [the Black Hills of South Dakota] looked at some [Warbonnet] property. Another of our pilots [Captain Pat Colgan] who is from that region [Rapid City] is interested but wants a firsthand look.

We will probably be home again this summer, work load permitting. It is worth it to avoid some of the flooding that takes place here during the rainy season. This past year the floods were the worst since I have been here and ruined all the

³² Bill Leary 1971 Notes Regarding John Ford.
Wayne Knight Email, 11/10/00.

John Ford later extended the same offer as Phil Goddard for me to work with him in the office. It might have worked, for we had a good relationship. Moreover, John was low-key, efficient, and cared for his charges. However, I still had not changed my mind, preferring to work the line.

roads in town. It will be three to four years before they are all repaired. We were lucky that there was no epidemic.

We are in the process of placing twin turbine engines in the old H-34 airframes. It is a modification the British have had for years..."³³

Letter Sent to Don Valentine and Charlie Williams in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, 01/18/71.

"I may be home early next month. We are converting a few H-34s to twin turbine ships. A few of us will have to go to the engine school in Canada [United Aircraft Corporation] and the Sikorsky factory in Connecticut for the airframe [instruction]. I am to be the program's IP. This is the program that Bob Davis was in the States for last summer. The first H-34 will be converted next month, so I assume we will really be home. There are always changes though.

I am counting on a couple days at home. There is a black suit somewhere in the house that I possibly might get into. Could you take it out and air it? Also, there is a pair of brown wool trousers that I would like available. I think that is all the cold weather gear I have. I am really not looking forward to a trip this time of year. I had a flu shot the other day...

I understand that I am being considered for Assistant Chief Pilot. I told the boss [Phil Goddard] some time ago that I wasn't interested in working in an office. The job is a large headache and isn't worth it. I hope they don't try and put pressure on me..."

01/19/71 Letter Home.

³³ Reference to the British Wessex gas turbine engine conversion to the Sikorsky H-55 (H-19) helicopter.

"The news that you possibly would come to the States next month sure filled us with elation. I suppose it will be one of those quickies, here today and gone tomorrow. We sure would like to be able to welcome the whole family. Already it seems ages since you were home.

I am not sure I understand how they will convert H-34s into twin motored jobs but I guess anything is possible. If it will make the ships safer I say Amen..."

01/27/71 Letter from Home.

Overhaul work on the H-34 airframes was already underway by Technical Services personnel in hangar number one on what would become our first Twinpac, identified as XW-PHA. This consisted of stripping old paint to check rivets for corrosion, and replace any fatigued or damaged fuselage panels, stringers, longerons, and other parts to ensure complete structural integrity. It appeared that we would have an almost new aircraft, which would include new wiring bundles.

About this time an article, most likely written by the conversion Project Manager Bob Davis, appeared in the Company paper involving some specifications for the five new S-58T aircraft.

Slightly abridged by the Author, the article stated: Five UH-34D helicopters were being converted to S-58Ts by substituting twin turboshaft engines that were almost 400 pounds lighter than the single R-1820 reciprocating engine.

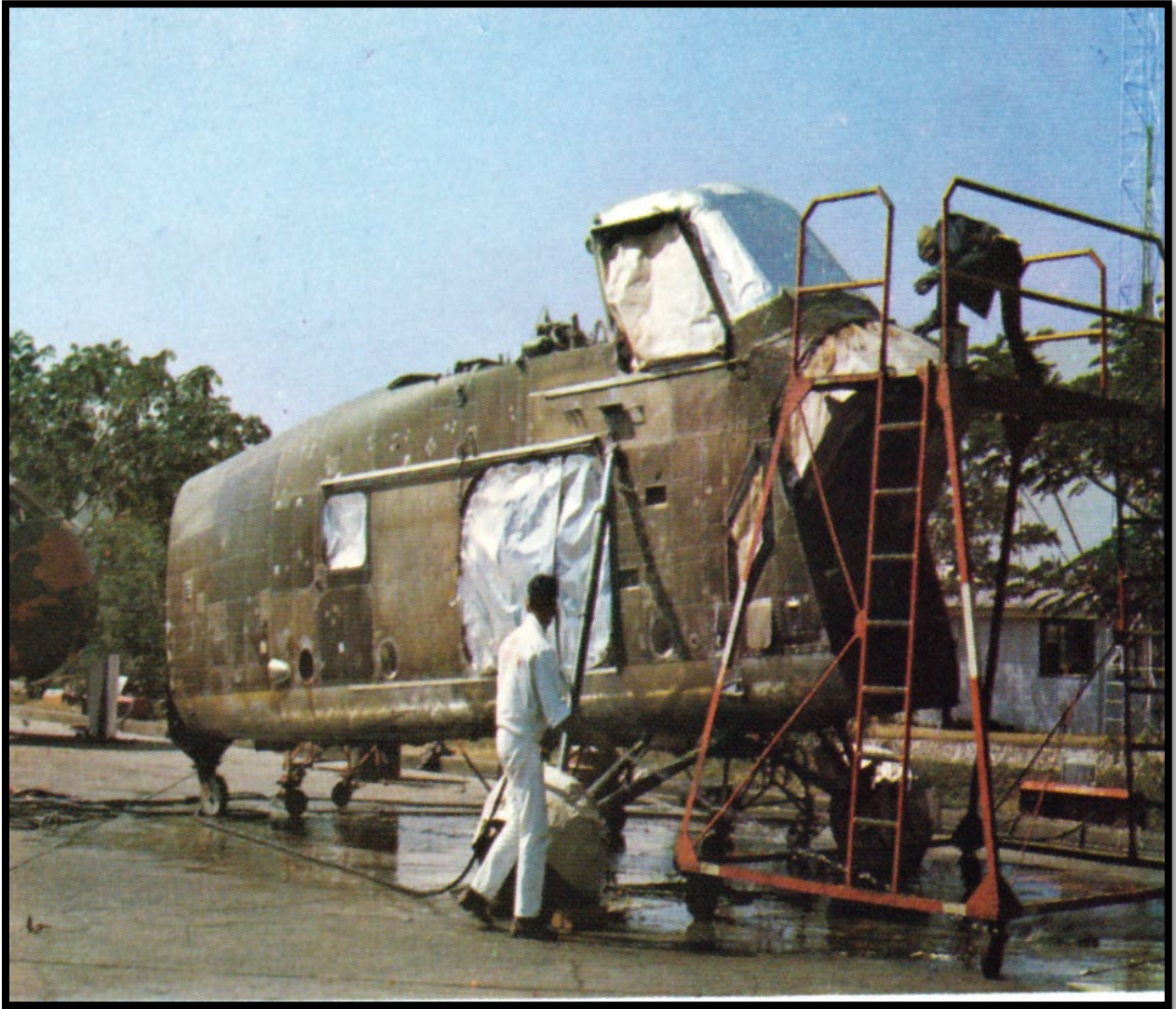
Each of the helicopters selected for conversion was programmed to be overhauled to make the airframe airworthy.

Most of the changes were to the engine and clutch compartment to accommodate the two engines and the angle gearbox. There were also modifications to the air intakes, firewall, and clamshell doors.



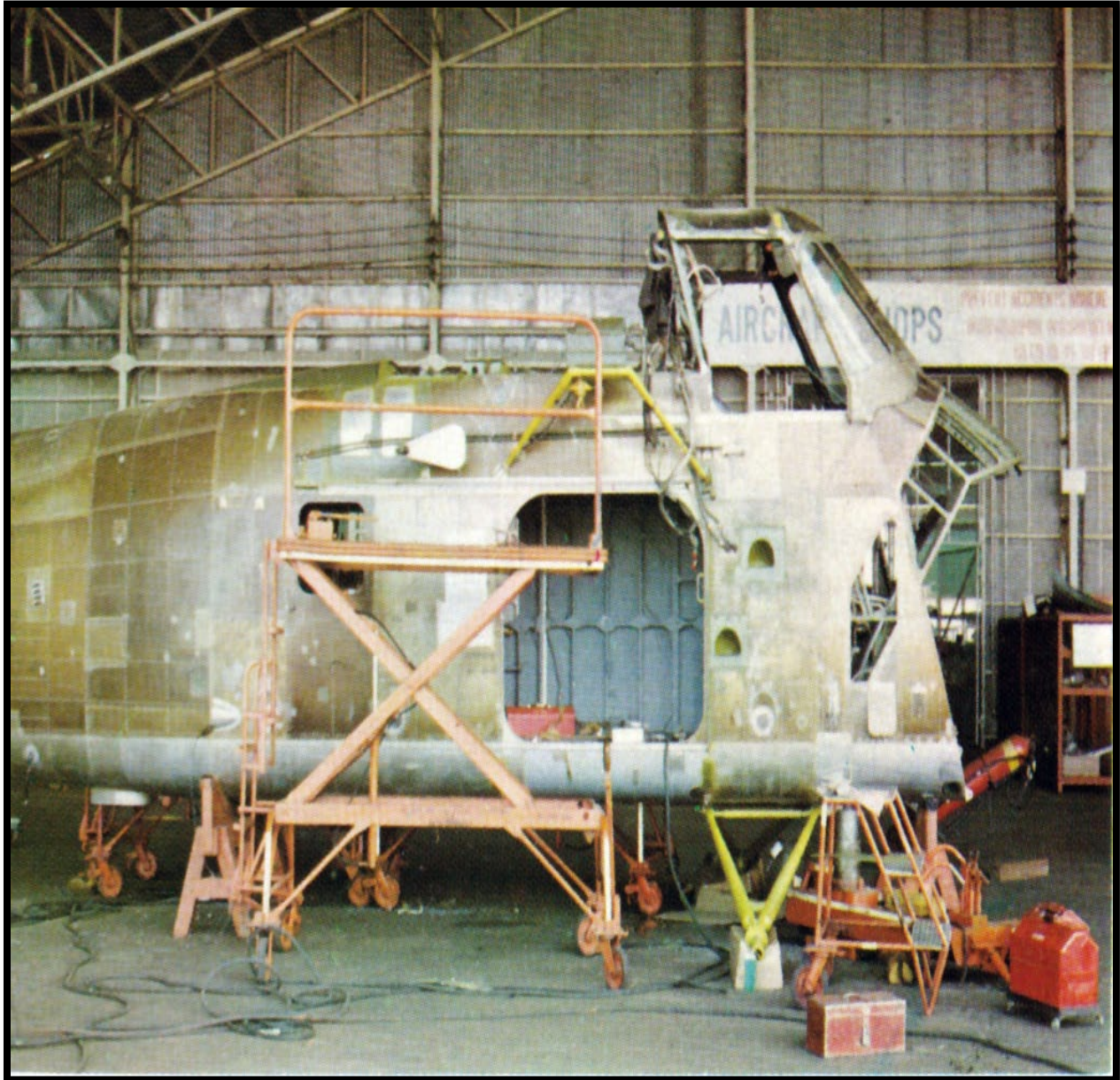
A former U.S Marine Corps HUS-1 (UH-34D) in the final stages of disassembly prior to paint stripping and a thorough overhaul process.

Air America Log Volume 5, Number 3, (printed at) Kadena, Okinawa, 1971.



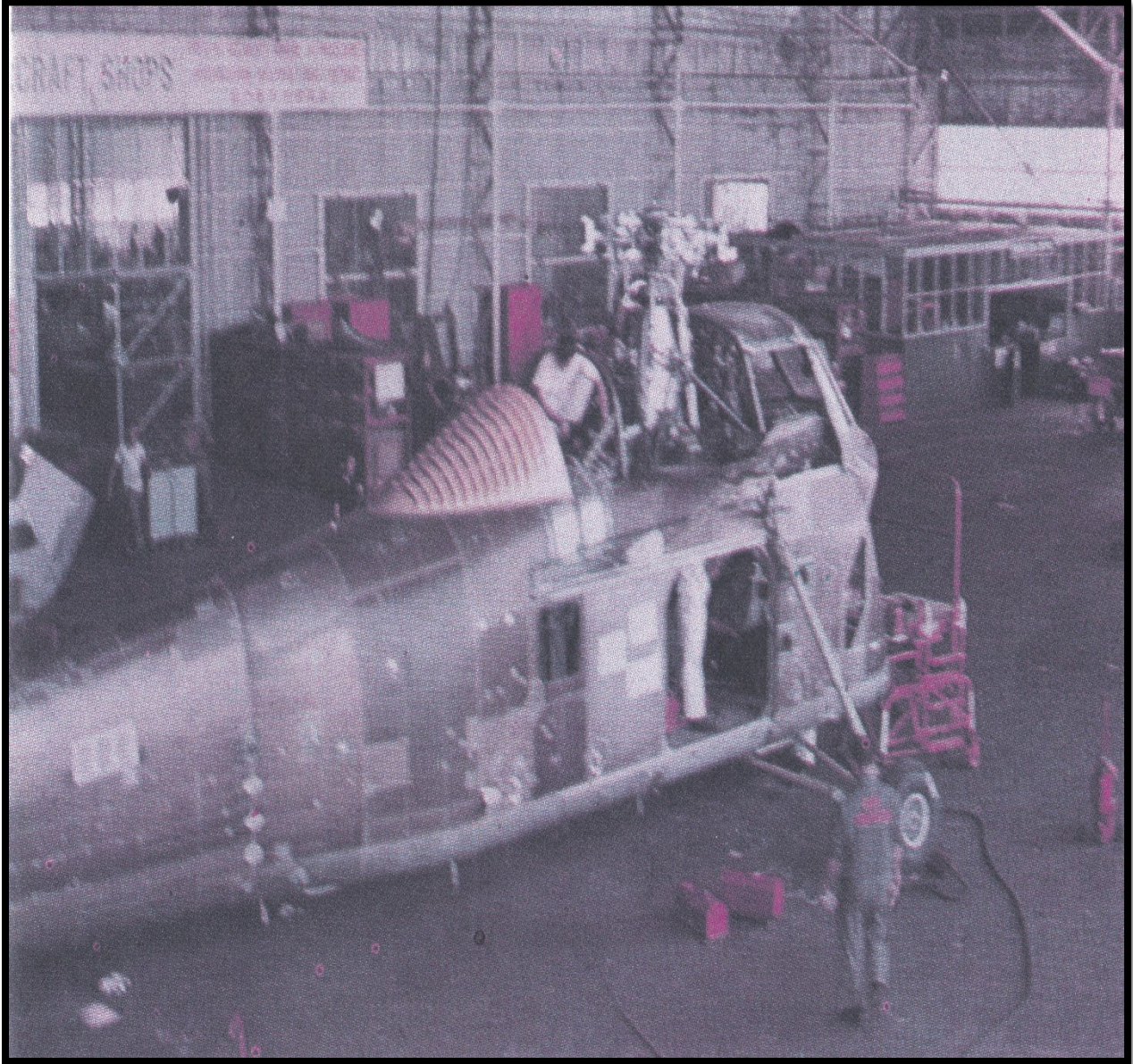
Fuselage paint stripping and wash phase nearing completion on the ramp outside the hangar.

Air America Log.



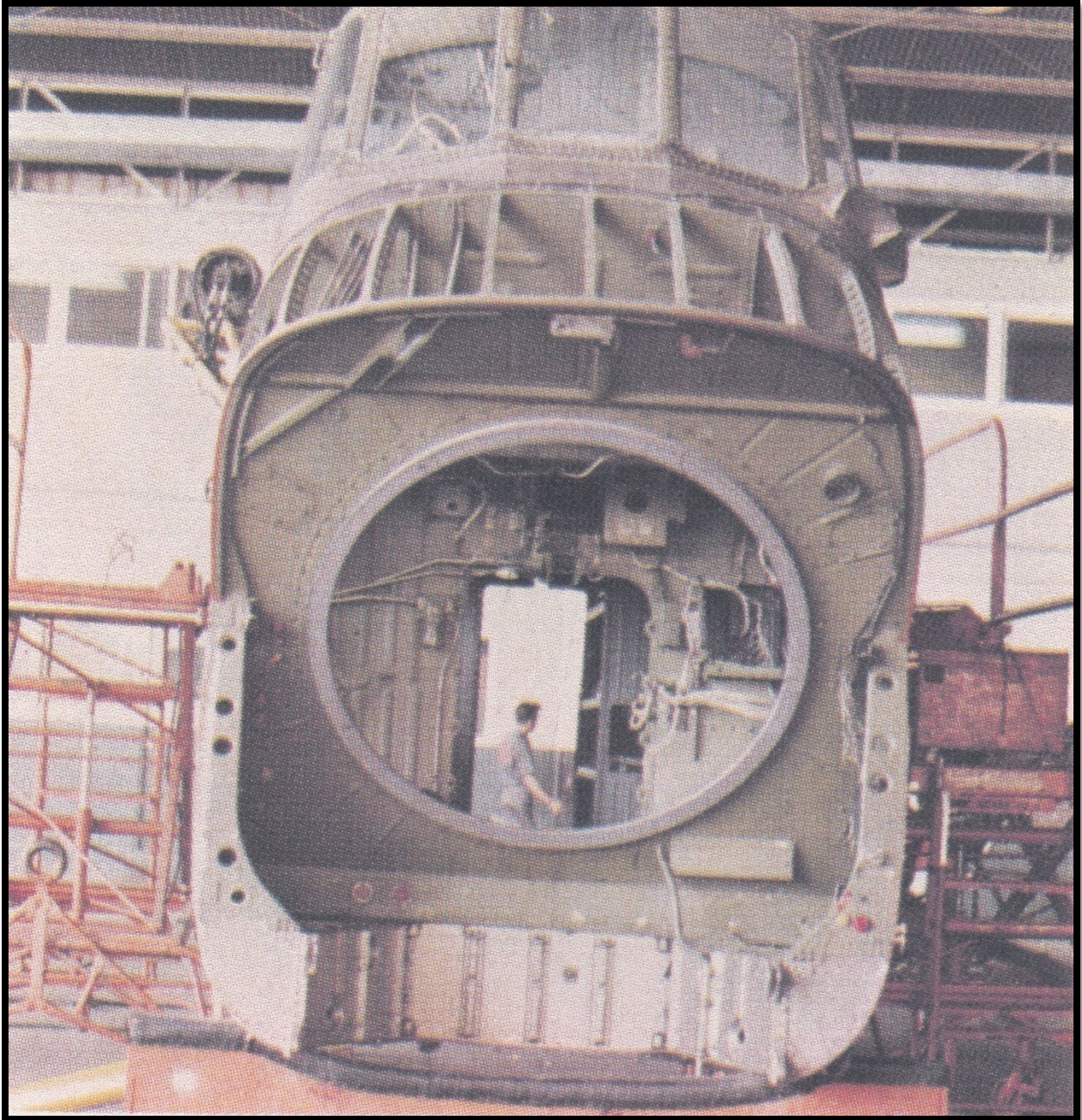
H-34 undergoing a detailed inspection for cracks, metal corrosion, and an overhaul, after completion of paint stripping.

Air America Log.



A UH-34D nearing overhaul completion in an Air America hangar. The main transmission and rotor head assembly are already installed, and the aircraft is being modified as per S-58T specifications.

Air America Log.



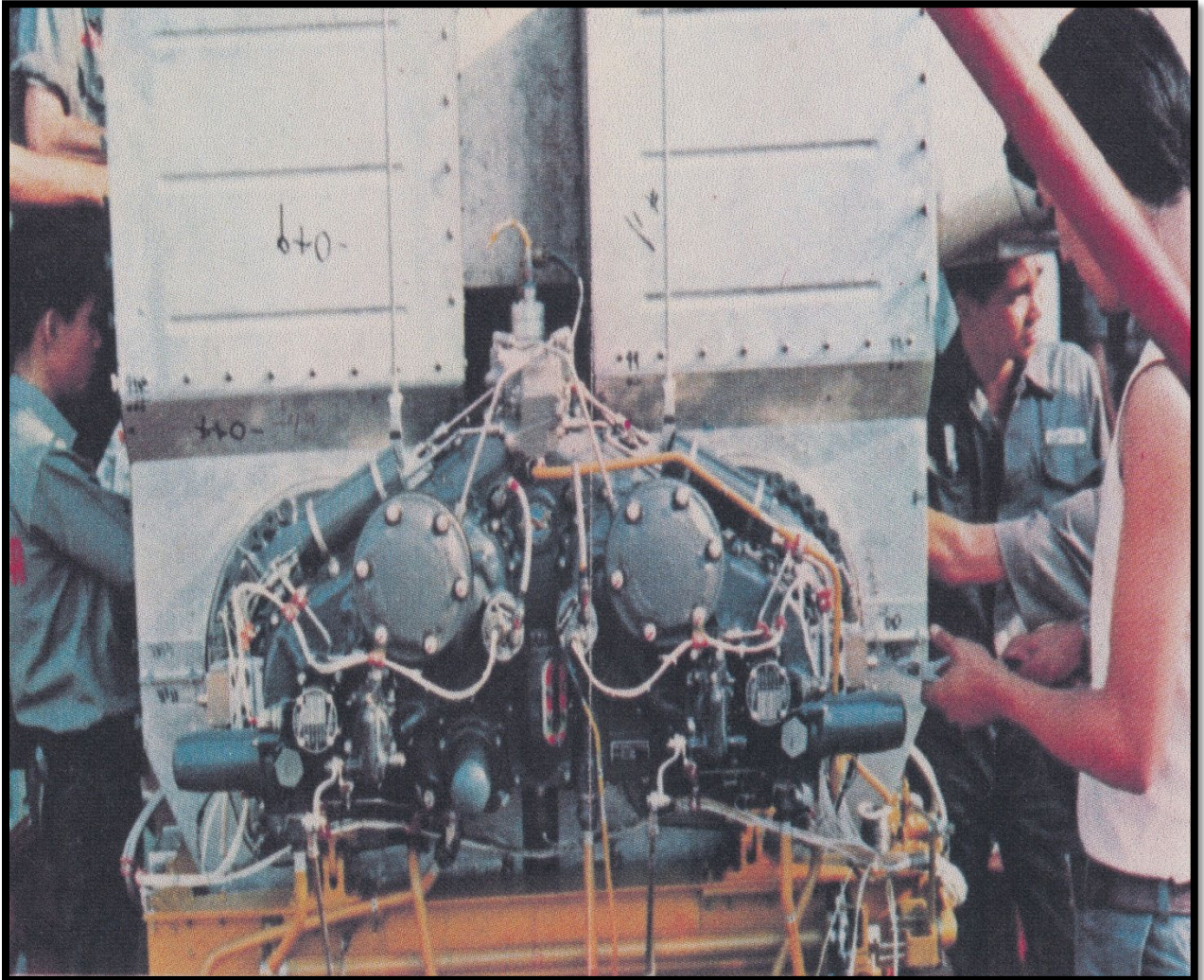
The "tub" section of the UH-34D with the R-1820 reciprocating engine removed in preparation for modification and conversion to accommodate the angle gearbox, two PT6T-3 turbine gas power plants, and the combining gearbox components. The fuselage cone is still removed and a worker can be seen to the rear of the cabin section.

Air America Log.



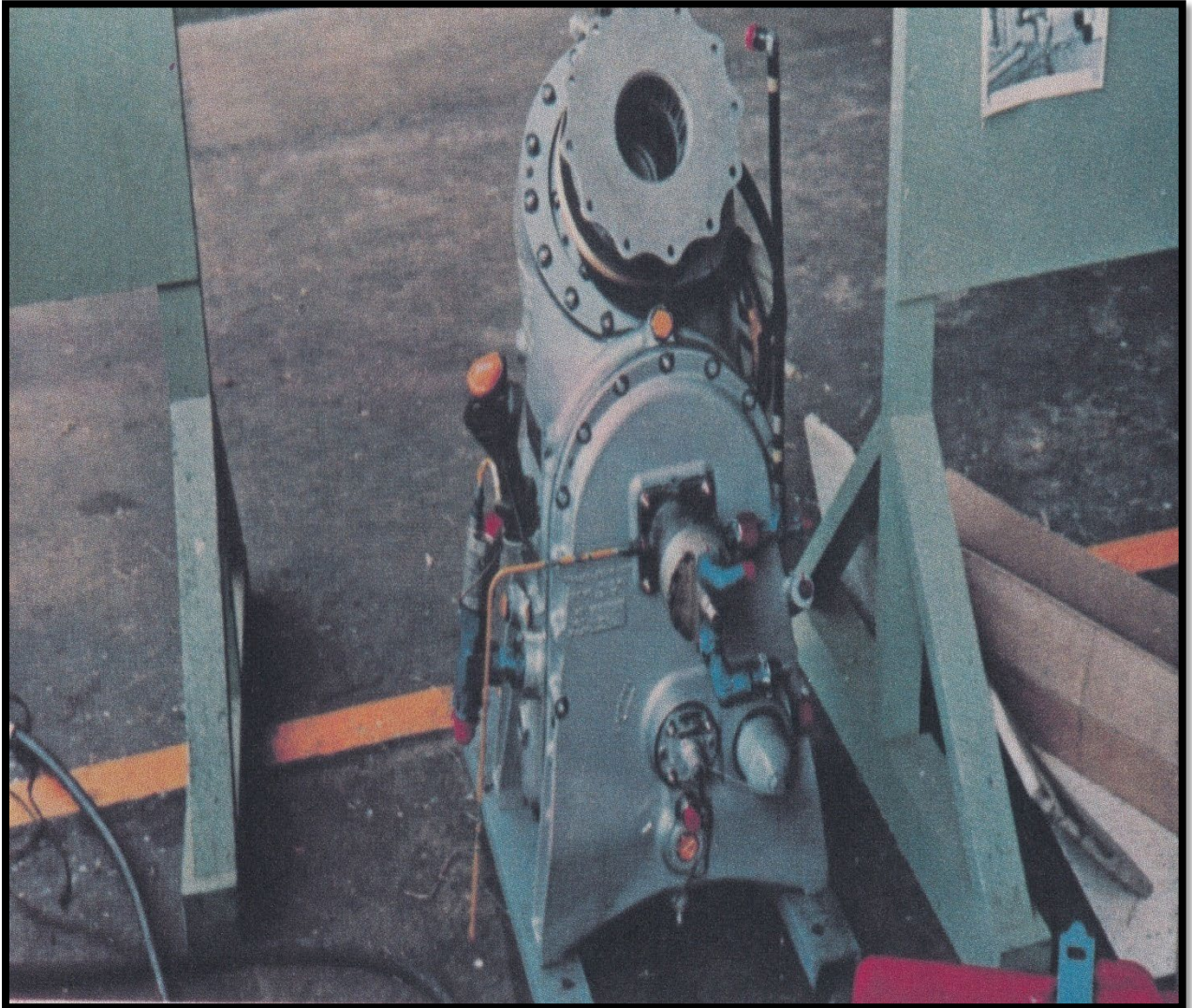
Air America mechanics working on the Pratt and Whitney turbine engines (PT-6) and combining gearbox prior to installation. Left side of a stainless-steel firewall-housed engine is displayed.

Air America Log.



The S-58T combining gearbox attached to the front of two turbine engines power sections (not seen behind fire-wall stainless steel metal shielding).

Air America Log.



The unique angle gearbox (rear portion) especially designed for the S-58T to reduce engine RPM and convert shaft horsepower from the horizontally mounted angle gearbox and to direct torque upward to the main transmission to drive the main rotor blade system.

Air America Log.

Adaptation of the electrical system, a substantial re-work of cockpit consoles, instruments, and controls would relate directly to the new system. A fire warning system would be added to the engine compartment, and some avionics moved forward to adhere to the center of gravity limitations.

The rest of the aircraft structure would remain basically the same as that of an H-34.

Twinpac units, furnished by Sikorsky Aircraft Division of United Aircraft Corporation, consisted of a pair of PT6T-3 engines, produced by United Aircraft of Canada. The horizontally installed engines, mounted on sturdy metal rails, drove a combining gearbox, which reduced engine revolutions per minute (RPM) from 33,000 to 6,600 RPM and directed 1,800 shared horsepower (SHP) through a horizontal output drive shaft to an angle gearbox. To monitor the engine system, the combining gearbox incorporated two torque meters, and a power sharing device. The gearbox also contained a pair of overriding clutches and independent oil systems to assure maximum reliability should emergency single-engine operations become necessary.

Pratt and Whitney Canada Corporation, based in Longueuil, Quebec, Canada, was a subsidiary of United Technologies Corporation in Hartford, Connecticut. The PT6 engine program had commenced in 1958. The powerplant was first mounted on a Beech 18 plane in 1961. After being demonstrated as a reliable turboshaft engine in various environments, it was installed in some Pilatus Porters and purchased by Bird and Son for STOL work in Laos. The engines were installed in the Twin Otter, a STOL plane that later became very popular with Customers for air dropping supplies to difficult or besieged sites.

An angle gearbox located behind the engine (in the former UH-34D clutch compartment) received 6,000 RPM from the combining gearbox and converted the torque through heavy gears to 2,804

RPM, which an output shaft directed upward to the main transmission component to drive the main rotor blades.³⁴

The entire first conversion process from a UH-34D to a S58T helicopter was estimated to require 3,000-man hours to complete.³⁵

A PROJECTED RELOCATION

"We will probably move again. Tuie's aunt has a nice house that she will rent to us. It appears to be a bit better than the one we are [currently living] in. There are more bedrooms and the yard is well taken care of...the move will probably be a wise one."

01/19/70 Letter.

"The move you are about to make seems to be a good one and I hope the area is safer and healthier for you all. A place that floods and has a leaky roof is not conducive to health."

01/27/71 Letter from Home.

Khun Kluawon (nee Musagablert, a cousin of Khun Yai) was married to Udorn Provincial Governor Suphat Wongwhathant, who

³⁴ Torque: The moment, or moment of force, in rotational force. The power output of an engine is expressed as its torque, multiplied by its rotational speed of the axis.

³⁵ Information taken from two articles: *Air America Log* Volume #1, 1971, *Air America Log* Volume 5 #3. Pratt & Whitney Canada's PT6 Turboprop Marks forty years of In-Flight Success.

died from an "accidental" gunshot wound at her hand in 1963. ³⁶

Ironically, in a "what goes around comes around" type scenario, Suphat was a crony of rightist, pro-western Prime Minister Sarit, who ordered the governor to execute a boyhood friend from the Sala Den Din area of Isan, accused of being a communist at a time of active political agitation in the northeast. Tuie ³⁷ had attended a party at the governor's residence and had met Air America Chief Pilot CJ Abadie a few months before Suphat died.

Since the children's toys consumed half our living room space, even though I had grown accustomed to our present house on Benjarn Road, we had outgrown the two-story dwelling. About this time, Tuie learned that Chuck Frady, who had experienced family problems, had departed her aunt's rental house on the Nong Khai Highway. We enjoyed living in the general area, and since the house was around the corner, we agreed to look at it.

A hundred yards or so off the main road sat an impressive modern two-story structure exuding much charm, including French doors leading into a large downstairs area. Kluawon's older daughter, Jim, was married to Singha Nentheen, a civil servant working in the Thai forestry department. Singha's job allowed him access to many different hardwoods that he carefully selected and employed during the house construction. Singha had supervised the planting of the well-cared-for grounds that included many shrubs and flowers in the sizable yard. If we decided to rent the house, and since Kluawon owned a swath of land to the highway, she agreed to allow us to expand the fence area and provide a larger play area for the children. The fence

³⁶ Thai governors were selected and assigned to various provinces by the Bangkok-based Minister of Interior. Governor Suphat exonerated his wife of all blame before expiring, and she was not prosecuted.

³⁷ Tuie pronounced Duie, or "red bird."

would be installed at our expense, as would the dirt, sod, and labor.

There were many positive aspects, and few if any negatives we could discern at first. We were informed that the roof did not leak or the yard flood during the monsoon season. Security appeared to be the finest we encountered anywhere. An older cousin, Nai Nuan Musagablert's home, abutted the property to the rear. Joe Tansobsasak and Khun Jun, who both worked at the U.S. Information Service (USIS) library across from city park, and whom I had known and liked for years, lived to the right on land owned by Kluawon. To the left, civil servants lived in apartments along an adjacent road. Flight Mechanic Tom Coynoyer rented a house on the right side of the dead-end access road leading to the house. Khun Yai's first cousin, Nong Khan (respectfully called Yai Noi) Musagablert lived across the Nong Khai Highway. From all outward appearances, ringed with relatives or friends, it looked like the area provided decent security and mutually interlocking fire.

Inside, beautiful hardwood floors spread throughout the downstairs and led to a step-down rear kitchen. Outside, in back of the kitchen, was a small concrete utility area for washing and hanging clothes; also, a sizeable servant quarters, and a one-hole privy. A tall wooden tower with a standard 400-gallon galvanized metal water tank was positioned on the right side to provide gravity fed water to the upstairs bathroom. Inside off the left side of the living room, a broad wooden stairway led to four upstairs rooms that could be used for sleeping, play, or a study.

After some minor, but friendly haggling, we agreed to a reasonable rent that was only twenty-five dollars more than we were presently paying. Singha, Jim, and their children were current residents, but would depart the premises when we were



The Casterlin family residence since 1967 until moving to the Nong Khai Highway house. This house was located on Benjarn Road Udorn, Thailand. Our green English-manufactured Ford Cortina station wagon is parked in the laterite driveway.

Author Collection.



The more modern Nong Khai house with a French door entrance. Son Ricky standing on a bench near a wooden trellis. One of several species of trees, an established Mango tree stands to the left top; Bottle Brush tree to the right. Freshly planted grass sod is beginning to grow.

Author Collection.



A colorful and unique Bottle Brush tree growing next to the gate of the Nong Khai house.

Author Collection.

ready to move. Other than for economic reasons, for a time I could not fathom why they would decide to leave such a nice abode. ³⁸

BILL FOSTER

On the morning of 20 January, Captain Foster approached a Thai-manned outpost with a load. Displaying a fixed tango victor (TV) signal, the landing zone was located at TG7525, less than three miles northwest of Sam Tong. Training Flight Mechanic RG Boston (DOH 11/21/70) sat in the mechanic's seat by the cabin door and Flight Mechanic Ernie Cruz was in the cabin rear. Two Thai soldiers were inside the cabin helping to unload supplies while several others stood outside.

Within a minute or two, a loud explosion occurred, that propelled a flash fire up into the cockpit. Severely impacted, helicopter Hotel-78 collapsed on its side, and burned. Additional explosions and flames continued entering the cockpit. Foster unbuckled his restraining harness and fell a short distance to the ground. Because of the unknowns involved in the incident, Bill initially began running uphill away from the burning aircraft toward the Thai trenches and earthworks. Then, intent on departing an area of possible conflict, he elected to vacate that position.

The first explosion threw Reggie Boston against the forward bulkhead and ignited his clothes. Reggie noted that the resulting fire forced Ernie Cruz and a Thai helper toward the

³⁸ Author Note: I later discovered that Kluawon was seriously addicted to the female "Thai disease"-that of excessive gaming. With card games normally fixed by unscrupulous types, naturally she lost considerably more than she won, and had amassed large debts, which could be gradually satisfied by monthly rents from Tom, Joe, and soon-to-be us.

electronics compartment. A second blast ejected Boston out the door, still hooked to his gunner's belt. After releasing the belt, Reggie attempted to reenter Hotel-78 to help Cruz. However, a third explosion blew him further away from the ship. Then, with the helicopter totally engulfed in flames, Boston began rolling in the dirt to smother his flaming clothing.

Since the valley and hills surrounding the Sam Tong area proliferated in outposts and landing zones, many other helicopter crews were present working the defensive lines. One Bell was crewed by Captains Ken Wood, Jack Knotts, and Flight Mechanic Bennie Shaffer. Spotting the fire and smoke, they flew toward the source and landed. Shaffer jumped from the cabin section and carried the injured Boston to the ship. Then they conducted a search for Foster. They discovered him charging through elephant grass. After Wood arrived at a low hover and blew the grass flat with the rotor wash, Bennie pulled Bill into the cabin. The crew then headed for Udorn where the burned crew was immediately driven to the USAF hospital for medical treatment. Because of their extensive injuries that required sedation, CPH Goddard was not able to obtain detailed information relating to the incident for a report to Taipei headquarters.

Circling aircraft determined that Cruz was nowhere in sight and the fire was too intense for immediate investigation.

Later in the day, with the two crew members stabilized and somewhat improved, Goddard was able to glean minor information relating to the incident. Depending on who was queried, there was speculation that a mortar shell or rifle propelled grenade (RPG) round had impacted the aircraft, but no one really was cognizant of the actual cause of the explosion.

Both men incurred serious injury. Foster suffered second and third degree burns over thirty-five percent of his body,

including his face, both arms, both legs, and right eye. Boston was burned over forty-five percent of his body. In addition to suffering severe burns to arms and face, he had a puncture wound to his right eye that required its removal. He also had a broken right arm. Depending on the men's condition, evacuation was planned to Japan to an established burn clinic.

Cruz was still missing later in the day, as reports from upcountry indicated that the area was still too hot for a ground team to investigate the wreckage. Attempts would be made the following morning. ³⁹

Hotel-78 was reduced to ashes and Cruz became another Flight Mechanic statistic. In addition, the remains of seven local personnel were found in and around the debris field.

News of the accident both surprised and saddened all of us. Many of us had landed at the same pad with no previous problem. Granted, the situation was becoming more fluid every day, defense lines were thin and porous, and it was entirely possible that an enemy trooper or crew had infiltrated close to enough to the pad to perpetrate such an act. There was also some conjecture about sabotage that speculated a grenade might have been placed in a fuel tank. It was an old story, but there had been incidents in South Vietnam where a rubber band placed around a grenade spoon and the restraining pin removed. When the rubber band disintegrated in the volatile fuel, the resulting explosion destroyed the helicopter and its occupants. To counter such eventualities, porous metal screens like a colander were inserted in the fuel orifices. Long before this tale surfaced, at night after final refueling, savvy Flight Mechanics placed a hair between the filler caps and fueling ports.

³⁹ Hotel-78, Two Air America XOXOs

As was Air America's policy, following the event, both Foster and Boston received outstanding medical care. Following ten days of ice baths at the U.S hospital in Japan, the men were flown to Brook Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, to undergo further recovery and skin grafts.

Sometime later, Mike Jarina was on home leave. After previously completing two years at Pensacola Junior College, intent on continuing his education, he was attending classes at West Florida University, which he considered a good college to complete junior and senior years, and also attain a master's degree. Mike and Foster both attended a "new" math class. Although measurably improved, Foster wore an eye patch (he had not yet opted for a matching glass eye). One finger on his right hand was still badly damaged, as he was only wearing one leather glove at the time of the fire to better enhance cyclic feel. While discussing the incident, Bill informed Mike, that except for the explosion and fire, he really did not recall what exactly had occurred that fateful morning.

When Jarina terminated his Air America employment in 1974, he and his wife Dee were invited to a reception in a large home. Henderson, Mike's math professor, was also there. The professor asked if he was still with the Company. Surprised that he used the generic term Company, Mike looked at him quizzically and answered no. Then the professor asked if he had to go again. Jarina again answered "No," he was no longer connected. Mike logically deduced that Henderson might have learned that he worked for Air America through Bill Foster or by his hurried departure to return to Southeast Asia in 1972.

The next time he encountered Foster was after he went to the States and visited the offices of the Chief of Naval Air Training or Basic Training, where he had formerly been the



Captain Bill Foster during better days.

Assistant Engineering Officer. Foster had been granted a permanent civilian staffer job there after completing college. ⁴⁰

WORK CONTINUES

I worked all of the 22nd day on the ramp testing XW-PFJ. Blade tracking proved a problem and required twenty take-offs and landings. These consisted of short five to ten-minute flights that netted me only three hours flight time. At this time blades mismatched as to weights, made tracking difficult. Moreover, despite the presence of blast strips, leading edges were worn, and temporary patches from battle damage and foreign object debris (FOD) strikes increased the problem. Also contributing to adverse vibration levels, worn rotor head trunions and other moving parts were not being replaced at the frequency they should be. All these factors made it very challenging for a conscientious test pilot to produce a ship that would stand rigorous upcountry work imposed by the current battle conditions.

Saturday was much of the same. Only the helicopter, 204B 8513F was different. The twelve-hour days working under the hot January sun were debilitating and not appreciated, but part of my unpublished instructor job description.

The next morning, I was picked up very early at the house by the Transportation Department bus to fly Bell 204B 8535F upcountry for a scheduled RON at Long Tieng. Accompanying me were Captain Vladimir Broz (DOH 11/30/66) and Flight Mechanic Bob Noble (DOH 07/17/68). Saigon transferees were still arriving

⁴⁰ I had heard an erroneous report that Bill went to medical school.

Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*, Hotel-78.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

Steve Nichols, *Air America Laos: The Flight Mechanic's Stories*, Ernesto M. Cruz, 281-283.

to join our Bell program. This could have been done to fill in the blanks when some of us transitioned to the S-58T program. Like so many other pilots who arrived from Saigon, the reason might have been associated with CPH Bob Hitchman's peculiar management techniques, or perhaps a desire for an increased challenge and income.

The Company had hired Vlad Broz toward the end of 1966. Vlad was no stranger to flying in Southeast Asia, but not acquainted with the techniques mountain flying demanded of pilots flying in Laos. Even though already checked out in Bell equipment, our Operations Department required a certain amount of IP-monitored flight time for these new arrivals during the transition phase of training before releasing them to fly as PIC. Fortunately, most of these men were highly proficient, quick learners, amenable to instruction and constructive criticism. What they lacked in combat skills (not gained during military operations in South Vietnam) and the associated stress, they compensated for with common sense. Vlad was one of this type and a pleasure to fly with. Consequently, except for very difficult pads on some of the narrow ridgelines, I allowed Broz to fly most of the local missions and only conducted five landings myself.

During the day, while working out of Phu Cum (LS-50), we conducted two Special Missions in the hills north of San Pa Ka (LS-33). Enemy road survey and construction work was in its infancy in the Moung Heim Valley, and required monitoring.

Since the eleventh, when enemy patrols were spotted near The Alternate, a radio had been installed in our hostel to enable two-way communicating with the Sky radio room on the hill. When I was the senior man, I would call the duty radio operator with varying degrees of success to assess the situation when groundfire or explosions reverberated in the valley or

rocked our parking area. In addition, it was difficult to sleep with the knowledge that enemy forces were moving closer to us, and with the Thai 105mm howitzer battery firing all night at phantoms from the King's house on the southern hill.

Bennie Shaffer replaced Bob Noble on the 25th. It was a long day, and again I allowed Vlad to fly most sling loads and landings to the local defensive positions.

We were instructed to return to Udorn toward the end of the day and blocked in with forty-five minutes night time.

With over eighty-four hours, when I believed that I was finished flying for the month, I was surprised when the B-Bus driver arrived at the house on the 29th with a note from Goddard to report to the field for a day mission. I was assigned to fly to Long Tieng with Captain Ben Densley, yet another transfer from Saigon in January. Like Broz, Densley was also hired in the fall of 1966. Ben had quite a history. He had previously worked in Laos, but on the ground as a sergeant in a White Star Special Forces A-Team unit, located on the Plain of Jars from May to December 1960. He worked out of Khang Khay and Lat Houang with Major Vang Pao, Pop Buell, and Dick Bowen until enemy pressure made further presence untenable.

Densley later went through U.S. Army helicopter flight training, returned to Southeast Asia, and flew UH-1B gunships in the South Vietnamese Delta region from 1965 to 1966. After ten years' service, Ben left the Army, and was hired to fly Bells for Air America out of Saigon. ⁴¹

Although well into the day, we ferried 96W upcountry. Under my guidance, I allowed Densley to fly all but four landings to local pads. At day's end, we switched from 96W to Papa Foxtrot Hotel and ferried the 205 to Udorn.

⁴¹ *Air America Log*, Ben Densley, U.S. Army 1956-1966.



Captain Ken Wood and another pilot waiting for a Volkswagen bus ride outside the Transportation Department office, located on the north side of the Administration/Operations building. The first Thai man standing the right was the drivers' supervisor.

Stan Thompson Collection.

According to ABCCC reports, with the enemy banging on the gates of our area, weather on 30 January was poor in the Barrel Roll area (PDJ), prompting cancellation of all scheduled air strikes.⁴²

⁴² ABCCC Extracts, 19.

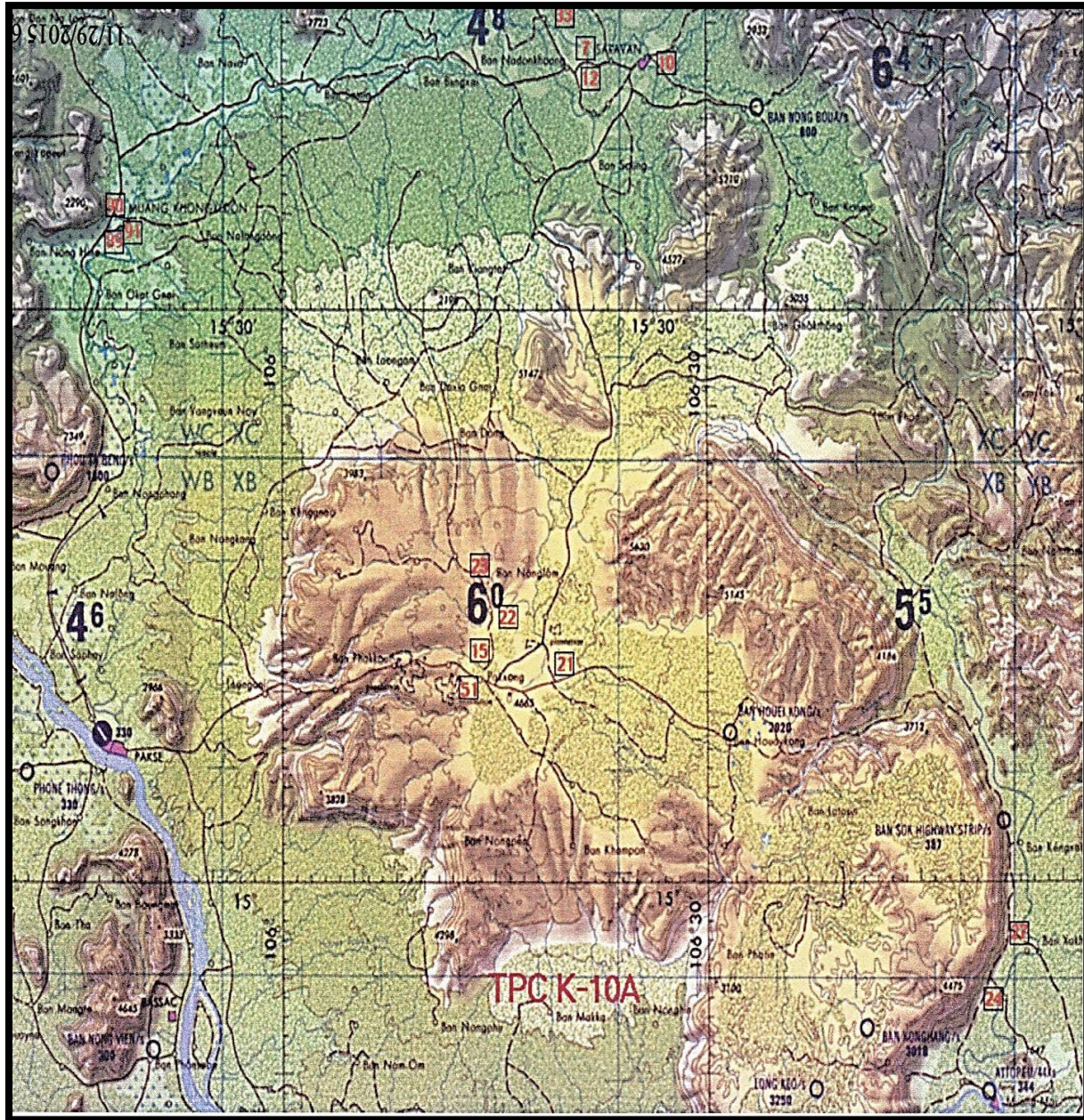
In order to fill a major void after loss of the critical seaport at Sihanoukville, Cambodia, during the spring of 1970 extraordinary road building work was accomplished by the enemy in order to expand the Ho Chi Minh Trail system further west in Laos and to accommodate increased requirements in South Vietnam. This project entailed an enormous amount of manpower and equipment while laboring under battlefield conditions.

The undertaking also necessitated capture of two provincial Lao capitals: Attapeu and Saravane in Military Region Four. (Both of these goals would be achieved in April and May.) To protect the southernmost logistic system from harassing fire, enemy clearing actions, with special guerrilla unit (SGU) action, and road watch team infiltrations, were waged on many Pakse Sites (PS) lining the eastern and southeastern rim of the Bolovens. Conducted by the Vietnamese on one side, and troops from Military Regions Four, Three, and Two on the other, success of these battles waxed and waned, and by early January the control issue was still largely unresolved.

*"Action...remained focused on the Bolovens area. Government irregulars recaptured without opposition two of the three small sites on the plateau's southern rim that had been [previously] lost to the enemy on 1 January [PS-22 and PS-42]...The third site [PS-40] apparently remains in communist hands."*¹

PS-22 was the oldest and largest SGU training and road watch launch base on the eastern rim of the Bolovens. Along with other Pakse Sites, PS-22 had endured a number of bombardments

¹ CIA Daily Bulletin, 01/04/71.



1:500,000 topographic map of the Bolovens Plateau and surrounding area in Military Region Four showing mountain concentrations and the network of trail and road structures. Route-23, the paved road from Pakse ascended the Plateau to Paksong and continued north through Thateng to Saravane. From there the artery continued north into the Toumlan Valley to become part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail system.

Hukee.



Southwestern edge of the Bolovens Plateau near Attopeu in southern Laos. PS sites were situated on the rim's perimeter. Water flooded patchwork rice fields lay at the foot of the plateau.

Author Collection.

and attacks during December. Depending on their ability to hold and not break and run, various troop units were rotated in and out of the site. Since PS-22 (Ban La Tee) had a 3069-foot clay-soil STOL² airstrip, this was easily accomplished by Air America Caribou and C-123 crews.

Because of the expanding nature of the war, after the U.S. and South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, southern Laos assumed the complexion of a more international conflict. Toward the end of 1970, two Thai battalions moved into positions on the Bolovens Plateau near the sizeable town of Paksong. Soon coming under Vietnamese pressure, the well-trained units acquitted themselves well, winning a major engagement on 8 January.

Another extraterritorial country's participation did not fare as well. An Agency Department of Defense (DOD) project funded sufficient Cambodian men to assemble two battalions, which were indoctrinated and trained at the PS-18 camp in the hills northwest of Pakse. To test their mettle, one battalion was shuttled to PS-22. On 1 January they were lifted southwest to PS-43 by USAF "Pony Express" helicopter crews. During the second week, the fledgling unit was lifted southwest to PS-38, where they reoccupied the former area headquarters. Neither movement initially resulted in enemy contact, but this soon changed. After the first battalion was reinforced on the 25th by a second unit, the Vietnamese struck. Suffering many casualties, Cambodian survivors departed the field for Paksong. With the experiment having failed miserably, the units were airlifted to PS-18 and most were soon repatriated to Cambodia.

² STOL: Short takeoff and landing aircraft, such as the C-7 Caribou and C-123 aircraft.

Supported by American air, although still hanging in the balance, the eastern Bolovens held through February. ³ During 11 February, C-123 554524, piloted by Captain JH Ackley, landed with a load at PS-22. During touchdown the nose wheel assembly collapsed, penetrating and badly damaging the fuselage. ⁴

With Ban La Tee seriously threatened by enemy forces, Chief Mechanic Stan Wilson was assigned to a seven-man repair team. Stan, one of the most competent mechanics in the Air America inventory, was the go-to person for outstation repairs and recovery.

Captain "Weird" Neal Hanson arrived at Site-190 on the 14th to fly 524 to safety before the enemy destroyed the aircraft. Seeing how much repair work remained on the nose section, he was doubtful that the repair could be completed that day. He was wrong: the maintenance team performed a miracle in jig time under harsh conditions. Just prior to sunset 524 was ready for departure.

Early the following morning, the Pakse Customer reported that the airfield had been hit by enemy artillery fire that most certainly would have destroyed the 123. ⁵

MR-3

By 1971 Don Courtney was a senior Case Officer at Savannakhet. The former Montana smoke jumper and U.S Marine Corps officer was long associated with the Lao conflict. In 1957 and 1958 Don and I had participated in the 20th Officer Candidate Course (OCC) at the USMC Mainside facility Quantico,

³ Kenneth Conboy with Jim Morrison, *Shadow War: CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, Colorado: Paladin Press, 1995) 283-285.

⁴ J Ackley and crew were killed later in 1973 while flying in Military Region One.

⁵ Air America XOXO C-123K, 554524, 02/11/71.
Bill Leary February 1971 Notes.

Virginia, on the banks of the Potomac River. After commissioning, we attended officer basic school in the western boonies of the military reservation at the Quonset hut Camp Upshur, and then at the new modern facility at Barrett.

Following his release from the service, as an Air America kicker working out of Takhli, Thailand, Don helped support early efforts to supply air-dropped cargo to Vang Pao's guerrillas. In and out of the Theater on Agency contracts, he served in Vietnam, Vientiane, Udorn, Savannakhet, Pakse, and briefly participated in the 1969 Plain of Jars operation.

During his early career with the Agency, Don underwent a basic skills course, and later advanced Case Officer training, at "The Farm" ⁶ for between a year and year and a half with interim breaks. Training there consisted of two categories: agent handling and paramilitary special operations. Instruction revolved around parachute jump qualification, resistance to interrogation, survival skills, map reading, small boat handling, drop zone, and helicopter landing zone work. Courtney, a former Marine Corps engineer officer, considered the three-week demolition school training the finest he ever attended.

Subjects taught at The Farm were not particularly channeled toward Laos at the time. Instructors were mostly former OSS types, who Don states with tongue in cheek:

"...ensured the trainees were prepared to jump into occupied France and work behind German lines."

The last three years of Courtney's Agency tenure were spent at The Farm acting as Chief of Special Operations Training, which included counter-terrorism tactics. Subjects taught were much the same as during his original training period: a basic skills course not seeking to train, but merely to educate an

⁶ The Farm: The Camp Peary Virginia Agency training facility.

individual regarding a subject. This methodology, in contrast to a military boot, provided three weeks of weapon schooling and rifle range work. By the time the boot trooper completed the course, he knew everything about the weapon. The Agency approach was to teach an individual what every weapon was required to do in order to function. Then to fire as many different weapons and weapon types as possible and to develop a situation the student had never encountered, and have him or her solve the problem to activate the weapon. In accomplishing this task, despite a boot soldier being able to outshoot the Agency person, the Agency goal stressed dealing with unusual facets the boot never faced. Since many civilian trainees were academics, and initially lacked the necessary intestinal fortitude necessary for the job, there was a lot of emphasis placed on confidence building.

Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) was the original nomenclature for the Savannakhet Units' fourteen ordinary battalions. This name was later changed to Battalion Guerrilla (BG). Both terms were considered misleading, as the units actually consisted of light irregular infantry troops.

Field operations and procedures varied within the five military regions, and were the responsibility of the assigned Case Officer. Previous military experience and agent handling training learned at The Farm were essential to achieve success.

In Military Region Three, when an operation was being organized, a supply system issued required items, while a training section with sufficient personnel provided troops and a weapons refresher course. The Case Officer devoted time helping unit commanders plan missions, and briefed them with available intelligence. When provided a green light, the designated Case Officer planned the field insertion, briefed USAF helicopter crews, and then led the ships to the helicopter landing zone (HLZ) in a Porter. Throughout the operation, he remained in

contact with the unit (s) by conducting daily overflights, or ground visits if a helicopter was available. Cognizant that the Lao often fabricated battle reports for the American's consumption, he carefully perused information derived from the field and the troops. Then he assembled and composed all current intelligence for the nightly briefing.

The officer coordinated with AIRA ⁷ for T-28 support and action on selected targets. He ensured that his units were supplied by airdrop, and that wounded and dead were promptly evacuated by helicopter. He paid the troops' salaries and furnished death benefits to surviving families.

Should an operation become bogged down or not proceed according to plan, it was the Case Officer's duty to replace the errant commander on the spot and whisk him off the battlefield. Then he would appoint a new commanding officer. Invariably, a young, hungry lieutenant who had just observed his boss being fired normally made an excellent commander. ⁸

Unlike legendary Tony Poe, who violated almost all the Agency-mandated rules in Laos, a Case Officer was strictly forbidden to grip a USMC KA-BAR knife between his teeth and dash off into the jungle John Wayne style leading a pack of guerrillas.

⁷ AIRA: USAF Air Attaché. Such U.S military units were imbedded in the Vientiane U.S. Embassy and reported to the ambassador. This also included ARMA-U.S. Army Attaché.

⁸ In many ways, Savannakhet Special Guerrilla Units (SGU) battalions and regiments were different from those in the north. In contrast to Meo SGU in Military Region Two, Military Region Three Case Officers had the option to hire and fire personnel depending on their performance; they paid and trained the troops; they also could promote and demote as they deemed necessary.

SILVER BUCKLE

During the latter part of 1970 new Agency Chief of Operations Wil Greene replaced Jack Hallet at the Lima-39 unit.⁹ Black Lion came through the door sans a smile, and with an agenda that was bent on radically changing things and shaping up unit Case Officers, many who had already served their time in hell. Those who had known Greene as an excellent, highly motivated, affable Case Officer, were quite surprised and resented his uncharacteristic demeanor. Even more so when he produced a wordy, excessively detailed standard operating procedure (SOP) that turned everyone off and nobody chose to read.

Looking to initiate larger operations, Greene elected to restructure existing SGU BG units into four battalion Groupement Mobile (GM) regiments. SGU Case Officers were not convinced that this was the correct action to take, but not being in the loop, they were still unaware of classified higher echelon plans for the February cross border Lam Son-729 operation.¹⁰

Because of his SGU battalion and other multi-battalion experience during the 1970 Bolovens and Tchepone operations, Colonel Touane Bouddhara was selected unit commander of the first unit: GM-30. Don Courtney, Touane's close friend, became the regiment's Case Officer and advisor. Since it was the first GM formed, and based on his reputation, Touane was accorded his pick of battalions. By early January the new GM was deemed ready for field work.

With Savannakhet unit brass anxious to commence an operation preceding the still highly classified Army of Vietnam

⁹ Don Courtney Email, 04/30/16, Jack Hallet, a former Special Forces major, was considered an excellent boss, who treated everyone under him with respect and good will.

¹⁰ Don Courtney Emails, 08/29/02, 08/28/02, 06/28/15, 04/30/16, 05/01/16.

(ARVN) penetration into Laos toward the logistic hub at Tchepone, which was named Silver Buckle (derivation of the name is lost to history), was slated to commence on the 5th.

The operation closely duplicated one Courtney had been in charge of the previous year; that of retaking Ban Houay Mun (LS-310) with two battalions. Anything else was new. Site-310 was located in Savannakhet Province, but very close to the border of Saravane Province. During the previous period units had *"messed around without getting anything much stirred up."* The fresh operation was planned to be a little more ambitious, marking the deepest major Trail incursion in Military Region Three to date. Employing Houay Mun as a base, elements of GM-30 would move northeast to impact a new section of Route-92 leading into Military Region Four, probe the road complexes around Mounng Nong (Lima-19), and search for a prisoner of war camp reputed to be located in that vicinity. At the onset, in contrast with past operations where Agency requests for supporting air often arrived late in 7th Air Force Saigon headquarters, for Silver Buckle, sufficient air assets of all types were planned and scheduled well ahead.

A mix of twelve USAF CH-3 and CH-53 helicopters lined up on the Agency's remote Nong Saphong training camp strip ¹¹ while the troops mustered for boarding. Courtney went ahead in a Continental Air Services (CASI) Porter flown by a Thai pilot to recon the landing zone and coordinate the operation. Escorted by A-1E pilots, the Air Force helicopter pilots shuttled the troops seventy-eight nautical miles southeast to the largely abandoned site. After seizing the area, they established a perimeter

¹¹ Also listed as Keng Ka Boa, LS-235, located sixteen nautical miles north-northeast of Savannakhet. The site was originally developed to accommodate General Ma's Royal Lao Air Force operations away from prying eyes at Lima-39.

defense and prepared for the large infiltration north. In order to implement the lift, drum barrel fuel was trucked to Site-310 from Route-13.

In the interim, Touane established his command post in a small stilt hut on the edge of a rice paddy, while preparations were underway for the next phase of Silver Buckle. Don was sharing a bowl of chicken soup with the colonel when he noticed several large red ants floating on top of the broth. Curious, he asked the colonel for the name of the soup.

Touane replied, "*Khai muat daeng or chicken red ant.*" Courtney commented that it was good tasting soup, asking if he always put red ants in it.

"Only when I cannot obtain lemons." ¹²

At the appropriate stage of the operation, on 12 January, again escorted by A-1E pilots, GM-30 was lifted by U.S. military helicopter assets forty-two miles northeast to Phou Dotouy. The high mountain range encompassed an entire six-by-six-mile UMT map grid square, thirteen miles south of Moung Nong. Since the area had previously been used as a forward base for road watch launch purposes, and landing zones already existed, the troops temporarily moved into old positions while preparing to move on to their assigned goals. A double crewed H-34 was available for medevac and resupply as deemed necessary.

The lift was not conducted without incident. At some point during the shuttle Air Force helicopters were lined up on the Houay Mun airfield refueling. Before the crews were finished fueling, Don and Thai CASI Porter pilot Lickett arrived at the strip low on fuel after scouting the landing zone and areas immediately surrounding Phou Dotouy. Dangerously low on fuel

¹² Apparently, when sufficiently hungry, formic acid tastes as good as citric acid to some individuals.

themselves they discovered no place remaining on the narrow runway to land. After several attempts. Don failed to establish air-ground radio contact using different frequencies. With no alternative, and committed to landing somewhere before engine flameout, they tightened their shoulder harnesses. Then Lickett dove for the deck and plopped the Porter onto a small patch of earth adjacent to the strip. Immediately after touchdown he applied the propeller reverse braking feature and wheel brakes so robustly that the tail pitched up and they were both looking directly into the cockpit of a Jolly Green helicopter. ¹³

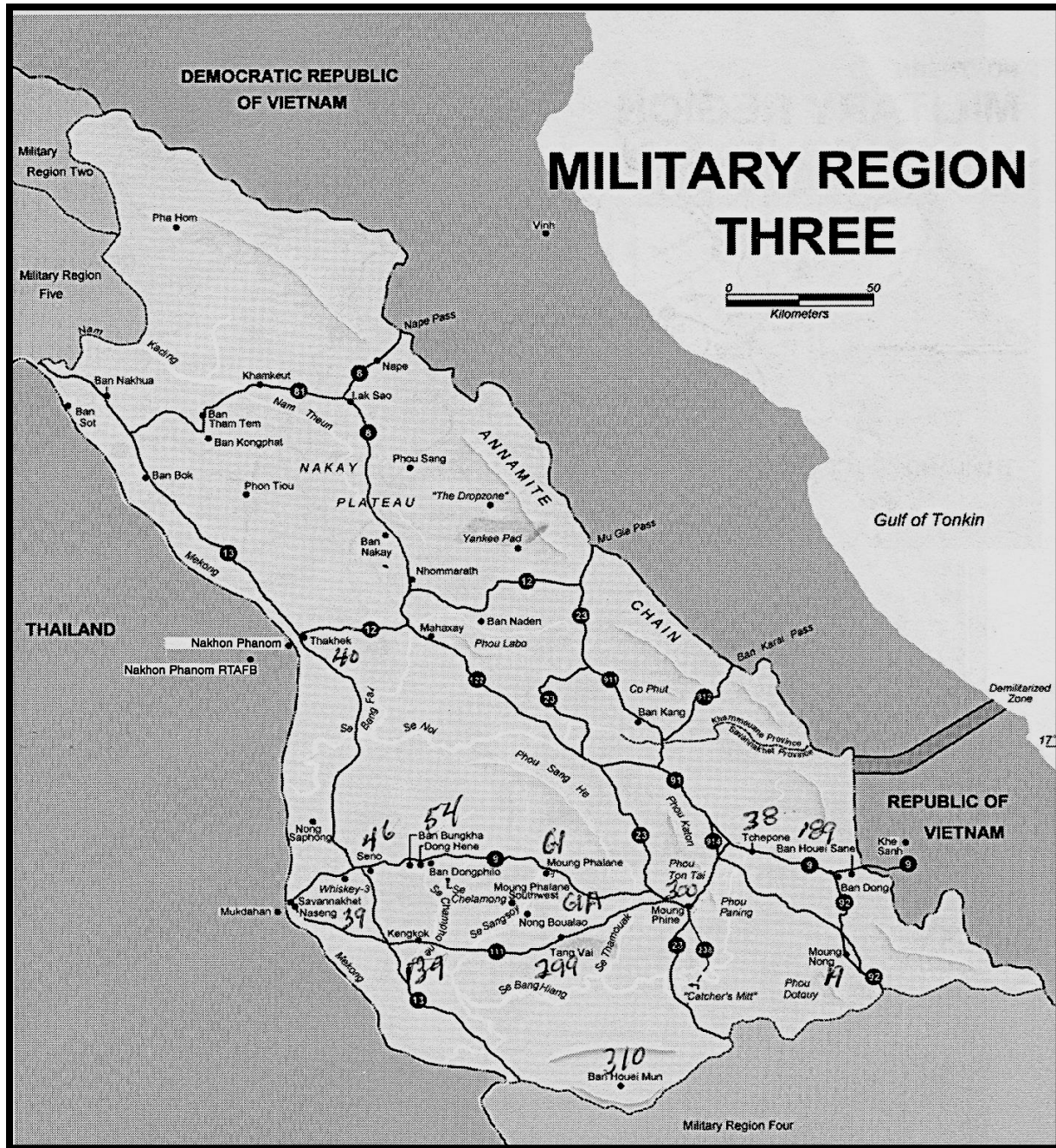
In order to execute the pragmatic, dual phased operation, the regiment divided in half. Preceded by several B-52 strikes to soften up the area, elements of two battalions moved east-southeast toward Route-92 to *"mess with a stretch of new road,"* and two battalions marched north toward Moung Nong.

Another transportation-logistic hub south of Tchepone, Moung Nong was nestled in a northern bend of the Xe Lanong. ¹⁴ Several roads of varying transport capability--Routes-234, 92, 914, 920, and 921--either intersected the town or fed into arteries that passed nearby.

To ensure a modicum of success by providing current intelligence for Silver Buckle's forces, which would hopefully divert large numbers of enemy forces from the immediate Tchepone area, U.S. military Special Operation Group (SOG) teams first penetrated eastern Military Region Three. During the month, as

¹³ Don Courtney considered Lickett and his Thai counterpart Mi fine pilots who performed gallant work, which caused him to offer his profound thanks and a couple bottles of scotch.

¹⁴ Depending on the part of the country, a river's name was preceded by the Lao word Nam, Se, or Xe.



Bottom right sector of the graphic shows the Silver Buckle and Desert Rat operation areas, including Ban Houay Mun (LS-310), Phou Dotouy, Moung Nong (L-19), Route-92, and Moung Phine (LS-300).

Conboy, 433; site designations are the Author's.

Silver Buckle unfolded, additional teams were inserted further south. ¹⁵

After departing the mountain base, the southeastern column encountered some resistance, but managed to push forward to the Route-92 objective. Along with commando teams, they attacked construction workers, their equipment, supplies, and planted anti-vehicle mines. Then they wheeled north to clear the road and join the first regimental unit.

Colonel Touane's two battalions moved slowly and cautiously north, not closing on Moung Nong until the final week in January, when enemy resistance stiffened significantly. Undeterred, over the following week Touane dispatched two smaller units toward Moung Nong to target, direct air strikes, stir the pot, and search for the POW camp.

During the night of 25 January, the enemy, which had been marshalling divisions and weapons in the Panhandle since March 1970, surprised elements of the battalion with heavy assaults.

At this point, with the men fatigued by two weeks of constant hostilities, the government operation began to unravel. Becoming an everyman-for-himself situation, survivors of the besieged battalion near Moung Nong began making their way west toward Savannakhet.

By 4 February, BG-313 was impacted by multiple assaults and heavy mortar fire. After almost a day resisting attacks, out of ammo and with the eastern two battalions delayed a short distance away, BG-313 departed the field.

¹⁵ SOG units from South Vietnam rarely supported Agency-directed operations. The SOG recon maneuvers, the impending Tchepone operation, or true purposes of the actual mission were never revealed to Don Courtney, the Savannakhet Unit Operations Case Officer, or the commander on the ground, until long after the operation terminated.

Faring somewhat better, the remaining battalions temporarily returned to their assigned task of interdicting roads and trails.

"On 28 January a reinforced [NVA] company of an estimated 150 men attacked the irregular command post and its two attached companies. The irregulars beat back the attack; they counted 16 enemy dead. A second attack was also repelled.

Nearby, a battalion of irregulars placed 25 anti-vehicular mines on Route-99, the newly completed road bypassing heavily bombed sections of Routes-92 and 96. Irregulars guarding the mining operation ambushed an estimated company of Vietnamese, killing another 16.

The North Vietnamese can be expected to react more strongly to the continued government presence in their midst..." ¹⁶

Beset by superior forces, after 9 February, with elements of Silver Buckle then largely ineffective, the surviving troops began withdrawing south.

Savannakhet unit officially declared Silver Buckle over by 11 February (four days after the ambitious Lam Son-719 ¹⁷ cross border operation commenced), but stragglers and the remaining regiment did not recover to Ban Houay Mun until 22 February. From Site-310 the dispirited men were returned by helicopter to the Nong Saphong camp for rest and refit. ¹⁸

¹⁶ CIA Daily Bulletin, 01/30/71. Laos: Government irregulars' operation against the communist infiltration corridor south of Moung Nong have reported increased contact with the enemy.

¹⁷ Lam Son: A Vietnamese name honoring the birthplace of the fifteenth century national hero Le Loi.

¹⁸ Thomas Ahern, Jr. CIA History Staff, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006), 407-408.

AFTERMATH

Tactical close air support proved largely ineffective. USAF after action reports indicated:

"...most aircrews reported little BDA [bomb damage assessment] for their strikes. Dense foliage in the area was probably the primary factor influencing the unimpressive results. Because of the dense jungle foliage and rugged terrain in the area, ground teams had difficulty in passing target coordinates, and aircrews had a hard time assessing strike results." ¹⁹

Needless to say, Agency people closely involved with Silver Buckle were not elated with the operation's overall results. In eyewitness Don Courtney's abbreviated bitter words to the Author:

"Too many troops; too new an organization; too little purpose; too far east. Got there [Moung Nong], milled around, no POW camp, lost resupply [and] TACAIR [to] weather. Found nothing and [two days before the NVA arrived] I was blowing the whistle to come home. Got firmly denied repeatedly. Finally got hit by a fair force, couldn't support, couldn't pull back, [so] two new and untested battalions broke. The other two then pulled back. I [calculated] our losses at just over 600 men, for no real purpose [a pointless sacrifice]...Some of them did make it home.

And then a few months later, we got told there had been something called Lam Son [occurring]. And that we had been a vital part of it. And if that had been the game [plan] all

¹⁹ CHECO USAF Operations in Laos 1 January 1970-30 June 1971 HQ PACAF With Support of SAC, A Project Corona Harvest Study, Prepared by General L.D. Clay, Jr. USAF Commander in Chief Pacific Air Forces, 31 May 1972, 109.

along, there were many better ways to support that op..." ²⁰

ONCE MORE INTO THE BREACH

Like Silver Buckle's effort to divert and prevent enemy reinforcements and resources from reaching the Tchepone area, MACV Saigon encouraged continued Agency support for Lam Son-719. Therefore, Desert Rat was conceived to disrupt "*communist supply efforts along Route-23 between Moung Phine and the Se Bang Hiang.*" With four battalions of GM-33 ready for action, and the ARVN Lam Son-719 operation underway, 1,200 irregulars were lifted by USAF helicopters to Ban Houei Mun on 16 February. Once assembled and organized at Site-310, the GM was inserted eight miles southwest of Moung Phine. From this primary landing zone, receiving little resistance, Desert Rat forces moved across Route-23 to seize and occupy high ground east of the artery. From there they were tasked to raid, mine Routes 23 and 238, road junctions, and develop worthwhile targets for air strikes around the Moung Phine logistics center.

"Air support of the operation was provided primarily by the RLAF, and coordination between air and ground units during the operation was particularly good. Lucrative targets located by ground units were passed to RLAF pilots and were struck rapidly, yielding favorable results." ²¹

²⁰ Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 288-290.

Ostensibly both Silver Buckle and Desert Rat operations diverted portions of six enemy battalions from the Lam Son Route 9 battlefield. Don Courtney Emails, 08/31/02, 01/05/14, 03/09/14, 03/10/14, 03/14/14, 05/23/14, 05/24/14 (2).

Bernard C. Nalty, *The War Against Trucks: Aerial Interdiction in Southern Laos 1968-1972*, Chapter 8, Cambodia Command Hunt 4, and Southwest Laos, 149.

²¹ *CHECO*, Lucius Clay, 109.

Encountering only light resistance, a modicum of success was achieved for over a month. Then the Savannakhet Unit ordered Phase Two of the operation: an attack on the enemy-held Moung Phine complex. While underway, the GM was engaged by sizeable Vietnamese units. Some probes of Site-300 were conducted, but with the ARVN Route-9 operation stagnating and the push largely finished, by 21 March, after rallying, remaining battalions of GM-33 withdrew either to Tang Vai on their way back to Lima-39, or toward Moung Phalane via Route-9. ²²

²² Ken Conboy, 290-291.
Bernard Nalty, *The War Against Trucks*, 150.
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 409.
CIA Document, 02/17/71.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 342.

With enemy pressure building throughout the country, impacting almost all military regions, the Lao Theater became very active for all principals during February 1971. Tending to reaffirm Sir Isaac Newton's third law of motion, ¹ the expected communist offensive commenced against Long Tieng in Military Region Two. Additionally, in Military Region One several government positions were lost northeast of the royal capital at Luang Prabang; ² and in Military Region Three, while Lao irregular units struggled to interdict LOCs around Moung Phine, the ARVN cross border offensive commenced.

THE THRUST TOWARD TCHEPONE

"On January 18, 1971, in a meeting with Laird, Rogers, Helms, Kissinger, Colonel Alexander Haig, Kissinger's deputy, and Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I authorized a major military operation to cut the Ho Minh trail by attacking enemy forces in Laos."

Richard Nixon.

Constituting the largest Vietnamese Army (ARVN) cross border invasion of the entire war Lam Son 719's ³ major objectives were generally twofold: To interdict and disrupt enemy logistics activity along the Ho Chi Minh Trail system in

¹ Newton's Law: "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction."

² Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 293.

³ Originally referred to by U.S. administration officials as the Tchepone Operation.

the Military Region Three Tchepone area, and to thwart any current year major North Vietnamese offensive in South Vietnam. Also a gamble, a secondary, but equally important object, was calculated to test the viability of the Nixon Administration's Vietnamization policy adopted in 1969: an attempt to equip and train the South Vietnamese military to the point where they could survive alone and prosecute the war against the Vietnamese without U.S. advisors.

Like the previous year's Cambodian operation and the 4 February offensive underway in that country against enemy border sanctuaries and logistics activities, ⁴ severing the main logistics route to South Vietnam, destroying Base Area 604 and 611 infrastructures north and south of Route-9, and clearing out areas north, west, and east of Tchepone, the control center and headquarters for all logistics operations in Laos, would prove immensely beneficial.

South of Tchepone around Moung Nong, the logistics route leading to South Vietnam divided into two or more LOCs. One was an original trail paralleling the South Vietnamese border, and the other a relatively new artery along Route-23 that ranged into Military Region Four through Attopeu, and south into Cambodia along the Mekong River. Denying movement of supplies out of Tchepone would disrupt and prove critical to future enemy operations in South Vietnam, southern Laos, Cambodia, and might even impede North Vietnamese offenses for a year or more. In addition, Lam Son would tend to allow the ARVN to strengthen its capabilities, and provide additional time for American troops' safe withdrawal from the Theater. If successful, the operation would perhaps enhance the potential for negotiations toward some

⁴ *CHECO*, Lucius Clay, Lam Son 719, 130-131.

kind of an equitable political settlement to the war.^{5 6}

Beginning with General Westmoreland's proposals in the mid-sixties the invasion of the Lao Panhandle along Route-9, and cutting off enemy supply lines into South Vietnam at vulnerable Route-9, had long been a cherished objective of Saigon's high level MACV command, and of some individuals in the State Department. However, lack of resources, later political restrictions, and ARVN deficiencies precluded such action.⁷ With air interdiction failing to fully accomplish the intended task (although destruction of one hundred trucks a day was being reported in January),⁸ despite the enormous political and physical risks of such an ambitious operation, a ground assault was deemed increasingly more feasible. However, in a too little-too late scenario, the plan was not seriously resurrected until December 1970, when President Nixon tentatively approved the operation contingent on additional study. Consequently, joint military planning commenced in January. Then, with a somewhat cautious approval from his military commanders and the South Vietnamese hierarchy, Nixon finalized his agreement to conduct the operation on 18 January.⁹ The following day, Chairman of

⁵ U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976 Volume 7, Vietnam, July 1970-January 1972 Document 109 Memorandum for the President's File by the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) Washington January 26, 1971, Meeting with the President, Dr, Kissinger, Admiral Moore and General Haig.

⁶ Philip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presido Press, 1988), 658.

⁷ At the time it was realistically estimated that six U.S. divisions would be required for the task.

⁸ FRUS, Document 108, 01/21/71.

⁹ Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 641.

the Joint Chiefs of Staff announced that the operation had been approved. ¹⁰

The Cooper-Church Congressional Amendment, triggered by the Cambodian invasion, prevented American ground troops or advisors from entering either Laos or Cambodia. ¹¹ However, emulating a "Catch-22" scenario, U.S. air in the form of bombing missions, close air support, and helicopter transportation could legally participate in the all ARVN operation. Despite restrictions, the overall strategic aspects of such an invasion were deemed feasible.

As envisioned, the multi-phase operation was calculated to last up to three months, until the mission was complete, or monsoon conditions rendered further progress untenable.

Because of preparations, including the buildup of 20,000 ARVN and their equipment, 10,000 American military, 700 helicopters and 2,000 planes, like any large operation, and despite attempts, secrecy was difficult to achieve and maintain. Moreover, chains of command and channels were long, enemy spies were embedded everywhere in the South Vietnamese military and government, and press leaks proliferated. Therefore, by 26 January, an Agency analysis realistically concluded that the enemy likely expected an attack and had prepositioned "troops accordingly." Moreover, it was expected the enemy would stand and fight. ¹²

As plans for the Tchepone operation went forward, there was some optimism in the administration that an overwhelming success

¹⁰ *CHECO*, Lucius Clay, 134. For political reasons, Souvanna Phouma and the U.S. State Department were initially against the operation, as were COMUSMAC and CINCPAC.

¹¹ Phillip Davidson, 643.

¹² FRUS, Document 111, CIA Analysis of Probable Reactions of Various Concerned Parties to Operations in Laos.

would end the war "by totally demolishing the enemy's capability." In any event, envisioned enemy troop concentrations provided choice targets for destruction. ¹³

CLARKSON

Even though a desultory Lao SGU push on Tchepone had been underway for some time in later years, ¹⁴ word of an impending cross border operation from South Vietnam reached my low-rung level in Udorn, when I encountered former Air America UH-34D helicopter Captain Verne Clarkson during one of my frequent visits to the Flight Information Center (FIC) map room, for a briefing on the latest upcountry intelligence. U.S. Marine "bird" Colonel Clarkson was present wearing his dapper summer service gabardine uniform.

Before joining Air America, the former high school teacher, disgusted with a total lack of discipline in the 1960s Seattle, Washington schools, quit teaching and elected to fly UH-34Ds with Air America. A prince of a person, Verne had been commanding officer of the Seattle area U.S. Marine reserve unit. He left us for a time, but had returned to the Theater in an active-duty status likely with some liaison function related to the upcoming Lam Son operation. Without divulging much detail, he informed me that our crews and helicopters would be involved in a large operation to the east. I left the room a bit

¹³ FRUS, Document 110, 01/26/71, FN: 13.

¹⁴ Reference the Author's November 1970 compressor stall incident in Book 11.

confused, wondering exactly what he was talking about, and the extent of our participation. ¹⁵

THE PLAN

In conjunction with continuous U.S. air strikes, ground interdiction of the Route-9 (Base Area-604) infrastructure leading to Tchepone was contingent on armored columns and infantry penetrating the border at Lao Bao; then quickly advancing along Route-9 to the Routes-9/92 junction at Ban Dong (Aloui), and then moving on toward the Tchepone Valley, where search and destroy operations would commence. Toward the end of the operation, a search and destroy withdrawal was envisioned through the southern 611 Base Area. Depending on the situation, and if not feasible, egress would take place through Base Area-604.

Because of projected good weather during the period, depending on the roadbed condition, initial movement to the initial objective was anticipated to take only a few days.

As a diversion, in order to confuse the intent of the main operation to the enemy, another troop maneuver would commence in the vicinity of the A Shau Valley.

U.S. air mobile assets were a key asset to the airborne portion of the operation. With emphasis on the northern sector, aided by artillery support, air cover and gunship support, helicopters would shuttle elite ARVN troops to commanding high

¹⁵ Although it was expected, to the best of my knowledge, Air America helicopters were never assigned to participate in the Lam Son operation.

ground both north and south of the road in Base Area 604 to block enemy movement toward the main thrust. ¹⁶

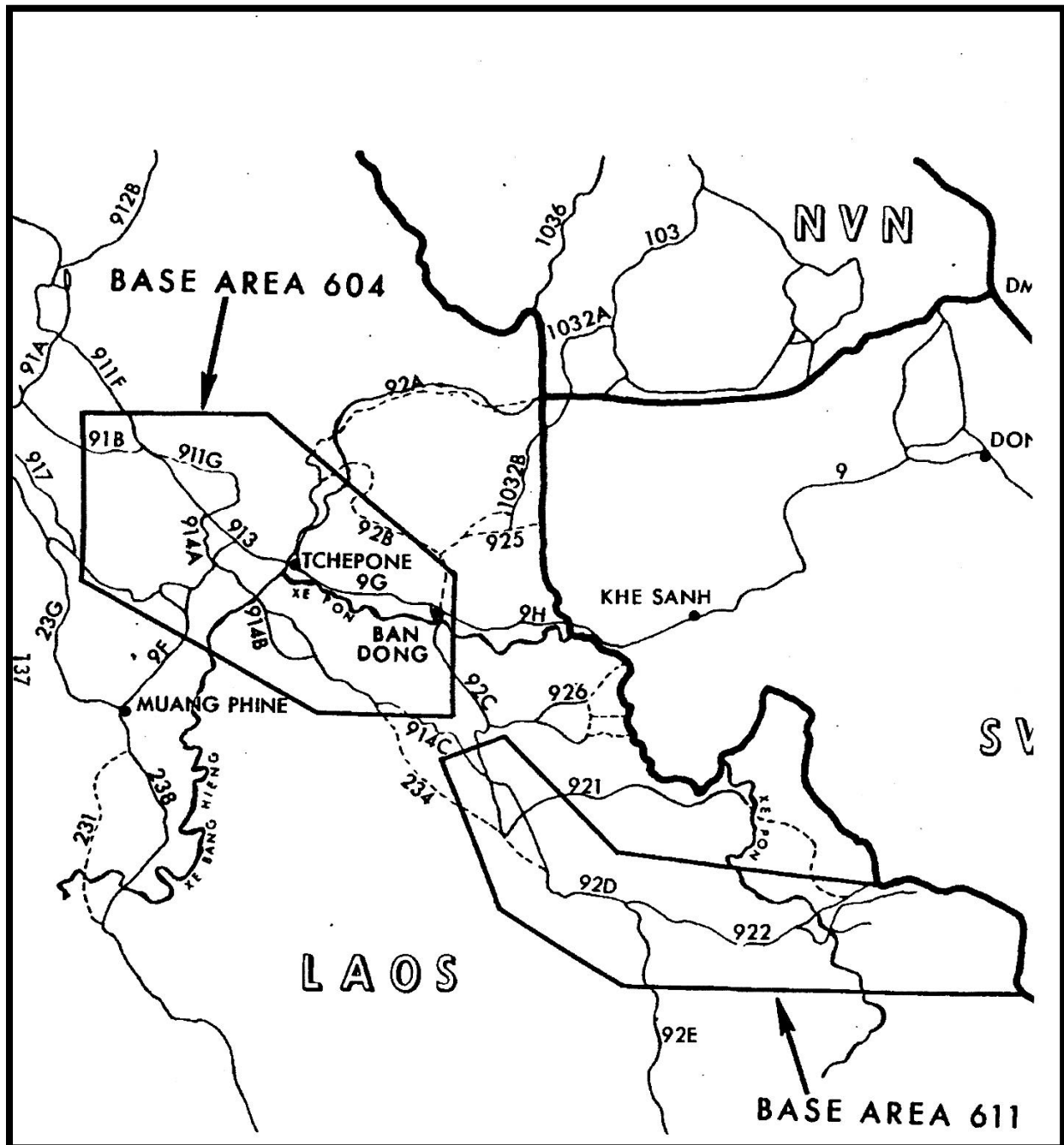
Like much of the eastern two thirds of Laos, the selected battlefield terrain for Lam Son-719 was extremely rugged, a difficult place for any conventional army to maneuver and fight either on the ground or in the air. Route-9, the main byway necessary for movement of troop vehicles, artillery pieces, and tanks toward the ultimate objective of Tchepone, Laos was rudimentary and rough. Lined with double-canopy jungle, the Xe Pone flowed parallel to and south of Route-9. A long, steep ridge, also covered with dense undergrowth, dominated the landscape to the south. Mountainous terrain predominated throughout the entire area. ¹⁷ Despite the enormous, numerous risks, and what ifs involved in Lam Son, Phase One preparations for the offensive commenced on 30 January. With a jump-off date of 8 February fast approaching, American engineering units began clearing and repairing the Route-9 salient inside South Vietnam.

By January 31st, the road was open to Khe Sanh, site of a major Marine Corps-North Vietnamese battle in 1968, just prior to the TET offensive. Khe Sanh was reoccupied and work begun to re-commission the airstrip.

Road clearing to the border was completed by 3 February. However, rolling stock moving along this stretch of highway leading to Laos was still vulnerable to enemy attack. Therefore, concurrent with the road operation, to create and establish blocking positions, U.S. Army helicopters lifted ARVN units to northern high points flanking and overlooking the road south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Lastly, heavy long-range artillery pieces were emplaced along the Lao border to provide fire

¹⁶ *CHECO*, Clay, Lucius, 136, 139.

¹⁷ Phillip Davidson, 643-644.



Graphic depicts the Ho Chi Minh trail structure in the eastern Panhandle section of Laos and major enemy logistic base areas in Military Region Three. The main focus of the Lam Son operation was interdicting LOCs in the 604 area, which included Tchepone.

CHECO, Clay 137.

support inside the operational area. ¹⁸ ¹⁹ After the airfield was hurriedly refurbished to provide a logistical airhead, and artillery defenses installed, by 5 February, with Khe Sanh and border areas somewhat secure, thirty-four battalion sized South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) units had assembled at various launch points.

However, unknowns would ultimately hinder success of the undertaking. Underestimating the enemy potential to maneuver and reinforce their units, U.S. intelligence sources had incorrectly judged and revealed to the Washington Administration that opposition to the operation would be light. Through spies in the ARVN leadership and other obvious signs, North Vietnamese intelligence was already cognizant of the operation's details. After losing their sanctuaries and storage facilities in Cambodia during early 1970, efforts began to beef up critical Panhandle base areas. By the end of 1970, three divisions of front-line troops, two artillery regiments, and one armor regiment were present in the two base areas. In addition to these assets, logistical units, Pathet Lao, and twenty AAA battalions supplemented the 7,000 regular combat troops. Presenting a formidable air defense, the anti-aircraft units manned deadly and highly effective 12.7mm, 14.5mm, 23mm, 37mm, 57mm, 85mm, and 100mm guns in numerous emplacements. B-52 strikes and other tactical air had pounded some of the area in support of the Silver Buckle operation. Efforts to suppress

¹⁸ Bernard Nalty, *The War Against Trucks*, 151.
SEATO Lucius Clay, 147.

¹⁹ FRUS, Document 104, Memorandum for the President's File by the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), Washington January 18, 1971, Meeting Between the President, Secretary Rogers, Secretary Laird, Admiral Moorer, Director Helms and Dr. Kissinger.

enemy AAA was addressed by air dropping considerable numbers of cluster bomb units (CBU) along both sides of Route-9. ²⁰

Despite Lam Son being sandwiched between the dry and wet seasons to take advantage of favorable weather conditions, weather patterns in Laos were still often unpredictable. This was certainly prevalent along the eastern border regions. ²¹ Consequently, last minute air strikes on 6 and 7 February intended to eliminate much of the enemy AAA capability northwest in the Lam Son area were cancelled because of adverse weather. Undeterred by the conditions, allied commanders confident of victory proceeded as scheduled.

PENETRATION

While the Silver Buckle effort in Laos, calculated to divert enemy units to the south and southeast, was slowly unwinding, three major South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) border penetrations, coordinated movements of two airborne and one armored ground unit, commenced during the early Monday morning of 8 February. The main thrust of lead ARVN elements along Route-9 moved five and a half miles of the twelve miles to Ban Dong during first day. The slow progress was attributed to light enemy harassment from dense foliage alongside the road that hindered flanking infantry's clearing operations. Furthermore, the rate of movement was reduced by heavy rain and poor road conditions which hindered road repair. Supporting airborne assaults north and south of the road allowed ARVN troops to seize high ground. ²²

²⁰ *CHECO*, Lucius Clay, 176.

²¹ Author Note: I later discovered the tendency toward unpredictable weather in the area during night Special Project missions to insert phone taps on Vinh, North Vietnam communication lines.

²² *CHECO*, Lucius Clay, 149.

During a 9 February afternoon meeting in Washington regarding the operation's latest details, it was revealed that there were 6,200 ARVN troops twelve miles inside Laos. They were moving as fast as combat engineers could clear and repair the road. Airborne units had been lifted to Route-92, the north-south artery that crossed Route-9 at Ban Dong.

As reported in Washington, over the last twenty-four hours there had been 640 helicopter sorties conducted for logistical support, thirty-three for medevac, and forty-four for troop lift. TACAIR contributed thirty B-52, six A-4, two F-4, and three B-57 sorties.

It was believed at first that the enemy, not totally convinced of the extent of ARVN plans, had not yet reacted. However, when the South Vietnamese ventured fifteen miles west of the border, a vigorous response was expected.²³

Adverse weather continued impacting operations during the second day of Lam Son, slowing movement along Route-9 over the next two days. Scheduled helicopter insertions to initiate blocking positions and establish fire support bases (FSB) were cancelled. In addition, tactical air strikes were restricted.

On Wednesday morning, preceding ground forces, heliborne insertions into Aloui, overlooking the Route 9/92 intersection near Ban Dong, was hindered by enemy AAA fire. In the afternoon the mission was completed after U.S. Army gunships and tactical air had silenced the guns. While the landing zone and defensive perimeters were being prepared to accommodate a FSB, lead elements of the main ARVN column reached Ban Dong.²⁴

By the eleventh, most ARVN ground units reached Ban Dong, not quite halfway to Tchepone. At that point, unexpectedly,

²³ FRUS, Document 125, 02/09/71, Minutes of a Meeting of the Washington Special Actions Group, Military Operations in Laos.

²⁴ CHECO, Lucius Clay, 149.

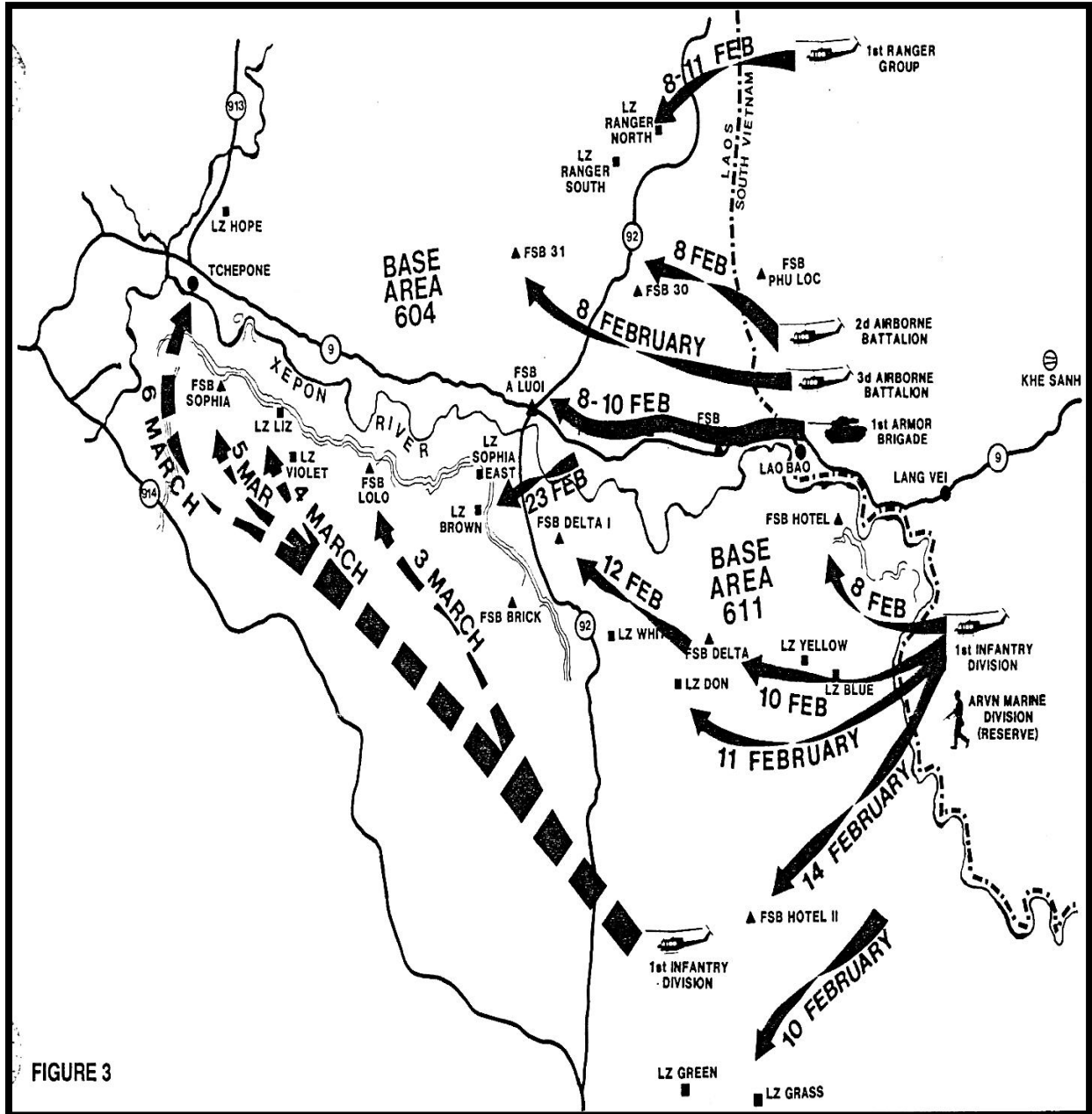


FIGURE 3

Lam Son-719 battle plan showing dates and routes of allied ground and airborne penetration from South Vietnam into Laos. Also displayed are helicopter landing zones and ARVN fire support bases.

Jim Fulbrook, 39.

political issues arose in the Thieu Saigon government and further armored movement ceased at a time when success of the operation was predicated on maximum speed before the enemy had time to fully react.

While U.S. airmobile units continued to establish fire support bases north and south of Route-9, flanking units conducted search and destroy operations, discovering caches and finding enemy dead killed by air strikes.

Time elapsed with little movement from the main armored column. Moreover, the task force's inability to secure the road impeded resupply by truck, causing less effective delivery of critical goods by helicopter.

STRIKING BACK

Finally reacting, the enemy was in place throughout the operational area, with elements of four divisions supported by tanks and artillery.

On the 14th the enemy engaged the northern bases.

On the 17th, President Nixon conducted a news conference, the first since the commencement of the Lam Son offensive. During the address he refused to limit the use of American airpower. He also indicated that U.S. troops would remain in South Vietnam as long as American POWs languished in enemy prisons. As a result of the offensive, and his determination to stay the course, Nixon's approval rating among those polled fell to the lowest during his term in office.

The following week, in response to surface-to-air missile launches, U.S. fighter-bombers attacked AAA and missile sites for three days near the Lao border.

Two days later, continuing to hamstring the Nixon Administration's ability to wage war, both houses of Congress initiated legislation preventing U.S military support of any

South Vietnamese invasion of North Vietnam without congressional approval. Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Senator William Fulbright declared the Lao invasion illegal under terms of the repealed Tonkin Gulf Resolution that allowed the president only a mandate to end the war.

In response, President Nixon went public, emphasizing the risk of under-involvement should the burden of the war be shifted too rapidly to the South Vietnamese.²⁵

The enemy offensive moved into high gear by 18 February. Heavy fighting continued at a fever pitch for about two weeks. Even well supported by air both day and night, with the enemy willing to take enormous casualties, but maintaining a two-to-one superiority ratio, ARVN FSBs were lost or rendered largely ineffective, in the total concept to capture Tchepone. Nighttime AC-119 and AC-130 gunship support was considered critical for those FSBs that survived. With each side largely exhausted, resupply and troops reinforcement temporarily slowed action.²⁶

Released media public relations reports relating to the offensive were initially glowing:

"Over the past few days, influential Thai officials and journalists have indicated their general approval of the South Vietnamese action in Laos. An article in the 16 February edition of the Bangkok Post, strongly endorsed the move and had high praise for President Nixon's 'bold stroke.' The story was written by the paper's executive editor, a confidant of Foreign Minister Thanat, and almost certainly reflects Thanat's views."

Hedging their bets, not all parties were enthralled by the ongoing operation:

²⁵ John Bowman (ed), *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War*, (New York, New York: Pharos Books, 1985) 276, 277.

²⁶ CHECO, Lucius Clay, 152, 155, 166, 172.

"On the other hand, concern that the widened war in Laos could easily spill over into Thailand has begun to creep into the statements of senior government officials, After initially giving his blessing to the South Vietnamese offensive drive on 11 February, Prime Minister Thanom later expressed concern to reporters about the Laos situation, noting that the communist threat to Thailand is through Laos. He nevertheless tried to reassure his listeners that Thailand would not become a battlefield. Recent propaganda blasts from Peking charging Thai Government collusion in the South Vietnamese operation into Laos and endorsing Thai insurgent threats of retaliation undoubtedly have fueled Thai anxieties on this score." ²⁷

"From all I read and hear we are having real success along the Ho Trail. As long as [the ARVN] keep moving and don't bog down I think they will be successful. They can go all the way to Savannakhet if they have to. I know that area is hot as I have had some experience there."

Letter Home 03/01/71.

Becoming more a battle of attrition than ever intended, the operation ground on into early March. By then it became patently obvious that the original plan to destroy the extensive enemy logistic bases had largely failed.

With the original concept of northern Ranger units moving into Tchepone thwarted by enemy attacks and the units' ultimate withdrawal from the battlefield, a new plan was devised. This was implemented on 3 March by a sizeable insertion into the elevated ridge south of Route-9, about half the distance from

²⁷ CIA Bulletin, Thailand-Laos: Bangkok has voiced support for the allied strike into southern Laos but is becoming apprehensive over the possible consequences for Thai security, 02/19/71.

Ban Dong to Tchepone. Following substantial air strikes, troops were lifted to site Lolo. Largely neutralizing the operation, loss of helicopter assets was heavy, with eighteen aircraft being shot down.

Undeterred by the resistance and losses at Lolo, insertion of troops and development of landing zone Sophia proceeded southeast of Tchepone on 5 March. Massive B-52 and Tacair sorties likely contributed to little or no enemy resistance. ²⁸

Relying even more from air mobile assets in the wake of B-52 bombing, on 6 March an ARVN division was heli-lifted to landing zone Hope.

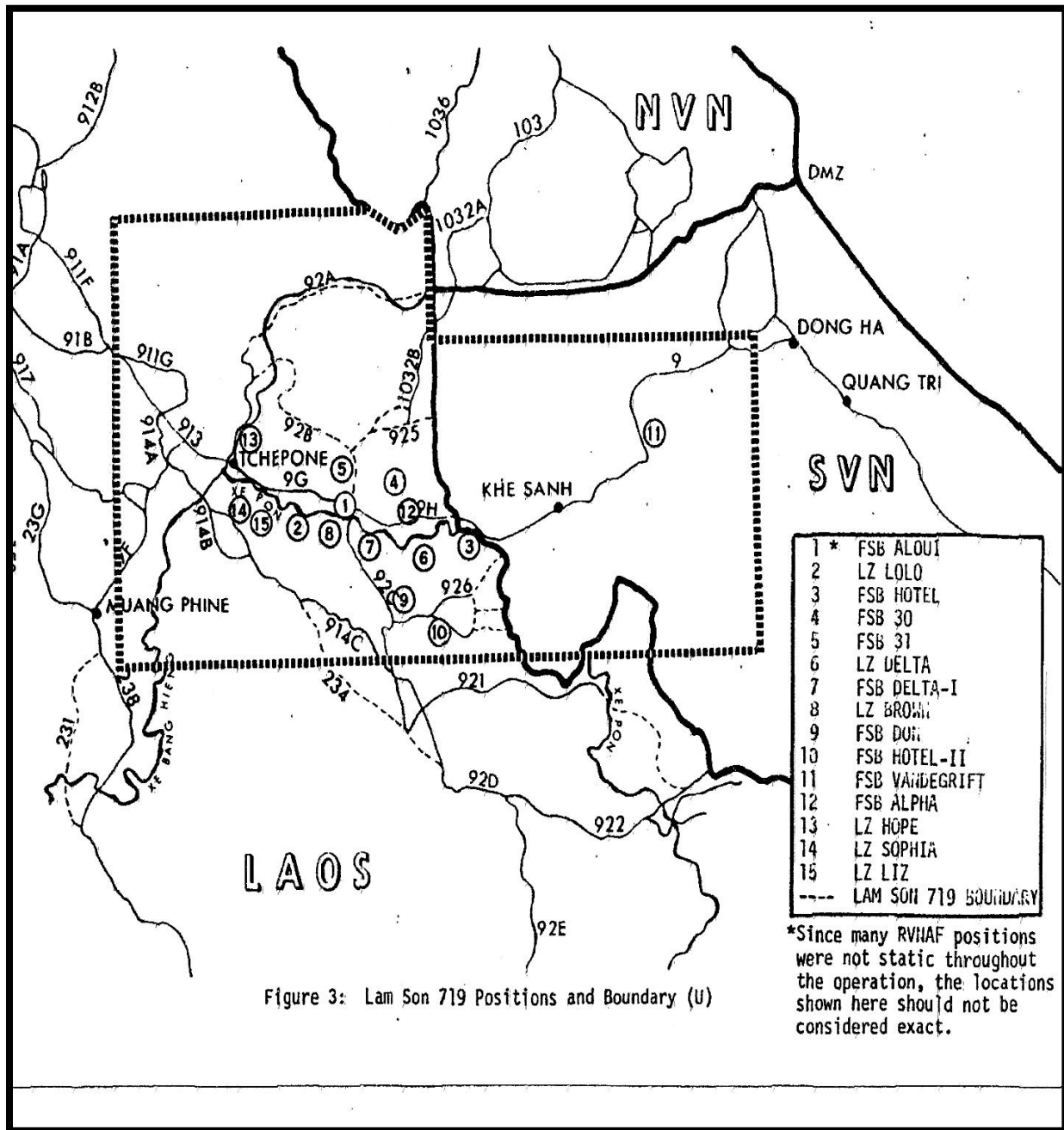
The next day, lead elements moved into largely abandoned Tchepone. Encountering only light resistance, they discovered numerous dead North Vietnamese from past bombing raids, and many caches holding a plethora of tools of war in the area.

With the long-range goal achieved, and the first three phases of the operation partially complete, on 10 March the Hope division began withdrawing to southern FSBs. Thus, began a total withdrawal, considered the most difficult part of any operation. In the process, because of ongoing enemy attacks, movement through Base Area-611 to conduct search and destroy activity was abandoned.

Cognizant an ARVN withdrawal was imminent, the enemy waited patiently. Fire support bases and landing zones were surrounded.

The North Vietnamese counteroffensive commenced on the 14th. Within five days, all ARVN positions were attacked by infantry wielding automatic weapons, mortars, and rockets. Heavy U.S. helicopter losses were incurred. Air supply and evacuation did

²⁸ *CHECO*, Lucius Clay, 159.



Graphic displaying the North Vietnamese Trail infrastructure in the Tchepone area. Numerous helicopter landing zones (LZ) and fire support bases were created throughout the battle zone. Ban Dong, the first objective, is located on Route-9 at number one.

CHECO, Clay, 150.

not proceed well, and by 19 March all friendly units were being attacked. ²⁹

SCRAMBLE FOR THE BORDER

Beset by ambushes, armored troops on Route-9 making their way to the border had it no easier than their airborne counterparts. By 22 March, after conducting innovative maneuvers to avoid enemy choke points, the main task force of a hundred vehicles was stalled at the southern bank of the Xepone (Tchepone) River, about three miles from the border. While preparations were conducted to cross the river, enemy tanks were spotted barreling down the road from the west. These were stopped and many eliminated by fast mover aircraft, ³⁰ allowing the column to continue to march.

At great cost, except for stragglers, ARVN was across the border by 24 March, but at the expense of a fifty percent loss of the original tank force, artillery, and APCs committed to the operation. ³¹

As MACV's General Abrams proclaimed success, ³² with withdrawing ARVN troops running a gauntlet of enemy fire and ambushes, at a very high cost in U.S helicopter assets, Lam Son-719 was generally over by 24 March, marking only forty-five of the ninety days originally estimated for the operation.

Despite the pro and cons, it was generally believed that the Lam Son operation had thwarted a 1971 planned communist offensive in South Vietnam.

²⁹ *CHECO*, Lucius Clay, 161-162.

³⁰ Fast mover: A term for a jet plane as opposed to a reciprocating engine propeller driven aircraft called a slow mover.

³¹ *CHECO*, Lucius Clay, 164, 166, 195.

³² Bernard Nalty, *The War Against Trucks*, 152.

SOVIET-CHINESE BLOC OPINIONS

Despite Souvanna Phouma's tacit agreement to allow the ARVN cross border offensive in Military Region Three, both Chinese and Soviet leaders believed him to be the most desirable prime minister for the country.

"Both countries have made it clear that they still regard Souvanna's presence in [Vientiane] as crucial to maintaining political stability and keeping alive the possibility of a future political settlement under the umbrella of the 1962 Geneva Accords. Their position is a clear sign that while the communists may doubt the efficacy of Souvanna's 'neutrality' in Laos, they are reluctant to see the 1962 agreement, which legitimizes the communist movement in Laos and affords it a position in a coalition government, completely abandoned.

Last fall, the Chinese charge in [Vientiane] provided the first indication of China's position on this subject when he said China wanted to see Laos return to 'strict neutrality,' with the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) participating in the government. He also stated he was doing everything he could to persuade the NLHS to negotiate with the Royal Lao Government. Other Chinese officials in [VTE] have made it known the Peking is backing Souvanna and that China will support Laos' neutrality and all other provisions of the Geneva Accords that concern it. In keeping with this attitude, the Chinese on 8 March officially endorsed for the first time he 'five-point' proposal for a political solution in Laos put forward by the Laotian Patriotic Front on 6 March 1970.

For its part, Moscow has also recently stressed its continuing support for Souvanna Phouma's leadership. During a conversation with a U.S. Embassy official in Moscow on 9 March, the deputy chief of the Foreign Ministry's [SEA] division flatly stated that the Soviets still view Souvanna as prime minister

despite their official position the tripartite coalition government has collapsed. Moscow's expressions of support for Souvanna seem designed in part to prevent possible challenges to him from Laotian rightists. Like the Chinese, Moscow clearly thinks Souvanna's continued presence at the head of the [Royal Lao Government] is far more desirable than the uncertainties that would attend his overthrow by other non-communist elements." ³³

AFTERMATH

With General Abrams' concurrence, intended to insert a positive spin on the questionable results of the operation, on 7 April, President Nixon erroneously announced to the American people that his Vietnamization policy had succeeded. It definitely had not, for the ARVN failed to achieve the major intended goals. Nixon's optimistic statement failed to address a full accounting. Casualties and destruction of assets on both sides during the forty-five-day operation were considered very high. ³⁴

Overall, allied objectives of Lam Son-719 had not been achieved. Interdiction of projected LOCs on the east side of Tchepone succeeded to a certain extent, but not for long. Moreover, the enemy shifted its logistics route west to Route-914, where it could still function to a degree, but was more exposed to air strikes.

³³ CIA Bulletin, Communist China-USSR-Laos, 03/13/71.

³⁴ Author Note: Except for field and air reports that were always subject to gross overestimation, accurate estimates were often difficult to assess. Moreover, there was no interface to compare notes as to losses with an enemy who had never admitted to their military presence in Laos.

The original goal to destroy two base camps had not been fully accomplished, and although disrupted for a time, the Trail system was returned to operation within a week. Base Area-604 was heavily damaged during and after the operation, but Base Area-611 was barely impacted.

The operation revealed gross weaknesses in ARVN and Royal Vietnamese Air Force (RVNAF) military abilities and government leadership. However, some ARVN units did manage to fight with a pronounced degree of proficiency. Others...There were no reserve units committed to reinforce positions, and influence critical battles; communications security was bad; there was no tank-infantry coordination; the South Vietnamese relied excessively on helicopter support, and were completely dependent on U.S. assets. Heavy casualties had been incurred, and timely reinforcement often proved difficult because of the inability to secure Route-9 for safe and unimpeded road traffic. Furthermore, enemy tactics of moving close to fire support bases and landing zones (called hugging), and employing small arms fire, denied airborne medevac, reinforcement, and resupply. ARVN losses in men and equipment were felt for some time. Moreover, there were approximately three more North Vietnamese regiments present in southern Laos than prior to the offensive. ³⁵

Without abundant American air support, the operation never could have commenced. The mixed assets did not escape unscathed. Aside from fixed wing losses from enemy AAA fire, running the gauntlet of enemy fire en route from Khe Sanh and at the landing zones, the helicopter portion of Lam Son received the brunt of damage and destruction, with 674 aircraft hit and 114 lost. In retrospect, leaders realized too late that a high intensity

³⁵ Lowenstein-Moose report for the Subcommittee on U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad (Foreign Relations), 1, 08/03/71.

battlefield was not conducive to helicopter survivability and successful operations. ³⁶

There were many other pros and cons related to Lam Son-719, and the operation was long analyzed and discussed by intelligence types and leaders in military circles. Recommendations and lessons learned were many, but it was very late in the Second Indochina War's timeline, and despite enemy preparation to defend against another incursion, a Lam Son type operation was never repeated. ^{37 38 39}

Whatever the prognostications, the Second Indochina War proceeded toward its inevitable conclusion.

³⁶ Author Note: Although our war had evolved considerably from an early low intensity conflict, and continued heating up in Military Region Two, we pilots or most Customers never would have sanctioned such a convoluted operation. Of course, unlike military operations, we had the option to refuse any mission considered too hazardous.

³⁷ Segment Sources:
 Captain Jim E. Fulbrook, PhD, MSC *Lamson-719: Part 2: The Battle, United States Army Aviation Digest*, June 1986, Volume 31, Number 7. Information used in this Segment is largely paraphrased from Pages 36-39, 41-42.

John Bowman, *Almanac*, 03/04/71.

Colonel Thomas Hanson U.S. Army, Director of the U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, *Military Review*, 02/01/15.

Review of Robert Sander's book (who participated in the operation as a helicopter pilot), *Invasion of Laos, Lam Son 719*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2014.

³⁸ Paraphrased Material from Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 645, 647, 649, 651, 659-660.

³⁹ *CHECO*, Lucius Clay, 187, 190, 191, 193, 195, 214.

If there was any respect and restraint exhibited by the enemy during the prolonged war, normally it was at the royal capital of Luang Prabang, traditional site of the King and his family. ¹ But Luang Prabang also contained the regional Royal Lao Army (RLA) headquarters for Military Region One and a contingent of RLAF T-28s. For these reasons the royal capitol was normally well defended (by Lao standards), but had experienced some light mortar and sapper attacks in the past.

This changed. During February enemy attacks unexpectedly rolled up several government positions northeast of the capital.

With the royal capital threatened, reinforcements were solicited from other regions. Responding to the call and exhibiting a nationalistic flavor, battalions were dispatched from Vientiane and Pakse. Upon arrival, the units moved north toward the King's farm to establish forward defense positions.

"Government irregulars are using the lull [in ground action] to improve their defensive positions northeast of Luang Prabang and have reoccupied ridge positions lost on 9 February. An irregular battalion has been airlifted into position about 25 miles north of Luang Prabang to conduct sweep operations." ²

"...members of the government parachute battalion that had recently reoccupied ridge positions northeast of the royal capital have deserted those positions and moved back to the

¹ During the early days of the confusing and fractious tripartite government, Luang Prabang was also a rest and recreation (R&R) center for Pathet Lao troops, who had separate bars and hangouts in the town.

² CIA Bulletin, Laos, 02/16/71.

outskirts of town. By the evening of 15 February there will be no government units north of the Nam Soung...At nearby Pak Soung [the King's farm]; government artillery will be moved back to a safer site nightly until another security unit can be moved into the area."

Fighting continued for several months. Aided by reinforcements from other military regions the enemy bid to capture Luang Prabang failed. ³

During the increased pressure, there was concern in Washington should Luang Prabang be attacked in force; the status of its less than one hundred American personnel and the King's welfare were also in question. Assurances of evacuation by RONing helicopters and crews were made if the airfield became unusable, landing zones would be built and designated throughout the area, but this would require two weeks. ⁴

Agency daily reports tracked events in the Luang Prabang area during March and April:

"Government troops have abandoned a number of defensive positions in the face of a series of coordinated communist attacks, and at last report fighting was continuing in the mountains just east of the city. [LP's] already threadbare outer defenses are now almost nonexistent. The communists for the first time this dry season placed rocket fire on the [LP] airfield. Although damage to the field and aircraft was light

³ CIA Document, 02/17/71.

⁴ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 293-294.

CHECO, Lucius Clay, 105.

Lofgren, Bill and Sexton, Richard CHECO, HQ PACAF, Directorate of Operations Analysis, *Air War in Northern Laos 1 April-30 November 1971*, 40, 06/22/73. "In March FAR units were shifted from MR-3 to MR-5 to stop the NVA drive on Luang Prabang."

compared with previous years, the new attack underlines the continuing vulnerability of the city.

The U.S. Embassy estimates that a communist attack against [LP] is unlikely, but U.S. dependents have been temporarily evacuated to Vientiane as a precautionary measure. Steps have been taken to send three additional irregular battalions to the area if they are needed. King Savang...will press for additional military measures, including increased U.S. air support.

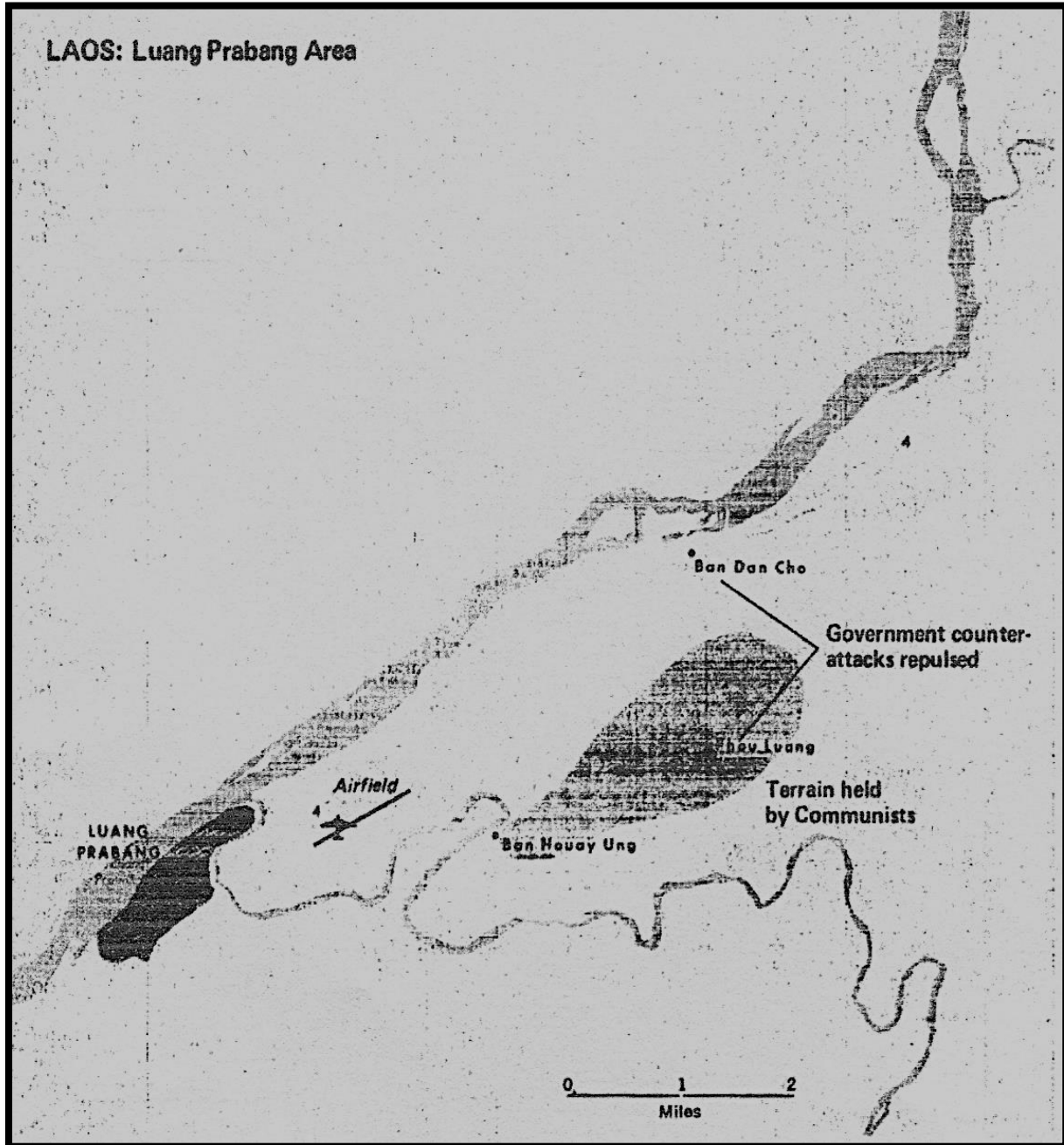
This is not the first time [LP] has been threatened, but the communists are closer to the city and in larger numbers than they have been before. As in the past, the communists could move into the city almost at will, but such a step would mark a major departure in North Vietnamese strategy in Laos. Almost without exception, the communists have refrained from direct attack, harassment, or terrorism against major population centers in the country. It seemed more likely...that the current campaign near [LP] is to further communist objectives in the countryside and to demonstrate once again to the Lao leadership the essential precariousness of their country's situation." ⁵

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and Defense Minister Sisouk visited [LP] on the 22nd.

"Minister Sisouk later said he thinks the situation there has stabilized, but he was dismayed that government units north and northeast of the town had fled in the face of what he believed were only some 300-400 enemy attackers.

Sisouk was clearly displeased with the performance of military leaders in Military Region-1, and he has ordered two generals and several other officers from the general staff to

⁵ FRUS #125, 02/09/71, Minutes of a Meeting of the Washington Special Actions Group.



Enemy positions located close to Luang Prabang and action to the north along the Route-4 Mekong River Road.

CIA Map, 03/27/71.

move to [LP] to assume control of all tactical operations in the region...General Vang Pao, commander of [MR-2], also visited [LP] and subsequently ordered some 400 guerrillas from his region to reinforce the town.

King Savang is taking an active role in planning new government military moves; he has ordered government units to recapture the positions nearest the airfield at once. The King canceled his traditional appearance at Army Day in [VTE] yesterday to remain in [LP]. His continued presence there should have a beneficial effect on the town's citizenry, who believe his presence affords the town itself military immunity. " ⁶

The enemy proceeded to effect gains around Luang Prabang:

"In a series of coordinated attacks beginning at sundown on 25 March, communist units advanced on a two-mile front through the rugged terrain overlooking the [LP] airfield. By the morning of the 26th, the [NVA] had occupied a position [Ban Houay Ung] about one mile east of runway, and three battalions of government troops had withdrawn to the flatlands near the Mekong River. From the ground the communists now hold they are in a position to close the field with periodic mortar and artillery fire.

In Vientiane, [PL] representative Soth Pethrasy told reporters on 26 March that the attacks were intended to enforce the neutrality of the Laotian capital and were a 'warning to the Americans and the Laotian rightists not to use the airfield as a military base.' The government uses [LP] as a base for a small force of T-28 attack aircraft and AC-47 gunships.

⁶ CIA Daily Bulletin, 03/22/71. Laos: The government has suffered some sharp setbacks in the Luang Prabang area. CIA Daily Bulletin, 03/23/71. Laos: The government is taking steps to stabilize the situation around Luang Prabang.

Soth's tough statement is consistent with a new letter from [PL] chief [Prince] Souphanouvong...The communist leader reportedly posed hard line new conditions for the initiation of peace talks, including the cessation of bombing in Xieng Khouang Province and the withdrawal of all Thai troops and American 'advisers,'

The communists had demanded a similar bombing halt last year, but...had called for a stand-down only in the [PDJ] area...King Savang [redacted] believes the communist attacks in the [LP] area are intended as a rejection of Souvanna's proposal." ⁷

Two days later:

"Government forces defending the royal capital made several attempts to contest the communists' control of the high ground four miles east of town. The threat of enemy artillery fire from this hill mass has curtailed the use of [LP] airport, which lies between the high ground and the capital.

After two days of heavy fighting, irregular units regained a former artillery position just south of Ban Dan [from the map Don] ⁸ Cho, a Route-4 ville four miles north of the capital on the afternoon of 28 March. Their advance farther northward along Route-4 was blocked...by sustained enemy mortar fire. A more ambitious effort to retake Phou Luang, a terrain highpoint seized by the communists on 25 March, was broken up by heavy enemy resistance and by misplaced artillery fire that fell among the government troops.

⁷ CIA Daily Bulletin, 03/27/71. Laos: North Vietnamese forces have moved into the high ground immediately east of Luang Prabang.

⁸ Dan vs. Don: Transliteration was often confusing and, a problem when converting an Asian language to English.

Morale among military leaders in [LP] appears to be low. After examining the situation there on 26 March, arm chief of staff General Oman expressed doubt that the government could redress recent communist gains in the capital area-despite growing reinforcements from other military regions. The King apparently believes that the [NVA] intend a siege of [LP] and is concerned about arranging airdrops of food and supplies. He remains determined to stay in capital.

Communist motives in the current fighting around [LP] remain uncertain. Their aim...may be to suppress use of the capital/s airfield as a military base. A siege of the town seems improbable in view of the communists' record of desisting from actions against major population centers. Nevertheless, the isolation of the capital could be readily effected by closing Route-13 to the south and by stopping civil as well as military air traffic." ⁹

The 335 Regiment and the Pathet Lao 409th Battalion had advanced to within three kilometers of Luang Prabang before being halted. By 1 April they had begun to withdraw from the exposed position leaving only a light delaying force a little more than four miles north while the main force withdrew nineteen miles north. Traditionally a sanctuary, the enemy was developing and stocking a series of supply depots in the upper Nam Ou valley.

Further west the Pathet Lao's 408 Battalion had eliminated almost all friendly outposts on the north and west bank of the Mekong between Luang Prabang and Ban Houei Sai. Smaller enemy

⁹ CIA Bulletin, 03/29/71, Laos: Sharp fighting was reported in several sections of the country over the weekend, with the most important action taking place near Luang Prabang.

units were operating in Sayaboury Province, where they were in contact with Thai communist terrorists (called CT).

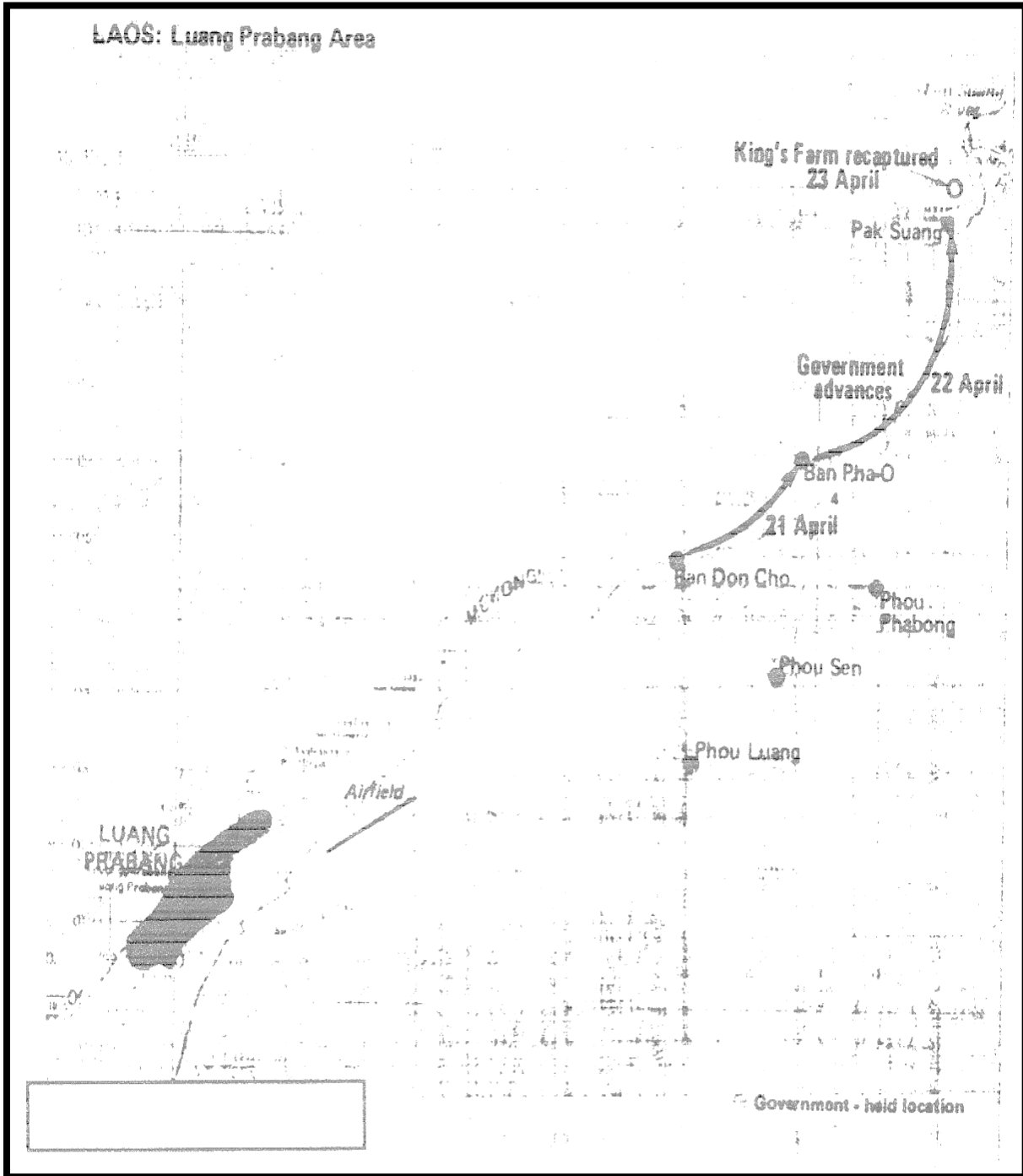
On 2 April a volunteer Thai battalion began an operation in Sayaboury to disrupt communist terrorist (CT) camps and infiltration points in the province. However, a lack of supporting artillery and air hindered the failed operation. At the same time, another operation in Thailand that was fully supported by supporting arms cleared the border. Not meeting much resistance, base camps and LOCs were destroyed.

By 8 April, Lao forces that numbered almost 5,000 men from all MRS, were marshaled and ready to move north in a three-prong operation utilizing armored equipment, gunboats, and helicopters. The original plan had evolved from a two-column offensive into three after the enemy chased government forces out of Ban Don Cho. The reinforced main task force planned to proceed directly up the river road. Implementing other facets of the operation, the previous day H-34 crews lifted two battalions into the hills more than thirteen miles east of LP to work their way back to the river. A third force was lifted to a bend in the Mekong where it turned south toward Luang Prabang. From there the unit would march east toward the Nam Ou. The entire operation was to be supported by RLAF planes.¹⁰

Even though resistance was considered light, the main unit movement was cautious and slow. With artillery eventually staged at Ban Don Cho, government forces proceeded further north retaking the King's farm. *"There they rested and regrouped for about a week"*¹¹

¹⁰ CIA Daily Bulletin, 03/29/71. Laos: Sharp fighting was reported in several section of the country over the weekend, with the most important action taking place near Luang Prabang. Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 294.

¹¹ Lofgren, Bill, *CHECO, Air Operations in Northern Laos*, 57-58. Ken Conboy, 294.



April government gains to the east and north of Luang Prabang.
CIA Map, 04/24/71.

Fighting continued until the fourth week in April.

Government units initiated gains east and north of Luang Prabang:

"Irregular troops appear to have consolidated their hold on three positions on the high ground overlooking the [LP] airfield and have substantially extended their control of Route-4 along the Mekong River. Government battalions seized Ban Pha-0 on 21 April and by the 22nd had reached the junction of the Mekong and Nam Suang [Suong] rivers. Yesterday irregular units crossed from Pak Suang to the northern bank of the Nam Suang [Suong] and reoccupied the King's farm which had been in enemy hands since 21 March. A second government task force was reported to be closing on Pak Suang from the east where irregulars have had considerable success during the past week in encounters with [NVA] troops and have captured weapons abandoned by the enemy.

Substantial numbers of communist troops remain in this area...and it is possible that enemy forces may yet strike hard at the government battalions.

North Vietnamese units are known to have taken significant losses during the past week, particularly in the area southeast of Pak Suang. Their abandonment of weapons is uncharacteristic and suggests that they have been subjected to heavy pressure. It is too early to conclude that the threat to the [LP] area has been dissipated, but for the moment the communists appear to be falling back to safer ground." ¹²

By the 29th the offensive resumed with the 335 Regiment's resistance stiffening.

On 15 May Air America helicopter crews lifted government troops north of the Nam Sounng where, except for skirmishes and

¹² CIA Daily Bulletin, 04/24/71. Laos: Government forces in the Luang Prabang area are making headway in their campaign to clear communist units from the hills east of the capital.

patrolling, further progress ceased north and east to wait for other prongs of the offensive to converge.

Two days of bombardment by the RLAF, and strong probes by ground forces, had failed to dislodge the enemy. USAF F-4 pilots delivered CBU-42, anti-personnel mines, and bombs on enemy supply routes and suspected cave storage facilities. On the 17th, a low overcast prevented air strikes. ¹³ By late May, RLA units were in place.

On 5 June the enemy regiment had few options and chose to attack and preserve rear supply lines. It made some progress, but overwhelming government numbers and supporting arms of Lao T-28s, AC-47s, and a few U.S. F-4 strikes with CBU and anti-personnel mines saved the day. The 335th was recalled to North Vietnam to reorganize, refit and eventually return to Laos. Accompanying them north, remnants of the Pathet Lao 409th Battalion retired to the Nam Bac Valley to lick their wounds.

The immediate threat to LP was considered over. Toward the end of the month, SGU troops returned to their respective regions. ¹⁴

LIFE IN NAM BAC

By late August, reports from Nam Bac began filtering in from villagers that Pathet Lao morale was low because of a lack of foodstuffs, medical supplies, and clothing. Moreover, haughty attitudes and orders from 335th Regimental Vietnamese advisors and their troops added to the unrest.

Because of the possibility of RLG T-28 strikes, Vietnamese and Pathet Lao personnel and many civilians had moved to outlying villages and caves. Under the communist system, locals

¹³ CHECO.

¹⁴ CHECO, Lofgren, Bill.
Ken Conboy, 294.

were not allowed to participate in trade activities or as merchants unless they were official members of the Pathet Lao. Nothing was plentiful in the area. The Pathet Lao established a cooperative store in a cave in order for the locals to purchase dry goods. However, these items were only obtainable if the villagers displayed need and paid using enemy currency.

Farming was the primary means of earning a living, and the soldiers demanded one third of every harvested crop. Villagers were conscripted for labor and paid a meager salary.

A Pathet Lao propaganda team of twelve men and eight women was active in the area. They visited villages one to three times a month when discussion groups and speeches were prevalent. Topics of discussion revolved around communist indoctrination, unity, cooperation with the Pathet Lao, the need to act as informants on government movements to the area, and the necessity of supplying the Pathet Lao with food and labor.

Movements of villagers were not directly controlled by the occupiers, but overseen by village chiefs. In case of short visits, people were supposed to verbally inform the chief regarding their business and obtain permission. Long distance travel required them to obtain permission cards, although the villagers often travelled without such documentation. ¹⁵

JOHN FORD

On Monday, 1 February, I was scheduled to FCF two Bells, 8535F and XWPFH. 35 Fox was in good shape and I released it without much effort; Hotel took considerably longer to test and track.

¹⁵ Message, Laos, August 1971, Low Pathet Lao morale, local economic situation, Pathet Lao propaganda activities...11/07/71.

John Ford had returned from CEO George Doole's indoctrination at the Washington office and was scheduled to transition to the Bell prior to his taking the helm as chief pilot helicopters (CPH). He had undergone Drex Morgan's mandatory, but interesting, ground school and local introduction and proficiency training with Phil Goddard. Now it was time for John, a former H-34 line pilot, to obtain a taste of combat Bell work in the Long Tieng area.

We began work early Tuesday morning. Before leaving for Military Region Two, I conducted a short local proficiency training stint with John and Flight Mechanic Phil Ortillo in 204B 8512F.

Because of enemy presence and John's unfamiliarity with the steadily diminishing forward defense positions, I flew some of the sorties (ten landings). Unable to pick and choose assignments, many were in the form of sling loads obtained from the lower ramp and overseen by Customer Shep Johnson's trained people. This type of rapid and efficient delivery to a pad had proven highly effective during the past few years. John, a quick learner, did well and I accorded him the maximum exposure to Bell operations in the mountains.

SIERRA COMMENCES

That night, as we attempted to obtain a restful night's sleep at The Alternate, the enemy commenced its expected dry season offensive, coded 74B. For openers, Moung Soui was deluged with artillery shells and PT-76 tank fire from the east. With enemy guns outranging the Neutralist battalion's 75mm pack howitzers, just before the half-light of false dawn the battle was over. Leaving their equipment, under the cover of dense fog so common during this part of the year, the FAN battalion

departed north into nearby hills toward the friendly Meo redoubt at Phou Fa (LS-16).

The initial attack on Moung Soui was likely delayed a month by Vang Pao's semi-successful operation to sever Route-7 in the Ban Ban Valley to disrupt supply and destroy stored material. Moung Soui's loss, except for the porous northern Nam Ngum flank of Houei Ki Nin (LS-38), San Luang (LS-41), and Than Heup (LS-238), allowed increased enemy movement toward the Meo heartland.

This year the dry season offensive would lack the punch of the previous year from the long-term destructive effect of numerous B-52 sorties on supply depots along lines of communication (LOC) from North Vietnam. With fewer forward stocks available, troops carried less ammunition, and artillery rounds were closely monitored. However, this in no way curtailed enthusiasm and motivation to achieve a successful offensive.

Despite diminished supplies and a February renewal of B-52 strikes to prevent restocking depots, the enemy switched to "alternate [logistic] routes and storage areas."¹⁶ In a semi-coordinated maneuver, from the caves and foothills of the southern Plain of Jars, North Vietnamese Army regiments began closing on the Meo heartland, with designs on Ban Na, Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72), Sam Tong, and Long Tieng. To effect these goals were experienced combat troops from the 165 Regiment of the 312th Division, the 866 Independent Regiment, and the 316th Division. Special troops in support included 13, 27, and 41st

¹⁶ Victor Anthony and Richard Sexton, *The USAF in Southeast Asia: The War in Northern Laos 1954-1973* (Washington: Center for Air Force History, 1973), 341-342.

Dac Cong Battalions. ¹⁷ ¹⁸ The 312th was charged with reducing and taking down the Ban Na strongpoint. The 316th's overall goal was Long Tieng. Faced with an estimated eight-to-ten thousand Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops in forward positions against Vang Pao's 6,000 defenders, the situation did not bode well for our little guys. ¹⁹

Several of our forward positions toward the edge of the Plain of Jars had been lost. Therefore, with little restraining enemy movement except tactical air, under the cover of adverse weather, within a relatively short time enemy units and coolies began laboriously dragging 12.7mm and 14.5mm AAA guns and ammunition closer to Site-15 to discourage air drops and render our supply runs uncomfortable. Puncher battery counter fire from reinforced sandbagged pits helped somewhat, but never entirely eradicated the danger. With access to road infrastructure, long range 85mm and 122mm siege guns were moved into concealed locations, and positioned on the western Plain of Jars began shelling Puncher. Within a couple of days, mortar and 122mm rocket fire impacted the site. ²⁰

¹⁷ Segment Sources:

Dac Cong: Vietnamese sapper or the U.S. equivalent of Special Forces units.

¹⁸ Ken Conboy, 295.

Blout, Harry and Porter, Melvin, *CHECO, Air Operations in Northern Laos 1 November 1970-1 April 1971*, 05/03/71, 21.
CHECO, 60, 107.

¹⁹ "Our little guys" became an endearing term for the tough Meo fighters; they were becoming smaller in stature, but not in courage. As the older types died, younger children filled the gaps. Some of the youths could barely lift a rifle.

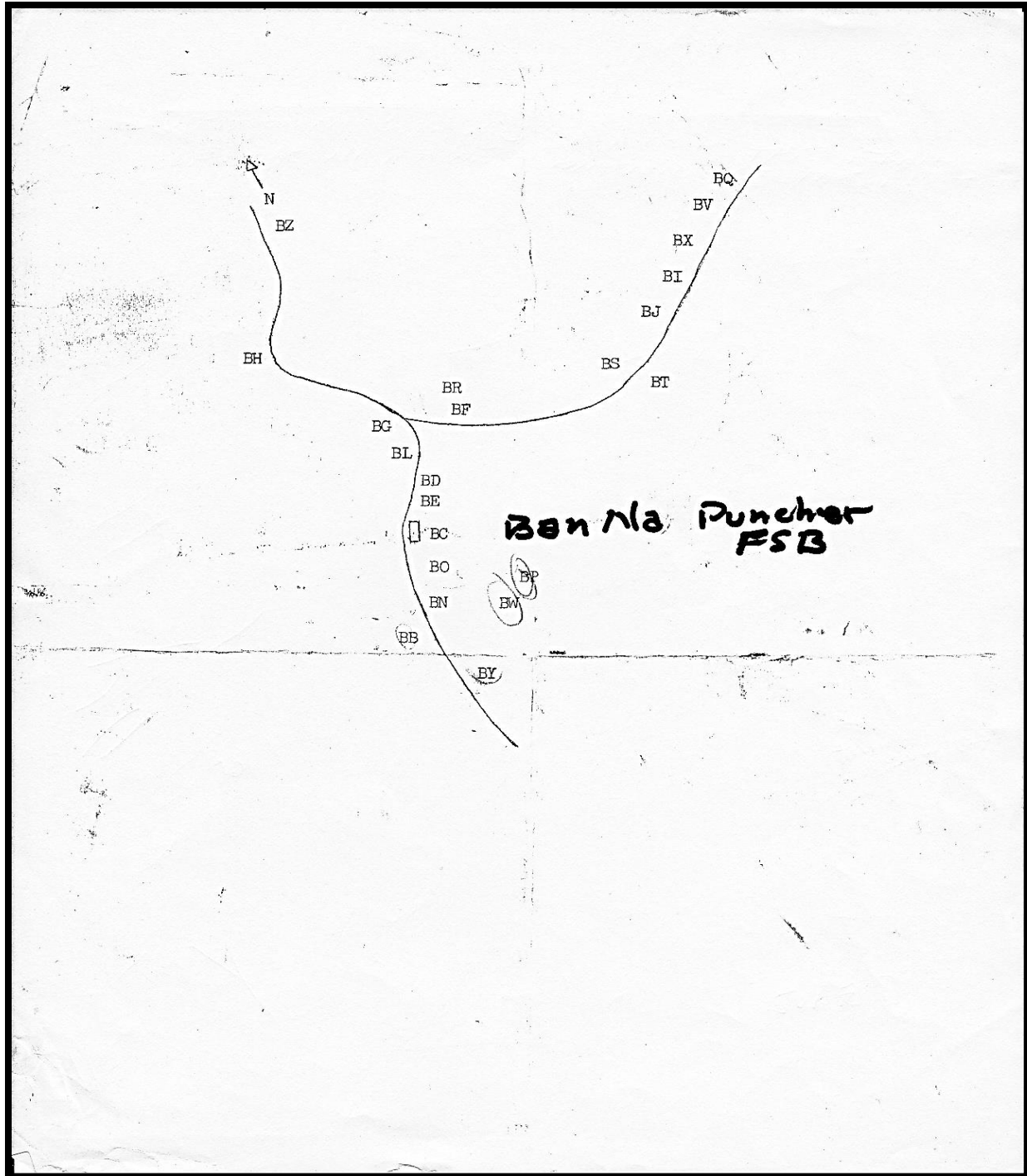
²⁰ Ken Conboy, 295.
Harry Blout, *CHECO*, 21.

Bobby Barrow (10/11/66) replaced Ortillo as my Flight Mechanic. With the weather not cooperating, sharing the workload, John and I only flew six hours. Some of the work entailed supplying the Thai fire base Puncher at Ban Na. We were still able to accomplish this with escort aircraft when it was available, but the noose was tightening on the site.

At times when making low level runs into the site, we had to contend with both incoming and outgoing artillery fire. The outgoing fire could be controlled with a call to the ground FAG who would then hopefully have Puncher's 105mm guns and mortar tubes silenced until we left. ²¹ That helped, but negating any element of surprise, an enemy specialist fluent in the Thai and English languages usually monitored our radios. Moreover, our daily supply runs and evacuations of wounded were predictable, later relegated to the same time twice a day when A-1 cover was available. ²² The number of helipads increased proportionally and assisted our chances of survival. As the situation at Ban Na worsened, to further add to our chances, knowing ahead of time which pad I was going to drop a sling load, I would radio the FAG asking for the drop area. After receiving an answer, I rogered a false landing zone, and faked an approach to that

²¹ FAG: English speaking Forward Air Ground controller tasked to coordinate friendly air strikes and resupply missions. We relied on these men for current information and they rarely ever let us down. Unless killed or wounded, individual FAG controller names remained the same. Some call signs of men working the central Vang Pao defense line were: Jackrabbit, Tiger Mobile Redeye, Yukon, Shamrock, Homerun, and Hotdog.

²² Later, as the situation at Ban Na worsened appreciably, pilot complaints led to established special missions that necessitated scheduling two cockpit pilots and USAF escort cover. Every day like clockwork, the first mission was scheduled close to noon; the second later in the day. If dense smoke or adverse weather was a problem, or the A-1 pilots' arrival from the Nakhon Phanom base was delayed, we had to wait at The Alternate and lost considerable flight time.



Early Puncher support landing zones. As the enemy encroached closer to Site-15, the number of pads to the north diminished and the ones in the immediate area of the firebase more than doubled to allow us options to deliver our loads.

Author Collection.

position before landing at the correct position. Since the previous year, I had been using this process with success throughout the entire Vang Pao Line.

Following another night at The Alternate, I switched aircraft to double crew with Ted Cash in 35F. With heightened demands to prepare for the expected assault on our base, after the fog and low clouds lifted, and as my thirty landings attested, the workload was heavy in and around Long Tieng. We chocked in on the ramp at dark with a little over six hours flight time.

I was off the schedule for the next four days, but STO was not available to crews because of operational requirements. Since we had moved into the Nong Khai house and there was much to be done, my time off was used to good advantage.

THE VANG PAO LINE

"Are we still expecting an attack on Long Tieng?"

Doctor Henry Kissinger. ²³

While I was attending to important domestic items at home, despite a three-aircraft B-52 strike on the west edge of the Plain of Jars on the sixth, ²⁴ enemy shelling continued on Vang Pao's defense positions stretching from Ban Na east toward Phou Long Mat. Under the cover of adverse weather, enemy ground

²³ FRUS #125, Washington 02/06/71. The interrogative was answered in the affirmative of *"...within the next several days. The enemy is carrying out probing and harassing actions."*

²⁴ FRUS #125, 02/06/71. William Sullivan expected an attack within two-three days, some three weeks ahead of the previous year's schedule. Sullivan considered the Long Tieng complex of *"maximum concern."* He wanted to move in the two new Thai battalions, care for the refugees, and obtain a *"free hand in the use of B-52s against areas calibrated by the MSQ radar..."*

forces moved against defensive positions on the eastern portion of Phou Long Mat on the late night-early morning of the 7th. Several outposts were lost, allowing a sizeable Dac Cong unit to bypass Vang Pao's troops and maneuver clandestinely toward Skyline Ridge. ²⁵

When weather permitted, responding to reports of troops-in-contact (TIC) and mortar bombardment from Shamrock's position, on Sunday Raven FACs from Long Tieng directed nine strike missions in support of the diminishing Vang Pao Line. They also worked quick reaction force (QRF) jets flying out of Udorn. Later, Jackrabbit was forced to abandon his outpost. At Ban Na, Homerun reported incoming rocket fire. ²⁶

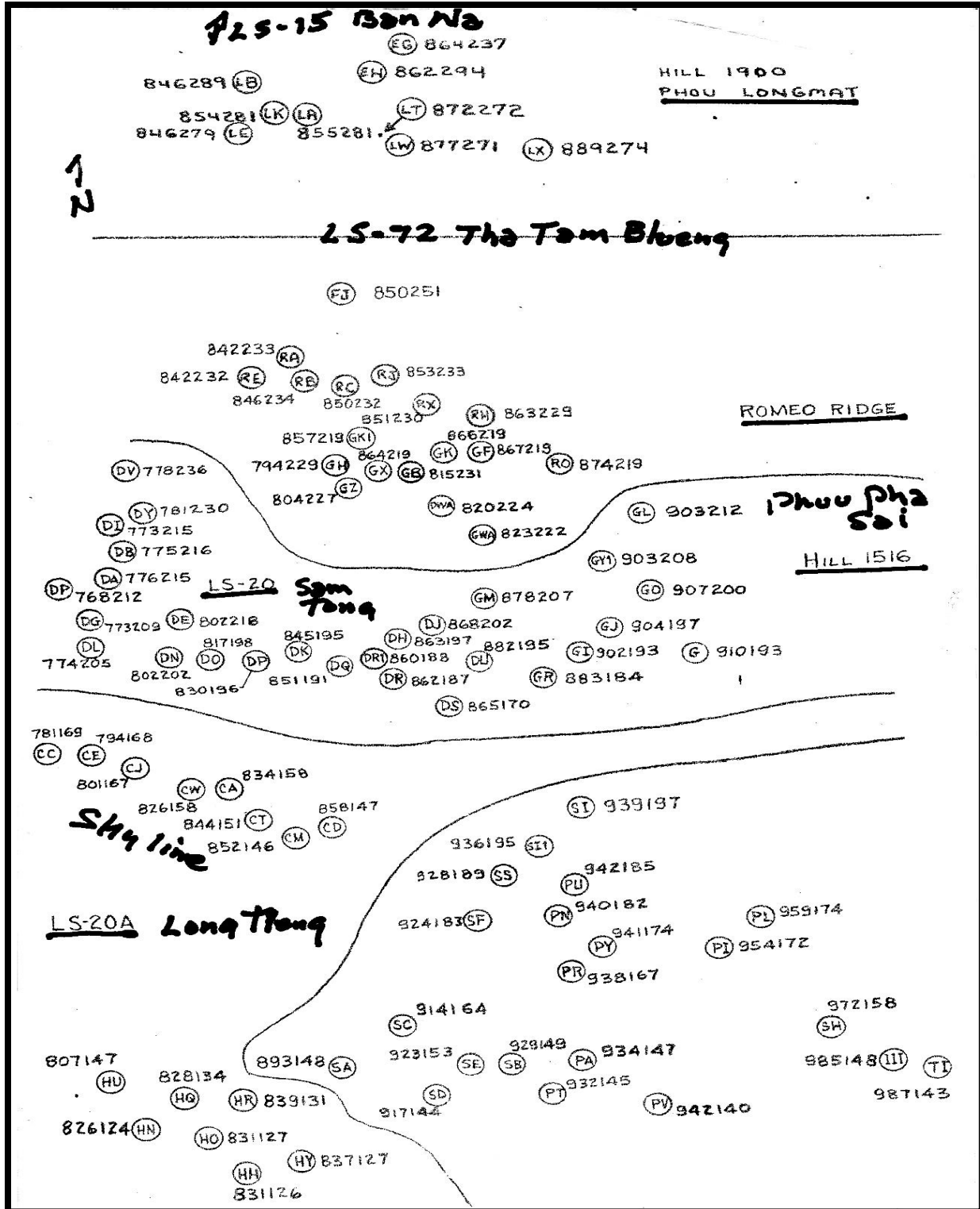
While advancing toward friendly positions, the enemy moved smaller AAA guns toward the Vang Pao Line to discourage resupply planes and helicopters. In attempting to locate and direct strikes to destroy these and large guns, it was inevitable that the Raven pilots would come under fire. With the weather clear enough on eight February to work fighter bombers, Jim Hicks, in the role of Raven-25, was directing air strikes in the vicinity of Puncher fire support base. Naturally, this took him over the edge of the southern Plain of Jars and many hidden enemy positions.

Finally, Hicks' T-28 was hit in a critical section by 12.7mm or 23mm ZPU machine gun fire. ²⁷ A counterpart flying an O-1E Birdog directed him toward a "friendly" area for ejection. He did not make it. He landed safely in enemy territory and sought concealment. With no other workable signaling devices in

²⁵ Harry Blout, *CHECO*, 21.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 295.

²⁶ ABCCC report, 11.

²⁷ Either gun hurled a large round or shell skyward capable of spoiling one's entire day.



The Vang Pao Line in The Alternate area separated and protected by high mountains or ridgelines. Customer generated, the graphic was issued to helicopter pilots for quick reference while assigning and distributing supplies. Pads have UMT map coordinates and signals.

his kit, he set fire to a bush. The field expedient worked, and he was rescued under small arms fire within twenty-four minutes by the crew of Bell helicopter XW-96W. ²⁸

The next day I was back at work, but only to FCF 8513F. Compared to other Bells test fights in the past, it was a relatively short day and I was finished after lunch.

Wednesday morning Ben Densley, Phil Ortillo, and I checked into the Air America facility early for a Long Tieng commute. Adverse weather and the enemy situation initially delayed our 8535F launch. Flying from the left seat, I was still monitoring Ben prior to his release and allowed him to conduct most assignments. Even so, I logged ten landings, some at the besieged Ban Na firebase, where the noose was constantly tightening and becoming more of a crapshoot on every landing.

Logging forty-three minutes night time, we touched down on the Air America parking ramp after dark.

Flying the same machine, Ben, Tod Yourgliche (DOH 01/13/66), and I returned to The Alternate the following morning. Because of the deteriorating military situation, I took part in fifteen additional sorties and logged less instructor time than normal. Moving ever closer, enemy artillery began taking a toll at Puncher positions and our Bell crews were tasked to retrieve many killed (KIA) and wounded (WIA). Aware of our daily time on target (TOT), aided by forward observers, the enemy always stepped up their attacks to greet us. We were escorted by formidable A-1E pilots to help deal with the TIC problem and successful landings necessitated considerable wile on our part to complete a mission. Seconds counted, hence, unless there were

²⁸ Christopher Robbins, *Air America*, 261-262. ABCCC report, 11.

sick, lame, or lazy individuals to be extracted, sling loads were the norm.

While fragged strike sorties and eighteen quick reaction flights (QRF) were employed in the Barrel, Raven FACs were still trying to discover the gun that downed Jim Hicks. Grant Uhls, Raven-22, was trolling an area northeast of Site-15 on the edge of the Plain of Jars when a 12.7mm gun crew opened up on his plane. Climbing higher to avoid the fire, he radioed his position to incoming Ravens and returned to positively identify the gun's location. He was greeted and hit by the more powerful ZPU-23 that projected a shell higher than the 12.7mm. With pilot and aircraft mortally wounded, the ship augured in at (TG9245). The resulting crash and burn required no SAR attempt. ²⁹

Everyone was aware that it was crunch time in Military Region Two, a period that required an all-hands effort above and beyond the call for action. Therefore, toward the end of the day, with so much occurring we flew final critical missions through the twilight period, hot refueled, and after a brief stop at Site-272 to deliver wounded to the hospital, returned to Tango-08 in the dark. ³⁰ Night flight was something normally not sanctioned for single engine helicopter work, but the battlefield situation warranted bending the rules.

Because I blocked in so late and there was not enough time available for the stipulated rest between consecutive duty days, our regulations prevented me from flying the next day.

IZZY FREEDMAN

Midmorning on the 13th, I was assigned to FCF and train Izzy

²⁹ Christopher Robbins, *Air America*, 262-263. ABCCC, 11.

³⁰ Dark in the mountains and flatlands indicated just that-no illumination on the ground.

Freedman (DOH 05/29/68) in 1196W. Izzy was another Bell transfer from Saigon and the clutches of disliked CPH Bob Hitchman. As many of us senior pilots had opted to transfer to the S-58T program, the upcoming empty Bell slots provided those so disposed and well qualified to replace us. Most were former Army pilots who had combat experience in South Vietnam and had flown with Air America.

Taking a break after the test phase of the Bell Bob Davis intercepted me with yet another scheduling requirement for S-58T school that I had to refuse. Bob was visibly not happy, and I later discovered that he wrote and placed a nasty-gram in my private pilot file. A few days later I sent a letter home briefly explaining the circumstances:

"As you probably surmised, I won't be coming home this month. It is all a bit confusing but here is what happened. At first the [plan] was to go to school in February. Then I was shifted to March. Around the 13th I was approached to leave the 15th as someone had canceled and a slot was open. I told them that I was in the middle of moving and could not go. Actually, I was more miffed that they would come around two days before time to go. I think there is a limit to what these people should expect out of us. Well, they are going to conduct ground school here, so I won't be coming home at all-I think!"

The S-58T program is behind schedule as it is and there isn't too much information about it yet."

Letter Home, 02/21/71.

"Yes, we were on tenterhooks awaiting your arrival home. Every time the phone rang I expected to hear your voice saying you were at the airport and looking to be picked up. I also hoped it would not be on one of the nights everything would be coated with ice."

Letter from Home, 02/27/71.

After lunch Flight Mechanic Casio (DOH 01/25/67), Izzy, and I began the training phase. We went through all the standard maneuvers on the infield and around the strip. Then we began the unwritten emergency procedures aloft that Wayne Webb had taught to simulate high and low governor problems. It was a rapid maneuver that required coordination and great attention to detail after splitting the needles and placing the manual fuel switch to manual. ³¹ Minimum loss of altitude was stressed, therefore, marrying the tach needles and returning the power to prior levels was necessary. The maneuver was a teaching tool only, but had served me well when I experienced compressor stalls east of Savannakhet. Still, I did not particularly like the multi-procedure, for too much could go wrong.

After I demonstrated the maneuver, I asked Izzy to try one. As a former Army pilot, I assumed he was already familiar with the sequence. I was wrong. While recovering from the descent, he wrapped the throttle on too fast and over-temped the engine.

Normally an over-temperature occurred so rapidly that one observed the temp needle on the way down past the red limit mark rendering an accurate sighting. At any rate, our training session was finished and the engine required an inspection, if not a change.

Neither of us was happy as we entered the chief pilot's office, where John Ford was transitioning to CPH as Phil Goddard was terminating his Air America employment. As an IP I was responsible for the aircraft and crew. Therefore, I should have monitored the throttle more closely for just such an occurrence.

³¹ Splitting the needles: This entailed retarding the throttle grip to idle and adjusting the collective to maintain the rotor RPM tachometer needle within safe limits.



EMBASSY OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Vientiane, Laos

February 12, 1971

Captain Philip Goddard
Air America
Vientiane

Dear Captain Goddard:

I have been informed that you're about to leave Laos and return to more pacific pursuits. After your many years of outstanding and creditable service in Laos, your rest is more than merited.

Many times you have risked your life to save Laotians and Americans. Your conduct has been an inspiration to the younger and less-experienced pilots and the spirit that you and your associates have always shown is part of the cement that binds the Laotian people to ours. Your conduct always has been to the credit of your country and I am personally extremely grateful for everything you have done toward achieving our national objectives in this country. "Well done" is more than appropriate and I wish to take this occasion to wish you bon voyage.

All the best,

As ever,

G. McMurtrie Godley
Ambassador



A self-explanatory letter and photos of Captains Phil Goddard and John Ford in the CPH office appearing in the *Air America Log*.

It was evident that I was deficient in my duties and I was very embarrassed as I explained what happened to Goddard and Ford. Moreover, I hated to damage a machine I was flying. ³² ³³ A visual inspection of the engine by maintenance technicians revealed no overt damage. ³⁴

LONG TIENG

While only a few civilians still resided in the valley, a couple of Raven FACs, the air operations center (AOC) commanding officer, other support personnel, and a few Customers remained overnight in the SKY compound to advise the troops and direct air strikes.

Heralding what was about to occur, at dawn on 13 February, five 122mm rockets fired from southwest of Sam Tong impacted the Long Tieng Valley. It marked the first time in months that such terror weapons had been used there.

Aware of the rockets' general launch direction, FACs trolled the area, but nothing tangible was observed. In the

³² John Ford was transitioning to the CPH slot as Phil Goddard was preparing to leave for Christ Church, Barbados, on a leave of absence. Probably preordained, Phil never returned to Southeast Asia. Goddard received a rare letter of commendation from Ambassador Godley dated this day. Without going into detail, Phil claimed to me that he had received the Order of the Elephant, Laos' highest award. Phil was a highly political person, and I could never discern that what he said was truth or hyperbole.

³³ EW Knight Email, 06/18/00. Phil never mentioned the Order of the Elephant to Wayne. At the time Wayne visited him in the late summer of 1971 during a school break from San Jose, Phil was managing the flight kitchen and he and Kathleen were setting up housekeeping in a new home being built. In the interim they were billeted as guests at one of the family hotels on the island.

The Goddard family in Barbados was very well connected, but they were not political. Phil was the first Goddard to enter politics and was extremely successful. He became a senator and a member of the government front bench. Phil was Minister for Transport and Communications, but had great influence beyond his two portfolios.

³⁴ Izzy Freedman eventually transitioned to the Bell and became a valued and productive pilot.

afternoon a report from a ground patrol stated that a sizeable enemy unit had been spotted to the west close to the Nam Nung. Craig Duehring, Chad Swedberg, and other Raven pilots directed multiple air strikes of T-28s, F-4s and A-1s on the area, with no observable bomb damage assessment (BDA) except for "smoking holes."

That evening a Thai crew directed 105mm howitzer fire from the vicinity of the King's villa on a hill south of the runway west toward the projected enemy area. Rounds spewed out of the tube every few minutes until the artillery position was silenced.

By midnight, part of the Dac Cong sapper unit that had previously bypassed the forward Vang Pao defense line and had obtained a foothold on the southeastern tip of Skyline Ridge. Members of the team directed DK-82 recoilless rifle fire on The Alternate, while the diversion allowed another team to enter the valley from the south.

Mounting a surprise attack, by 0330 hours the enemy had silenced and disabled the howitzer and set up their own 60mm mortar and additional 8mm DK-82 rifles on the southwest ridge overlooking the valley. Within thirty minutes rocket fire commenced in support of the attackers. With defenders scattered and unable to initiate an offense, enemy gunners began directing rapid and multiple weapons fire at the SKY compound on the western hill. Under the pounding Raven pilots, crew chiefs, and other support people scrambled for a durable bunker that had been hastily constructed from pierced steel planking (PSP) and sand bags that same afternoon.

Probably running low on ammunition and shells for their crew served weapons or conserving already scarce ammunition for a final push on the American compound, enemy firing diminished about 0530 prompting the people on the hill to anticipate a

ground assault on their position. Unaware that Vang Pao was in Udorn, enemy troops moved down into the village and began firing AK-47 and rifle propelled grenades (RPG) rounds into his two-story stone house, causing some damage.

During a lull in action, Customer Dick Mann (Bamboo) and a Meo crew climbed the long rope ladder that hung from the south side of the heavily forested karst, located just to the north of SKY hill to man a .50 caliber machine gun. Once established, the men began directing accurate fire on the southern ridge and the location of the mortar tube.

The attack had been sudden and so far, except for some desultory machine gun fire, there had been little other friendly countermeasures, particularly in the form of air support. Because of the ongoing Lam Son-719 operation in Military Region Three, USAF air sorties had been reduced in the Barrel. Filling in for the lack of U.S. air, a Lao C-47 Spooky gunship, dispatched by Alleycat, had been flying in the area when the battle commenced. The ship never reached Long Tieng, and after expending all ammunition on worthless terrain, the crew retired to Wattay Airport without appreciably affecting the situation.

One T-28 pilot managed to launch, but, beset with darkness and enemy fire, was unable to deliver his ordnance accurately on enemy guns. Winchester, he departed south for Vientiane.

Burr Smith had been in the SKY radio room for some time relaying action reports to Udorn and attempting to raise the orbiting ABCCC ship to obtain help before the situation became entirely untenable. The ABCCC controller eventually responded. Killer-01 and another F-4D pilot from the Eighth Tactical Fighter Wing based at Ubon were diverted from AC-130 gunship duty in the southern Steel Tiger area to Site-20A. The F-4 pilots arrived over the Skyline Drive TACAN station at false dawn and were informed by Cricket to contact Raven Control. At

the time less than favorable weather conditions prevailed in the valley that included fog, haze, and smoke from grass fires.

As professional FACs, the two Raven pilots, along with a radio operator, moved into position to direct airstrikes. Initial attempts to establish contact with Cricket and the F-4s on FM and UHF radio frequencies failed. Finally, attempts to reach the fighters, using a hand-held survival radio, succeeded. *"After approximately 20 minutes radio contact was made on [UHF] frequency 282.8."* Killer leader then informed Raven Control that the flight was carrying CBU-24 and forty-nine anti-personnel cluster bombs.³⁵

While Dick Mann and his gun crew poured .50 caliber tracer rounds into the southern hillside in order to suppress fire and mark the enemy mortar position overlooking the valley, Killer lead delivered mixed CBU bomblets near the target. Although a little off, the strike was credited with thwarting an attack on the SKY compound and discouraging further enemy advance.

The second F-4 pilot's ordnance delivery was deemed a disaster. *"He asked Raven Control if he should drop. The transmission from Raven Control was garbled and Killer answered, 'Understand I am cleared to drop.'*

Raven Control replied, 'Negative.'

Killer responded answered, 'Understand I am cleared to drop.'

Raven control replied, 'Charlie. Charlie.'

At 0610 hours the airborne ordnance was delivered too high and well-off target, with many CBU bomblets scattering and

³⁵ Cluster bomb units-CBU: This ordnance was dispensed from a metal canister that opened at a predetermined altitude. Some bomblets were the size of a baseball, which upon exploding dispensed up to 250 steel ball bearings. It was a particularly nasty anti-personnel weapon in that unexploded or delayed action ordnance could inflict serious injury or death long after reaching the ground.

falling into and north of the SKY compound. Some CBU explosions were instantaneous upon contact, others were time delayed. Beset with surprise and random explosions, personnel on the hill again scrambled for the bunker's safety. Explosions continued for thirty minutes or more.

With their mission largely complete, remaining Dac Cong invaders withdrew and moved toward their secondary goal at Ban Na. Ravens arriving from Vientiane searched the area, but were unable to locate any bad guys.

Even before Killer flight arrived at Long Tieng, General Vang Pao and Jerry Daniels were en route in a Lao O-1 Birdog. After the action simmered down, the pilot landed and the general began the process of rallying his men and reestablishing abandoned defense positions.

When the smoke cleared somewhat, it became obvious to all present that between the efforts of enemy and friendly entities, some Alternate infrastructure had received a grievous, but not mortal wound. The SKY compound lost a few wooden buildings, including the Customer bar. However, trapped in the cage below the bar, Ralph, the beer-guzzling honey bear, and his mate survived the fracas physically unscathed. The Air Operations building was damaged. The main supply warehouse, the diesel fuel depot, the electrical power station, and billeting quarters were destroyed. ³⁶ The Air America hostel became history. "The airstrip, gasoline, and ammunition depots escaped damage." ³⁷ Along with military personnel, a few civilians still in the valley were wounded or killed by either side. The only Customer injured during the fracas was hard-working sling load

³⁶ It is anyone's guess, but most structures and equipment were probably destroyed by the USAF.

³⁷ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 02/16/71.

supervisor, Shep Johnson. Shep had received rocket fragments to a leg during the initial attack. Except for estimates there was no immediate positive number of enemy casualties. ³⁸

Since there were dead and wounded to retrieve in and around Long Tieng, our merry band of warriors was marshaled and summoned in force. I was assigned XW-PFG along with ES "Jim" Spencer (DOH 11/02/66) and a Flight Mechanic. It was the first time I was assigned to fly with Spencer, a tall, dark individual lately transferred from Saigon, who I thought might have more than a drop of American Indian heritage.

We launched for Wattay Airport to await word to proceed to The Alternate, pending an all clear from the Customer. At Long Tieng we proceeded with WIA shuttles to the hospital at Site-272. Over the course of the afternoon, when escort was available we conducted three Special Missions into Ban Na and surrounding defensive positions that had been impacted by enemy attacks. *"North of Long Tieng the irregulars position at Ban Na that includes some key artillery positions is reputed to be under heavy fire and surrounded by well entrenched NVA troops."* ³⁹

In addition to the Puncher support, there was plenty of work. Two Thai infantry battalions (1,400 men) were introduced early from training in south Thailand in order to create new positions and bolster Skyline Ridge defenses. ⁴⁰ (During the day, I conducted fifteen takeoffs and landings; Spencer probably an

³⁸ Segment Sources.

Harry Blout, *CHECO* 26-30, Raven Craig Duerling's account of the attack on Long Tieng.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 295.

Christopher Robbins, *Air America*, 265-272.

ABCCC Extracts, 11-12.

Bill Leary Notes, *Project CHECO*, Short Rounds 07/15/72.

³⁹ CIA Document, 02/16/71. Laos: The communists put heavy pressure on Long Tieng over the weekend, and more attacks may be in prospect.

⁴⁰ Ken Conboy, 295.

equal number.) We landed at Homeplate well after dark necessitating a down day on the 15th.

The next day in Military Region Two ABCCC reported:

"five enemy trucks destroyed and five damaged by U.S. air. Raven FACs directed 30 sorties in support of friendly troops located south and west of the PDJ.

*[Also in the Barrel], on the 21st Raven FACs flew 31 missions in support of ground forces. Enemy activity was at a lower level than it had been during the last several days."*⁴¹

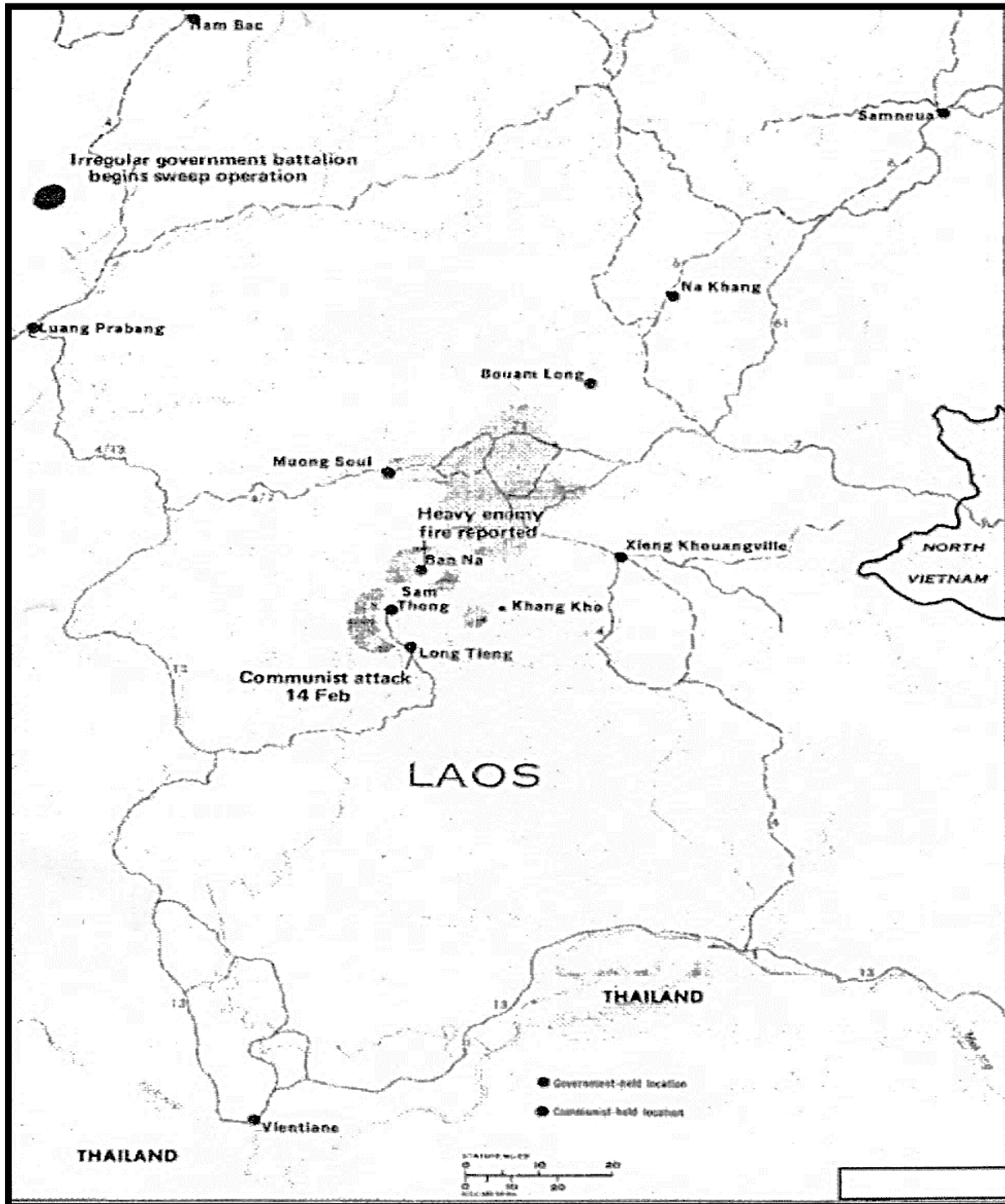
An Agency brief reported on the 17th:

*"Only small unit clashes took place around Long Tieng and Sam Tong, although one patrol twice encountered an enemy unit thought to be part of the communist force that attacked Long Tieng on 14 February. The irregulars killed eight of the enemy bringing the total losses to that unit to an estimated 21. Meanwhile most of the valley's civilian population has been evacuated with villagers moving to smaller villages to the south and west of Long Tieng. There were no signs of panic among civilians. Communist shelling continues at Sam Tong and Ban Na."*⁴²

"As you have been reading things are pretty grim at present. We lost both hostels, but fortunately, none of the pilots were there when the attack happened. We stopped RONing three days previous to the attack. Our flanks have been rolled up and we control an area around the base that is constantly harassed. We come home each night and go up in the A.M. we are commuters in every sense of the word.

⁴¹ ABCCC Extracts, 02/16/71, 02/21/71.

⁴² CIA Document, 02/17/71. Laos: In northern Laos enemy activity has been light and scattered throughout the country.



Enemy activity in the Long Tieng salient of Military Region Two.
CIA Map, 02/16/71.

Other parts of Laos are in bad shape also. It looks like there could be a major attack on LP at any time. [The NVA 335th Independent Regiment began heavy pressure on Luang Prabang.]

According to the paper Pakse is to be threatened.

From a nice little war it has blossomed into a goodie. I notice though that the papers always overplay the issue."

Letter Home 02/21/71

"As you say things are pretty grim over there and even if the News Media overplay the situation, it is one of main topics of conversation and items on the radio and TV. It is also a source of worry to us, as we feel a close relationship to the issue."

Letter from Home, 02/27/71.

On Tuesday the 16th, I was scheduled to FCF XW-PFH after an overnight inspection. Operations intentions were to launch the Bell and crew upcountry after the ship was declared airworthy. Therefore, JJ McCauley and Andy Anderson (DOH 07/19/66) accompanied me during the extended FCF. After several hours work and ten landings that proved unsatisfactory, the machine was towed back to the hangar for some minor tuning. With the upcountry weather largely unworkable, we were released before lunch and told to expect an early launch the following morning.

THE CONTINUING CURSE OF LUANG PRABANG WORK

The area north of Luang Prabang was never a particularly safe place to fly. Over the years several Air America and Continental Air Services International (CASI) crewmembers, along with other American civilians, had been killed or wounded in various incidents. Some were incidental to the job. Others were a direct result of bad luck or a gross lack of common sense. At

any rate, it was incumbent for a pilot to be conservative and use caution during operations there.

The weather was not good when Bob Caron (DOH 02/08/68), Fred Fram (DOH 11/19/69), and Thai Flight Mechanic Veera Champanil (DOH 11/25/64), fondly known as "Champy," ferried Hotel-71 to Luang Prabang on Monday the 15th. After parking and securing the aircraft at the airfield, and while walking toward the Customer shack, Bob and Fred encountered Captain Bill Johnson. Bill had been relieved and was walking toward a C-123 for a ride back to Udorn. Bill warned, *"They're waiting for you inside for a [mission] briefing, but boy you better watch out for this one!"*

Johnson's warning was in reference to the aftermath of a six-man infil that Frank Stergar and another PIC had conducted single pilot six days earlier eighty-four nautical miles north-northeast of Luang Prabang near Route-19 to report on road construction progress. This mission failed to evolve without trouble and soon turned out to be the "Sierra Sandwich" that Bill had predicted.

Air Operations Customer Fred Costs pushed to complete the mission ASAP without benefit of a standard operation procedure (SOP) recon or T-28 escort (virtually worthless because of the language difficulty). When Frank arrived at the projected landing zone area (TJ5827), ⁴³ he discovered no viable place to land. The team leader claimed to be familiar with the area from past missions, so Frank selected a place on a slope formerly used for slash and burn agriculture. He descended cautiously into secondary growth consisting of high grass and stands ten-

⁴³ Located in denied area, the original landing zone was in Meo territory adjacent to Route-19, three miles south of the Nam Ou, and west of the abandoned site of Xieng Than (LS-188), a position we had supported in the past.

foot bamboo. Rolling on high RPM, Frank continued his descent and dropped the team at an approximately five-foot hover. Intelligence gathering teams normally remained in the field a week or so, or until they had sufficient data that could be translated into tangible targeting information. For some time, road watch team missions to the north were fraught with problems and many proved unsuccessful. This one was no exception, for during ensuing days since the insert a problem arose with communications that on some days was established by the indigenous Customer onboard Eldon Walker's Beech Baron, and on others not. Intermittent communications from the team radio operator confirmed that they were on the run from the enemy, and this led to suspicion as to their viability and continued independence.

Over the years, when weather permitted, CASI pilot Walker normally launched at first light to ascertain road watch team disposition and requirements. On the day Caron arrived and entered the air operations building, Walker and Costs were deep in conversation regarding the sighting Eldon had made that morning. During the course of his recons, Walker had encountered four men dressed in army fatigues waving their arms, trying to attract attention. Fred Costs, interested in a helicopter attempt to recover the men, was in a hurry to conduct further investigation and to ascertain the bona fides of the men on the ground, proposed another immediate recon. Since Caron was a senior H-34 pilot, he was tapped to accompany Walker. ⁴⁴

After arriving in the team area radio contact was established with an interpreter. To Caron, the cadence and

⁴⁴ Many pilots accompanying Walker on recons commented that because of his low-level flight and erratic maneuvering profiles, trips with old Eldon were often as exciting as a regular mission. Walker had worked in the Theater for many years, first with Bird and Son and then Continental Air Services International (CASI).

smooth dialogue sounded far too calm for a person supposed to be pursued. Before returning to Luang Prabang, a landing zone was identified and agreed upon for an exfil the following day.

On the morning of the 16th, inclement weather precluded sighting or establishing radio contact with the four men. Therefore, because of this and continuing adverse conditions, the projected exfil was slipped to Wednesday.

Weather appreciably improved by the 17th. Men were again sighted in the target area. However, no signal was displayed or radio contact established as on the 15th. Another trip was conducted in the Baron with an interpreter and a hand-held radio that was dropped to the group. The ensuing conversation was transmitted in the correct language and satisfied the interpreter's questions as to the men's authenticity. Before leaving, Bob noted their location on top of a sizeable horseshoe shaped ridgeline a couple of miles from Site-188. A path traversed the entire ridge and the entire area was considered hostile terrain.

Despite the successful contact, back at the airport base there was skepticism and doubt regarding the situation. Fueling the controversy, the interpreter was convinced that the men were genuine, and offered to accompany the lead helicopter. Finally, Agency Air Operations and team Customer pressure to perform was too great. Against their good judgment, the pilots reluctantly assented to attempt the mission, pending positive indications that they were not entering a trap.

At noon, Costs authorized the mission to proceed. Two Lao T-28 pilots, call sign Mustang Blue, would escort the flight of Hotel-71 consisting of leader Bob Caron, Fred Fram, Champanil, and an interpreter (Amnaj), who was forced on them; primary SAR unit included Frank Stergar, First Officer Tex Richie, and the Flight Mechanic in Hotel-73. Tagging along, First Officer Leon

Lashomb, his PIC, and Flight Mechanic were assigned to deliver personnel to TH2982, three miles west of Nam Bac, ⁴⁵ near LS-137. After completing the drop off, they would rejoin the flight of two to the extraction zone to assume a primary SAR role should a hovering type maneuver prove necessary over the high grass in order to hoist two men each into Caron and Stergar's H-34s.

The flight diverted west of Nam Bac for Lashomb et. al. to discharge their load and then continue to march.

Approaching the position from altitude, Caron observed smoke and established radio contact with the ground. Then he began a tight right descending spiral while looking out his window for trouble. The apprehensive men in the cabin stood near the door with their weapons clutched, looking for any suspicious signs. Fram, who could not observe the ground, cradled his 9mm Israeli Uzi in his arms and prayed. ⁴⁶

At one hundred feet AGL, Caron stopped the descent for a final look at the immediate area. Satisfied, he began a southerly approach along the ridgeline to the landing zone.

The trap all had anticipated came to fruition. Thirty feet above the kunai grass, Caron observed six or so individuals leap up and begin firing their weapons. The small pad was enveloped in smoke from automatic weapons fire. From Stergar's vantage point, he observed the helicopter being "smoked down" from both sides just as the rotor wash was parting the leaves. Because of the obvious ambush and heavy firepower, he considered it

⁴⁵ Nam Bac was located in a strategic and large agriculturally valuable valley well north of Luang Prabang. The area was captured by government forces in 1966 and lost to the Vietnamese in 1968. For further details see Author's 1966 and 1968 books.

⁴⁶ After French Smith was shot down on the western Plain of Jars during early 1970 and was rescued by returning small arms fire, we were authorized to carry Customer-provided Uzi weapons. Introduced late in the conflict, the gesture was generally academic, for many of us already owned weapons of choice.

advisable to hesitate momentarily, assess the situation, and not dart into the zone to become another statistic.

Fram's first indication that all was not well was when a large cloud of gray smoke rose above the engine compartment and a rapid descending left turn commenced on the spot. With all power to the engine lost, the aircraft continued its gravity-induced death spiral. At ninety degrees to the landing zone bullets tore through the cockpit. Chaos prevailed. While shards of splintered glass from the instrument panel splattered everywhere, a projectile or piece of shrapnel damaged Fram's plastic visor and cut his forehead. Bleeding profusely, he was soon blinded by a copious flow into his right eye.

Hotel-71 continued its pirouette, landing softly 180 degrees to the original flight path and about seventy-five feet from the landing zone. Although certainly in shock, the pilots momentarily looked at each other and, realizing they were in "deep kimshi," departed the cockpit in anything but the normal manner. Fram swung his legs out the left window and jumped, painfully contacting the wheel air-oleo strut. Caron had no clear recollection of egress, but ended up on the ground with a throbbing right shoulder. It was 1530 hours.

Standing at the cabin door Amnaj, who was likely an experienced Thai PARU, appeared fine. Although badly wounded, Champ was mobile. At that point, survival was paramount. With bullets whistling over their heads and no sign of their SAR ship, the group moved at "high port" down the eastern slope and charged into tall, dense elephant grass. Encountering a rudimentary trail, they soon separated, with Caron moving into the thicket. Fram, Amnaj, and Champy opted to continue down the trail. In the process, Champ, bleeding from leg and chest wounds stumbled and fell while attempting to plunge through the thick grass. After he regained his footing, Fred lost sight of him. In

the next five minutes, several rifle shots rang out from a point above the men beating through the brush. Because of the location of the reports, Fram believed that Champ had been discovered and dispatched.

Caron continued his difficult and painful progress through the razor-sharp grass until eventually reaching a clearing. It was then that he realized he was alone. He continued toward the curved portion of the "U" in the horseshoe-shaped ridge until reaching a small hill. Without any signaling devices that were in the survival vest still on the floor of the cargo compartment, he took off his blue uniform shirt and tee shirt to use as a recognition device and awaited developments.

To Amnaj's disgust, Fram was also without his survival vest. In the venue of escape and evasion leading to a successful rescue, this meant that the men were on their own with no two-way radio, smoke signaling devices, mirror or compass. ⁴⁷ Amnaj formed a logical plan. Time was important. They would continue down slope another thirty yards, turn south to parallel the ridge, and turn again to climb to the top. From there, they would proceed west before dark. Descending to the valley, they would move north toward the Nam Ou, where the chances of Walker spotting them in the morning was better.

After witnessing the shoot down, Stergar circled, but because of trees and dense foliage, observed no activity. He called the T-28 flight leader, a Lao youngster who had not been paying close attention to the briefing, and who Stergar

⁴⁷ Because of the extreme heat in tropical Laos, some crewmembers chose not to wear the bulky vests, instead storing them beneath the bucket seats in the cargo compartment and relying on the Flight Mechanic to distribute them during a time of need. By doing this they violated a cardinal rule and learned the hard way that if one went down, the only item (s) available for survival would be what one was wearing. I for one never flew in Laos without all my survival items on my person.

considered very flippant. Lead acknowledged that he had the H-34 spotted, so Stergar advised him to strike the ridgeline between the helicopter and village to the south. After acknowledgement, he lost sight of the flight. Richie saw them to the left side at about 5,000 feet, but failed to observe where they were delivering their ordnance. Soon afterward, lead announced, "*I bingo now.*" (Fred Costs later said he would dock them mission pay.)

From the weeds, both Fram and Amnaj were heartened by the exploding bombs and machinegun fire delivered at the enemy. Each T-28 pass was greeted by long, intense automatic rifle fire from the ridge to the south. Before the Tangos departed, this rifle fire sounded more distant.

Ever since Hotel-71 was forced down, Stergar had been anxiously anticipating voice radio, a mirror flash, or smoke from someone in the crew. Nothing... He dropped down to 1,500 feet to continue a lower recon, but this was equally unrewarding. Without any signal or sign of the crew, he logically believed that they must have been killed or captured. While Stergar was dealing with the T-28 pilots, Leon was relaying the predicament to Vientiane and then to Udorn. In his excitement, he passed the wrong set of coordinates, ones where he had originally dropped his passengers. Because of the heavy load, he had taken on less fuel and was forced to return to Luang Prabang (RTB) shortly after the incident.

Stergar was now alone, deep in bad guy territory. Seeking help in the form of air resources, he soon raised Raven Frank Burke on Guard frequency and requested his immediate presence. However, Burke would be delayed as he was in the process of landing at Luang Prabang to refuel his Birddog. With sufficient fuel onboard he launched and approached the area within thirty minutes. Using the en route time to good advantage, he had

radioed the ABCCC control ship for available assets. F-4 and A1-E pilots were supposedly on the way, and were projected to arrive about 1615. Before the fighter-bombers arrived, Stergar directed Burke to conduct low passes over the downed helicopter and immediate area. In the process, Burke incurred battle damage. Since the enemy was still present, Stergar opted to remain at altitude awaiting additional cover aircraft and the revelation of survivors. ⁴⁸

THE CALVARY

With Papa Foxtrot Gulf on the ramp and ready for upcountry work, we were picked up early on the 17th, arriving at the Air America facility before five o'clock.

After gathering our weapons and other gear, checking out survival vests, conducting a preflight, and attending to other minor items, JJ, Andy, and I launched for Wattay Airport to obtain the latest intelligence regarding the situation at The Alternate.

Because of enemy pressure at Bouam Long, Air Operations directed us to work at Site-32. JJ was still transitioning to first pilot in the Bell, so I let him conduct most of the local assignments until 1530 hours. At that time a radio relay arrived from one of the Oscar Mikes ⁴⁹ that a H-34 had recently gone down

⁴⁸ Frank Stergar Email, 11/28/97. Years later Frank Burke, a graduate of the Air Force Academy, sought Stergar asking him to produce information regarding the mission. Frank wrote up a glowing citation.

According to former Raven Fred Platt, Burke was granted an award for obtaining support and single handily extricating some Air America aircrews while they had to run for their lives. Burke became the USAF B-1 project officer and went to work for NA Rockwell. He was killed in Germany while demonstrating the JPAT trainer. He is buried at the USAF Academy.

⁴⁹ Oscar Mike: The title used by crewmembers for Operation Managers at Vientiane or Udorn.

near UMT coordinates TJ5827 north of Luang Prabang. While we were being topped off, I studied the map and took a wild-ass guess for a heading and distance of 330 degrees and seventy-four nautical miles from our position. Depending on wind direction and velocity, a direct flight would generally require fifty minutes to arrive in the area. Such a remote SAR was not a good development so late in the day, for the area we would have to fly over was all denied territory and it would be ill advised to have an in-flight emergency while proceeding to the area. JJ and I switched seats,⁵⁰ while Andy, looking much like a warrior of old, donned his ridiculous looking "chicken plate" chest protector brought from South Vietnam, and we launched. I had not done anything like this since I retrieved Dick Crafts in May 1965, when he crashed a Helio Courier late in the day at a Meo site in Phong Saly Province.⁵¹

En route, I received limited information that there were H-34 crews already on the scene and more helicopters were supposedly on the way. Nothing else--no estimated time of arrival (ETA)--no side numbers.

About halfway to the area, Frank Stergar established contact with me. He provided a UHF direction finding (DF) steer, and briefed me on the latest situation. Over the course of several minutes, he revealed that Bob Caron's helicopter had been shot down during an exfil. Hotel-71 was sitting upright on a trail on top of a narrow ridgeline adjacent to Route-19. None of the crew of three (nothing was said about a passenger) was observed departing the helicopter or since. Therefore, after several reconns by himself and the Raven FAC, both were very

⁵⁰ A very pleasant individual, JJ McCauley was a comfortable person to associate and fly with. The previous year, he and I had participated in an extraction during the Vang Pao ring episode.

⁵¹ For an account of this incident refer to the Author's Book six.

pessimistic, speculating that the crew was still in the helicopter, injured or dead.

While I was still en route, the Air Force jets arrived at the stipulated time. The F-4s began striking the road to the north and east. Then the Skyraider pilots began working the area over with ordnance, which at times seemed dangerously close to Fram and Amnaj.

Before I neared the target the support aircraft, who were diverts from another mission, called Winchester and bingoed.⁵² Stergar was anxious to leave because of a low fuel state; however, relying on direction finding (DF) steers he provided, and not wanting to miss the spot, I urged him to remain in the area until I was almost there.⁵³ He agreed, but was gone by the time Hotel-71, squatting upright on top of the ridge and pointed north, came into sight. I was alone with the Birddog pilot who complained that he had recently taken a hit. Still, he agreed to remain and help with the SAR. Before descending to within potential small arms range, because high grass and bushes obscured both sides of the ridge and presented an excellent ambush spot, I asked the Raven to drag the helicopter to confirm the absence or presence of bodies in and around the ship.⁵⁴ The FAC complied, conducted two high speed passes and reported negative sightings, signals, or the presence of small arms fire. This had encouraging implications that indicated the crew might

⁵² Winchester: Out of ordinance; Bingo: Low fuel state and return to base.

⁵³ Because we were in separate helicopter programs I had not flown with Frank Stergar since June 1965, when we were sorely challenged to retrieve an F-4C pilot in the Na Son/Son La valley of North Vietnam. At that time Frank showed a great deal of resolve and courage during a very trying and dangerous period.

⁵⁴ Concurrent with SAR work it was standard procedure to employ the fastest aircraft to positively identify a person or persons on the ground before committing a helicopter to low level rescue efforts.

have escaped, but where? It was a large, heavily forested area of ridges and hills that sloped down into darkened ravines.

After alerting the Raven to monitor my progress, I briefed my crew of my intentions to descend to just above ground level and check the cockpit and cabin door of Hotel-71. This would be JJ's main task, as he would be closest to the H-34's right fuselage.

A slow hovering pass confirmed neither the presence of the quick nor the dead. The cockpit was empty, as was what could be seen in the cargo compartment. Perhaps the men were evading. Foliage on both sides of the ridge was heavy. The slopes were lengthy, falling off into a ravine or river valley, but were less pronounced on the east side. Presented with the same situation, I would have selected the east rather than the steeper west side for a maneuver and escape conduit. Moreover, with the difficulty of movement involved through tangled undergrowth any surviving crew could not be far away.

I returned to a comfortable altitude and requested the FAC to continue searching the eastern and western sides of the ravine for signs of life, while we waited impatiently for additional helicopter support. I stressed trolling the eastern portion of the inner horseshoe. After several low-level, high-speed passes with negative sightings, reaching a low fuel state, the Raven indicated he had to RTB. In my mind, he had done a splendid job, perhaps above and beyond the call in helping us search for our people.

Fram:

"About a half hour later we were aware that the FAC was circling lower than the rest...I used my Buck knife to cut off my T-shirt in case we needed something to attract his attention. A short while later the FAC descended to an even lower altitude

and we debated the advisability of revealing our position before knowing whether or not it was safe to do so. We decided to stay hidden until we were more certain of the situation.

After making three or four orbits the FAC made a dive in our direction. I stood up and cautiously waved my white flag as he passed only a few hundred feet in front of us. For a moment we were practically eyeball-to-eyeball and I thought, 'If he'd been looking out his left side he may have seen us.' He came around again, and since no one shot at him the first time, I waved my flag a bit more enthusiastically. He came around a third time, and although he wasn't headed directly toward us I was certain we'd been spotted."

The Raven's departure left us alone over enemy territory with no help should we encounter a problem. Therefore, I elected to remain at a safe altitude and continue an expanded search, scanning terrain for a signal-any signal. Since all crewmembers were issued survival vests containing radios and pyro technique devices, I considered it strange that there had been no physical sighting or radio contact. Perhaps Stergar had been right: it was an exercise in futility and there were no survivors to rescue. Still, I was not leaving the area until relieved or forced to do so by a low fuel state or darkness.

Even after climbing higher, my radio calls in the blind went unanswered, and there was no response from any projected inbound aircraft. If additional ships did not appear soon further SAR participation would prove academic, for gathering shadows in the ravine prevented observation, the lateness of the day portended darkness, and, depending on the prevailing winds, we were almost an hour from Luang Prabang.

Then, without warning, Hal Miller and Flight Mechanic Bill Long arrived at low level in Hotel-63 from Site-272. About the same time, Ted Cash, Ivar Gram, and Dave Crowell (DOH 08/30/66)

appeared in 96W from The Alternate. Both PICs were flying lower than me. Without any acknowledgement of our presence or request for a briefing, they began to search.

Recognizing that the time frame in the area before dark was very narrow, I was still a little miffed, for normally the on-scene senior man was in command of an SAR and would form decisions as to how it was conducted. Because of my low fuel state, assuming all the crew was clustered together, I had planned to descend and conduct a more thorough search with the other ships covering me. Not so in this case. The urgency of the situation and lack of discipline dictated that each crew was on his own. It was obvious that there would be no coordination or control, and an abundance of apprehension flooded my thoughts should one of us be shot down at this late juncture.

While Ted Cash and I began descending orbits along the eastern slope, Hal Miller went north toward the bend in the horseshoe-shaped ravine at low altitude.

Fram:

"The helicopters began descending to a lower altitude and I could hear an H-34 continuing its descent nearby, It was in a right descending turn and when it looked as though it was in position to make an approach to our location I was surprised to see it continue around and descend out of sight to a level on the slope below us."

Amazingly, people were spotted about the same time. Excitement mounted. Miller shouted that someone was waving a white T-shirt at him and went about the business of retrieving Caron.

Fram:

"I heard the increasing roar of the H-34's engine as it climbed away from its pickup and thought, 'We're next.' But it turned away and made another descent even further down the slope. (Miller had spotted smoke from a small fire that Champanil had managed to light) Amnaj kept asking whether or not I thought we'd been seen, and I repeatedly assured him of my conviction that we had.

All the while the H-34 [pilot] was making the pickups the Bells were flying directly overhead, not more than 100 feet above us. I could see the flight mechanics leaning out their cabin doors and couldn't figure out why they didn't acknowledge my signal. They were flying east to west toward the top of the ridge and I deduced they wanted us to move up the slope because the few small trees that surrounded us could complicate a hoist pick-up. We then began a frustrating climb that almost put us in a panic.

...Now with the possibility of rescue so near, and the sudden realization that we hadn't been seen at all, our progress up the hill seemed agonizingly slow...

We couldn't have moved more than twenty feet up the slope before Amnaj found a near level spot and started beating down the grass to completely reveal our position. We were spreading our arms and falling forward, taking down as much of it as we could with each effort. And when the first Bell made a pass overhead I waved my T-shirt...The helicopter [pilot] made a right circling and a moment later was in a hover directly above us with the jungle penetrator on the way down."

Ted observed individuals in the weeds. I was shocked. JJ, Andy, and I had been searching the area for some time, apparently without anyone revealing themselves.

I started down and said, "Let's go get them."

While Miller headed south with Caron and Champanil, Cash extracted Fram and Amnaj. With these men safely onboard, we all proceeded south toward Luang Prabang. It was 1730, two hours after the shoot down. After grinding around in those unfriendly skies, it seemed like an eternity to me. Moreover, we were still not on the same page of music.

In a semi-agitated state, I had a lot of time to think during the long trip south. I was very happy that the crew was rescued, particularly when others had abandoned hope, but I was still angry over the breakdown in the chain of command and lack of regard for safety--during the excitement of the rescue, we had come perilously close to a mid-air with Cash. JJ had never experienced anything like it either. With last light fading fast, some of these depressing thoughts passed as flying over dark, hostile terrain in the dark and a very low fuel became a stark reality.

Flying at high altitude to conserve fuel, at long last the distant dim lights of the capitol came into view. Since enemy action around the King's farm north of Luang Prabang continued, it was incumbent on me to maintain altitude until close to the airfield perimeter. Our arrival was none too soon, for the low-level fuel warning light had illuminated, flooding the cockpit with the unwelcome announcement that we better get our fannies on the deck ASAP. Not normal operating procedure, or even close to a smidgen of common sense, the emergency situation had called for extraordinary measures. I only hoped that our efforts were appreciated.

Ted Cash was in the process of hot refueling from the commercial fuel truck when I landed on the tarmac behind his flashing tail light. Because Luang Prabang was considered only marginally more secure than Long Tieng, operations ordered us home, otherwise I would have RON there.

Directly after Cash touched down near the Customer's shack, Fram and Amnaj separated. Fram never saw the PARU again. While chugging three shots of the Customer's whiskey Fram washed dried blood from his face and arms incurred from numerous saw grass cuts and the bullet damage to his forehead. Then he changed to clean clothes and boarded the Beech Baron for Udorn.

Fram:

"Bob was still in the Chief Pilot's office when I arrived. When I entered, we just looked at each other in shocked amazement. He said, 'Where the hell have you been? You look like you just stepped out of the shower!'...I had cleaned up pretty well. Bob, on the other hand looked like he's just had a scrap with a tiger. His face and arms were all scratched up and his shirt and trousers were torn and dirty. 'What the hell happened to you, I countered, and he told me how, as he pushed his way blindly through the elephant grass, he suddenly found himself descending through space. He'd unwittingly launched himself over the edge of a precipice and landed in a heap at the bottom."

When we were topped off, I launched toward the mountains and assumed a 170-degree heading for the 156 nautical mile flight to Tango-08. I was quite tired, and fought a tendency to drift ten degrees off course to the right. Not sure if the instrument was calibrated properly, the wandering tendency was probably me. I joked with JJ a little about this, but without much of a horizon, realized that my instrument and night flying proficiency was lacking.

We arrived in the chocks about 2030 hours with two plus seventeen night and five minutes short of eleven and a half hours flight time. The upside to the long day was the anticipated day off the schedule.

Later in the operations building, I did not participate in the fanfare. I was still angry, and as my face was always an open book and easy to read, I was sure that this was apparent. Moreover, I really had not done anything to merit kudos, and recalling my faux pas with Frenchy after he was rescued, was concerned that I might say something bitter or sarcastic to Caron and Fram.

AFTERMATH

Because of serious wounds to Champ's upper left chest and a nasty lacerated wound above his left knee, right after Miller landed, he and Caron were ushered onto a C-123 bound for Udorn and medical attention. The Air America doctor determined that Caron's injuries consisted of minor scrapes to his nose and body bruises incurred from the leap from the cockpit. After examination Bob was released. Except for bruises and dings to his forehead, Fram was advised to return for X Rays the following morning and released. ⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Air America XOXO 02/17/71, 2225 hours. Goddard was still chief pilot and signed the XOXO. Champ's flight crewing career was over. He convalesced in a Bangkok hospital for some time. Fram saw him a year later when he was working at the National Museum in Bangkok. He had incurred nerve damage from the wound that rendered his left arm withered and his hand useless.

Frank Stergar Letter, 04/16/97. V Champanil was one of Stergar's favorite Flight Mechanics. Champ taught Frank how to buy and enjoy all the dozens of available fruits in Laos and Thailand. He considered Champ technically marginal, but an excellent source of intelligence.

While RON in Vientiane, Chuck Frady noted that Champ's post flights were nil, as he rushed to meet his girlfriends. Once, on preflight, Frady pulled himself up grasping an H-34 transmission brace, which subsequently dislodged in his hands. Frady was furious and Champ was nearly fired.

Champ was involved in other life challenging incidents. He was blown out of a helicopter at Nam Yu when an overheated lead-acid battery exploded.

Champ passed away in August 2008.

Fram and Caron staged a party for Cash, Miller and their crews at the Charoen Hotel. Our crew was not invited. This did not matter to me, but I did not like the bad-mouthing I heard second or third hand about the helicopter pilot who was flying at 10,000 feet. I was completely satisfied that I had performed my job properly for the situation. Whoever said this was not aware of Stergar, the Birddog pilot, and our efforts to search and attempt to discover the downed crew. Later, when I heard that none of the crew had their survival vest on that day, especially working in that area on a hazardous mission, I was disgusted over their inexplicable stupidity, and wanted nothing to do with them again. I must have voiced my disapproval to others, for a year or so later, while eating dinner with several peers at the Pakse hostel, Caron approached me saying he had heard that I was unhappy with him over the SAR operation. This was true, but so much time had elapsed since the incident, and as I had many other more important issues to ponder, I did not divulge my true feelings. By then I could only feel sympathy for the crew and believed it was only good luck that they were rescued that day and none of us had been shot down. The scenario could have ended a lot differently.

For various reasons, there was bad blood between Caron and Stergar that continued for years after we left the Lao Theater and until Frank died. Confrontations had been prevalent even before the incident. When Stergar returned to Air America, he learned that Caron played tennis, so he invited him to the Thai tennis club across the street from town park. Being obnoxious, Caron embarrassed Frank so much in front of the sensitive Thai business man, Charoen Kunakorn, that he told Caron never to go there again, and he did not have much to do with him afterward. In addition, the two men shared a locker at the handball area, so Stergar removed Caron's gear and threw it on the ground.

Other pilots, besides Stergar, considered Caron "something of an oddball." One First Officer wrote a report and submitted it to the chief pilot for his failure to wear a seatbelt or shoulder harness.

The anecdotes were endless. Caron's wife and Marius Burke's wife were friends. They were at the Caron home anticipating supper and Caron's arrival from an upcountry RON. Seeing the couple, he said to Marius, *"What the hell are you doing here?"* The Burkes immediately left.

Hate and vindictiveness ran irreconcilably deep for years and Caron never forgave Stergar for failing in his SAR responsibilities to retrieve him when he was waving his white T-shirt in the high undergrowth. The animosity finally ended with Stergar's death.

With time and introspection, Fred Fram realistically concluded:

"...As I saw it, we had failed in our responsibility to Frank by not having the basic means (radio, map, and compass) to assist him (or anyone else) in safely effecting our own rescue. I never discussed this issue with Bob, in fact we really never really had a post-mortem on the episode in which we could have hashed it out. Each of us had a chat with the chief pilot, wrote his report, made his recommendations, and that seemed to be the end of it. ⁵⁶ The only thing that I saw come out of the incident was a redesign of the survival vest, which everyone then wore...

But as far as Frank's performance is concerned, I don't really know what he was thinking, nor was I in a position to observe what he was doing, and I have never passed judgment on

⁵⁶ A first in many aspects and not reflecting on the organization's finest qualities, perhaps there was urgency by management to push the unsavory detritus under the rug and quietly assign the episode to the dustbin of history.

his actions. Because of our inability to communicate with him he could have not known that we had all split up like a covey of quail, nor because of the tall grass surrounding us do I think he could have seen which direction we'd headed when we fled from the helicopter. What he could clearly see was that there were bad guys in the area, and that they were well armed and dangerous, and that the rest of the situation was simply uncertain. Had I been in his position without any data upon which to base a rational decision, I don't think I'd have simply flown to the rescue in what would have been nothing more than a display of blind, and misplaced courage that could have resulted in another crew on the ground. No, I think the four of us failed ourselves in that respect, and I have to take personal responsibility for the part I played in it-nor can I shift the blame for the position I found myself in at the time..." ⁵⁷

UDORN

Tuie had begun moving to her aunt's house on the Nong Khai Highway while I was still upcountry. We employed my time off to complete transferring and arranging our household items in the

⁵⁷ Segment Sources:

Professor William Leary 02/15-17/71 Notes Including Interviews from Bob Caron, Frank Stergar, and Harry R. Casterlin.
 Frank Stergar's Emails 11/28/97, 12/26/97.
 Letter to Author from William Leary, 05/19/92
 Fred Fram's comprehensive seven-page recapitulation of the exfil mission, shoot down, time in the weeds, and eventual rescue. Posted to the Author by Frank Stergar, 07/24/92.
 Fred Fram 08/01/92 mea culpa Letter to Bill Leary with pertinent notes from Frank Stergar Tape, The Bob Caron Incident.
 Frank Stergar Email, 03/24/99.
 Letter to Author from William Leary, 05/19/92.
 Judy Porter Emails, 09/09/09, 09/12/08 (2).
 Two Air America XOXOs for 02/17/71. Goddard signed both. Like many initial accounts, under duress the coordinates for the shoot down were incorrect. The rescue time was also erroneous.

new house. After the move I discovered a few items missing.⁵⁸

"We are moved into the new house but not everything is fixed or straightened out.

Inside painting was complete, but workers were still varnishing the wood floors when I came home. The floors were beautiful, so shiny that you could see your face in them. We have spent quite a lot of money on improvements and things that we need. The yard was extended and a fence built by the jack-of-all-trades Vietnamese handyman living in the Nisagonrungsee compound. The ground was covered with grass sods and the fence painted. There were lots of trees and bushes here, so some of these were removed and/or new ones purchased and planted. Tuie bought a cute topiary tree in the form of an elephant. She is making a small garden at present...

⁹⁷ In 1970 after our maid and her cousin were incarcerated in the Udorn jail for pilfering items from our house our former houseboy, Pic, who used to take care of Ricky, came back to work for a time. At an age when male hormones are raging and teenage boys are wild, he later disappeared. Then he reappeared while we were moving and I thought he was going return to work for us. After moving and taking inventory, I discovered my M-2 carbine rifle and a hand grenade missing. Ricky, who was home with a bellyache at the time, confirmed that Pic was in our bedroom and took the gun. Pic disappeared again. Without hard evidence, and with forbidden weapons involved, I was unable to pursue the issue. Khun Yai intervened and during late February a box appeared on the front porch containing my carbine and a note of apology for stealing the gun. It was not written by him, but by his brother.

Then on the 28th, Tuie discovered her expensive Omega watch missing. We liked Pic and I really did not want to place another youngster in jail. Totally exasperated, Tuie issued a contract to find the boy and we expected results. As USAA had previously forwarded 300 dollars to cover the last home invasion, I was too embarrassed to submit another claim. We never saw Pic or the watch again.

We had to have wiring done and the kids playroom fixed up. The electricity is not as good here as it was at the old house but we will get by. We bought a new air conditioner. I have a den with a real desk! We bought some furniture from a couple who left on home leave. We really needed this as it is a larger house than the old one. There are four bedrooms upstairs, a maid's room, and guard room attached to, but in the rear portion of the house. ⁵⁹ It is quite adequate and you can visit us at any time. ⁶⁰

Tuie is quite the socialite now. She belongs to the Thai and American woman's club. We are invited to parties and happenings all the time. Last night we went to a presentation of all the past Miss Thailand beauty queens. We had front row seats with the governor."

Letter Home 02/21/71.

"Your new home sounds quite nice and we hope you will have good luck in it. I'm sure you will all find a lot of satisfaction and enjoyment in making it a layout according to your own ideas. Bet the boys got a kick out of the move and Tuie with her garden. There is something about a desk that makes a man feel big. As for a visit from us, I guess you don't realize our age, or do you?"

⁵⁹ Tuie's cousin Jim's husband Singha was a government forest civil servant with access to many items of nature. We later had a larger electric wire strung from the main road to provide more amperage to power our equipment. Jack Parks was nearing retirement. He and his family were going on home leave to Australia and were selling some household goods.

⁹ Although I still continued my philosophy of working for Air America from day to day, we had spent a considerable sum (about seven hundred dollars) on the new house and yard, therefore, it was logical that we remain in Udorn and enjoy the residence.



Part of the well-appointed front yard with the Ford Cortina parked at the Nong Khai house. The white leg of the obligatory Thai "spirit house" is seen to the left of the car.

Author Collection.



Ricky on his tricycle in front of the gate and road leading to the Nong Khai highway. Tom Coynoyer's rental house is to the left.
Author Collection.

Congratulations to Tuie on becoming a Club member. It's one of the best ways of winning friends and influencing people. In spite of the conditions in the world at large, there always should be a way to break the monotony and enjoy oneself."

Letter from Home, 02/27/71.

Following a day off, on Friday afternoon I was assigned to FCF Papa Foxtrot Juliet. The testing went reasonably well, requiring less than an hour flight time.

S-58T GROUND SCHOOL

While overhaul work and engine conversion work on the first S-58T proceeded in the final stages in hangar 1, Tuesday, the 23rd, marked our first day in Twin Pac ground school. As a prelude to engine and airframe school and before the Pratt and Whitney engine instructor arrived in Southeast Asia, Project Manager Bob Davis conducted a day-long symposium intended to be a refresher course on helicopter operations in general.

Before seeking employment with Air America, Bob had served in a Marine Corps Reserve squadron in Seattle, Washington, commanded by Verne Clarkson. Sometime after Verne left to join Air America, Bob applied for a job with the Company. After flying the line for a time, Davis began complaining to management about shoddy maintenance, and a requirement for a full-time test pilot crew to FCF helicopters before they were released upcountry. As a result, an FCF program was created, with Bob in charge. Later, when it was decided to purchase the S-58T-Twin Pac conversion package from Sikorsky, he was allowed to transfer to Washington in order to help coordinate with Sikorsky and Pratt and Whitney.

Before the conversion began in Udorn, Sikorsky Technical Representative, John Kindybul, arrived for the duration of the

retrofit program. John not only assisted in the complicated and unfamiliar conversion process, but also in the H-34 FCF program.⁶¹

Most of us volunteers attending the initial ground school class with a sprinkling of Flight Mechanics were senior Captains. Bob covered many subjects, including aerodynamics, which no one had studied or probably even thought about for many years. Bob, with an engineering background and penchant for detail, droned on for hours, finally asking questions calculated to keep us awake. *"When hovering, why does the helicopter drift slightly to the right and the fuselage hang left wheel low?"* After no one could answer the query, he became a little flustered and disgusted that we were unable to identify translating tendency. I don't believe that I had ever heard the term before, or had forgotten it long ago.⁶²

At Bob's feigned or perhaps genuine unhappiness, an exasperated, uncouth Billy Pearson, who was not the most sophisticated individual on the pampas, countered, *"Who the hell cares about translating tendency or any of this bullshit. I just fly the machine."* Everyone harbored the same attitude to some degree, but out respect for Bob remained quiet, and Billy was the only person to voice this rude attitude.⁶³

Pearson's outburst just about drove Davis crazy, for he had spent numerous hours preparing for this class. Bob seemed really depressed, and it was easy to feel sorry for him.

⁶¹ Bob Davis Letter, 08/08/91.

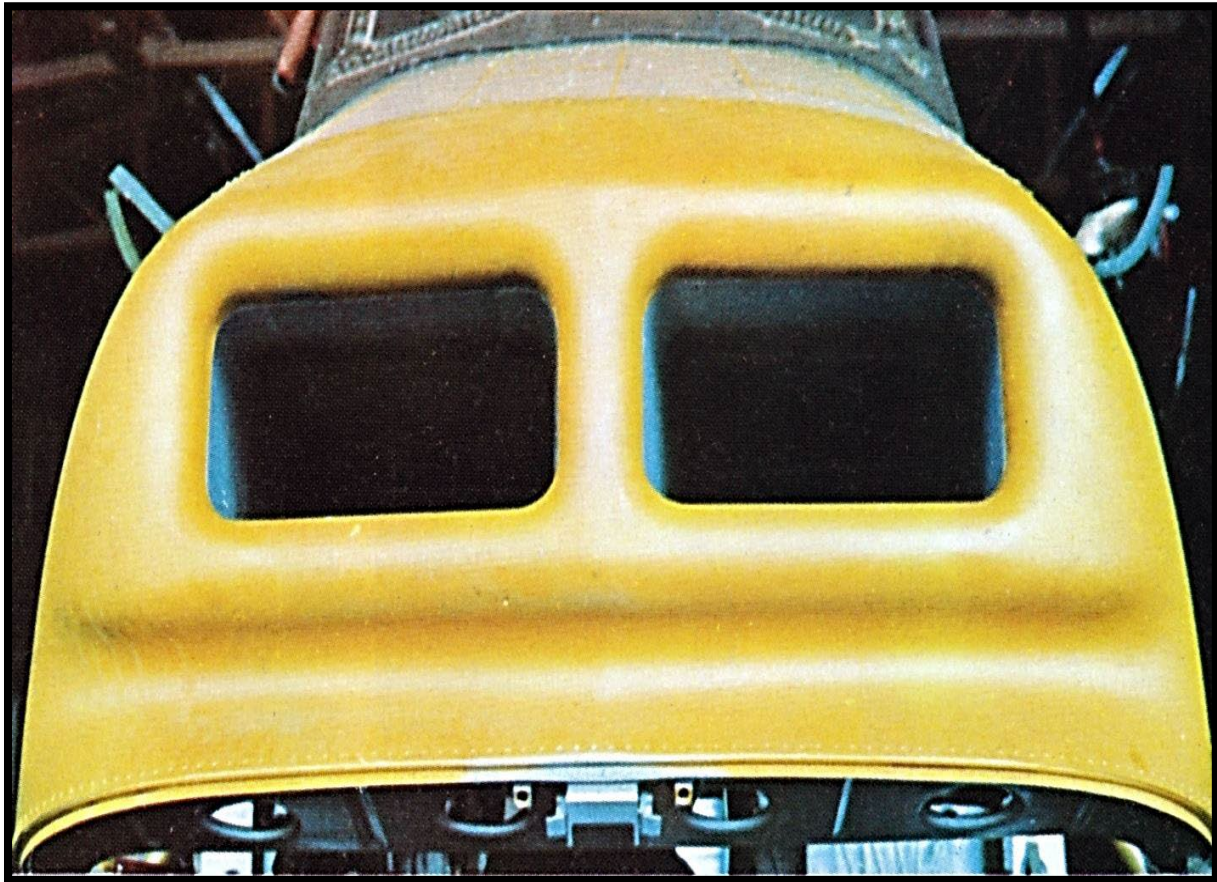
⁶² Normally, helicopter ground schools at the Ellison Field facility were very boring, conducted by uninspiring, colorless military instructors who fostered extreme drowsiness.

⁶³ We had been working the hazardous front lines for so long under undesirable, stressful conditions that we were relatively fatalistic about many things, and as such, would tolerate little BS from anyone.



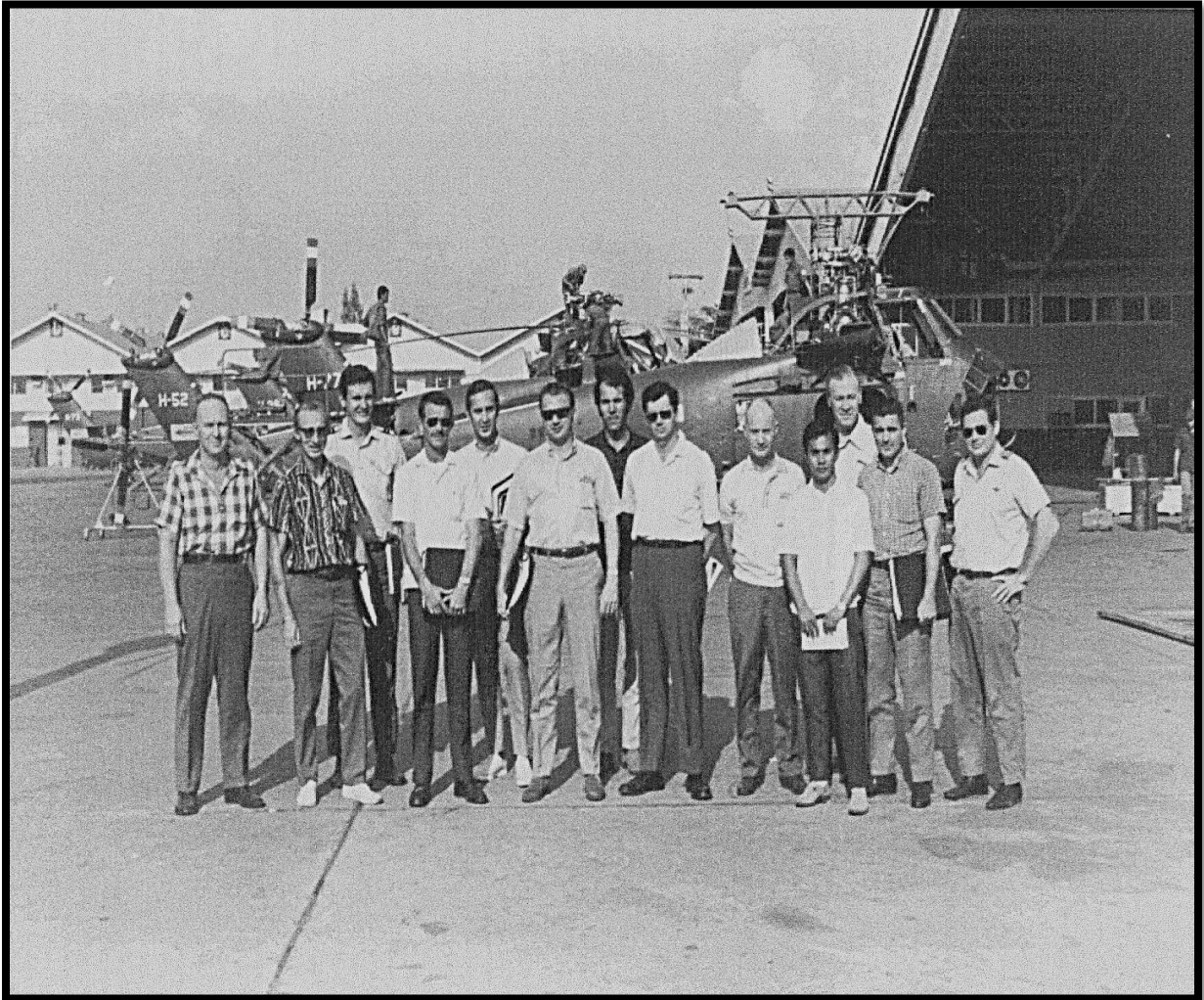
Technical Services personnel performing the final stage in the S-58T conversion package. The elongated fiberglass nose section was especially designed to fit the twin power sections.

Air America Log, Volume 5, #4, 1971.



The new fiberglass nose configuration as seen from the front of the first S-58T assembled at the Air America maintenance facility in Udorn, Thailand. Attempting to be humorous, I referred to the aircraft, and particularly this portion, as "snot nose."

Air America Log, Volume 5, #4, 1971.



The initial S-58T ground school class standing in front of two H-34s undergoing maintenance. Supply buildings and shops are seen to the rear.

Front row left to right: Captains Rip Green, Billy Pearson, Ed Reid, Charlie Weitz, Tony Byrne, Lloyd Higgins, Flight Mechanic Rudy Serafico, and Captains Dick Casterlin and Tom Moher. Second row: Flight Mechanic Bob Piggot, Captain Scratch Kanach, Flight Mechanic Bill Long, and to the right rear, a Sikorsky Technical Representative.

Photo by Bob Davis.

Perhaps Bob had been away from the line pilot scene too long, and as an idealist, could not understand the group's negative attitude. ⁶⁴

JOHN SHINE

John (DOH 01/27/67) was another transferee from Saigon. A C-45 pilot with helicopter experience, he was relegated to flying the H-34 out of Udorn. While at the outstation of Ban Houei Sai, Shine was involved in an incredulous incident that is still not clearly reported or totally understood today.

Late one-night John was sitting alone outside one of the three bars in town. After consuming his ninth drink, he failed to obtain the waiter's attention to order another. Upset, he fired his 357 Magnum into the air. This definitely got the waiter's attention, but also triggered a most extraordinary tale.

At about 1200 hours, six local police arrived and attempted to appropriate John's gun and arrest him. This proved an exercise in futility, for Shine was six feet four inches tall and tipped the weight scales at 240 pounds.

Fed up, John began walking back to the Air America hostel trailed by the police who were armed with carbines. They attempted to surround him while the sergeant demanded he surrender. John continued to march and climbed the steps to the porch, while the police waited by the front steps.

John charged into the house, attempting to roust the Air America crews out of bed, saying the police were going to

¹⁰³ We had been working the hazardous front lines in Laos for so long under undesirable, stressful conditions that we were relatively fatalistic about many things, and as such, would tolerate little guff from anyone.

attack, and they should get their guns. No one paid attention to the drunk.

Increasingly incensed in his alcoholic fog, he grabbed an M-16 rifle and went outside. When the police saw the M-16, they quickly dispersed, withdrawing to a ditch across the street, with their guns at the ready. In response, John crouched behind the brick rail along the porch. He drew his 357, cocked it, and placed the weapon on top the railing. The situation was fast developing into a serious showdown of epic proportions when John inadvertently knocked the 357 off the railing. The gun struck the floor and discharged, delivering a hot round into Shine's back and ending the standoff.

A Volpar pilot was in the hostel and promptly evacuated the badly bleeding pilot to Udorn. Shine recovered quickly, and soon commenced his transition to the Bell. ⁶⁵

UPCOUNTRY

As an Agency bulletin specified, conflict continued in the Long Tieng area of Military Region Two:

"[NVA] forces this weekend attacked and overran four Lao irregular outposts northeast of Long Tieng in the vicinity of

⁶⁵ Years later, the Shine account was proffered to the Author by former H-34 Captain Ben Van Etten and differs from the version I heard at the time. I thought Shine was carrying a weapon in his pilot bag when it fell on the floor of the aircraft and discharged, wounding him.

In contrast, Wayne Knight had a slightly different account, "...A forbidden firearm was discharged in Ban Houei Sai. Shine denied any complicity, but several witnesses disagreed. He was brought back to Udorn and was terminated after a few days. There was some FEPA complaint, but not very vigorous at the time..."

Mike Jarina indicated, "John had a Thai girlfriend. He promised her that if he got better after he shot himself, he would become a monk for a period. He put on the saffron robe and did everything they did."

Tha Tam Bleung [LS-72]. The outposts were garrisoned by elements of two guerrilla battalions which withdrew to the southwest after sustaining casualties of eight killed and twenty-five wounded. Enemy losses are unknown. Three of the outposts were considered of vital importance to the over-all defense of the Long Tieng sector. The irregular base at Tha Tam Bleung itself was also subjected to enemy ground probes.

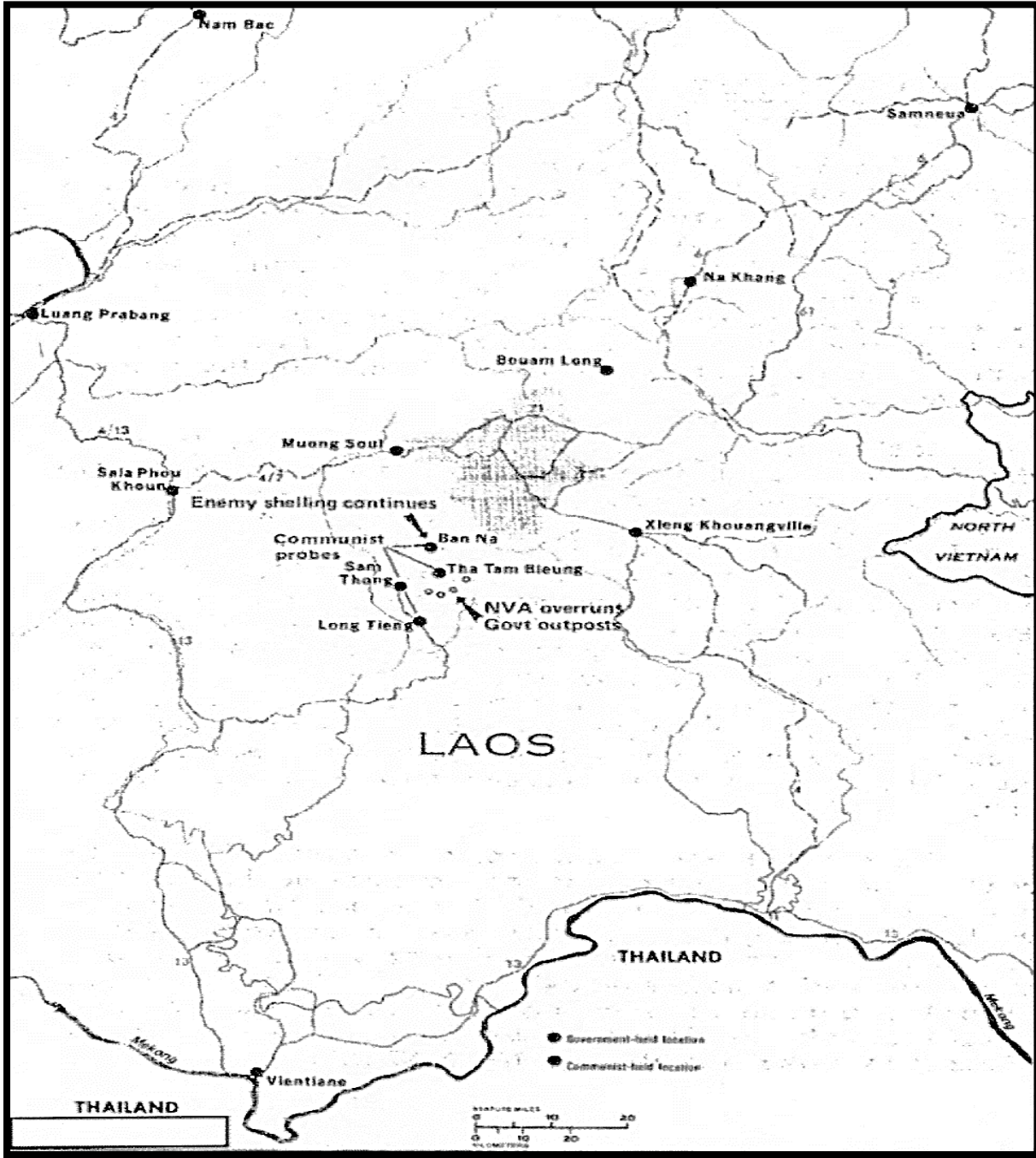
Ban Na, another linchpin in the defense of Long Tieng, remains under strong pressure. The base, which contains vital artillery emplacements, was shelled on at least a dozen occasions during the weekend [20-21st]. Small-scale ground clashes were also reported around its defensive perimeter as well as around the nearby base at Sam Tong. Despite the intensity of enemy shelling, the airstrip at has been reopened, and medical evacuation and resupply missions are once again underway.

Meanwhile, in the immediate Long Tieng area, government irregulars beat back several small-scale ground probes against outposts within a mile radius of the headquarters." ⁶⁶

Taking a break from the S-58T ground school, I was assigned to fly with and instruct a transitioning John Shine, while Peter Brougmas, the Pratt and Whitney engine instructor, arrived in Udorn and organized his material while coping with jet lag.

With Casio crewing the cabin section, we departed Udorn early Wednesday morning in 1196W for Long Tieng. John, a very large man, perhaps not as heavy as Fonburg, but taller, severely limited our payloads. Some of the day was spent supplying Ban Na for hard charging Customer Kayak. The enemy web around

⁶⁶ CIA Daily Bulletin, 02/22/71. Laos: The communists are continuing to nibble away at government strong points commanding the approaches to Vang Pao's headquarters complex at Long Tieng.



Tactical situation depicting enemy pressure within the Long Tieng-Sam Tong defensive complex in Military Region Two.
CIA Map, 02/22/71.

Puncher artillery site was tightening and it was obvious to me that our days there were numbered.

Including ferry time, we managed to fly more than nine hours (five plus five IP time) before chocking in after dark about 1900 hours.

The next morning was a repeat with the same helicopter and crew. Flight time was limited to less than six hours, likely because of delays in USAF escort aircraft for Ban Na and weather. Recovery to Tango-08 was two hours earlier than the previous day. ⁶⁷

RESUMPTION OF S-58T GROUND SCHOOL

While the war in Military Region Two continued unabated without us, on the 26th, and extending into March, we began seven full days of concentrated Pratt and Whitney PT-6 engine instruction. We were only allowed an hour for lunch and an occasional smoke break. By the end of each day, I was generally frazzled by a plethora of facts and figures.

Peter Brougmas, of Dutch ethnicity, conducted the class. We had some basic knowledge of turbine engines from experience flying the Bell, but much of what Peter taught was highly detailed and completely new to us. We discovered that the security of two engines actually introduced far more complexities into the equation and it seemed to me that more things could go wrong within our harsh working environment. ⁶⁸ It was a very comprehensive and difficult subject that covered many systems, including the new combining gearbox. Peter brought a number of overlays to use with his projector, and many handouts that helped us visualize the engine, its numerous components and

⁶⁷ Except for a single mission to Mugia Pass, this was the last time I flew with Shine.

⁶⁸ At this time, I did not know how prophetic this view would be.

systems. Drexel Morgan, our Company ground instructor, except for functionality, had always glossed over the finer more complicated parts of the internal Lycoming engine and its external components. Not Peter.

The general descriptive notes pertaining to the PT6T-3 and associated graphics went a long way toward our understanding of the engine:

"The PT6T-3 engine consists of two identical free-turbine turboshaft power sections driving a single output shaft through identical gear trains in a common reduction gearbox. Each power section uses two separate turbines: one driving a compressor, and the other driving a turbine shaft coupled to a reduction gearbox input shaft. An accessory gearbox on each power section houses lubrication system pumps and provides mounting pads for fuel control system units..

Inlet air enters each power section through a circular plenum chamber formed by the compressor inlet case and is directed to the compressor. The compressor consists of three axial stages and a single centrifugal stage assembled as an integral unit.

Rows of stator vanes located between rotor stages, diffuse compressor air and raise its static pressure, and direct it to the next rotor stage. Compressed air from the final centrifugal stage passes through diffuser pipes which turn its flow direction through 90 degrees. It is then led through straightening vanes to the combustion chamber liner.

The combustion chamber liner consists of an annular, reverse-flow weldment, with varying sized perforations to allow entry of compressed air. Air is mixed with fuel and ignited within the combustion chamber liner, and air in excess of that required for combustion is directed over the liner surfaces to cool them. Airflows to and from the liner are in opposite

directions, and this reversal, together with a second air flow reversal beyond the combustion chamber liner eliminates the need for a long shaft between compressor and compressor turbine. Power section overall length and weight are thus reduced.

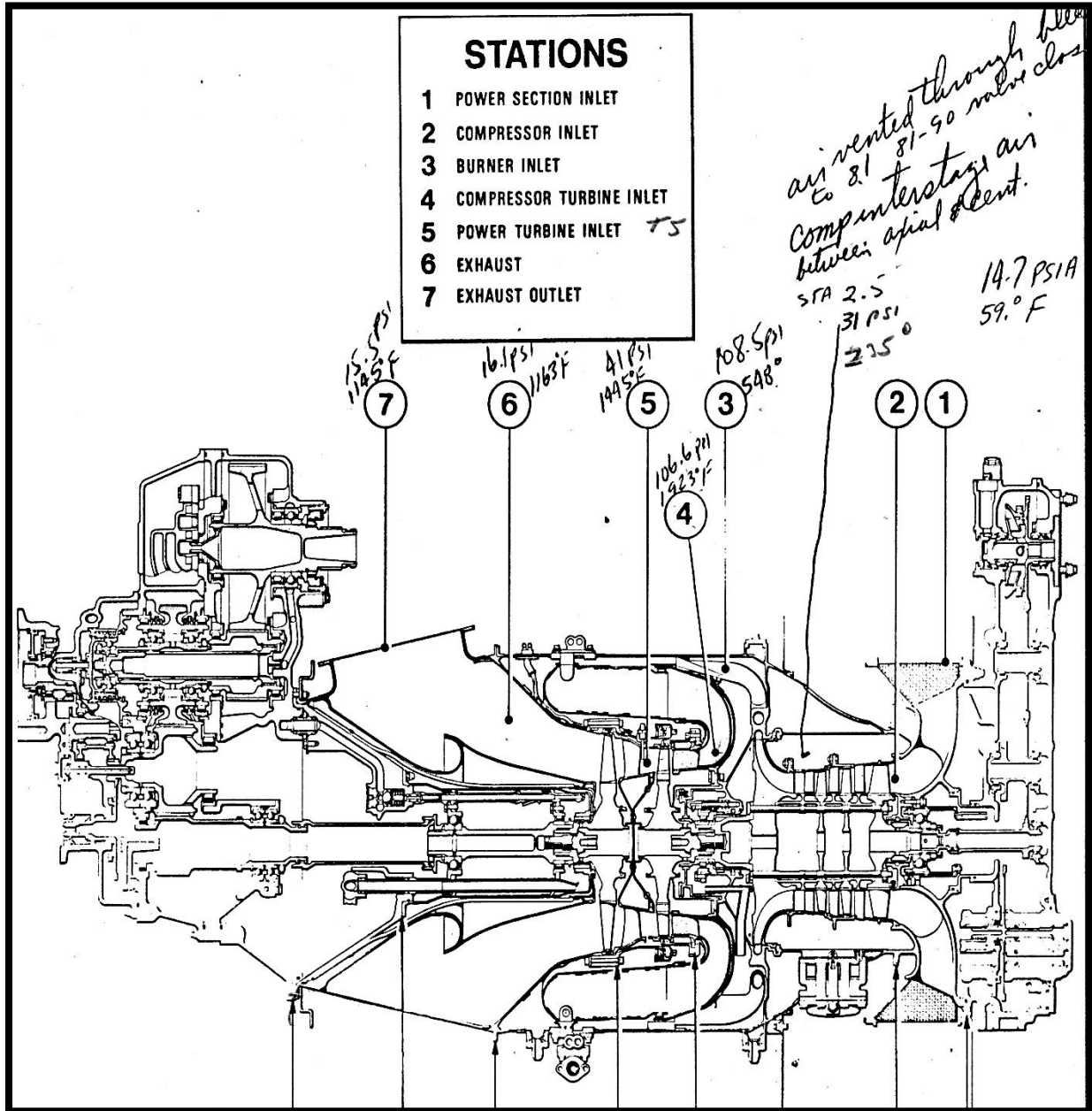
Fuel is injected into the combustion chamber liner by 14 simplex nozzles supplied through a dual manifold. Air and fuel mixture is ignited by two spark igniters which protrude into the combustion chamber liner, and resultant gases expand from the combustion chamber liner through compressor turbine nozzle guide vanes to the compressor turbine. Nozzle guide vanes ensure that expanding gases impinge on the turbine blades at the optimum angle and velocity for minimum energy loss throughout the turbine operating speed range. Expanding gases from the compressor turbine pass rearward through a second set of nozzle guide vanes to drive the power turbine.

Compressor and power turbines are situated in the approximate center of the power section with their shafts extending in opposite directions. Exhaust gas from the power turbine is directed through an exhaust plenum to atmosphere, via an exhaust duct and port.

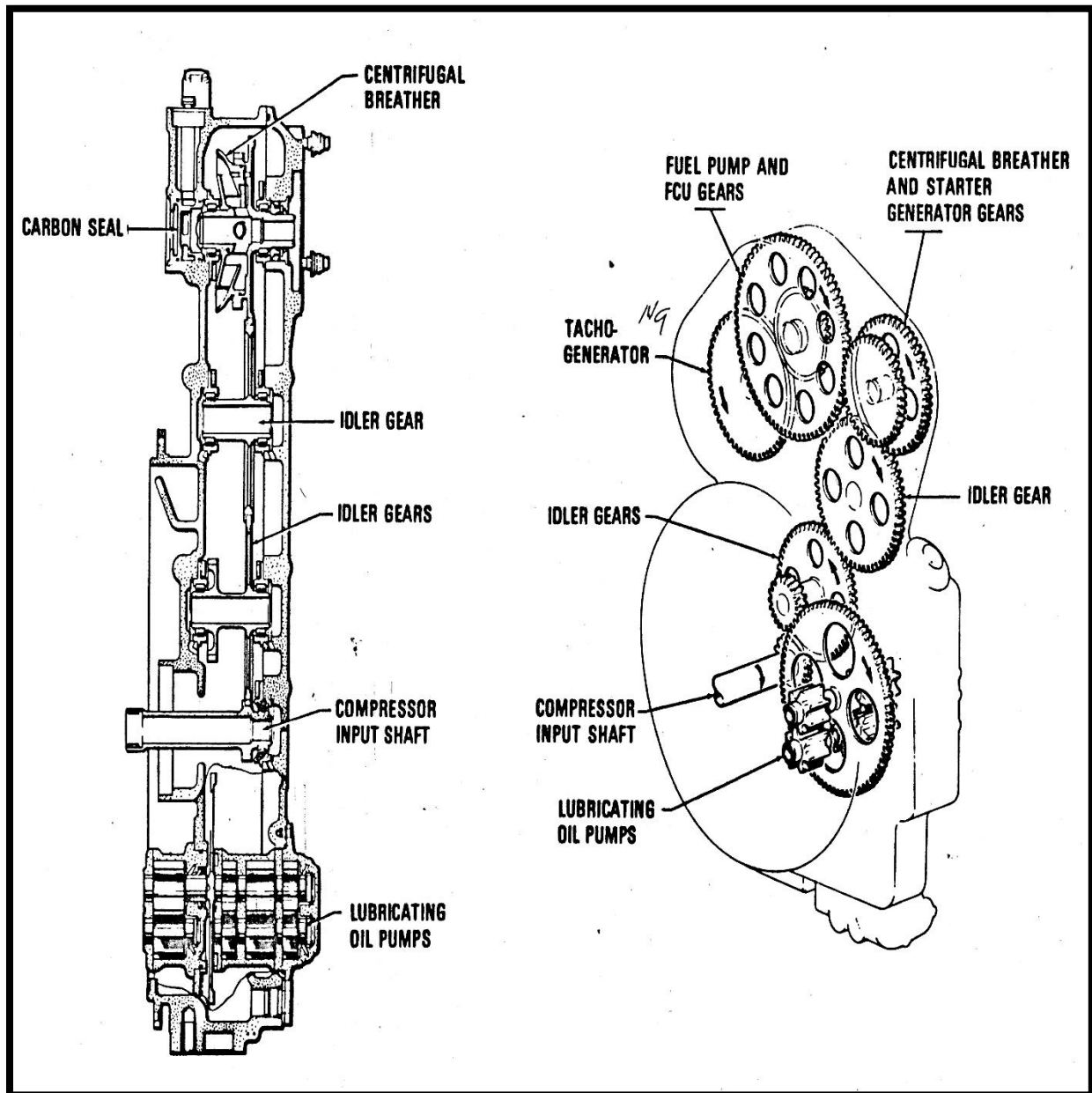
Power section driven accessories, with the exception of Nf governor, tachometer-generator are mounted on the accessor gearbox. They are driven from the compressor by means of a coupling shaft, which extends drive into the accessory gearbox, and gear trains within the gearbox.

Engine oil supply is contained in three separate oil tanks. Each accessory gearbox contains an integral oil tank, and the reduction gearbox output section houses the third system tank. Visual level gages and drain plugs are provided for all three tanks.

The power turbine of each power section drives the reduction gearbox output shaft through a three-stage reduction

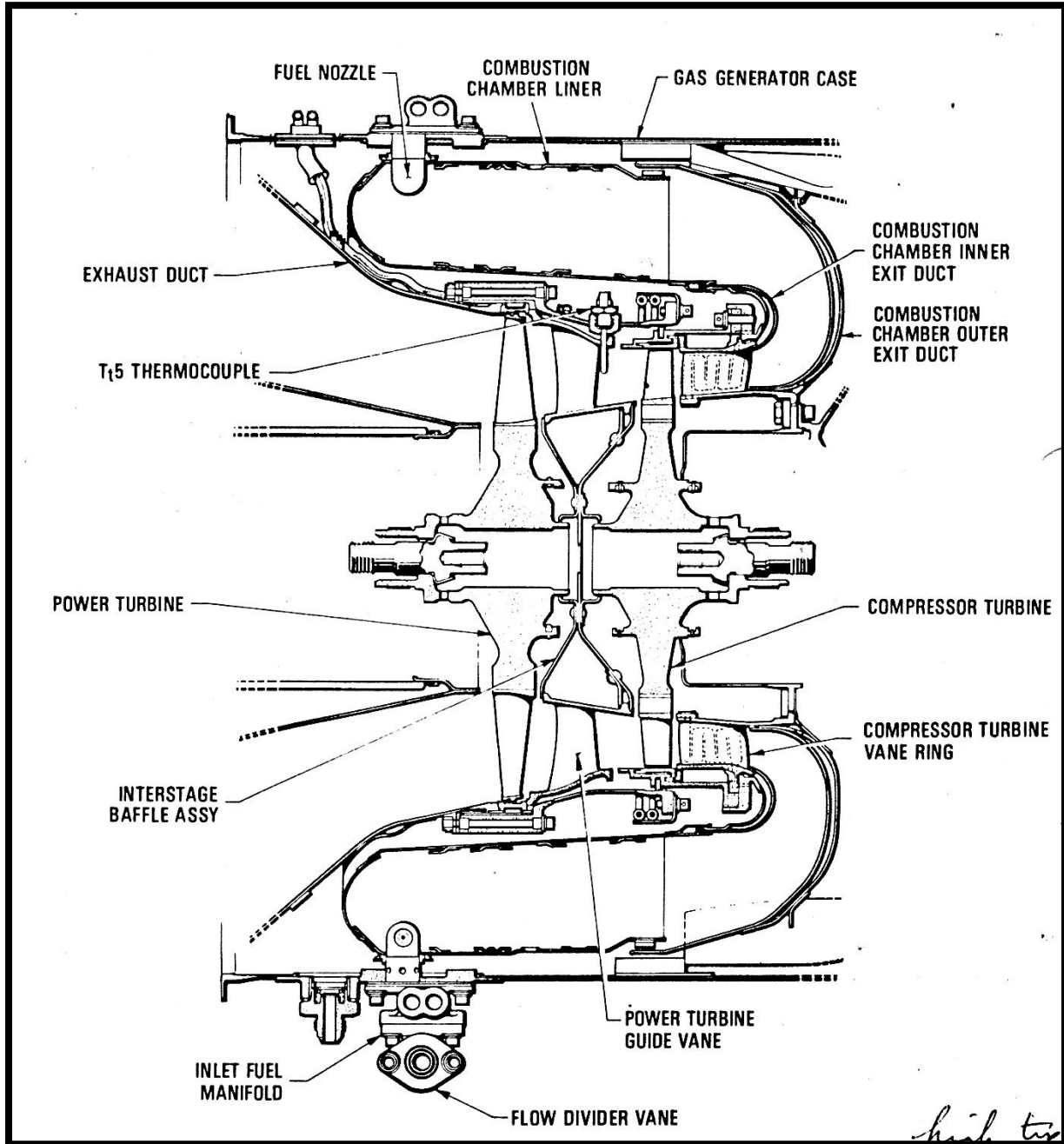


Typical PT6-3 Pratt and Whitney engine showing the internal parts. Combining RPM reduction gearbox is mounted on the right side.
 Handout from the S-58T ground school.



Each accessory gearbox reduced both engine power sections from 1800 shaft horsepower (SHP) to a constant output speed of 6600 revolutions per minute (rpm) and allowed transfer of power from the combining gearboxes to the angle gearbox for further distribution of torque to the main transmission and rotor blades. The two accessory gearboxes also provided pads for installation of torque meters, power turbine governors, tachometer-generators, and a torque sharing device.

Handout



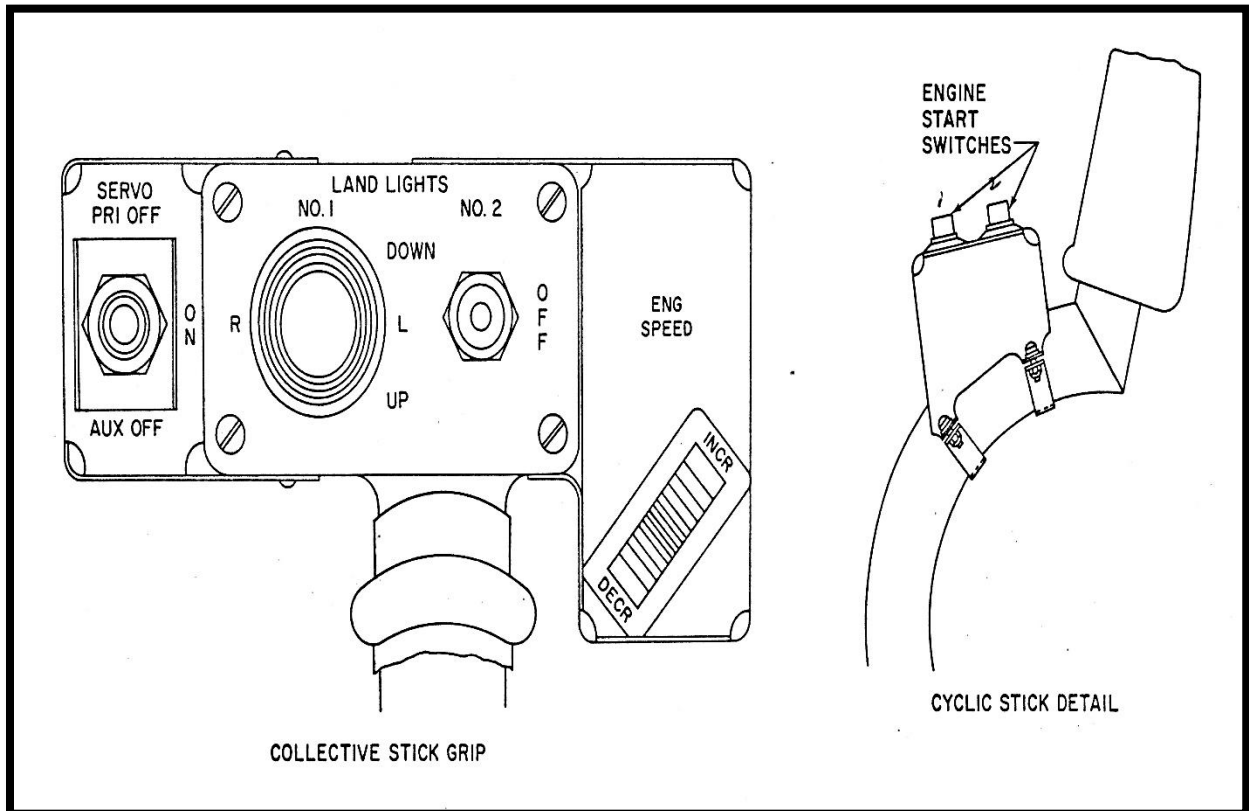
Cross-section of the PT-6 engine combustion chamber.
Handout

gear train. Incorporated in each gear train are:

An integral torquemeter device to indicate power section torque. A torque-indicating system, consisting of a torquemeter and an airframe-supplied transducer provides indication of each power section output torque. The torquemeter develops an oil pressure dependent on its power section output torque. This pressure, and reduction gearbox internal pressure are applied to the transducer and the differential is used to provide a visual torque indication [on the cockpit instrument panel].

A power turbine governor to regulate power turbine rpm [revolutions per minute] of each power section fuel control system [FCU] is mounted on the appropriate side of the reduction gearbox and driven at a speed proportional to its power turbine. It supplies a signal to the automatic fuel control unit (AFCU) to change compressor speed whenever it senses a power speed change and employs a drive body similar to that of the AFCU compressor turbine governor. The power turbine governor is called a "droop" governor because its speed setting is effectively changed (decreases or droops) when power output [cockpit collective lever] is increased. This characteristic droop must be compensated for in order to maintain the helicopter rotor speed constant. This is achieved by linking the Nf governor speed set lever to the collective pitch reset system of the helicopter through a suitably designed cam.

A tacho-generator to give an indication of power turbine rpm. Four airframe-supplied tachometer-generators generate electric signals proportional to power section gas generator and power turbine rpm. A tachometer-generator can be mounted next to each manual fuel control unit on accessory gearboxes and next to each power turbine governor on the reduction gearbox. The electrical signal from each tachometer-generator is applied to a tachometer to produce a rpm readout [in the cockpit].



Pilot collective power lever and cyclic devices. The beeper control mechanism mounted on the right side of the collective head is provided for the pilot to manually regulate constant engine speed to 6600 rpm.

Handout

An [internal] sprag clutch to isolate [disengage] an inoperative power section.”⁶⁹

Saving the best for last, specialist Peter attempted to explain the complicated P3 air system, the governor, and automatic fuel control unit (AFCU) and manual fuel control unit (MFCU) in minute detail.

Each power section of the PT6T-3 engine had a separate and complete hydro-pneumatic (liquid-air) fuel control computing system (composed of at least nine sub-units). The two systems were interconnected through the power sharing and torque limiting features of the torque control unit.

As with the Bell, a manual fuel control system was incorporated in the fuel system to bypass the automatic features, a device that later saved my bacon one dark and stormy night deep in the bowels of Indian country.⁷⁰

“The manual fuel control unit [MFCU] is mounted with the automatic fuel control unit [AFCU] on the accessory gearbox. Under normal operational conditions it passes fuel from the [fuel] pump to the AFCU and from the AFCU to the fuel manifold and nozzles. If manual control is necessary is necessary, a solenoid valve is [manually] energized to operate a transfer valve and direct fuel through the MFCU to the manifold.

The [MFCU] contains a metering valve and a pressure drop regulator in parallel with the main fuel control. The metering valve is positioned manually by an external lever interconnected with the main fuel control lever. The mode of operation is selected through a solenoid valve. The fuel shut-off valve functions in either the manual or automatic mode and is part of

⁶⁹ Information derived from United Aircraft of Canada PT6T-3 descriptive notes that were distributed to ground school attendees.

⁷⁰ Twin Pac Project Manager Udorn, Bob Davis, Memorandum to all S-58T Pilots Udorn, PT6T-3 Fuel Control System and Rigging, 11/24/71.

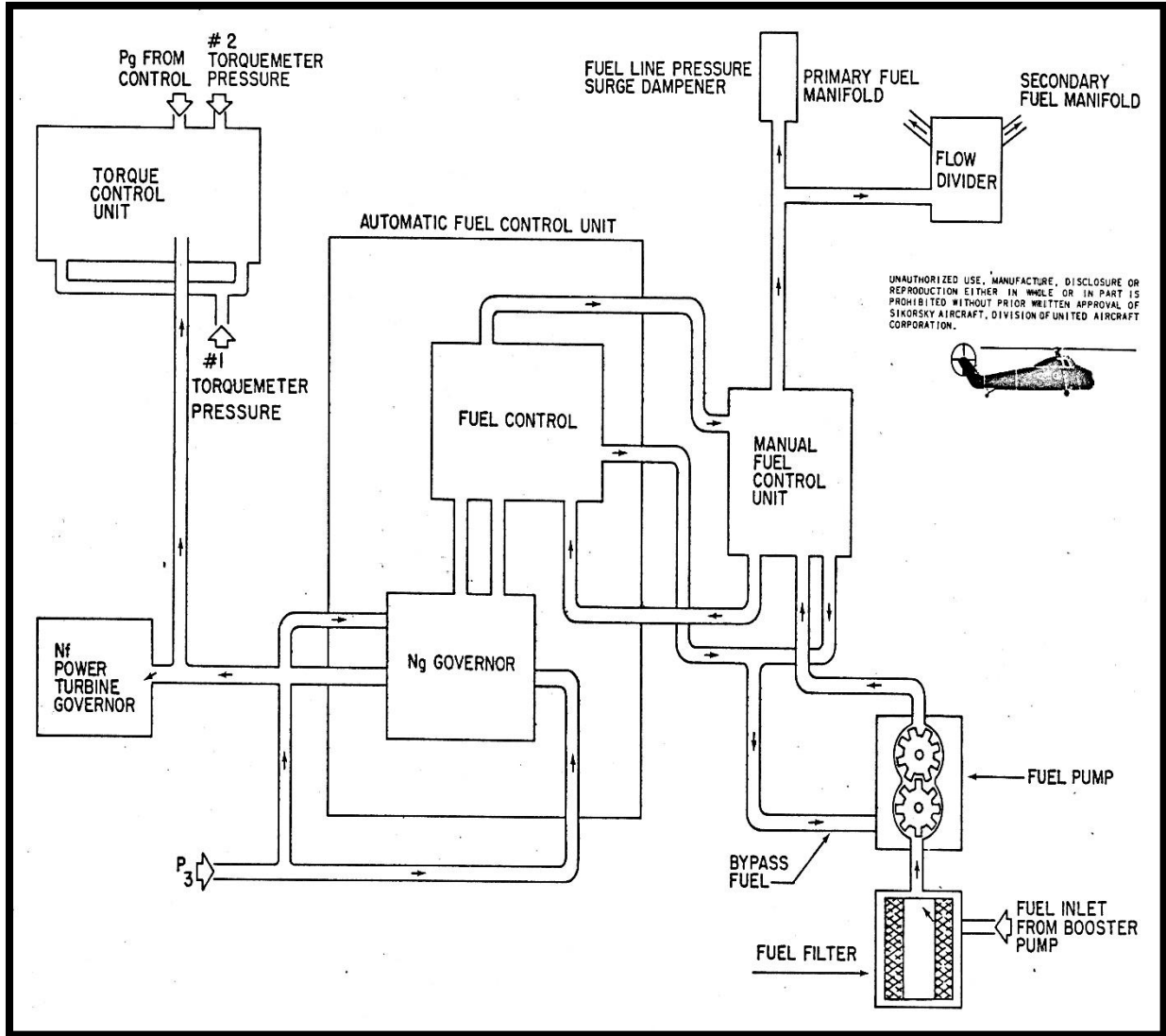
the manual metering valve assembly. A pressure relief valve is also incorporated into the manual fuel control to protect the engine fuel system from excessive pressure.

In the automatic fuel control mode, fuel is pumped into the manual fuel control unit and directed to the main fuel control by a transfer valve. Metered fuel is returned to the manual fuel control from the main fuel control, goes through a check valve, the fuel shutoff valve and through the pressurizing valve to the fuel flow divider and fuel nozzles. To select manual fuel control operation the pilot energizes a solenoid valve which then bleeds fuel from one side of the transfer valve. The resultant force unbalance causes the transfer valve to shift, shutting off the fuel to the main fuel control and directing it through the manual metering valve..."

A single torque control unit mounted on top of the reduction gearbox (between the two accessor gearboxes) received torquemeter oil pressure signals dependent on the torque outputs of the two power sections. By varying P_g ⁷¹ in each power section fuel control, the system maintained equal pressure and limited maximum total output torque to a selected value (108 plus or minus one percent). Power sharing was achieved by sensing torque pressure in each power section by means of opposed bellows. Torque limiting was obtained by sensing torque pressures from each power system and summing their total. To achieve this, system governors were integrated to limit or reduce power.

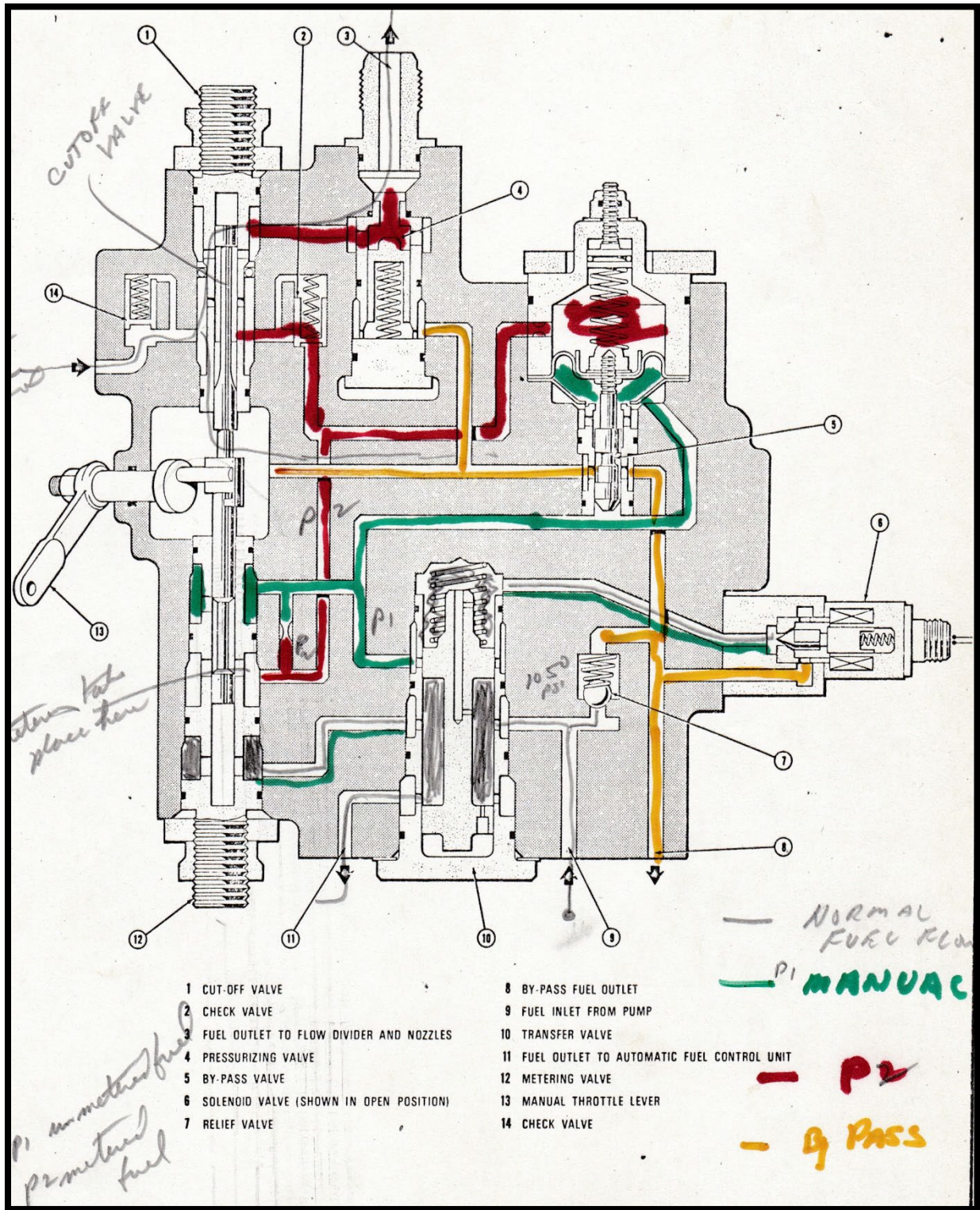
Engine torque was limited by sensing torquemeter pressures from the two power sections and adding them in two summing bellows. At a specific total (as mentioned), normally closed pneumatic orifices opened to lower P_g in both power sections, and fuel flow was reduced.

⁷¹ P_g : PT-6 engine governor pressure.



Schematic of the hydro-pneumatic PT6-3 engine fuel control systems and accessories.

Handout



Manual fuel control unit schematic showing the flow and transfer of fuel.

Handout

Power section torque differential was minimized by means of opposed bellows, which sensed difference in torques, and moved a lever to restrict one of two normally open pneumatic orifices. Each pneumatic orifice vented P_g from its power section fuel control system. Closing an orifice resulted in increased P_g in that power section and consequent fuel flow increase, resulting in equalized torques.⁷²

The relatively new concepts were quite foreign for me. Never addressed before in Drex Morgan's Bell ground school, and difficult for me to completely fathom, I came away from Peter's class far better informed about the workings of a turbine engine than I had been previously. Perhaps Billy P had been right. We really did not have to know all the nuts and bolts of an engine to perform our jobs, but Bob Davis wanted us to have exposure to all systems in the new aircraft.

UDORN SOCIAL LIFE

While I was having fun wrestling with new information in ground school, Tuie was quite active socially. She and 200 other Thai girls had practiced dancing for the King and Queen's arrival on the 28th to dedicate a statue of the man who founded Udorn.⁷³ The event was televised and beamed to the northeast over the station at Khon Kaen. Tuie was visible in the first rank of dancers. She had been on television several times,

⁷² In addition to the handouts, a United Aircraft of Canada book of descriptive notes on the PT6T-3 twin power section turboshaft engine and the S58T, dated 20 July 1970, was issued to all attendees.

⁷³ Information collected from the American Consular library during the Author's January-February 1995 trip to Udorn, Thailand: During January 1893 Prince Kromaluang Prajak Silapakharm moved his Lao Phuan headquarters, which was then situated in Nong Khai Province, to Ban Markhaeng. In 1907 King Rama the Fifth officially declared the village a province under the administration of Udorn Region (Monthon Udorn). The administration was reformed many times to eventually become the present day Udorn Thani.

either dancing or participating in a fashion show. On 2 March she and the Thai womans' group were going to Khon Kaen to participate in a fashion show at the TV station. Since she had been active, we attended Thai parties and I met several highly placed Thai officials. I had no problem conversing with them, as they were all highly educated and spoke excellent English.

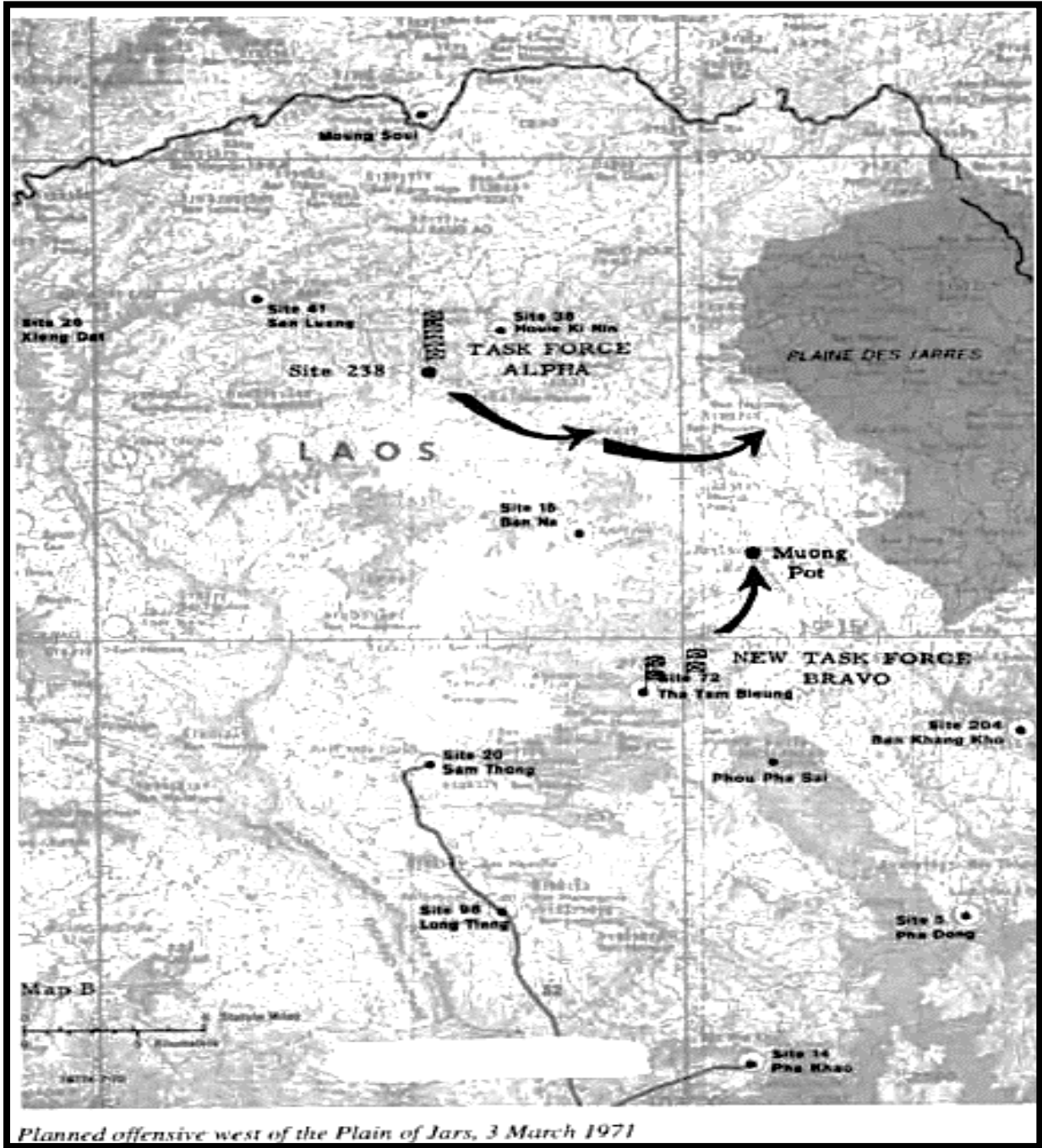
"Tuie, you must be having a ball with your TV appearances and wearing all those gorgeous gowns. Dancing is one of the best occupations to keep a good figure. You wear a mean gown-by that I mean you make it come alive."

Letter from Home, 03/23/71.

MR-2

The enemy attack on Long Tieng defenses had been semi-successful in that it cleared the valley of many civilians, created some infrastructure damage (mostly from our side), and alerted us to the fact that actual penetration of the valley and a surprise attack was possible at any time. Such audacity necessitated a vigorous response. Since the offensive was likely a precursor to a major push on the Meo homeland, directly after the attack, Vang Pao, his staff, and Agency advisors cobbled together a plan to move forces east on the Plain of Jars to divert, slow, or stymie the enemy timetable.

The operation was conceived to begin toward the end of February, and was patterned on the 1970 San Tiau-Ban Ban offensive on the upper reaches of Route-7. Before the operation could be implemented, a more realistic plan was substituted. This envisioned a large task force moving from the Sam Tong area toward Ban Na, and then slicing behind Vietnamese lines from the



Early diversionary plans calculated to relieve enemy pressure on Ban Na and the Vang Pao defense line.

Ahern, 397.

west toward the Plain of Jars. To implement part of the operation, SGU GM 31 Regiment from Savannakhet began arriving at Long Tieng on the last day of the month. After assembling and receiving unit marching orders, their assigned mission would be to walk west on Skyline ridge to Sam Tong and then move further northwest down to the banks of the Nam Ngum.⁷⁴

The Ngum River had been successfully employed by troops before for relatively easy movement to the west portion of the PDJ. However, the Savannakhet regiment, with several weak units rotting in the apple barrel, presented an intangible as to motivation, and further movement was predicated on initial progress.

In the end, the original plan failed, and General Vang Pao had to reconsider his battle strategy.

⁷⁴ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 295-296.

"I am working the Bell and going to school on the S58T-3. The first machine will be ready on the 15th, but there will have to be a lot of testing done. I am not sure when it will be operational to take upcountry. We are not sure what is planned for it either and some of us are a bit leery. We are in the middle of resolving this. ¹

Letter Home 03/01/71.

Twinpac engine ground school continued through Friday 5 March. I was off Saturday before resuming the Long Tieng Commute rat race.

BARREL ROLL (MR-2)

By March, the Vietnamese had deployed their largest number of troops around the Plain of Jars, with firm orders to capture Long Tieng. In contrast, Washington leaders wanted the Meo-controlled area held.

The defenders of Sam Tong, Long Tieng, Ban Na, and Tha Tam Bleung areas, and the agencies supporting them in anticipation of the monsoon season, responded to enemy pressure. It was imperative that the sites and defensive positions be held. Therefore, measures to meet enemy probes, counter firing at rocket, mortar, and artillery locations, and launching occasional offensive actions were required. In implementing

¹ I initially believed that because of the twin engine capability, the relative quiet nature of the machines, and the extended range, the machines were intended to replace the Huey on long-range road watch missions. I had no idea at the time about the advent of black, highly classified Agency Special Mission intelligence gathering operations, and the monumental problems they would generate for the small unit.

defense, daily evaluations were essential in allocating air sorties for TICs, destroying artillery, providing escort resupply and medevac at Site-15, and conducting interdiction.

During the first half of the dry season, a daily average of thirty-six USAF sorties had been scheduled in Barrel Roll. Because of adverse weather, cancellations, and diverts, only two thirds delivered ordnance. This changed. With the advent of the enemy push in early February, both USAF and RLAF increased their sortie rates. ² In response, from 10 February to 31 April Air Force participation increased to fifty-six daily sorties. Moreover, an increase in all-weather bombing techniques were deemed highly effective. F-4, A-1, F-105, and AC119K and RLAF AV-47 gunships were employed day and night during this phase of air defense. ³

To elicit some control of air assets, in early February AIRA assigned a priority area of responsibility, called a designated battlefield area (DBA), that included most tactical air. The large perimeter encompassed most major headquarters areas. It included the range of enemy 122 rockets, crew served 85mm guns, and mortars...VFR close air support strikes within this area were controlled by an increased number of Raven FACs, mostly out of Long Tieng, but also by OV-10 Nail and F-4 Tiger FAC pilots. Raven pilots also contributed to the ground portion by acting as airborne forward observers to adjust artillery fire.

² The Royal Lao Air Force conducted a majority of sorties in support of the ground forces. After a shaky beginning, C-47 gunship pilots were considered effective. T-28 sorties peaked at over a hundred per day.

³ Generally, four RLAF Spookies and Air Force Stinger gunships were employed at night to enhance troop morale and in support of troops in contact (TIC). C-130 Candlestick flare ships and F-4 quick reaction force aircraft also participated in the defense of the Vang Pao Line.

Within the DBA twenty-eight IFR bombing boxes were located generally east and northeast of Ban Na and Site-72. ⁴

"...On 2 March two quick reaction flights (QRF) were requested but neither was used due to poor weather and an air abort. Ravens directed 32 sorties in the mountains south and west of the PDJ. Red Hat received two rounds of 82mm recoilless rifle fire at 0131Z. ⁵

The weather was good on 5 March. The Ravens directed 28 strike sorties in support of ground forces. Rainbow received 82mm recoilless fire at 0100Z. He did not ask for air support...

On 6 March the weather was good all day. The Ravens directed 28 air strikes in support of ground forces. When Cricket came on station Hotdog had troops in contact. No support was available at the time and Cricket was unable to make radio contact. Shamrock received incoming...

On 7 March ten trucks were destroyed and nine were damaged. Weather good all day. There were six reports of troops in contact..." ⁶

Sunday, the seventh, I was picked up early by the Company Volkswagen B-bus driver, driven to the airfield, and blocked in at 0445 hours. I was assigned 1196W with Captain Al Cates and Dave Crowell for a Long Tieng commute. Al was still transitioning to the Bell from the H-34. I had not flown in the same cockpit with Cates before, but was impressed with his outstanding participation in the Bullwhip SAR. Therefore, from the beginning of our day, convinced of A-1 pilots' displayed

⁴ Harry Blout, *CHECO*, 33, *CHECO*, 112-114, 120.

⁵ Zulu time plus seven hours produces Lao local time, i.e. 0131Z+7=0831 local.

⁶ ABCCC Extracts, 12.



A latter-day guard house leading to the Air America facility just off the main road. This version contrasted with the original entrance, which was only a dusty laterite dirt road.

Author Collection.

courage and ability to make wise decisions, I felt comfortable flying with him.

At The Alternate the object of our early launch became evident. Since the Savannakhet unit that was charged with moving to the Nam Ngum had departed the field, part of our job was to reestablish a presence in that area. Therefore, a daisy chain of helicopter activity commenced, with cover aircraft to shuttle fresh troops to a flat area along the river bed. The troops' task was then to clear the area while moving along the river toward the Plain of Jars.

Mike Jarina, recently back from home leave, participated in operations with Dick Lister in 13F.

Other Special Missions that day included wounded retrieval from defensive positions and a couple of runs into the Puncher fire base at Ban Na, where the daily situation was becoming more critical.

Having flown almost ten hours, we blocked in at 1805. The long day produced six Special Missions, and I logged seven hours and fifteen minutes instructor pilot hours and twelve landings. Since we were on the schedule in the same ship the following morning, we had dinner at the Club and headed for the house.

Monday was more of the same, only to a lesser degree. A combination of weather, escort delay for the daily Site-15 runs, and rockets impacting Long Tieng all combined to reduce our fight time by half.

Cates was released for solo flight on the 30th.⁷ Jarina was also upcountry with Dick Lister in 13F flying missions into Ban Na and the Site-72 area. They logged two Special Missions.⁸

⁷ Al Cates Email that provided information about incoming rocket fire at Long Tieng.

⁸ Mike Jarina's Numerous Interviews with the Author.

Tuesday, my entire day was devoted to tedious FCFs of 8535F.

BAD DAY AT SAM TONG

On the ninth, Jack Knotts and his stick-buddy ⁹ Jon Stewart were working in the same area of Sam Tong where Bill Foster had been severely injured on 20 January. They had just launched to the west from Site-20 when two USAF CH-53s approached the strip heavily loaded with passengers. The first aircraft, Knife-34 (68-10931) from the 21st SOS, piloted by Milton Ramsey and Albert Tijerina, and crewed by G. Pearson and F. Deck, believing the immediate area under enemy pressure, approached long and hot. The helicopter struck the ground hard at the high end of the strip, bounced, spun to the right, and rolled off the end. Tobogganing uncontrollably downhill, the machine tipped over and burned. The two enlisted flight engineers survived.

The second Knife landed safely halfway up the strip.

Hearing radio chatter regarding the crash, the Bell crew returned to Sam Tong and landed on the west end. From his vantage point Knotts observed one crewmember running around thirty feet down the slope. Knotts remained at the controls while Stewart scrambled down to the crashed aircraft to provide assistance if needed.

Bodies were strewn throughout the area. Over the next several hours the Bell crew participated in recovering bodies.

The crew of the second Knife did not assist in the cleanup. They had been explicitly ordered by superiors not to get involved in anything that would unduly cause adverse publicity,

⁹ Stick-buddy: A slang term exclusively used in U.S. Army aviation and translated to former Army pilots hired by Air America. I first heard this term from Howard Estes in 1962.

for under the protocols of the Geneva Accord they were not supposed to be operating in the country of Laos. ¹⁰ ¹¹

The day following the CH-53 crash at Sam Tong, Vladimir Broz, a Flight Mechanic, and I crewed Papa Foxtrot Hotel to The Alternate. Like most days during the period, we participated in resupply, and wounded evacuation of landing zones on the Vang Pao line, and the two daily Ban Na shuttles. Although Broz was still formally undergoing transition training, because of the numerous Special Missions conducted and nature of the situation, I opted to conduct fifteen landings.

BAN SON

AID representative Blaine Jensen had worked at the LS-272 refugee center since the first loss of Sam Tong in 1970. Depending on the patient load at the hospital, Blaine sometimes allowed the medical staff to RON. He and the other AID personnel commuted from Vientiane on a daily basis.

The enemy was not only concentrated in the Sam Tong-Long Tieng area. Numerous armed bands of Pathet Lao circulated in the south. Early in March they attacked a village north and a little east of Ban Son, about a day's walk from 272. The people living there were Lao Theung, and by nature were Pathet Lao

¹⁰ Jack Knotts Interview at the Author's home.

¹¹ Contrasting to what Knotts related and what I heard, Ken Conboy wrote that the Knives were not shuttling refugees, but the Military Region Three BG-308 Battalion into Sam Tong.

After the fact, word circulated that USAF leaders believed that any qualified pilot could fly helicopters. As there was a shortage of pilots during this phase of the Southeast Asian wars, personnel were scrounged from all available units to fly helicopters. We heard that the former "desk colonel" had attempted a downwind landing with over a hundred passengers. We also heard that the cockpit crew was posthumously awarded silver stars. Whether any of this information was valid and reliable, I am not sure, but regardless of the "facts," every story contained at least a smattering of half-truth.

sympathizers. The Pathet Lao attack was intended as a warning because Jensen had been helping the ville and the people were providing intelligence regarding Pathet Lao operations with respect to Long Tieng, and more importantly, Vang Vieng.

A day after the attack, a Lao general Jensen knew very well arrived from Vientiane. Jensen informed him how important Site-272 was in terms of the Military Region Two effort and the situation at Long Tieng, plus his concern of Pathet Lao so close to his refugee area. Seemingly understanding the situation, the general indicated that virtually all the troops in Laos were committed, but he would attempt to help.

Two days later, around 1000 hours, the requested troops arrived by air. They made quite a sight. They wore ill-fitting uniforms, a mish-mash of outdated weapons, and the entire crew was drunk as skunks. What the general had done was round up all the Lao officers' orderlies. These included the cooks, the shoeshine boys, the gophers, the barbers, and the sort. As they stumbled, not marched, off toward the previously attacked ville, Blaine turned to his staff saying, *"Dear God, what in the world have I done?"*

Losing contact with them, he did not recall how long they remained in the field. He did hear that several incompetents shot themselves in the foot either because they were drunk or had never fired a rifle. However, the exercise accomplished what he wanted. The Pathet Lao received the word that reinforcements had been sent to protect Ban Son, and the mere threat of FAR participation dissuaded them from bothering them again. ¹²

¹² Blaine Jensen Letter.

SCHOOL

Keeping us off the front lines, the next three days were spent in hangar one classroom while both John Kindybul and Bob Davis described the S58T airframe and associated systems. Although considerably more detailed than normally taught by Drex Morgan, in contrast to the complicated engine, this was a subject with which we were vastly more familiar.

Gear reductions for drive train components were the same as the H-34, except for the engine (6590 RPM) and new angle gearbox (2800 RPM). The cockpit had a master caution light and advisory panel that was very comprehensive. Like the H-34, there were six separate hydraulic and pneumatic systems installed: the primary and auxiliary servos, the rotor brake, the wheel brakes, the hydro-mechanical clutch, and the rescue hoist.

During one class, Bob described a performance chart he had devised depicting a gross weight of 13,000 pounds for hovering in ground effect and out of ground effect (HIGE and HOGE). Patterned after Sikorsky charts, the jury was still out regarding the viability of the Sikorsky statistics. Only actual upcountry work would verify or negate this as valid and reliable. ¹³

UPCOUNTRY

By the middle of March enemy forces moved ever closer, capturing defensive positions within four and five miles of Long

¹³ HIGE & HOGE: Depending on the density altitude, the difference in performance between the two could be considerable. Hovering in ground effect was considered within five feet of the ground with lift dependent on the air cushion provided by the rotor blades downwash. Hovering out of ground effect was related to no additional lift and required more power. This was an important variable and required an adjustment in payload on small, pinnacle type landing zones.

Tieng, three to four miles northwest of Sam Tong, and three miles south of Tha Tam Bleung. ¹⁴

Two additional Thai battalions were committed to the defense of Long Tieng with the objective of occupying Phou Tham Seh, three kilometers north of Skyline Ridge. ¹⁵

Flying 8512F on the twelfth, and 8513F the next day, Mike Jarina was one of the Bell pilots participating in support of the Military Region Two defense line. (He was logging the old site number of 98 for Long Tieng.)

Mike and Jack Knotts returned to The Alternate on Monday in XW-PFH to work the Site-72 area. I followed in 1196W with Vlad Broz. Vlad had satisfied all the proficiency and upcountry familiarization requirements, and was now flying as a co-pilot equal. Sharing cockpit responsibilities with Vlad, I conducted eleven landings, one a Special Mission at Ban Na. After flying nearly a full day, we recovered at Udorn about dark.

Mike and Jack continued their Long Tieng commutes in Papa Foxtrot Hotel on the sixteenth and seventeenth. Working with other Bell crews, they began moving the newly introduced Thai battalions forward. The men were not totally without combat experience. Warding off enemy attacks, they had successfully held a position near Paksong and Route-23 on the Bolovens Plateau. ¹⁶ Attesting to the movement into dangerous positions, Jarina logged ten special missions. ¹⁷

¹⁴ Harry Blout, *CHECO*, 33.

¹⁵ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 296.

¹⁶ During an 18 January 1971 meeting between the President, Secretary Rogers, Secretary Laird, Admiral Moore, Director Helms and Dr. Kissinger, Nixon "...then commented that he had been encouraged by the recent report on the performance of Thai forces in Laos." FRUS 104 Memorandum for the President's File by the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig).

¹⁷ Mike Jarina Interviews.

THE FIRST TWINPAC MAKES AN APPEARANCE

Marking a milestone for the Air America Maintenance Department and helicopter operations, on the 17th, Air America's first Sikorsky Twin Pac conversion, XW-PHA, was towed by a tug driver from hangar one to the parking area for testing by Bob Davis.

BURKE RETURNS

Former ACPH Marius Burke returned to Udorn. After well over a year in California attending school on leave without pay status (LWOP), Marius was contacted by the Company to return for a couple of months as the helicopter program was short of pilots required to satisfy double crew requirements. Since he was working on a thesis, something that could easily be deferred until he returned, he elected to fulfill the requirement. Burke would soon receive an eyeful and likely question his decision to return to the fray.

Upon his return Burke discovered a host of new faces at the Air America facility. A senior pilot, he began transition training in the Huey as "Peter Pilot."¹⁸ Following his local indoctrination and proficiency flights, he was cleared for supervised upcountry field work.

On Thursday the eighteenth Burke and I were scheduled to fly out of Long Tieng with Tod Yourglich in XW-PFG. It had been years since we had flown together in the H-34 at Sam Tong, or on proficiency check rides. Now the situation dictated that as a second pilot fulfilling the double crew requirement on the front lines, he would not only receive area familiarization, but also valuable hands-on combat experience with an IP in the Vang Pao

¹⁸ Marius Burke Interviews.



A clean-looking Sikorsky factory manufactured S-58T used for publicity photos.

Air America Log, Volume 5, #1, 1971.



Displaying a distinctive, but unrealistic paint job, XW-PHA the first S-58T conversion flying over the rice paddy flatlands around the Udorn air base. All five Twinpacs located at the Udorn facility were eventually painted Marine green in order to conform with other helicopters and blend in with the terrain.

Stan Thompson Collection.

Line meat grinder before being turned loose on his own. He was not disappointed, for Long Tieng was rocketed during the day.

With large numbers of reinforcements arriving at The Alternate there was plenty to do. Men had to be moved forward and supplies shuttled to these and established positions. I logged almost ten hours and ten landings, allowing Marius to fly as much as I believed he could safely handle.

During the day Raven-26 reported to Cricket that enemy fire was impacting Long Tieng at 0216Z. Shamrock FAG reported 82mm mortar fire at 1300 hours. ¹⁹

"The major parts of two North Vietnamese Army divisions-the 316th and the 312th-are still encircling government positions at Ban Na, Phou Long Mat, and Phou PHA Sai, and they are close enough to the main complex at Long Tieng to harass it on a regular basis. On 18 March...they launched four rockets into Long Tieng, closing the airstrip for an hour but doing only relatively minor damage. Incidents of this type-rocketings, shelling attacks, small-unit clashes, and probes-are a daily occurrence, but of late no important positions have changed hands." ²⁰

The following morning, we returned to the field with the same crew and aircraft. Along with other Bell crews, Mike Jarina and Jack Knotts also moved north in XW-PFH. We were tasked to participate in a large lift of two Thai battalions and insert them in selected sites around the Site-72 valley. After consolidating, the men would move two miles southeast toward the abandoned village of Hintang in order to establish a defense line against enemy advances toward Zebra ridge and Sam Tong.

¹⁹ ABCCC Extracts.

²⁰ CIA Daily Bulletin. 03/20/71. Laos: The communist offensive west of the Plaine des Jarres is now nearly two months old and has yet to make any major gains.

With the landing zone properly identified and cleared by the Customer, I only conducted five landings during the day, allowing Marius to fly the rest and gain maximum experience in the Bell.

We were able to fly under the overcast, but adverse weather prevented visual air strikes by USAF assets. Also working underneath the cloud layer, Vang Pao's pilots flew and one was shot down and killed between the eastern Vang Pao line and Phou Pha Sai.²¹

Working late in order to complete a major portion of the lift, we recovered at Udorn well after dark with another ten-hour day in the book.

THE FINAL DAYS OF BAN NA

After Ban Na was finally recaptured by Meo irregulars and cleared for operations during October 1970 artillery fire support base (FSB) Puncher was quickly established and manned by two reinforced regular Thai Army infantry and artillery battalions. It was also flanked by defensive positions on ridgelines to the west and south. Original positions to the north had been lost or abandoned. The intention of this strong point was to plug a critical gap and control old trails leading from the Plain of Jars to Sam Tong and Long Tieng. In addition to covering the northern sector, the fire support base would also provide artillery support for Thai and SGU positions located to the southeast and southwest. Crew-served artillery and mortar positions were well entrenched and reinforced with all the accoutrements necessary for modern warfare base defense. For some time, aircraft supply missions were largely unopposed,

²¹ ABCCC Extracts.



Looking north-northwest at the Puncher fire support base and surrounding battle-scarred defensive positions at Ban Na.

CHECO, Blout.

with fixed wing (the largest being Caribous) either landing on the Site-15 strip or air dropping to outposts. Months before, occasional helicopter missions to the site were casual and unopposed without armed escort.

This scenario shifted dramatically toward the middle of the 1970-1971 dry season. The enemy systematically moved artillery and light AAA guns closer to the site, rendering air supply and landings extremely hazardous to all aircraft.

PAVN GENERAL CHUONG

To better understand the developing battle at Ban Na from the enemy perspective, excerpts from Major General Nguyen Chuong's 2002 book are inserted: ²²

"In early August 1970...I was summoned to the Joint Front Headquarters of the Combined Lao-Vietnamese Armies to be briefed on the plan for launching an offensive against the Long Tieng-Ban Na area...officers from the Vietnamese volunteer army's 316th Division and 866th Regiment and from Pathet Lao army units were already there...a number of sapper commanders also arrived...

...the 316th Division and 866th Regiment, together with a number of sapper units, were given the task of attacking Long Tieng...the campaign's primary offensive sector and attack target...

Pathet Lao army forces were given responsibility for providing coordination and support by attacking enemy forces along Route-13.

²² Nguyen Chuong, *Long Journey in the Land of a Million Elephants: A Memoir: Ban Na Before Time to Open Fire* (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2002) Translated by Merle Pribbenow, a CIA academic and Vietnamese linguist. Account provided to the Author by James Parker. Excerpts are paraphrased by the Author.

Our [Chuong's] 165 Regiment, reinforced by a composite battalion of 120mm mortars and a battalion of 12.7mm machine guns, was responsible for attacking the complex of defensive strong points at Ban Na ²³...Our regiment would be accompanied by a battalion of civilian coolie laborers from [NVN], which would transport ammunition and rice for us and would help us evacuate casualties.

After we returned from headquarters, we met with the senior officers of our regiment's three headquarters elements (staff operations, political, rear services) and of the regiment's subordinate battalions to give them their mission orders. We also immediately organized a team of command-level officers to go forward to reconnoiter the enemy's situation and the terrain to mark out the march legs for the movement of our troops to the attack position, and to diagram and lay out attack plans. I would command this advance unit...

The Lao mountain forests in this area were extremely rugged. None of us was familiar with this terrain, and there were no civilian residents to ask, so we had to rely on our maps and compare the terrain features we saw with our maps in order to map our route of travel. It took us more than a week of difficult travel, scaling high mountains and fording streams to finally reach the Ban Na area.

After three days of studying the area, we were able to obtain a rather good understanding of the enemy's strong-point complexes. Ban Na was located in a small valley with hills and rice fields, but it was surrounded by high mountains and ridges that almost completely encircled the valley.

²³ Author's Note: Ban Na had not been recaptured by Vang Pao's forces and the Thai fire support base Pucher established until October 1970. Therefore, Chuong's memory appears somewhat deficient, or more likely, his regiment's participation was a result of continued planning.

Three kilometers [1.8 miles] northwest of Ban Na was a high ridge that had a cluster of four enemy strong-points. Four kilometers [2.4 miles] southeast, on another high ridge, were four more strong-points. The center of Ban Na had a number of enemy strong-point complexes, with the most significant being the cluster of 105mm howitzer and [81mm] mortar positions, the supply warehouse complex, the helicopter landing area, and a cluster of four strong-points on the crests of a low ridge. We designated targets for each of our battalions and asked our commanding officers to go in close to their individual target in order to get a solid understanding of the target and to work out attack plans for each.

In order to simplify things, we decided to call the central area of Ban Na '**Area 1.**' This area consisted of the enemy's central headquarters and command post with a battalion of Thai troops, a Thai composite artillery battalion...a Lao battalion...The enemy's defensive fortifications in this area were rather solid...

The high ridge northwest of Ban Na was called **Area 2.** We called the four enemy strong-points on this ridge Points 3, 5, 9, and 11...This area [White Horse Fire Support Base] was held by [two Thai battalions].

Area 3 was the high ridge to the south held by a right-wing Lao Army SGU battalion. It also had a total of four strong-points"

Saturday was a very active day, with six Special Missions performed in various areas. Daily runs into Ban Na to supply Puncher and to bring WIAs and KIAs out were standard fare.

The Puncher missions marked a new and exciting experience for Marius Burke. He recalled later that enemy mortar fire covered most of the landing zones with generally heavy incoming fire. Therefore, it was incumbent on the pilots to fake a

landing at one pad and quickly land at another. He considered the entire operation outrageous, and the unreasonable demands on the pilots insane. ²⁴

Allowing for the time change inherent in the world, an Agency bulletin reflected:

"Since their damaging sapper attack on Long Tieng in mid-February the [NVA] have apparently concentrated on resupplying and repositioning their units. Although the communists have largely avoided large-scale ground assaults against fortified positions, some units have suffered substantial casualties from air strikes and government artillery bombardments. For its part the government has significantly reinforced the Long Tieng area-irregular combat forces there now number over 10,000-and aggressive patrolling in recent weeks has helped to keep the communists off balance.

Although the [NVA] offensive has lost some of its momentum, there is no evidence that the enemy is disengaging. As in the past, the communists have the capability of striking swiftly and in force with little warning. Only about two months of good weather remain...and if the North Vietnamese intend to try to take Long Tieng, they should begin pressing harder soon." ²⁵

By the end of the month Captain Marius Burke was released as a Bell PIC. On one flight, with Jack Knotts as Co-Captain, he was leading a gaggle of five helicopters into landing zones down ridge from Ban Na. During these trips Jack maintained the logbook. It was a particularly hairy time, so Jack asked Marius about keeping his hand on the manual fuel control switch should

²⁴ Marius Burke Interviews.

²⁵ CIA Daily Bulletin, 03/20/71. Laos.



March area of contention in Military Region Two.
CIA Map, 03/20/71.

it become necessary to activate it for "get out of Dodge" power. Burke indicated that it was acceptable to take this precaution.²⁶

AND THE BEAT GOES ON

Accurate air drops to troops at Site-15 and the surrounding hard points became increasingly difficult for fixed wing pilots, especially to outlying positions west of Ban Na proper. Ridgelines there were narrow and windy, with drop zones difficult to hit. Long periods of adverse weather prevented accurate parachute drops through the clouds. At first, employing sound and air-ground communications, airdrops were attempted into the windy bowl. However, like the battle at Dien Bien Phu, most drop attempts missed their targets and ended up in enemy hands. Unhappy with Air America's inability to perform the supply job, the Customer turned to CASI Otter pilots using LORAN navigation coordinates to place their loads on target. This worked for a time, but no drop technique proved satisfactory at this critical juncture in the battle for Ban Na. ²⁷

As the enemy noose tightened around Ban Na, making resupply less tenable, drinking water became the major scarce and cherished commodity. There was a water point at a stream located

²⁶ Jack Knotts Interviews.

²⁷ Toward the bitter end of the battle for Ban Na, General Chuong recalled: *"Virtually all the supply pallets that enemy aircraft had dropped by parachute had fallen around our positions, and some of them had contained fresh chicken meat, some had contained bread, some had contained cabbages and onions, etc. Only two parachute supply pallets had landed inside the enemy perimeter wire, but none of the enemy soldiers had dared to try to crawl out to retrieve them..."*

As for the enemy parachute supply pallets that we have captured. you can let your men eat the food and use the supplies, but make sure that you check on them carefully."

This was important, for Chuong's forces did not receive basic logistical support like food and they were *"forced to ration ammunition...firing just one bullet at a time, and yet still we fully carried out every mission order we had been given, and with minimal casualties..."*

in the valley north of the village and firebase, but it was a fair distance removed from the base and hauling water uphill proved a dangerous and laborious task that was only possible at night. Helicopters could no longer be used for the process because of an accessible trail system that permitted enemy access to the area. Moreover, troops manning outposts on the adjacent ridges had never been able to utilize the facility. The Customer was desperate for methods to deliver water to the men. All methods, no matter how absurd, were considered. Large rubber blivits, or bulky inner tubes filled with water were considered for drop. This suggestion was rejected when it was realized that the pillow tank would bounce on impact and be destroyed or lost in jungle ravines. One day Case Officer Dick Mann (Bamboo) and I landed on a hill south of the Site-15 complex to watch a CASI plane air drop supplies. Dick explained the water requirement dilemma and the rejected proposals for delivery. When he mentioned water filled inner tubes, tongue in cheek, I suggested erecting 200-foot poles over which I could hover with a sling load of tubes to drop. The pole's height would restrain the tubes, preventing them from bouncing off the landing pad. Of course, such a ludicrous suggestion was never seriously entertained.

As the situation worsened, helicopter pilots were increasingly reluctant to venture into the dangerous beehive of activity, and began to loudly complain to anyone who would listen. Therefore, in lieu of outright intimidation, Special Mission pay was authorized as an incentive for crews to perform the job. Of course, this entailed implementing the SOP stipulating two cockpit pilots, a SAR ship, and fixed wing escort. This was a problem as the drawdown and attrition had reduced the number of A-1s in one operational squadron at Nakhon

Phanom to 19 by February. ²⁸ Still, A-1E escort (call sign *Hobo*) was provided twice a day for the multi-helicopter gaggles. Time on target was generally programmed for 1000 hours and 1500 hours. ²⁹ However, with March normally the height of the smoky season, noon was often selected as an optimum time for the initial resupply mission of the day. At this time the sun was directly overhead, penetrating the haze to a degree, and better illuminating the ground.

To help assuage pilot reluctance and to assess and assemble current information and Thai requirements, the site's aggressive Case Officer George Bacon (code named *Kayak*) accompanied the first of two to three *Bells*. He then returned to *The Alternate* on an afternoon flight to provide a briefing during the nightly SKY Case Officer planning session.

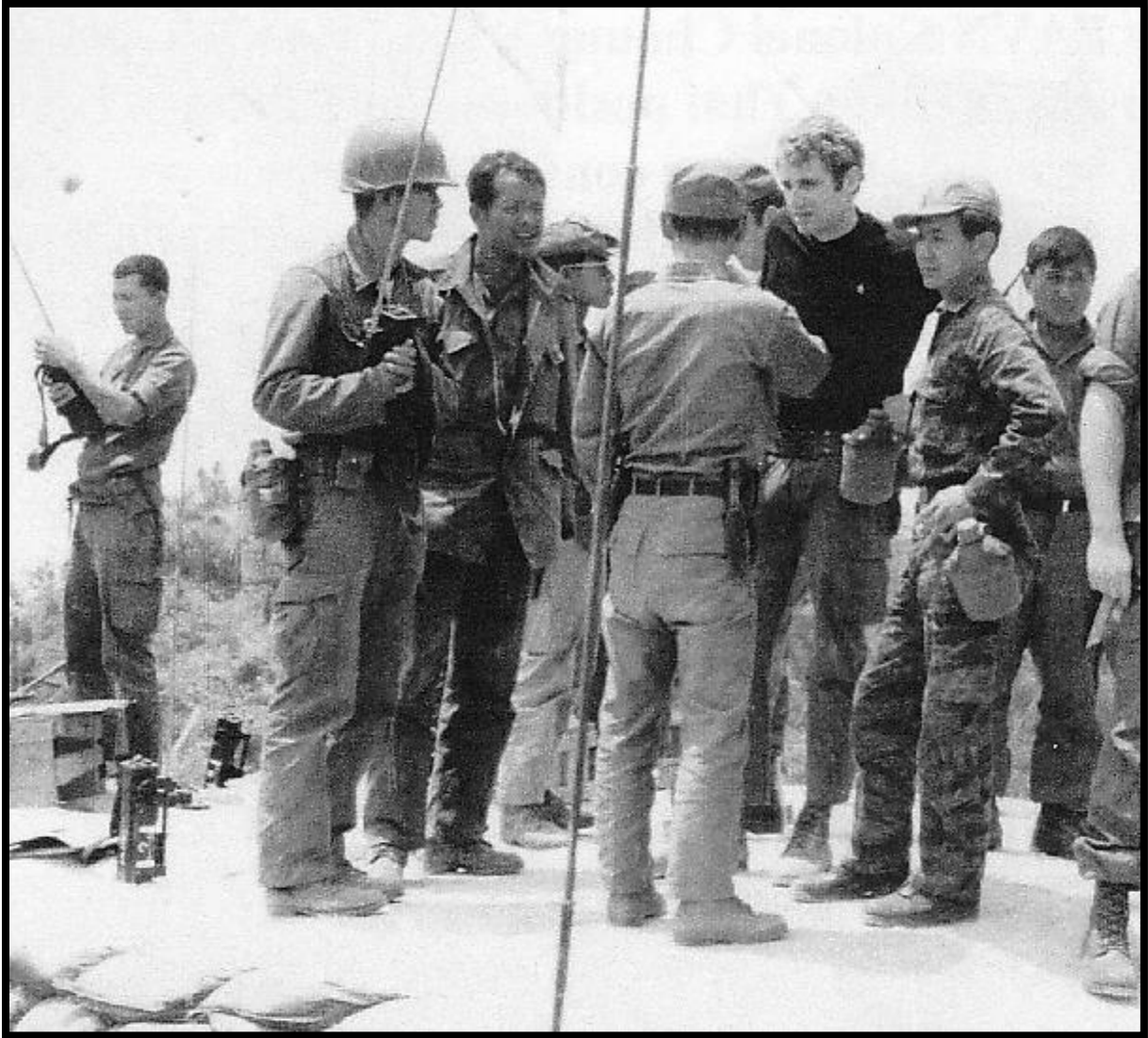
George rode with me several times. Although I never really entirely trusted his enthusiasm or judgment, as it seemed that he took undue chances, I admired his genuine gung-ho attitude. Consequently, I believed we always had good relations. I did what I could for him, and he always accepted my decisions.

BOB NOBLE

While assigned to SOG in Nam, Nobs frequently worked with George Bacon and considered him a top-notch warrior. Early in 1971, they reacquainted at Long Tieng, and Bob supplied George with his favorite snack consisting of saltines and Slim Jim beef jerky purchased from the Udorn Country Store.

²⁸ There originally had been six A-1 squadrons and one hundred planes in the USAF inventory. The low number of aircraft in 1971 and 1972 required strict priorities. First priority were SAR missions, without which no crewmember in his right mind would have acquiesced to fly in the Theater. Second was support of Lao government operations in MR-2 (the *Barrel*) during Vietnamese offensives.

²⁹ Blout, Harry, *CHECO*.



Case Officer George "Kayak" Bacon discussing a situation and plans with Thai officers at Ban Na.

Parker Collection, 61.

After their bonding derived from Nam experiences, Kayak attempted to ascertain which helicopter Bob was crewing and would take that one to Ban Na. As Noble was spending more and more time upcountry, this became a ritual, *"averaging at least two a day, once in the morning to drop George and crew off, and then the scary afternoon pick-up surrounded by artillery fire."*

On the day of Bob's birthday, 13 March, it was impossible to descend into the Ban Na valley without being fired at. During the morning trip to deliver George, the groundfire was intense:

"I tried to answer their fire with my CAR-15 but it was futile-something like a kink in a garden hose. When I returned to 20 Alternate, I checked for bullet holes and then ran off to find Jim "Tiny" McElroy begging him for a gun [with sufficient sound and hitting potential]...Tiny gave me a sterile Bren gun in 7.9 caliber with a box of loaded 30 round magazines...As we reentered the Lima Site-15 area the groundfire started but I was ready for them this time. I gave them three full magazines and thanked them for their birthday gift, a bullet hole in one of our rotor blades." ³⁰

After rendezvous with our A-1 cover, we flew fairly low over the Sam Tong bowl and remained low over the mountains and up the valley toward the site. Then, approaching Ban Na valley, after alerting the controlling FAG that we were inbound and requesting that he shut down outgoing fire from Puncher, we descended to the 4,500-foot level to partially mask our arrival from enemy units assumed to be located northeast, northwest, or anywhere in between. This helped our chances somewhat, but prewarned by the sound, forward observers on high ground were privy to our progress and were monitoring Puncher's radio frequencies. Moreover, after the first couple of missions the rigid nature of

³⁰ Bob Noble Email, 04/01/15.

our supply runs was predictable, and enemy gunners acted accordingly. Raven FACs trolled the area looking for potential targets for the A-1 pilots and other strike planes, but most of the camouflaged enemy weapons were in defilade and difficult to spot or destroy.

Adding to the danger, most pads were exposed and not situated in defilade, and they were pre-registered by indirect mortar fire. As "safe" landing zones dwindled, depending on the pilot's experience level (most of these missions were conducted by senior pilots) diversion and facade tactics became the norm, faking landings and making bogus radio calls before actually landing. While we were still able to land to retrieve wounded or dead on the ground, seconds counted. While sweating potential incoming, we remained "light on the skids," ready to leap off at a moment's notice should the situation warrant.

Part of the Agency agreement with the Thai military leaders for support during the battles for Long Tieng was prompt retrieval of their dead and wounded. This was acceptable when the situation was less invasive. However, when "nut cutting" time arrived, it became less feasible to spend undue time on the ground loading dead. Moreover, the odor of decaying humans was unbearable and invasive cabin contamination prevalent. I drew the line at this risk. I determined that I would continue retrieving WIA, but not the dead. As an alternative solution, nets were employed to haul the bodies out. This worked to a degree, but still required precious time and a "knowledgeable" Thai on the ground to hook the net to the lifting device while blinding clouds of dust were churned up, providing a lucrative target and inviting enemy fire. It did not seem to be a wise technique for longevity. Therefore, believing it foolish to risk

a helicopter and crew to retrieve bodies, I deferred to those more agreeably disposed. ³¹

Over time, and under enemy artillery pounding, the friendly defensive perimeter contracted and the site became a churned-up dirt pile, a white wasteland, something like pictures I had seen of the French Dien Bien Phu defensive positions in Bernard Fall's outstanding book, *Street Without Joy*. It was obvious that the end was near for Puncher and no one in their right mind wanted to die for a presumed lost cause.

Understandably, helicopter crews began to wonder and question why the Thai troops chose to remain in place taking severe punishment, and why we were attempting to retain a fixed piece of real estate that could be moved to another area. How much sacrifice (and the potential loss of a helicopter and crew) was acceptable to the Thai military and the Customer? Still, the Customer wanted to retain the Ban Na position no matter what the price.

At the time, we were unaware of high-level commitments, back-room deals, and assurances conveyed to Thai commanders and politicians by USG agencies that their troops would be fully supported no matter what happened. Therefore, with an obligation like that, despite the odds, pressure was intense on us to perform. It is unfortunate most pilots were never consulted to provide a more realistic picture of the situation and intended goals. Fortified with this information, we might have been more willing to cooperate in the high threat situation, but we probably would have incurred losses. Perhaps the thinking was that we would absorb the big picture by osmosis. The "go perform

³¹ Likely concessions had to be made by Thai leaders for this unconventional method of not respecting the dead, but given the situation and sentiment at the time, there was little choice or alternative for them. It became a distinct problem when Thai bodies began dropping out of the nets.

this assignment" did not always wash with helicopter pilots, particularly in such tenuous situations. We were not members of the U.S. military who could be ordered to perform a mission, and there were no acceptable losses attributable to our group. With the influx of new pilots, increasing lack of rapport with Case Officers (lie to me once, shame on you; lie to me twice, shame on me), direction of the war, and FEPA safety considerations, individual attitudes vacillated regarding what was an acceptable mission. Our participation in the battle for Ban Na continued to be dicey and contentious, but was not over yet.

To the east, Thai battalions moving toward the valley of Hintang ran into enemy resistance problems. This led to WIA recoveries around Site-72. Mike Jarina was upcountry flying 12F, and participated in work in the Site-72 area.³²

Phou Pha Sai, located at the end of the long ridgeline we called Padong, had served in the past as an outpost and artillery position overlooking the Hintang valley, associated trails, and terrain leading to the Plain of Jars. To revitalize and utilize the site, we conducted several shuttles to the high position.

During the day, Raven pilots directed thirty-seven strike sorties in support of ground troops. In the afternoon Raven-27 received serious battle damage and elected to land at the Site-72 strip. At 1645 hours, the pilot was retrieved by a helicopter crew. Of course, when something like this happened, even though not actually affecting the rescue, we all made ourselves available and participated in some way.

My three days of instructor flight with Burke completed, we chocked in at 1845 with almost ten hours and more than an hour night time. Even though I considered Burke reasonably proficient

³² Mike Jarina Interviews.

and wanted him to gain all the experience possible, because of the large number of Special Missions and unusual events cropping up during the day, I conducted fifteen landings.

Using the same aircraft, Captain Fonburg double crewed Gulf with Tod and me on Sunday, the 21st. Attesting to the sixty landings I conducted that day, doubled by John's participation, we shuttled sling load after sling load of bullets, beans, and bandages to Skyline, local fire bases, and surrounding landing sites. Five to ten-minute round trips were not unusual during the eleven-hour day.

We did not service Puncher that day, because escort was not available for various reasons. Therefore, John Fonburg's input regarding the Puncher mission is worth recording:

"It was a daily affair to hear a call to all Bell aircraft to report to the ramp at LS-20A for a briefing by Kayak. He would have us go into Ban Na to evacuate wounded. We had air cover but the place was surrounded and the [enemy] mortars were registered in on the area surrounding the strip. We would vary our landing spots around the runway but how they ever kept from hitting us in the air I'll never know. It was like flying through the target area of a bombing range while operations conducted and hoping no one would get lucky. As we started our landings the mortars would rain on the strip. We would pick up the wounded first then the last [aircraft] would hook up a sling load of dead bodies in a net and take these to the ramp at LS-20A for sorting out." ³³

Like the high flight time we had logged over the past few days, this day was equally busy with five minutes short of eleven hours.

³³ William Leary Notes, February-March 1971. Bill Interview with John Fonburg 08/09/91.

Early Monday morning, Don Overfield (DOH 01/19/68),³⁴ Flight Mechanic PA Velasquez (DOH 02/13/66), and I launched in 1196W for Long Tieng. The flight, in addition to a double crew, was scheduled for Don's route check. Because of this I only made two landings the entire day, for two of the three Special Missions.

Flying with Jack Knotts in Papa Foxtrot Juliet, Mike Jarina was also one of several other Bell crews working in the field that day. Exceeding our number, the crew conducted five Special Missions.³⁵

Having satisfied a one-year tour, some regular army units of the Thai contingent in the Long Tieng-Sam Tong area, known as Task Force Singha, were replaced by the first Unity³⁶ artillery battalion from Kokethiem, Thailand (Lopburi). This battalion was composed of 380 volunteers, led by twenty regular Thai Army (RTA) personnel. The force was deployed to fire base Zebra on the Romeo ridgeline and to FSB Tiger at Sam Tong.³⁷

On the 23rd, noticing the increased activity at the Zebra FSB, enemy gunners provided a "welcome aboard" with substantial mortar fire. For good measure, this was also duplicated at Tiger FSB.³⁸

³⁴ Don Overfield had originally been hired to fly H-34s, but, unable to satisfy the proficiency requirements, was reassigned to fly Bells in Saigon. Later, when there was a need to double crew Bells, he chose to return to Udorn.

³⁵ Mike Jarina Interviews.

³⁶ Unity: Thai volunteers deployed to Laos to supplement Meo and SGU defenders to ward off enemy advances and preserve the Long Tieng and Sam Tong complex for the Royal Lao Government. USG absorbed all expenses related to the movement.

³⁷ Ken Conboy, 297.

³⁸ ABCCC Extracts, 12.

"I started flying the S-58T-3 or Double Muscle as we call it. It doesn't seem too bad but the final test will come in the mountains.

The war gets wilder every day. I wish I could tell you everything, for you would be amazed at what goes on over there [in Laos]. It doesn't look like it will go away for some time yet."

Letter Home, 03/25/71.

THE NEW MACHINE

As the letter to my parents stated, on 23 March I began my hands-on introduction to Twinpac XW-PHA, with Bob Davis and Flight Mechanic Pigott. Following a thorough preflight in which Bob reviewed the new systems, using an abbreviated checklist we cranked the number one engine section, then the number two (subsequent starts were alternated between power sections). The whining sound of the engines was very different from the chugging of the R-1820 reciprocating engine. Transmission of power to the combining gearbox, the angle gearbox, and to the main transmission and rotor system was very smooth.

After taxiing to the grassy infield between the main runway and parallel taxiway, I began re-familiarization with the UH-34D's characteristics. We began by hovering. Since I had not flown the machine for some time, I had a tendency to hover low and touch the tail wheel on the ground. I was not aware of this until Bob cautioned me about it. With so much more shaft horse power (SHP) impinging the main transmission than ever planned when developed (1520 maximum SHP) the performance level was noticeable and satisfying. The engine, transmission, and tail rotor noise level seemed slightly lower than the H-34. Even with a different nose configuration, standard flight maneuvers were similar to any UH-34D proficiency check ride.

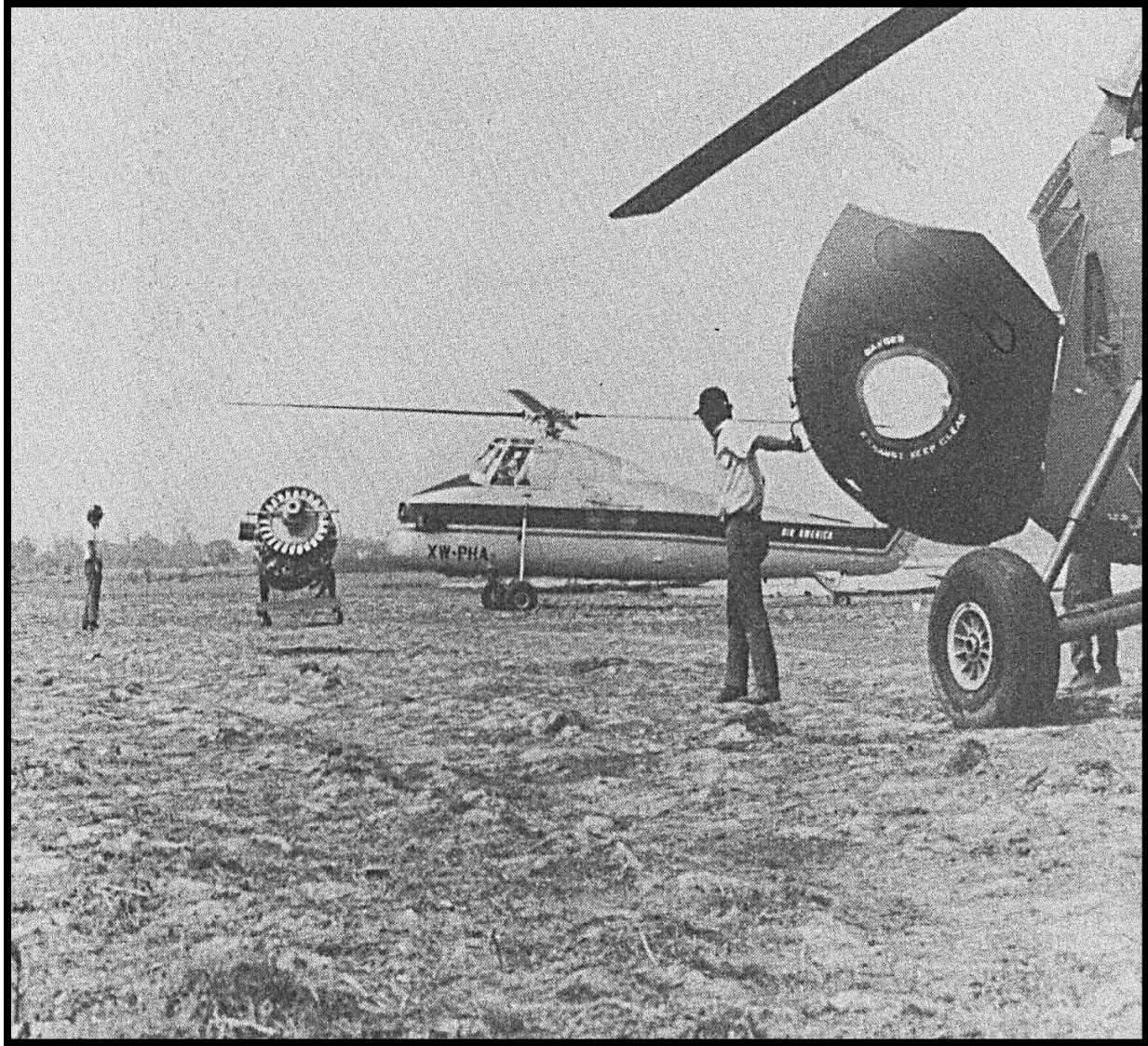
All in all, following the two-hour workout, I felt comfortable, was able to achieve a fair amount of proficiency, and learned new emergency procedures, like a single engine failure. However, from past experience I did not believe that the pilot operating manual and ground instruction had covered all the emergencies that could occur to the machine--failure of a gear in the combining gearbox was one. It was that way with all the helicopters I had flown. I was not particularly concerned with book descriptions; I could handle those. I was concerned with unpublished potential emergencies, those that might sneak up on and kill me when least expected. Knowing what could occur ahead of time was half the battle. As time went on, I addressed this subject.

After a debriefing with Bob, my day was not complete, for a FCF of 96W awaited me.

Two days later, local training on the Alpha Twinpac continued with Scratch Kanach and Rudy Serafico (DOH 06/23/61). Since Scratch was the Senior Instructor Pilot (SIP) under Davis for the program, and I was his assistant, we spent an hour training ourselves and standardizing our forthcoming teaching techniques. I could not have paired with a better man to do this with, for Scratch was always calm, cool, and collected and possessed many good ideas. Moreover, we had flown together many times in the past, and felt comfortable in the same cockpit.

Almost anticlimactic, we flew with "Pete" Peterson, a Sikorsky test pilot, who had been sent from the factory to show us the ropes. To achieve this and display the machine's capability close to gross weight, Davis had a 1,200-pound cement block strapped in the cargo compartment.

Seemingly a nervous type, Peterson talked a lot. He was quick to remind me that I had a lot more time in the machine than he did, but during our session he indicated that I was air



Following initial training, as part of the shakedown process, S-58T Papa Hotel Alpha was used to move Hotel-73's engine from Nong Khai to Udorn. Before scheduled upcountry, the distinctive paint job was changed to the olive drab color consistent with all UH-34D aircraft.

Air America Log, Volume 5, #4, 1971.



Conducting the first operational heavy lift, XW-PHA's pilot delivering Hotel-73's engine to Udorn.

Air America Log, Volume 5, #4, 1971.

taxiing sideways (I thought this strange, but perhaps he was a shaky individual and felt obligated to say something). For two hours Pete first demonstrated the S-58T's capabilities, and then had me perform. A large man, he reminded me of the cliché of a bull in a china shop. Toward the end of our session, as a confidence builder, he demonstrated, and then had me conduct, single engine performance maneuvers from an out-of-ground effect (OGE) at a hundred feet. Never having done this in an H-34, the exercise was a little scary, particularly the landing. It was an impressive feat, except for the fact that each power application exceeded the inter-turbine temperature (ITT) on the involved power section. Perhaps he had more success performing this on the factory tarmac, where the ground cushion would certainly provide a greater air cushion and more lift than on our grassy infield. I thought that, being an exalted Sikorsky test pilot, Peterson knew what he was doing, but I was decidedly wrong. The machine took a considerable beating that day, and required an engine change for one power section. Moreover, the session revealed that, other than a controlled crash, such performance in the mountains, as our canned demonstration attempted to portray, would never be achieved.

Friday morning, I was assigned standby at field for half a day without touching a helicopter, while Papa Hotel Alpha was being tested and then repaired.

AN EXCITING DAY AT BAN NA

With Puncher undergoing increased artillery barrages and the morale of the Thai troops waning, Major General Vitoon Yasawat (code name DHEP), Commanding Officer of Headquarters 333 located on the Udorn air base, elected to visit the firebase to

consult with officers and to rally the troops. ³⁹ Albeit a highly classified operation, Vitoon had first lost a modicum of face at Phu Pa Thi in March 1968, when his Thai troops elected to evacuate the position after North Vietnamese sappers attacked the Air Force manned electronic apparatus there. The second time was at Ban Khay, east of Moung Soui when the Thai artillery complex was attacked during June 1969 and the men withdrew. Granted, both times his men had not been adequately supported by other units unable or unwilling to fight. So far, the Thai battalions helping to defend the Long Tieng and Sam Tong complex had been performing a commendable job. Even though the situation at Site-15 was almost untenable, Vitoon wanted the men to remain in place, hold, and not further besmirch his reputation.

On 27 March, the day of Vitoon's planned visit, Captain Dick Elder, Flight Mechanic Bob Nobel, and I were scheduled to work The Alternate in Bell 205 Papa Foxtrot Juliet. Since we were both senior pilots except for a proficiency ride, we rarely flew together. A highly experienced pilot, I respected Dick and his ability to handle a helicopter during all phases of operation, particularly during Special Missions. What I should have realized at the time was that we were paired for a specific reason.

Taking turns conducting missions, we initially supported the volunteer Thai BC 605 and 606 battalions' 24 March movement

³⁹ General Vitoon Yasawasi's name. Depending on the source and transliteration of his name into English it had been recorded as Yasawsdi, Yasawat, or Yasawatdi. The Author later was involved in an embarrassing incident concerning the general.



Thai General Yasawat (DHEP), left, discussing tactical affairs with his officers at Long Tieng.

Parker Collection, 70.

to Zebra (Sebra) Ridge line ⁴⁰ after being rejected by the enemy, and failing to assume defensive positions around the Ban Hintang salient.

Later in the morning, our helicopter crew and another one were called to the upper parking ramp for a briefing by a Customer. (Kayak had gone into the site earlier.) At this time, we learned of the planned very-important-person (VIP) trip into Ban Na. Being the senior pilot, Elder would lead the flight.

Unlike some other pilots, Elder's view of the Puncher situation was largely pragmatic. Normally he simply attempted to safely accomplish a mission. In Dick's words:

"The siege of Ban Na didn't just happen overnight. The Thais were brought in to help hold Sam Tong and Long Tieng...It's in a small bowl with a ridge to the northeast. [During the early period] we could go in and out with air support without exposing the aircraft to direct enemy fire. The idea was fine until the enemy got into the bowl and tunneled to within a few hundred yards of the strip [like the battle for Dien Bien Phu]. We held the ridge and the strip but flying into the pads, the enemy [later] would come out of spider holes with automatic fire and 82mm mortar [fire]. The helicopter mission was to remove the dead and wounded which became more and more precarious the closer the enemy came to the strip until it was like running the gauntlet every trip. The basic theme never changed however; it was always voluntary. We all knew what was involved and the risks..." ⁴¹

⁴⁰ Author Note: Some Thais not fluent in English have a problem pronouncing certain words. The letter Z was one, hence Zebra morphed into Sebra. This was evident on the 14 October 1972 SCAT (Thai) Chopper pad #2 schematic.

⁴¹ Professor William Leary Notes, 8 February-6 April 1971. Dick Elder's recollection of the Site-15 situation as related to Professor Leary on 19 August 1991.

The Thai general and four of his subordinates boarded our Bell. Then, when the A-1E escort was overhead, our two crews launched for the fifteen-minute trip to Puncher.

The Ban Na complex had been receiving some harassing fire when we arrived and it increased while Dick circled to wait for a lull in activity. The place looked even worse than it had a week before. Gun positions still appeared intact, but sandbagged revetments and trenches were torn up and the areas surrounding the firebase looked more and more like an imagined moonscape. Cordite and other unmistakable acrid chemical odors of artillery and rocket fire rose to our altitude.

With the SAR ship monitoring us, at the appropriate time, Dick began a rapid descent toward Puncher's command post. It was scary. I was just along for the ride, so with nothing to do but monitor gages and look for potential hot spots, I had to suck up my courage and hope for the best. I had been through a lot of sierra in the past, but nothing quite like what we endured that day.

After landing, with only a little assistance from Noble, the passengers hustled out of the machine and scurried for the reinforced command post bunker at high port. During his time on the ground, I suspected the general would obtain a firsthand look at the hell to which his troops were being subjected.

Within seconds, we were airborne, surging through piss, sierra, and corruption, en route to The Alternate to return to work morning assignments. Of course, we were aware that the second phase of the operation, the retrieval, remained for us to conduct later in the afternoon.

Our time in the barrel finally arrived. In a repeat of the first run of the morning, Dick darted into the jaws of death again under identical, if not worse, battle conditions. As a prearranged strategy, the passengers were encouraged to hide



Overhead view of the Ban Na air strip and battle-scarred complex.
Parker, 88.

in a ditch while Dick faked a landing to the opposite side of their location. Then, as artillery and mortar barrages converged on that area, Dick rapidly hovered to the actual landing zone. The same passengers plus Kayak boarded, with the general (DHEP) diving onto a bench seat and curling up into a ball-like fetal position. ⁴² With ground and artillery fire increasing by the second, Dick took off and began a high-power spiral to altitude. When I glanced into the rear cabin section, I saw an emotional general, unlike anything I had ever seen in a Thai man. With his face buried in his hands, I was not sure if he was so elated to be leaving that hornet's nest, or if he wanted to cry or kiss us. It had been a heart-pumping operation for all of us, and frankly, I was happy to be leaving that damned place of death and destruction. Moreover, I also wondered how long we would be able to support the Thai force there without losing a crew and machine, and before all crews refused to support the mission.

Prepared for the inevitable, this time I cradled my compact .30 caliber M-2 carbine. I had only fired the weapon once before in anger, from the cockpit during the Ernie Brace SAR mission in the Beng Valley with Robby Robertson in May 1965. ⁴³ Now, as we departed, I suspected some of the small arms fire directed at us emanated from the water point in the valley below. Each time we became uncovered during Elder's 360-degree spirals, I could see the northern sector below. Therefore, using the logic that there certainly were no good guys down there, I drew a bead and fired

⁴² I had seen such extreme mental trauma and shock under duress before off Okino Island in the Ryuku chain, when we rescued a Japanese seaman from a pitching and rolling vessel in the South China Sea. After the large U.S Navy corpsman was brought up on the hoist cable and entered the cabin, crying, curling into a fetal position, he immediately sought the comfort of the corner of the bench seat. Obviously in deep shock, I brought him back to reality with a robust punch to the face. For the story, see Book 2, *The Crotch*.

⁴³ See Book Six-1965.

a few indiscriminate bursts out the window at the area on full automatic. If my action did nothing more than create noise, add to utter confusion, and further rattle nerves in the helicopter, it went a long way toward making me feel better. It took my mind off the intangibles, and established me as an active participant in the wild mêlée. Additionally, there were times when suppressive fire from our helicopter was warranted. Moreover, without counter fire from a Flight Mechanic, I probably would not have survived the war. ⁴⁴ ⁴⁵

Wondering if our machine had been hit, the flight back to Long Tieng seemed to take an eternity. Once on the ramp, while the passengers disembarked, Dick shut the helicopter down for inspection. Miraculously and inexplicably, we had escaped battle damage. Dick Elder performed a masterful job that day, dashing into and out of the Puncher facility. Undoubtedly there was a lot of skill involved, but blind luck and more than a bit of praying must also be lauded.

After refueling we headed for the house. I had twenty landings under my belt, and I am sure Dick had an equal or greater number.

⁴⁴ There was a prior mission with Scratch Kanach, on a road watch insertion eighty or ninety miles northeast out of Savannakhet, when our Flight Mechanic refused to carry a weapon, that I wished I had fired at a visible combatant on the ground, who shot at and hit our ship

⁴⁵ Years later, while still conducting research for my project, I described this incident to Wayne Knight. He said that he probably would have chastised me for my action had he been there and been made aware of my firing of the M-2 carbine from the cockpit. He never did anything like that in his thirteen years with Air America.

This poignantly shows office management mentality. Despite Wayne's 1972 wounding on Skyline, he had been in the States in school during much of the hours of sierra we had experienced in 1970-1971. Adhering to Company policy was fine, but recalling Charlie Jones' philosophy of "one hand for you, one for the Customer, and if necessary, two hands for you," we did what was necessary to survive. In rebuttal, Wayne stated that sometimes rotor blades, skids, and the sort were damaged by such action.

THE QUAGMIRE

Ban Na had been generally surrounded by units from the dreaded 315th Division and the 27th Special Forces Dac Cong battalion since February. Now, pressure began increasing with the addition to the fray of the 165 Regiment of the 312 Division. Exacerbating the situation, friendly air to counteract enemy advances was severely limited by an inability to conduct accurate visual strikes because of smoke and haze. In addition, air support had contracted in Military Region Two because of the Lam Son operation and retaliatory strikes in North Vietnam for the enemy's violation of the Vietnamese DMZ buffer zone.⁴⁶

DHEP's Puncher visit had been productive in one sense, for the general now realized that drastic measures had to be taken to bolster Puncher's troops by taking pressure off the site; and providing a pressure relief valve should the position become totally untenable and a sudden withdrawal become necessary. Therefore, with Long Tieng Case Officers' assistance, a plan was formed whereby the two Thai battalions recently arrived at Romeo Ridge from the failed Hintang Valley operation would be lifted to the base of a commanding hill about two and a half miles southwest of Ban Na. Once the position was captured, it would be fortified with a 105mm howitzer and 4.2mm mortar crew calculated, to bring further misery to the enemy.⁴⁷

Sunday morning Scratch Kanach, Bob Noble, and I launched for The Alternate in Papa Foxtrot Juliet. It was time for my upcountry route check. We supported the mustering of BC 605 and 606 personnel in and around Romeo Ridge for the next day's proposed lift ten miles north-northeast to the selected site near Ban Na.

⁴⁶ John Bowman, *Almanac*, 278.

⁴⁷ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 297.

After flying almost six hours, we switched ships to Papa Foxtrot Gulf. Flying until almost dark, we returned to Udorn after logging ten hours. During a busy day, I had conducted twenty landings in each Bell in and around the Vang Pao Line.

The lift was programmed to commence on the 29th. However, one unit of forty individuals, discouraged by losses and low morale, deserted, walking to Sam Tong and Long Tieng. ⁴⁸

Undeterred, accompanying other Bell crews, Mike Jarina and Don Overfield went upcountry in 13F to participate in the two Thai battalion lift. In the process they completed one Special Mission. ⁴⁹

The initial effort to seize the hill failed. On 31 March, two Meo units joined the Thai battalions with "four deuce" support. Supported by 105mm and 155mm fire from Zebra artillery batteries, the objective was taken by 1 April. ⁵⁰

IP TRAINING

Keeping me out of the Ban Na blender, the following three days of the month were involved in S-58T transition training. It was ironic that I would be flying both the Bell and S-58T for a while. I could recall complaining to management about alternating flying the Bell and H-34, sometimes during the same day, during the Plain of Jars operation in late 1969, because of the different aircraft configurations and emergency procedures. It seemed like déjà vu all over again, ⁵¹ but the difference now was that I was a "professional" instructor pilot (IP), and such activity was expected.

⁴⁸ James Parker, *Timeline*.

⁴⁹ Mike Jarina Interviews.

⁵⁰ Jim Parker.

⁵¹ Courtesy of humorous witticism from former New York Yankee baseball catcher Yogi Berra.

From late morning on the 29th until early afternoon, Kanach, Pigott, and I conducted standard flight techniques and emergency procedures in Papa Hotel Alpha. This was done for aircraft familiarization and standardization, in concert with the upcoming demands on us when S-58T pilot training began in earnest.

On Tuesday, with Rudy Serafico the acting Flight Mechanic, I spent the entire day at the field flying Papa Hotel Alpha (PHA), first with Bob Davis and then with Scratch Kanach. After almost five hours of rigorous training and twenty landings, I was released as Kanach's assistant S-58T instructor.

We were still working out Alpha's bugs prior to sending the ship upcountry. Toward noon on the last day of the month, after PHA was released from the hangar, Charlie Weitz and I participated in an FCF and short training stint in the machine. Although he had attended S-58T classes and had been through preflight and cockpit sessions, Charlie seemed ill prepared and fumbled through the cockpit checklist. It seemed to me that he either was having a bad day or had not studied procedures. Except for saying that he needed to study, I did not make an issue of his deficiency.

As the strong man and de facto vocal leader of our group, Charlie had issues with Kayak regarding Ban Na missions. Echoing what many pilots thought, his argument with George Bacon was lucid and logical. He indicated that creating a fresh emergency would never solve an existing emergency. Of course, Bacon, concerned about his people's welfare, was loath to

Listen Charlie's argument ⁵² ⁵³ ⁵⁴

It was generally accepted among our group and his peers that Bacon was a difficult person to deal with. In the words of a fellow Case Officer, he was an aggressive type who, if given his head, *"would have been in the thick of battle with his troops. He was very devoted to the people he worked with and didn't think much of the Air America pilots...he probably pushed the edge where their safety was concerned...It was a very bad situation for everyone."* ⁵⁵

"In retrospect, [Bacon] should have been pulled out-but no one at the time questioned his commitment or his courage." ⁵⁶

KUDOS

General Vitoon must have been impressed with our performance on the 27th, for within two weeks a pleasant letter from DHEP arrived in the Chief Pilot's office for each member of our crew. In addition, we received a cigarette lighter

⁵² During our Email discussions that covered the entire period of our participation in the war, Wayne Knight indicated that Charlie Weitz, who he considered a good friend, did not have time for such things, but he was also a very proficient pilot. He was a more complex person than most gave him credit for, suggesting that perhaps he intentionally messed-up his procedures in order to illicit a response from me.

I do not believe Charlie was contemptuous or jealous of my instructor position, but who really knew a person's real motivation. In rebuttal, Wayne indicated that Charlie had a lot of faults, but jealousy was not one of them. When Wayne elevated Marius to his deputy, Charlie entered the office complaining about the selection. That was the only time he heard Weitz criticize an individual.

⁵³ With over 114 hours and twenty-seven Special Missions, the month had been quite rewarding from a financial standpoint.

⁵⁴ Bill Leary 1971 Notes, Weitz Interview, 08/08/91.

⁵⁵ Bill Leary 1971 Notes, former Case Officer at Long Tieng George "Digger" O'Dell Interview, 01/05/93.

⁵⁶ Bill Leary 1971 Notes. Interview with James Glerum, AB-1's second in command to Pat Landry.

8 April 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR: Air America
FROM : DHEP
SUBJECT : Prime Minister's Tokens for
Air America's Officers

1. Our gratitude goes out to the three Air America officers - Captain Richard Wareen Elder, pilot; Captain Harry Richard Casterlin, pilot; and Mr. Robert Bruce Noble, flight mechanic - who are in charge of regular helicopter missions to resupply the forces at Ban Na, where the situation has now grown serious and enemy threat and pressure are great. In addition, they help undertake medical evacuation of the sick and/or dead individuals from the unit sites.

2. The worthwhile contribution to Ban Na operations in such a dangerous environment reflects their individual exemplary working spirit and sense of combat man discipline and bravery that contribute directly to the morale and will to fight of those field combat units. Such heroic performances lead to high appraisal and appreciation on them by all who may witness and hear of the deeds, especially those personalities concerned.

3. On the other hand, when the H.E. the Prime Minister has heard of this, he chose compact token for each of the above Air America officers and delivered them with his personal regards through DHEP.

4. I would, therefore, upon your acknowledgement, request for your kindness in passing on these pieces of the Premier's gift to Captain Richard Warren Elder, Captain Harry Richard Casterlin, and Mr. Robert Bruce Noble, added with deep congratulations of mine to all the three.

Yours very sincerely,

DHEP

The DHEP (Vitoon) letter to the crew of Bell 205 PFJ.

purportedly from the Prime Minister of Thailand. Inscribed on the black plastic overlay was the Thai Army coat of arms and something relating to the New Year (they were obviously excess gifts). It was a nice gesture for merely performing our job and another kudo to add to my increasing "attaboy" collection.

"I am sending you under separate cover some letters [of commendation] pertaining to my job. With one of them I received a lighter with the compliments of the Prime Minister Thailand. I will explain this one when we get home. Please gather these and the rest that I have sent you and put them in the safety deposit box so that they won't become lost and I will have them available to show the kids someday."

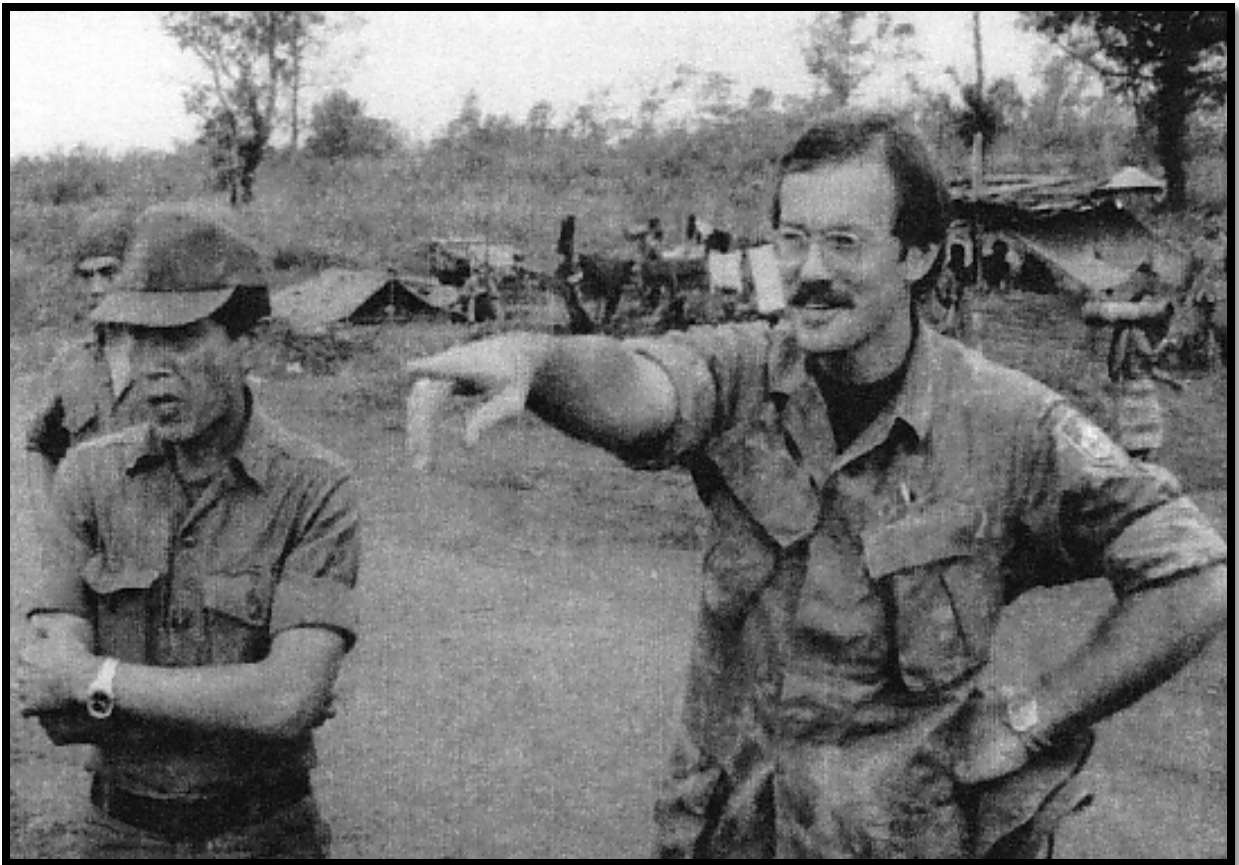
Letter Home, 04/27/71.

JARINA

While I was proving my worth and obtaining my credentials for IP work in the Twinpac, Mike Jarina retraced the familiar Long Tieng commute track with PIC Ed Reid in PFG. They worked until it was time for a morning trip into Puncher to evacuate wounded. The briefing was attended by several pilots, including an animated Frenchy Smith, who was talking about the enormous risks involved in the mission. Emotions were generally high, and someone was yelling about not flying into Ban Na because there was incoming artillery and the effort was much too dangerous.

Former Marine Mike Ingham, code named Hard Nose, had recently arrived at The Alternate as a Case Officer and advisor to a Thai unit. He sat in on a number of briefings Bacon presented for the Ban Na missions:

"...it was clear that the Air America folks were very suspicious of Kayak's enthusiasm for the project. That friction created a good deal of hostility on both sides and it colored



Agency Case Officer Mike "Hardnose" Ingham discussing tactics with a Thai commander.

Parker, 72.

the opinion of not only the case officers, but the Air America guys who were forever more suspicious of the customers motives...

After I saw this, I became more cautious in how I treated the Air America crews and in what I asked them to do..." ⁵⁷

After getting everything sorted out, and willing crews established for the mission, the pilots launched for a standard 1130 rendezvous when the sun was at its zenith and optimum visibility afforded. Before long the A-1 drivers called' wanting to know the helicopters' location. The smoke and haze was so bad that visual contact was never established, so the mission was aborted. Reid, leader of the Bell contingent, said to all involved, *"We will try again tomorrow."*

After returning to The Alternate, Ed said to Mike in passing, *"Good luck tomorrow, Mike. I am off the schedule."*

On the 31st, the weather was unworkable for visible [bombing] delivery until 1000 local hours. Raven FACs flew twenty-three missions in support of friendly ground forces. Raven-50 made an emergency landing at LS-249 [Ban Na Then between Vang Vieng and Mounk Kassy] with control problems. ⁵⁸

After arriving at The Alternate, Mike and Pat Colgan continued supporting irregular Thai forces attempting to capture the high ground southwest of Site-15 and other missions in the area. So far volunteer Thai units had not been successful in the endeavor because of efforts of a few well-dug-in North Vietnamese Army troops. ⁵⁹

⁵⁷ William Leary Notes: Interview with former Case Officer Mike Ingham, 01/07/93. This was written long after the covered time period and does not reflect the considerable animosity between some pilots and Ingham.

⁵⁸ ABCCC Extracts, 12.

⁵⁹ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 297.

About 1000 hours Tod was refueling Papa Foxtrot Juliet, when Kayak dashed to the ship anxious to mount an emergency trip into Ban Na. ⁶⁰ Overhearing Kayak's request, another pilot indicated that Billy Pearson was the senior pilot upcountry and all were supposed to abide by his decision as to a "go or no go." When Mike asked if Billy P had been contacted, Kayak indicated he was unable to find him.

Suspicious, Mike conducted a radio search and talked to Billy P about the mission. Billy said that he had refused the mission, and said in the clear that if Mike went on the mission and got shot down, he would not come to his rescue.

Double checking Pearson's story, Mike asked Kayak if he had talked to Pearson. Then he informed him of what Billy had said. Kayak responded, *"Yeah, but someone has to go in and pick up the wounded."*

"I think you have a problem. If Billy P turned it down, then I'm not allowed to go in there. I think you should call the CPH and obtain a decision. If he says OK, I can do it. Excuse me, I have to go back to work."

There was a young Customer in the cabin section who heard all the conversation, who then asked Mike, *"Do you remember me?"*

"No."

"Rice, refugees, and rooftops. I was one of the people at your house the night you were briefing us about Air America."

The young Case Officer was in charge of a Thai unit who had just recaptured a landing zone overlooking Sam Tong. As a reward, he wanted to air drop a case of beer. Mike asked why

⁶⁰ Crewmember enthusiasm for George Bacon's missions continued to wane, particularly after John Fonburg refused to go into Puncher at night, and some other pilot had dinged a ship. As a result, SOP policy dictated that the senior pilot upcountry would make the final decision as to the viability of a mission.

drop the beer? The youngster indicated that the pad might be mined. Mike countered that the weight of the object would trigger any mine. Therefore, as the lesser evil, he elected to land with the beer.

While they were en route to the pad, Mike discussed the proposed mission to Site-15 with his crew. *"If Ford says OK, I'm going. If you don't want to go, I'll get another crew."* Pat and Tod opted to go.

Later, when it was getting close to the time for the mission, Mike asked Kayak if he had called and talked to John Ford regarding the situation.

"No."

To obtain a final determination and attempt to satisfy all parties, they walked to the radio shack and called Udorn. Mike explained the situation, indicating that, *"Billy P turned the mission down. If you OK it, we are all set to go. If I get knocked down, they are probably going to fire me. If I do go and make a success of it, it will be a bad reflection on Billy. It's not fair."*

John said not to conduct the mission.

As a result, for the first time Mike was called to the SKY headquarters fortress, where a maze of offices existed. He was asked by a tall person with a mustache why he had turned the mission down. (With the increase in military activity, there were a lot of new personnel at Long Tieng we did not know at the time). Then he began, *"Since the union had been formed..."*

Mike cut him off, saying passionately, *"Wait a minute, Billy P isn't a member of FEPA (he joined later)."* Mike explained the facts to the guy. He completely forgot to inform the individual that the Customer sitting in the cargo compartment had heard all that transpired, and that Mike was going into Ban Na if given the green light from management. As

he left the headquarters, Mike could not understand why the COS did not know the chain of command. In addition, he felt bad because he thought he could perform the mission, and was disappointed when Ford said not to go.

A few days later, Dick Elder showed him a cigarette lighter obtained after a recent mission (the General Vitoon mission to Ban Na with Elder and me). He also related that he had been working around Bouam Long. On his way back to The Alternate, someone called him asking if he would stop by Site-15 and retrieve some people. He complied, and did not get shot at. ⁶¹

The situation and contention generated by Puncher missions were naturally a topic of conversation in Udorn. The necessity to do something positive eventually reached Washington, as a meeting of the 40 Committee on 31 March attested. ⁶² There was general discussion and agreement to station U.S. military gunships at Udorn to support Air America medical evacuation flights into Ban Na. Cobra helicopters were not available and CINCPAC would have to be queried as to the availability of UH-1B gunships that could also be used for medevac. Until advised otherwise, Chairman Kissinger was under the misguided assumption

⁶¹ Mike Jarina Interviews.

⁶² The 40 Committee: According to Internet Wikipedia information this was a division of the Executive branch of the United States Government whose mandate was to review major covert actions. In 1971 this special group was composed of members from the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CIA, and the National Security Council.

that Air America pilots would be employed to fly the gunships. ⁶³

⁶³ FRUS #172, 03/31/71, Minutes of a Meeting of the 40 Committee, San Clemente. Various subjects were covered including Thai SGU, gunships, funding and control, and tribal pressure on Vang Pao for relocation.

Kissinger's statement reveals how little some Washington, D.C. hierocracy knew about Air America personnel, their participation, and mission in the Laos war.

White Horse program: Thai operated gunships accompanied by an experienced U.S. Army attaché pilot in the cockpit did not become available in time to support our missions at Ban Na.

As the waning days of the dry season moved inexorably toward the annual change, it was obvious that this rainy season would be different in Military Region Two. Washington leaders were disposed to withdraw from the war and disengage from combat. Therefore, offensive actions that might involve increased U.S. participation were not favorably considered. Except for continued interdiction of infiltration routes in Laos, strategic and tactical air had been greatly reduced to the point that supporting offensives or defensive sites was impaired.

With a war run primarily by the U.S. State Department and its representative, Ambassador Godly, coordination was lacking, and a high priority assigned to operations in Military Region Two. Moreover, *"there was no effective organizational structure for directing joint operations and no provision for joint planning to effectively use the available resources."* Despite the inherent and new problems, air power played a dominant role and successes hinged on its effectiveness.

The current enemy offensive in Military Region Two was more persistent and severe than in prior years. While attention was focused on preserving the Long Tieng complex, enemy units had been improving the primary logistic Routes-7 and 72. Before 1969 supply bases were located in North Vietnam, necessitating two months of laboriously moving supplies along LOCs into position prior to any attack. Now huge, well defended supply depots were established inside Laos at Ban Ban and Xieng Khouang Ville. Smaller, but equally necessary, depots were fashioned in the Nong Pet road junction area and in caves along the Ban Than valley. Other forward storage areas existed in sites along the

north and southeast Plain of Jars. Photo recon even divulged a storage cache at the inviolate Chinese Cultural Center at Khang Khay. Consequently, with supplies located within a reasonable distance from the main battlefield that could be moved forward by coolie labor, larger enemy units could be maintained in country during the wet season.

Attesting to the massive storage sites in Military Region Two, during late March, air strikes in the Ban Ban locale produced more than 4,000 secondary explosions. ¹

Largely unimpeded by occasional "mango rains," ² estimates of 8,500 Vietnamese were located close to sites 20, 20A, 72 and 15. Well supplied by Plain of Jars stockpiles, the majority in the southern area, enemy gunners daily shelled Ban Na with 85mm Long Tom and 122mm artillery. Their range of action allowed them to move freely around the area, rocketing and mortaring all government defensive positions. Some probes had overrun outposts and increased threats to most sites.

In addition to depleted Meo ranks FAR and SGU battalions from Military Region Three, there were twelve Thai volunteer battalions present for the anticipated battle. Totaling 12,000 men with the Thai equipped with the latest weapons, the balance of power had nearly swung toward equaling that of the enemy. Vang Pao's troops were well entrenched, able to deliver counter fire from the four fire support bases at the four sites, and also implement minor probes toward the enemy.

By April a major ground effort to relieve Ban Na was underway. To the north, substantial enemy forces masked the

¹ Lofgren, William and Sexton, Richard. *CHECO, Air War in Northern Laos 1 April-30 November 1971*, 1-2, 06/22/73.

² Mango Rains: A Thai term describing early rainfall preceding the actual wet season.

Bouam Long complex. ³

UPCOUNTRY

Attesting to the serious nature of the conflict in the Long Tieng area, and the continuing ferry requirement (Long Tieng commute) that consumed about two and a half hours up and back, I was retrieved early from the house and arrived at the Air America facility at 0430 hours for a first light departure in 8535F. Jim Spencer, who was still undergoing transition in our area, was my cockpit mate.

Consolidation of Hill 1663, two and a half miles southwest of Ban Na, had just begun after superior Thai forces took an inordinate amount of time to reach the summit held by a small number of enemy forces on 1 April. A 105mm howitzer and "four-deuce" mortar were lifted to a nearby site that was designated fire support base White Horse.

That night BC 605 was attacked by mortar fire and sapper teams. Largely unprepared, exposed, and without adequate perimeter defense, the Thai unit lost five KIA and thirty-eight WIA. ⁴

We all considered the loss of Ban Na a fait accompli. Landing zones had been substantially reduced and enemy who had breached the perimeter were popping up from spider holes to shoot at pilots courageous enough to attempt a landing. Nobody wanted to fly into the site, and there were some crewmembers who outright refused to comply with Kayak's mission requests. Since Vang Pao and the Customer considered the site essential to area defense, there was a lot of unpleasantness and tension created

³ Harry Blout, *CHECO, Air Operations in Northern Laos 1 November 1970-1 April 1971*, 48.

⁴ Ken Conboy, 297.
Jim Parker.

over the situation. The simple fact was that without helicopter support, Puncher and its units could not exist and it was doomed. Parachute air drops by fixed wing pilots rarely were successful, and most bundles landed in no-man's land or in the midst of the enemy. ⁵

During the ten-hour day, Jim, the Flight Mechanic, and I, along with several other crews, flew sling load after sling load into the site to stoke the thirsty guns. I ended the day with twenty sorties; Jim probably logged the same or a greater number.

Since the combination of my duty and flight time exceeded the stipulated maximum, I was not scheduled on the third.

Other areas endured hostilities. That night the enemy seized the regional headquarters in the Moung Nham (LS-63) valley, ten miles east of Tha Thom in the Zone Steel region. Within a week, under the guidance of Case Officer Dick Mann, the site was retaken. ⁶

During the night and morning of 3 to 4 April, while I was absent from the battlefield, Two Company from BC 605 was tasked to proceed from the hills northeast toward Ban Na, to clear the area, create a diversion, and take some pressure off Puncher's Thai forces. The operation became impractical after an F-4 driver accidentally dropped a 2,000-pound bomb on the outpost,

⁵ I personally had no problem with Customers at The Alternate. During 1971 there had been an influx of new Case Officers, formerly involved in the South Vietnam war as military personnel, who failed to understand our peculiar civilian status. Moreover, since we were commuting to Long Tieng, there was little chance to establish the rapport that had been possible during past years. Naturally, many pilots were reluctant to comply with hard charger requests, and the occasional rabid, and perhaps jaded, Customer could not understand that we were not being paid to die.

⁶ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 297. The Author had a photo of Bamboo (Dick Mann) and his assistant at this site but it was lost after lending it to a friend.

killing a battalion and company commander, a few troops, and wounding many others.

Despite the tribulations encountered, the Thai units did succeed in temporarily diverting enemy attention away from Ban Na and other defensive sites in front of Long Tieng. ⁷

Perhaps flight Mechanic Bob Noble's observation of the Ban Na missions helps to explain what constantly churned through every man's mind:

"From the latter part of March to April 5, my life seemed to be deeply entwined at Lima Site-15. Whatever aircraft I crewed, George was still after me. I was slowly coming to the realization that my charmed life could be ending real soon.

On the 4th of April, [on the spur of the moment] George came running to my aircraft for an [immediate emergency] wounded pick-up at Site-15. I can't describe what made me feel if I had gone to Lima Site that afternoon, I would not return alive. My crew accepted my refusal and Dick Elder said, 'Nobs, if you don't go we don't go, unless we get cover and can suppress artillery fire from the PDJ...'" ⁸

Other problems surfaced toward the end of the Site-15 operation. The fifth of April marked the final day helicopter crews supported the Ban Na salient.

Reduced to landing one aircraft at a time, senior Captain Ed Reid, who in general always attempted to perform a mission, along with Co-Captain Jack Knotts and Flight Mechanic Bob Noble, was leading a gaggle of Bells into a ridgeline position four kilometers to the west, to conduct a medevac of nine Thai soldiers. Artillery shells from the Plain of Jars rarely

⁷ Jim Parker, *Timeline*.

⁸ Bob Noble Email, 04/01/15.

impacted the site because they had to clear a higher ridgeline toward the Plain.

Ed approached a small saddle at the 3,800-foot level. Apparently, the site was under fire, for after landing sideways on a down slope, stretcher bearers dropped their litters and the ship was immediately mobbed by panicked Thai wanting out of the hell hole. Healthy Thai crawled over WIA's already in the cabin section. Other troops stood on the skids making a normal takeoff almost impossible.

With the aircraft in a right skid low configuration, the litter bearers began pushing Nobel back into the cargo compartment. There was little he could do with the amount of chaos occurring.

While Noble was attempting to eject unauthorized people from the helicopter, a rifle propelled grenade, or a DK-82 recoilless rifle round struck a dirt berm below the saddle, exploding near the front of the ship. A cloud of large dirt clogs and debris was thrown up through the main rotor blade system, splattering noisily off the wind screen. Nobel yelled, *"Time to go! Go! Go!"*

Grossly overloaded, twenty-one souls were onboard the 205 Bell. Despite this impossible load, the situation warranted getting out of there. Therefore, Ed pulled pitch and headed down slope, hoping to become airborne, translating altitude and insufficient power into airspeed and a modicum of flight. The inevitable occurred. RPM declined fast and Noble could see the top of trees in the doorway as the rotor blades began shredding leaves.

As what was becoming normal procedure for the Puncher operation, the pilots had pre-briefed that Jack would monitor the manual fuel control switch in the event that Ed required extra power in order to vacate a landing zone. Through the noisy

clattering of the blades chopping lumber, Ed gave Jack the high sign to switch to manual. While Nobel continued tossing Thai off the helicopter, *"like the hand of God,"* the resulting surge of power provided sufficient power for the over grossed Bell to clear the landing zone and become airborne. While heading back to Long Tieng, Ed canceled the operation.

Vang Pao and the Thai commanders met the aircraft and inspected all eighteen passengers for wounds. Few were found, and the troops were marched off to an unknown fate.

After inspecting the aircraft for the certain over torque and overspeed caused by the sudden injection of unmetered fuel to the engine, Noble discovered that the internal tension-torsion straps (TT straps) had stretched, pushing the rotor grips holding the rotor blades to the yokes out one-half inch.

Constituting a serious condition, because of the unsettled military situation at The Alternate, a decision was made to ferry the ship to Udorn, where the Maintenance Department elected to replace all the rotating components. Since the damage was triggered by operational battlefield conditions, no administrative action was taken against Reid. ⁹

Ban Na's final days spawned many stories and varied incidents involving courage and valor, as related by Captain Freedman regarding his participation on the fifth:

"...as time went on it became more and more difficult for the choppers to support the site as the bad guys had gotten the ability to mortar most of the regular chopper pads and we were landing in improvised places on the site selected by Kayak.

Anyway, on the final day we supported Site-15 I was the last Bell to leave The Alternate for Vientiane. Shortly after

⁹ Jack Knotts Interviews.
Bob Noble Email, 04/01/15.

getting airborne one of the customers in someone's aircraft started checking and realized that nobody had picked up Kayak and since I was the closest [to the area] I said I would get him. JJ McCauley who was directly in front of me said he would return and fly cover for me while I picked [George] up. I had been into the site during the afternoon and landed on the east side of the location in low bushes alongside a path to pick up wounded. [This occurred] without incident [so I] decided to land there again...about that time JJ [radioed] in a very high-pitched voice and told me he was taking 12.7 fire and was trying to get clear to the south. At the same time Kayak called and [informed] me not to land where I intended, as they had taken mortar fire in that area after I had landed earlier. Instead [I was] to pick him up on a trail between two of the hard sites.

Looking across the location, I saw Kayak running along a path from a hard site on the very north of the location to the south. I moved over and landed on the trail, got Kayak and departed to the west staying low well over the valley that led south to Site-20 well out of sight of McCauley's 12.7 and with JJ headed for Vientiane.

I am not sure who or how the decision was made, but it was decided that Air America helicopter [crews] could no longer support the site and we would no longer land there. I think there might have been some bad feeling..."¹⁰

At Udorn I spent most of Sunday with Flight Mechanic Terry Dunn (DOH 10/11/67) and ground mechanics FCF Papa Foxtrot Hotel.

¹⁰ Jim Parker Email containing an account from Izzy Freedman regarding his final landing at Ban Na, 01/02/13.

BAN NA EVACUATED

With two of his battalions removed and reassigned to join the main force attacking the Long Tieng complex, North Vietnamese General Chuong and his regimental staff were forced to abrogate the original attack plans from a rapid coordinated assault on all three strong-point areas at once to a more protracted offense. This specified that one strong point, requiring siege tactics, would be reduced before moving on to the next. Considered the strongest fortification, Area One, although heavily bombarded, would be the last to be attacked in force.

Extensive ground reconnaissance revealed that Area Two, on the ridgeline to the northwest of Site-15, was the weakest defensive position, and its loss would pressure both Area One and Area Three, making their capture easier to achieve. The mass of four mixed ethnic positions at Area Two would be attacked one at a time.

The enemy siege was tailored to surround the positions, then dig trench-lines to the perimeter wire and forward trench-line. ¹¹

"...heavy weapons units (120mm mortars) must prevent helicopters from landing so that no one inside the enemy position will be able to get out and no none from the outside will be able to get in. We must make the lives of the defenders miserable by preventing them from being able to eat or sleep and make the living share their quarters with the dead."

Once heavy weapons eliminated enemy firing positions and breach points were established, a main assault would follow.

¹¹ Called "hugging," the process of moving as close as possible to an enemy position had been developed over time by the Vietnamese, to minimize casualties from airstrikes. This had worked with excellent results during the Military Region Three Lam Son-719 operation.



Meo fortifications located on high ground east of Ban Na.
Parker, 88.

Fighting intensified. The afternoon of the fourth was characterized by artillery duels. B-52 Arc Light planes carpet-bombed the area around the Ban Na area, which became engulfed in smoke and flames.

That night strong point three in Area Two was totally surrounded, the initial target relatively quiet from shelling, and the assault force was in position. With the moon illuminating the battlefield, after a short preliminary barrage, the battle was joined. Within a short time, friendly resistance ceased, and the position belonged to the Vietnamese.

On the fifth, enduring heavy air strikes and artillery fire, the same enemy battle techniques applied to the next set of strong points in Area Two. That night two strong points were overrun and the final defensive position capitulated, with Lao troops fading into the jungle.

At this juncture General Chuong ordered all his units to proceed toward Area Two and the primary objective at Ban Na, where constant barrages had heavily damaged the central command post headquarters, set the supply warehouse on fire, and damaged the artillery position.

B-52s resumed carpet-bombing on the sixth, which delayed enemy progress toward what was left of PUNCHER, and allowed final plans to go forward for the site's evacuation.¹²

While the fun continued in the Ban Na valley, Jim Spencer, Dave Crowell, and I proceeded to Long Tieng in Bell 204B 8513F. Jim was still in a familiarization mode, so I was still logging instructor pay. Because the situation at PUNCHER was tenuous at best, and air strikes continued almost non-stop, we were not tasked to land there, but worked the front lines at Sam Tong and Phou Long Mat to beef up defensive positions.

¹² Nguyen Chuong. *Ban Na Before the Time to Open Fire*.

THE FAT LADY SINGS 13

After being surrounded for a month and subject to punishing artillery fire, troop morale at Ban Na was extremely low. That night, long after we had recovered at Udorn, what was left of the Thai and indigenous forces at Ban Na exfiltrated south toward friendly positions on Phu Long Mat. Previously expecting stragglers to move northwest toward the pressure relief valve at Hill-1663 and Sam Tong, Chuong's forces were late to the party, and the sanctioned and orderly retreat of Puncher was conducted with minimal casualties.

Fully expecting an immediate counterattack, Chuong deployed his people to defend and consolidate positions at Ban Na. The early phase of the battle for Long Tieng was over. The strong plug protecting the forward center of the Vang Pao Line was eliminated. The Alternate was flanked by hostiles on three sides, and three enemy regiments occupied ground in the immediate area. One was located at Phou Long Mat, another at Ban Na, and a third at Phou Pha Sai. One enemy reserve regiment languished on the southern Plain of Jars. With several weeks remaining until the monsoon season began in earnest, the prognosis did not appear especially promising for Vang Pao's troops. ¹⁴

AFTERMATH

It was blame game time. George Bacon took the abandonment of Site-15 very personally. He later commented in a *Soldier of*

¹³ The Fat Lady Sings: Modern reference to the end of an event or performance, likely by talented and beloved American Kate Smith belting out a rendition of Irving Berlin's patriotic song *God Bless America*

¹⁴ Ken Conboy, 297.

Fortune magazine article that he was disappointed in Air America's support for his mission. ¹⁵

Sometime after the evacuation of Ban Na, hearsay had Jerry Daniels blaming all helicopter pilots for the loss of Puncher. Looking for a scapegoat for the predictable defeat, finger pointing likely went around in a circle eventually coming to rest on the heads of our small, defenseless group. Although I did not personally hear this from Hog's lips, and never confronted him about it, I was crushed at the general attitude, and the words certainly hurt. ¹⁶ I rationalized and believed that he might have said something like this in anger, frustration, the heat of the moment, or perhaps while deep in his cups.

I had always attempted to perform my job within existing parameters, often taking risks beyond what I should have. Therefore, based on the rumor, even if half truth, I never had much use for Jerry after that.

This episode may have marked the trigger or enhancement for the souring and rapid decline of Customer-helicopter pilot relations at Long Tieng. Actually, rapport had been waning between the two elements since our movement from the large thatched administration-operations hut at Long Tieng to the Air America hostel at Sam Tong, and Tony Poe's departure for Nam Yu in 1965. Long gone were the nightly face-to-face discussions with the Customer regarding current situations and our perceived or real problems. Not all early Case Officers like Vint Lawrence, Tony Poe, and Terry Burke were intelligent and

¹⁵ Bob Noble, Email 04/01/15. At the end of Kayak's tenure in Laos, Bob believes that George's anti-communist feelings led him to go to Angola. Within seventy-two hours of his arrival in the country, he was ambushed at a small bridge site by Cuban forces and killed. Bacon's body is reputedly buried in a small town near the ambush site.

¹⁶ The childhood adage of "sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt you" was ill conceived.

adaptable to the difficult work at Long Tieng, as the stationing of Mike Lynch attested.

Rapport never again achieved former levels of the early days. When the Air America hostel at the Long Tieng ramp was established, we were located closer to the Case Officers, but were really apart, for we ate and slept in widely different areas. Unless we drank beer at the Customer bar on SKY hill,¹⁷ the only time we would see them other than flying (with Chuck Campbell-Whitetop, or Burr Smith-Clean), was at the nightly movie or during ramp briefings.

There were several explanations for the problem. The entire Meo operation, as earlier predicted by Bill Lair and Tony Poe, had expanded to unmanageable levels. Too many questionable promises of support under all conditions were made to Vang Pao and Thai leaders, and too many unreasonable demands made on "civilian" helicopter pilots.

*"A lot of good will and rapport was lost with the rapid expansion of Agency efforts in MR-2. A couple of really bad egg Case Officers, FEPA, a deteriorating tactical situation, and too few aircraft resources contributed to the problem."*¹⁸

The rapid expansion of the war in Military Region Two necessitated the Agency hiring of additional Case Officers to advise the burgeoning forces from other military regions and Thailand. Many of these new Customer types were formerly U.S. Special Forces sergeants from South Vietnam. Used to issuing orders without question, each individual had his own agenda when it came to pilot compliance and helicopter operations. In addition, Air America pilots from less invasive theaters, and younger generation types, who did not have a clue as to what our

¹⁷ This was rare, for we were highly fatigued after a day's work and cold beer was also available at our hostel.

¹⁸ Wayne Knight Email.

war was all about, were hired by the Company. Consequently, considerably out of their element until gaining experience, they contributed to the mess. It was too bad that only few individuals triggered a black mark on all of us.

I was not the only pilot appalled at the attitude exhibited at the time. Marius Burke recalled that some of the newer Customers vehemently blamed Air America pilots for the loss of Site-15. This bothered him. Customers seemed to have the attitude that pilots were expendable; that they should obey orders without question. This was different from the earlier period. Respected Case Officer Tony Poe would never place anyone at risk without first explaining the need and making the situation clear. ¹⁹

Mike Jarina had a slightly different version regarding Customer ability and relations. Some new Customers ordered when questioned by a pilot regarding a mission, "*You just do what I tell you.*" ²⁰

Other Customers had no idea how much to place in a sling load net until we educated them and received their cooperation. Shep Johnson was easy to work with and got the job done in the loading ramp down strip. Many failed to understand the fuel burn concept after fueling; that we could take more weight per sortie as we burned off fuel. (For some reason this concept was never fully understood.)

¹⁹ Marius Burke Email.

²⁰ Fortunately, no one ever said this to me. I would not have tolerated it. I usually asked what they wanted done and to allow me to do it my way. Of course, I was a senior pilot, but without exception, they agreed, saying they would not argue with my experience and success. Overall, it would have been more efficient to have had someone from Air America management brief them on our capabilities prior to sending them upcountry. This might have avoided much unpleasantness before they had a chance to form a biased opinion.

One example was bearded Junkyard, considered a good guy. When new, he assigned Mike a load on a hill that Jarina was unable to lift. The pad was not close to the edge of the cliff, so using pilot technique and skill while attempting to accomplish the mission, Mike had to "walk" the loads to the edge of the precipice and dive off.

"We operated a lot in overloaded conditions. You had to know your limitations and understand the calculated risk." ²¹

AB-1's Jim Glerum provided perhaps a more cogent explanation to the Customer-Air America pilot situation that developed during this period:

"On the whole, the case officers and the pilots got along well, developed good working relationships and (in many instances) strong personal bonds. Nevertheless, the case officers/pilot interface was a major (or at least most recurrent) source of friction between customer and contractor—particularly as the war heated up and, at the same time, more younger case officers were added to the units. Most of these new officers were U.S. military trained, Vietnam experienced, and further trained for up to a year by the Agency. However, in earlier project years, they still would have spent a period of time under the direct supervision of a more senior, more experienced case officer before they were assigned their own irregular units. As we were forced to forego this 'luxury,' the conflicts did increase. Thus, in the middle of an inherently hazardous situation, a pilot could question the new case officer's knowledge of the ground situation and/or his judgment/integrity as it affected the pilot's [and crew's] wellbeing.

²¹ Mike Jarina Interviews.

A case officer could believe that the overpaid (by his standards) pilot was being at best lazy or at worst cowardly. At times, and to varying degrees, there was truth on both sides. Discussions on this subject with successive Air America rotary wing chief [pilots] were not infrequent. Most of the time we were able to resolve the issue. Having been so close to Air America for so long, I like to believe that I was able to understand their problems and we also were blessed with an exceptionally fair-minded group of chief pilots in Abadie, Knight, Goddard, and Ford. However, on occasion it did become necessary to reassign one of both of the protagonists.

Interestingly, most of the case officers reassigned to Udorn, sent home, or read the riot act over the year were guilty of too much courage (or inadequate common sense), or too much courage in relation to their abilities.

...Personalities were strong to say the least and there obviously were conflicts, misunderstandings, hard feeling, and even distrust. However, virtually everyone (customer and contractor) alike was a volunteer. And, particularly in retrospect, I can recall very few whom I do not believe were trying to do their best. Virtually everyone worked seven days a week, pressures were enormous, and most decisions drastically affected human lives..."²²

Former Case Officer at Long Tieng and author Jim Parker posited:

"...I know from my experience that Air America had the last word on whether a site could or could not be worked...as was their right in that aspect of the program...If it was an

²² Professor William Leary's 1971 Notes and Interview with AB-1 ranking Customer James Glerum, 02/15/93.

individual pilot's decision or became a company policy, I don't care. The final call was Air America's.

Apparently as the situation of working Ban Na made its way up the command channel, everyone seemed to understand.

And as it turned out, the situation took care of itself...the Thais bailed.

...seems the whole Ban Na operation worked in that it split the Vietnamese force-some attacking Skyline, the other off attacking Ban Na-and Long Tieng survived. Good tactic. Vang Pao showed he was the best general on the battlefield..." ²³

CONTINUE TO MARCH

Despite the acrimony and recriminations attached to the loss of Ban Na, as the only game in town, our services were still required in the battle for Long Tieng.

Wednesday morning Jack Knotts, Bobby Barrow, and I crewed XW-PFH to The Alternate. There, we were met on the ramp and assigned to retrieve Puncher's commanding officer and selected personnel at a set of coordinates south-southeast of Site-15. After receiving a thumbs up from a FAG on an assigned frequency, I landed in the Long Mat mountains overlooking the Ban Na valley. All was quiet and seemed peaceful after the awful pounding the area had endured during the previous weeks. Anxious to learn details about the withdrawal, I disembarked to talk to the Thai leader. Happy to be out of the deadly hornet's nest, the smiling Thai indicated that the entire garrison had escaped along a predetermined channel without casualties, and their spirits appeared good. The men were in the process of moving to friendly positions and then to Long Tieng.

²³ James Parker Email to Izzy Freedman, 01/01/13.

We delivered our passengers for debriefing, then commenced local supply work to defensive positions. Most of this was done from the sling load ramp on the south side of the lower runway. Rope nets were positioned with supplies weighing 600 to 1200 pounds. A loader held up a cardboard flash card containing black site coordinates and the signal. Another of Shep Johnson's crew stood by to hook up the load. After a number of deliveries to a landing zone, depending on the enemy situation, we would land to retrieve nets and return them to Shep's people.

A traffic control tower had been erected in the valley on the north side of the runway. The Thai controller's task was advisory only, but it was still the smoky season and the military situation necessitated a dramatic increase in both fixed wing and helicopter traffic that warranted some kind of traffic control. Therefore, we were encouraged to call when entering or departing the various gaps (south, east, west, or Skyline Ridge) during operations. The system worked well, particularly when visibility was at a minimum.

Long Tieng was still under sporadic attack from enemy rocket fire. Displaying more than enough courage, the tower operator often remained in his perch during the sporadic incoming fire. However, on this particular day, after several rockets splashed in the area, after radioing his intentions, the Thai scrambled down the tower ladder to seek shelter.

Since rocket fire, usually in a stick of three, was inaccurate, we continued working. I was facing up-strip waiting for a load when a 122mm rocket exploded nearby, perhaps 250 yards or closer to our front. I had previously experienced the blast from one of these weapons during February 1970, the last days at the Lima Lima base on the central Plain of Jars. Rattling the helicopter, this detonation, the noise, and the ensuing concussion was equally, if not greater, than the one I

experienced on the Plain of Jars. Naturally, it scared the hell out of me. Not knowing if this was one, two, or three in the assumed launch stick, I opted to become airborne. Pulling pitch, I immediately slid to the right toward the runway. I was almost over the strip when, through the haze, I observed a landing C-123 getting larger and larger in my side window. With the tower operator gone, there was no landing advisory and I had not heard the pilot of 195 radio his position at Check Point Peter; but only now as he was passing over the south gap, and by that time he was committed to landing, while the heat of battle prevented further communication. ²⁴ Somehow, I managed to avoid a midair collision, but only barely. It was that kind of war: continuous hazards not only from the enemy, but also those of our own making.

Jack, who was sitting in the left seat twiddling his thumbs, seemed unconcerned over the incident and later related his other experience with rockets when the hostel was still in use:

"A few pilots were having coffee when a 122mm rocket came in and hit the karst. Because of the bowl-like terrain [and resulting acoustics] the explosion was very loud reverberating. Jack was flying with Dick Elder and Bob Noble. They ran down the ramp to the Bell which was parked off the side in the gravel. Dick cranked the engine with the blades still tied down. He knew what he was doing, as he saw Bob running to the aircraft. When Noble [removed] the tie down, the blade spun around fast. Everyone piled into the helicopter until it was maxed out. Dick [lifted] and hovered over the tarmac. Danny Williams arrived

²⁴ Supplying the Vang Pao defense line required a large number of airplane sorties from Peppergrinder and other supply sources. Therefore, U.S. military cargo planes were sometimes employed with Air Force pilots, who perhaps were not aware of all the precautions evolved over the years that we used to prevent incidents.

wearing shorts. [Dick landed and Dan, a large man] jumped into the Bell. [Dick] took off over crossed. They flew around for a while and then landed after the rocket attack was over..."²⁵

All weapons fire--small arms, mortar, and artillery fire--were disconcerting, but none intimidated me as much as rocket fire. The weapon did what it was supposed to do: terrorize. Except for a scream on a downward trajectory, they were not discernible and you never knew when or where they would impact. I never felt comfortable until the third rocket landed. Often equipped with timed devices, the bad guys had the weapons set up in various areas and they were sometimes discovered by our roving patrols.

When shut down on the upper ramp for fuel, I had begun wearing my flack vest as a precaution against steel fragments flying around the area. One day I had forgotten to wear the vest and returned to the helicopter to don it. I was walking down the ramp, taking a break from the action, when a rocket whomped the ground, creating noise and chaos. My natural reaction was to hit the deck. In doing so, I later discovered that I had lost the top jeweled portion of my Vang Pao ring the general had presented me for participating in a hairy WIA recovery northeast of Lima Lima in 1970.²⁶ This angered me more than the threat of being hurt from the incoming. I kept the bottom part of the ring, and when the situation quieted down, asked Zack to see if the general would have the ring repaired or replaced. He took the item and that was the last time I saw it. I was disappointed, but realized that it was only a minor item in the unfolding drama of the battle for Long Tieng. I also asked Zack if Vang Pao would allow me to have a picture taken with him.

²⁵ Jack Knotts Interview.

²⁶ See 1970 book, January chapter, for details of this incident.

I had worked with him for so many years that I wanted something for posterity. This never happened either.

When confronted with an eyewitness report of a rocket location, Alternate Case Officers appeared disinterested. During a period when Long Tieng was being impacted by rockets, Captain Marius Burke took Father Luke Broussard to an eastern pad on the side of Padong Ridge where a long-standing leper village was located. Father B spent the day at the site ministering to his flock and Marius retrieved him toward evening. During the short distance back to Long Tieng, Luke told Burke that he heard rockets coming from the base of the mountain near a large cave.

The same night Marius presented a couple of Case Officers with the information, but they refused to believe it. They indicated that Luke did not know what he was talking about. It was obvious to Burke that they did not respect the padre that much. They believed that they knew everything.

In fact, Luke was one of the best sources of intelligence in the region, for he talked to everyone. He always provided straight and accurate information. Rationalizing the Customer's attitude toward the priest, Marius postulated he was not utilized (except by the pilots) because the Customer did not want to create trouble with his religious order adding that it is likely that early Customers used Luke's information, but not the younger generation who arrived later.

Luke was a neat, unassuming person whom Burke first met at Sam Tong. One day, Burke was flying Father B to some village with a new copilot onboard. Thinking to "yank his chain" a little, Burke said, *"You know, Father, you have been over here all these years and you have a price on your head. All these folks are out to get you and you are still here. What do you attribute this to?"*

"Just lucky I guess."

"You don't think the Lord may have something to do about that?"

"Oh, yeah, of course."²⁷

I was on the schedule Thursday to FCF Bell 204 8513F with Flight Mechanic LP Estrella (DOH 03/09/66). Although I spent all day at the airfield, I only logged thirty minutes and four landings.

Since 13F failed to meet my airworthiness standards, I was back on the ramp the next morning for additional testing. After releasing the ship, I conducted three proficiency checks with Bob Hallsworth, Jon Stewart, and Ben Densley. I was not finished with this until nearly dark.

YANKEE BELLS

Attesting to the changing war and crises realized in Military Region Two, in April we were slated to receive twelve to fourteen brown Army UH1Ds on a temporary basis to help cope with the emergency in Military Region Two.²⁸ Eight were to be used, with the remainder grounded and used for spare parts. The ships were equipped with dash 1100 engines and armored seats with sliding side panels. The web nylon seats were much lighter, cooler, and infinitely more comfortable than our massive armored seats. The ships remained with us about seven to eight weeks before being rotated back to the Army.

There were some incidents with the machines. Jack Knotts worked one Yankee Bell at Bouam Long. Returning to Udorn at the end of the day, he learned that he was off the schedule the next

²⁷ Marius Burke Interviews.

²⁸ Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*. In actuality we only received six ships, Y-11-Y-16. They were returned to the U.S. Army by 30 June.

day. Jack was living at Charoen Hotel and was surprised when he received a phone call asking him to come to the base.

At the Chief Pilot's office, John Ford said, "*Let's go to the maintenance hangar.*" A rotor blade with a large gouge lay on the deck. Personnel indicated that they had taken it off Jack's Yankee Bell and they wanted to know where the damage had occurred. Knotts had no idea, but insisted that if he had known something of that magnitude was wrong with the blade, he would have mentioned it. Bewildered, he recommended that they query the Flight Mechanic who had been crewing his ship.

As Jack thought about the incident and the cause, he postulated that the aircraft had been tied down on the ramp after shut down; a maintenance type then pushed a work stand into the blade. Instead of admitting the error, in an attempt to cover-up the true cause, maintenance (he believed Jack Forney) was determined to blame the damage on a pilot. Knots had no rapport with hangar people, and was nervous regarding the incident for some time afterwards. ²⁹

From the seventh to the fourteenth, adverse weather settled in on the Military Region Two region curtailing major offensives from either side. However, helicopter operations were not unduly impacted and, as always, our operations continued to march.

The additional Bell assets had arrived at an appropriate time to assist Vang Pao's intention to first reinforce his main defense line. Realizing his narrow window of opportunity, this would be accomplished with fresh Thai units and other Lao forces to bolster Hill 1663 to the west, and Phou Long Mat and Padong ³⁰ to the east, prior to the projected 1 July drawdown of USAF air in the Barrel. It would precede the general's tentative plans to

²⁹ Jack Knotts Interviews.

³⁰ To aid the defenders, a 105mm howitzer was installed at the site.

implement a wet season offensive to clear the enemy back from the Plain of Jars, which was encouraged by the King and Souvanna Phouma, but frowned upon by Washington leaders. ³¹

Mike Jarina took Yankee-16 to The Alternate single pilot on the eighth. As additional troops arrived in the valley, Mike and other crews shuttled them north to positions around Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72), and to Padong, where Meo forces secured that portion of the eastern flank.

The following day, Jarina was back upcountry in Yankee-16 supporting Bamboo's effort to retake Moug Ngam (LS-63). On Saturday he doubled up with Marius Burke in PFG to work The Alternate area. ³²

My Long Tieng daily commute resumed early on the eleventh, with John Fonburg and Flight Mechanic Casio in XW-PFG. Consistent with the Customer's desire to cut expenses, John and I were obliged to log deadhead either on the inbound or outbound ferry flight. Even with this yoke hanging over our heads, I flew over nine hours and completed thirty sorties supporting the Vang Pao Line around The Alternate.

Prior to the final days of the Ban Na operation, Meo guerrillas had assumed defensive positions three miles west of Site-15 to contain enemy advances before the site fell. The same afternoon we were tasked to mount an emergency mission to extract Mike Ingram from TG800365, four miles west of Ban Na. He was tending to and attempting to bolster the morale of his Thai charges, who had withdrawn from forward positions during the Vietnamese offensive. The rally point was under pressure and he needed help getting out. This was accomplished without incident.

³¹ Ken Conboy, 298.
William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 61-62

³² Mike Jarina Interviews.

Early Monday morning Ken Wood, Bob Noble, and I launched for Savannakhet in Papa Foxtrot Juliet. We were joined by several other crews for a mission to the Mugia Pass area. Directed to Whiskey Three after refueling at Lima-39, we were loaded with twenty-four Commando Raiders, along with three 81mm mortar tubes, base plates, and sufficient ammunition for a preemptive strike on Vietnamese road assets. With the initial Military Region Three mission a success, we recovered at Udorn after lunch.

The same day, Mike Jarina and Bill Hutchison worked The Alternate area in Yankee Bell-11. One Special Mission was flown. The next day Mike and Larry Hennesy worked the Long Tieng area, completing three Special Missions. Swapping crews was common, and Hutch joined Bob Noble and me in Papa Foxtrot Juliet working the Vang Pao Line. Unlike Jarina, we did not participate in the Special Missions.

On Wednesday, while Jarina and Hennesy returned to Long Tieng to work Sam Tong and Site-72 sites in 13F, I tested 1196W with Phil Ortillo. When airworthy, I took the machine upcountry single pilot to support the defensive positions around Long Tieng.

TIME OFF IN BANGKOK AND PATTAYA

With hostilities somewhat diminishing, I had a week off the flight schedule. Needing a change from the demanding work, we decided to take Rick to the beach.

Leaving Pete with "Uncle" Cha's children Tokay, Ginleed and the maid Pun, with Khun Yai supervising, Rick, Tuie, and I drove the Cortina to Bangkok. After a night there, we continued to Pattaya, located on the eastern peninsula adjoining the Gulf of Siam.

No longer a sleepy little fishing village where Bangkok residents spent weekends, Pattaya had grown considerably since it was declared an R&R spot for American troops vacationing from South Vietnam. (It was actually still fairly quiet compared to the later building boom and tourist incursion.) When building first began, Jim Moore attempted to interest me in investing in the Nipa Hut, the first luxury type hotel built on beach road. Now there was a new hotel, the Ocean View, where Tuie's cousin worked. She was able to book us a room at a favorable rate. Except for the delicious seafood and swimming, the highlight of the trip was watching Ricky riding a pony along the beach. In fact, he loved riding so much that we had difficulty removing him from the animal. After two days we returned to Bangkok to relax before the hot eight-hour drive up the narrow road to Udorn.

We arrived home fatigued to discover that, Charlie, our German shepherd, was gone. He had last been seen playing with other dogs next door, and, despite the army of people looking for him--the kids, maid, and wash woman--he was nowhere in sight and believed stolen. (Unlike Vietnamese, Thai people do not eat dogs.) After Caesar, I was partial to German Shepherds. Considering Charlie both a friend and first line of defense for the house and us, I was very angry at his disappearance. Moreover, I was disgusted at the Thai heavy finger, and vowed it would not be pleasant for the next Thai person I caught stealing my property. ³³

"...I am sure you deserved a vacation and from the horsey pictures, it looks as if a grand time was had by all. One can't

³³ This information was conveyed to my parents in a 04/27/71 letter.

blame Ricky for loving to ride horseback...Tuie looks like a veteran horsewoman, but I pity the horse you were on. Tell Rick we love him too, but will have to mark time until you all get to the States...Trust the boys won't miss 'Charlie' too much...

...Dick, I will take care of the documents and you all take care of yourselves."

Letter from Home, 05/03/71.

Kuhn Jun, known as the "Dog Lady of Udorn," and her "husband" Joe Tansobsasak, lived next door in a house they had built on land leased from Tuie's aunt, Klua Won. Both employees at the United States Information Service (USIS) library in town across from City Park, I had known the couple for several years. They had always been friendly and helpful when I patronized the library to read the two-day-old Wall Street Journals and other newspapers and periodicals.

Jun was far different from most Thai people, and exhibited a strange quirk: she loved all and every kind of dog, and currently housed and fed thirty-two mixed breeds. Unable to resist rescuing a stray dog from the street, she employed three maids to care for them at a cost of 4,000 baht per month. Pups were clad in diapers and all the animals slept on one bed under a mosquito net to prevent heartworms.

The dogs yapped a lot, but this did not bother us. However, when the wind impacted his property, the smell and noise drove Khun Yai's cousin, Noun, crazy at times. In protest, exasperated, and perhaps deep into his cups, he would fire his pistol into the air.

Jun, a compassionate woman, offered us a gray-black female Shepherd pup she had named Pepsi Cola. Seemingly enamored of drink names, she had another dog-Soda. To simplify things, we



The Casterlin children standing on top of their slide.
Author Collection.



An all-hands effort to wash Pepsi beside the gravity fed elevated water tower located to the right rear of the house.

Author Collection.



Another view of the Casterlin males bathing Pepsi.
Author Collection.

shortened her name to Pepsi. She participated in all our outside activities. After watching the boys having fun, this included climbing the kids slide stairs, and then with encouragement sliding to the ground (the equipment was obtained in September). In addition to providing our first line of defense against thieves at night along with the sleepy, elderly guard who worked another job during the day, Pepsi became an enormous source of joy and integral part of the family. In addition, she was not difficult to care for, and readily accepted cooling baths.

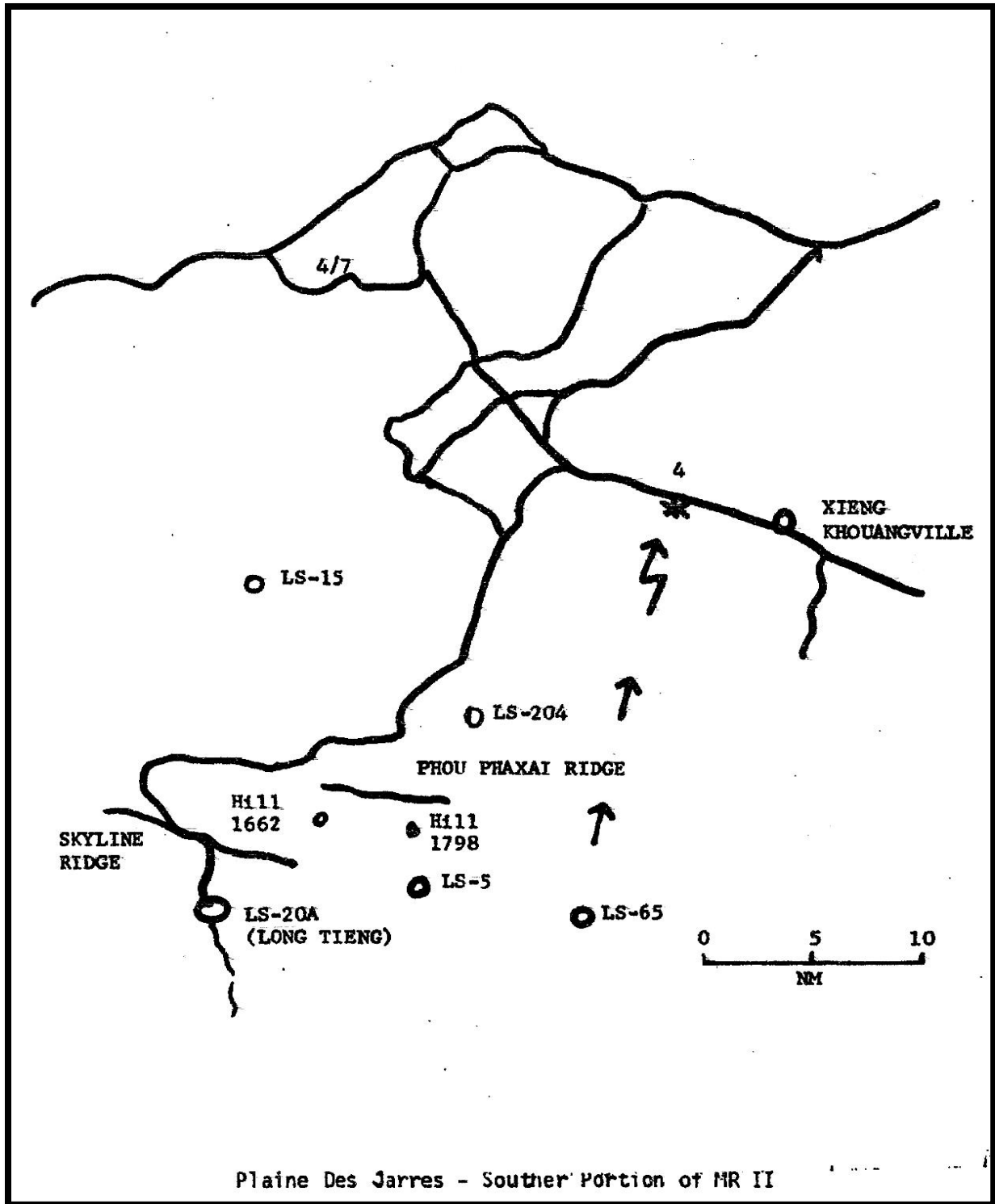
JARINA

Naturally, the war did not cease when I was off the schedule. It was imperative the enemy be pushed back from the immediate area encompassing Long Tieng and Sam Tong. Therefore, when the weather pattern improved on the 15th, a counterattack commenced to clear Skyline and a portion of the Romeo (Zebra) Ridgeline. Within three days, Skyline was devoid of enemy, but the high point on Romeo was still in enemy hands. Several days elapsed before action resumed.³⁴

On 16 April, Mike and Ivar Gram performed the Long Tieng commute in 96W to support the offensive, which included troop rotation and movement and supplying the thirsty war machine intent on clearing remaining enemy from the forward defense lines. Crewing 12F, the next day Jarina was back at The Alternate solo pilot.

Two battalions from Padong had been busy and had moved the defense line about ten miles east to Pha Phai (LS-65), a 3,600-foot hill we formerly occupied in previous years. Mike, along with Ted Cash in 12F, helped lift and support the troops.

³⁴ *CHECO*, William Lofgren, 69.



Focus of late April government operations, when a battalion of troops moved north overland from the hills of Pha Phai (LS-65) to harass Route-4. Offensives also began to clear Phou Pha Sai (Padong Ridge) and high points on Zebra (Romeo) Ridgeline.

CHECO, Lofgren, 70.

After the movement was completed, on 18 April, one battalion proceeded north in order to interdict Route-4 between Xieng Khouang Ville and the Plain of Jars. After some success ambushing the road, but without further reinforcement, the unit returned to Site-65. ³⁵ Mike was back working on the line at Long Tieng on Wednesday the 21st in Papa Foxtrot Juliet, then, flying the same machine, he and Marius Burke returned to The Alternate the next day.

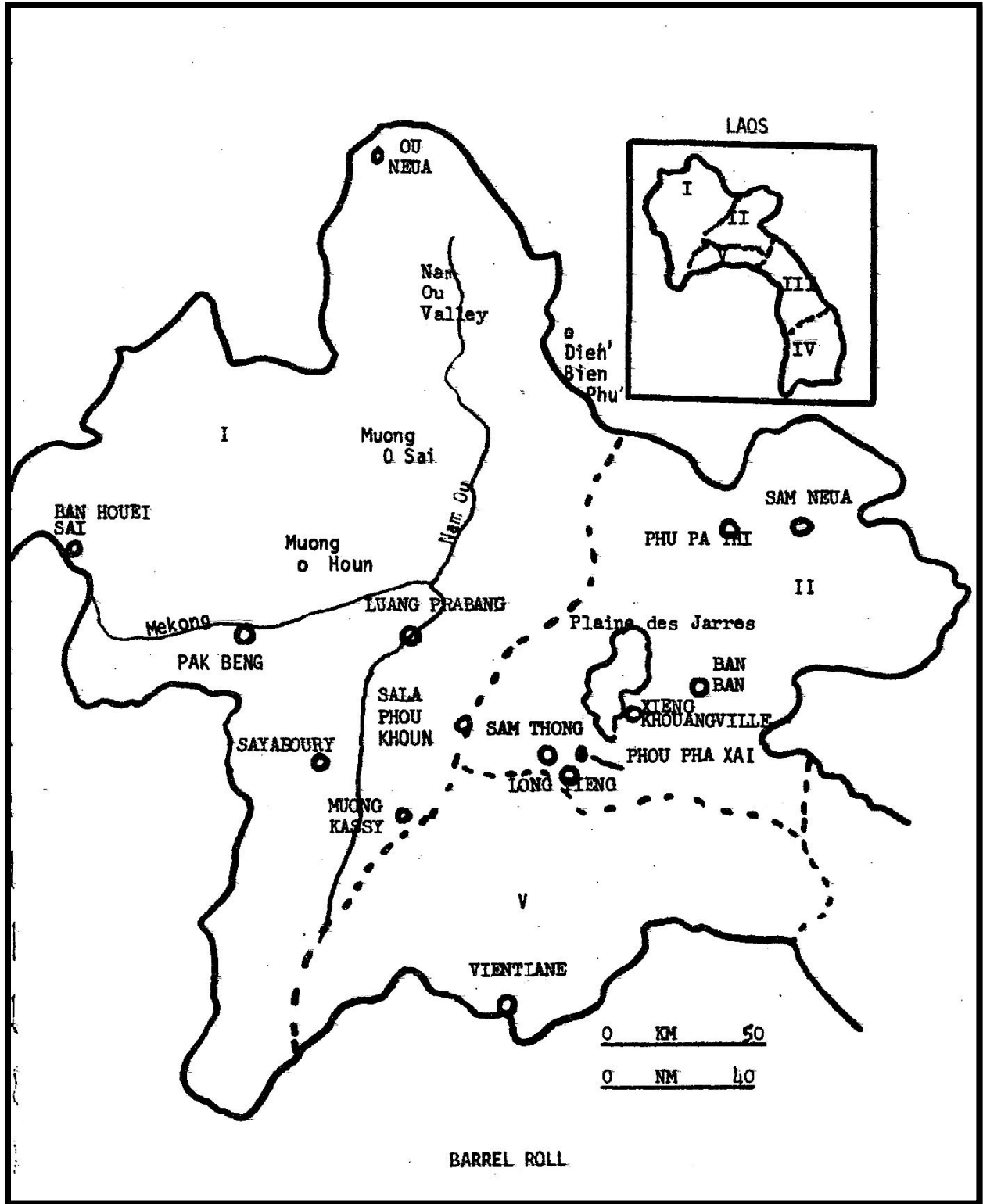
Assigned to fly Yankee-13 on Friday with Ted Cash to Site-63 Mike aborted the flight and RTB with a maintenance problem that was revealed as crossed control rods. He was reissued Yankee-14, and worked Long Tieng. Sometimes overlapping my participation around Long Tieng, Jarina worked the 28 and 30th in PFJ and 96W. ³⁶

I resumed flying on the 22nd in XW-PFB, the second S-58T released for local test flights and shake-down before being released for upcountry work. After Bob Piggot and ground mechanics laboriously trimmed engine torques, I continued training Charlie Weitz. During those early days of the Twinpac, as part test pilots, part cannon fodder, we had a lot to learn about the new machine. I did not know it at the time, but Charlie's checkout marked the commencement of the Agency's Special Project program.

By the 23rd, Meo were lifted from Padong to the foothills of Phou Pha Sai to conduct an offensive on the enemy held hill. Fighting was fierce, and first attempts were thwarted until the end of April, when the Meo managed to seize a portion of the elongated mountain range.

³⁵ William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 69.
Ken Conboy, 298.
Bill Leary, 18 April 71 Notes.

³⁶ Mike Jarina Interviews.



Graphic of Military Regions-One, Two, and Five. It shows the proximity of the Phou Pha Sai ridge to the Long Tieng-Sam Tong defense complex.
 CHECO Lofgren.

There was still a problem at Romeo Ridge, where small enemy units maintained a presence on southwestern low and high ground.

Concurrent with the Phou Pha Sai operation, the enemy struck and captured a key position on Phou Long Mat, the most forward portion on the defense line. By the 27th, counterattacks had restored the position to friendly hands. Confident that the military situation had ameliorated sufficiently, Vang Pao reinstalled his wives in the valley. Additionally, Raven pilots returned, but helicopter crews continued the daily commute. ³⁷

UPCOUNTRY

Flying Yankee-14 with Flight Mechanic Bobby Barrow, on Saturday the 24th, I was back in the Long Tieng caldron supporting viable defense positions. Equipped with the web seat, the machine was fairly comfortable to fly, but the dash 1100 Lycoming engine limited my ability to carry good loads. Still, every ship and man was required for the abundant work.

After completing a respectable thirty sorties, I landed and secured on the Air America ramp close to 1900 hours.

I did not obtain much rest that night, for a trip to Savannakhet encompassing a road watch mission was planned the next day. Checking into the base at 0500 hours, John Shine, Benny Shaffer, and I, along with other crews and machines, launched southeast in 8535F for the 123-mile flight to Lima-39. John was still undergoing training, so I let him fly the entire day except for conducting two landings myself.

Upon arrival, the Customer assigned us flights to Moung Phalane, where the intelligence unit expected imminent enemy attacks. Toward mid-afternoon we stood down to await the arrival

³⁷ Ken Conboy, 298.
William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 69.

of our escort for the mission to the Mugia Pass area. The mission was conducted without incident and we reached the chocks a little after 1800 hours.

With so much back-to-back duty time amassed during the two days, I was accorded a day off on Tuesday. Then a morning standby at the field was cancelled by noon, as the projected helicopter did not materialize from the hanger.

"We have been having some problems with the Twinpac, but now have one operating and another imminent. I still haven't been upcountry with one, but should in the next few days.

I did a lot of Bell flying last month. In the past couple of weeks things have quieted down a bit. It's a good thing as everyone was going a bit crazy with the strain of combat. One can only take so much of this sort of thing.

Tuie has been doing some entertaining at home and it is hard for me to get used to it, as it is the first time. She is going to the Philippines at the end of this week with a lady she knows [Rose Malana]. It will be good experience for her to be on her own for once...She says that she would like to see some of the Far East before we go home for good..."

Letter Home, 04/27/71.

On Wednesday the 28th, Captain Ted Cash, Flight Mechanic Bob Piggot, and I launched early in 8513F for Long Tieng. Our troops had just reclaimed the most forward defense position on Phou Long Mat, which had been lost a few days earlier. While supporting this effort, I flew fifteen Special Missions into landing zone Echo Hotel (EH at coordinates 862294). Before the day was complete, I had completed thirty-five sorties, and Ted likely a similar number. To let us know they were still around

and potentially lethal, the enemy fired a string of rockets into The Alternate.

We did not know it at the time, but a combination of Allied airstrikes, seasonal monsoons, and determined offensives by Vang Pao's forces had coalesced to discourage further major enemy movement toward Long Tieng, and to begin a major withdrawal to North Vietnam to rest and refurbish their depleted forces. In North Vietnamese leaders' overall planning for conquest, there was always next year. Despite gradual movement of the main forces to the rear, enemy policy was always to leave some stay-behind troops so that Vang Pao's task to clear his defense lines would never be easy. The lengthy eleven-hour day was not finished until we touched down at dark.

Ted Cash, Flight Mechanic Demindal, and I returned to Long Tieng in 8535F. Flight time would have equaled that of the previous day had not we been obliged to log deadhead time for the ferry portion of the commute. With the resupply missions close to The Alternate, the number of sorties was high.

Danger always lurked in the Lao hills. Late that afternoon, while departing southwest from the grass strip at Mounng Nham (LS-63) in Porter PC-6C N180, Captain Harry Mulholland collided with a FAC pilot flying a U-17 aircraft. In the resulting crash Harry was killed, along with three passengers. Mulholland, a well-liked individual, was an original member of the FEPA negotiations committee. ³⁸

I spent the final day of the month training Charlie Weitz and Hank Edwards in XW-PHB. Selected twelve out of twelve for Twinpac transition, Edwards was the last man to enter the select program for some time.

³⁸ Bill Leary April 1971 Notes.

A modification had been made to Bravo, whereby two sliding armor plate panels, designed to cover each cockpit window and calculated to deflect small arms projectiles, had been installed. Except for the heavily armored Bell seats, marking the first armor in any of our helicopter programs, should have been a logical tip off that the machine was intended for more than just normal work or long-range road watch missions.

Like many retrofits, the modification created another problem. There was an inherent shudder in the H-34 at low ground speed (achieving translational lift in a no wind condition) while taking off and, to a lesser degree, when landing. However, this condition was greatly enhanced in the S-58T. With the armor fully deployed, while decelerating to land, the armor vibrated violently, challenging one's tooth fillings. The annoying and distracting tendency was even worse when passing through translational lift. It was something we would have to get used to if we chose to deploy the plates.

A WASHINGTON FACT FINDING MISSION

From 22 April to 4 May, James Lowenstein and Richard Moose, staff members from Stuart Symington's Subcommittee on U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, visited Laos and Thailand. During the period, they were either exposed to, or gathered, much interesting information relating to the ongoing conflict and the participants. Of course, even though classified top secret, the information was going to be divulged to the Committee on Foreign Relations. Therefore, more classified aspects involved in the war were not revealed to them.

In a predetermined cross section of actors in the Theater, the two men met with Ambassador Godley, the senior and junior civilian officials, and the military officers of the U.S. Mission. Also contacted were Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, the

Foreign and Defense Delegates, and the Transport Minister; the Commander of Military Region-5 and the Governor of Xieng Khouang Province; the Pathet Lao representative in Vientiane; reporters, teachers, and others in private life; and a number of other Ambassadors.

They spent two days in Savannakhet with the ambassador and Chief of the AID Mission. During this period, they visited one SGU camp and the [Agency] SGU training camp, Whiskey Three east of Lima-39. On the 28th they traveled to Long Tieng (to visit General Vang Pao) and then to Bouam Long in Military Region Two.

In Udorn, Thailand Moose and Lowenstein were introduced to the 7/13 Air Force Headquarters and the 1802 Joint Liaison Detachment (JLD), then went to Nakhon Phanom Air Base, where the equipment for the southern Laos electronic battlefield was staged.

Information gathered from various parties tended to conclude that the military situation was growing worse, with the initiative clearly in enemy hands. There were no plans to reclaim and hold the two-thirds of Laos not currently controlled and leaders hoped the remaining territory could be held.

At Long Tieng, the same day as I worked the forward defense line at Echo Hotel pad, the staff members learned that Thai troops were located at Long Tieng, Sam Tong, and Hill-1663. Restricted to only daytime work, fifty-five Americans were shuttled to Site-20 and 20A daily. Heavy Meo losses had stimulated the introduction of Thai irregular forces. Additionally, forty percent of Vang Pao's army were Lao Theung from other military regions. The enemy was conducting the majority of fighting and incurring most casualties.

At the time of the report to a closed session of the Senate on 7 June it was revealed:

"Since last July, the enemy has extended his control to the western edge of the Plain of Jars, past Moung Soui and Sam Tong, while pushing further west in southern Laos, taking Moung Phalane shortly after Lam Son 719 ended. To the west of the area in which South Vietnamese forces were active during Lam Son 719, a whole new network of trails has been constructed, although the enemy continues to use the route in the area in which the Lam Son operation took place. Enemy forces have put increasing pressure on the important towns of Seno and Pakse, both of which are now only a few kilometers from the area under enemy control.

Virtually the entire Bolovens Plateau is now held by the North Vietnamese, the few remaining Lao outposts on its western edge having been captured in the last few days. ³⁹ In sum, over 60 percent of Laos is no longer under Lao Government control...

In the weeks immediately preceding our visit to Vientiane, Luang Prabang had been rocketed and the enemy surrounded it on all sides. During the time that we were there, the enemy pulled back...During the same period, however, they rocketed the principal base at Long Tieng daily with rocket attacks averaging 30 a week...

...the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao would continue the war in the north despite American and Lao bombing...they...could do pretty well whatever they wished during both wet and dry seasons provided they were willing to take heavy casualties...

...both American and Lao officials told us that they would consider the loss of Long Tieng to be a disastrous psychological blow and hence had determined that it should be defended..."

³⁹ General Soutchay Vongsavanh, *CHECO* Monograph, In April the Vietnamese began to push into the Bolovens Plateau. Despite the lack of major battles, the SGU on the eastern plateau were restricted in movement without encountering NVA. By 1 May they had pulled back to Houei Khong.

A wealth of information was contained in the report, but the upshot of the facts seemed to indicate that none of the principals had a definite idea of exactly what to do:

"Other than to continue what is being done now. Some observers pointed out to us that, in the long run, the odds are heavily against defending Laos, given the [tremendous] advantages the North Vietnamese enjoy. These are: a 1,300-mile front along which they can attack; short, well-developed and increasingly heavily defended supply lines; a sanctuary largely safe from direct attack; a population 10 times that of Laos; and a larger, more experienced and better [led] and motivated army...

...If there is no settlement in Vietnam and the war also continues in Laos, Laos will remain a hostage available to the North Vietnamese should they wish to draw American airpower away from Cambodia and South Vietnam, embarrass the United States, threaten Thailand, or bring the Chinese into closer involvement. Perhaps the only real protection the Lao have is whatever limits the North Vietnamese wish to place on themselves. Some U.S. officials believe that these limits include not taking over the whole country but continuing to use Lao territory as a supply route while assisting the Pathet Lao as a political-as well as military-force with the final objective of a partitioned Laos in which the eastern portion will be governed by the [PL] and the western portion by a regime not unsympathetic to North Vietnam."⁴⁰

Unpublicized, our tax dollars were at work behind closed doors. The afternoon following the Lowenstein-Moose report to

⁴⁰ Congressional staffers Lowenstein and Moose, Laos: April 1971, A Staff Report, Prepared for the Use of the Subcommittee on U.S Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, of the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, v, 1, 4-6, 12, 15, 21-22. 08/03/71.

Senate members, the Senior Review Group (SRG), composed of people from State, Justice, Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the National Security Council (NSC) met in the Situation Room of the White House to discuss Laos.

Members of the group "agreed that the U.S. should seek to negotiate a stand-down in North Laos which permits Meo retention of the Long Tieng area (Option 3 of the Laos Ad Hoc Group Study of May 13, 1971 which specified keeping the Meo in Long Tieng, and would initially require the United States and Lao forces to maintain their existing defensive posture, but as they reduced their military actions would eventually entice the enemy into reducing its forces.) Another option involved negotiating with the enemy in conjunction with a U.S./Lao military stand-down that would be followed by an evacuation of the Meo from Long Tieng and withdrawing the Meo and having the Laotians and Thai takeover defenses in the region.]). However, in the event a stand-down cannot be achieved or is violated by the enemy, the U.S. should be prepared to augment military support to permit Vang Pao to hold Long Tieng over Lao Patriotic Front and North Vietnamese Opposition (Option 1 of the Laos Ad Hoc Group Study) [this option involved much more effort, greater Thai participation, and increased costs].

A scenario to implement the above strategy will be prepared by the Laos Ad Hoc Group and will be submitted to the President for approval. The scenario should spell out the steps necessary to trigger negotiations for a stand-down and should list actions which the U.S. must take in order to retain the flexibility to shift to Option 1 as rapidly as the situation may require. Such steps would include movement of additional Thai and Lao SGUs into the Long Tieng area, increased FAR participation in the

defense of Long Tieng, and earmarking U.S tactical air assets for use in North Laos if needed." ⁴¹

Almost a month after the SRG's meeting in Washington, Chairman of the group Henry Kissinger and his cohorts from the NSC and U.S Thai Embassy met with Prime Minister Thanom Kittkachorn and top Thai generals in Bangkok to discuss the situation in Laos.

Some of the talking points involved and discussed were:

"Military conditions seemed to have improved with the arrival of the rainy season. Thailand would continue to send SGUs to help out in various places at the request of the RLG. Presently there were eight infantry battalions in MR-2 and one artillery battalion; one infantry battalion was in Sayaboury [Province]; and two infantry battalions were on the Bolovens. It, therefore, appeared appropriate to bring the number of SGUs up to the total number which had been requested [36]...

Kissinger agreed that the situation in Laos had improved, noting that Vang Pao's offensive in Northern Laos had captured a considerable amount of equipment...In South Laos the situation was not as good."

Kissinger continuing inquiring as to the pace of SGU recruiting and training:

"Prime Minister Thanom and Air Marshall Dawee agreed that the process was being carried out at a rapid rate and that there was no problem in training of recruitment. Nevertheless, units could not be trained in a matter of weeks and advance

⁴¹ Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, volume 7, Vietnam, July 1970-January 1972, Document 215, Minutes of a Meeting of the Senior Review Group, Washington, June 8, 1971, Laos.

preparations needed to be made to take care of filling out the full 36 battalions." ⁴²

THE TWIN OTTER

Like any well run and efficient organization, the Agency planned its moves well in advance. A prime example of this was the S-58T helicopter, capable of covering great distances and flying at night with the "security" of two power sections.

Not long after the Twinpac program became a reality, the Special Project's section in the AB-1 White House implemented a fixed wing program to complement the S-58T helicopter. ⁴³ This was achieved by purchasing a De Havilland DHC-6 Twin Otter, an impressive STOL aircraft. The plane and its positive attributes were not new to the Theater, for CASI had already flown the extraordinary machine upcountry to resupply the Site-15 Puncher FSB.

When Air America Captain Jim Pearson returned to Vientiane after working large fixed wing planes from the Tachikawa, Japan, base, he elected to fly the Pilatus Porter. After being based there a year, on 29 April 1971, Otter N774M arrived at Wattay Airport, and Jim Rhyne provided Pearson with an introduction and initial training flight in the aircraft. ⁴⁴

⁴² FRUS, Document 127, July 6, 1971, 9 a.m., Memorandum of Conversation, Bangkok.

⁴³ When I visited Bob Davis at the Company office in Washington, DC during the summer of 1970 ostensibly to help evaluate the Bell 212, the Agency was likely well aware of the helicopter equipment required for the Special Projects program. In the Author's estimation, the short ride in the 212 was a facade, calculated to appease Bell hierarchy.

⁴⁴ The second week in February, Captains Jim Rhyne and Berl King completed DC-6 ground school at the De Havilland factory in Canada. Flight training was scheduled in Arizona. Bill Leary 02/14/71 Notes.

Soon after the aircraft arrived, Tom Deeble and other Air America technicians retrofitted the Otter with Teledyne prototype LORAN C long range navigation equipment to access and eventually accomplish night resupply missions within a small margin of error. Because of Pearson's seniority, he gravitated to this sensitive work. Clyde Moorehouse was the program Chief Pilot, but deferred to Pearson, who became the Twin Otter Special Project Chief Pilot.

As envisioned by the Agency, the plane was to be flown by one pilot during missions. This policy was later abrogated when abnormally high operational risks surfaced and the Customer agreed to two pilots in the cockpit.

First Twin Otter (called a Twotter in the trade) crews included: Pete Parker, Don Romes, Jim Russell, and Ben Coleman.⁴⁵ Later participants were: Roger Vikre, Dick Stuart, Bob Watson, Ray Salucci, and the first contingent of First Officers, Joe Conde, Barney Heidt, Ted Mauldin, Clyde Moorehouse, and Pappy Mahew. Other pilots were: Ray Chowing, Grover, KD Nolan, Glen Van Ingen, Jason Broussard, Bob Gaines, Jim Voyles, Connelly, Frank Renegar, Larry Wilderom, Jake Wehrell, and Olsen. Jim Rhyne and Berl King also flew the eventual complement of three Otters.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ According to Jim Pearson, Ben Coleman worked a swap with Red Kern for the position because the Agency did not want Kern exposed to the risk of capture due to past operational involvement elsewhere.

⁴⁶ Jim Pearson Emails, 04/29/98, 04/30/98, 05/02/98; Pearson logbooks.
Ken Conboy, 380.

"I have been training people and flying the S-58T all month. Essentially it flies like the old H-34 but with the twin power pack can perform much better. One also has the security of two power sections. We have three now but have the normal start up problem with parts. The company still tries to get by on the cheap in everything it does.

We are making a few gains in north central Laos and the rocket attacks on Long Tieng have stopped. I am really glad about that, as I was usually there for the big booms."

Letter Home, 05/19/71.

My month commenced with a training session with First Officer MG "Buzz" Baiz (DOH 10/14/70) in Papa Hotel Alpha. For reasons only known to him, Scratch Kanach had largely conducted senior pilots training and, except for Charlie Weitz, I generally handled the permanent First Officers.¹ The 29th of April had marked my last flight in the Huey, and with additional S-58Ts emerging from the hangar, I was now completely out of the Bell program. Training was a little more relaxing and I was removed from the immediate battlefield for a period, allowing me to obtain more rest and spend additional and more relaxed time at home with the family.

Beside training new pilots, although not quite there yet, we were still striving to learn, ascertain maintenance foibles,

¹ During this period, Scratch Kanach was processing selected individuals for the Agency's S-58T Special Projects program. Although not directly involved, but subject to visual clues, innuendo logic, and osmosis, I was well aware that the Twinpac was slated for some kind of black operations. At first, the cadre was small and I was not included in the initial group, likely for my conservative opinions, flying techniques, and vocal objections to cross border operations after my unpleasant fun in the Son La/ Na Son Valley of North Vietnam.

and achieve a durable airworthy machine that would stand the demanding upcountry ordeal. Consequently, these training periods involved many startups-shut downs, and both static and flight testing. For example, during an almost nine-hour duty day, I recorded fifteen landings while logging only two hours and forty-five minutes.

Averaging more than five hours per day, training in the Twinpac continued for four days. The group included First Officers Buzz Biaz, Paul Gregoire, Larry Price, and Mike Barksdale (DOH 01/06/71).² The relatively new group were all former Marines who had seen military service in South Vietnam. When hired, they were first relegated to UH-34D work, and then to observing and potentially opting to transfer to the S-58T program as permanent First Officers. Captain Pogo Hunter was included in the group to transition to the new machine. After demonstrating maneuvers during the first sessions and stressing emergency procedures, as my charges became more proficient and comfortable, my number of landings decreased from twenty to ten.

MR-2

"CIA has informed us that the CIA Station Chief [Hugh Tovar] in [Vientiane] believes the situation in the Long Tieng area of Northern Laos, while still serious, is not critical at this time. One [NVA] regiment has been badly mauled and is pulling away from Long Tieng and the remaining units of the 312th and 316th NVA divisions in the general vicinity are under strength. Enemy capabilities have thus been affected. On the other hand, the situation among the Long Tieng defenders has improved. The energy and enthusiasm displayed by General [DHEP],

² Julian Kanach selected First Officers Gregoire and Price for the initial Special Project program. Since this was a highly secret operation, I had no knowledge of their participation at the time.

the Thai Commander, have raised morale considerably among the Thai irregulars. Morale is better today than at the beginning of April. This in turn has had a favorable effect on the morale of General Vang Pao and his Meo troops. The Meo performance is now the best in several months.

While it is still possible that the enemy may try to launch one more major attack on Long Tieng before the rainy season begins about mid-May, the strength of the defenders is greater than that of the 4,500 enemy troops deployed in the immediate Long Tieng area. If an attack comes, it might be on the birthday of Ho Chi Minh, which is May 19. Even without an attack, the enemy will probably try to provide a head start for the next dry season offensive. Nevertheless, Generals [DHEP] and Vang Pao believe that the Long Tieng situation has been stabilized for the moment and they are beginning to think in terms of offensive action of their own beginning in June." ³

With the removal of American troops, and the war winding down in South Vietnam, MACV Washington leaders were more interested in maintaining the status quo and largely unenthusiastic about promoting large offensives in Laos to regain lost territory. However, they were still interested in preserving the buffer state policy protecting Thailand and major Lao Mekong River towns. Therefore, they encouraged expanding RLA forces and retaining and developing strong defenses for the certain North Vietnamese dry season push on Long Tieng and the Vang Pao defense line. Instead of another large movement north with intentions of seizing the entire Plain of Jars, it was believed that securing high ground on the Plain's perimeter

³ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume 2, Vietnam, July 1970-January 1972, Document 198. Memorandum from the President's Deputy Assistant for national Security Affairs (Haig) to President Nixon. Washington, May 7, 1971. Situation in Long Tieng in Northern Laos.

should suffice. What was not fully understood by many was that the war had long since morphed from small unit guerrilla operations conducted from hilltops to large mobile units more attuned to conventional war.

USG policy was somewhat flawed, for the enemy, even though many units were in the process of withdrawing or had already withdrawn north, several strong elements remained to maintain pressure on Vang Pao's forces. Also, the buildup and storage of supplies on the northern Plain of Jars along Route-7 was significant, and would aid the Vietnamese cause early during the next dry season, and perhaps help dislodge government forces for good. ⁴

As a realist, Vang Pao was well aware of the enemy's strength, and potential to displace and capture his battalions. Therefore, supported by the King and Souvanna Phouma, he began dusting off plans for another Plain of Jars operation similar to the 1969 success. Consequently, aware that with his current assets and motivation he could never fully duplicate the 1969 operation and hold the Plain for a relatively long period, he prepared to march with or without MACV or Washington's sanction, and perhaps only a back-door wink-wink from the Vientiane Embassy.

Although semi-successful, friendly April frontal assaults to dislodge the enemy knocking on the porous gates of Long Tieng had been largely unproductive, as a tenacious enemy still clung to their hard-won positions. ⁵

⁴ Vietnamese leaders were careful before proceeding with any sizeable offensive. It normally took up to two months moving supplies along drying roads to forward bases before a prepared attack was mounted. With forward supply depots already stocked around Ban Ban, an offensive could be mounted early.

⁵ Withdrawal from a position was rarely tolerated by Vietnamese leaders and normally met with death or dishonor.

With airlift assets capable of working in even foul weather available in the form of helicopters and talented crews, a standard three-pronged, abbreviated operation was conceived as the initial plan for the 1971 wet season offensive. Taking high ground east and north of the Plain, disrupting upper Route-7 traffic, and severing the choke point at the Nong Pet road junction and controlling Route-4 to Xieng Khouang Ville, was paramount to moving deep onto the Plain of Jars to identify and target enemy caches for destruction. Since USG policy stipulated that USAF air support would be significantly reduced on 1 July, there was a distinct sense of urgency to proceed with the operation without delay. ⁶

THE KICKOFF

The first phase of Vang Pao's second Plain of Jars operation was slated to airdrop forty-five Commando Raiders at night into the Nam Mat Valley south of Phu Se Bott (LS-82), located thirteen miles northeast of Ban Ban, and about five miles north of Route-7. The mission objective was similar to the multi-battalion San Tiau (LS-02) search and destroy operation begun the previous November and concluded in early January. Although the group was measurably smaller, the tough raiders, employing rapid hit and run tactics, were envisioned to create havoc and disrupt enemy logistics.

Complementing the raider team, a column of troops from Bouam Long would move south over the mountains toward Route-71 and the Nong Pet junction. However, at this time Site-32 was beginning to experience problems with 316 Division units deployed from the main force that was moving back to the

⁶ CHECO.

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 344.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 299.

Northwest Military Region in North Vietnam for rest and refitting.

The airborne delivery mechanism for the night drops would be the Twin Otter. In the Special Project, only Pete Parker and Jim Pearson were fully checked out on the onboard electronic equipment. In lieu of inaccurate time and distance flying, purportedly new accurate long-range navigation (LORAN) was being introduced.

While Pete and Jim were attending ground school learning the intricacies of the new LORAN-C equipment in Hangar One's upstairs classroom, Tom Deeble and other specially trained electronic technicians were on the hangar deck below, installing necessary wire bundles, the LORAN set, and associated equipment. The updated LORAN-C deviation indicator (CDI) installed in the instrument panel was a computerized, highly accurate device that would signal a one-minute warning bell and light to target, and then register with a needle swing when the plane was over the drop area.

On completion of the abbreviated ground school, at 1700 hours they departed for the first mission. As Long Tieng was too crowded, the operation was staged from Ban Son (LS 272). The five shuttles and parachute jumps became an unmitigated disaster. The LORAN failed to function as published, and in the midst of nocturnal thunderstorms, commandos were dropped and widely scattered throughout the valley.

Later analysis revealed that human error had led to erroneous and erratic behavior of the equipment. The new LORAN system only required an initial point (present position) and the destination to be manually entered. Then the computer solved any off-set problem. Because none of the Customers were very familiar with the new system, the drop zone was selected along one of the LORAN map grid coordinates, as was customary for the

previous time-delay LORAN version. The mission drop zone was incorrectly programmed along a single line of position (LOP) instead at the intersecting angle of two LOPs, a no-no according to the operator's technical manual. As a result, the computer attempted to divide information by zero, providing useless information in locating the drop site. ⁷ Confused, Pearson and Parker flew down a LOP and, like a back-room crap shoot, attempted to drop the men when they crossed an imagined intersecting LOP. ⁸ Left to their own designs and experience, at considerable risk to themselves, they rang the jump bell while flying on instruments, in pitch black conditions, below mountain ridgelines, and in thunderstorms and rain. Knowing what he had done, Pearson felt bad for the men.

Upon landing, the men radioed, "On DZ Captain." However, Jim was well aware that the teams did not actually know where they were. After time some Commando Raiders managed to regroup and proceed toward their objective.

Thus, despite the glitches and unforeseen circumstances, which always plagued the pilots during new situations, Special Project missions began. Because of "the need to know," prevalent in such highly classified missions or individual embarrassment, the pilots were not debriefed or informed as to causation of the operational error. By the very same token, the crew was not held accountable for the inaccuracy caused by the Customer's ineptness. ⁹

⁷ LORAN maps were crisscrossed with three lines of position (LOP) plotted from three remote transmitting sources located throughout Southeast Asia. When planning missions using LORAN equipment for accuracy, it was essential to mark drop zones or landing zones where two, or preferably, three lines of position intersected.

⁸ LOP: The curve of all points having the same difference in distance to a pair of LORAN C stations.

⁹ Jim Pearson Email, 04/30/98.
Ken Conboy, 299, Captain Jim Pearson information.

The second phase of the end-run operation commenced at Padong. Troops from GM-21 were gathered, mustered, and transferred to Site-05. On 1 May, during a two-day operation, the regiment was shuttled seven miles north across the valley to the Khang Kho ridge.¹⁰ By the third Site-204 was again in government hands. Consolidation of positions and buildup proceeded in anticipation of further movement toward the Plain of Jars and the surrounding mountains. Despite this diversionary tactic, the enemy clung tenaciously to their positions adjacent to the VP line.

At the end of May another regiment, GM-22, was heli-lifted to Padong from the Site-72 area to supplement GM-21 when the Plain of Jars offensive began.¹¹

S-58T UPCOUNTRY TRAINING AND OPERATIONS.

Because of minor problems with various aspects of the Twinpac, like trimming the engine power sections, torque meter adjustments, and combining gearbox leaks, the machine had been initially restricted to the Udorn environment to accomplish local shakedown and pilot training. When these issues had been resolved, the machine was released for upcountry work. In order to acquire experience and confidence in the aircraft without encountering major combat conditions that the Long Tieng area might provide, with Customer concurrence, we elected to work in the less invasive Moung Nham (LS-63) Valley area east of Ban Tha Si, where harsh terrain and weather still prevailed. Granted,

¹⁰ Using Khang Kho (LS-204) as a troop marshalling and launch point had become Vang Pao's traditional standard operating procedure for movement toward and around the eastern hills overlooking the Plain of Jars.

¹¹ William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 69, 71.
Ken Conboy, 299.

the position had been briefly captured by the enemy more than a month before, but was then firmly in government control.

With the Twinpac's introduction to field work, it was time for my upcountry IP check. Therefore, on Saturday, May eighth, Captain Scratch Kanach, Bill Long (DOH 07/29/69), and I launched seventy-eight nautical miles northeast to Paksane in Papa Hotel Alpha.

Bill Long (DOH 07/23/69), from Chelsea, Massachusetts, had been a crew chief in my former squadron of HMM-261. Before entering the S-58T program, Bill had crewed the UH-34D. The tall, aggressive Flight Mechanic was reputed to be a good reliable worker. Later, while a crewmember in the Special Project, he was also a good gunner, independent minded and not reluctant to fire his weapon if the situation dictated. A likable person, he was also a fun-loving person, who relished occasionally pulling out a white hair growing between my eyes. *"If I did not love you, I would not mess with you,"* was the usual retort when this gentle harassment took place. Bill was a relatively loud person when compared to the more reticent Chuck Low (DOH 10/21/70); slightly intimidating and one obviously capable of great violence if provoked.

After fueling at Lima-35, we proceeded thirty-three miles north to Site-63, located eleven miles east of Tha Thom (LS-11), and the same number of miles west of Mounng Moc (LS-46). The valley was squeezed against high mountains that formed the Lao-North Vietnamese border. We had worked in and out of the site for some time for Customer Dick Mann (Bamboo). A challenging training area, rough landing zones were sprinkled in the mountains to the northeast. Some pads were small, on razorback ridges with only one-way approaches in and out. While still transitioning John Fonburg in the Huey, I approached one saddleback pad downwind and added maximum power, almost over-

torquing to stop the aircraft, and finally going around. It was embarrassing, but difficult landing zones and lack of wind direction and velocity were part of everyday work.

At the airstrip we were loaded with soldiers and dependents for the described site between two small pinnacles. Since I was the person receiving the check ride, I was flying from the right seat. On the way to the pad, curious as to maintaining altitude with a single power section, I posed a question to Scratch about the capability of the machine to fly with a full load. Without saying anything, probably as interested as I was as to performance and capabilities of the aircraft, he rolled one throttle to flight idle. Since we had already achieved cruise speed, we continued to fly, but at a reduced airspeed, while monitoring the inter-turbine temperature (ITT) and torque gages on the engaged engine section. The exercise marked an impressive and excellent confidence builder, knowing that if one lost a gas turbine engine in flight, it was possible to fly to a safe area to perform a roll-on landing. We already knew that losing an engine during takeoff or landing below translational lift or at a hover, one would be committed to a controlled crash. We practiced emergency maneuvers predicated on this assumption. Overall, it was apparent that no twin engine helicopter produced would be perfect, but the S-58T power system appeared to be a huge improvement, operational and survival wise, over the H-34.

One of several problems we had experienced at Udorn with the S-58T was continuing combining gearbox (CGB) leaks. During the training phase, this component that shared and reduced the two-engine power input was considered one weak link in the system that all machinery generally displays (the angle gearbox presented another unknown quantity).

There were two heavy gears contained in the gearbox that received shaft horsepower from each power section. After

reducing input power, and regulated by a power sharing device, a third gear transmitted horsepower via a heavy driveshaft to the angle gearbox for further RPM reduction in preparation to delivering torque to the main transmission. I was interested to know whether, in the case of a complete loss of oil or malfunction, would the gears in the gearbox seize, preventing disengagement from the drive shaft and a pilot's ability to autorotate. Thus far, no one had been able to give me a plausible answer to my question. ¹²

During the course of Twinpac development, Archie Loper, the regional Sikorsky technical representative, who had relocated from Bangkok to Singapore, paid a rare, complementary visit to Udorn. I knew Archie from the early days, and had confidence in his knowledge and wisdom as a tech rep. After spying him in the Club, I voiced my concern and queried him as to the viability and reliability of the combining gearbox.

Typical with aircraft manufactures in a rush to create a market presence for their product and begin earning profits, information was often sorely lacking for the pilot as to system failures and emergency procedures to cope with the situation (the combining gear box was one; the angle gearbox another). ¹³ This was likely due to an information deficit or reluctance to

¹² Not every emergency situation and procedure was published in the pilot's manual. While transitioning to an advanced helicopter, I was always eager to know in advance regarding any hidden items that might possibly kill me. This information would enable me to form a plan in my mind that could help me to survive.

¹³ Angle gearbox: We were informed that the angle gearbox was manufactured to strict U.S. Navy specifications that like the UH-34D helicopter transmission which required an almost one hundred percent safety factor. Tests generally required dry running a component with no oil for at least thirty minutes or until gear seizure or catastrophic destruction.

become involved in potential litigation.¹⁴ Ever since my involvement with the Huey fuel control-governor system problem, I had been dubious regarding system-components that were purposely avoided, or glossed over quickly, during Drex Morgan's ground training classes or in pilot flight manuals.

Although seemingly not really concerned with my question, Archie was completely forthright in regard to my inquiry. He believed that during any combining gearbox failure the pilot would be able to disengage the engine from other components and enter the autorotation mode, but he qualified this answer, admitting that he was not really positive of this. The unknown qualities the S-58T presented made me feel uncomfortable and caused me to wonder about the machine's survivability, particularly given a sticky combat situation.¹⁵

Because of the unknowns and frequent combining gearbox leaks, we elected to periodically inspect the CGB oil level. Monitoring the CGB oil pressure gage in the cockpit was also encouraged. A sight gage was installed on the front of the box, but the glass would craze, leading to an unreliable reading. Instead, removing the oil cap fitted with a dip stick on top of the box provided a better indication of the true oil level.

Before we departed for the assigned landing Zone, Bill visually and manually checked the oil in the combining gearbox. After Kanach rolled one power section to flight idle as a

¹⁴ Litigation: A law suit to redress a perceived wrong. Something for which American automobile manufacturers are famous.

¹⁵ Wayne Knight Email, 11/25/00. *"Archie was a hail-fellow-well-met individual and a pleasure to have a beer with. However, Wayne suspected he spent an inordinate amount of time and attention on things in Bangkok (by now he was the Sikorsky Regional Tech Rep and dealt with Singapore). He did not come to Udorn very often. Until the S-58T evolved Air America had never bought anything from Sikorsky. Even hulls were provided by the military. Moreover, he was too closely aligned to the operations side for Technical Service Chief Jack Forney's liking."*

demonstration of single engine performance in flight, and I recovered power, I noticed the combing gearbox pressure needle fluctuating. This was alarming. Something was obviously wrong, and we had our asses hung out over very rough terrain. Sweating all the way into the pad, I plopped the machine down and hurriedly climbed down from the cockpit, while Bill Long opened the modified doors enclosing the engine compartment. He discovered that in checking the oil level, he had replaced the cap and "O" ring in a cocked position, so that substantial oil had leaked out, resulting in the pressure gage fluctuation.

I climbed back into the cockpit feeling a little cocky, as I had correctly diagnosed a potentially dangerous situation during a check ride. But when I looked at Scratch, he was glowering. Pointing to the brakes, he was not happy. It was then that I realized that in my haste to put the machine down and inspect the machine, I had landed slightly down slope and had forgotten to lock the brakes, (Unlike the S-58T, the Bell was skid configured with no hydraulic brake system.) My euphoric bubble at what I thought deserved a kudo burst when Kanach sarcastically hissed that my effort had produced sloppy work. Of course, he was right. Thus cowed, I wondered if my error would jeopardize my instructor pilot status.

When we chocked in at Udorn, I had finished the long day with forty sorties and an hour twenty minutes night-time. In addition, except for the one minor error, I had demonstrated my ability to manipulate the Twinpac in the mountains with adequate proficiency.

The day's work confirmed our belief that LS-63 satisfactorily fulfilled all the requirements for a semi-leisurely initial upcountry field training in the S-58T. Therefore, we decided to continue the aircraft shakedown and training process there until it could be established that the

machine would be safe and reliable enough to work out of Long Tieng. I heard no more regarding my boo-boo. ¹⁶

While we were doing our thing to the east, Mike Jarina, Ben Densley, and Flight Mechanic JG Demandal (DOH 09/13/68) in 13F, along with other crews worked the Long Tieng area.

Sunday morning Charlie Weitz, Long, and I returned to Moung Nham in XW-PHB. To enable him to gain experience, I allowed Charlie to perform almost all the work. At the same time Mike Jarina, John Fonburg, and Phil Velasquez worked 35F out of The Alternate.

I was not on the schedule the next day, but Jarina, Densley, and Velasquez returned to Long Tieng in 35F. Their output, excluding ferry time, was consistent, averaging just over eight hours.

WEBB

On the eleventh I was scheduled to work LS-63 with Wayne Webb and Flight Mechanic Joe Gaculais (DOH 04/03/61) in XW-PHB. The mating of the crew was kind of ironic, for now I was tasked to train the individual who had busted me on my first Huey check ride, and was unhappy that Scratch had chosen me over him to be the assistant S-58T IP. I was curious as to his disposition, for this was the same guy who accepted a Company Bell IP position to get out of flying upcountry, and was reputed to be terrified to perform the same work that we had all been performing for years.

Webb had quit the Company for a time, going to Australia, where he met and married, Lorraine, a pleasant and comely blond-

¹⁶ As Scratch was heavily involved in the upcoming Special Project, and busy training his own small pilot cadre, I was the only IP remaining to conduct normal pilot training.

headed girl. When he returned to Udorn, other pilots like Mike Jarina believed that he just did not belong in our group. ¹⁷

Disregarding his normal bluster, on the basis of what I observed in the Animal Bar ¹⁸ one night, I considered him an exceedingly odd individual. Well into his cups, Webb was sitting in the corner on top of the semi-circular bar. He was bemoaning something, but I was not sure exactly what was troubling him. However, I was shocked, and received additional insight into the man's character, when attempting to make a point, he unzipped his trousers and removed his flaccid member. While contemplating his next move for a moment, he pulled out and opened his Buck knife, and then debated whether to sever the organ. Of course, he did not, but it was most unusual, disgusting, and gross behavior for any seemingly sane person, something that might interest and engage a competent psychiatrist for some time.

Aside from the animosity Webb felt for me, I wanted him to fly as much as he could to obtain experience and confidence in the machine. I still flew my share of the loads (twenty sorties), mostly to display to him how the Twinpac operated in mountainous conditions, and perhaps allow him to emulate my techniques. During the course of our day, I stressed emergency procedures including a demonstration of Scratch's single engine performance.

In order to operate in the mountains, one had to be able to judge all variables and fly into some demanding places. However, given correct planning and technique, most could almost always be worked. There was a pad beyond a prominent northeast site,

¹⁷ Mike Jarina Interview.

¹⁸ Animal Bar: Originally conceived and created by Ben Moore, this room was supposedly a sanctuary for pilots to unwind and vent some of the nervous, pent-up energy accumulated during difficult combat work. Mutually agreed upon by patrons, what occurred in the bar stayed in the bar.

located on a narrow, wooded ridge where I wanted him to deliver a light load. Granted, it was a difficult landing zone to negotiate, and when he saw it, he waffled. Instead, he wanted me to show him how to land there. It was the only time a pilot had done this to me. I was not positive if he was merely testing me, or was honestly reluctant to attempt a landing there. I took control of the ship, commenced a slow, sidewise, power on approach, and conducted a perfect landing. With an excess of power available there was no problem, the aircraft was well equipped to handle situations like that. Webb did not say a word.

It was the first time I had flown with Webb upcountry, and I received a firsthand revelation confirming existing rumor and what other pilots had indicated, that he was more than normally apprehensive about flying in the mountains, preferring not to be there. In this, he was similar to Tom Moher, but not as honest as Tom to admit it. Still, he chose not to change his vocation.

A LITTLE UNPLEASANTNESS

"We have one fellow [here] that is a bit psycho, who had bad-mouthed me and the boss of the [S-58T] program and seems to be a problem. I guess he really wants my job. I would settle it with him man-to-man, but he is considerably larger and I stopped fighting years ago with my fists. It will probably work out. If it doesn't we will have to get rid of him. In all the years that I have been over here I have never had anyone talk to me the way this guy did; of course. he was in his cups."

Letter Home, 06/08/71.

Webb continued resenting me for obtaining what he considered "his IP job," and it all came to a head one evening, when Tuie and I attended a party at "good time" Dick Lister's

house in Tony Poe's compound. Webb was there, along with several other employees, their wives and girlfriends.

Webb was a heavy drinker--lately we were all tipping a few more adult beverages than we should-and, as usual, we were talking shop-flying. The subject eventually circled around to training. Webb was obviously baiting me, and I casually mentioned that the paramount item I looked for in a pilot was safety. Webb did not agree, and probably would not have agreed with anything I said. As the conversation continued, one thing led to another, and he finally uttered what he was really thinking: that neither Scratch nor I were real instructor pilots. Booze often brought out the worst in some people. Granted, I had never attended a military instructor pilot school and attained the level of IP helicopter pattern work as Wayne had, but I had amassed more real time experience working in the mountains with other pilots, under almost all conditions and situations, than he could ever hope to duplicate. In addition, I took pride in imparting my knowledge to others.

His declaration was voiced with such venom, and at the right time of night, that I saw red. I had been seriously challenged, and my human instinct reverted to fight or leave. Webb was a big, lanky person and had presented himself as a very loud, mouthy type from the time he had arrived in Udorn.¹⁹ (Roy Hickman, his buddy, was a clone, but was not a hypocrite, and did not last long in our organization.)

I thought for a minute. Through my alcoholic haze, and as an alternative to an embarrassing scene in a friend's house, elected to take a bathroom break. It was a wise decision, for by the time I washed my face and returned to the shot pattern,

¹⁹ When believed to be wronged, I had never been loath to take on men larger than me.

Lister and others had calmed Webb down and we continued the party.

My Father reacted to my letter about Webb with some words of wisdom.

"Now Dick, a word of warning. Beware of that so-called psycho you mentioned who wants your job. If he is a boozer there is no way to figure his actions. You are right not to fight at the drop of a hat, for that is no way to settle with a guy like him. Let the boss of your program take up the issue, but you keep away and preserve your health."

Letter from Home, 06/28/71.

Over time, Webb's drinking only worsened, and he became a wife beater. ²⁰

MIKE

The same morning that Webb and I journeyed to Moung Nham, Jarina, Fonburg, and Noble arrived at Long Tieng in Papa Foxtrot Hotel to support Vang Pao's offensive. Toward the end of the day, even though Fonburg was the senior man, Mike was delegated to fly the machine to Udorn. They were preparing to launch south when Jerry Daniels approached the helicopter saying he needed a Thai trooper with his arm blown off extracted from a GLAD ²¹ pad.

At that time of day, there was no cover aircraft available. Mike, who had made up his mind to conduct the medevac told Fonburg, *"You can either go with me or get out. I'll pick you up afterward."* Jerry Daniels went with Mike.

²⁰ I assume Webb eventually got his drinking problem under control. Today, like Wayne Knight and family, he and Lorraine live in Australia.

²¹ GLAD pads: A series of Thai-manned positions surrounding the Sam Tong perimeter.

Because the landing zone was receiving mortar strikes when Mike arrived, the FAG indicated he should not land because of incoming rounds. Mike told the man to ignite and throw a smoke grenade to where the last round had splashed. Mike then told the FAG to have the wounded man moved fifty to one hundred yards below the smoke. Next, Jarina descended below the ridgeline to mask his position from the enemy forward observer, then ascended to the same level as the pad and landed. Mike could see the Thai was in bad shape and was wearing a tourniquet.

When they arrived at Long Tieng, a Porter was waiting to ferry the wounded man to Udorn. In order to save time unloading and reloading the man, Mike suggested to Jerry that he ferry him south. Daniels agreed. While cruising at the maximum speed of 120 knots, Noble said they were shaking the wounded man too much, so Mike slowed to a hundred knots. Arriving at the Air America ramp, Jarina continued air taxiing to AB-1, where the soldier was unloaded.

Jarina did not think about the incident until Dick Elder, who was a good friend of Jerry asked Mike what he had done. Apparently, Daniels had been impressed with Mike's performance and told the Chief Pilot that Mike should put in for a special, and he would approve it. Mike never did this. Dick later told Daniels that Mike did not want the money, but might like a letter of appreciation. Such recognition was never forthcoming.

Sometime later, when Mike took Daniels diving at Pattaya, he found that Daniel's entire attitude about Mike had changed regarding the Ban Na episode, but Mike still harbored ill feelings because of the deleterious comment he had purportedly made regarding the helicopter pilots losing Site-15.

Jarina and Marius Burke returned to the fray on Wednesday in Foxtrot Hotel. They had a very active day, flying almost eleven and a half hours and conducting over a hundred sorties.²²

The next morning, Lloyd Higgins, Flight Mechanic Piggot, and I were scheduled for upcountry work. It was the first time that I had shared a cockpit with Lloyd in ages.²³ Instead, we became involved in a series of FCFs because of torque splits caused by improper engine trimming. There were still problems in the new program, perhaps caused by improper understanding of the T-5 trim and fuel control rigging. Granted, the systems were somewhat complicated, and required a modicum of expertise. For this reason, Twinpac Project Manager Bob Davis issued a memorandum to all S-58T pilots at the end of May. Perhaps a little unrealistic, Bob wanted all of us to be able to diagnose a problem and with maintenance assistance, conduct proper trimming procedures. The procedures were fairly comprehensive and covered: T-5 trimming, part power trim, Nf beeper micro switch position, Nf governor paralleling, Nf beeper minimum limit adjustment, collective bias flight check, and a power assurance check.²⁴ Toward noon we were released, having logged thirty-five minutes.

CRASH

About the same time we were terminating our FCF, Ken Wood, Don Overfield, and Bobby Barrow crashed Yankee-11 in the vicinity of "Echo Hotel" pad on a Phou Long Mat hill. During landing, the aircraft downwash caused a parachute to emerge from a foxhole, billow, and wrap around the tail rotor. The resulting

²² Mike Jarina Interviews.

²³ At this time, I did not know that Lloyd Higgins had been tapped for the Special Project program.

²⁴ Bob Davis Memorandum, S-58T T-5 Trim and Fuel Control Rigging, 05/31/71.

sudden stoppage caused the tail rotor and gearbox to separate from the ship. With all anti-torque and directional control lost, the ship spun two and a half times to the right. The tail boom received damage upon ground contact. None of the occupants was injured, but area security was considered marginal and the ship deemed in peril, for the enemy was reputedly resupplying their Military Region Two battle positions at night by helicopter. Several were spotted engaging in this activity during early May and a gunship observed one landing close to Ban Na on the 13th.²⁵

John Ford and I journeyed to the site that afternoon to investigate the accident. It appeared that the crew was lucky to have survived in one piece. Everything had been as portrayed, except that the lie of the downhill slope was such that if there had been more movement, Yankee-11 could have rolled off the hill. The Bell was recovered, repaired, and returned to the Army on or about 30 June 1971.²⁶

Two days later, I was back in a training status, working at LS-63 in Papa Hotel Bravo with Lloyd Higgins and Rudy Serafico. Whatever problems had grounded the machine on Thursday had been resolved and the machine operated as published. Operating in the same area and landing on the same pads was becoming a bore, but the ships had not been released for work to the west until our pilots were ready.

Mike Jarina, Al Cates, and Tod Yourglich repositioned in Papa Foxtrot Gulf to Paksane for assigned troop shuttles to outlying pads and then to Thakhet for a late Special Mission

²⁵ William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 71.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 344

²⁶ Air America XOXO, UH1D Yankee-11, 05/13/71, JD Ford.
Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*, Yankee-11. There is a photo in Joe Leeker's work of Yankee-11 sitting on the "EH" pad.

(infil). At the completion of the mission, they bypassed Lima-40, refueling at the Nakhon Phanom base and RTB Udorn.

Pogo Hunter was an experienced and accomplished UH-34D pilot, but prior to entering the S-58T program had no previous gas turbine engine time. Therefore, he required slightly more OJT exposure and familiarity to the new system than other pilots who had transitioned from the Bell program. Consequently, on Sunday, when Hunter was deemed ready, we were scheduled to the Moung Nham common training area. Pogo, Rudy, and I took a relatively well functioning XW-PHB to the site.

While we were performing our daily Customer missions, Mike Jarina, Larry Hennesy, and Bobby Barrow, along with other crews were scheduled to The Alternate to help bolster and secure the Vang Pao Line. The process seemed to be working.

Hunter, Deak Kennedy, I and returned to Moung Nham in Bravo the next day for an additional training session in the mountains. Deak, like Bill Long, was also a confident and aggressive type from Massachusetts.²⁷ Complementing the trio of Chuck Low and Long, Deak fit in well as a crewmember in the Special Project-those who could think independently themselves and act without prompting during times of need. Mercurial with wide swings in mood, Deak was quite profane, often uttering invective that tended to get him in trouble. Overall, he was a courageous and consistent performer. We blocked in after dark with almost ten and a half hours logged

On a pivotal day, Jarina, Ted Cash, and Flight Mechanic Estrella moved north in Golf. Foul weather and Allied air strikes had tended to discourage the enemy, and strategic hills in the vicinity of Ban Na were retaken. On this day, Phou Pha

²⁷ My Father was born in Framingham, Massachusetts. I think Yankees like him tended to be a little more aggressive than the average individual.

Sai was finally occupied without a fight. Site-15 was still in enemy hands, and many enemy troops still occupied the southwest Plain of Jars.

Ed Reid and Mike Jarina were paired in 35F on 19 May. While working The Alternate area, a T-28 pilot went down and an A-1E pilot called for any "Alpha-Alpha" to respond for a possible SAR. The call sign was the generic SAR designation for the airborne controller King. Mike had previously talked to a USAF pilot in the Air America bar after coordinating with him during an actual mission. During the course of their discussion, Mike inquired, *"If I want to talk to you, how do I do this without using the emergency frequency?"* He replied to simply call on the VHF frequency channel-130.5. The Air America common VHF frequency-119.1-was King's primary frequency that was constantly monitored, and the initial call for a SAR mission was for an "Alpha-Alpha" in the affected area. Hearing this, Mike was impressed that we were the first contacted.

A Skyraider pilot over the downed T-28 site, after making a low pass with an observer, did not believe that the pilot had survived. Therefore, he radioed in the clear, *"Don't bother sending anyone. The crew was dead. All you will achieve is getting somebody shot down attempting to enter the area."* ²⁸

Friday the 20th was my final day on the schedule during May. Larry Price, Bill Long, and I were involved in testing and training in XW-PHC the third, and latest, ship converted to Twinpac status. There were add-ons present in the cockpit that obviously pointed to operations other than normal.

With three S-58Ts on the line, I assumed that Special Project crews were practicing or even conducting daylight missions.

²⁸ Mike Jarina Interviews.

Jarina was under no constraints, and continued to fly until the end of the month. On the 20th Mike, Ken Wood, and Andy Anderson worked PFG in the Sam Tong area.

Five days later, he and Bobby Barrow crewing 96W, conducted sixty-three sorties in the Long Tieng (sometimes logged as Lima Site-98, or LS-30) complex. Days were long, and on the 27th, Mike and Casio worked the entire day in the Lima Site-63 valley. The 30th was spent upcountry with cockpit mate Phillips in Papa Foxtrot Juliet.²⁹

Attesting to enemy presence anywhere in the Long Tieng area, particularly to the south, a Bell helicopter received battle damage on 24 May. Flying N8535F, "Big" Ed Rudolphs and Flight Mechanic R Ueda (DOH 04/19/71) had conducted a resupply mission to Long Pot, twenty-five nautical miles northwest of Long Tieng. While en route to a second landing zone near Phu Houot (LS-99), ground fire struck the right-hand windscreen, the lower right-hand fuselage, and the tail boom. Ueda was hit in the upper right arm, and Rudolphs recovered at Site-20A.³⁰

BOUAM LONG

The battleground was not equally weighted on all fronts. To the north at Bouam Long, after withdrawing from the castle gates of Long Tieng, between two and three thousand enemy converged, pressured, and were preparing to assault the site from three separate directions. Since Houa Phan Province was generally lost to the government in 1968, several serious attempts, including artillery barrages, had been made by the Vietnamese to dislodge the defenders of Bouam Long. None were considered successful.

²⁹ Mike Jarina Interviews.

³⁰ Bill Leary Notes. Information from a 05/24/71 Air America XOXO.



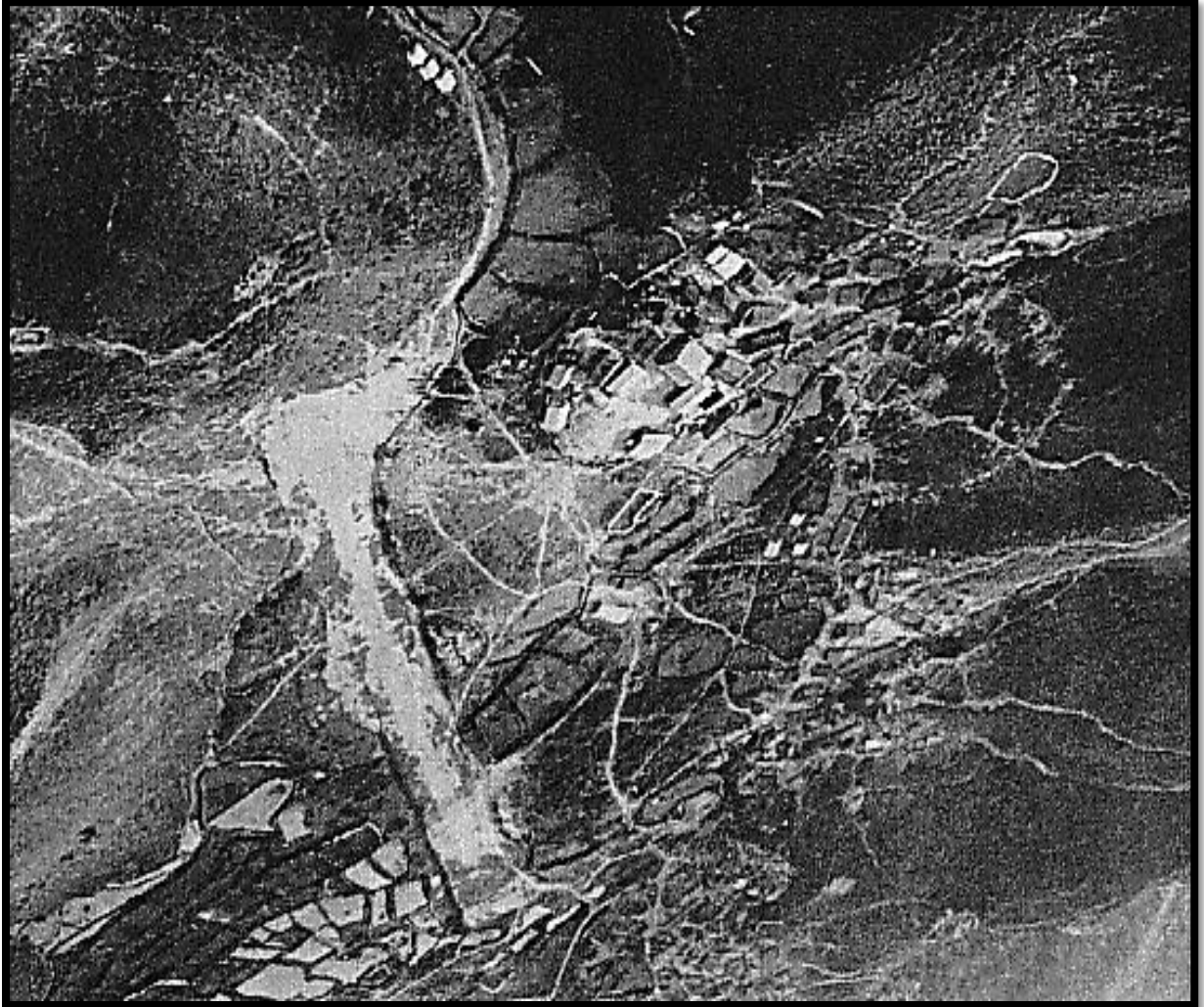
The Bouam Long (LS-32; originally LS-88) complex located at 4,800 feet in an inhospitable mountainous region. Note the proximity to the northern reaches and lines of communications of the Plain of Jars. Old sites at Phou Vieng (LS06) and Phu Cum (LS-50) are located to the upper left. Xieng Khouang (Lima-22) airstrip is located in the left-hand corner.

Jim Henderson Collection—from the Author's LP, Series 15-1 Air Sheet NE 48-1 Joint Operations Graphic.

There were many cogent reasons to retain the mountain bastion under RLG control. Aside from the fact that Bouam Long was historically one of the original Meo sites, it was also the remaining position of any consequence on the northern flank of the Plain of Jars. Providing a blocking position to incursions from the north, the site was a launch pad for guerrillas to move south to high points where they could observe, obtain, and report intelligence on vehicle traffic along the Route-72 valley. They were also well suited to move on the Nong Pet junction to disrupt traffic during Vang Pao's multi-pronged Plain of Jars offensives. The site provided fuel and was also a safe way point for helicopter missions delivering commando teams well to the north.

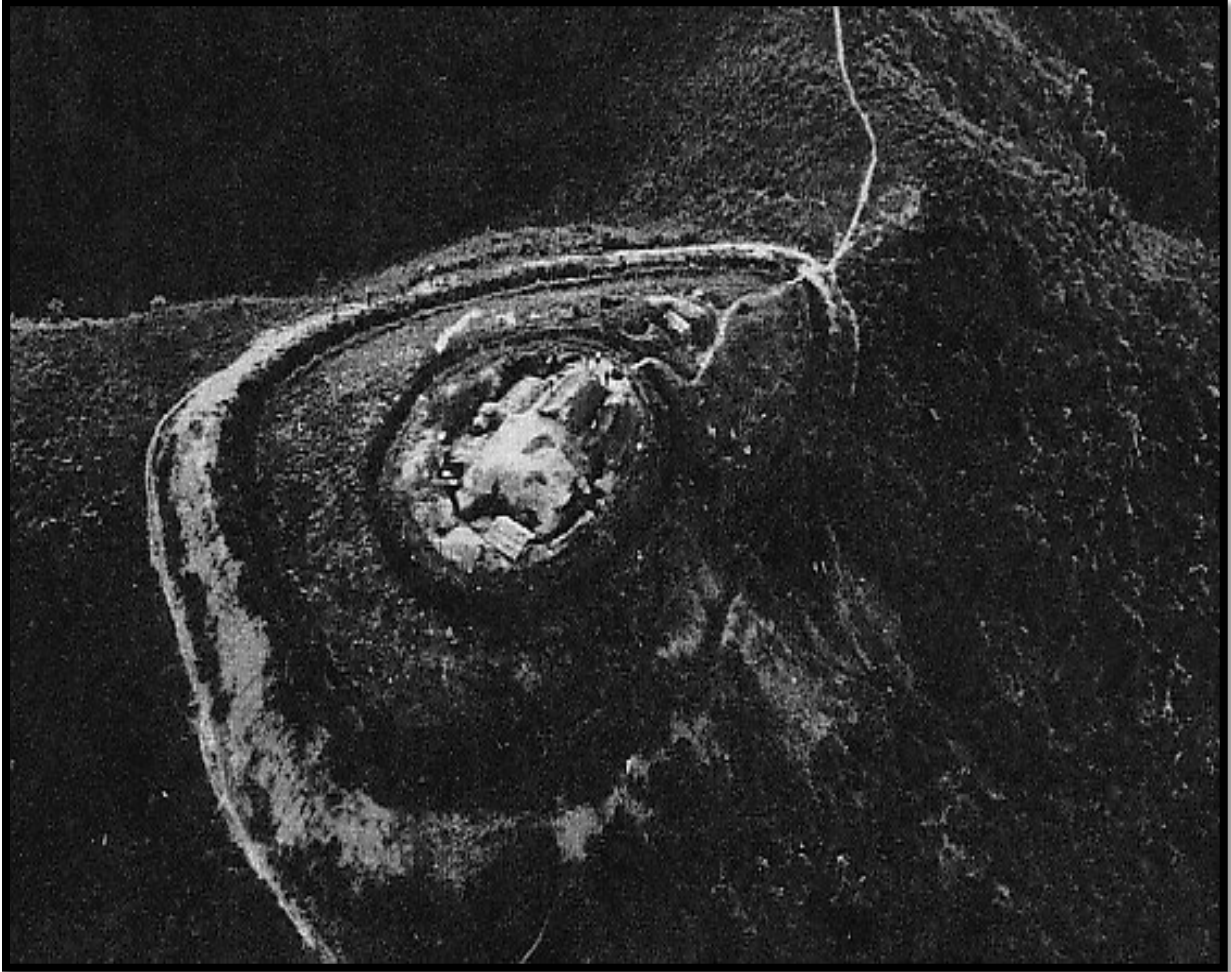
Bouam Long was a difficult objective for any belligerent force to conquer. Because of the extremely harsh terrain and a burning desire by the Meo defenders to preserve their sacred mountain complex and homeland, they always persevered.³¹ In addition, Vang Pao was related by marriage to headman, Cher Pao Moua. Therefore, the general willingly provided assistance in the form of troops, air support, and the wherewithal to fight. An Agency Case Officer was always at the site to bolster morale, provide advice, and order whatever supplies were necessary to sustain the site. Consequently, Bouam Long's defenses were formidable, with numerous outposts stitched together with bunkers, tunnels, interlocking fire, and trenches fitted with sharp bamboo punji sticks and barbed-wire lined perimeters. Probably the most important aspect in maintaining the site's survival, RLAf and USAF assets provided constant day and night

³¹ Bouam Long's favorable poppy growing soil provided the Meo with a substantial cash crop of opium to barter, or to pay for sugar, salt, and other essential commodities. In 1962 and during other periods, when the site was logged as Lima Site-88, I observed Meo ladies harvesting the product in the corn fields.



Overhead view of the Bouam Long airstrip, one village, and rice fields.

Parker, 95.



A formidable Meo fighting position with defenses in depth on high ground at Lima Site-32.
Parker Collection, 95.

air support during periods of conflict. All these factors had coalesced in the past to allow Site-32 to survive.

Maneuvering under the cover of foul weather, the enemy struck Bouam Long on Thursday 20 May. Fighting was intense for three days, with the enemy employing crew-served weapons. Cher Pao Moua's three 105mm howitzers countered enemy attacks. General Vang Pao dispatched reinforcements by helicopters that increased the site's total number of defenders to 1,200.

Possibly saving the day, the USAF introduced a portable ground beacon named Pave Mace. A specially trained Meo FAG was landed with an "off-set beacon." The highly accurate battery powered electronic device allowed the Meo operator to forward information regarding a target, its range, bearing, and the ground operator's location to overhead aircraft. Utilizing this data, orbiting gunship crews, regardless of visual conditions, could conduct accurate strikes on enemy locations during the night and in any weather. Tactical fighters could perform the same task during the day.

The device worked perfectly. As the enemy wildly charged up the slopes, the FAG performed his job, and gunships poured lethal fire into the assaulting forces. When the fire and smoke cleared, the defenders observed hundreds of chopped-up bodies hanging in the barbed wire. ³²

Along with this improved tool, the combat expertise, and intestinal fortitude of the defenders, by month's end, Vietnamese commanders accepted their losses and withdraw from the field, leaving three Pathet Lao battalions in the area to dissuade Bouam Long's defenders from appreciably expanding the

³² William Leary, May 20, 1971 Notes.

site's perimeter. ³³

Despite the 1 July deadline for a reduction in U.S. air support, the current prognosis for friendly air was not encouraging to the war effort. The drawdown in U.S. military Tacair assets commenced earlier than projected. This was attributable to fewer U.S. Navy sorties.

Approximately forty-seven Tacair and five gunships would be allocated to the Barrel Roll area daily. These planes would provide interdiction and ground support for friendly forces. Gunships would provide nightly air cover in the primary battlefield area. Quick reaction F-4 pilots would supply added support if needed. ³⁴

SOUTH

In a country of many disparate agendas, political wrangling, and, arguably, disparate wars, Military Region Two was not the only region under constant pressure by the enemy. Because of an essential requirement to continue logistical support along established arteries to forces in South Vietnam, Laos may have constituted the most important Theater in the survival of Cambodia and South Vietnam. At first, the Lao government and American advisors appeared slow to realize this fact. ³⁵

³³ William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 71-72.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 344-345.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 298.

³⁴ John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices* (Viking, 1984), 431. Message from PACAF/DO to CONUSMACV indicating the decreasing U.S. commitment to the war.

³⁵ Brigadier General Soutchay Vongsavanh, *Indochina Monographs, RLG Military Operations and Activities in the Laotian Panhandle* (Washington, D.C.: U.S Army Center of Military History, 1981), 61. Provided the Author by FE Stergar.

"The commies have taken just about all of the Bolovens Plateau east of Pakse. They have never done this before. They are advancing on Savannakhet also and have taken Dong Hene (consult your map). Southern Laos looks grim. I really can't see them holding all this ground during the rainy season, but if they do, we may have a turkey shoot. The only trouble now is they bring their anti-aircraft guns with them as they advance. I heard that they shot down four T-28's at Moung Phalane the other day."

Letter Home, 05/19/71.

MR-3

"In 1970, Moung Phalane [L-61] [existed as] a small district capital and market center on Route-9, about midway between Savannakhet and Tchepone. It was the last run on the taxi-bus run from Savannakhet, and the easternmost point in the bulge of territory controlled by the Royal Lao Government...There was a District Chief's office, a new U.S. AID dispensary, a three-building school, a small Lao Army garrison, and a string of shops on both sides of the main street...The town had changed sides a few times in the past, but for two years had been [generally] in government hands.

During December 1970, [NVA] forces began to operate closer to Moung Phalane, and in January 1971, they rocketed and burned the FAR position southwest of town. The garrison withdrew, followed by public officials and traders...One irregular [SGU] battalion continued to operate in the neighborhood, but by mid-

March had been forced back toward Dong Hene..." ³⁶

A mid-February attempt to retake the site ended in failure.

The setting:

*"Between 24 March 1971 and 4 May 1971, two under strength paramilitary GM-30 battalions (about 540 men) of ethnic lowland Lao captured, occupied, defended, and finally lost the Route-9 town of Moung Phalane...During those five weeks, their operations encompassed a [modicum] of counterintelligence, a considerable amount of covert action, some effective intelligence collection, and some very hard fighting. They [incurred] heavy casualties, and in the end were overrun and shattered..."*³⁷

In response to rocket and recoilless rifle fire on the Dong Hene airstrip and FAR garrison during mid-March, two irregular SGU battalions moved on Moung Phalane from the west.

The evening of the 23rd GM-30 Commanding Officer Colonel Touane Boudahara and Case Officer Don Courtney, riding in a Porter, overflowed the main unit near the old airstrip two miles northwest of town. Taking a page from the paratrooper assault during the pre-hours of the Normandy invasion in France, Don airdropped "firefight simulators" northeast and south of the town.

The diversion worked, and on 24 March the GM moved into the deserted site and began pushing the enemy east.

Following the waning days of Lam Son-719, enemy forces moved west toward Moung Phalane. Within two days of GM-30's

³⁶ Edwin K. Stockinger AKA Don Courtney, 1. Stockinger was a pseudonym for former Military Region Three Case Officer and GM-30 advisor Don Courtney. *Five Weeks at Phalane*, CIA Historical Review Program, Released as Sanitized, 2 July 96, posted May 08, 2007, last updated August 04, 2011. Internet: (cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence).

³⁷ Ed Stockinger (Don Courtney).

victory, the enemy counterattacked across open fields with three battalions. Lacking adequate cover, they were badly mauled by friendly air. That night RLAF AC-47 gunships continued to take a toll on the enemy still in the field.

Undeterred by heavy losses, the enemy attacked again on the morning of the 27th. With fighting over by noon, Colonel Boudahara and Courtney were ferried to the site by a H-34 pilot. The Colonel remained, while Don, casualties, and a number of enemy weapons were returned to Savannakhet. The action was costly as characterized by the number of government casualties, only exceeded by enemy losses. ³⁸

During April area villagers continued to describe enemy movements and plans to retake MOUNG PHALANE, using six Vietnamese battalions and supported by AAA guns. On 30 April, enemy contact occurred to the west, heralding the counterattack.

Early morning of 1 May, elements of one battalion advanced across the rice paddy killing fields with intention of striking the town's outer perimeter. They were engaged by T-28s and F-4s and incurred severe casualties. After friendly air departed, another battalion moved out across the same field. By the next day two companies were surrounded, and resupply proved difficult.

The second was also costly in terms of Allied air assets, with four T-28s and one F-4 hit by AAA. Crashing and burning, one T-28 pilot was hit by 37mm fire. Another landed at Lima-39 after being hit in an oil line. One pilot landed at Seno. Yet another pilot landed wheels up at the MOUNG PHALANE southwest

³⁸ Ed Stockinger, 2-3. On 30 March a radio intercept gathered by agents in an orbiting Piper Cub revealed that 375 Vietnamese were killed and many more wounded. The daily information provided the means for the GM to stay ahead of the enemy and move positions to safer areas. Friendly villagers also provided timely information regarding enemy disposition.

strip and was recovered by a helicopter pilot. Lastly, the F-4 pilot was hit by 23mm fire, but managed to nurse his jet back to Thailand with a wing on fire.

On 3 May Colonel Touane ordered some of his outlying units to the north and south, under heavy pressure to pull back inside the main MOUNG PHALANE perimeter or move west toward Dong Hene. Some managed to accomplish this, but others, encountering dug in enemy, running low on ammunition, and without air support, perished. Excuses for the lack of air that morning ranged from essential Trail work, a funeral for the T-28 pilot killed on the second, AIRA determining AAA danger too great for O-1 Raven-directed USAF strikes. These deterrents to staving off the enemy offensive were rectified by afternoon.

The command post was besieged by mortar, recoilless, B-40 rocket fire, followed by three infantry attacks. A break out to the west commenced at 1800 hours.

After three days of serious fighting at Site-61, two battalions of GM-30 withdrew toward Dong Hene with heavy losses. AAM helicopter pilots landed on Route-9 to retrieve wounded.

"There were many enemy bodies along the escape route, some of them at least two days old. Enemy weapons were scattered about the field, but there were no wounded on the ground." ³⁹

So ended the five weeks at Phalane. Over the next few days survivors of the battle straggled back to Dong Hene.

An Agency aftermath analysis concluded:

"The communists have continued to move westward on Route-9 after capturing MOUNG PHALANE early this month. Government units in the Dong Hene area-one battalion of irregular troops and three regular army battalions-probably are not strong enough to stem a major enemy attack."

³⁹ Ed Stockinger, 5

Government strength in this region has been reduced somewhat by the temporary assignment of units to northern Laos. The communists may be trying to take advantage of this to extend their control along Route-9 or they may hope to force the government to return the southern-based units that have been active in the [LP] and Long Tieng areas. An offensive along Route-9 presumably would also be designed to keep government forces off balance and to preclude government harassment against the western portions of the communist infiltration corridor." ⁴⁰

Although the enemy timetable was disrupted, with FAR resistance dispatched, the enemy moved west at a slow pace on Route-9 toward the FAR frontline at Done Hene. As the possibilities of peace negotiations were bandied about, this site was considered a choice plum. Its capture would also allow an assault on Keng Kok and the ability to rocket Seno.

With this in mind, substantial government reinforcements, supported by armor, arrived at Lima Site-54 to defend the site and then move east on Moung Phalane.

"...irregular units have entered the abandoned town of Dong Hene and occupied some enemy positions east of the town. The irregulars have so far encountered little enemy resistance, tending to confirm reports that enemy units have pulled back toward Moung Phalane. The irregular task force plans to sweep toward Moung Phalane in the next few days." ⁴¹

The proffered intelligence was wrong, instead the force was immediately hit, and on the 17th, the commanding officer elected to withdraw his forces toward Seno. The enemy moved into and burned a majority of the town, including the military

⁴⁰ CIA Bulletin 05/11/71, Laos: Communist military activity on the increase in southern Laos.

⁴¹ CIA Bulletin, 06/16/71, Laos.

headquarters on the site of the original officers' training school.

After reaching Seno base, Thai troops from Military Region Two arrived to help stabilize the new front line for two months.⁴²

MR-4-THE BOLOVENS

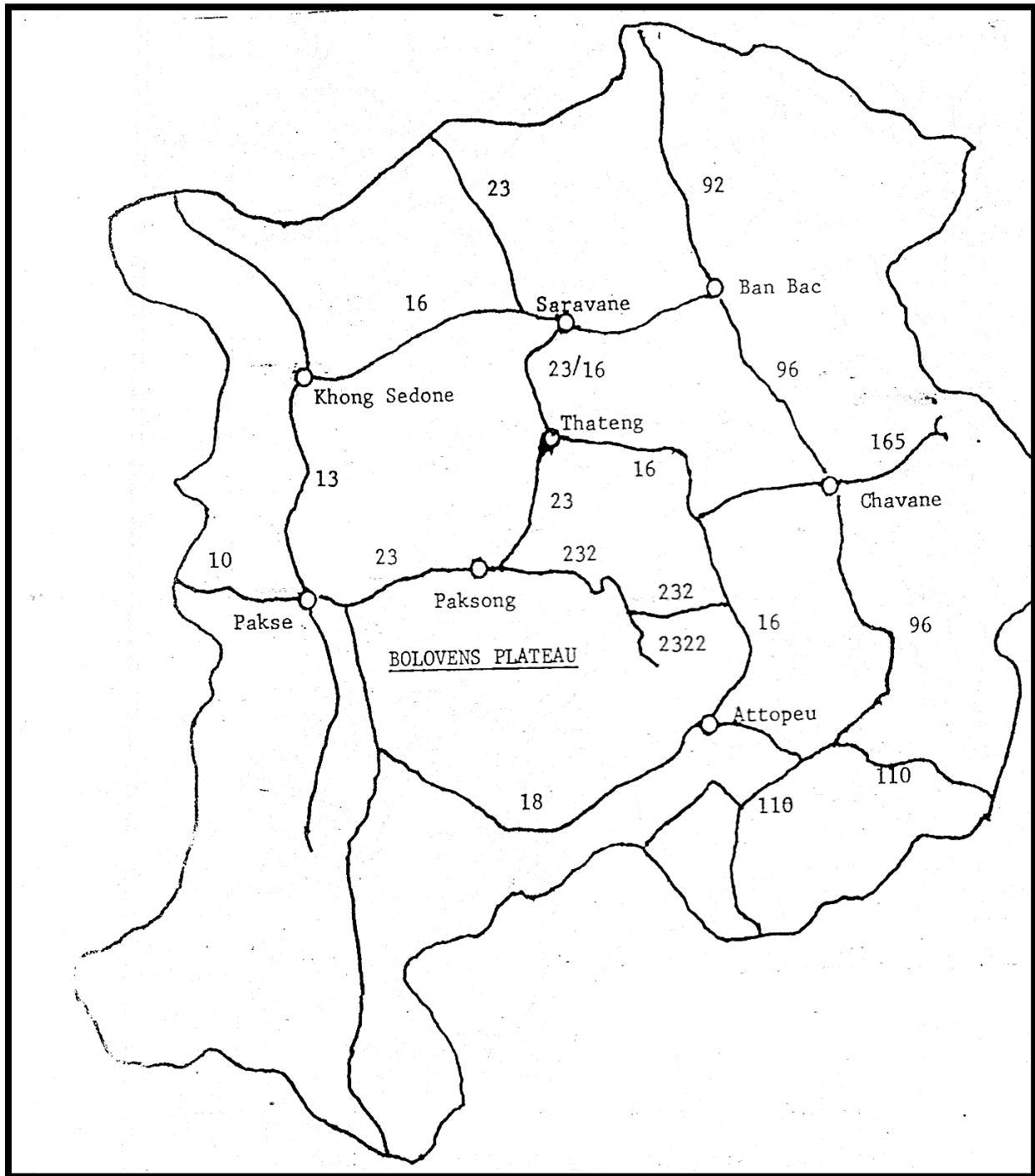
Despite defensive and offensive fighting in Military Region Three during the Lam Son operation, the enemy managed impressive gains on the Bolovens Plateau and in Saravane Province.

After Saravane was lost in early 1970 during the enemy push to expand their logistic corridors westward, RLA was intent on recapturing the provincial capital. During March an irregular regiment from Military Region Three was lifted by USAF helicopter crews to the airstrip. Overwhelmed, the Vietnamese battalion there withdrew. For three weeks GM-32 conducted clearing operations and then turned the security assignment over to a battalion which had formerly occupied the site. Under pressure from an enemy regiment, BV-41 did not remain long, and in April began withdrawing toward Khong Sedone.⁴³

"Fighting in the Bolovens region had been at a low ebb since early January, when government defenders [Thai] repulsed a communist assault on the northern side of the plateau. Communist forces have been regrouping for a new thrust at the irregulars, especially on the eastern rim where the government bases have constituted a serious irritant to communist operations along the infiltration corridor into Cambodia.

⁴² William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 28.
Ken Conboy, 291-292.
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 411-413.

⁴³ General Soutchay Vongsavanh, *CHECO*, 64.



Graphic of a portion of Military Region Four showing major towns and area road-trail structure. Eastern and southeastern LOC arteries (Routes-165, 96, and 110) were critical to North Vietnamese war efforts in South Vietnam and Cambodia.

CHECO Bolovens Campaign, xiii.

Site-22 was evacuated by its four battalions of irregular defenders after more than two days of almost continual shelling and ground attacks by a communist force estimated at three battalions supported by a heavy weapons unit.

On 8 March two irregular battalions abandoned Site-165, [also PS-3 and 4] some five miles southwest of Site-22. All six irregular battalions are withdrawing westward [toward Houei Khong], and heavy government air strikes are being called in on the enemy forces. The orderly withdrawal from these positions evidently is in keeping with the government's recent decision to avoid, whenever possible, costly defenses of fixed positions on the plateau.

The tenacity of the assault in the face of extremely heavy air strikes suggests that the communists place considerable emphasis on clearing the heights overlooking Route-16 and the Se Kong River. These have not yet figured prominently in the communist' logistic effort in the lower panhandle, but it is possible that the enemy would like to make greater use of the westerly river and road routes to Cambodia in the waning months of this year's dry season." ⁴⁴

By April the Vietnamese had restricted irregular troop movement, and by 1 May were in position to move on north-northwestern Bolovens government strong points.

"The communists seem to be planning new attacks...on the

⁴⁴ CIA Bulletin, 03/10/71, Laos: The last major government base on the eastern rim of the Bolovens Plateau fell yesterday to a determined communist assault. Ken Conboy, 286. Conboy is more specific with information as noted in the bracketed portions.

Bolovens Plateau. Ban Houei Sai, ⁴⁵ the principal government base on the northern approaches to the plateau, may be the communists' first objective. In past years, the communists have managed to maintain military pressure near the Bolovens well into the rainy season in contrast to north Laos, where longer lines of communication and more difficult terrain have slowed down the temp of the war during the monsoons."

The long war and lingering privations were impacting all factions, particularly the Pathet Lao, who were more interested in a country where all ethnics were included in the government and national policy than communist ideology. Consequently, the issue of recent enemy defections in Military Region Four was addressed in the CIA Bulletin:

"The North Vietnamese are running into some new problems in the south this year. In the past two months over 200 [PL] troops have rallied to the government at Pakse. The latest group of 55, which rallied on 10 May, included field-grade officers and political cadre. The ralliers have helped to locate [NVA] troop and supply concentrations for air strikes and have provided useful information on the strength and composition of NVA units in the area.

The decision of the ralliers to switch sides apparently stems from what they view as North Vietnamese mistreatment and increased [food] levies on Lao villagers as well as their belief that the North Vietnamese were responsible for the death of a widely respected [Pathet Lao] general [Phomma Douangmala died in

⁴⁵ Author Note: There is no southern site named Ban Houei Sai listed in the Laos site book and the Author does not recall a site by that name anywhere on the Plateau, or can find such a name on the aeronautical map. Because of a misspelling, the reference could be for Houei Soi (LS-164) seven miles north of Ban Houei Kong, or more likely the Houei Kong base.

a North Vietnamese field hospital in late 1970]. *The latter story was trumped up by the government.*

[Despite this statement, tension and fighting between communist factions did occur. "After negotiations with Military Region Four Commander General Phasouk, one Pathet Lao battalion commander brought half a company with him when he defected in March..." One Pathet Lao officer urged villagers to report North Vietnamese locations for air strikes. ^{46]}

There have been relatively few defections among Laotian communists during the course of the war, and these are the first instances of unit-size defections. It is too early to tell whether this is an isolated problem or is a sign of widespread disaffection in communist ranks. Communist propaganda reflects North Vietnamese sensitivity to the problem, and because the North Vietnamese depend on the PL for logistic and rear security support, they will probably redouble their efforts to keep their restive allies in line." ⁴⁷

Early morning on 15 May, after emplacing heavy weapons around Paksong, the Vietnamese gunners opened fire on the town, located at the intersection of Routes 23/232. BI-20 defenders endured the mortar and artillery barrages for a short period and then withdrew to the west. Desultory attempts to rally and reinforce the battalion failed. By the 16th Paksong was in enemy hands. Wrapping up defense of the Bolovens, the base at Houei Sai was also abandoned.

In a country rife with nepotistic bents, the inept commanding officer, General Phasouk's political hack brother, Colonel Samrane, proved more interested in his profitable coffee and vegetable trade with Pakse merchants than in the defense of

⁴⁶ Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 415.

⁴⁷ CIA Bulletin, 05/11/71, Laos. Conboy covers the interesting aspect of defections in greater detail.



A portion of Bolovens Plateau terrain including an extinct volcano located near the Route-23/232 junction leading north to Paksong and east to Houei Khong. Superior coffee beans and other agricultural products proliferated in the rich volcanic soil that predominated on the lava extruded Bolovens.

Author Collection.

Paksong town. He was also profiting from Pathet Lao agents, bartering rice, gasoline, and the sort for coffee. In a country noted for selfishness and corruption, he was not alone in his greed. It always was and remained that kind of war.

Following the loss of the "major" plateau town, Chinese and Vietnamese merchants began packing up and leaving Pakse for safer climes. A few American families temporarily departed and then returned. Along with the departures, Lao T-28 pilots dispersed their planes to Ubon RTAFB, Thailand. ⁴⁸

After Paksong fell it was logical that the isolated Houei Kong base, then bracketed by enemy forces, would be the next enemy target. ⁴⁹ Despite the bravado exhibited by the exuberant and optimistic Kha commander that his irregular defenders and the base would hold, by the 19th, enemy encroachment on the town by patrols was reported. The information was sufficient to cause some RLA and Kha irregular defenders to withdraw from the Houei Kong complex without a fight. Those who remained in place, choosing not to die, surrendered, and were instrumental in assisting the enemy clear the area of government assets.

⁴⁸ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 286-287.
Soutchay, 65.
Bill Leary, 1971 Notes.
Lofgren *CHECO*, 28.
Project CHECO 7th Air Force, HQ PACAF, Directorate of Operations Analysis, *CHECO/Corona Harvest Division: The Bolovens Campaign, 28 July-28 December 1971*, xiv, 05/08/74. Six authors are cited by the editor. Reprinted by the Dalley Book Service.

⁴⁹ During the early years, Air America small fixed wing and helicopter pilots developed a long-lasting association with individuals at Lima-56, particularly the friendly and sociable John and Eleanor Davis missionary family, who were by then located elsewhere. Over time, John contracted a serious case of cerebral malaria from one of the numerous female *Anopheles* mosquito species, carrier of the plasmodium falciparum parasite, during his outstanding work with the area's Kha clans.

Only minimally pursued, retreating government forces from both Paksong and Houei Khong rallied at Ban Gnik on Route-23, eight miles west of Paksong. There they established a weak defense line and prepared to defend the route to Pakse.

After battling enemy forces for two years, complete control of the Bolovens allowed the enemy to spread their logistic routes west and south of existing LOCs. They now occupied all strategic Bolovens high ground, enabling movement into the lowlands to guard the trail system. Moreover, government loss of the plateau denied the use of forward airstrips that had previously been employed by Air America and USAF helicopter crews to infiltrate and exfiltrate troops, charged to initiate reconnaissance, interdiction, and targeting of the Sihanouk Trail system.

The serious implications caused by the loss of the Bolovens Plateau, and the genuine threat to Pakse, stimulated action in the command centers in both Pakse and Vientiane. This resulted in a five-month monsoon campaign of stop and go attrition that waxed and waned with little gained.⁵⁰

COMMUNICATIONS

"Our leave has been put off until August 10th-September 11 due to operational requirements. I am still trying to rearrange things so that we can take two months [off]. I will have to wait until the last moment on this. I have put in for our tickets early so we can take advantage of any breaks. I really don't

⁵⁰ Ken Conboy, 287.
Soutchay, 64.
CHECO, *Bolovens Campaign*, xv.

think we should make that long trip for just a month. Perhaps Tuie could leave early and I could follow later."

Letter Home, 05/19/71.

"...Dick and family were supposed to come home July 1st, but later advices say it may be late in August. This is not positive as his outfit is extremely active in Laos. He has test piloted the new S-58T machine that has two power packs and in chief instructor for their use. Needless to say monetarily he is knocking it off and as his agent here I have kept him way ahead on the market..."

Dad's Letter to the Wes Taxter family, 06/06/71.

"...Did I tell you our disappointment in the delay of your possible homecoming? Well, what will be, will be. I know from your deposits these last few months must have been humdingers. The S-58T must be a great ship and I wish you the best of luck flying it..."

Letter from Home, 06/06/71.

The extended time off the flight schedule enabled me, sitting at my desk, to ponder and organize my thoughts. It also allowed me to accomplish many items that had been left in abeyance. One was letter writing to my cousin Robert T. Anderson and his wife Phyllis on 05/21/71:

"We are starting into another rainy season. The last was quite bad with the roads in town being destroyed and the complete town flooded. Not much money was allocated for road building so we are starting behind the eight-ball. [As a result, Udorn was called the "red city" from excessive laterite dust collecting on the tin rooftops.]

We had planned a two month leave this summer, but due to work requirements, this has been cut to one month in August. It is very difficult to travel with the family for one month, so if I can't wheedle some more time, we may skip leave this year.

We have placed a twin turbine engine in the old H-34 helicopter and I am an instructor pilot in this program. It keeps one quite busy. At least now we have the security of two power sections when we fly over the jungle.

The kids are growing at last. Rick has been doing very well since having his tonsils out last fall.

We have moved into a larger house and I even have a den in which to conduct my business. We added to the existing yard and planted grass, which is now full of crabgrass and other junk, just like anywhere in the world. [I had purchased a hand propelled lawn mower, which was difficult to manipulate over the uneven sod.] The house belongs to Tuie's aunt [or her son-in-law Singha], so it is nice to have relatives. They would like to sell it but the price is too high and [still skeptical about the longevity of the job] I still don't wish to commit myself fully." ⁵¹

⁵¹ Suffering from the pervasive Thai female curse, our landlady, Klua Won, was a compulsive gambler who remained constantly in debt. This is why she initially rented the house to us. From time-to-time Klua Won arrived at the house soliciting advance rent money to satisfy debt repayments. At first, I liked the friendly, smiling woman, but realizing her as an uncompromising card-game addict, wisely did not entirely trust her motives. Moreover, I had extensive experience with a dishonest landlady during our residence in the Godnoma compound on Soi Mahamit.

After a little old-time haggling both Tuie and I agreed to advance her money for a slight reduction in monthly rent to one hundred dollars. Her woes continued and she eventually approached us with a proposal to sell the house. She wanted 15,000 U.S. for only the house, but not the land outside our fence leading to the main road. I did not want a ramshackle shed or ugly building erected in front of the house blocking the breeze and view so, after due diligence, I

counter offered 5,000 dollars for both the house and land to the Nong Khai Highway. The package was ultimately rejected.

During June we discovered that Tuie's aunt had worked herself into a serious bind with the local bank. She "owned" three houses plus a little land in a compound. She also owed the bank the baht equivalent of 7,500 dollars, which was due in May. During the same month Tuie discovered that she had been attempting to sell part of the land toward the road, one or all of the houses, and in general, most of her assets to pay off the bank loan...

We had been advancing her rent for a discount which was paid through September. I thought that I was being shrewd...

Naturally I was angry at the revelation. The conniving woman was attempting to sell a house that we had spent considerable money improving and had also paid the rent through September. I did not believe this was fair, especially from a purported relative. Probably because of the large debt, she was unable to sell anything, so we called a family meeting and arrived at a plan acceptable to all parties. Instead of directly loaning her money, which she preferred, to preclude her losing all or part of it during crooked card games, we proposed a twelve percent two-year promissory note for 150,000 baht, 100,000 from us and 50,000 from Plang and Cham. As in a balloon payment, at the note's termination, the money would be repaid or the entire compound would revert to us. Since our stay in Southeast Asia was tenuous, depending on the status of the SEA wars, I really did not want the woman's real estate, but mainly desired some peace. The monthly interest on our portion of the note would apply to the rent, making the cost seventy-five dollars per month.

On the basis of our initial proposal, and anxious to obtain their money, with few available options, the bank owners agreed to extend Klua Won's loan for a month, but the deal continued in limbo. Two years was quite a long time and, aware from the *Bangkok Post* that the Thai balance of payments was skewed, I was concerned regarding the baht devaluation and desired a bump-up clause included in the promissory note to allow for this possibility at the note's expiration. Furthermore, as the newspaper denied the baht would be devalued, I was really suspicious. Because of the language barrier, I had difficulty explaining all these details to Plang and Cham, and did not really believe that I could obtain such a clause.

The loan proposal was tabled until July and was finally scrapped for one reason or another. It was probably better, for by then, no one trusted the obviously scheming, devious woman. Instead, we agreed to evaluate her needs at six-month intervals and if she required advanced funds, we would provide it at a discount...

Over time her plight failed to substantially improve and wanting her land to satisfy the bank demands, she eventually put pressure on Joe and Jun, our next-door neighbors to dismantle their wooden house and move. No one was particularly unhappy to see all the yapping dogs leave, and our children used to play on the stacks of wood left in the vacant lot.

June marked two new operational phases for me. After successfully completing the S-58T shakedown in the LS-63 area, the machine was cleared to work around The Alternate and other areas. Also, depending on room availability, for the first time since early February limited RONs at the site were reinstated.

On Wednesday the first, I was retrieved early by the Volkswagen bus driver and blocked into the Air America facility at 0445 hours. First Officer, heavy-set Ray Purvis, one of several men either recently hired or transferred from another station, who opted to take a permanent left seat slot in the S-58T program in order to avoid relocation or termination, accompanied me to 20-Alternate in XW-PHC. Ray, a former Army pilot, had already been checked out by Scratch, so there was no requirement for instruction. Consequently, I flew more than my share of assigned missions to Skyline Ridge and beyond (forty sorties). I enjoyed this, for I had been away from the front lines too long. ¹

With a little tender-loving-care Papa Hotel Charlie fulfilled assigned requirements well considering the restrictions we worked under.

POWER LIMITS

Two factors limited our ability to perform to full potential upcountry. Under Phase One of the brand new Twinpac program I was obliged to teach, and we were encouraged to limit maximum allowable power during operations. (This was generally

¹ Unfortunately, I did not log every Flight Mechanic's name at this time.

only ninety percent of available power and torque limits for various altitudes were placarded on the instrument panel.) Also, almost as an afterthought and a quick fix to introduce the machines to the field, Sikorsky engineers incorporated electrical activated ramps in the air intake system, with the intention of diverting large particles of dirt and any small FOD overboard away from the engine's compressor sections. This particle separator system was basically designed to minimize wear and tear on the engine turbine and stator blades. ² Although a necessary addition in our environment, the system was yet unproven as to viability, and when electrically activated the ramps raised internal turbine temperatures (ITT) a hundred degrees. Thus, it was necessary to closely monitor not only torque readings, but also the ITT gages when operating. If closely adhered to, these limitations required a fair degree of division of cockpit attention and pilot technique to operate, something we had been accomplishing for years with underpowered helicopters. It was not the best way to function, particularly in a combat environment, and some pilots simply disregarded the mandate; others when the situation dictated. Operating was no problem if able to make a rolling takeoff. Sling loads required caution and a constant monitoring of the total weight vs. altitude and atmospheric conditions. For takeoff from an elevated pad with an unknown weight, I developed a technique whereby I hovered into the wind (if possible) at the maximum allowable torque and, if unable to takeoff, waited for a gust of wind to enhance lift and carry me through translational lift. In most instances, this seemed to work and satisfy the power limitation.

² The system failed to accomplish its intended goal, and led to severe engine problems within a year.

Because torque indications were sensitive (fluctuated), sometimes erratic, or erroneous due to torque calibration problems, Bob Davis knew how difficult it was to adhere to the proscribed limits at all times. Still, he implored us to make the effort. ³

Despite operating limitations, we were still able to carry 1000-pound sling loads from Shep's ramp to the surrounding landing zones, but even after being apprised of the situation, the Customer could not have been overly pleased after all the positive hype regarding the so-called super helicopter. ⁴

It was obvious that George Dole had concluded a deal with Sikorsky hierarchy, and possibly Pratt and Whitney managements, who quite possibly did not charge anything, or only a minimum amount for conversion components in exchange for current input on aircraft airframe and engine and performance in the Southeast Asian environment. Consequently, in addition to working and proving a new helicopter in the field, we were also test pilots, guinea pigs to enhance Sikorsky's anticipated commercial business. ⁵

We recovered at Udorn by 1925 hours.

Mike Barksdale, a young Marine veteran from the war in South Vietnam, was another permanent First Officer assigned to

³ Bob Davis Memorandum to all S-58T Pilots, S-58T Phase 1 Torque Limits and Power Checks, 10/19/71. One percent torque took fifteen percent horsepower and equaled 150 pounds of lifting capability.

⁴ Helicopter sling loads from The Alternate ramp began with rope lines and morphed into more durable metal nets. Every so often we stopped at a main landing zone to retrieve the nets in non or minimum combat areas.

⁵ Much later we received information that Sikorsky had not only employed creative writing for high altitude performance data, but also the single engine capability at altitude. We were really assembling our own performance parameters while operating in the mountains.

After the Bell fiasco regarding the governor problems, I was a little dubious and jaded about helicopter manufactures' inflated claims.

the Twinpac program. Hired on 01/06/71, Mike had paid his dues waiting for a chance to transfer and upgrade to a program more deserving of his talents.

We flew upcountry in XW-PHA at a more respectable time than the previous morning. Including the ferry flight, weather prevented us from working more than half a day, and we RON at the site. The RON may have occurred for a number of reasons: weather, a temporary maintenance problem; to begin early operations for Vang Pao's push on the Plain of Jars, or as a relief valve in case Customers required evacuation because of enemy sappers entering the valley.

DEATH AT BOUAM LONG

As previously noted, after failing to capture Site-32, the enemy main force withdrew from the field, leaving three battalions to constrict and discourage the site's defenders from participating in Vang Pao's annual wet season offensive.

USAID representative Mac Thompson, in charge of air supply for troops, dependents, and refugees, worked the Bouam Long area during the times of enemy offensives. In Vientiane, no one was doing anything much about the resupply requirements at Site-32. If there was a specific problem, and Mac did not like how subordinates were doing the job, he would assume the responsibility and handle it himself.

Unable to land at Site-32 for several weeks during hostilities, equipped with a Bayside 990 radio, Mac located at Phou San (LS-336), five miles northwest of Phou Cum (LS-50), and twenty-two miles northwest of Bouam Long, with Case Officer George Bacon (Kayak). From his forward site, he briefed the crews on the latest information

The general location of a crew-served AAA 12.7mm gun was well known by Customers and FIC offices. The coverage and lethal

potential of the gun created problems in air dropping food by C-46 aircraft crews to a population under siege. It was too much of a requirement for helicopter or Twin Otter pilots, and USAID was not budgeted to use these aircraft.

A "safe" way into the bowl was finally achieved for C-46 pilots. The initial route to the destination took the cargo planes to Phou Vieng, Phou Cum, and Sop Khao, the four rivers check point near Phou Cum. While still at 10,000 feet, a southerly descent was initiated toward the Lima Alpha pad located southeast of Site-32. Further descent took the pilot into an easterly notch and relative safety masking a plane from enemy gunners. Cargo drops were conducted from west to east in the bowl. Right hand patterns were used. Following a drop, the pilot turned right, left, and then right to commence another run. Using this method, they would drop a pallet or two while on a northern heading, then cut right staying in the defilade provided by the bowl, continue the right pattern, and drop a few more pallets. After expending all cargo, they would exit through the east gap, ascend, and fly direct to Four Rivers, head west and then south to Wattay Airport. It was difficult work, but successful, and no one was shot for a week or two.

The lull did not last. On Thursday, 2 June, Captain Herb Clark, First Officer SC Wang, and Kicker Trikit Thuttanon were killed crewing C-46 XW-PFL, while dropping cargo over Site-32. During the fourth pass over the drop zone, the aircraft was hit, receiving wing and engine damage. The AFD kickers onboard reported AAA fire during all three passes.

Eyewitness Khambong Hatsady (Bong) later stated that the engine was on fire. The three kickers watched as the Captain discharged the CO-2 fire extinguisher mounted in the engine nacelle to combat the blaze. All attempts to extinguish the fire were in vain. All the time, automatic weapons fire ricocheted

inside the doomed C-46. Raging flames consumed the left side of the plane and escape via the main entrance door was impossible. Struggling to keep the aircraft airborne, the pilots departed the drop zone, while the AFS personnel removed the right rear exit hatch and bailed out. The plane subsequently crashed into a hill near Sop Khao, burned, and was destroyed.

When word of the crash reached the Vientiane Oscar Mike and Flight Information Center (FIC) office, Mac Thompson was temporarily under a dark cloud for having given a bad briefing and getting a plane shot down. This was dispelled within two days after an Air America investigation revealed the facts. Mac, who was "down in the dumps," was exonerated from blame and apologies followed.

Clark had recently returned from home leave and speculation advanced the theory that he did not attend the FIC briefing regarding the current dangers at Bouam Long. Therefore, after flying into the bowl and disliking right hand drop patterns, Clark descended to the left and performed a standard left hand drop pattern. Watching in horror, people on the ground and in the air radioed, *"They are shooting at you guys."* Despite the panicked calls, Clark continued to drop using the standard pattern.

With the fire intense and the plane heading north and obviously going down, after bailing, one kicker landed near Site-32, another one fairly close, the third farther out. Surrounded by enemy, Bong remained with troops in a bunker for twenty-eight days before being rescued.

The incident ended the use of C-46s at Site-32. Although Mac Thompson preferred the C-46 accuracy for aerial delivery at Site-32, after the crash, and perhaps because of the competition between Air America and Continental, he was directed to use the C123K model for work at Bouam Long. With better performance, the

pilots could descend quickly, drop, and depart, but the accuracy was never as good as the C-46.

Naturally, the accident report faulted PIC Clark for continuing his flights with a non-standard drop pattern into a known hostile area while receiving ground fire. ⁶

Attesting to the fact that the enemy was still active at Bouam Long, incidents continued.

The day after the C-46 downing, Mike Jarina, Lee Gentz, and Phil Ortillo (DOH 09/23/70), crewing PFJ, were assigned to work at Bouam Long. Pogo Hunter piloted the second ship. They were well aware of the 12.7mm gun mounted just below the lip of the strip's northwest approach end. During supply shuttles from LS-50, low clouds complicated flying and they were boxed in when approaching Site-32. Undeterred, and in order to enter the working part of Bouam Long, Mike paralleled the right side of the complex with intentions to slip over the ridge and descend into the bowl. They had managed to get under the clouds when groundfire commenced. Gentz looked at Mike and said, "*They are firing at us.*"

As he had remarked to a nervous Boonrat during a Military Region Two road watch mission when AAA shells were probing the skies in their vicinity, Jarina stated his favorite cliché, "*That's ok. It's on your side.*" Ever the jokester during tough times, Gentz grinned broadly.

At about the same time, Pogo began screaming in his characteristic high, squeaky voice, "*They are shooting at me!*" Thinking Hunter had been hit, Mike reversed course and flew to Pogo's estimated location, but he was already lunging back to Phu Cum with his load.

⁶ Bill Leary Notes, 06/02/71.
USAID MacAlan Thompson, Emails, 05/10/04 (2), 05/11/04.
Air America Log, Volume 8, #2, June, Jesse Walton.

After ascertaining that Pogo was OK, Mike again reversed course and headed for the southern backdoor of Site-32. After troops and the Flight Mechanic unloaded the ship, Jarina was told to pick up a Customer, who was waiting for him when shelling commenced. The Customer was standing in a trench looking at Mike; Mike was looking at him, exposed and impatiently waiting for him to board. After he finally stepped into the cargo section, Mike asked the man why he did not run out to the helicopter. He replied, "*We were taking incoming.*" They departed the area without incident. ⁷

There was one last attempt to capture Site-32, and Phou Vieng (LS-06) to the west-northwest was captured for a short time. ⁸ By 3 July, the Bouam Long siege was considered generally over, allowing units to concentrate on moving south over the hills to participate in the three-pronged operation and Vang Pao's plans to disrupt enemy LOCs around the Nong Pet junction. This part of the offensive was not supervised by Cher Pao Moua, who had been evacuated in June to Thailand after incurring wounds from incoming recoilless rifle fire during an enemy assault. ⁹

CONTINUING CUSTOMER PROBLEMS

After flying the line, Marius Burke rotated back into the CPH office to complement John Ford. He soon discovered that the job was not as easy as it had been before he departed for school.

A few months after the fall of Ban Na, and contention over the loss took its toll on American participants, Customer-pilot problems arose during the Bouam Long conflict and other questionable mission requirements, although this did not

⁷ Mike Jarina Interviews.

⁸ William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 74

⁹ Ken Conboy, 300.

necessarily apply to Skyline operations. It seemed like Burke was being summoned into the AB-1 Customer office daily regarding pilots not accepting a mission. Other calls from upcountry demanded, *"You have to come up here and get this straightened out."* Therefore, he went upcountry and sat in on briefings. For the most part, it was apparent to him that the Customer was attempting to forego providing USAF escort aircraft because it was not available. Violating established SOPs for missions, they wanted to conduct what was considered hazardous work without air cover. Naturally, the pilots rightly complained that it was not wise to perform these missions without deterrent.

The Customer relied on Marius to instruct the pilots that they had to execute the mission, despite A-1E escort being unavailable. Most of the time Burke supported the pilot force. He attempted to educate the Customer that the risk was too great unless air support was provided. They could not expect pilots to unnecessarily jeopardize either machines or crews. Moreover, he believed that some of the missions were outrageous even if conducted with cover.

He heard comments about the SOB Air America helicopter pilots not wanting to do anything.¹⁰ They were considered worthless. Burke was not happy about these accusations. Ninety-five percent of these allegations were totally unwarranted. Only five to ten percent of the pilots did not desire to take any risks, or do anything they considered hazardous. However, he knew that these few pilots could have provided enough ammunition to sour some Case Officers. When the remaining pilots legitimately complained about a mission, the Customer would say, *"You Air America pilots are all the same. You don't want to do*

¹⁰ SOB: A common swear word.

anything." Much of this was related to the new breed of Customer and pilots introduced to Laos. ¹¹

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SECOND PDJ BATTLEFIELD

Military history from the North Vietnamese perspective:

"As part of the strategic campaign to launch attacks on the outer perimeter with the goal of destroying their opponents' transportation corridor and strategic rear area in Laos..., [during] June 1971 the U.S. sent Thai mercenaries and Lao puppet soldiers out from their positions at Sam Tong and Long Tieng to attack and take the Plain of Jars-Moung Soui area in order to seize and hold this important strategic area, to divide the Lao liberated zone and threaten the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, thereby giving them an advantage in their war of aggression against Indochina.

Taking advantage of the [annual] rainy season, by early July 1971 the enemy was [eventually] able to seize Moung Soui, Phou Keng, Phu Theung, and [virtually] the entire [PDJ]. They then attacked Khang Khay, Xieng Khouang [Ville], and Nong Pet [crossroads], and they planned to attack the Vietnamese-Lao border [at the Route-7 Barthelemy Pass crossing leading to the Moung Sen storage depot inside North Vietnam]. However, [North] Vietnamese Army troops and [Pathet] Lao troops blocked them, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy and forcing them to turn back, establish defensive positions [fire support bases] in the [PDJ]

¹¹ Marius Burke Interviews. Marius believes such acrimony is why the Customer solicited more compliant Thai pilots for the helicopter program. Perhaps they were programmed into the system from the beginning, but they had dangerous work for the Thai crews.

and regroup their forces. ¹²

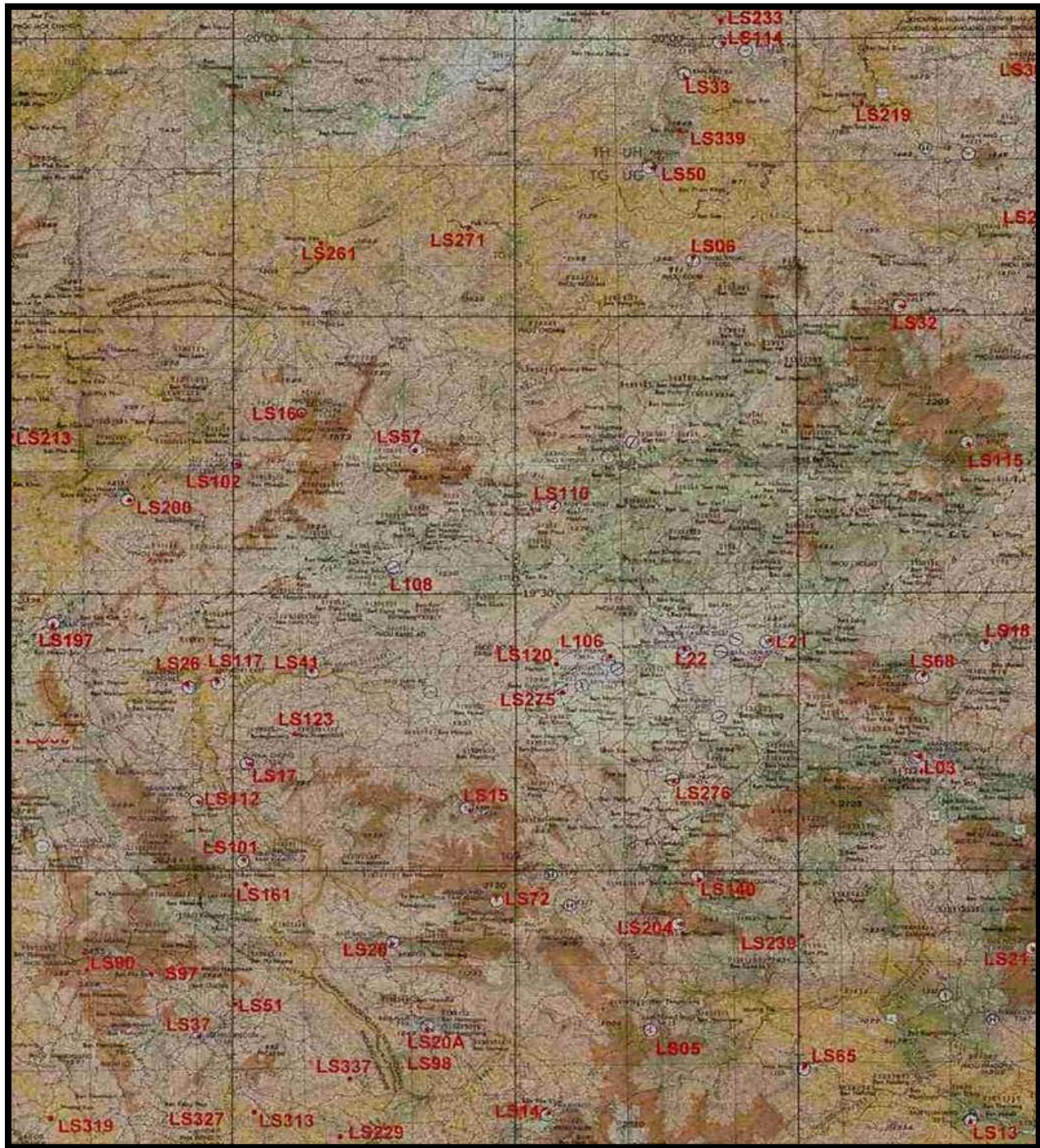
FRIENDLY TROOP MOVEMENTS

As seasonal rains commenced in earnest, a month after Vang Pao's troops had been airlifted onto the Khang Kho (LS-204) ridge, GM-21 and other Meo units were prepared to launch a limited offensive calculated to force the enemy to withdraw from the immediate Vang Pao line, and relieve pressure on Bouam Long before the fall dry season allowed another concerted enemy push on Long Tieng.

Almost a repeat of the former Plain of Jars offensive, Lat Sen (LS-276) airfield abutting Route-5 was targeted for capture, and used as a temporary forward supply base and springboard for further advances. One regiment was slated to capture the commanding heights of Phou Seu, located at the southwest corner of the Plain leading to the "Nipple" and backdoor to Meo land. Consistent with seizing surrounding southern high ground, another regiment was programmed to move onto the heights of Phou Theung (Teung), an elevated mountain on the eastern PDJ guarding and overlooking the western throat of the Xieng Khouang Valley. Yet another regiment would march onto the Plain of Jars west of Ban Na (LS-15) and proceed toward Phou Seu to support GM-21's effort.

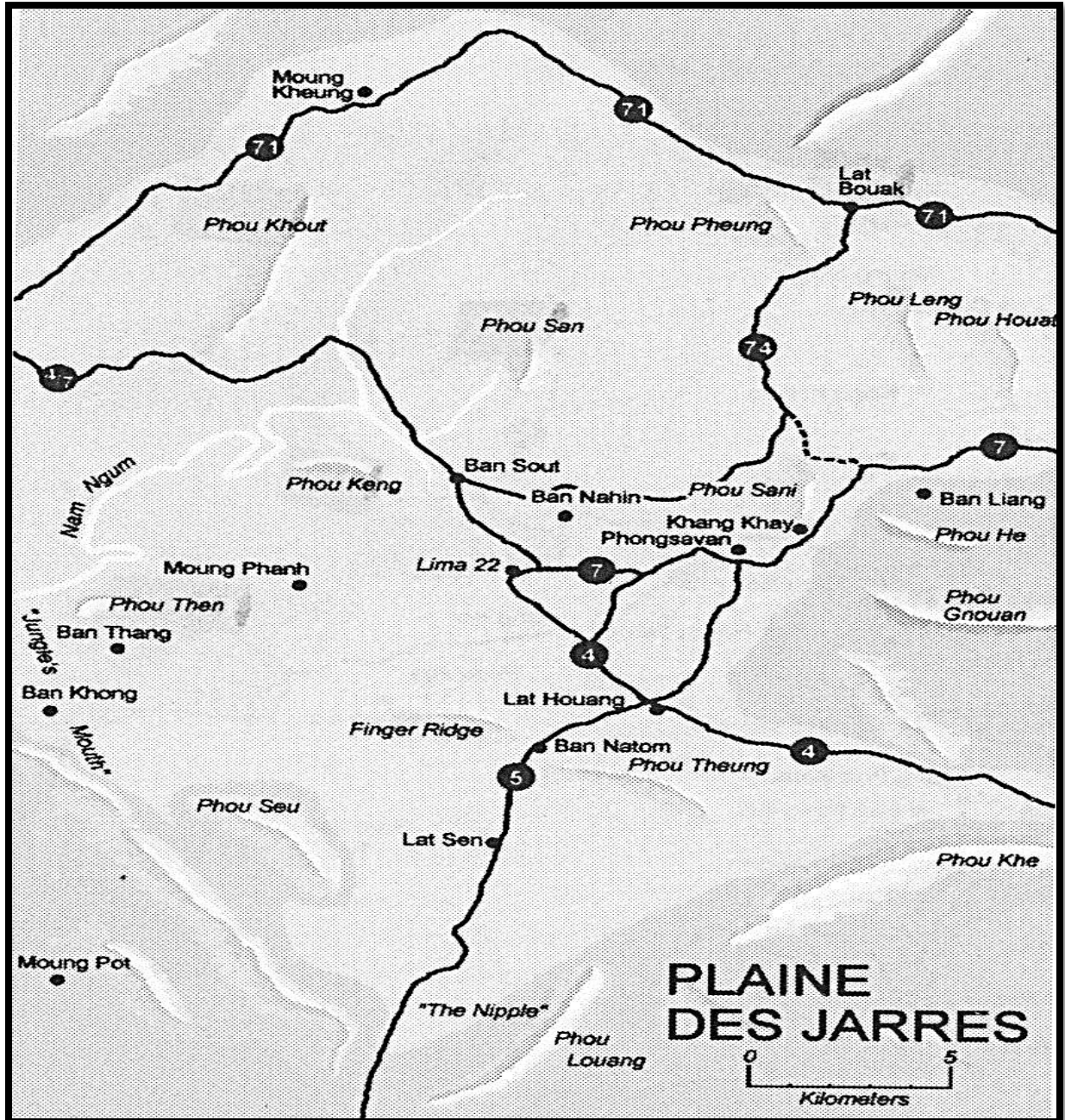
¹² North Vietnamese Army military history information translated by Merle Pribbenow and provided the Author in Jim Parker's Email, 07/26/17.

The first paragraph is only partially true. Vang Pao's initial inclination was to force and draw enemy forces north from the Sam Tong-Long Tieng complex and destroy their forward stockpiles of military goods before the next dry season, which would surely see a renewal of attacks on the Meo homeland. However, like the successful 1969 Plain of Jars operation, with allied air leading the way, substantial initial advances were made until the enemy stiffened, resulting in forward defense lines being established on strategic terrain-high mountains and hills that could be used to interdict enemy LOCs.



The second Plain of Jars operation, Vang Pao's wet season offensive, began at Khang Kho (LS-204) ridge. First objectives were in the hills of Phou Louang (LS-140) and the old airstrip at Lat Sen (LS-276) on the southern Plain of Jars. Troops also moved northeast from LS-72 toward Phou Seu. If successful, plans were made to move north to Phou Theung, Lat Houang (LS-09) at the western throat of the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley (L-03), and the Xieng Khouang (L-22) airstrip.

Jim Henderson 1:250,000 Chart Collection.



Graphic showing the multi-battalion general northern and northwestern advance routes and relative locations of initial objectives during the second Plain of Jars offensive: "The Nipple," Phou Louang, Lat Sen LS-276), and Phou Seu. Later Vietnamese offensives were conducted on Lat Houang, Phou Theung, and Xieng Khouang (Lima-22).

Conboy, 432.

About mid-morning on the third, with weather cooperating to a fair degree, several helicopter crews moved a vanguard of troops to forward positions from Khang Kho. Totaling 700 men, other troops moved overland west and north toward assigned objectives. The next day troops arrived in the southern foothills at the "Nipple," where adverse weather impeded notable progress for the next six days.¹³

My crew and I flying XW-PHA, Jarina, Gentz, and Ortillo in Papa Foxtrot Juliet, and others participated in the initial offensive. We all conducted dozens of sorties. At the end of the day, the PFJ crew RON at Long Tieng, while we RTB to the Udorn facility, landing well after dark.

Except for one inactive standby assignment at the field, I was not on the schedule for the next nine days.

Employing Bell helicopter Papa Foxtrot Juliet for two additional days, Mike Jarina, Gary Gentz, and Phil Ortillo continued to RON and support the Plain of Jars operation with maximum sorties (forty-seven). On the fifth, joining other helicopter crews, the same PFJ crew shuttled supplies and men across the valley from Padong to Khang Kho, where supplies were organized for distribution to advancing troops, and the advancing men continued toward their various destinations. After forty-three sorties, Mike headed south for Udorn.

Except for an aircraft change to 96W and Israel as Flight Mechanic, Mike and Lee returned to The Alternate on Sunday. After working all day at Bouam Long, the crew returned the ship to the Air America facility.

An Agency Bulletin explained the fledgling days of the Plain of Jars operation in considerably more detail:

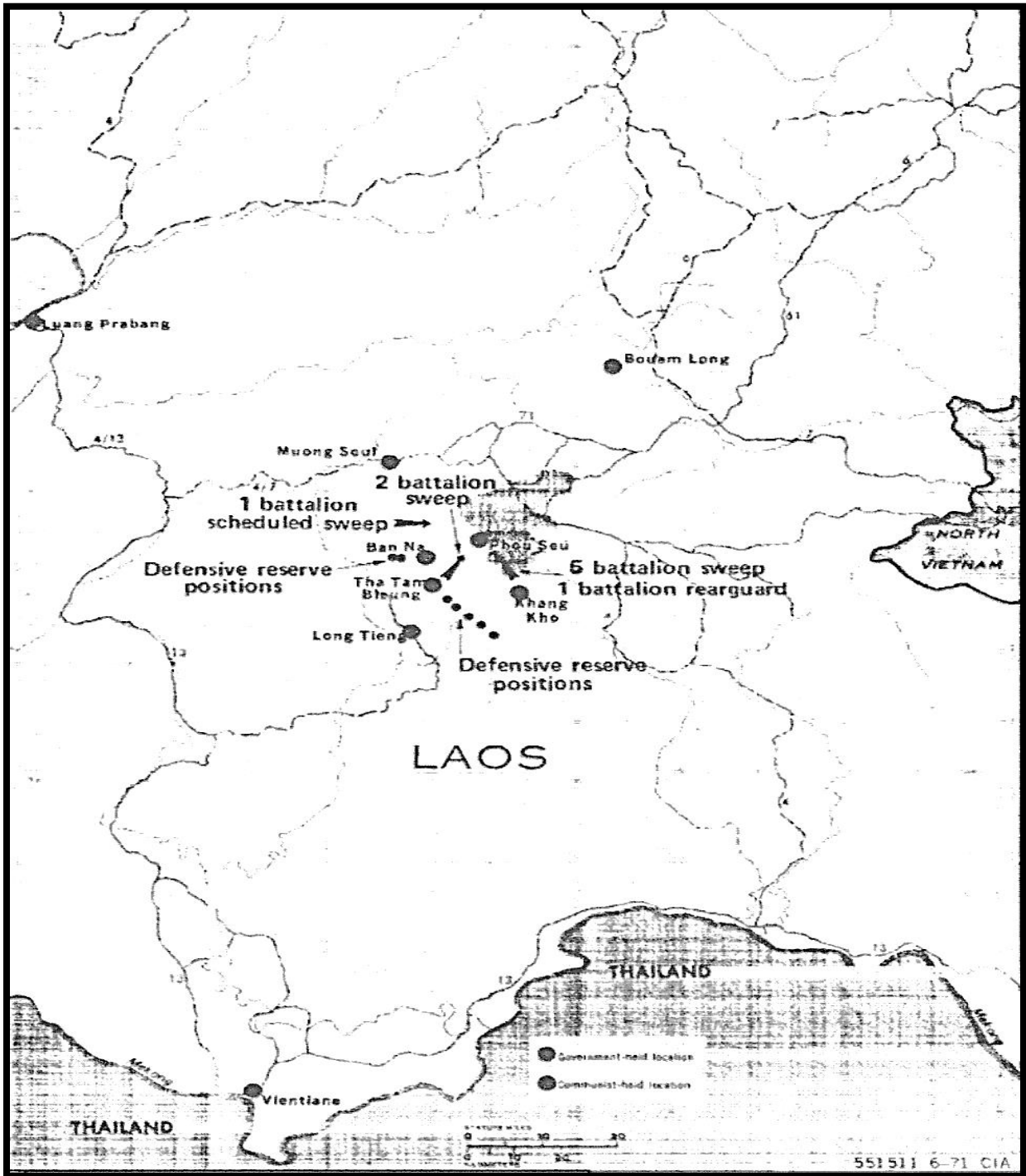
¹³ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 299-300.
William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 72-72.

"The operation, the initial phases of which are already under way, is to be conducted by nine battalions of General Vang Pao's Meo and Lao troops, with seven more battalions held in defensive reserve positions north and east of Long Tieng. The total irregular force numbers about 4,000 men. Five battalions are sweeping across the southern Plaine from Khang Kho toward Phou Seu, with one battalion providing rear guard security. Two others are moving toward Phou Seu from the vicinity of Tha Tam Bleung [LS-72]. The ninth battalion is scheduled to move eastward toward the Plaine from a base northwest of Ban Na.

The operation is designed to make the communists' position west of the Plaine untenable by capturing supplies in the southern and western portions of the Plaine and by taking the high ground commanding the infiltration routes toward the Long Tieng complex. Another purpose of the operation is to lessen communist pressure against the guerrilla base at Bouam Long. A redeployment of communist forces back to the Plaine, however, would prove counterproductive. Aside from the tactical considerations, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma has been urging Vang Pao to undertake an offensive, presumable to take the sting out of recent communist gains in south Laos and to improve the government's bargaining position in possible forthcoming peace negotiations [in Paris].¹⁴

[During the first week of operations] the irregulars have successfully located and destroyed some communist supplies [considered sufficient to sustain the enemy for three months of operation, this included 800 tons of supplies: 3,000 bags of

¹⁴ John Bowman, Almanac, 286, "Announced by the North Vietnamese Paris peace talk delegation, the Pathet Lao renew their peace plan proposal which includes an immediate end to U.S. military involvement and bombing raids in Laos. Souvanna Phouma rejects the plan by calling for Vientiane as the site of the proposed Laotian peace talks and by calling for the prior withdrawal of [NVA] troops from Laos."



Graphic indicating Lao government troop movements from Khang Kho, The Tam Bleung (LS-72), and west of Ban Na (LS-15) during the early Second Plain of Jars operation.

CIA Map, 06/08/71.

rice, over a thousand rounds of 82mm mortar shells, medical supplies, small arms caches, a bomb-damaged 85mm field gun, and a 122mm field gun].¹⁵ They have moved relatively easily because communist strength south and west of the Plaine has been reduced in the last month or so by the redeployment of at least four battalions on main-force troops to the Bouam Long region north of the Plaine. Remaining enemy units near the southern Plaine probably consist of four or five battalions, plus an armored unit. In addition, three more communist battalions are in positions near Ban Na. The recent reduction of enemy forces around the Long Tieng complex suggests either that the [NVA] may want to ease the logistical problem of sustaining a large force west of the Plaine during the rainy season or do not place high priority on an early resumption of their Long Tieng offensive in the fall."¹⁶

PARTY

"Tuie had a surprise [birthday] party for me on the 5th. It was a large one and well attended. It was coordinated. There was enough booze, food, and everything-in short, a damn good party. This was really the first big party we have ever given. My wife continues to amaze me!

Letter Home, 06/08/71.

I was scheduled to fly one of the Twinpacs upcountry on Saturday the fifth of June. I had forgotten that it was my 36th birthday or passed it off as unimportant. When I started the machine, I discovered a torque problem on a power section. The

¹⁵ William Lofgren, 73.

¹⁶ CIA Bulletin, 06/08/71, Laos: The government has launched an operation to clear communist forces from the southern and western portions of the Plaine des Jarres.

ground maintenance people changed parts and recalibrated the system, but the problem persisted. As the morning morphed into early afternoon, Jack Forney arrived on the ramp to jack-me-up and verify that there was an actual problem. Like so many times before, I described the discrepancy and expected him to parrot his normal spiel, that the problem was correctable, just work with it. At this stage in Twinpac development torque problems were common, mainly because of bad parts, improperly calibrated units, insects in the orifices, and so forth.

All attempts to "fix the problem" failed, but I was kept around until late afternoon, at which time the ship was towed into the hangar and I was released.

The "sneaky Pete" operation and the unfolding facade to keep me at the airfield continued. At that time Pogo Hunter took over and coaxed me into the bar for a cool one. Hot and frustrated at wasting an entire day seemingly accomplishing nothing, I was ready for a drink, so we repaired to the Club to suck up some air conditioning and a couple of beers. I started to get up and leave several times, but Pogo expertly managed to keep me on the bar stool. Finally, after a relief break, I shook Hunter's tentacles and obtained a B-Bus ride home.

As the driver drove down the access road and slowed to a stop by our gate, through the fence, I was startled to see our yard gaily lighted and packed with tables and chairs. Despite my semi-inebriated state, I was easily able to deduce the course of events that day. I had been thoroughly snookered and there was never any intention to send me upcountry.

I learned later that after conceiving a surprise birthday party for me, Tuie had worked an entire week arranging all the detail and aspects required for such an ambitious project. (I thought everyone had forgotten.) She cleverly arranged with local management to keep me at the field the entire day through

the subterfuge of a maintenance problem so the yard could be prepared with tables, chairs, and umbrellas. Two hundred people were quietly invited by word of mouth, but many pilots were upcountry working or otherwise unavailable, so their wives came instead.

Preferring the status quo, I did not particularly like surprises, but made an exception in this case. There were not too many people present at the time, so I greeted my wife and those within hailing distance. Then I dashed upstairs to take a lengthy shower in order to sober up a bit and change to civilian clothes.

Both genders of Thai and Americans attended, but the Americans generally did not mix with the Thai folks, who sat at two large tables scattered throughout the yard.

There was an abundance to eat and drink and dancing on the driveway for those so disposed. Spending about 10,000 baht, Tuie had ordered 300 egg rolls, 500 grilled Shish Kabob, fried chicken, and shrimp balls. Many of her long-time friends, like Jarun, the town veterinarian, helped to obtain the food. Others cooked over open grills. Tuie's cousin, Et, his friends, and five students from the Udorn Teacher's College rotated bartending duties. There was one tense moment during the night when Et and his cronies nearly engaged in fisticuffs with Air America Thai employees who they perceived were lording it over them. However, the flare-up was only momentary and they apologized after discovering Et was closely related to Tuie.

There were a few presents. Khun Yai presented me with a new twenty-four karat gold chain to hold my Buddha images. Others offered booze in various forms. Jack Forney, who I discovered had a soft, human side to him when not working, a pair of imitation dueling pistols. Jack even took time to relate the



Hostess and party implementer Tuie Casterlin standing with neighbor and aircraft mechanic Tom Conoyer (partially eaten Shish Kabob in hand) and his wife. Hank Edwards is to the left of Tom. Thai boys standing to the right.

Author Collection.



Tom Moher regaling a bevy of ladies with high tales. S-58T Project Manager, Bob Davis standing to the right.

Author Collection.



Tuie prepares to place the birthday cake on the grape laden table as JJ McCauley obtains some nuts. To the left, Scratch Kanach converses with Jack Knotts.

Author Collection.



Partiers observe as the Author prepares to blow out candles on his birthday cake. Those identified from left, Kathy Cash, Cliff "Wagon Tongue" Hendryx, CPH John Ford, and a Transportation Department employee. Jack Parks white shirt. Bob Davis to the rear of Jack.

Author Collection.

Moher and McCauley incident in late 1961, when Tom and JJ, after failing to catch the bus to Bangkok, attempted to purloin an H-34 and fly it to Bangkok while in their cups. They were taxiing out to the runway when Forney intercepted them, climbed to the cockpit, shut off the magneto switch, and foiled their foolish plan. I had never heard this story before, and thoroughly enjoyed it. ¹⁷

The mix of individuals who attended the party included a good representation of helicopter pilots, flight and ground mechanics, flight and aircraft facility maintenance management types. Also, a sprinkling of Air America school teachers, Gil, the Club Manager, retired General Dick Fischer, from the engineering department, and many more.

Many Thai employees representing various departments attended, including Somsak from Operations. Thai relatives and friends abounded: Both Khun Yai (Cham) and Khun Tha (Plang), Khun Yai Noi, Nong Karn from across the street, and landlady Klua Won. Already-mentioned Vet Jarun, Jun and Joe from next door. Quan Chai, the architect from city hall, an army colonel, a prosecutor, judge, and lawyer. Khem Tong, Tuie's special buddy helped a lot and stayed the night.

After everyone had gone home, about four o'clock in the morning, Scratch and I went into the kitchen and consumed a bowl of tomato soup, a customary practice I had acquired early in life after drinking bouts to relieve some of the after effects.

From all outward appearances, the party had been a resounding success, although I doubt the Casterlin family made the American community social register list that night.

¹⁷ See Book One for the complete incident.

MOVEMENT ON AND AROUND THE PDJ

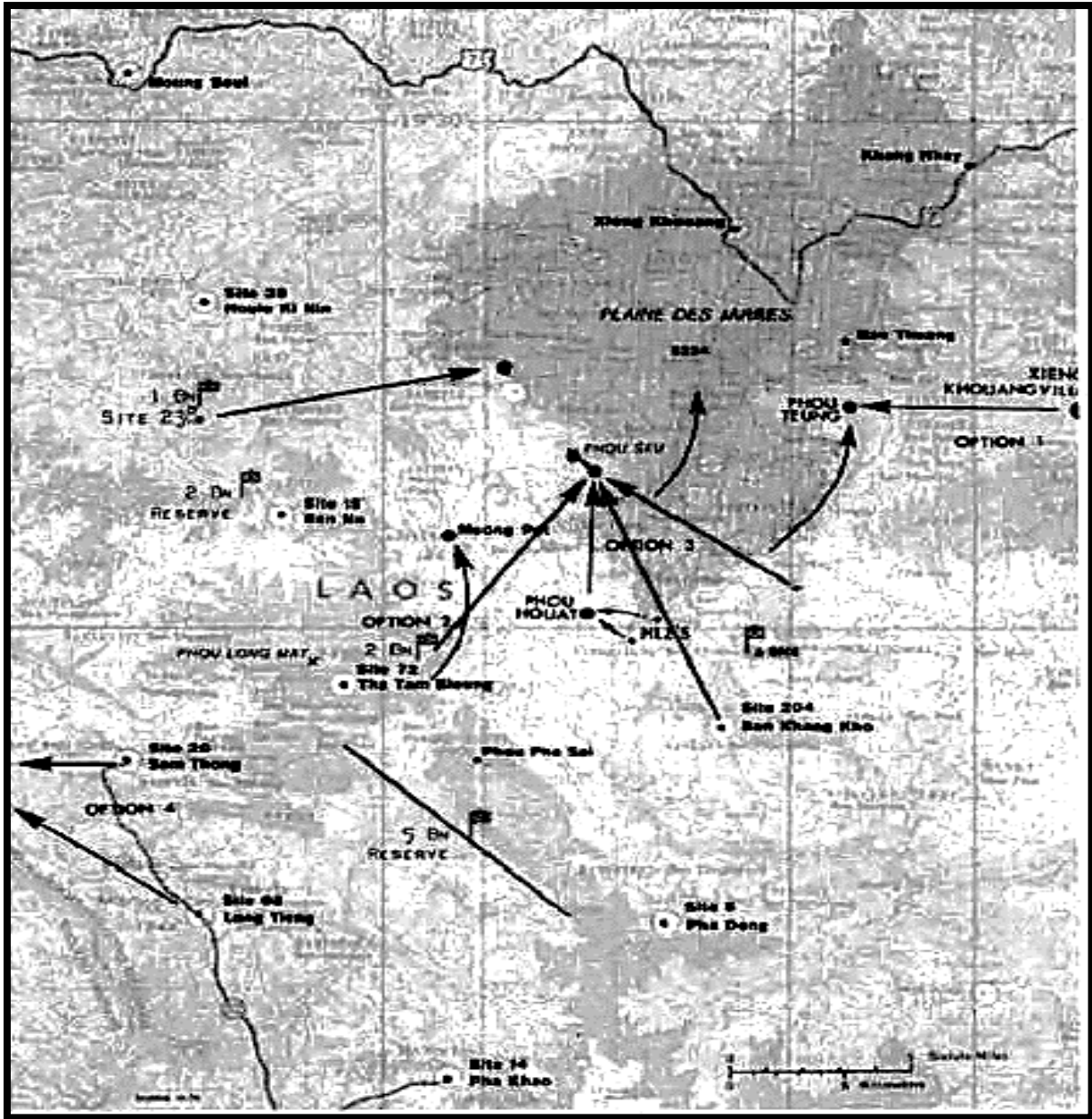
The day after my birthday party, GM-22 troops, after struggling over hills, marshes, and streams, invested Phou Louang, a 5,625-foot mountain located on the southeastern rim of the Plain four miles north of Khang Kho. Experience had taught Vang Pao that artillery support, unimpeded by weather or other variables, was a reliable and often more dependable supplement to his Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) air arm. Therefore, following hasty consolidation of Phou Louang, on 12 June, a Thai unit with two 105mm howitzers from Sam Tong's Tiger fire support base were lifted by USAF helicopters to Phou Louang. Named Cobra, and marking the first forward fire support base (FSB) of the fledgling operation, Cobra provided excellent coverage for the early battle area. ¹⁸

Along with Mike Barksdale and Joe Glaculais, I ferried Papa Hotel Bravo to Long Tieng on the 13th. After a full day of supporting Vang Pao's offensive, which included thirty sorties, we RON at The Alternate. Then, following an early Monday morning briefing by a Raven pilot in the upcountry FIC office, we were back on the line moving bullets, beans, and bandages necessary for the offensive. Stoking Customer confidence in the Twinpac, we were slowly proving our ability to haul decent sling loads to surrounding high area pads. Relieved toward the end of the day, I deadheaded home on Bell Papa Foxtrot Hotel. ¹⁹

Before heading to the house, I noted that I was on the schedule to fly Papa Hotel Bravo on the 15th with Paul Gregoire and Joe Glaculais. I had just secured the machine upcountry, but was not surprised at the movement. This could indicate only one

¹⁸ Ken Conboy, 300.

¹⁹ Many photographs of the First Plain of Jars operation can be seen in the 1969 Book.



Vang Pao's ambitious battle plan calculated to seize strategic high ground and retake strategic portions of the southern and eastern Plain of Jars.

Ahern, 426.



One of two Cobra fire support base (FSB) 105mm howitzers, located on the heights of Phou Louang overlooking the southeastern edge of the Plain of Jars.

Parker, 69.

thing to me. It was logical that our Twinpacs were now being used for dual purposes: a facade of daytime normal work, and Special Project late afternoon work, night training, or actual operations, after which a machine was returned to Udorn for an air worthiness inspection, removal of special mission equipment, and normal use the following day. ²⁰

There was a substantial delay while maintenance work was completed and we were released. This curtailed a full day's work and number of sorties for the Plain of Jars operation.

Despite Vang Pao forces' feints and multi-battalion movements, the enemy retained their own agenda. They attacked and captured the outpost on top of Phou Pha Sai. Within five

²⁰ Black Operations: Like the Twin Otter, LORAN-C was considered essential equipment for S-58T Special Project missions to aid in long range navigation for extended missions. During S-58T conversion, the aircraft were fitted with wiring and provisions for quick installation and removal of LORAN-C equipment. Hardware for this were manufactured and placed between the pilot seats and in the electronic compartment to the rear of the cabin section. First installation of the equipment required both day and night evaluation and calibration. This was initially accomplished by Scratch Kanach and John Ford, with electronics expert Tom Deeble performing the technical work.

Of course, I, and anyone else flying the machines, was well aware of the unusual configurations and its implications, but not details of the specific purpose. In any event, we were intelligent enough not to probe or talk about the new system between ourselves, in the bar, or with anyone. Still, I kept my eyes and ears tuned.

Julian "Scratch" Kanach-Author Telephone calls, 02/11/97, 03/07/98.

There were additional clues as to the non-standard and real work intended for the Twinpac. In addition to the electronic hardware, there were tubular supports and other provisions for installation of a 150-gallon auxiliary fuel tank on the fuselage's left side. At a standard fuel consumption of ninety-five gallons per hour, this added fuel would greatly extend the combat range of an S-58T. Only slated for long range missions, tanks were also stored upcountry.

Similar to the operation of a bomb rack, there was a provision to jettison the tank electrically should the need arise. This actually proved very useful, and saved Scratch and my bacon later during an evening troop extraction.

Bob Davis Memorandum regarding the Auxiliary Fuel System, 06/04/71.

days, the ridge (also known generically as Padong Ridge) was recaptured.²¹

We RON at The Alternate and were assigned to fly XW-PHD in the morning, the latest S-58T conversion that was also remaining overnight.

Establishing Cobra FSB enabled GM-22's battalions to move down the slopes and ravines and continue toward the Lat Sen objective. Joined by units from GM-21, they seized Site-276 without much resistance. At this point, probably as expected, the operation became less defensive in nature and a more pragmatic, aggressive offensive--a "let's go as far and as fast as we can" scenario. Tony Poe would have been proud.

Duplicating the 1969 offensive, supposedly without USG approval,²² contingent on resistance, the troops continued a rapid rolling offense north on the eastern side of the Plain of Jars toward Phou Theung, with eventual designs on the Lat Houang junction of Route-4 and 5.²³

There was a lot of work slinging loads to surrounding pads, artillery shells to Cobra, and supporting friendly movement toward Lat Sen. After a forty-sortie day, in what was becoming standard procedure, I was regulated to deadheading home on 12F.

The following two days were spent at the airfield flying PHC with Phil Payton, Deak Kennedy, and Joe Glaculais. All my

²¹ Lofgren, *CHECO*, 74.

²² USG did not want to create an uncontrollable military situation that would appreciably skew the balance of power, perpetrate a large Vietnamese response, and disturb ongoing bilateral peace negotiations. Since there had been a minimum of coordination with USAF planners for air support, there was a possibility that a successful operation would outrun an ability to support VP's forces. Still, there was a lot of high-level wink-winking going on, ultimately a stubborn and ego driven Vang Pao would not be denied his day in the sun.

USAF air support of about thirty-three sorties a day was programmed. These aircraft included F-4s, A-1s, and gunships. *CHECO*, William Lofgren, 77.

²³ Ken Conboy, 300.

flight time (four hours and ten minutes each day) was logged IP, while demonstrating and monitoring maneuvers with Phil in preparation for Payton's SIC check with Scratch.

"On 18 June the irregulars took the summit of Phou Theung [bench mark 5,197 feet] on the southeastern edge of the Plaine. This is a commanding position from which the irregulars can direct [allied] air and artillery fire on communist positions on the Plaine and along Route-4 and from which they can move into the lowlands and hills along the eastern portion of the Plaine. Other irregular units have moved northward to take several high ground positions in the south-central Plaine and have also destroyed numerous enemy supply caches.

In moving across the Plaine, [Vang Pao] intends in part to protect the flank of other irregular units that have been unsuccessfully attempting to take Phou Seu on the Plaine's western edge." ²⁴

After GM-22 troops moved up the sides of Phou Theung without resistance, Meo-crewed 105mm tubes were positioned in the foothills to interdict Route-5 and support projected movement north to the Lat Houang lowlands.

By the night of the 18th, enemy sappers reacted, overrunning the lower 105mm gun positions. Enemy tanks moved in during the morning to shell the firebases. Having accomplished this, the Vietnamese withdrew.

On the 24th a battalion was lifted from the Ban Na area to Phou Theung, allowing the mobile GM-22 to commence movement east toward Route-4 and Xieng Khouang Ville. As GM-21 and another

²⁴ CIA Bulletin, Laos: Vang Pao's irregular task forces are continuing to make gains on the southern Plaine des Jarres, 06/24/71.

battalion converged and moved forward, Lat Houang was captured with no enemy resistance. ²⁵

On Sunday the 20th, John Ford, Gary Gentz (DOH 04/27/71), ²⁶ and I ferried Papa Hotel Charlie (PHC) to Long Tieng to participate in the reinforcement of Phou Pha Sai after its recapture. We joined a roundtrip daisy chain of helicopters shuttling troops and supplies nine miles northeast to the elevated site.

Logging all instructor time, I contributed twenty sorties before we secured the ship on The Alternate ramp and returned to Udorn on USAF C-130, a thirty-five-minute trip. The next morning, while Mike Jarina launched in 96W with Andy Anderson, ²⁷ our same crew spent the entire day conducting Papa Hotel Delta (PHD) FCFs. Then I was not scheduled for the next seven days.

Five days later, Mike Jarina flew upcountry for three consecutive days in Bell 204s 35F and 12F. Adverse weather hampered flight operations for two out of the three days. ²⁸

Because the 148 Regiment's units tenaciously held onto their positions, at first, Vang Pao's troops were initially less successful in capturing the twin peaks of Phu Seu (highest point 5,400 plus feet).

"On 26 June government irregulars occupied the southern summit of Phou Seu, the strategic high ground on the southwestern edge of the [PDJ] and a key objective of [VP's] current offensive. Fighting reportedly was still going on near the northwestern end of the ridge.

²⁵ Ken Conboy, 300.

²⁶ Both men were early participants in the S-58T Special Project program. Although unusual for a CPH, John Ford was an actual CIA employee, and was still gaining Twinpac experience in preparation for his extracurricular activities. Although we did not talk about the project John was aware that I knew and vice versa.

²⁷ Mike Jarina Interviews.

²⁸ Mike Jarina Interviews.

Other irregulars have occupied important high points near Ban Khong [located on the edge of the PDJ eight miles north northeast of Ban Na], farther to the north.

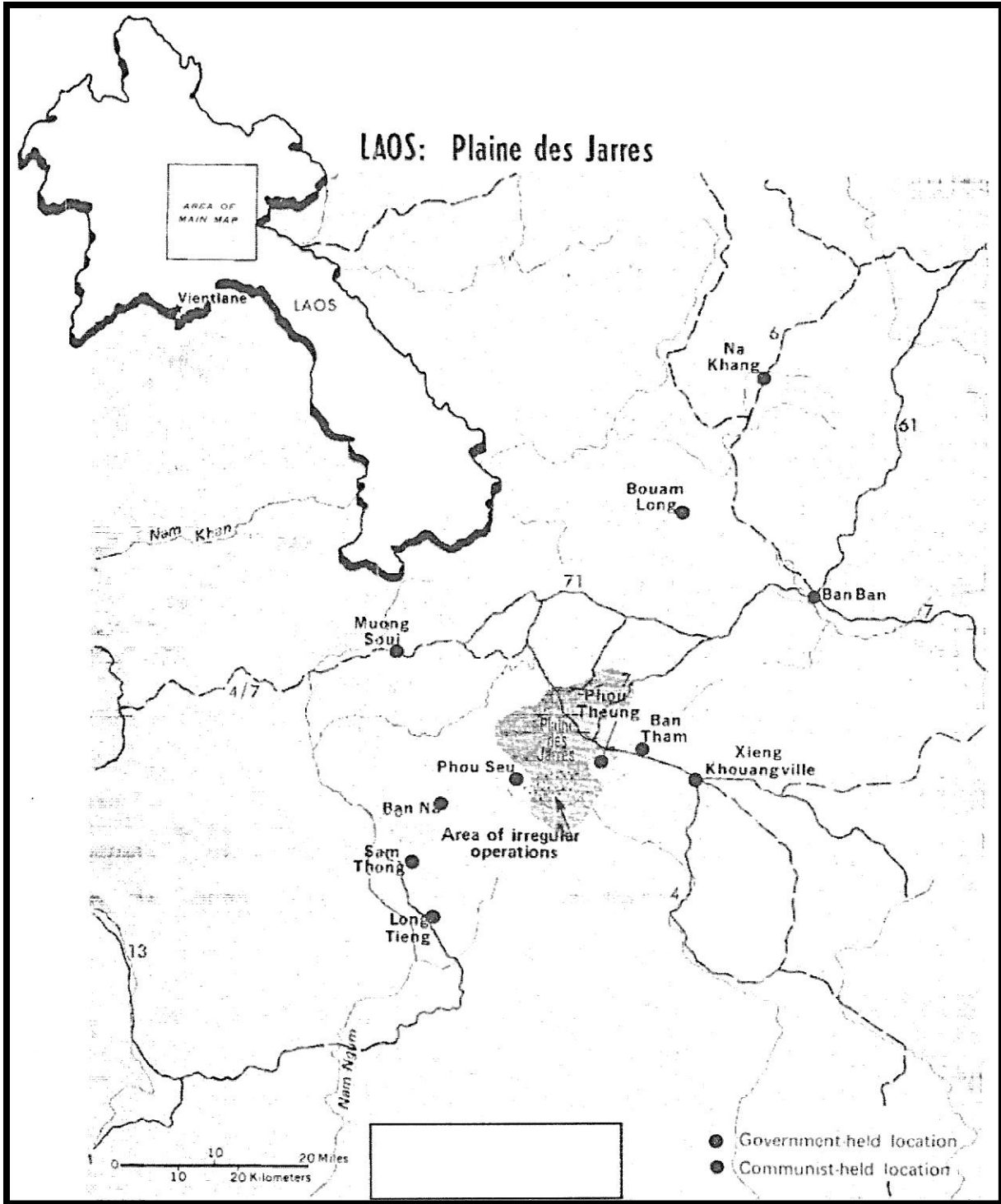
On the eastern side of the Plaine, additional irregular units have been moved in to reinforce and consolidate the government's newly won positions near Phou Theung." ²⁹ [This also allowed friendly movement west toward Lat Houang and northeast toward Route-4.]

After being lifted to Khang Kho, a fresh Meo regiment, GM-24, with hard-charging Case Officer George Bacon as advisor, walked to Lat Sen. After clearing the immediate area, they wheeled west toward Phou Seu. As the unit approached the mountain, the remaining enemy elected to withdraw and live to fight again another day.

"On 29 June, irregular patrols reached the Xieng Khouang airfield [L-22 or Lima Lima] in the north central portion of the Plaine and established a landing zone nearby. At the same time, other patrols moved into the northeastern part of the Plaine locating and destroying numerous small supply caches. Government forces have not been present in this area of the Plaine since February 1970, when a [NVA] counteroffensive drove the irregulars from Xieng Khouang Ville and swiftly rolled back the gains of the rainy season campaign in 1969.

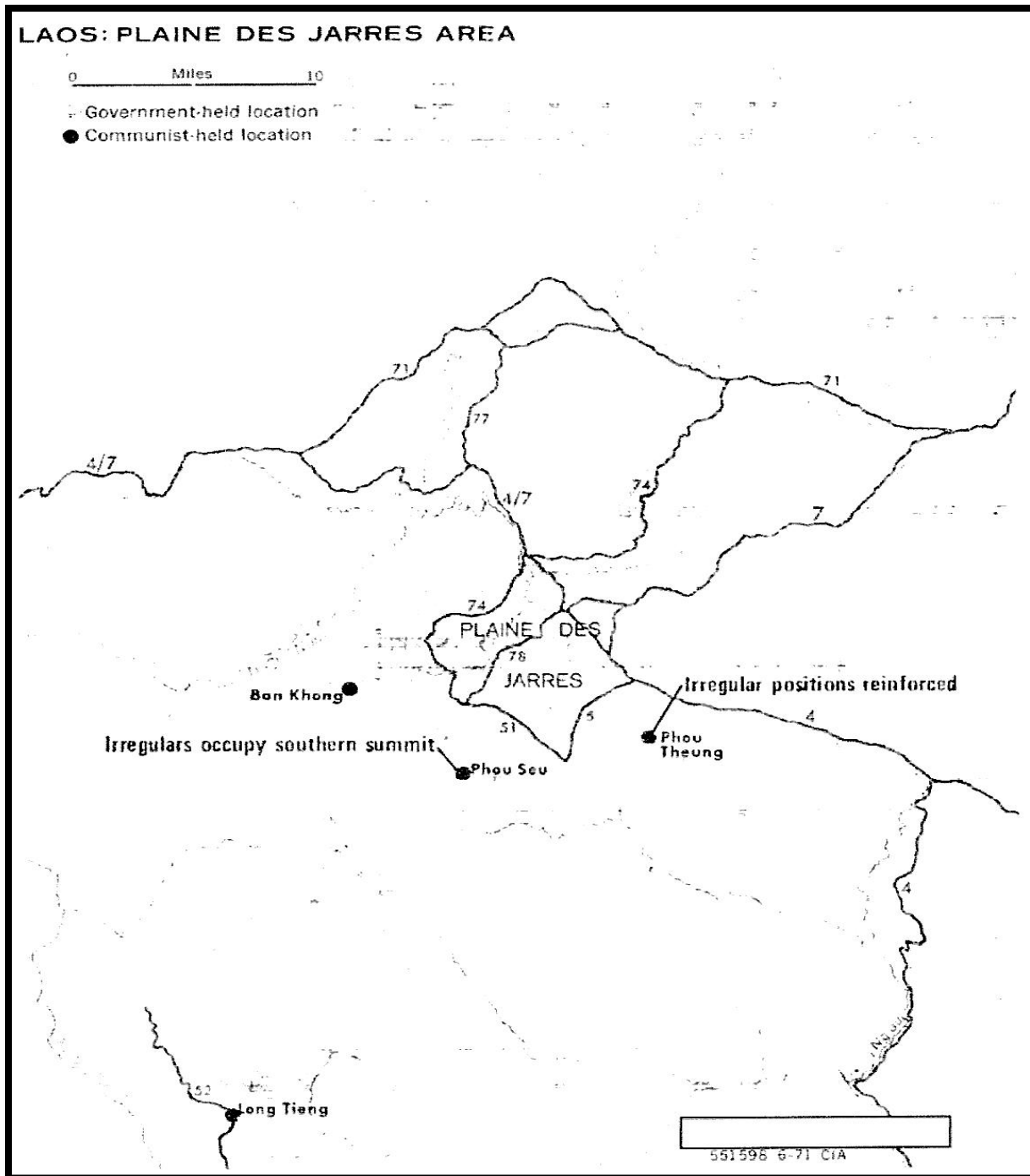
Other significant government advances were scored west of the Plaine. Irregular units have captured the entire Phou Seu ridge-which has been the scene of clashes for several days-while other irregular forces moved back into Ban Na, an important government artillery base that had been abandoned in April. Vang Pao was not able to take Ban Na until mid-October last year, and

²⁹ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 06/28/71.

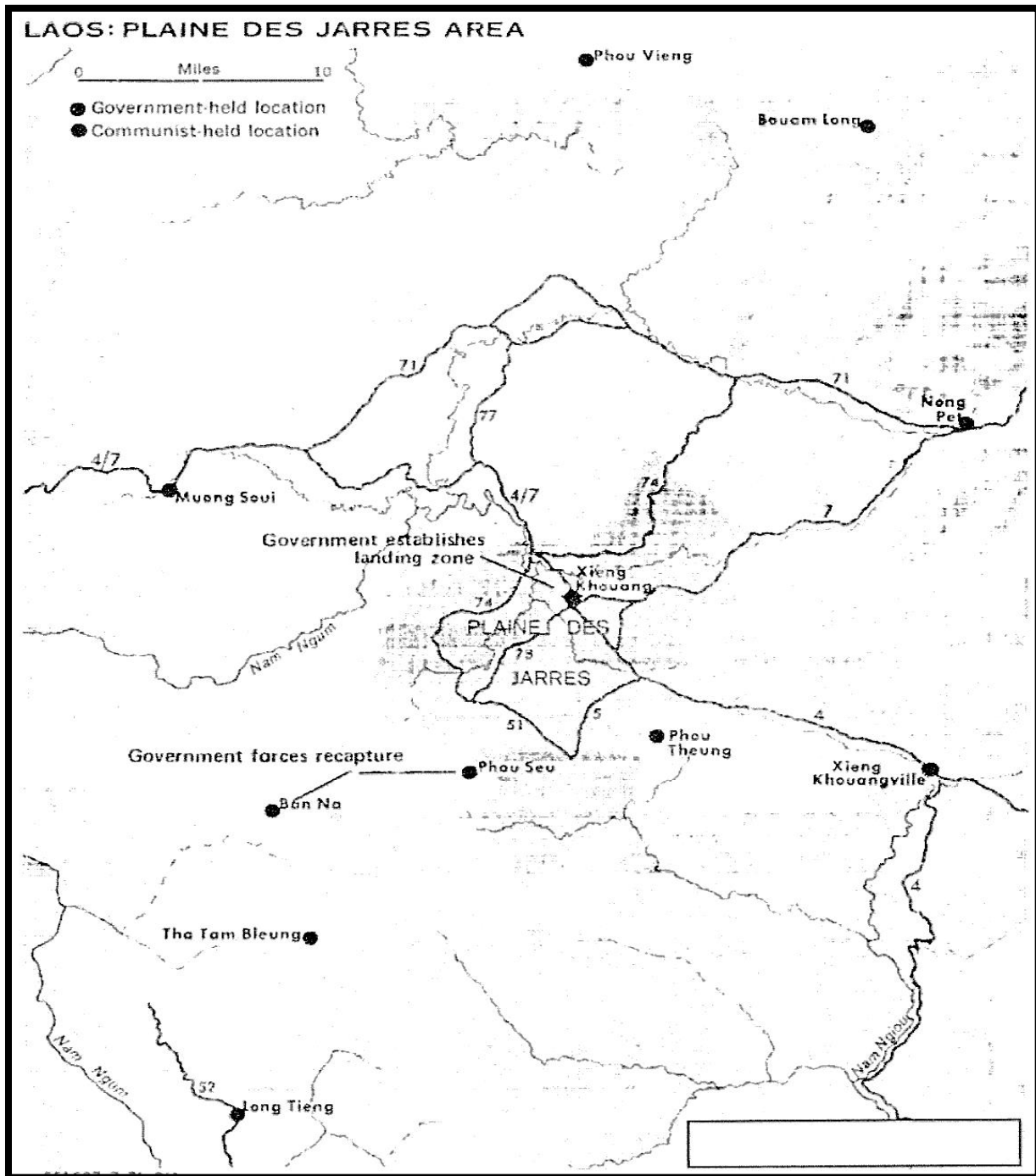


The heights of Phou Theung commanded the surrounding low ground and parts of Routes-4 and 5.

CIA Map, 06/24/71.



Vang Pao's Plain of Jars offensive showing the location of Phou Seu and Ban Khong on the southern and southwestern edges of the Plain. After Phou Theung was reinforced, troops moved east toward Route-4.
CIA Map, 06/28/71.



07/01/71 CIA map showing road infrastructure on and around the Plain of Jars. It also displays Vang Pao troops' areas of relatively easy success in rolling up Vietnamese units and continued movement north around Ban Ang (Xiang Khouang).

his efforts to secure strong points north of Ban Na had proved only temporarily successful. The North Vietnamese clearly have been caught off balance by [Vang Pao's end run] offensive. They had been pulling back some of their units from forward positions west of the Plaine, which in part accounts for [VP's] relatively easy progress to date. Nonetheless, the [NVA] still have six regiments, with artillery and armor support, in the general vicinity of the Plaine. ³⁰

STO

Seven days scheduled time off commenced on the 22nd.

"We are planning a two-day trip to Korat and some ruins near there [at the town of Pimai]. The weather is quite rainy so I don't know how we will make out"

Letter Home, 06/23/71.

The weather finally improved, so, leaving Peter at home with Tokay and the maid, we drove to Korat with Khun Yai, Khun Tha, and Orn's second child, Mike Carlson. We visited Cham's second cousin, Ot's father. Ot had lived with the family as a youth and boiled Tuie's water when she was little. This task made him angry and he wrote his mother of this. Later, Ot graduated from the police academy and was now a border police major at the BPP facility outside of Udorn. He had visited us once in the past and, upon entering the house opened the refrigerator door to see what was inside. I thought this quite strange at the time, but he had been a member of the family and considered himself privileged.

³⁰ CIA Bulletin, Laos: Vang Pao's forces are continuing to cut deeply into communist territory on and near the Plaine des Jarres, 07/01/71.

We remained overnight in a dingy local hotel, and the next morning after breakfast departed with a picnic lunch for the remote Pimai ruins. After negotiating dirt back roads through scrub jungle, we arrived at our destination.

Except for a caretaker, who monitored our progress through the area, we were about the only people visiting the historic site. Although in its infancy, there was an enclosed area of sorts that sheltered and housed better preserved items that archaeologists considered particularly worthwhile.

Outside the main complex, a gigantic banyan tree, reputedly the largest of its kind in Thailand, spread out for what seemed an acre or more. Completely obscuring the sun underneath, the tree provided shade and picnic areas for visitors.

It was a great experience for all of us, as the old, deteriorating Khmer sandstone ruins had not been exploited or commercialized yet. Except for attempts to preserve some precious items, I was amazed that many ancient treasures, particularly those with images in bas relief, were lying half buried in the jungle, subject to accelerated deterioration, as they had for many centuries. ³¹

During ancient times, this portion of Isan had been part of the Khmer empire and subject to that culture. Pimai was erected in the 11th and 12th century. Although Hindu in nature, Pimai appeared more Buddhist oriented. The architecture was patterned on that of the Angkor Wat complex in Cambodia.

In addition to decaying shrines and temples, the area included prang towers and murals, all telling a story and having some religious significance. Drilled holes in the stones were evidence that indicated they were carried to the site during the

³¹ In later years the ruins were restored to a degree, and a sound and light show purportedly developed to cater to the tourist trade.



Tuie leaning on an ancient Khmer era lintel in front of the small Pimai historical museum.

Author Collection.



An enormous Banyan tree in the Pimai area. Area caretaker, Rick, Mike, Tuie, Cham, and Plang.

Author Collection.



Another side of the spreading Banyan tree at Pimai.
Author Collection.



A view of the Pimai prang tower from outside the main complex.
Author Collection.



Sandstone images carved in bas-relief lay scattered in brush outside the Pimai complex.

Author Collection.



One side of the raised Pimai ruins revealing the advanced state of deterioration.

Author Collection.



One entrance with a well-preserved lintel of story-telling images in bas-relief.

Author Collection.



Paving stones and support columns in the inside gallery were in reasonably good condition.

Author Collection.



The inner courtyard housing shrines and other religious items.
Author Collection.



One of several shrines or temples at the Pimai site. A Buddhist statue can be seen in a recess to the right.

Author Collection.



Another fairly well-preserved shrine.
Author Collection.

building process. Stones and murals lay half buried in the jungle outside the walls, where people might have attempted to steal them over time. Inside, a small gallery formed a rectangle. Relatively smooth stone floors persisted, attesting to the careful and enduring work of the original builders. There was a large Buddhist image in one temple, giving rise to a discussion that seven-foot giants roamed the land. This legend seemed to prevail throughout Asia. ³²

In previous years, we had journeyed to the more extensive ruins of the ancient Siam capital at Ayutthaya north of Bangkok, but for us novice explorers the older Pimai structures seemed more charming and people friendly.

Before leaving for home, I snapped many color slides of the amazing place for posterity.

THE LINE

Thursday the 29th, I deadheaded to The Alternate on C-123 545, the first early Peppergrinder flight to fly Papa Hotel Echo, the final Twinpac conversion. I was joined by Pogo Hunter and Rudy Seraficio. Apparently, Papa Foxtrot Echo had been released from the barn, tested, found airworthy, and sent upcountry while I was off the flight schedule.

After less than two and a half hours and ten sorties, we encountered torque split problems that compromised power and effectively grounded the machine. As they had in the past, crews would attempt anything and everything to keep an aircraft flying. Therefore, improper rigging NF fuel control rods in the field, while attempting to marry the needles, still plagued our program. Correct rigging required a fair degree of knowledge, as

³² The giant legend seemed to be reinforced when the Ban Chiang dig in the northeast Thailand became publicized and relatively large skeletons were exhumed.



The fifth and final Twinpac turbine engine conversion X-Ray Whiskey-Papa Hotel Echo (XW-PHE) parked on the Udorn ramp.
Author Collection.

torque units first had to be accurately calibrated using a dead weight tester; then the NF (power turbine selected speed) fuel control rods adjusted along with all physical stops, including the maximum beep micro switch, minimum beep stop, high pitch stop, and proper clearance at the NF fuel control maximum stops.

Adjusting the NF control rods to marry the torques in the field was not recommended, for it would invariably serve to skew the entire monitoring system. Therefore, all rigging was recommended and normally accomplished during a FCF at Udorn by knowledgeable mechanics and where proper equipment and maintenance manuals were available.³³

Since there were no dead weight tester instruments or mechanics upcountry capable to calibrate the torque units and make the correct adjustments available at Site-20A, we had to wait for a ride to Udorn on Triple Nickel (5-4555).

Mike Jarina also worked upcountry supporting the Plain of Jars offensive which, with little or no opposition, continued to acquire territory at the important Phou Seu and Ban Na sites, and where troops ranged as far north as Ban Ang and the former Xieng Khouang base at Lima-22.

The final day of the month, Larry Price, Charlie Brigham (DOH 10/23/70), a ground mechanic with equipment, and I deadheaded to Long Tieng with the intention of returning Papa Hotel Echo to flight status. After time-consuming calibrations and adjustments were made, we launched. The day was mostly over and we only managed to fly three hours plus twenty-five minutes, and ten sorties to local pads before deadheading home on 5-4374.

Because of tiny baby steps involved in the Twinpac program, we were still feeling our way, while encountering unforeseen maintenance problems with the new machine. Accumulating only

³³ Bob Davis Memorandum, NF Fuel Control Rigging, 06/30/71.

seventy-seven hours during the month, it appeared that this figure would approximate the new normal.

SYNOPSIS

Thus far, Vang Pao was winning his energetic effort to retake the Plain of Jars. In USAF hierarchy's opinion, the success attributed to the current Plain of Jars operation had largely stemmed from the high level of Allied air support, and troop lift mobility provided by Air America and USAF helicopter crews. At the behest of 7/13th Air Force in Udorn, Seventh Air Force Saigon fragged an average of fifty-five strike sorties per day in Barrel Roll. Adverse weather, maintenance problems, and diversions reduced the number of effective sorties to forty-five, with fifty percent in direct support of Vang Pao's operation. Of the rest, twenty percent expended ordnance on instrument flight rules (IFR), twenty percent hit lines of communication (LOCs) and storage areas. The remaining ten percent were allocated to gunship escorts. The RLAFF provided thirty-five sorties per day with ten AT-28 planes.

The combined air endeavor resulted in what was considered excellent progress in a concentrated area containing many enemy troops and vehicles. As Vang Pao's men moved forward, numerous targets were developed for air strikes.

The next phase of the Second Plain of Jars operation depended to a great extent on continued allied air support. However, as in the past, a high level of cooperation and coordination between the U.S. Air Force, Agency, and U.S. Embassy types in Vientiane had been generally distrustful, lacking, and not forthcoming. Additionally, there had been no

change to USG's policy to reduce Barrel Roll sorties to thirty-two per day as of 1 July. ³⁴

Clearly a joint solution had to be achieved to resolve this deficit.

MR-4

Following the loss of Paksong, a weak line of defense blocking the road to Pakse was established at Ban Gnik on Route-23, twelve miles west of Paksong. Royal Laotian Government leaders were adamant about reclaiming some of the Bolovens and other lost territory, but the inept commanding officer in charge delayed, and any movement was desultory at best. Prodded by Agency pressure, General Phasouk placed Colonel Soutchay Vongsavanh in charge of three mixed battalions. Employing helicopter lifts the multi-battalion offensive began on nine June. In typical Lao fashion, progress was slow, and when the Vietnamese struck the following night with PT-76 tanks (the first in the region) and infantry, the task force fell back toward Ban Gnik.³⁵

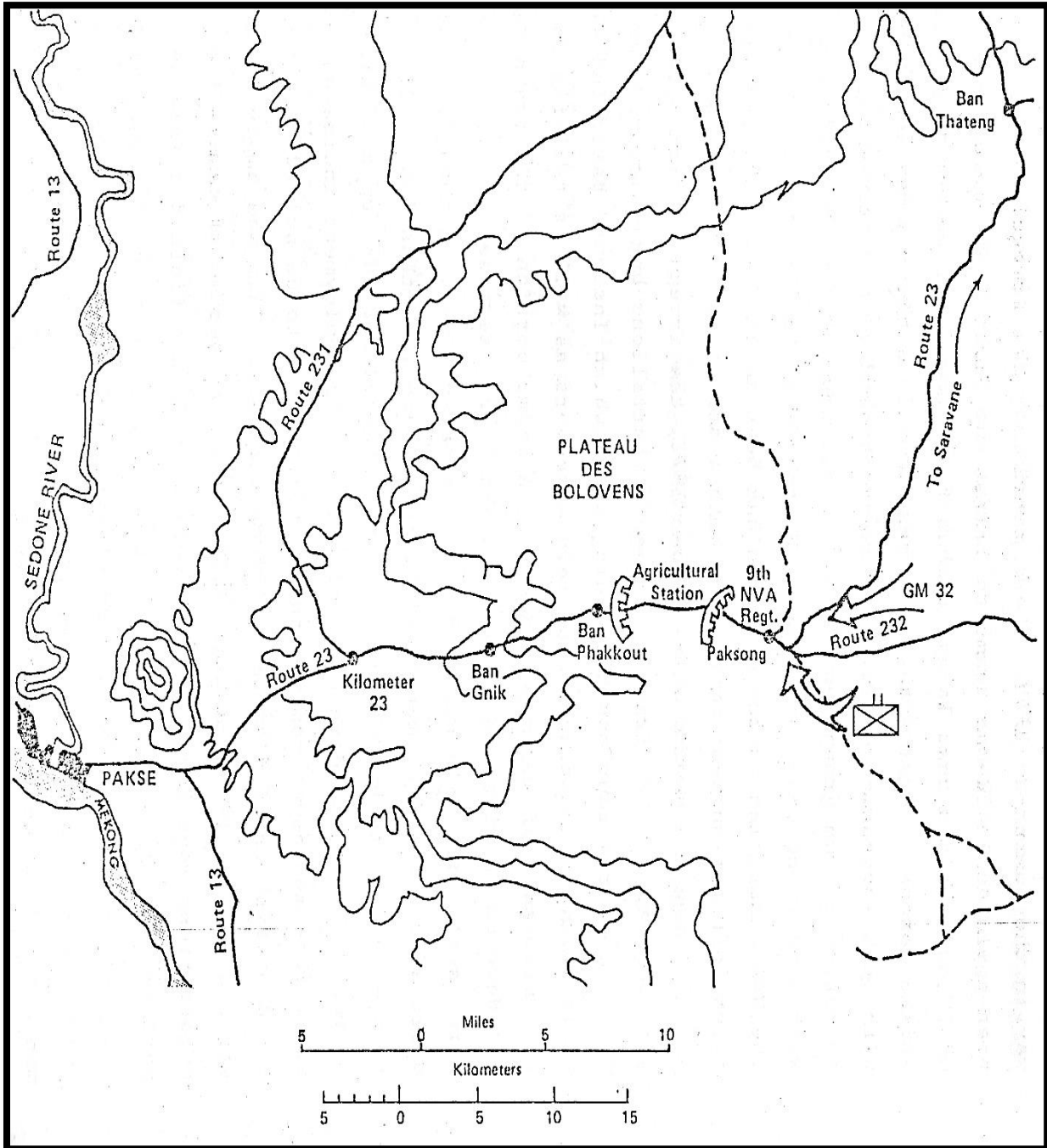
An Agency bulletin from the period attempts to describe the macro action:

"A multi-battalion government operation launched on 9 June to retake key positions of the western Bolovens Plateau has encountered some serious problems. On Wednesday the lead elements of a regular army task force moved eastward along Route-23 toward their first objective, Ban Phak Kout. Their progress was stopped when two key battalion commanders were killed-one by a short round from his supporting artillery.

³⁴ William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 75-76.

³⁵ Soutchay Vongsavanh, 65.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 415.



Graphic of the 1971 Route-23 area depicting areas of contention between FAR and Vietnamese forces on the Bolovens Plateau leading to Paksong.

Soutchay, 69.

Government forces again tried to move toward Ban Phak Kout on 10 June, but were hit hard by a NVA shelling attack followed by a ground attack reportedly led by two tanks. The Lao army units were dispersed and are still trying to regroup around their command post on Route-23. Bad weather has limited air support. Several irregular battalions, many of which are in position northeast, east, and southeast of Paksong [inserted by helicopter] will support the operation if it achieves its initial goals and moves on toward Paksong.

Enemy resistance to this operation is likely to continue to be stiff. The communists are dug in at many points along Route-23 and hold most of the key high ground positions. Moreover, the [NVA] have given every indication that they intend to hold the Bolovens at least in part to protect their infiltration corridors into Cambodia and South Vietnam. They have continued to push supplies and personnel southward despite the onset of the rainy season. There is some evidence suggesting that probably during the next dry season that they plan to increase the use of the western infiltration corridor-Routes-23/16. Recent aerial photography indicates that they have begun improvements on the long unused section of Route-16 between Ban Phone and Attopeu and are building a new road to link the staging areas at Ban Bac with Route-16" ³⁶

Under the cover of low hanging clouds and fog, threatening to roll up government forces, the enemy resumed their attack on the morning of the 11th. However, North Vietnamese commanders had miscalculated. Just as victory seemed assured and Lao troops had been overrun and were making their way west, heat from the sun dissipated the fog and clouds, allowing multiple sorties from RLAF T-28 pilots based at Pakse and USAF assets to break up

³⁶ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 06/11/71.

the attacks. Allied air caused so many enemy casualties that further enemy attacks and offensives were curtailed. It really did not matter, for by that time the combat effectiveness of Colonel Soutchay's battalions was considered almost nonexistent.³⁷

"No major action was reported over the weekend on the Bolovens Plateau as both sides recover from last week's heavy fighting. Several government units that had been cut off filtered back to friendly lines, but no firm government casualty figures have been reported. ³⁸ It is not clear whether the effort to retake the central portion of the plateau will be postponed indefinitely, although the communists have also taken heavy losses as improved weather facilitated airstrikes." ³⁹

Two days later:

"The communists have renewed pressure on Lao Army units on the western Bolovens Plateau...

Yesterday two to three North Vietnamese companies attacked a Lao Army battalion five miles east of the junction of Routes-23 and 321. Government troops were forced to pull out from their outlying positions, but the battalion command post stood its ground with support from gunships and artillery, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. To the east, irregular battalions are still operating south of Paksong but have had little contact with the enemy.

As of 14 June, the government estimated that 465 of its nearly 1,600 troops committed to the abortive operation to retake Paksong were still missing as a result of the [NVA]

³⁷ Soutchay, 67.

Tom Ahern, 416.

³⁸ Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 416, "...NVA units still managed to circle around behind Soutchay's defenders, blocking the road back to Pakse."

³⁹ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 06/14/71.

counterattack last week. In addition, at least 175 [government] soldiers and irregulars were wounded and 26 irregulars killed. There are no definitive estimates of [NVA] casualties, but air observers and army commanders on the ground believe that as many as 500-600 enemy were killed or wounded by air and artillery attacks." ⁴⁰

Despite all the effort expended, the result of the short offensive was to totally exhaust both sides and reestablish RLA battle lines west of Ban Gnik.

Additional fighting lay ahead.

⁴⁰ CIA Bulletin, Laos: The communists have renewed pressure on Lao army units on the western Bolovens Plateau, 06/16/71.

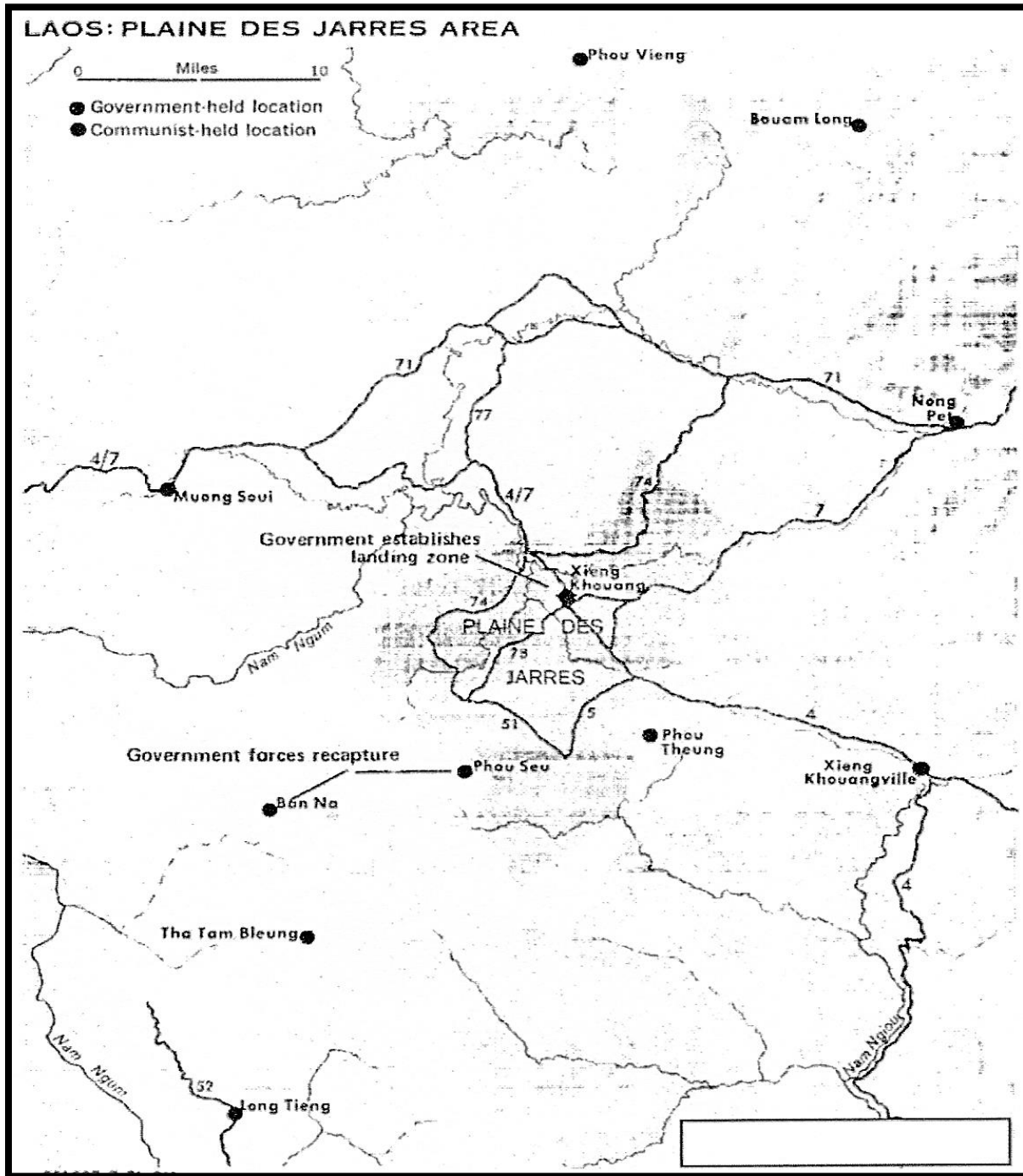
"There is considerable cutting of pilots and machines going on right now [the war was winding down]. Of course, I am not affected because of my low seniority number. I imagine that it will go farther and deeper before it is over.

We still have a good war but peace talks are taking place also. We have a major portion of the PDJ again and are in good shape territory wise. The enemy hasn't started to hit back yet."

Letter Home, 07/19/71.

With high ground at Phou Seu, Phou Louang, and Phou Theung commanding the southern and eastern rim of the Plain of Jars under government control, and Meo patrols wandering at will throughout the area, it was a propitious time for Vang Pao to continue moving north and committing forces to retake the entire region. As with the 1969 offensive, speed of advance was essential before the Vietnamese could fully react or reverse their wholesale troop movement toward North Vietnam. Moreover, with peace negotiations underway, and the possibility of a settlement looming on the horizon, the Lao King wanted territory gained; even American leaders, considering a successful advance fodder in negotiating purposes, acquiesced to supporting a limited offensive.

On 1 July, the day programmed for a reduction in USAF support (but not RLAF T-28 and AC-47 gunship assets), elements of GM-22 units from Phou Theung moved across Route-4 toward Ban Tham in the foothills north of the road where enemy storage caches had been discovered in caves during previous offensives.



The Plain of Jars situation as of 1 July 1971. With Lima-22 in government hands, Vang Pao's forces were afforded a launch point to continue spreading out to the north and northeast.

CIA Map, 07/01/71.

As during previous wet seasons, Vang Pao took advantage of Air America's versatile helicopters, which provided the means and capability to bypass the enemy and move numbers of troops almost anywhere with a minimum of trouble. Therefore, the same day as the Route-4 movement, a battalion was lifted from Lat Houang (LS-09) to the vicinity of the Xieng Khouang (Lima-22) pierced steel planking (PSP) airstrip. Two more battalions were transported to the same area by helicopter crews. ¹

I was approved for home leave in August. (I liked to take leave in the summer to avoid the monsoon rains that often flooded Udorn.) Therefore, the CPH advised me that I would be scheduled upcountry frequently in order to satisfy a total yearly flight time that approximated that of other pilots. Of course, this largely depended on weather, aircraft availability, and no unscheduled maintenance.

Because of limited facilities and the means to support only one or two crews, daily Long Tieng commutes continued. Bill Hutchison (02/27/66), Charlie Brigham, and I deadheaded to The Alternate on 384. Bill, who had been strictly a Bell pilot, and had no previous H-34 time, was transitioning to the Twinpac and I was allowed to log instructor time. Two years older than me, Hutch, as he was known, was a large man, but a non-aggressive, soft-spoken type. He reminded me of a Kappa Sigma fraternity brother and Duke football player, Charlie Klinger. Both men reminded me of a gigantic, cuddly teddy bear (unfortunately, not all large men were of the same temperament).

Weather was not good. After delays, we crewed Papa Hotel Echo, participating in Vang Pao's troop movement north toward Lima-Lima for two and a half hours before returning home.

¹ William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 77.
Ken Conboy, 301.

Mike Jarina was upcountry flying Papa Foxtrot Gulf with Veazy. Also impacted by weather, and only flying minimum time before RON at Long Tieng, they conducted one Special Mission out of Bouam Long, moving troops south to participate in Vang Pao's northern offensive prong to interdict LOCs around Nong Pet and Ban Ban. ²

Friday morning Hutch, Bill Long, and I crewed Papa Hotel Delta upcountry, where I joined former Marine pilot Mike Lapierre (DOH 09/30/70) and Chuck Low in Papa Hotel Echo. Chuck was a very quiet, polite individual from Pennsylvania. He always called me sir or Captain, even though I pointed out we were civilians and insisted he be more informal. Divorced, Low had a couple of children and wanted to put money aside for their education. After getting to know him better, I counseled him to purchase General Motors stock for their futures. Chuck was an excellent gunner, and one of those rare types who required no coaxing to return ground fire. Without his able marksmanship, I doubt that I would have survived the Laos experience.

Although I logged some IP, our total flight time was again marginal. Although it was preordained, it appeared that Bell pilots would far exceed our flight time. Mike Jarina and Veazy flew nine hours in Papa Foxtrot Juliet and conducted forty-four sorties supporting Plain of Jars operations. Since advanced units determined that the enemy had withdrawn from the environs of Ban Na, SGU troops from Hill 1663 were lifted to reinforce the former FSB site. Amazingly, like previous aerial bombing at Moung Soui, Puncher howitzers were discovered undamaged. ³

Continuing our Long Tieng commutes on Saturday, Hutch, Deak Kennedy (DOH 10/24/70), and I drove Papa Hotel Delta to the

² Mike Jarina Interviews.

³ Ken Conboy, 301.

upcountry base. Much of our six and a half hours in the area was supporting troops at high points in and around the southern Plain and at Lima-22. It was a repeat of the 1969 operation, and lent itself to some measure of stress related to unknown enemy disposition. From the low casualty level, I observed that it was easy to deduce that there was little Vietnamese resistance, but some caution was warranted. With the troops moving fast, ranging far and wide to avoid presenting a stationary target, and with so much terrain to cover, I knew there were always scattered enemy pockets present where one least expected.

I was not enjoying the work as much as the previous Plain of Jars operation for several reasons: I no longer worked closely with General Vang Pao or Case Officers; I was charged with conducting instructor duties that detracted my full attention to the offensive; with few machines in our inventory, I was not flying very much; and, like the old saying that familiarity breeds contempt, I had previously been to or seen all the areas we were working. Still, the operation was anything but hum-drum, but it certainly lacked the mystery and high level of excitement previously encountered. ⁴ Leaving Delta on the ramp, we deadheaded home on C-123 5-4555.

On the fourth, Buzz Baiz, Deak Kennedy, and I deadheaded north on C-7A Caribou to fly Papa Hotel Delta. The deadhead cut into our total flight time, but saved the Customer money by eliminating ferry flights. It also provided a machine in the field that might otherwise undergo tinkering of nervous hands at Udorn. Consistent with operations methods, we left the ship and deadheaded home on a USAF C-130.

⁴ In 1969 I never wanted to leave the battleground excitement. I could hardly wait to go upcountry to work, and half-seriously told CPH Knight one day that I would gladly work for subsistence wages.

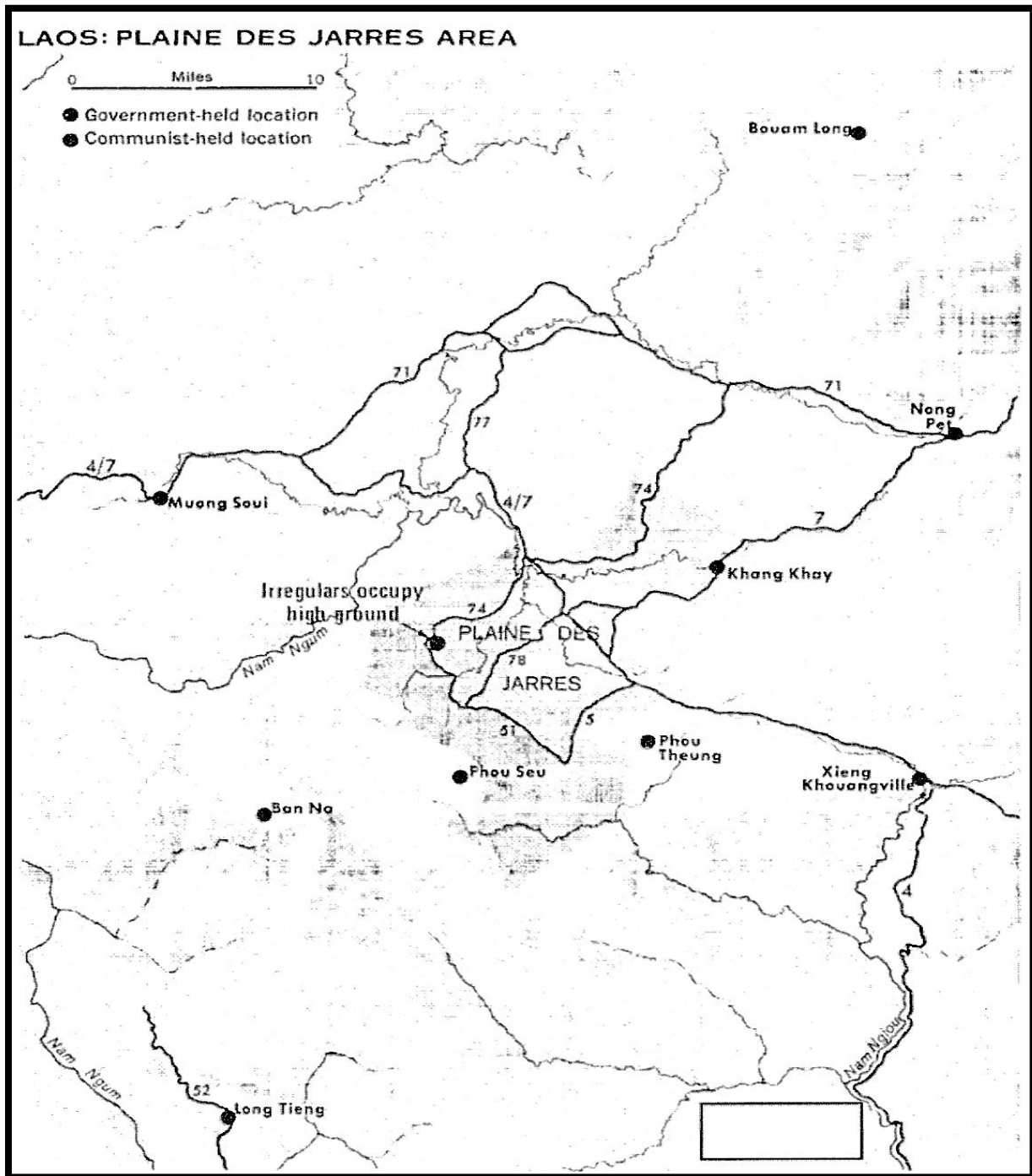
After one day off, I worked six consecutive days (6-11 July) out of Long Tieng. Two days of this period were spent overnight there in order to begin work early in the morning. two Portacamp trailers had been installed on SKY hill to accommodate a couple of crews. Meals were taken in the Customer mess hall.

On the sixth, Dave Cox, Deak Kennedy, and I deadheaded to The Alternate on C-7A Caribou 389 to fly Papa Hotel Delta. After four hours and forty minutes working fifteen sorties around weather and supporting forward positions on the PDJ we transferred to Papa Hotel Charlie to RTB for maintenance. By that time, it was quite late, and after contacting Udorn tower and flying the iron compass,⁵ we chocked in well after dark.

Our crew remained the same on the 7th. When Charlie emerged from the hangar and maintenance inspection, and was cleared for upcountry work, we launched about midmorning.

It was an active day shuttling troops. With Lima-Lima returned to government hands, but with enemy resistance beginning to become more evident at the Route 71/74 road junction at Lat Bouak, Vang Pao's next move was to move men forward into position to seize the commanding high ground at Phou Keng, four miles northwest of the Xieng Khouang strip. To accomplish this, we and other crews, including Mike Jarina who had deadheaded from Udorn and was flying 96W, lifted three battalions from the Phou Seu area nine miles north to hills short of the objective, where the regiment could re-form into units and move toward the objective. The next day GM-23 troops reached the enemy-held mountain and began an assault that required five days of difficult fighting to obtain a successful

⁵ Iron compass: The railroad track from Nong Khai to Udorn could be used in foul weather for low level flight and a positive navigation guide to the airfield. This could be used to good advantage when we were too low for ground control intercept (GCI) radar acquisition and vectors.



The disposition of government troops on the western Plain of Jars. To the northeast, enemy forces at the Lat Bouak 71/74 road junction were striking back at advancing irregulars.

CIA Map, 07/07/71.

conclusion.

⁶An Agency update reflected on recent developments:

"Vang Pao's forces are now ranging over nearly all of the PDJ except for the northeastern sector around Khang Khay [the town was off limits for political reasons, as it was being considered a possible location for peace negotiations between the hostile parties]. In the last few days irregular units had moved onto high ground positions dominating the northwest section of the Plaine [Phou Keng]. Patrols and small units have conducted search and clear operations over most of the Plaine encountering practically no resistance and locating numerous enemy supply caches. Tactical air support for these units has been extensive." ⁷

That night we RON at The Alternate, something preferred by crewmembers rather than the dreary task of returning to Udorn each night. This rotating RON policy was predicated on space available in the two-man Portacamp trailers or in Customer facilities.

A monsoon weather system enveloped the area the next day, severely limiting our participation in the offensive. We only flew one plus forty-five, and I was limited to three sorties. Mike Jarina was similarly impacted by foul weather. After deadheading to The Alternate to resume flying Bell 204B XW-96W, Mike logged only two hours prior to deadheading home. ⁸

Friday, the ninth, was considerably more productive, as we were able to work a full day supporting Plain of Jars operations before leaving Papa Hotel Charlie at The Alternate and deadheading to Tango-08 on C-123 Triple Nickel. Jarina did not

⁶ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 301.
William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 77.
Mike Jarina Interviews.

⁷ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 07/07/71.

⁸ Mike Jarina Interviews.

fare as well flying 96W, only logging four and a half hours, and deadheading both north and south.

The morning of the tenth, after riding north on Caribou 401, Hutch, Long, and I resumed flying Papa Hotel Charlie. Since Hutch was showing encouraging progress in transition to the Twinpac and the enemy threat was minimal, I allowed him to fly the entire six-hour day before boarding C-123 617 for our trip home.

The next morning Buzz Biaz, Bill Long, and I joined the airplane crew and a center load of supplies in C-7A 393 bound for Long Tieng. After conducting a preflight of Papa Hotel Charlie, obtaining current intelligence, and a load, we launched for the Plain of Jars. On the western side troops were nearing the zenith of Phou Keng. It was cleared on the 13th, and after being reinforced, troops swept north between the Nam Ngum and Route-7, and discovered several enemy supply caches. From there they were ordered to move east to occupy Phou San. This goal was not achieved until month's end.

Meanwhile, other units were attempting to contain the sizeable Lima-22 area and fend off enemy counterattacks. Full control and security at the airfield was not to be achieved until August.

On the eastern side of the Plain, the Phou Theung group, which had moved north of Route-4, encountered stiff resistance from PT-76 tank crews and enemy infantry intent on protecting its rear supply areas and preventing further movement. After withdrawing, the GM-22 regiment was reassigned to move east as far as possible along the road toward Xieng Khouang Ville. On the 12th they were blocked six miles short of the airfield and the town by an enemy still well supplied and reinforced from eastern LOCs.

By the 23rd, while retrenching for another move on the ville and airfield, two battalions were assigned to join GM-21 in its push north toward Khang Khay. Stripped of two battalions, the remaining battalion reverted to a turtle walk status. ⁹

Sunday had been a long, productive day hauling bullets, beans, bandages to, and WIA, from the battlefield. After seven hours crewing Charlie, we were reassigned quite late to Papa Hotel Bravo, with orders to ferry the ship home for maintenance, or whatever else was planned for it. With so much happening, work was backed up, so we worked the ship locally for less than an hour and did not depart the field until dark, arriving at the Air America parking ramp after eight o'clock. The total crew duty time warranted a day off the schedule.

Jarina drove north in Bell Papa Foxtrot Juliet to fly an action-packed day in support Vang Pao's operation. ¹⁰

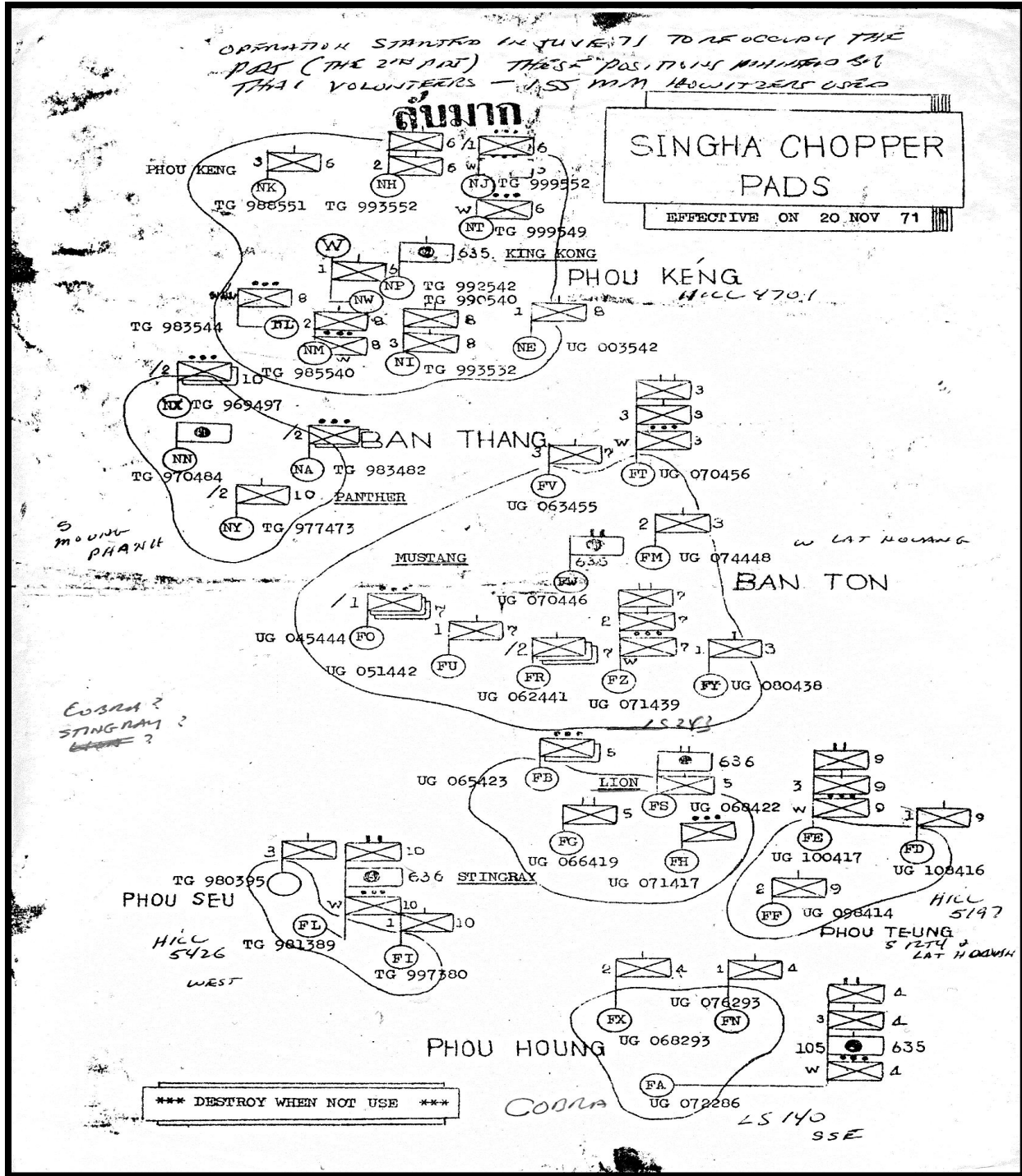
DEVELOPMENT OF THAI FIRE SUPPORT BASES

Since Air America possessed no such aircraft, for a number of years U.S. Army CH-54 Skyhooks and CH-47 Chinook helicopters and crews had occasionally been clandestinely assigned temporary duty (TDY) from South Vietnam to Udorn, to provide heavy lift capability to move artillery guns, men, machines, and crashed aircraft in Laos. During the past two years these assets had been employed to good effect in moving tubes and loads of ammunition to support and stiffen the Vang Pao defense line in front of Long Tieng.

Even though enemy resistance still existed around Lima-22 and Phou Keng, and enemy counterattacks were expected, the

⁹ Ken Conboy, 301.
William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 78-79.

¹⁰ Mike Jarina Interviews.



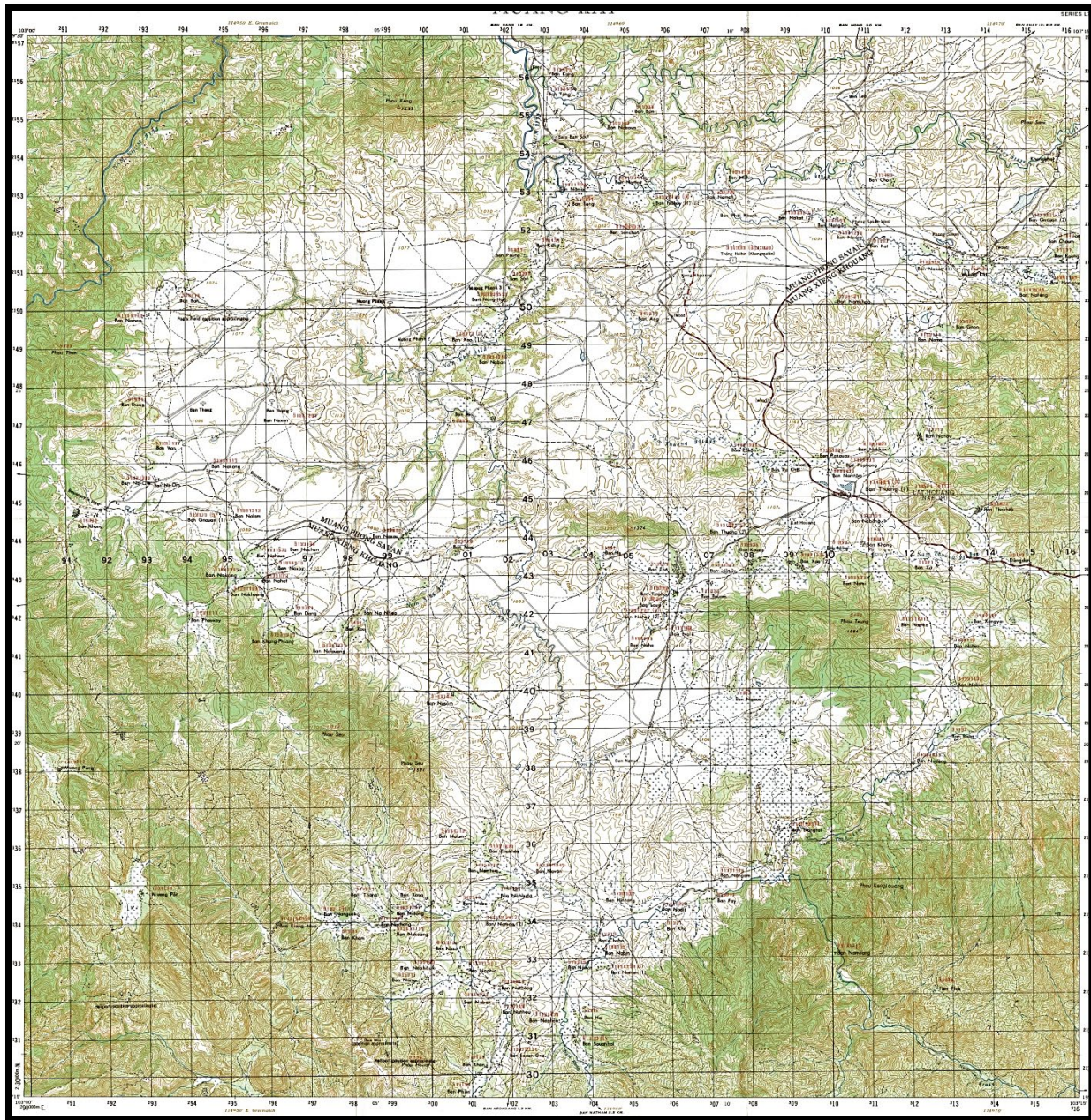
Thai fire support bases (FSB) and defensive positions eventually located, developed, on the east-west and central Plain of Jars and surrounding hills. The graphic was provided by the Long Tieng Customer with coordinates and landing zone signals to aid crews in accomplishing supply missions. Each position had at least one Thai Forward Air Guide to aid pilots supplying them.

Author Collection.

central and lower Plain of Jars were generally secure. Therefore, with politics dictating caution, and chances of further successful advances to expand territory problematical, it was time to dig in and prepare hard defenses and supporting ground fire before an off-balance enemy could fully react.

The Second Plain of Jars operation was entering a crucial phase. The relatively uncontested part of the operation was history. Therefore, despite large amounts of territory reclaimed by Vang Pao's forces, the enemy was beginning to "draw a line in the sand" along their northern LOCs in the upper Plain of Jars. General Vang Pao was also beset by political constraints limiting large-scale friendly movements. With USAF assets reduced to what was believed a minimum daily support level, military and civilian shakers and movers elected to stress defensive measures, encouraging and establishing strong Thai manned and protected artillery bases on the Plain of Jars before the advent of the dry season. When completed, the reinforced hard points would not only provide support for the forward defensive layer of three mobile Meo regiments (GM-21, 22, 23) and interdict LOCs, but would also provide interlocking fire in depth for other fire support bases. They would also theoretically prevent Vietnamese incursions south and west into government-controlled areas of the Plain of Jars.

Just prior to the middle of July, ground for a Mustang battery, the first of four reinforced artillery bases on the Plain, was surveyed. The fire base was slowly established on the central portion of the hill four miles northwest of Phou Theung, on what became known as Finger Ridge (hill UG070446, Phu Ton or



Detailed 1:50,000 map of the Plain of Jars where Thai fire support bases proliferated. Cobra was situated at the lower right corner; Phu Theung on the mountain mass to the north; Mustang and Lion on or near Finger Ridge just northwest of Phu Theung; Stingray at Phou Seu on the southwestern portion before the "Nipple"; Panther was located to the west at Moung Phan; to the north King Khong was at the southern base of Phou Keng.

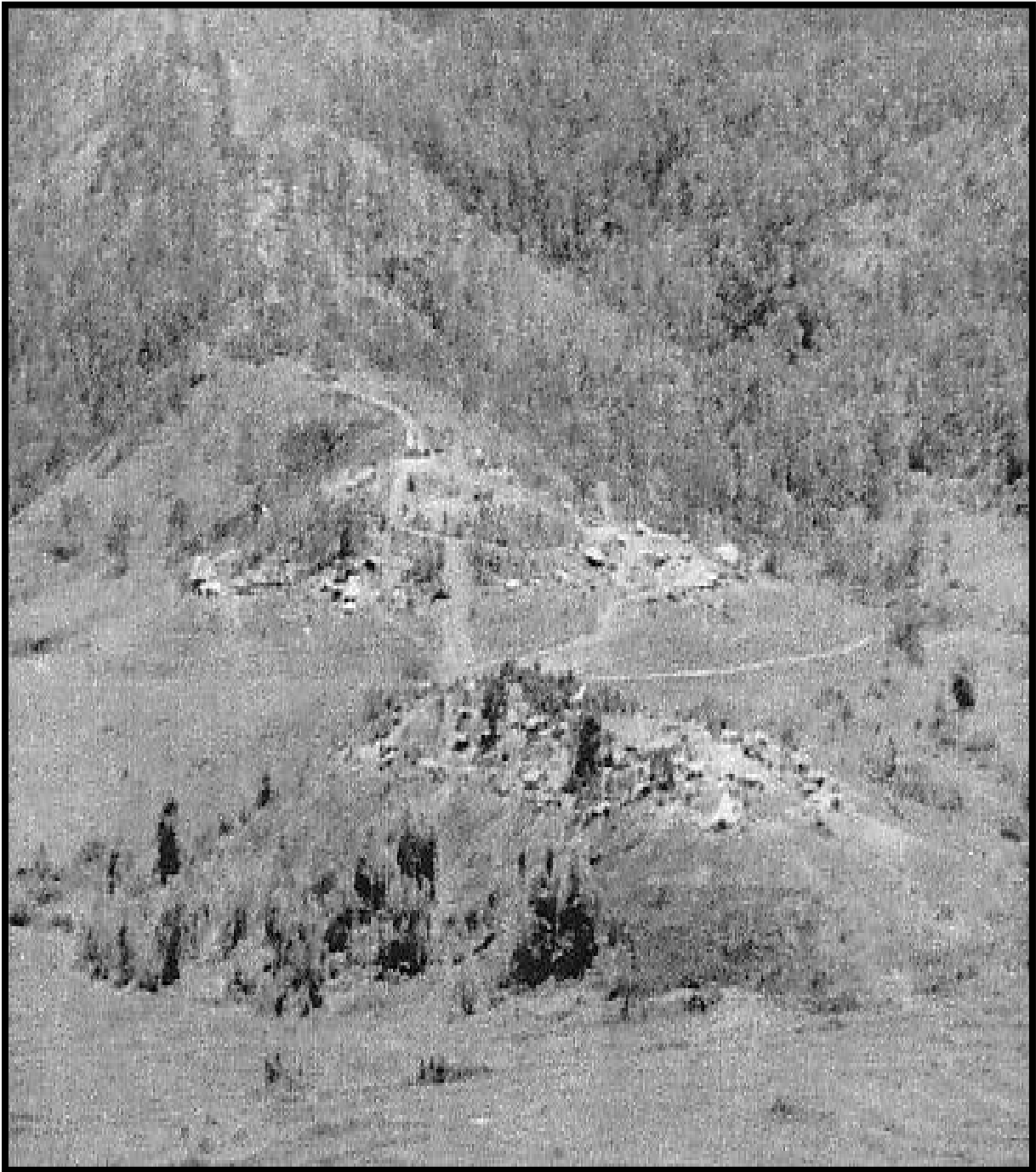


A portion of Mustang FSB being supplied by a steady stream of S-58T crews carrying net sling loads to effect a quick turn-around. A defensive perimeter in depth surrounds the complex,
Parker, 112.

Ban Ton). ¹¹ Heavy lift U.S. Army helicopter crews moved two 105mm, two 155mm howitzers, two four-deuce mortars, and ammunition from the Vang Pao Line to the semi pre-prepared positions. This also required moving artillery crews and infantry forward to protect the base. A number of items needed to be addressed before the FSB could be fully functional and operational. Gun pits, fighting holes, bunkers, crew-served gun positions, hooches, helicopter landing pads, and drop zones had to be quickly and efficiently erected and designated. Barbed wire had to be strung and lethal mine fields established. Artillery had to be pre-registered, and effective fields of fire established.

Defense became an ongoing, laborious process. Eventually, six Thai fire support bases--seven if Phou Theung is included--manned by eight battalions were established both on the Plain of Jars and its periphery: King Kong (BC-608 with Chinnasotta Pichai commanding) just south of Phou Keng, would guard the entrance from the north sector (Route-71); Panther (BC-606 and one company of BC-610) south of Moung Phanh at Ban Thang, would form a second line of defense and support; Mustang (BC-603, 607) west of Lat Houang and Lion (BC-605, BC-609 were located at Phou Theung) south of Mustang, stood as sentinels to enemy inroads from the northeast and east (Route-4 and 7); Cobra (BC-604) on Phou Louang; and Stingray (BC-610) on Phou Seu formed rear support and defense units. Depending on the size of the base and number of battalions assigned, several English-speaking FAGs with individual call signs and discrete VHF radio frequencies were positioned to direct supply traffic and to apprise us of

¹¹ Cobra FSB had already been established on Phou Louang, located in the hills on the southeast corner of the Plain of Jars at the onset of Vang Pao's operation.



Thai FBS King Kong, located at the southern foot of Phou Keng located on the western Plain of Jars.
Parker Collection, 113.

the current situation as to enemy disposition and outgoing fire. As always, we had to rely on these men for accurate and timely information to remain alive. To my knowledge, none of these courageous men ever failed us. ¹²

Hutch, Bill Long, and I ferried Papa Hotel Bravo to Long Tieng on the 13th. Since Bill was still checking out in the Twinpac, except for two sorties, he flew the entire eight hour and forty-minute day. We remained busy shuttling many necessary items to the developing Mustang site. This included barbed wire, PSP sheeting, empty sand bags, mines, and the sort.

We RON at The Alternate.

ENEMY PLANS INTENDED TO COUNTER THE VANG PAO OFFENSIVE

With lower Military Region Two starting to look like a 1969 offensive, [during] *"mid-1971, the Politburo and Central Military Party Committee [in North Vietnam] decided to launch relatively large and strategically significant campaigns in northern Laos during the 1971-1972 dry season in order to divert the enemy's attention and create favorable conditions for our preparations for our 1972 strategic offensive in South Vietnam.*¹³ *After analyzing the enemy's strategic deployment of forces in Laos, the Lao and Vietnam Ministries of Defense decided to mount an offensive campaign aimed at destroying enemy forces in the Plain of Jars-Long Tieng area, push the enemy back to the area southwest of Nam Ngum, and clear away the puppet ethnic [Meo] minority bandits (Vang Pao guerrilla forces) that still remained in the liberated zone."*

Although the offensive was considered a relatively easy task in some portions of the Plain of Jars, in the southern area

¹² Some information was derived from Ken Conboy's historical book, *Shadow War*, 301 and William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 78.

¹³ This operation became known as the Easter Offensive.

of the proposed battlefield, "the Sam Tong-Long Tieng area, consisted of a series of high mountains covered with jungle. Some of the mountain ridges were more than 1800 meters in elevation. The terrain made the movement of heavy weapons and technical equipment extremely difficult."

At any particular time, the Vietnamese Army presented formidable forces. As battlefield plans unfolded and the situation evolved they began with:

"Two [battle experienced] infantry divisions-the 312th and 316th Divisions.

Two Independent infantry regiments-the 335th and 866th Regiments.

Two sapper battalions-Front 959's 41st Sapper Battalion and the Sapper Command's 27th Sapper Battalion.

One artillery battalion-Front 959's 42nd Artillery Battalion.

Four anti-aircraft battalions-the 14th, 24th, 125th, and the 138th Battalions.

One tank-armored battalion.

One engineer battalion-the 225th Engineer Battalion.

A number of specialty branch battalions from Front 959-the 24th, 25th, 26th, etc., Battalions plus nine Lao infantry battalions, three Lao local force companies, and one Lao artillery battalion...

In their battle plan, the Campaign Party Committee and the Campaign Command Headquarters decided from the start to mass all of their forces to attack the enemy's defensive formations, while using appropriately sized elite forces to make surprise attacks deep behind enemy lines to take Long Tieng and the primary targets there, such as the enemy's headquarters command post, his communications compound, his artillery firing positions [and so forth]. After our forces successfully

completed their attacks, they would quickly shift into a defensive posture for the rainy season in order to hold the captured territory and gain control of the civilian population.

The Campaign Command headquarters laid out the following formula for the campaign: Make powerful, quick, certain attacks, seize opportunities, attack continuously, making massed combined arms attacks our main method for destroying enemy forces in their fortified positions while at the same time placing emphasis on attacking enemy forces outside of prepared positions when and if the enemy sent in reinforcements or fled/retreated, combining attacks to seize territory with defending key areas, fighting while at the same time working to consolidate and strengthen our forces to ensure that our forces could fight continuously for a long time."

After Thai fire support bases and defenses were established on the Plain of Jars, upper Vietnamese echelon's plans were developed and refined to reduce and destroy the formidable defenses:

"The 312th Infantry Division, reinforced by a number of other units would conduct the attack in the campaign's primary attack sector, attacking from the east to overrun and destroy the enemy's defense clusters at Phu Ton [Mustang/Lion], Phu Tang [Panther], Phu Seu [Stingray], after which it would advance to attack down to Tham Lung, Hill 1800, Sam Tong and Long Tieng.

The 316th Infantry Division [and supporting arms-tanks, armored vehicles and 122mm artillery guns] would attack in the campaign's important secondary sector, attacking from the north to overrun and destroy the enemy defensive clusters at Na Hin [Route-74], Phu Keng, and the northern [PDJ] cluster, after which it would advance down into the Ban Na-Hin Tang sector and join the 312th Infantry Division in attacking the Sam Tong-Long Tieng area.

[Most of] the 866th Infantry Regiment [along with supporting sapper units and a 107mm rocket battery] would be responsible for infiltrating deep behind enemy lines to make a surprise attack against the enemy's headquarters command post, communications compound [located on SKY hill] and artillery position at Long Tieng.

The 148th Infantry Regiment would serve as the campaign reserve force.

Friendly Lao units [Pathet Lao and Deuanist elements] would operate in the supporting sector. They would initially attack enemy [Neutralist] forces in the Moung Soui area, after which they would advance [along Route-7] to Sala Phou Khoun in accordance with a separate Lao plan." ¹⁴

Flying Bell Papa Foxtrot Juliet, Mike Jarina, First Officer Ron Zappardino (DOH 10/21/70), and Flight Mechanic Israel worked Moung Nham (LS-63) to the east first and then the Plain of Jars.

Jarina believed Air America pilots had changed considerably toward the end of the Second Indochina War. When hired in 1965, Mike quickly gained the impression that the old timers were not mercenaries. The job was considered important, something a person wanted to do. Consequently, one remained in Udorn for years.

¹⁴ Jim Parker (Mule) Email, 07/26/17.

Major campaigns of the Vietnamese-Laos Combined Army, Campaign Z. The Plain of Jars-Long Tieng Campaign (18 December 1971 to 6 April 1972). Vietnamese Volunteer Army Troops in Laos website accessed 25 July 2017 at (<http://quantinhnguyenviet.org.vn/news/324.htm>). The information was part of an incredible 700 pages of Vietnamese military history translated into English by Merle Pribbenow, retired linguist and CIA operations officer. The North Vietnamese military history is reflected only from that perspective and may not correlate exactly with what actually occurred on the battlefield.

He sensed from younger generation pilots who came later that someone had informed them that they were going to earn a hundred thousand dollars, have a party, pack it in and go home.¹⁵

During the early 1970s there was a lot of helicopter hiring and dislocation at Saigon, and most would remain First Officers with little chance of upgrading. Many of this type were transferred to Udorn and all believed they would be earning a large monthly paycheck. Jarina thought the Company hired these people to replace regular Captains or subvert FEPA at the next contract negotiation.

Ron Zappardino grew up in California, where his mother owned and operated a seafood restaurant. When flying with Jarina while working the Plain of Jars, Ron asked Mike why management did not upgrade him to Captain, since he could fly better than the existing Captains. In addition, he attempted to impress Mike with his excellence and how combat flying should really be conducted by flying at tree-top level (NOE) while returning to Long Tieng via "The Nipple." ¹⁶ Mike countered by instructing him to climb to 2,500 feet above ground level (AGL), for they would be in serious trouble should an engine fail at such a low altitude. Ron indicated that that was the way they had operated in Nam.

¹⁵ This was one of the early pilot goals. Captain Dick Crafts had such a party in the Club Rendezvous bar. However, President Johnson's inane "guns and butter" policy led to considerable inflation, and when this was factored into the overall plan, going home and living on invested interest was no longer feasible. Still, the myth of the party persisted.

¹⁶ NOE: Low level flight was called nap-of-the-earth in U.S. military jargon. Although employing NOE from time to time I generally flew at altitude and was never hit by enemy fire. I became acquainted with the term when working as a tactics instructor pilot with Bell Helicopter International in Isfahan, Iran, in 1974 training Iranian youngsters.

After they returned to the Plain of Jars, Ron kept insisting to Mike that he could fly better than all the Air America guys in the helicopter program. Moreover, life was unfair because he was not a Captain. Exasperated, Mike finally asked Ron who he was going to replace-Charlie Weitz?

"No. No."

"Ed Reid?"

"No. No."

Mike rattled off several people who had worked for Air America for many years. Then he asked, "Are you going to replace me?"

"No. No."

"Then what exactly is your bitch? You will have to wait your turn. Someone will have to go home or die." That was the end of the conversation. ¹⁷

Wednesday the weather turned sour again. Stuck in the bowl most of the day, we only flew two plus fifteen and four sorties. Jarina and his crew experienced the same conditions, then we both RON at The Alternate.

In the morning the weather front had moved on leaving only lingering clouds. We resumed flying, joining the gaggle of ships shuttling two Thai battalions from the forward Vang Pao Line to the Mustang battery complex. It was humdrum work involving little danger, so Hutch performed most of the flying while I monitored his progress. We deadheaded to Udorn on C-123K 54-617. Jarina and crew also flew most of the day.

Mike's final flight of the month would occur later on the 31st, when he, Roger Cook, and Flight Mechanic Terry Dunn

¹⁷ Mike Jarina Interviews.

Ron Zappardino was often quoted in Christopher Robbins' less than stellar version of the Air America story. Ron was treated like an authority on the subject, as were other "Johnny come lately" types.

deadheaded upcountry on 617 to fly Bell 205 Papa Foxtrot Hotel. After logging five and a half hours in Military Region Two, the crew ferried 35F to Udorn for a maintenance inspection.¹⁸

The morning of the sixteenth Phil Payton, Bill Long, and I deadheaded on C-7A 389 to Long Tieng. We crewed Papa Hotel Bravo to continue moving troops and material to forward defensive positions. Phil performed most of the flying, but during the IP period I managed to conduct ten landings while demonstrating my techniques.

Toward late afternoon we were advised to secure Bravo at Long Tieng and ferry Papa Hotel Alpha to Udorn. It was "dark thirty" when we touched down and taxied to the Air America ramp.¹⁹

Saturday the entire day was spent testing Papa Hotel Charlie with Gary Gentz.

UNSCHEDULED MAINTENANCE

Unanticipated problems never seemed to cease during early Twinpac operations. The latest concerns were large fuselage cracks caused by a combination of excessive torque, high power, and unaccustomed vibrations at altitude. The amount of torque produced by the PT-6 engines and transmitted to the transmission caused considerable vibrations throughout an aircraft never designed or manufactured to withstand such abuse. These vibrations in turn eventually developed into substantial fuselage cracks (some measuring twelve inches or greater in length). This condition was first manifested on the side of the fuselage under the right-hand transmission mounts. Later, sizeable cracks were discovered on areas of the tail cone and

¹⁸ Mike Jarina Interviews.

¹⁹ Dark thirty: Slang for very late after sunset.

pylon. It fostered a distinct concern among those of us who flew the machine, for loss of either these components in flight would tend to spoil one's entire day. A fix was initiated by riveting aluminum doublers over the affected part. The sheet metal strengthening process seemed to solve the problem, at least near term, but we still had to conduct frequent fuselage inspections and particularly the junction of the cabin section to the tail cone.

Flight Mechanic Gary Gentz, who had also been a line maintenance boss on the flight line found a six-foot crack one time. Cracks would open up about a 1/32 of an inch and one could see daylight through them from inside the cabin. If he was crewing an aircraft at the end of a trip, he made it a habit to walk around inside, for it was easy to see the cracks while flying.

One time he was performing an inspection that paid particular attention to all the transmission mount areas. Toward the rear of the cabin section, he looked in the electronic compartment and saw a crack where the fuselage began tapering back. It had cracked along the whole split line and begun moving aft and up toward the turtle back cover. Alarmed, he entered a strongly worded statement in the logbook saying to be careful, as he believed the crack extended the entire length of the pro-seal line.

The following morning, when Gary began conducting an inspection of the ship, he noticed the fix amounted to only a patch over the visible crack--nothing else. Disturbed, he said to the line crew, *"Guys you have to strip all this pro-seal off the joint because the crack is running down under the seal."* Next, he talked Line Chief Jim Hyder into stripping the pro-seal. When this was finished it was easy to see that the crack

had worked upward six feet from the point the tail cone was bolted to the cabin section. ²⁰

After additional testing on the eighteenth, Phil Peyton, the Flight Mechanic, and I ferried Charlie upcountry. Weather restricted useful participation to about an hour, but I logged five local sorties. Leaving the ship at The Alternate, we deadheaded home on Pilatus Porter N195X.

Despite considerable gains on the Plaine, according to a CIA bulletin not all was going well for Vang Pao:

"A [NVA] company overran five advanced irregular positions on the eastern edge of the Plaine on 17 July. The attack was supported by two tanks that have been active in this area for several days. Other communist harassments were reported along the eastern periphery of the Plaine over the weekend, but no positions changed hands.

The irregulars, meanwhile, have turned their attention to the area north of the Plaine. One battalion has pushed into the foothills north of Route-7, while another continues to move south from the Bouam Long base [this unit eventually moved to within six miles of Route-71 before being challenged]. Vang Pao may hope that if these forces link up, he will force the communists to abandon MOUNG SOUÏ town and other isolated positions west of the Plaine.

North Vietnam's authoritative party and army newspapers asserted on 15 July that [Vang Pao's] actions had created a 'grave' situation in north Laos and threatened that they would be met by 'appropriate' countermeasures. The papers still

²⁰ It was fortunate that people like Gary Gentz, who had extensive maintenance experience flew with us. They had a vested interest in the wellbeing of the aircraft, for their lives were also on the line. Also, perhaps Gary had learned something special from my hair-raising hydraulic failure incident at Bouam Long, when he was a line chief and someone had misaligned a flex line in the transmission tunnel.

referred to communist proposals for a Lao peace settlement, however, and the tone and substance of their statements were similar to those issued during [Vang Pao's] offensive on the Plaine in 1969." ²¹

"We should be leaving here sometime around the 27th for home. I have attempted to get ten more days leave along with a short STO. I haven't received final approval yet but have most of the tickets and we are ready to go any time.

We will be travelling on Northwest Orient's 747 out of Hong Kong. There is a deal out of Vientiane whereby we can travel first class on 75 percent space available economy tickets."

Letter Home 07/19/71.

Wayne Knight had previously purchased a set of discounted airline tickets from Lee Krueger, a former Air America employee who rehired with CASI and worked at Wattay Airport. Based on this and others' experience with this method, I bought roundtrip economy tickets on Northwest Orient to Kennedy International. ²²

I was still not finished flying. On the twentieth, I was scheduled in the afternoon to transition Chauncy Collard (DOH 09/07/65) to the Twinpac. Mechanic Bill Long joined us in XW-PHB for the training session. Collard was another pilot relocated from Saigon as a result of the shakeup and downsizing of the Air America operation, due to the unwinding war in South Vietnam.

Chauncy was an older type--born in 1920 Chauncy was indisputably our oldest helicopter pilot--who came to us with a reputation. Apparently, he had illegally made a considerable amount of money on the Saigon black market exchanging U.S.

²¹ CIA Bulletin, Laos: The communists are beginning to counter Vang Pao's forces near the Plaine des Jarres, 07/19/71.

²² EW Knight Email, 11/22/00, 11/25/00.

dollars for piasters when the currency conversion rate was favorable. This was something we could not do in Thailand, as the baht was fixed to the U.S. dollar and rarely fluctuated from twenty baht to one dollar.

Before the day was over, Dick Ford countersigned my 600-dollar check for travelers checks to cover any unforeseen problems during our long trip home.

The following morning Larry Price, Deak Kennedy and I rode C-7A 389 to The Alternate to participate in the fire support base (FSB) work in progress on the Plain of Jars. ²³

A Thai artillery battalion and howitzers arrived to restock the two stripped firebases on Romeo Ridge and at Sam Tong. In addition, U.S. Army heavy lift helicopters slung four howitzers to a site south of Mustang and west of Phou Theung. This position became known as Lion FSB (UG 068422). ²⁴

We supported this effort until late in the day, when a call for SAR assets rang out over the airwaves to rescue a Jolly Green crew that had crashed several miles east of Luang Prabang. Since the information was sketchy and my knowledge of the area largely unknown, I was not happy. We started off across the southern Plain of Jars in the general direction of Luang Prabang, and were a few miles short of Moung Soui when the mission was aborted. We RTB with Alpha.

THE DRONE

HH53, Jolly Green-54 (68-8285) from the 40th ARRS based at Nakhon Phanom, had crashed while attempting to recover an

²³ I felt uncomfortable flying with Larry Price. New to the Twinpac program, Larry seemed to exhibit an attitude of arrogance and superiority and our chemistry never attained one of rapport and the special trust and confidence needed in cockpit crews. Additionally, I was not aware he had been selected for the Special Project.

²⁴ Ken Conboy, 301.

intelligence gathering drone (five-man crew: Bennet, Robben, Parachute Jumper (PJ) McGrath, a Flight Engineer (FE) and another PJ).

A drone was located on the north side of the same mountain where Harvey Potter had crashed and later expired from smoke inhalation. While hoisting a parachute jumper (PJ) aboard, the aircraft went down. (There were later unsubstantiated claims the ship was shot down.) JG-54 rolled over twice and came to rest upside down and down slope against trees in a small clearing that also housed the drone.

A Bell crew arrived to retrieve the flight engineer, who was suffering from a ruptured spinal disc. One PJ, who had been hit in the face by a rotor blade, was also loaded. PJ McGrath was denied entry to the cabin because of density altitude and power concerns.

Next, an H-34 crew hoisted the Jolly pilot and copilot from the lower end of the slope. Seemingly cursed, while hoisting McGrath, the cable broke and he ended up on the ground.

A little later another H-34 crew retrieved McGrath using the yellow hoist collar. H-34 Captain Dick Theriot then slung the drone out with minimum problem.

All those rescued were flown to Luang Prabang, where they were evacuated to Udorn by a C-130 crew. Except for the more seriously injured flight engineer and PJ, the remaining three crewmembers were only bruised, but required overnight hospital observation.

A subsequent flight to determine if the helicopter was recoverable was met by excessive groundfire, so the Sandy pilots

were instructed to destroy the HH-53. ²⁵

My last flight before leaving on home leave occurred on 25 July. Bill Hutchison, Charlie Brigham, and I deadheaded upcountry on Caribou 389 to fly Papa Hotel Charlie. We continued the effort to supply fledgling FSBs in order to secure that portion of the Plain of Jars in Vang Pao's hands. Since Hutch was still transitioning, I only conducted five sorties with Bill performing the rest. Late in the day we boarded C-123 7-6293 for a ride home.

As we prepared to depart on leave, compared to previous gains, Vang Pao's operation appeared to have reached a temporary impasse. Fending off enemy counterattacks, reinforcing, and consolidating territory already or almost seized took precedence over further movement. Even so, with Thai battalions securing the central PDJ with newly installed FSB and providing supporting fire, some of Vang Pao's units moved forward. Three battalions swirled around Phou San and the 71/74 road junction at Lat Bouak. Another battalion moved north of Lat Houang and up Route-7 toward Khang Khay, where they stopped short, for the town was considered a potential place for peace negotiations between warring factions. ²⁶

WASHINGTON

Each July the Senate Armed Services Committee conducted closed door Congressional sessions to consider Southeast Asian fiscal year funding. With a budget appropriation already stipulated that was well below a perceived required amount, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, U. Alexis

²⁵ Chuck McGrath, *Drone Rescue*,
(http://www.jollygreen.org/Stories/drone_rescue.htm).
Frank Stergar Email.

²⁶ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 301.

Johnson, and U.S. Ambassador to Laos Mac Godley were on Capitol Hill for testimony and to make appeals for more money.

Johnson forcefully indicated that failure to support efforts in Laos would lead to a military and political collapse. Such a scenario would release Vietnamese divisions fighting in north Laos and release their security forces guarding the Trail system, for further inroads into Laos...The "CIA is really the only instrumentality that we have" to conduct war [in Laos].

Ambassador Godley provided an encapsulated account of Meo, irregular troops, and the CIA's participation in the war:

"CIA trains, equips, and gives certain advice to approximately 30,000 Lao irregular forces. Following the signing of the Geneva Accords on July 23, 1962, 666 U.S. military personnel left the country; only 40 NVA departed through ICC checkpoints. By late 1962/early 1963 it had been apparent that Hanoi would not respect the agreements. The CIA was asked to assist Lao irregular forces covertly. In the beginning, these were mainly Hmong, but later expanded to other parts of the country. The initial concept was to provide a guerrilla capability to harass enemy lines of communication (regular Lao forces would bear the main defensive burden). Some 1,000 Hmong were broken down into small teams. With increasing enemy presence, 330-man Special Guerrilla Units [SGU] were formed. In 1962 there were 6,000 NVA in Laos; there are now 80,000.

The presence of Thai irregular forces is essential if the collapse can be avoided in Laos.

These operations that the CIA are conducting in Laos were not initiated by them. The task was assigned by the President.

The CIA in Laos is rendering a great service to our government."²⁷

[By the same token, this last statement tends to strongly support and solidify an argument that CIA proprietary units like Air America provided an essential arm to U.S. policy in prosecuting the war in Laos.]

S-58T SPECIAL PROJECT OPERATIONS

During 1971, ambitious long-range Trail operations formerly conducted by Bell crews were delegated to Twinpac crews. Possessing extended range--even greater with an auxiliary fuel tank installed--the machine was considered faster, quieter, with more payload and cabin space. Moreover, with the added security of two power plants and electronic navigation, night operations were deemed feasible and safer.

Highly compartmentalized for secrecy and ultimate crew and team safety, the Agency-sponsored S-58T project evolved slowly because of dwindling funding. It commenced with only a few senior pilots. CPH John Ford, previously "witting" and an undercover CIA employee,²⁸ became titular head of Air America's project participation. Tasked with selecting "perfect" crewmembers and working with strict guidelines, John first carefully considered, and then narrowed the field to certain individuals well suited for extra-hazardous missions--volunteers

²⁷ Professor Leary July 1971 notes. Bill's notes use the word Hmong instead of the generic term Meo for hill tribes. Since no one engaged in the war used Hmong at the time, the Author believes Leary, who intended to write and publish a book, was guilty of a little revisionism to appease surviving Meo, and appear politically correct.

²⁸ None of us were aware of John Ford's Agency affiliation at the time. "Witting," an awareness of CIA involvement with Air America was explained to a selected individual in Taipei or Washington. There were not many of this type in our organization, and "witting" status did not necessarily mean an individual was a CIA employee.

who were flexible, with special talents, who he believed would always attempt to complete a tough assignment.

Conducting private interviews with likely individuals, Ford initially selected Captains Scratch Kanach, Charlie Weitz, and Lloyd Higgins for their vast experience and previously demonstrated can do attitude. While in the U.S. Navy, Higgins had used many electronic tools, carried nuclear devices, and possessed a top-secret clearance. First Officer Larry Price was eventually selected because of his electrical engineering background and electronics experience. Charlie Brigham and one other Flight Mechanic were selected for work excellence. To better acquaint himself with the nature of the beast, John would also participate in the first missions. Naturally, operational secrecy was maintained for obvious reasons, and no one mentioned it outside AB-1's closed doors. ²⁹

Under Agency aegis, the Special Project program was structured under Base Manager CJ Abadie, also a "witting" type. Although at the top of the heap, Ab was not always directly involved in operational aspects, but was generally aware of the missions. Almost daily after lunch Abadie and CPH Ford crossed the steamy parking ramp to Jim Glerum's AB-1 White House office. Jim, Special Project Manager and AB-1 Lieutenant to Chief Pat Landry, was well liked, and normally the three men simply chatted about current issues. When a mission was contemplated, serious discussion ensued with the entire planning team assembled. The team gathered intelligence data and analysis of the enemy situation. After the briefing, John searched the proposed flight plan for obvious errors and introduced

²⁹ The difficult nature of the work was something that not every person could tolerate long. As the Special Project evolved, expanded, and some participants elected to leave the program for personal reasons, additional Captains, First Officers, and Flight Mechanics, including the Author, were tapped for the program.

suggestions. Then participating crews were formally briefed in detail, questions thoroughly fielded, and any perceived problems resolved.

Mission aircraft and electronic equipment had to be nearly perfect to ensure mission success. Therefore, inspections and test flights were constantly conducted to produce what was referred to by crews as a "gold plated" aircraft. Of course, the Twinpac was merely a man-made machine replete with thousands of interdependent moving parts and subject to wear and tear of normal flight, so what happened during actual flight operations was often unexpected and not ideal.

Because of a mission's critical nature, like the popular television series Star Trek, "venturing where few had ever gone before," pilots developed and adhered to logical standard operating procedures (SOPs). From experience, and out of necessity, many of these guidelines had already evolved, formulated, and been established during the daytime H-34 1964-1965 SAR era, and later to accommodate Bell trail watch missions. Two pilots manning the cockpit was standard procedure should one pilot become incapacitated; since the enemy had our frequencies, radio silence was maintained throughout a mission except in the case of an emergency.

The advent of long-range night operations required even more caution. Except for illuminated red cockpit lights, when not using night vision goggles (NVG), night missions were conducted with exterior red (port) and green (starboard) running lights blacked out or the bottoms taped, so only a pilot flying above could see them.

Provisions for mission aborts included electronic equipment malfunction or failure, one of the two helicopters encountering maintenance problems, and adverse en route or weather at the landing zone that commonly affected operations. Of course,

common sense was always paramount, but variables, certain to appear during any operation, had to be dealt with at the time, and correct decisions enacted to ensure the survival of both crewmembers and aircraft. That was why the original individuals were so carefully selected. Seniority had a role, as by implication, it connoted years of familiarity with the country, experience under fire, and likely all the emergencies the helicopter could offer. Scratch Kanach was at the top of the list in our organization as a highly respected pilot, a person considered cool under fire, one who was able to effect instant decisions that enabled him and his crew to complete a mission and return home safely. Plus, Scratch was considered a lucky coin or rabbit's foot, and people felt comfortable flying with him.

John, Scratch, Charlie, and Lloyd initially conducted six mixed day/night long range missions (mostly day) while continuing to acquaint themselves with the alien LORAN-C navigation system.

Early missions were conducted out of Luang Prabang beyond Dien Bien Phu, and sometimes into the fringes of China. Teams they carried placed electronic counters on the Military Region Three Trail system. One mission involved retrieving prisoners, including a high-ranking Vietnamese officer. Challenging, what were described as "barn burner missions," including many firsts, would later surface.

Directly following missions, participants were debriefed by the planning team at the Agency White House office.

Because the overriding mission concept and extra hazardous work and equipment were new to Air America crews and required a measure of on-the-job-training (OJT), first night infil missions were planned to depart in daylight in order to arrive at a landing zone at dusk (called last light) and egress in the dark.

On one of the first day/night missions, two Twinpac crews departed Luang Prabang with three troops each and equipment for a classified mission across the border into North Vietnam. ³⁰ Cruising at low altitude, the trip north was uneventful until about fifteen minutes from the drop point, when the crews encountered heavy groundfire. With the Flight Mechanics inspecting the cabin and electronics section, and the pilots monitoring the instruments, it was generally ascertained that no critical damage had been incurred by either ship. Therefore, they collectively elected to continue the mission. ³¹

Because of fuel considerations and twilight conditions, in order to correctly identify the timing of the landing was crucial. Therefore, the delay avoiding the hostile problem area proved costly, for by the time they reached the general drop zone, it was already dark. Consequently, unable to locate the specific landing spot, even with fairly accurate LORAN equipment, they aborted.

Planning a climb to altitude in order to avoid the same concentration of small arms fire on the way out, Ford observing a fog bank ahead, common in late afternoon operations, commenced an ascent. Unknown to John at the time, the fog bank had formed directly over an enemy camp. Groundfire erupted. Piloting the

³⁰ Sometimes mission goals and details were divulged to crews, other times only very little or only snippets were revealed. However, years of experience in this line of work provided insight into most, but not all potential missions. Since joint planning was involved by both Customer and pilots, something unheard of during our past road watch team missions on the Trail system, participants usually knew the mission objective, and with this knowledge were seemingly more motivated to achieve success.

³¹ Of course, while still airborne, except for cursory examination by the Flight Mechanic, sounds and smells, and instrument readings, it was physically impossible to determine if blades, transmission, engine components, and the sort had sustained battle damage.

number two ship in trail formation, Lloyd Higgins' bird was hit several times.

To compound their problems, that evening a storm cell sat directly over Luang Prabang upon their arrival. Low on fuel, and with few options available, they were committed to penetrating the storm and landing.

Within a few days, the mission was re-scheduled. This time, to the Customer's consternation, despite a MiG threat, Scratch, who commanded a lot of respect and influence in the tight-knit group, insisted that they conduct the mission at sufficient altitude in order to avoid repeat battle damage from small arms fire.

In order to monitor potential MiG activity with onboard radar equipment and electronics, Captain Jim Rhyne preceded the flight in a mission-equipped Twin Otter.

The first phase of the mission was successful. However, during the return trip to Luang Prabang, purported MiG activity was detected. Diving for lower terrain Kanach increased speed, assessing the speed never exceed (VNE) limits of the S-58T.

Jim Glerum provided two sets of battery-operated prototype IT&T phosphorous tube night vision goggles (NVG) to aid night operations. There was no instruction booklet, briefing, or special training available regarding use of the new devices, and current U.S. Army scuttlebutt indicated that the devices were quite dangerous to use. Relying solely on trial-and-error and on-the-job training (OJT), the Agency wanted Scratch and John to evaluate the instruments. They selected PS-44, a clandestine Commando Raider training base in the hills northwest of Pakse,

for self-indoctrination.³²

Using an H-34 for the evaluation, they chose a very dark night, so dark that one could barely observe a parked helicopter. Scratch climbed out, maintaining power and instrument settings, while Ford looked outside the cockpit window, attempting to overcome the problem of the red cockpit lights that tended to diminish and completely wipe out the goggles' green field. Quickly discovering that the NVGs were only effective at low altitudes, they encountered trouble descending to the same landing spot. It was obvious that considerable effort and practice were necessary to fully comprehend the vagaries of the glasses, and new crew techniques would have to be developed. Until becoming more comfortable, confident, and proficient using the NVG, Scratch preferred to continue conducting dusk last-light landings.

Like it had for over a decade, with mostly disappointing results, Agency attention continued to be focused on enemy movements and road construction operations north of Luang Prabang in the Dien Bien Phu region.

Fixed wing pilots increasingly became involved in Twinpac missions. On 25 July Captain Jim Pearson and Kicker Prayuth flew

³² Author Note as to usage of night vision glasses: Proficiency and expertise using NVGs depended largely on OJT and an individual's learning curve. The devices were mounted on our heavy combat ballistic helmets by nylon straps and dot type fasteners. They were not overly heavy, but the long fore-to-aft arm tended to exert a downward force centered on the rear of one's neck. This could result in a considerable headache if worn for a prolonged period. The life of the button type batteries was finite, and a sudden and complete blackout ensued when they failed. Overhead wires, rare to nonexistent in Laos, were invisible and could not be seen at night nor would the glasses penetrate fog or clouds. Any kind of bright white light would wash-out the green night vision field. Starlight was acceptable, but did not afford sufficient illumination for serious low-level work. A full moon provided too much light, which blacked out the field. Actual experience led to conducting missions during partial moon conditions.

an airborne radio relay link in 74M during a dusk Commando Raider raid near Dien Bien Phu. It would mark Jim's first experience working support missions with Twinpac crews.

In what constituted an almost twenty-four-hour duty day, Jim departed Udorn early for Pakse to fly routine airdrop missions. Toward evening, he headed for the PS-44 strip to retrieve the Customer and twelve heavily armed Commando Raider team members, tasked to parachute into an area should a Twinpac crew be forced down. ³³

After landing and completing the cockpit shutdown list, he noticed several uniformed individuals converging on his aircraft. With the late afternoon approaching dark, he opened the cabin door, jumped to the ground, and found himself surrounded by enemy looking troops armed with AK-47 rifles. A thought immediately flashed through his mind:

"What a dumb shit, now I cannot even get my pistol or UZI, as both are in the cockpit." Then he saw a soldier he recognized from a previous mission.

"Hey, Captain Jim."

At this friendly greeting Pearson realized that the men were merely our troops dressed as Pathet Lao, and that the strip had not been captured.

Jim's next destination was Udorn to refuel and board another Customer. Morrie "X" would accompany him in the right seat and oversee the mission. At this time Jim was casually informed by the Customer that a single pilot in the cockpit was all required on the mission. ³⁴

³³ This procedure was in force since the capture of Porter Captain Ernie Brace and the Captain Dick Lieberth H-34 crash in 1965.

³⁴ In order to keep the numbers of those involved in the Project to a minimum for enhanced secrecy, this was likely the policy at the time.

Pearson flew to Luang Prabang, refueled again, and waited for the mission to commence.

The helicopter crews eventually arrived. Sometime after 2200 hours raiders boarded the S-58Ts and the pilots departed north for the infil/exfil area. Since it would be almost an hour's flight to the projected landing spot, Jim waited, and then launched to assume a racetrack orbit south of the objective in order to avoid attracting attention along the border.

The troop infil proved uneventful. Commando Raiders were safely landed, placed their explosive charges, and destroyed their objective.

During the exfil phase, Higgins' ship was hit by small arms groundfire in a center belly fuel tank.³⁵ Rapidly losing precious fuel, the PIC commenced a climb and then established an emergency southerly heading for Luang Prabang. Radio silence was violated. Despite the potential severity of the situation, light comments at the time revolved around speculating that there certainly were some pissed off enemy at being awakened that early in the morning.

Jim was still orbiting south of the target area when Lloyd radioed, asking for his location. Not certain of his exact position because he had been employing dead reckoning navigation during the entire mission, Pearson answered that he was approximately...Old, crusty Lloyd Higgins, never one to mince words, even during normal times, interrupted the transmission shouting, *"I want to know exactly where you are!"* Able to see the lights of the city glowing from his altitude, Jim estimated

³⁵ Because of the necessity to lead a flying object, a second ship in formation was always more vulnerable to small arms fire. This was poignantly demonstrated to the Author when, as a brand-new PIC in 1963, his helicopter was hit while flying in an echelon right formation following Captain Red Austin past Phu Kabo in the Xieng Khouang Ville area.

that he was fifty miles north of the royal capital, and Lloyd should home in on him. As all aircraft had been blacked out for the entire mission, because of the emergency situation, Jim climbed higher and switched on all his running lights, rotating beacon, and landing lights, so Lloyd could see and follow him to Luang Prabang.

When the armada landed and secured, Pearson walked to the damaged helicopter to see what had transpired. The ship was still copiously leaking fuel and some soldiers appeared wounded.

After refueling, Jim flew to Udorn to offload the Customer. Then he established a southeast course for PS-44 to deposit the raider team. There he discovered that the strip was enveloped in fog. After two missed approaches the Customer advised over the radio to recover at Pakse. Jim countered by saying that he had been conducting each previous approach a hundred feet lower and would perform one more attempt at a fifty-foot lower altitude. During the third attempt to land he spotted the two painted stones defining the runway threshold, but when he switched on the landing lights another white out condition ensued. He reacted by moving the throttles to maximum power and initiating a maximum climb angle to effect another go-around. Then he saw the two white stones at the west end of the runway. Still on the gages, with the plane at a nose high configuration, the main landing gear brushed the ground. Taking advantage of this exceptional good fortune, Jim immediately reversed the propellers, stood on the brakes, and managed to stop the Otter on the grass and sandy runway.

After offloading the troops and the Customer, a fatigued Pearson flew the short distance to Pakse. He entered the Air America hostel to obtain a well-deserved rest just as other

crews were rising to address the day (ten hours forty minutes, five hours night, four plus thirty IMC, seven landings). ³⁶

DOWN SOUTH

With Military Region Two action achieving success during the month, but approaching a fairly static condition, the Lao General Staff, including newly appointed Military Region Four Commander Colonel Soutchay Vongsavanh, and Agency planners were encouraged to recover a portion of the Bolovens Plateau--namely Paksong, located on the Route-23 road between Pakse and Saravane. Such action was deemed necessary to complement the Plain of Jars success, enhance bilateral negotiations, and lead to a fruitful peace agreement.

Named Sayasila on operation orders, the undertaking was multi-faceted and excessively ambitious against a determined and combat savvy enemy. The plan strove to capture and hold Saravane for a finite time, interdict Route-16/23 in the Tha Teng area, destroy an enemy logistics base area south of the Se Don and north of Lao Ngam, recapture Paksong, and clear parts of Route-23 to the north and west. ³⁷

The envisioned Lao operation, engaging the experienced and well led Ninth Regiment of the 968th Vietnamese Division, employing superior but questionable combat ready forces, would

³⁶ Sources other than the Author's recollection of the early Special Project:

Bill Leary 1971 Notes. These notes include interviews with John Ford and Charlie Weitz regarding Special Project operations.

Original Special Project participant Julian "Scratch Kanach" Telephone Interviews, 02/11/97, 03/07/98.

Former Twin Otter Captain, Jim Pearson Emails, 04/29/98, 04/30/98 (2), 10/17/16.

Jim Pearson FEPA logbook entry for 25 July 1971.

Abbreviated information can be found in Ken Conboy *Shadow War* book, 380.

³⁷ Bill Leary July 1971 Notes.
CHECO, Bolovens, 1-2.

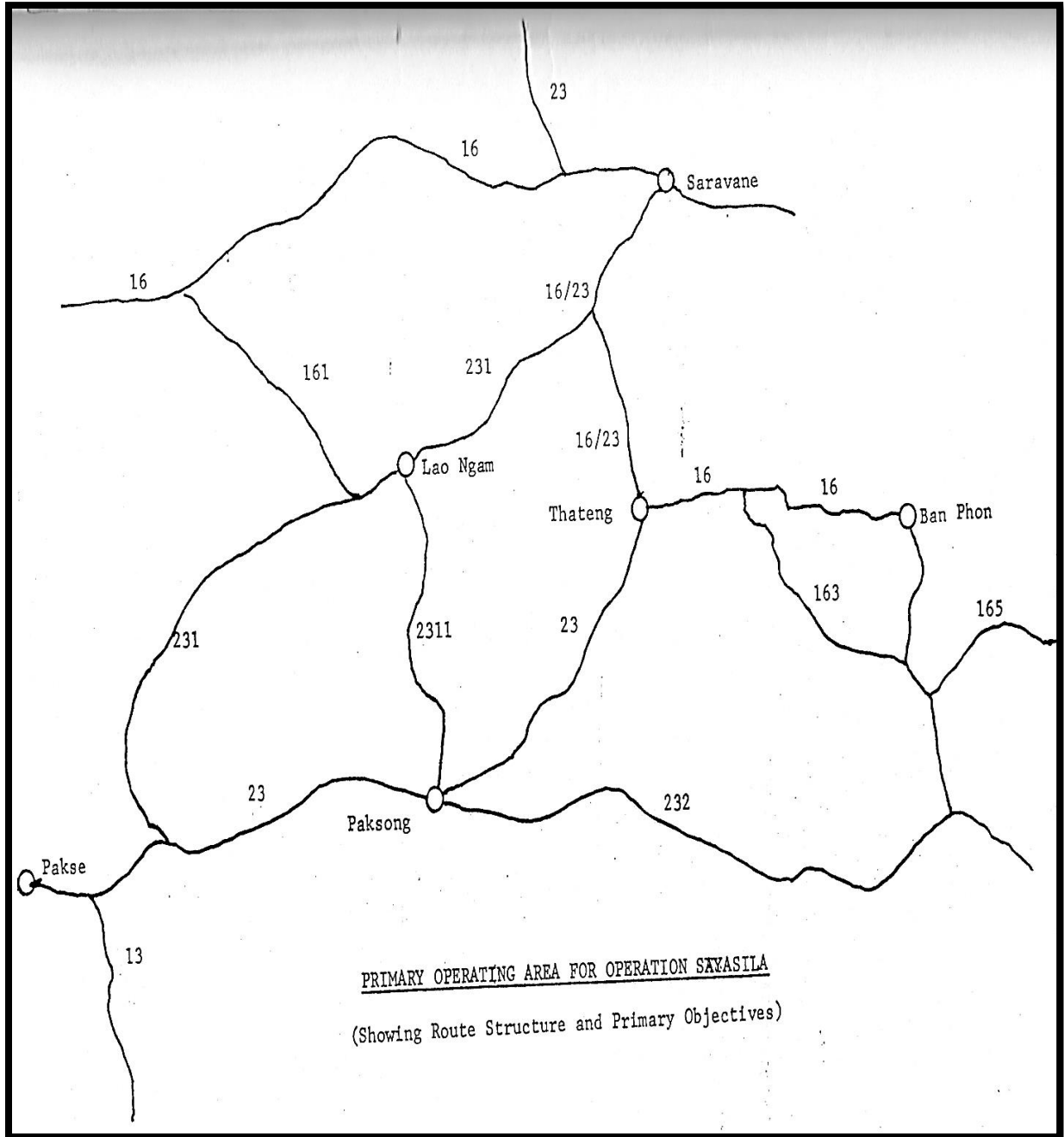
commence toward the end of July. Multi-battalion FAR, Neutralist, and irregular forces, one GM regiment from Military Region Three on a two-month assignment, would be lifted by Nakhon Phanom-based USAF CH-3, CH-53, and Air America UH-34D crews into Saravane as a diversion from the actual target of Paksong. Next, a double envelopment north from Lao Ngam and west along Route-23 would move on Paksong. Using thirty-five T-28s and two AC-47 gunship sorties per day, the operation was conceived to last one month.

As the days counted down in anticipation of the assault, the Savannakhet SGU force was shuttled to the Ban strip (LS-447 or PS-47) on Route-13, forty miles west of Saravane. However, political considerations and failure to communicate between agencies and a leading congressional leader, being what they were in Washington, muddied the waters and the USAF airlift scheduled for the 28th was canceled--it was that kind of war. Immediate embassy complaints at the behest of Vientiane-based COS Tovar reversed the situation and the operation kicked off on schedule with a Savannakhet Commando Raider team lifted to the Saravane airstrip. Since enemy units had withdrawn, the heli-lift of GM-31, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Kham Phou, proceeded without incident and a deserted Saravane was soon back in government hands. By noon, defensive measures were underway and a command post established.

There were plans developed to hold the provincial capital for a week, or until unduly pressured. The regiment remained longer than expected.

On the 30th, high ranking officials and officers visited Saravane to serve as a significant morale booster.

With Saravane successfully occupied, the second portion of the operation commenced on 29 July to retake the Bolovens town



Military Region Four road systems.
CHECO Bolovens, 3.

of Paksong. Insertion into Lao Ngam was accomplished without opposition, after which the troops prepared to move north. At the same time, a battalion was lifted from the Pakse area into a pre-selected position thirty-four kilometers northeast. By day's end the unit was joined by two other battalions.

On the 30th two battalions with armored cars in support began movement east along the paved Route-23 road toward enemy-occupied Ban Gnik. The units were supported by a Thai-manned artillery battery emplaced along the road since the 20th. By 1700 hours, artillery and continuous T-28 strikes enabled the column to capture Ban Gnik.

"Two regular army battalions met opposition before they were able to secure Ban Gnik village on Route-23. Elements of a [NVA] battalion, well entrenched in nearby bunkers, countered the government advance with [DK-82] rocket and [60mm] mortar fire. The government forces secured [Gnik] village following intense artillery and aerial bombardment.

U.S. air observers [Raven pilots] report that the communists are constructing bunkers and gun pits farther east along Route-23 and on high ground just west of Paksong, suggesting that they intend to put up a spirited defense of the central Bolovens.

To the north of Route-23, the three battalions that make up the 1,250-man main government task force are pushing east parallel to the road in an effort to take Paksong from the north. This force had been airlifted to positions on the western edge of the plateau without opposition.

[The units had moved within six miles of Paksong when they were engaged by a battalion of Vietnamese. Except for skirmishing, only minor progress north toward Paksong was conducted. ³⁸]

³⁸ CHECO, Bolovens, 10.

North of the plateau, government units are still holding Saravane. Several small clashes have occurred in this area." ³⁹

Except for minor skirmishes during search and destroy operations, relatively little activity occurred around Lima-44 during the next two months. The exception to this was the capture of Ban Nong Boua (LS-134) to the east. ⁴⁰

For a change in normal reporting, a fairly accurate article appeared in the Bangkok Post:

The Lao Army used a massive [USAF] helicopter airlift of troops to capture the strategic town of Saravane. A 1,000-man force comprising two special guerrilla battalions was ferried in by helicopter on Wednesday and encountered little resistance from NVA troops who overran L-44 last summer.

The NVA abandoned the town and other nearby positions, the source said. But the sources added that some 2,000 NVA now stationed to the north of L-44 were reported moving towards the town for a counterattack.

Saravane, about 62 miles north of Pakse, was a key part of the Bolovens Highlands until it fell into communist hands.

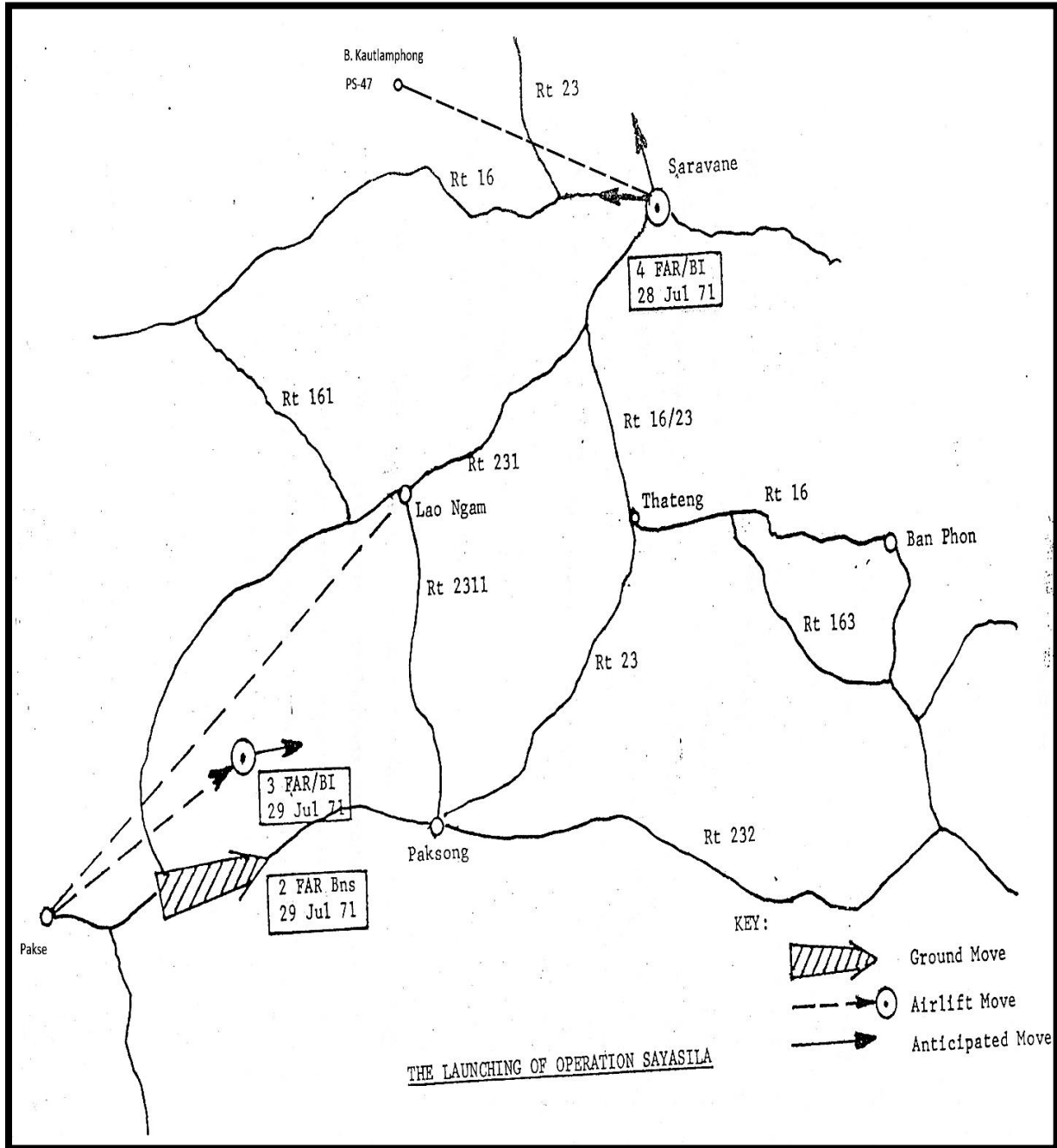
The recapture of L-44 marked the first major government success for a long time.

The NVA at the start of the rainy season this year took over virtually full control of the Bolovens Plateau, and have been trying to turn it into a sanctuary for military activities in northern Cambodia and the Central Highlands of South Vietnam.

The Plateau overlooks the Ho Chi Minh Trail a network of communist supply and infiltration routes into South Vietnam and

³⁹ CIA Bulletin, Laos: Government forces are making progress in their campaign to retake Paksong despite some determined enemy resistance, 07/31/71.

⁴⁰ Air Operations in Southeast Asia, 1-7.



Initial air and ground troop movement from Pakse and Ban Koutlamphong into Saravane, Lao Ngam, and up Route-23 toward Paksong. *CHECO*, Bolovens, 6 (slightly modified by the Author to reflect actual movement).

*Cambodia...*⁴¹

Despite isolated successes, once again there was little coordination and aggressiveness among all Lao forces. Commanded by an outstanding general, well versed in fire and maneuver techniques, the communist forces stiffened the line and temporarily halted the government assault. There was no forward progress toward Paksong for a few days. ⁴²

TRIP PROBLEMS

After making arrangements with relatives and our maid to secure the house, we left for Bangkok. Residing at the Montien Hotel, we obtained the necessary immunizations, filled out paperwork, and retrieved our airline tickets.

Traveling was never easy with a family, but what followed would challenge any nightmare in hell. The next day we arrived in Hong Kong and discovered, that despite Krueger's assurances of a smooth trip, airline employees had no knowledge of our arrival, or further booking on Northwest Orient to the States. Consequently, we were obliged to remain overnight in Kowloon and pursue the issue the next day. At the time, I had only wicked thoughts regarding Lee Krueger's continued existence in this world.

Fortunately, after considerable effort and cajoling, airline personnel took pity on our family and routed us home first class on the daily Pan American Airways 747 circuit. Despite our relief to be on our way again, we discovered that

⁴¹ The *Bangkok Post*, 07/31/71.

⁴² Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 346-347.
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 416-418.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 304-305.
CHECO, Bolovens, 5, 6, 9, 12. Soutchay Vongsavanh, 68.

our fun was not over. During the last-minute exchange booking no provision had been made to accommodate our food requirements on the Tokyo run. Therefore, while others were served at dinnertime there was nothing for us to eat. Except for one older Seattle, Washington couple, there were few people in the first-class section. I became suspicious when these were served and we were not. The stewardess indicated that she would check, then returned with the reason stated above. This was not acceptable. The children were hungry and Tuie became quite angry. I could not believe something like this was occurring to us during a period that was supposed to be the beginning of a happy, stress-relieving time away from Southeast Asia.

Finally, a dinner table was set up in the wide aisle to accommodate the family. Gourmet food, including tempura, arrived to satisfy our hunger. To this day I am not sure if the crew gave up their meals for us.

Whatever the previous problem, it was solved and the long, tiring trip across the Pacific from Japan to Seattle was uneventful, and as pleasant as a long, boring trip with two young boys can be.

CUSTOMS PROBLEMS

We retrieved our luggage at the Seattle terminal, and I was anxious to clear the customs inspection quickly, and I was anxious to clear customs quickly and confirm connections for our final flight. The customs process was never especially smooth or easy at either the Honolulu, or Seattle gateways. This time proved no exception and what happened next scored a huge black mark on U.S. customs policy regarding expatriate travelers.

Being a gateway, and one of the few ports of entry to the U.S., Seattle customs inspectors were reputed to be thorough and tough, almost as strict as the ones in Honolulu. Years before,

Air America helicopter Captain Tom Pitkin's wife Sandy failed to declare a jeweled necklace purchased in Thailand. Naturally, the article was discovered. She not only lost the item, but incurred a stiff triple fine.

While our bags were being checked I was asked by the inspector where we had purchased our clothes. Being a truthful individual, I said that almost everything was purchased or made in Thailand. I was then informed that the customs policy had changed. Visiting Americans were now required to declare all belongings not purchased in America. I would have to pay a newly instituted duty on all items not manufactured in the USA.

I was shocked. My own country, one that I was placing my life on the line to protect, was now unilaterally attempting to seize my hard-earned money. In essence, if I declared everything in our suitcases as obtained outside the U.S., we would be paying double for necessary items. Naturally, I was reluctant to yield to such chicanery without a fight. Without expressing anger, I attempted to explain that I was a bona fide resident of Thailand and had lived overseas since 1961; we were on a short home leave to visit my elderly parents in New Jersey, and had return tickets to Thailand in September. My entreaty fell on seemingly unconcerned and deaf ears. Considering the customs policy unjust, biased, and totally wrong, I mentally resolved not to pay any duty.

Finally, tired of listening to my pleas, they shunted us to the side, while consultations regarding our plight took place among customs officials, and other passengers continued to pass through the line.

Finally, a friendly, older-looking, customs official sidled up to me, attempting to appease me by explaining the regulations again, and encouraging me to declare our belongings. I offered a rebuttal in the most logical manner possible, reiterating that

the policy was not right for those on a short visit, and who were returning overseas. The "white-topper" listened patiently, seemed impressed, and then told us to repair to the corner of the room while he talked to his immediate supervisor. It appeared like we were slowly working our way up through the chain of command.

Fatigue from the trip and stress created by the bureaucratic red tape, was accumulating, and I was about to explode. Too much time was elapsing and, thinking we might miss our cross-country flight, I began to become a little unsettled. Then the kindly inspector returned and whispered in my ear that he had struck a compromise deal. I should declare a small amount, "make it low," of clothing that would require me paying only a small duty. Although affording a measure of relief from the department's onerous regulations, his proposal still did not resonate well with me. The offer still did not make sense, so I stubbornly hesitated to commit myself. Almost at an impasse, it was obvious that we were running out of options, fast approaching a point of no return, and causing me to wonder what would happen next.

The man left. He soon returned, reporting that we were cleared to enter America and continue our journey. I do not know what transpired, but for obvious reasons, I did not question this complete reversal in the local customs' confiscatory policy. Apparently, someone higher up the chain had agreed with my logical, impassioned arguments, and authorized our passage. I was indebted to our kind benefactor, shook his hand, and continued to march.

THE BEAT GOES ON

In life's chaos and imperfect scheme, unpleasant things seem to happen in threes and our nightmare trip was not over. It

was during the early morning hours when we groggily disembarked at Kennedy Airport. As usual, our baggage was slow making it onto the rotating carousel. By the time we exited the double doors of the terminal we were the only passengers on the damp sidewalk.⁴³

I immediately began searching for a cab driver to transport us to the folks' place in Plainfield, New Jersey. Yellow vehicles with their anxious drivers were lined up alongside the curb. Depending on the location, normally the first driver had the first right of refusal. Like everything else in America, I discovered that union taxi fares had escalated, and from past experience, knew that fares outside the city doubled. At one time, I had been informed that non-union "Pirate" drivers were available at more reasonable prices. However, no one mentioned the acrimony, or problems this would foster.

Therefore, after learning the inflated price home, I walked down the curb searching for a less expensive cab ride. At the third vehicle I discovered a young fellow who was willing to drive us to Jersey in an unmetered cab, at what I considered a more reasonable rate. As we prepared to take advantage of this good fortune, upset at losing his livelihood to a scab, the first driver approached me speaking in his abrasive New York City lingo that I could not hire a Pirate driver before him. The trade did not allow that.

Then other visibly disgruntled drivers, voicing similar objections converged on us, abruptly pushing the Pirate driver back toward his car. Before the situation turned ugly, tending to somewhat diffuse the situation, the cab driver who was first in line explained to me, in no uncertain terms, that if I

⁴³ Baggage was loaded in the cargo bins so the first in was the last off.

refused to hire him, he would summon a policeman and make trouble resulting in my family and me being delayed for some time. He appeared entirely serious, but I was uncertain if it was merely a bluff and what he stated would actually occur. Still, facing a foggy world from the long trip, I was not as mentally sharp as usual, but reasoned that this was America, and that free enterprise dictated man's actions, and that I could do about what I pleased. I considered my principal argument just, and if I was without a family, I would have taken the chance and made it an issue.

The cabbie's threat worked to his advantage, and number one won the battle. At that time of the morning, after travelling 12,000 miles, we were all very fatigued. Moreover, I could not afford delay and have my wife and small children embarrassed. Therefore, I swallowed my pride and acquiesced to his driving us to Plainfield. He loaded our luggage and we boarded the vehicle. Bitterly, I felt that I had been taken advantage of, and my basic rights violated in my own country. Still, trying to be somewhat objective, I attempted to understand the driver's position and had no real objection to him preserving his livelihood. I was not a happy individual, but agreeing to help with directions, I sat in the front seat. I did not do very well, and he had to stop at least once to ask directions.⁴⁴

Finally, we pulled up in front of 1123 Dorsey Place and happily disembarked. The fare was almost a hundred dollars, the most I had ever been charged for a cab ride from Kennedy Airport. I did not have sufficient funds so, hoping to obtain the correct amount, I woke Dad. He did not have enough either, but fortunately Tuie had some money squirreled away. No tip was

⁴⁴ Other than road maps there were no navigation systems like global positioning (GPS) available to drivers in those days.

proffered. The driver seemed a little miffed at this affront, but I considered our previous altercation and deemed the amount we were charged more than sufficient for his time and effort.

The episode seemingly ended our continuing nightmare. No 12,000-mile trip was easy with a family, but this long, frustrating, and tedious one had been an especially unsettling, and largely unsatisfactory, journey. I breathed a sigh of relief when we finally entered the homestead's portal, a sanctuary away from the greedy idiots of the world. Happy to be home and able to visit with loving parents, the recent airline unpleasantness and that in Seattle and New York were soon forgotten.

After a week or two resting and adjusting our jetlag-challenged bodies from multiple time zone changes to eastern Greenwich Mean Time, our vacation moved into high gear. ¹ I went to Steamboat Springs, Colorado on a combination business/pleasure trip, while Tuie flew to Boston to visit cousin Noi and her husband Bob Ellerin. I loved going to Colorado during the summertime, as the broad Yampa Valley was verdant and pleasing to the eye, and the beautiful surrounding mountains inspiring. As in Laos, I felt much at home in the mountains. The land development business and building projects seemed to be progressing well, and I gave Don my portion of payments for the Warbonnet land we had jointly purchased at Terry Peak, South Dakota. I also added to my personal land holdings at the Mount Werner ski area, purchasing a commercial lot at the Walton Creek development at the base of the mountain. Despite nosebleeds incurred from the rarified air that dried my nasal mucous membranes, I departed Steamboat Springs happy with what I had experienced in the valley.

After the difficult birth of Peter in 1969, Tuie did not want any more children. However, with more contemplation on the subject, and desiring a girl to complement our family, she acquiesced to having one more child. This was fine with me, for I was a solitary child and had found this quite lonely in later years.

The squeaky spring four-poster ancestral Casterlin bed was not without its merits and continued to function "according to

¹ Passengers were still allowed to smoke on airlines. This plus the dehydration factor caused by recycled air conditioning, changing sleep patterns, and lack of exercise, combined to make one feel awful. Only rest, a return to normal circadian rhythms, and time would reverse the jet-lag process.

Hoyle." ² Mister Sette, my high school English teacher and former decorated World War Two veteran, who shocked our mixed gender class one morning with a statement long ago was right; *"the bedroom was indeed reserved for sleeping and procreating."*

Soon after Tuie saw a local doctor when she suspected she was pregnant, a nurse phoned the house with the news that the rabbit had died.

We managed to visit a few friends and relatives still living in the northeast area. I had a new will prepared by boyhood friend and attorney Frank Blatz, who had political ambitions and had served as mayor of Plainfield during the tumultuous racial times in the sixties. We also visited a Kappa Sigma fraternity brother, the Bob Whitacre family in Florham Park, New Jersey. We showed them slides of Thailand and Laos, drank beer, and generally relived old times.

Dad and I had some thoughtful discussions about my future. During one talk, I indicated that I would like to cease flying combat in Southeast Asia and come home. Ever practical Dad indicated that I should continue working for Air America, as I would never earn the same amount of money in the States. After some introspection I concluded that he was right. Where else could I earn an entry level sum of 4,000-5,000 dollars a month?

LAOS

"In a once top secret classified report, now given clearance by the U.S. Defense and State Departments, the Nixon Administration officially acknowledges that the CIA is maintaining a 30,000-man force of 'irregulars' fighting

² Phrase accorded to 1700s English writer Edmond Hoyle who formed detailed rules for card games. Over time the term has been used in various contexts relating to authority on a subject.

throughout Laos. The 'irregulars' are recruited and paid directly by the U.S. intelligence agency." ³

ACTION IN MR-2

Friendly villagers, spies, and aerial reconnaissance in the form of drones (as evidenced by a July drone crash on a mountain east of Luang Prabang) that respected no international boundaries, had confirmed a Vietnamese buildup in the Western Military Region of North Vietnam and Houa Phan Province. In order to delay, disrupt, or possibly discourage Vietnamese movement south toward the Plain of Jars to engage Vang Pao's forces, several additional U.S. Air Force bombers were added to the daily strike mix.

On the Plain of Jars Vang Pao's troops continued to consolidate positions to the north and east in order to thwart an enemy offensive from the northeast during the dry season. During the month, local enemy forces pecked away at friendly positions, employing small unit attacks and shelling. Toward month's end, some outposts were lost to larger assaults.

In order to keep the enemy off balance on the northern fringes of the Plain, Vang Pao's Bouam Long contribution had reached a point six miles north of Route-71. However, by early August, they were forcefully attacked and scattered. In order to create a diversion along eastern Route-7 another element was launched from Moung Nham (LS-63), the same valley area where we had initially conducted our Twinpac training. The unit moved fifteen miles north to the Nam Sao Valley. However, support was not on the same level as it had been during the previous operation. While consolidating positions and anticipating

³ John S. Bowman ed., *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: Pharos Books, 1986) 287.

further march toward Ban Ban, they were contested by enemy forces.

Duplicating what had occurred in July, and punctuated by heavy monsoon conditions, air operations during the first two weeks in August were affected. Despite sloppy conditions, the wet weather proved a double-edged sword that benefitted both Vang Pao's troops and the enemy, but not equally, for Vang Pao relied heavily on air to keep the enemy off his hilltops. Consequently, to effect this and sweep the western sector with artillery fire, King Kong FSB was established at Phou Keng with two 105mm, two 155mm howitzers, and two 4.2mm mortars. The crew-served assets were moved from Sam Tong by U.S. Army heavy lift CH-54 pilots.

On Route-4, GM-22's second movement to capture or harass Xieng Khouang Ville continued. The unit moved closer to the ville before a strong enemy counterattack commenced on the 12th. Enemy pressure initially forced the regiment to withdraw into the welcoming hills of Phou Khe and then back toward Phou Theung on the 16th.

To relieve pressure points and prevent enemy inroads on the Plain of Jar's western flank, on 5 August a mixed regional two battalion and one company force at Moung Kassy, located above Vang Vieng, received marching orders to move north to the Route-7/13 junction at Sala Phou Khoun (LS-260). The next objective would be Moung Soui.

The first objective was achieved with few problems. Phase two was another matter. Rain and desultory enemy resistance slowed the troops' easterly advance until the 19th. Departing the road to the south, the task force slogged ten miles east before encountering a feisty Pathet Lao battalion, which curtailed further movement until mid-September.

"Government forces have continued to make slow progress in both north and south Laos.

Vang Pao's irregulars on the PDJ have reported some heavy enemy shelling attacks and skirmishing, but they are continuing to consolidate their positions around the eastern rim of the Plaine. In addition, a three-battalion government task force has begun to move eastward down Route-7 toward Moung Soui, the former neutralist headquarters, which appears to be only lightly defended [by enemy forces]." ⁴

JARINA

On Tuesday, August third, Mike Jarina, Jim Sweeney (DOH 09/30/70), and Demandal deadheaded to The Alternate on 401 to fly 13F and RON. Working around wet weather storms they flew to dark supporting troops and FSBs.

After the fog lifted the next morning the crew of 13F began slinging loads to FSBs. They supported too many pads to record. Leaving 13F on the ramp, they RTB Udorn.

On Thursday Mike, Jones, and Demandal deadheaded north on 545 to fly 13F. During a partial weather day, they flew less than four hours before deadheading to Tango-08 on 96W. ⁵

The sixth proved to be an equally wet day upcountry. After deadheading to Long Tieng on 393 Mike, fixed wing transferee

⁴ Ken Conboy, 302.

CHECO Project Corona Harvest, Summary Air Operations Southeast Asia, Volume-85, August 1971, 1, 1-5. Author obtained this pamphlet from Maxwell AFB Alabama Archives, 08/31-09/02/94.

William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 79.

CIA Bulletin, Laos, 08/09/71.

⁵ Weather had to be particularly bad in order to prevent helicopters from flying somewhere during a day.

Stan Thompsen (DOH 02/07/68), and Bobbie Barrow crewed Papa Foxtrot Gulf during Plain of Jars operations, only logging four hours. With RONS limited they rode home on Papa Delta Hotel (PDH).

Plain of Jars operations were beginning to become more hazardous for Air America pilots, but Mike always remained cool under fire. His First Officer was slinging a load from Shep's ramp into a Plain of Jars landing zone, and coming to a hover just short of the pad, when a round exploded about a hundred feet behind the helicopter. As the second pilot began to increase collective in order to abort, Mike placed his hand on the collective saying, *"Deliver the load."* He then remained on the controls until the load was dropped, when he said, *"Now let's get out of here."*

Another time his First Officer was delivering a load to a pad on the GLAD ridge north of Site-72. It was a long ridge on a peak, with a steep valley below. While on approach they encountered groundfire. Mike again said to deliver the load. Then he assumed aircraft control and, wanting to see where the fire was coming from, made a 180-degree turn. Alarmed the First Officer asked, *"Where are you going?"* Mike patiently explained that he wanted to radio the action to anyone else who might be assigned to support the pad.

The spate of monsoon conditions continued. Sunday morning Mike deadheaded, and Thompsen and Ortillo crewed PFG to The Alternate. The trip was a lost cause. Only flying two and a half hours, they left the machine upcountry and deadheaded to Udorn on 389.

The next morning the crew was assigned to fly PFG that had been ferried back late the previous evening. Bad weather precluded launching north, and they sat on standby most of the day.

On the tenth Mike, Andrews (DOH 08/23/66), and Zarembo ferried 13F upcountry. After working the Plain of Jars, the crew was reassigned to Bouam Long to support the failed movement toward Route-71.

During August, when activity in Military Region Two slowed, Udorn management spread the word that a person could take leave-without-pay. Mike's wife Dee advised him to return to Florida to work on achieving his AB master's degree and also teach school. Mike left Southeast Asia and remained in the States until May 1972. ⁶

With USAF assets diminishing in the Barrel, enemy AAA fire continued to claim a toll on machines and men. On 2 August an A-1J (Hobo-42) crashed thirty miles southwest of Mounq Soui without a survivor [the number of operational A-1 aircraft in the Lao Theater was only about twenty-four].

With foul weather certainly contributing, battle damage to planes continued. Two days later an F-4 was damaged while conducting reconnaissance operations southeast of Ban Ban. Two F-4s were hit by 14.5mm fire on the sixth, then a low flying F-4 pilot was hit by small arms fire on the 12th. ⁷

WASHINGTON

The Washington Special Actions Group convened to discuss Lao negotiations, possible neutralization of the Plain of Jars, and military support necessary should the negotiations fail before the dry season. ⁸ Talks were also taking place in Vientiane. The next phase, should it get that far, would be at

⁶ Mike Jarina Interviews. Mike's departure left a void in the Author's pilot battlefield narrative accounts.

⁷ *CHECO, Air Operations Southeast Asia*, 1-4.

⁸ Principals attending the meeting were Henry Kissinger, General Cushman, William Sullivan, Mister Johnson, Ambassador Godley, Mister Packard, and various other military and civilian leaders.

Khang Khay. Still believing they could control Vang Pao, there was no general consensus within the group about having Vang Pao's forces withdraw from the Plain of Jars until an agreement on neutralization was reached between the warring parties.

A briefing by Deputy Director of the CIA, Marine General Cushman, revealed to those present that due to the relatively minor movement of both forces, the situation on the Plain of Jars was considered generally static.⁹ However, three of Vang Pao's battalions maneuvering on the northeastern sector of the Plain were meeting some enemy resistance...[VP] was obtaining artillery support from the Thai battalions [FSB] behind him on the Plain. The general's prognosis, derived from Agency intelligence gathering, was that nobody was going anywhere; there was even doubt that Vang Pao could seize additional territory or objectives to the north and east of the [PDJ]...His troops were being impacted by some mortar fire and he was incurring casualties from enemy patrols.

If attacked by newly introduced enemy units (as indicated by movement of a portion of the Vietnamese 312th Division),¹⁰ there was a question as to Vang Pao's intentions. This time he had adequate defensives in depth and could [conceivably] conduct an orderly retreat...¹¹

A little more than a week after the WAG meeting, with most of the central PDJ in RLG hands, likely prompted by Ambassador

⁹ Author Note: There was a distinct impression that Kissinger and his cronies, more concerned with winding up the war, did not want Vang Pao to push further north or east like he had in 1969.

¹⁰ A large number of vehicles were detected moving in the Plain of Jars area on 16 August; Air Operations in Southeast Asia, 1-6.

¹¹ FRUS, Minutes of the Washington Special Actions Group, Laos, 08/10/71.

Godley, Souvanna Phouma, proposed a ceasefire in northeast Laos with the International Control Commission (ICC) supervising neutralization of the territory. However, Pathet Lao representatives refused to negotiate until a total bombing halt and ceasefire.

USG preferred a standstill in this region that would have allowed continued Trail interdiction, relieved enemy pressure on Vang Pao's Plain of Jars forces and the Luang Prabang areas, and allowed redeployment of dwindling resources to southern Laos. In order to influence the RLG, the U.S. offered an increase of 105/155mm howitzers, gunship helicopters, and an expansion of Thai and irregular forces. ¹²

"In north Laos, some of [Vang Pao's] irregular units are now about two miles from Khang Khay, one of the tentatively agreed-upon sites for Lao peace talks should they get underway.

On the subject of [peace] talks, Prime Minister Souvanna announced yesterday that his thinking at that time was of responding to the latest communist message by suggesting that the communists appoint a plenipotentiary [an official with full negotiating powers] representative empowered to begin negotiations alternately in [VTE] and Khang Khay." ¹³

The communists' attitude regarding serious peace talks continued obdurate:

"Lao communist leader Souphanouvong has dismissed Souvanna's message of 18 August-which proposed discussions for a cease-fire and a bombing halt in northeast Laos-as 'unrealistic' and a 'crafty maneuver.' Souvanna's more recent suggestion for neutralizing the [PDJ] was similarly brushed aside. The [PL] representative in [VTE] told a press conference on 27 August

¹² CHECO.

¹³ CIA Bulletin, 08/14/71, Laos: Government forces have continued to gain ground slowly on the northeastern [PDJ].

that Souphanouvong remains opposed to such a step as long as allied bombing of communist troops and the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos continues." ¹⁴

With the battlefield becoming increasingly fluid, the environment on the Plain of Jars was becoming more hazardous for helicopter crews. On the 14th, the crew of Captain Pogo Hunter, First Officer Mike Barksdale, and Flight Mechanic Tom Neis, while flying Twinpac XW-PHC north northwest of L-22 (UG0455) near the Route-7/74 intersection, received multiple small arms rounds. One Lao soldier was wounded, and the ship incurred substantial battle damage to main rotor blades, a main gear, and the fuselage. The incident would not be the last. ¹⁵

By the middle of August, monsoon conditions improved in the mountains of Military Region Two but, because LOCs leading to the PDJ were relatively impassable, lucrative enemy targets were lacking and bombing reached a new low since the air campaign began in earnest during 1965.

..."military activity has remained relatively light. Vang Pao's irregular forces on the [PDJ] continue to skirmish daily with communist units located in an arc to the east of the Plaine, but little new territory has been gained or lost." ¹⁶

Toward the end of August, the battalion on Phou San was severely impacted and reduced by enemy heavy weapons fire. Even with artillery support from King Kong battery, unable to withstand the pounding, the remaining troops withdrew nine miles southwest to Ban Sanchot, two and a half miles northwest of L-22. GM-23's movement left the two other battalions' flanks exposed. Consequently, GM-21 departed west from Khang Khay and

¹⁴ CIA Bulletin, Laos: The communists have rebuffed Prime Minister Souvanna's latest efforts to get peace talks started, 08/30/71.

¹⁵ Air America XOXO, XW-PHC, JD Ford.
Joe Leeker.

¹⁶ CIA Bulletin, 08/24/71.

set up camp one-mile northeast of L-22. Leaving no friendly units very far forward of Xieng Khouang strip, GM-21 slowly maneuvered rearward to the safety of the FSB.

Thereafter, frontline defenses stabilized from Route 4/7, Phou Keng, and L-22, to Phou Theung. The die was cast for an assured enemy offensive at the time of their choosing.¹⁷

Prognostications as to what action was next on the PDJ abounded. An estimate of the Military Region Two situation from military sources stated:

"We are told that friendly forces are being restrained by political considerations while the enemy is preparing for an October offensive.

*In the absence of any friendly offensive, the enemy will continue to be reinforced and will gain the offensive as the wet season draws to a close. Determined attempts will be made to dislodge friendlies in the northwest and southeast portions of the PDJ and force them to withdraw to the south. This will put pressure on the high ground positions of Phou Theung and Phou Keng. Friendly forces will be on the defensive and will attempt to hold their present positions relying on strong support from artillery and Tacair. While friendly forces are stronger than they have been in the past due to the presence of new battalions and artillery support, it remains to be seen whether an all-out defense of friendly positions will be undertaken. [It is believed] that friendly forces will be withdrawn if severe personnel losses appear imminent."*¹⁸

¹⁷ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 302.
William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 79.

¹⁸ *CHECO*

MR-4

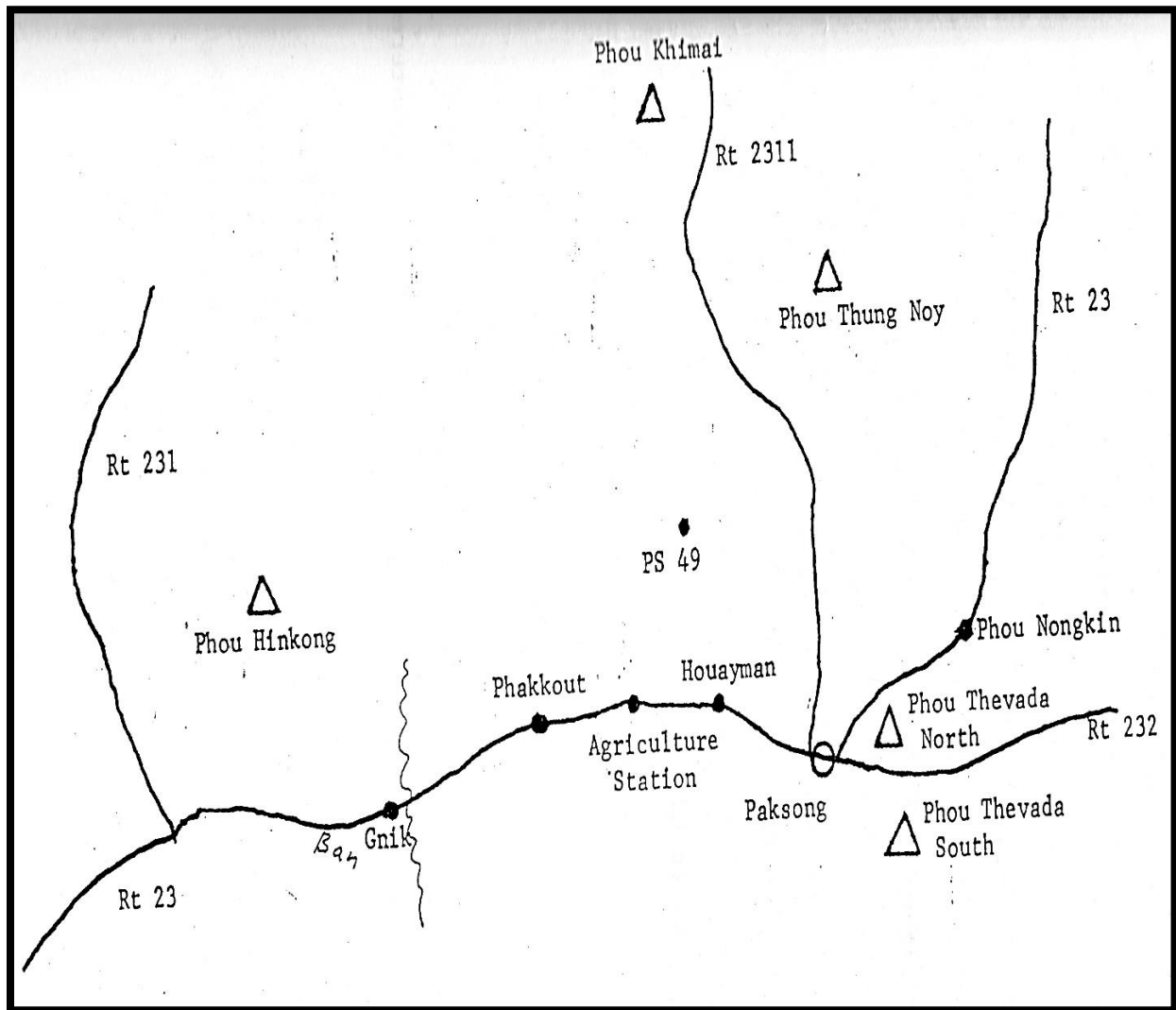
With three new battalions augmenting the other units at the Route-23 Bolovens Ban Gnik position, on the fourth, Colonel Soutchay's offensive resumed toward Paksong. By the sixth two battalions reached Phakkout, located a little more than five miles west of Paksong. After being reinforced with both Lao and Thai, and with consolidation underway, on the eighth two battalions pushed along Route-23 to the abandoned agricultural station located between Ban Phakkout and Ban Houayman. Further movement was countered by stiff enemy opposition.

"...government forces have occupied Ban Phak Kout on Route-23...Stiff enemy resistance has turned back efforts to move to Paksong and air observers report many new enemy positions around Paksong.

Government forces conducting sweep operations west of Saravane captured a rice and ammunition cache after driving off an enemy company." ¹⁹

"Three Lao Army battalions operating north of Route-23 [the Lao Ngam force] were hit hard by [NVA] units on 11 August and were forced to abandon their attempt to move toward Paksong from the northwest. These units have withdrawn to Route-23 to take up defensive positions. A new three-battalion operation is moving northward to harass enemy [LOCs] between Paksong and the main communist rear base area at Lao Ngam. [It was a week before the units began moving again.] Government units are also to continue down Route-23 toward Paksong, but so far stiff enemy resistance has blocked attempts to overrun communist positions about four miles west of Paksong.

¹⁹ CIA Bulletin, Government forces have continued to make slow progress in... south Laos, 08/09/71.



The Paksong battlefield. Triangles to the lower right indicate commanding mountain high ground overlooking the Paksong area from the east and north.

CHECO, Bolovens, 11.

Some elements of civilian government are being restored in Saravane. Presumably the government forces will stay until [NVA] pressure compels them to withdraw, although their original plan has called for holding the town only a few days." ²⁰

The Paksong operation continued to deteriorate:

"Earlier government efforts to recapture Paksong were repulsed by determined [NVA] resistance. The most recent enemy counterattack, on 18 August, dispersed four Lao Army battalions which reportedly suffered heavy casualties. [These units withdrew to Phakkout to resupply and regroup.] Air observers report that the enemy is continuing to build up defenses in and, around Paksong. Although the [NVA] have been hit hard by air and artillery attacks, they have shown no dispositions to abandon their hard-won gains." ²¹

By the 21st additional battalions had formed to commence a three-pronged attack on Paksong.

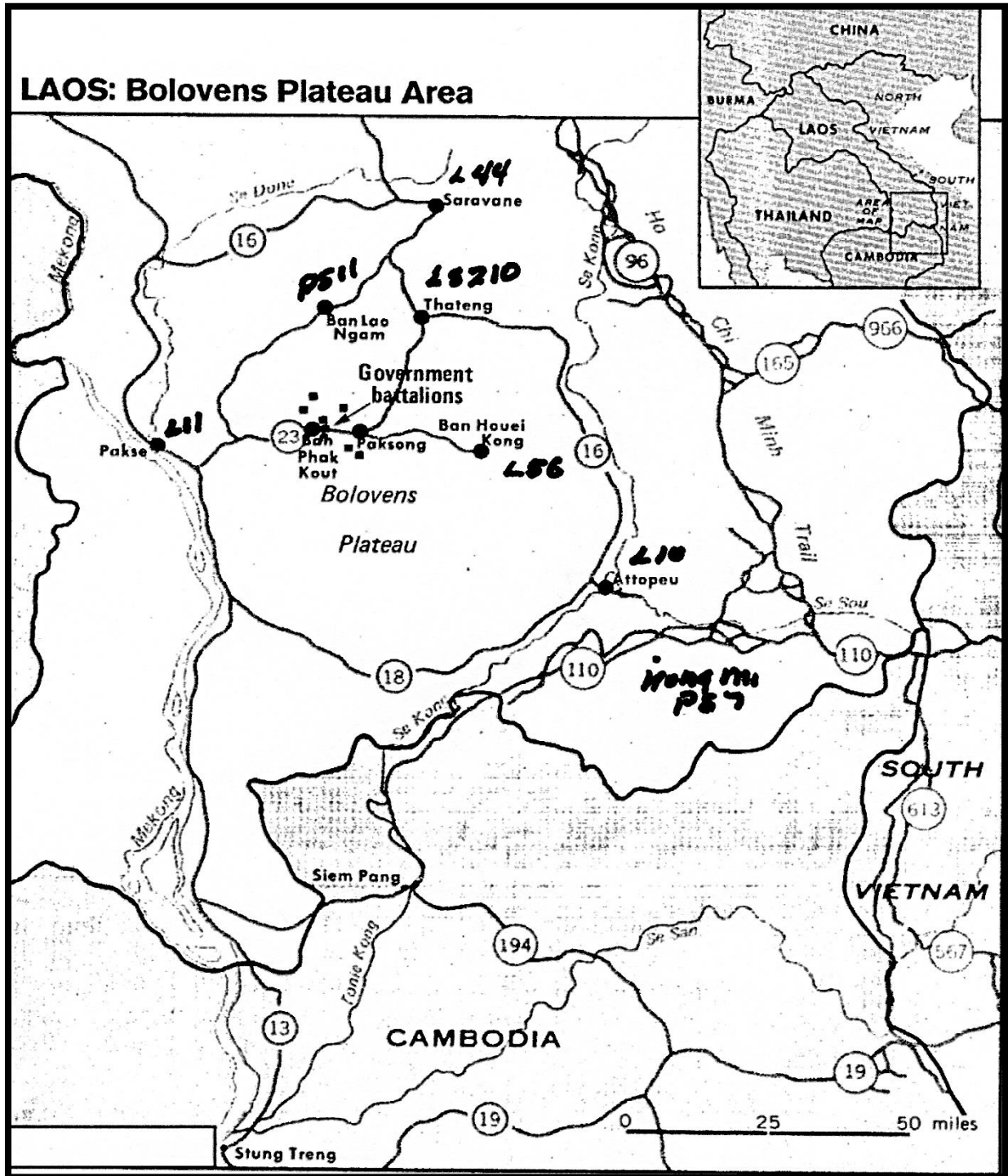
"Three irregular battalions are to be moved toward Paksong from the northwest, two other battalions have been airlifted into positions southeast of the town, and three Lao Army battalions are pushing eastward along Route-23. Two of the latter units have reported continuing contact with the enemy and have made little forward progress. Tactical air and artillery are being used to support the operation." ²²

Lacking coordination between columns, the government operation achieved little more than had previous ones. Attacked in turn by better led and highly motivated Vietnamese troops, although one friendly force managed to drive within three miles of the objective, during bloody fighting each was generally

²⁰ CIA Bulletin, Laos: Government forces have met reverses in their effort to retake Paksong in south Laos..., 08/14/71.

²¹ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 08/24/71.

²² CIA Bulletin, Laos: The government is mounting a new three-pronged assault against Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau, 08/24/71.



CIA 08/24/71 map displaying General Soutchay's forces general disposition around Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau.

rendered ineffective as a fighting unit or ignominiously chased from the battlefield.

On 27 August villagers told them that "In south Laos, government forces attempting to retake Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau continued to run into scattered communist resistance over the weekend and made no significant advances. An irregular reconnaissance team that moved briefly the few [NVA] troops remaining in Paksong were sick and dispirited." [By the 28th government units were located between Phakkout and the agricultural station.] ²³

Overall, the Paksong operation had been sorely plagued by shaky weather conditions that led to shortages of ammunition and air support. Raven reconnaissance on 26 August spotted enemy buildups on Route-23 and north of Paksong, and defense improvements that indicated a heightened resolve to remain in place. It was believed in Air Force quarters that only massive bombing would enable Soutchay's men to take the town. ²⁴

A NAIVE TEACHER ARRIVES IN TOWN

Curiously, while the Southeast Asian war appeared to be winding down in South Vietnam, and contributing to much dislocation, Air America Udorn was expanding. This was evidenced by employee hiring.

Jay Don Allen was originally from old Texas stock who settled the state. This included a former renowned Texas Ranger who became a no-nonsense sheriff that believed in shooting first and asking questions later.

²³ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 08/30/71.

Additional Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 305-306.

CHECO, Bolovens, 13.

²⁴ CHECO, *Air Operations in Southeast Asia*, 1-7.

A professional student, who had attended schools of higher education for seven years, Allen was completing a second master's degree in history during the early summer of 1971. At the time he was living with in-laws in central Los Angeles. Without any income, he consulted the newspaper each day and frequented employment agencies searching for work. (His father-in-law was also jobless.)

One day he spotted an advertisement in the paper for teacher employment in Thailand. Despite the fact that he was a raw, new teacher, he journeyed downtown to a hotel for an interview with Wesley Bougner. Acting like a spook, Bougner would not reveal the number of people in Udorn, as this was considered secret information. In addition, considering Allen too young. someone who would never make it in a jungle environment, Bougner initially rejected him.

Within a month, Allen contracted to teach at a school in Santa Barbara. In the meantime, an individual previously hired for the Air America job dropped out leaving the slot open for Allen, who jumped at the opportunity. In short order was winging his way to Washington, D.C. for another interview.

Never having been East, he learned that Washington was an extremely hot and sultry place in August. He had a corduroy suit in a bag and changed to this at the airport restroom. He then took a taxi to the address provided him at 1125 K Street, and climbed the stairs to the small office that included few rooms. Red Dawson, the Personnel Manager, was not in attendance, so Allen briefly chatted with a Negro employee. Then, realizing that this "interview" was merely a formality, he completed a small questionnaire within five minutes. The two men shook hands, and the employee took him to lunch, after which Jay walked around town, and then boarded a plane for California.

In an accelerated mode, he was instructed to obtain a physical, including several vaccines, photos, and passports. The shots made him so woozy that he had to pull off the road onto the median to rest. Trans World Airways (TWA) airline tickets arrived, and within a week from his interview Jay, his wife, and 130- pound Bull Master Waldo were on their way to Southeast Asia. Allen was very excited, as he had always wanted to journey overseas and experience new things.

Their first stop was in the middle of the night in Hawaii. After fifteen hours of darkness, the plane captain landed at Guam at sunrise. Jay recalled gnats bothering him. After fueling the TWA flight continued to Taipei, Taiwan.

On the ground a Chinese man in a white suit, who said that he was on the flight with them, offered to help them. They boarded his laundry truck and drove to the New Asia Hotel next to the Civil Air Transport where Jay left his wife. Attending to business, he went to the Thai Embassy, where he paid a bribe for an instant visa that he had not been able to acquire in the States.

He had fun during the two days in Taipei. Taxi drivers would drive fast in first gear and then switch to third gear, which resulted in engine lugging.

While checking in at the CAT office and obtaining a briefing, he was given several papers to fill out. One asked what to do with his possessions if captured, or with his body if killed. He said if he was dead to cremate him. The Chinese employee he was dealing with became animated, saying, "*Great, then they would not have to ship his body home.*" Downstairs, guards wearing pistols in armpit holsters wandered about. He noted that at lunchtime all the lights were dimmed and the Chinese ate quietly in semi-darkness.

Jay met another teacher, Mario Lauro, who exhibited a bad attitude. Mario had come through the system just before him. Afraid all the time, he became a recluse and did not last long. After asking Mario what to do in Taipei, Jay went to a theater and watched acrobats.

That night he and his wife ate at the Ruby restaurant next to the New Asia. Waiters brought steam carts to the table with Dim Sum in small bamboo wicker baskets, each containing four dumplings filled with various meats and seafood. Jay had never seen this before and thought they were offering him free samples. He easily made a meal out of them before ordering. Not having much money with him, he received a shock when charged for the Dim Sum "samples."

During a walkabout, discovering a labyrinth of streets and underground passages, with little sense of direction, he became lost.

He found time for the Wough Chow bath house and some slot machine gaming at the U.S. Navy club.

Their next stop was Kai Tak Airport in Kowloon, where a typhoon had just sunk a large ship in Hong Kong harbor. They were met and greeted by a man wearing a movie-like white Charlie Chan suit and hat. While still en route, Allen had read a magazine article that made reference to Air America being a CIA outfit. He wondered about this and the individual meeting them.

They were escorted to the Hong Kong Hotel in Kowloon where free lunch chits were issued. Jay ate snails in shells for the first time. They wandered around the steamy streets with clouds, remnants of the typhoon, boiling overhead. A myriad of shops were interesting, but they had no money to purchase anything.

They arrived at Don Muang Bangkok in the middle of the night to the sight of smiling, happy faces. He was told to go to the Montien Hotel on Suriwongse Road. He hired an unmetered Audi

cab, whose driver rapidly drove the eighteen miles to the city. At the hotel Jay believed he overpaid the driver.

In the morning, they awoke to what they considered "never-never-land--the brilliantly colored tiles of numerous spires and temples glinting in the early sunlight. They had tickets on Thai Airways to Udorn, and not having too much time in Bangkok, they walked around a little to view the local sights.

Waldo had been shipped to Southeast Asia on a separate airline and was impounded at the customs house. Jay had to pay a bribe to get his dog. Despite the long trip and his incarceration, Waldo appeared happy. Allen discovered that the Montien would not accept animals, so in the middle of the night, Jay elected to take the dog to a veterinarian and pick him up the next day for the flight north.

Thai Airways was unprepared to accommodate animals like major airlines were, so he placed Waldo behind the captain's seat. Waldo was not pleased, and howled during the entire trip. While en route to Khon Kaen to disembark and pick up passengers, Jay struck up a conversation with a large, young Air America pilot, who told them what he knew about Udorn town and the Company facility.

While approaching Khon Kaen, from the air, Jay thought the area looked somewhat like East Texas, with terrain of red dirt. Upon landing, not knowing what to expect, and believing they might be shot at, he was very excited.

It was the end of August when they arrived in Udorn. A blue Volkswagen with driver waited for them at the airport terminal and took them to the impressive Air America facility operations building. After securing Waldo to a large tree, Jay entered the building and talked to Base Manager CJ Abadie.

Using Claude Nelson's Personnel Department check-in list, they went from place to place and settled in fast.

There was a plethora of antenna on and off the facility. He learned of an aversion to news people, and was unaware that there was a symbiotic relationship with the CIA until well after he arrived. Tropical trees and bright flowers planted around the swimming pool provided a strange sight, where people were eating strange hamburgers on glossy buns. They talked to Twinpac First Officer Ray Purvis, who told them about the Confederate Air Force. John Wessel was the Rendezvous Club Manager. They met school Principal Wes Bougner again, and his wife Joan.

Initially it was all new and a source of wonderment. Never having been out of the U.S. before, he found the rainy, humid climate very tropical and oppressive. Like Khon Kaen, the city also reminded him of east Texas with red dirt roads that generated clouds of red dust as taxis passed.

The first night they stayed at the Paradise Hotel, located across the street from the Charoen Hotel. Because the bar girls would go there to swim, the Paradise pool was known as the "Bay of Pigs." It was reputed that one could obtain a venereal disease from swimming in the pool. It was also toxic on the eyes and eyelids that would close up and not open in the morning.

Everything constituted a new experience. At the hotel Jay saw his first samlor. Initially unaware that the machines provided a primary mode of transportation, and there were thousands of them in town, he thought it was a specially manufactured device. He was amazed and wanted to ride in one. Thai people teased him, saying he could ride in one for five baht, but to bargain. He climbed into one and observed hundreds more down the street. Only twenty-five, with raging hormones, he began observing "gingerbread" looking ladies, and this began the undoing of his marriage. For a long time, he just used the B-Bus, taxis, and samlor for transportation. Jay loved the rain, and driving through large puddles with samlor drivers. It seemed

to him that the drivers measured their steps and were on a different frequency than everyone else. It was like they were going through a strange force field. ²⁵

The second day Bougner took them around town looking for a permanent residence. They eventually rented an upstairs apartment in a turquoise building behind the town jail that everyone called the "Monkey House." Despite this, people advised him to be careful of the quemoy presence. He initially thought they were referring to the contested Chinese island in the Taiwan Straits. He put Waldo downstairs. The rooms were appointed with Belgian mirrors. If one was careful, there was just enough hot water from an egg-shaped device stuck on the bathroom wall with two small faucets. When activated, water would siphon through the device and shoot rusty water on him.

Everything was all so new, and he was so thrilled that he had difficulty sleeping at first. He met service men, who all had girlfriends making Jay jealous. They said he should go downtown and get a massage. Actually, they were talking about a "chock wa"-the slang Thai term for manual stimulation to orgasm of a penis by another person-a handjob. He thought this a funny sounding phrase, so while in his apartment courtyard, he yelled "chock wa." Almost immediately, girls' heads at the "Monkey House" popped out of doors and windows inquiring, "You want chock wa? Give me five baht." He went over, sat, and talked to them on the front steps, and they advised him to go to the Holiday.

Jay was late to school the first day. Before retiring the previous night, he had plugged in an electric clock. Not

²⁵ Before arriving in Udorn, the same typhoon that had sunk the ship in Hong Kong impacted Thailand, causing Air America employees to go to work in the morning on helicopters. Moreover, samlor drivers could negotiate streets that taxis could not.

uncommon to the town, there had been a power outage during the night. He was still sleeping when the piercing B-bus horn jarred him awake. The impatient driver was noticeably upset when Jay appeared at the Volkswagen fifteen minutes later.

Having expanded in 1971, there were 200 children representing many ethnic groups attending the Company school. Allen had been hired as one of the expansion teachers. The school curriculum had just substituted the Calvert system for improved Carnegie units. With this addition, the school had become a large education center offering classes from kindergarten through 12th grade. Team teaching was used. He was in a four through six quad with Lilly O'Hara and Joan B. Forty children were initially situated in an open air environment. Then they would trade off into smaller groups. It was strange hearing all the children talking together. It was also very noisy outside with USAF jet engines whining and moaning on the Runway 30 overrun, where the exhaust diffusion barrier was located. Helicopters being tested or taxiing from the parking ramp to the runway also contributed to the din. He noted strange looking aircraft, always changing insignia markings. One day he killed a snake outside the school. Guards continuously filled five-gallon water jars at the water point next to the school.

Allen taught second grade. The class included mixed ethnic children. In time he grew to love Thailand. One day he led his class a short distance to tour the facility fire station. On the way he saw an individual wearing a Hawaiian shirt in the cockpit of a T-28 with Lao Erawan markings taxiing toward the runway; an Asian was in the rear seat waving to the kids. He noticed a fifty-caliber machinegun deposited in a trashcan as they walked by. One day a Customer's child brought shrapnel to the class for a show and tell session.

Club Rendezvous had just been remodeled when he arrived in Udorn. To reduce stealing, the Rendezvous Club issued paper chits. He noted that CJ Abadie's favorite dessert was fudge cake with ice cream. To Jay, Club food tasted funny, especially the meat (gamy). The potatoes were green and rubbery tasting; the tomatoes and lettuce bitter. ²⁶

After work Jay ventured into the Animal Bar but, unable to understand or discuss aircraft, he felt out of place and departed for the plush bar located ninety degrees to the original bar. There he learned about the Griffin compound located south of the facility.

He was introduced to commissary and Air Force privileges. To fill out his spare time, Jay joined the officers' club and later the non-commissioned officers' club, as it was more fun. Filipino bands marched around playing Credence Clearwater music. Twenty-five cent drinks encouraged one to become an alcoholic. There was good food in the form of burgers and chicken. Thai girls were present who would rub you down with moist towels and provide a massage at the table for ten baht while watching the dancing girls. There were movies at the Air America Club and open-air facility at the Air Force where squeaky speakers added considerable noise to the dialogue. The Air Force barracks were raised, allowing water to flow under them during heavy rain storms. Air Force pilots performed barrel rolls over the field whenever they damaged or shot down a MiG. The event was announced over the club public address (PA) system. Perhaps humdrum by that stage in the war, patrons did not seem to care or pay much attention when the crews entered.

²⁶ Jay Allen was spoiled from California's fresh food and stateside living. Had he experienced our former grim living conditions in 1962 and vast improvement with the advent of the Club, he never would have mentioned this.

Despite an earlier purge of the Indian businessmen in Udorn, at least one tailor shop remained. At the Maharajah Jay had paisley shirts and other odd clothing custom made.

Allen could not obtain enough local color. Considering himself in hog heaven, he was so impressed with everything that he wrote long letters home describing the new experiences. Haircuts were five baht. Both he and his wife shopped at the incredible, but smelly morning market where fish flopped around in large aluminum pans and black eels lay in buckets. There were odd-looking vegetables positioned on raised concrete counters, also fuzzy looking fruit. There were delicacies like mummified rice bugs with string wrapped around them. Pig heads were flattened out like Frisbees.

At first, Jay was a little reluctant to eat Thai food. Bougner advised him to try Jimmy's Kitchen in town. There he ate his first fiery "magma pack." The food was so hot that his face flushed red like a brisket of corned beef. That ended his desire for Thai liquid fire for two years. After his mother visited, he began eating Thai cuisine again. Considering it too pungent, he never got used to pak-chee, a parsley like vegetable.

There were open air restaurants in town with what looked like a theater marquee in front. Cooked ducks and other items and vegetables were displayed hung on wires. There were tiered ice creations which dust collected on along with fish or anything uncovered. Both Thai-produced Singha and Amarit beer was available. Singha beer would give him a headache.

Jay and his wife went to Bangkok on the train, but he paid for a second-class sleeper, for he did not earn enough money to travel in the air-conditioned car. After two months of teaching, they went to Hua Hin on vacation and stayed at the Railway Inn, which had not changed much since the time I was there in the early sixties. The topiary bushes shaped like Thai classical

dancers were still growing in front of the hotel. Swinging doors, like old Dodge City bars, graced the rooms and mosquito nets covered the ornate bed. While swimming in the Gulf of Siam, Jay cut his leg on sharp barnacle-encrusted rocks. Sea serpents washed on shore. Stinking squid dried on lines. After gorging on seafood, he developed diarrhea. But generally, his health was good and spirits high.

Everything was so interesting; the culture was so welcoming; the people nice and friendly, kind natured, service oriented, industrious, fun and very accepting. He had some Thai friends, but soon learned that they merely used him to learn English. Communication was so slow at first and very difficult, as words came slowly.

Allen remained in Thailand until September 1974, and then went to work in Iran.²⁷

VIENTIANE FLOOD

"There has been no major flooding this year in Udorn. Vientiane, however, has flooded and the airport is closed. All operations took place out of here for a time."

Letter Home, 09/20/71.

The annual monsoon, reinforced by Typhoon Rose in mid-August, caused the Mekong River to overflow its banks. With effects lasting from 20 August until 15 September, it marked the worst flooding in Vientiane since 1966.

²⁷ Jay Allen Interviews during a visit to the Author's house, 10/20/96. Jay taught our son Ricky in the Air America school. After we left Air America to work for Bell Helicopter International in Isfahan, Iran, we encountered Jay again and became good friends. Although we do not see each other often, we have remained friends to this day.



Looking from the north across the Mekong River toward Nong Khai Province, Wattay airstrip is mostly inundated by flood water. USAID photo taken from a Bell Jet Ranger on 08/25/71. Received from former Air America Captain Steve Stevens on 01/15/2017, who passed the photos on to interested parties from former Kicker Dan Gamelin.



Air America, CASI, and commercial operations area at Wattay Airport.
At the lower portion, the RLA ramp is relatively dry.
USAID 08/25/71 photo.



U.S. Army S-64 Skycrane helicopter parked at That Luang to conduct heavy lift missions supporting the August-September 1971 flood relief operations. This landing zone was also used by Air America helicopter assets.

USAID photo.



After conditions deteriorated appreciably at Wattay Airport, air drop and air delivery operations were rotated to Udorn air base. Air America C-123 374 is preparing to launch upcountry.

USAID photo.

Air America and Continental Air Services bases at Wattay Airport were submerged in up to four feet of water. Emergency facilities were initially established at the higher end of Runway-13. This allowed 2,100 feet of the strip to be temporarily utilized for air supply work. Provisional supply operations were set up at the elevated That Luang complex. Management moved to Phone Kheng near That Luang. As the water rose, over 300 Air America employees and nearly all aircraft were later rotated to Udorn to continue supply operations in an almost normal manner.

AID loaned Air America two snorkel equipped trucks and a ten-man boat for Vientiane operations. The airport remained functional and the rice drop program was never entirely moved to Udorn. Trucks delivered rice by road from the Wattay warehouse to refugees at LS-272 as usual.

On 30 August Air America management disseminated an abbreviated memorandum to other Company stations regarding the flooding:

"The Mekong having dropped Sunday...began rising again...with a further rise in the offing. Mekong River commission computer in Bangkok forecasts rise...just one centimeter short of previous crest. [Measurements] at [LP] and Ban Houei Sai continue to show a rising trend. Since outlying countryside around Vientiane was thoroughly inundated in last week's flooding, it is problematical how much of the new water coming from upcountry can be absorbed without a disproportionate rise.

...is strengthening existing barricades in operations, administration, and technical services buildings to try and contain the rising water, but as [I] noted during our single side-band telecon on 28 August, the water seepage through the walls of these buildings, and the warehouse as well, continues to be a problem. It begins to look as though Air America



Air America ramp Wattay Airport, Vientiane, during the August/September flood. A wading individual (arrow) displays the depth of the water near the Traffic Terminal.

Air America Log Volume 5, Number 8, 1971.



Air America ramp and entrance to the base facility at Wattay Airport.
Air America Log.



With the Mekong River and flat Thai landscape in the background, another view of the Air America facility during the 1971 flooding. Warehouses are to the left of the hangar, Technical Services to the right.

Air America Log.



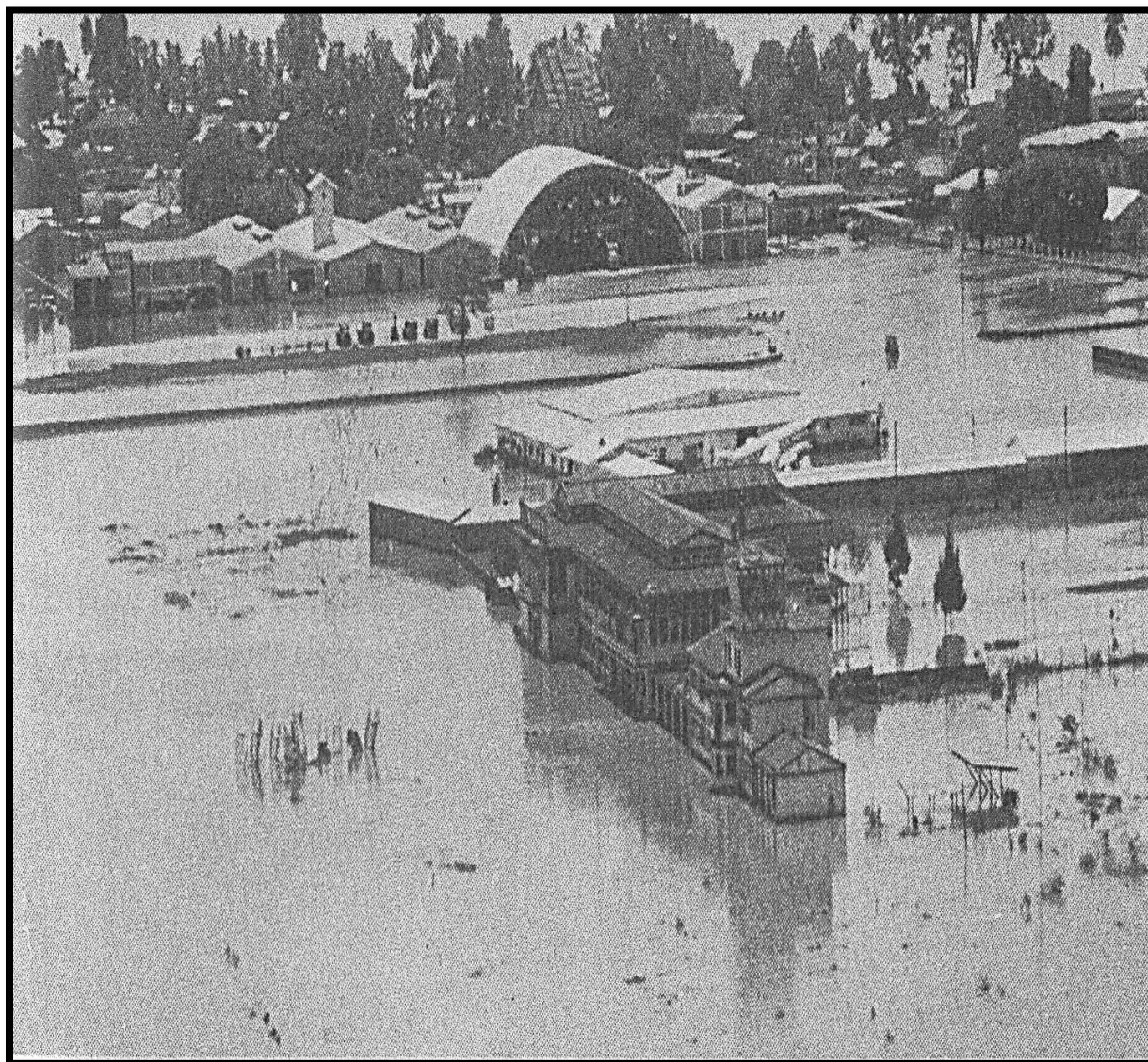
A solitary C-47 aircraft parked in the foreground of a very wet and damp Wattay Airport.

Air America Log.



An overhead view of the flooded Air America facility at Wattay Airport. An eighteen foot ten-man boat (circled) transported employees around the facility.

Air America Log.



An aircraft parked in front of the Wattay commercial airport terminal. The areas would normally be crowded with Air America, CASI, and Lao Air Development planes.

Air America Log.



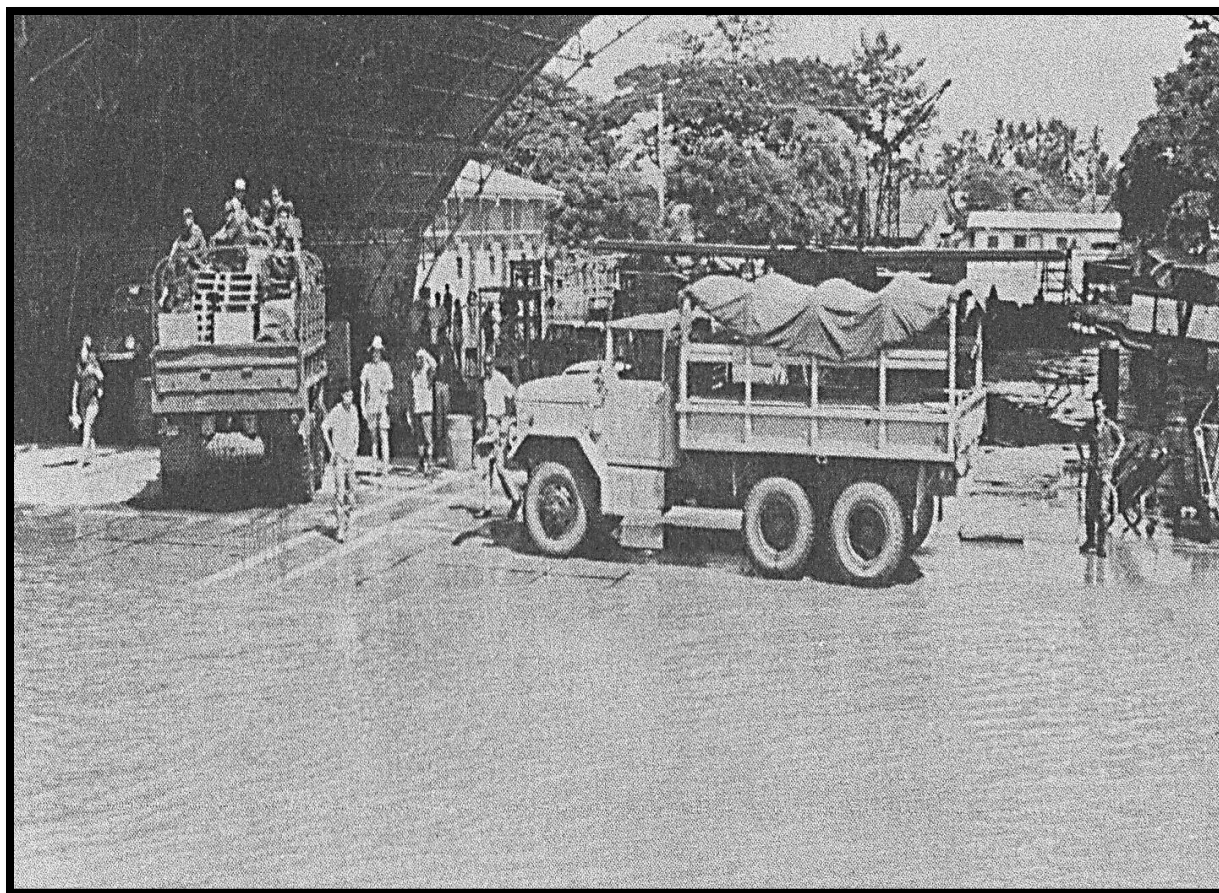
With the surrounding countryside flooded, a portion of the Wattay runway was temporarily used for limited operations. A C-47 departs from the available dry 2,100 hundred feet of Runway-13.

Air America Log.



Air America employees sloshing to work in front of the hangar.
Technical Services building is located to the right.

Air America Log.



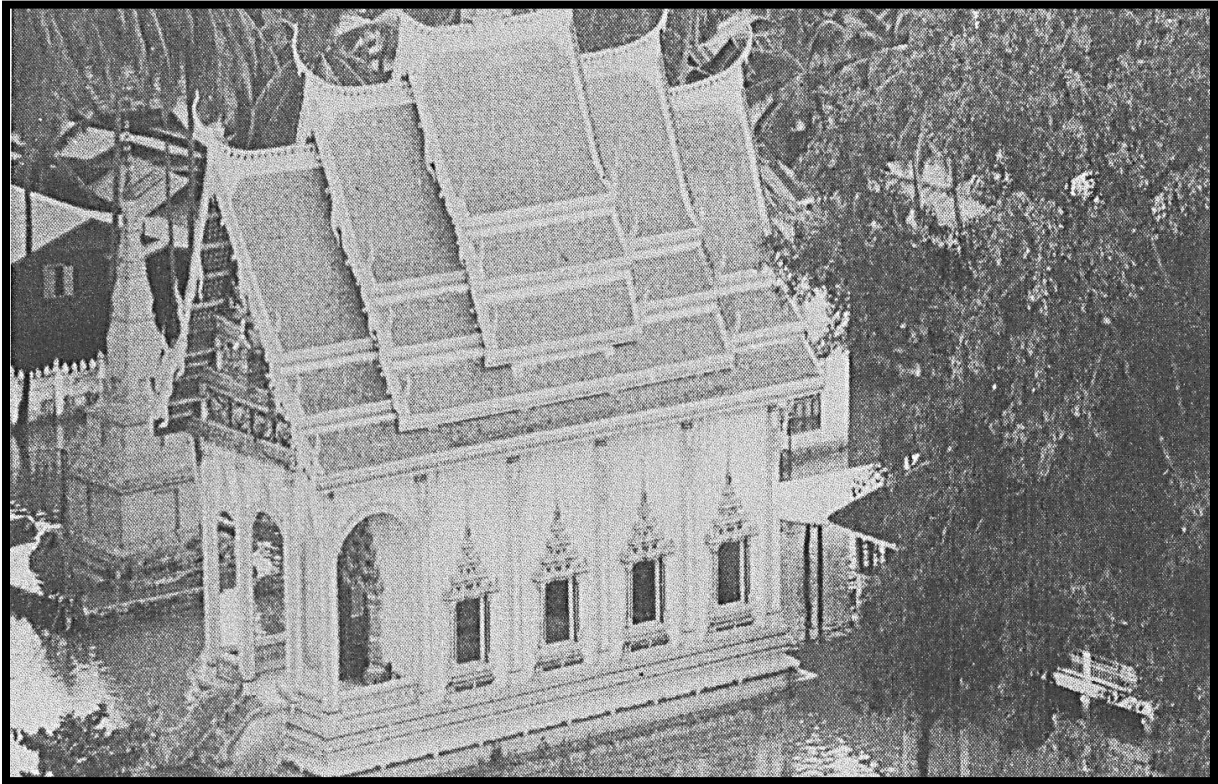
Air America hangar where "Snorkel" type trucks are being loaded for road delivery of personnel and equipment to facilities, planes, or rice north to LS-272.

Air America Log.



As during the 1966 flood, helicopter operations continued from the spacious and elevated That Luang complex.

Air America Log.

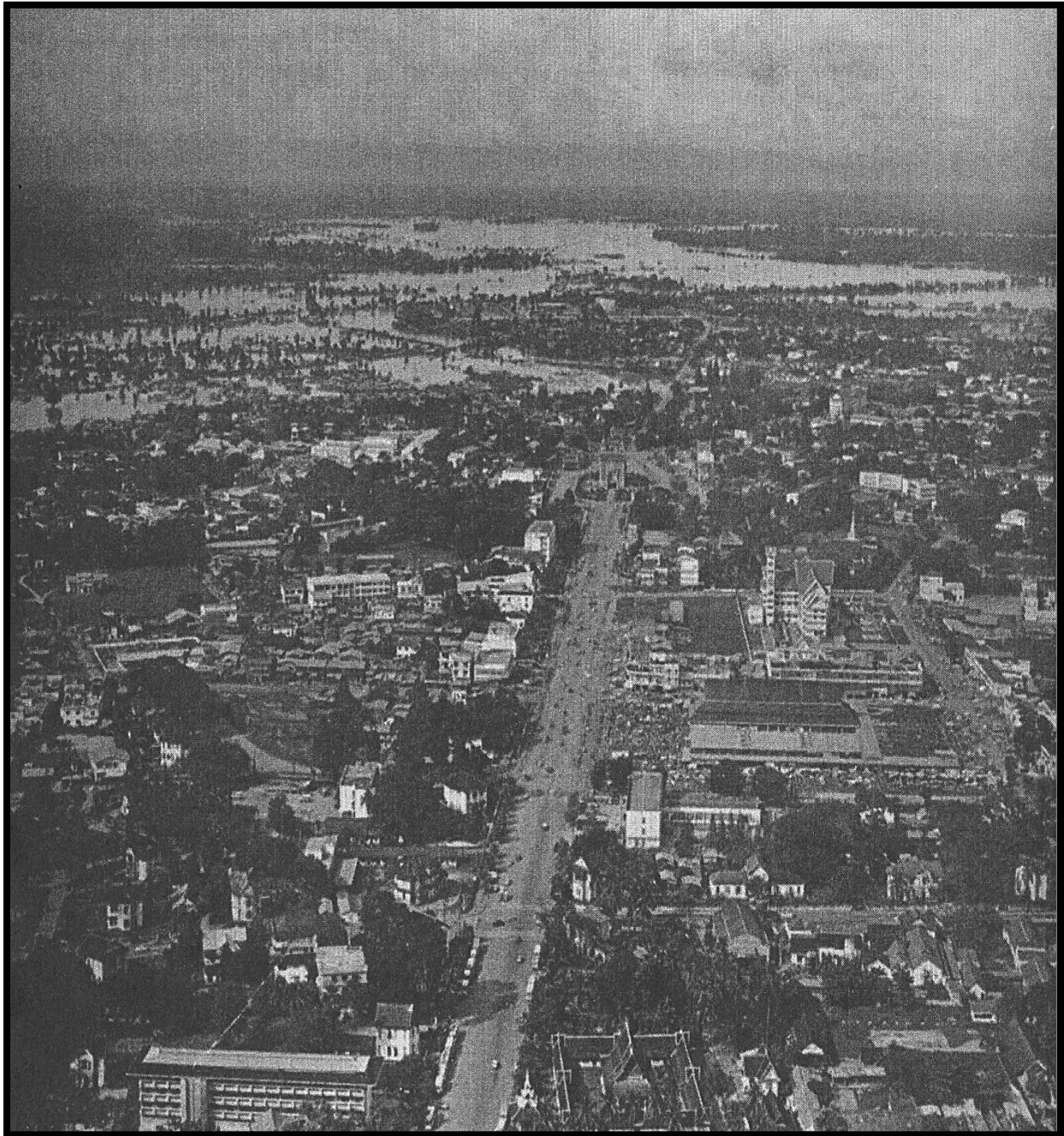


Wat Tay the Buddhist temple for which the airport was named. The building was located a few hundred yards off the end of Runway-13
Air America Log.

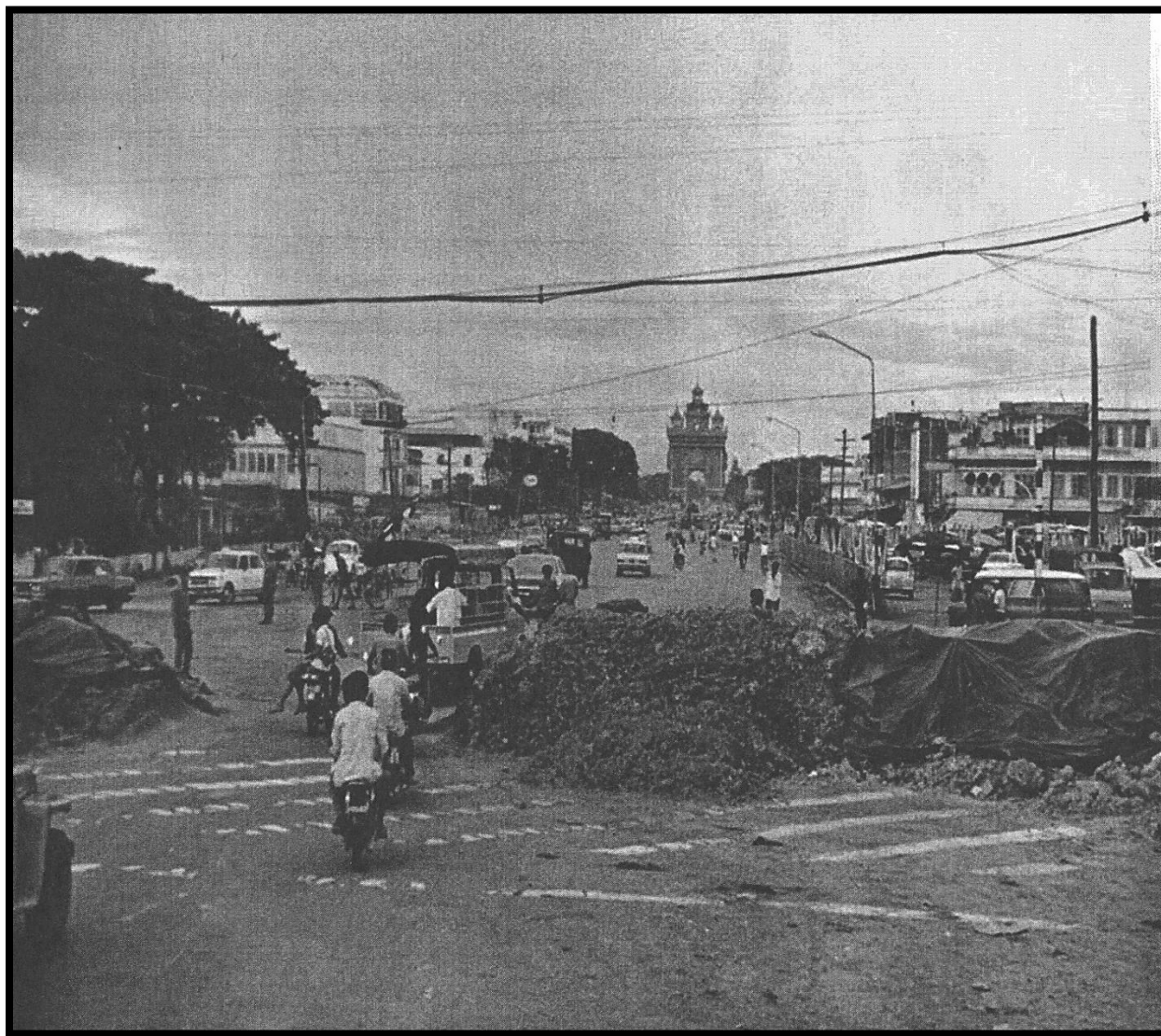


A riverside view of the swollen Mekong River. Arrow points to the Lan Xang Hotel.

Air America Log.



Looking north up Lang Xang Avenue toward the Monument of the Dead. The U.S Embassy and associated buildings are located to the left of the Monument. Middle right, generally protected by dikes, city and morning market commercial operations continued operating.

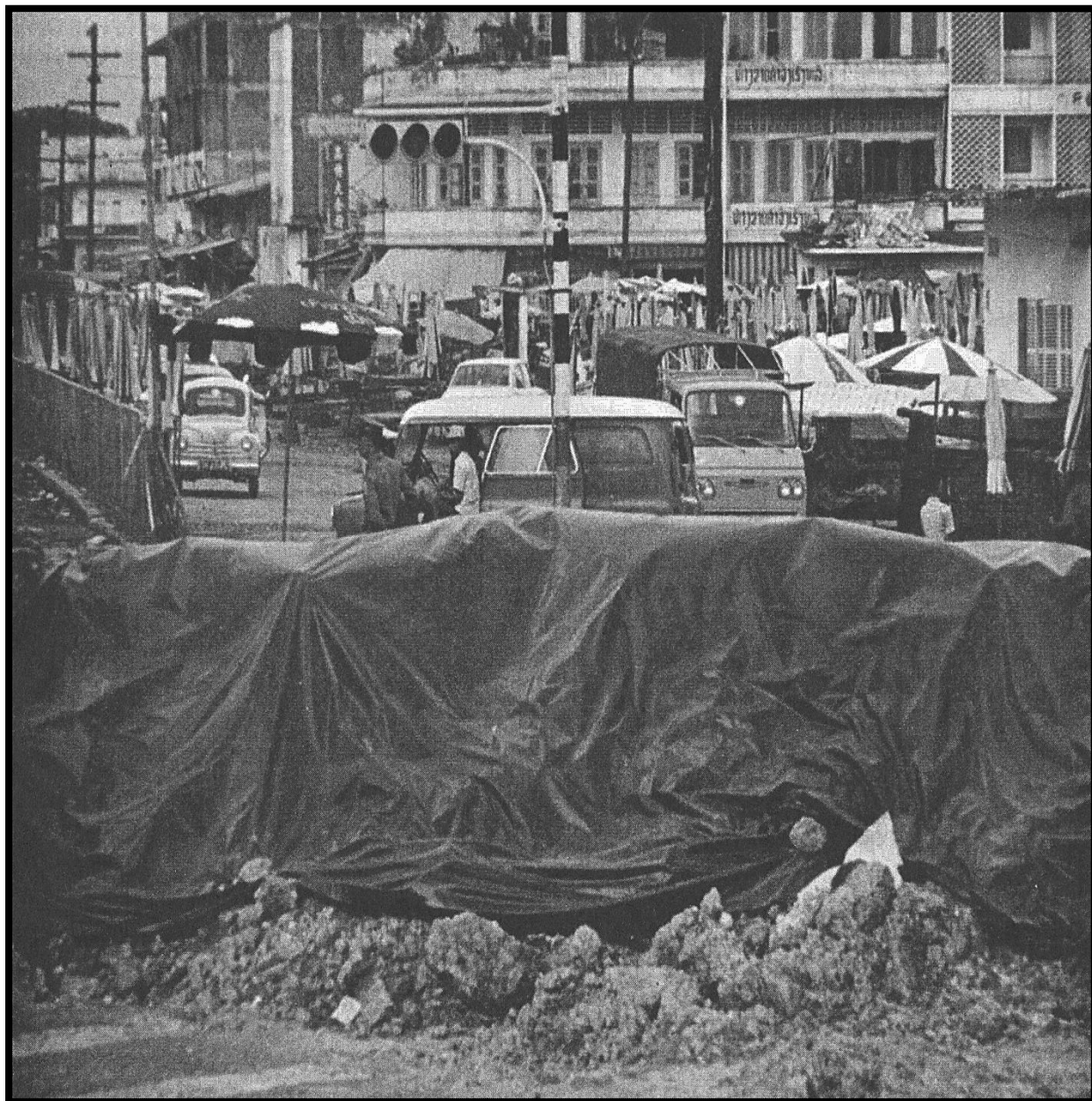


A secondary system of earthen dikes was erected in the city center to protect the morning market and government buildings.
USAID photo.



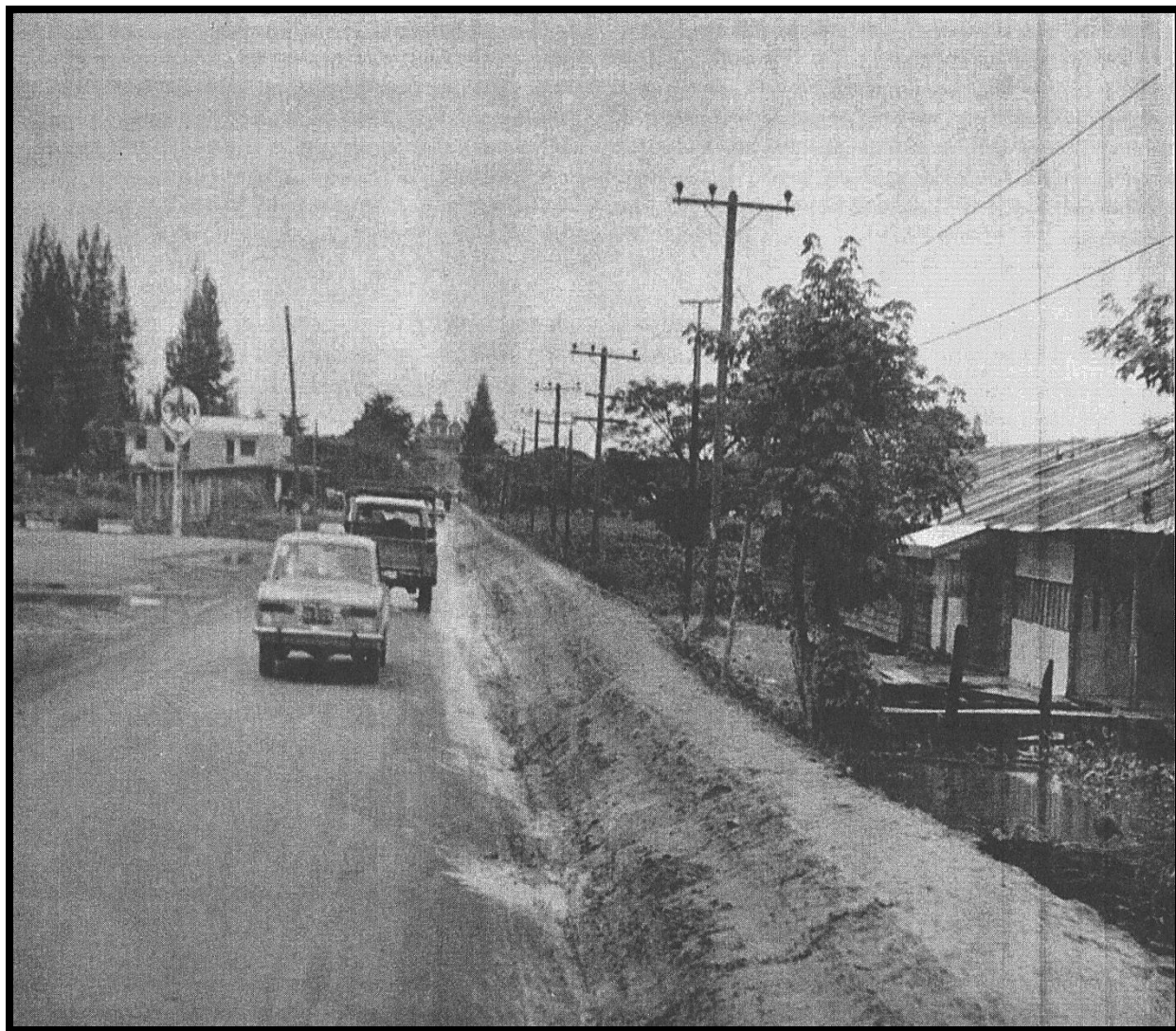
Southerly view of Vientiane's center. The American Embassy and USAID buildings are seen in center photo.

USAID Photo, 08/25/71.

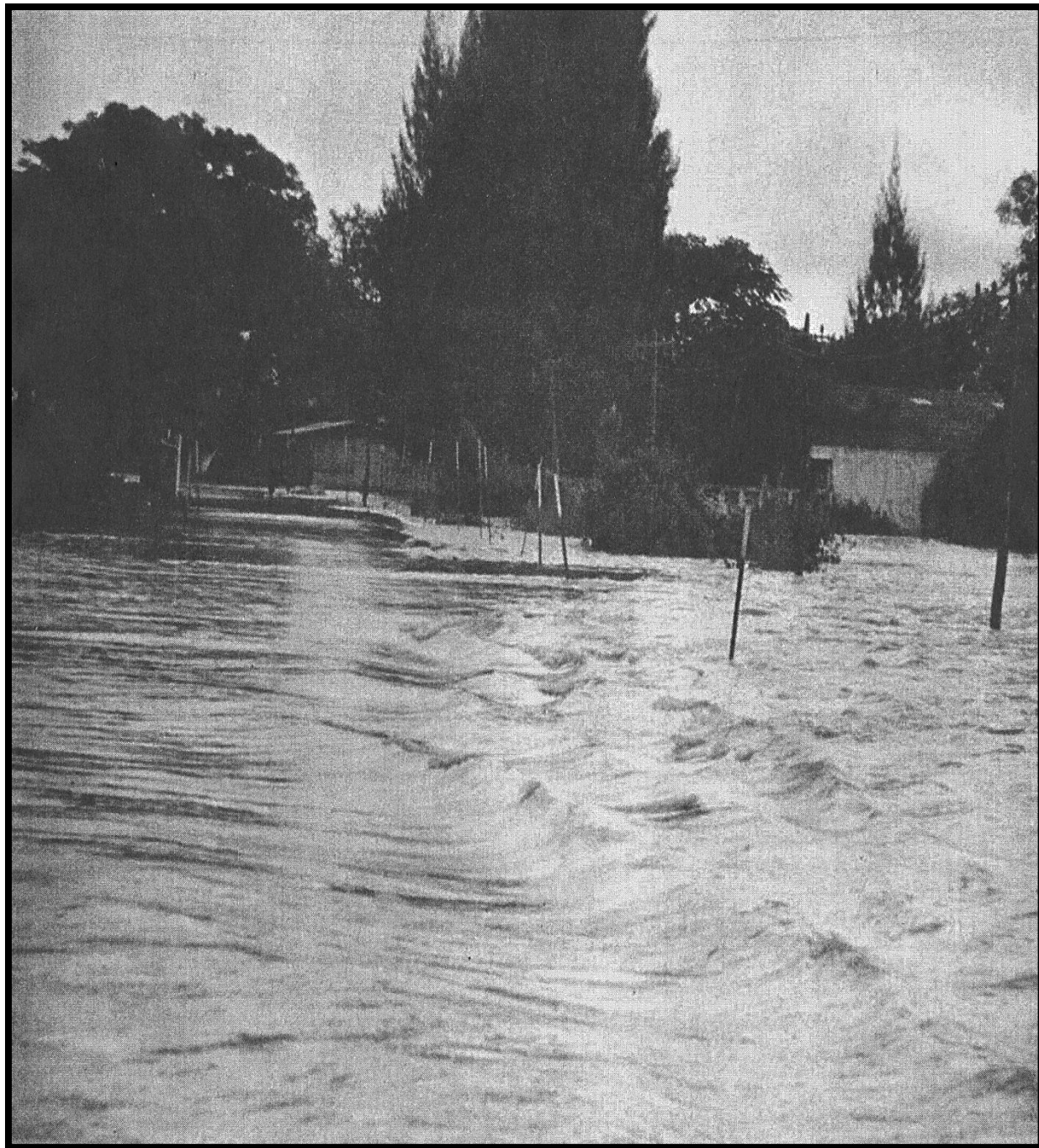


Hastily erected laterite earthen dikes covered by plastic sheeting were erected in the Vientiane city center.

USAID Photo.



Earthen dikes lined main roads in mid-city Vientiane.
USAID photo.



A turbulent flooded Vientiane street.
USAID photo.



Eleven days after the Wattay Airport runway flooded, substantial drainage permitted limited STOL air operations from 1,600 feet of the upper strip.

USAID photo.

headquarters at Phone Kheng house may well have to continue beyond the 15 September estimated termination period of last week. The prospect of renewed full-scale air operations from Wattay also appears farther in the distance than before rising began again. Commercial air operations into Wattay will have to be postponed accordingly.

As of last weekend, we had slightly over 300 people sent to Udorn to support and conduct Air America air operations and the 777 contract commitments. It should be noted that traffic has done an excellent job, assisted by Udorn staff. During the month of August thus far, a new record for rice movement has been set despite obvious handicaps. Both XW-PBW and XW-PBV have been pressed into service for rice drops to the exclusion of their other missions.

One bright spot is that local weather is sunny and pleasant, with only local rain showers in the afternoon and early evening." ²⁸

6 September.

"The Mekong continues a slow drop, although the airfield is still taking water. [The water is] knee high at the main gate...We expect the water level to return to flood stage, which should free both the runway and taxiways from flowing water.

Laos is generally under the influence of a southeasterly flow from the Pacific, as opposed to a southwesterly flow, so the general outlook is rather favorable.

[Water] seepage through walls of administration and operations buildings continues and both are being pumped out

²⁸ Sources:
Air America September 1971 Log.
Blaine Jensen Letter.
Air America Base Manager Vientiane, Mekong River Status, 08/30/71.

daily. Maintenance has been using time to repair and rehabilitate all ground handling equipment at Wattay including work stands, tugs and other four wheeled equipment...Expect it will be some time before AAM club can reopen.

In view of general improvement of local conditions, I will reduce the frequency of reports to once weekly barring unforeseen developments." ²⁹

The entire operation returned to an almost normal routine by the middle of September.

²⁹ Air America Base Manager Vientiane, *Mekong River Status*, 09/06/71.

Three weeks after seizing Saravane airstrip and the surrounding area, Savannaket's GM-31 SGU regiment was ordered to march west, clear Route-16 for ten plus miles, and then turn south toward Lao Ngam in the Bolovens foothills. The four battalions entered Lao Ngam on 2 September, occupying the town site and old airport. Despite being the target of enemy probes and shelling attacks, the task force patrolled the area to locate enemy positions and supply caches as targets for tactical air strikes. ¹

The unit remained in the area until early October. With enemy pressure increasing, and their field assignment in Military Region Four already past the intended two-month period, a company deserted and returned to Pakse. The remainder of the regiment was promised relocation home by 6 October, when FAN replacement battalions would arrive to take their place. However, when only a few companies showed up, the disillusioned regiment walked back to Pakse for transportation home. ²

HIGH DRAMA AND A MIRACLE IN A UH-34D

On 3 September, an incident occurred in Military Region Four that was not only a first in helicopter history that anyone could recall past or present, but one also considered not humanly survivable.

Captains Frank Stergar, Tony Byrne, and Flight Mechanic Steve Sickler (DOH 10/14/70) were crewing Hotel-39, a Sikorsky built helicopter Frank had ferried from Bangkok to Udorn in 1966

¹ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 09/07/71.

² Ken Conboy, 307.

as an addition to the Air America inventory. ³ The crew was assigned to work for a relatively new Savannakhet Customer John Hurd, GM-31 Case Officer (code named Boun), who was temporarily located at Ban Koutlamphong (LS-447, PS-47), north of Khong Sedone (LS-289) on Route-13, to monitor his regiment. Seasoned Savannakhet Case Officer Don Courtney (code named Thanh Chert), recently returned from ninety days home leave, which included advanced mid-career training, ⁴ was also assigned there, as a Case Officer without portfolio by Savannakhet Chief of Unit (COU), Gordon Dibble, to help mentor Hurd and obtain a feel for the current battlefield situation. ⁵

Friday morning, during an air-ground reconnaissance, Lieutenant Colonel Kham Phou informed the two Case Officers that Chommany's 310 Battalion was receiving incoming mortar fire. However, the rounds failed to impact the landing zone located at a road intersection on the old, abandoned Lao Ngam airstrip, which was overgrown with head-high elephant grass and secondary growth bushes.

Two to three helicopter lifts were planned to Lao Ngam that day. The first flight would deliver a "Four Deuce" mortar tube

³ Frank Stergar performed as the Author's copilot during a failed and traumatic 20 June 1965 SAR attempt to rescue a downed USAF F-4C pilot in the Na San/Son La valley region of North Vietnam.

⁴ Don Courtney, *Ration of Luck*, Chapter-16, 147. Don was the only Special Operations Officer in the class. Several speakers from various venues provided updates on current Agency activity. One individual, a headquarters type, touted the Meo as the only force holding back communists in Laos. As the southern SGU units were doing considerably more than their share of fighting and helping the Meo in Military Region Two, this declaration caused Don considerable heartburn.

⁵ Don and I served in the same company during the 1957 20th Officer Candidate Course USMC training at Quantico, Virginia, and later in 1958 roomed together at the Officer's Basic School in the reservation's expansive boondocks. After the Marine Corps Don joined the Agency, and we occasionally brushed shoulders both in Udorn and upcountry.

and base plate that had arrived from Savannakhet. ⁶ A six-man 4.2mm mortar crew would accompany the equipment, set up, and service the unit. Four Pathet Lao ralliers would also be lifted to Lao Ngam to serve as guides. In addition, two radio operators and ten men recently recovered from malaria would be returned to field duty.

Both Case officers planned to accompany the first lift. They would remain on the ground until the final lift, discussing the current situation and future plans with Kham Phou.

During a Customer-crew briefing regarding the lifts, the recent incoming mortar fire at the site was revealed. However, it was explained that the indirect-fire weapons were located too far afield to accurately strike the HLZ. Seasoned and experienced combat aviators, Frank and Tony were anxious to get started and agreed to performing the mission and that it did not merit an air escort. (Some helicopter pilots were air cover crazy at the time, mostly to justify extra hazardous pay.)

The heavy mortar pieces were loaded, but three of the crew were still in the village. Two were boarded, while the third trooper was dispatched to the ville to muster the men for the second flight. Instead, the four Pathet Lao ralliers were substituted. As a result, there was no room for Tony, Hurd's indigenous interpreter-operations assistant, who planned to arrive on a later flight.

At a reasonable distance from the site, Frank established contact with the unit radio operator. A CASI Porter pilot had already located the landing zone, established contact, and was in the process of air dropping supplies on the pre-established signal panel. In his opinion the area was safe.

⁶ The 4.2-inch mortar tube had a rifled barrel, weighed 332 pounds, and launched a twenty-three-pound high explosive round to a maximum range of 4,400 yards, and 563 yards effective range.

As Frank approached the stomped down elephant grass landing zone from the south, Don noted that friendly positions to the east appeared devoid of troops.

When Frank touched down, Don jumped out the cabin door and began assisting the mortar unloading, while John wandered to the west side of the strip in order to find Kham Phou. During the process, eighteen or so lightly wounded troops arrived and mobbed Hotel-39. This was a new and surprising revelation, for no one had previously mentioned WIA. They were successfully fended off until the mortar was on the ground.

At this time, Hurd and Operations Assistant/Forward Air Guide (FAG), Khamai, returned to the helicopter out of breath. They pointed to the right, excitedly indicating the bad guys were very close, and shouting they had better immediately depart.

With more Lao soldiers clamoring to leave, six lightly wounded troops, or malingerers, were loaded along with the two Customers and Khamai.

Using maximum power, Frank launched over tall grass to the north. Intending to spiral up to above 1,500 feet AGL before establishing a heading toward PS-47, he commenced a climbing right turn to the east, intending to turn back over the position and continue to climb over the friendly area to avoid small arms fire. Unknown to the experienced Stergar, he had breached the theoretical perimeter airspace and turned directly over the enemy. Don knew approximately where the enemy were located, but had no easy way to communicate with or appraise Frank of this fact. ⁷

⁷ After the incident, Courtney never boarded an UH-34D without a personal headset.

About a thousand feet southeast of the landing zone at a low altitude, Don heard a loud pop that he was unable to immediately identify, but it occurred to him that because of their location, they were probably under attack. Then a spattering of small arms fire was heard from below, including a four-round burst of automatic fire that was not considered very close. The initial round entered the ship through the open cabin door. It passed between Courtney and Sickler, upward into the sound suppressing covering. Maintaining velocity, it penetrated the overhead honeycomb and struck what was later believed to be the "fail-safe"-three-way hydraulic valve mounted on the right transmission deck. ⁸

At first Stergar thought the fire had originated from a friendly troop disgruntled at not being allowed into the helicopter.

As in most emergency situations, events occurred quickly. The collective and cyclic controls stiffened and the automatic stabilization equipment (ASE) unit failed, indicating that the auxiliary servo system had been rendered inoperative. ⁹ Since there was a redundancy of two incorporated into the hydraulic system, and the primary servo system was still working, Frank elected to continue to climb to 2,500 feet and establish a general heading for Khong Sedone.

Reinforcing the realization that they had incurred battle damage, red hydraulic fluid emitting a conspicuous odor began seeping through the small hole in the overhead, dripping on and soaking Steve Sickler's shoulder, and eventually travelling to

⁸ Additional battle damage was most likely incurred, but there was little time or incentive to examine the ship after the horrific landing.

⁹ Auxiliary pressure was provided by a pump operated from the engine; primary hydraulic pressure emanated from a separate pump run off the transmission.

his lap. Steve did not move to avoid the mess which Don thought most unusual. ¹⁰

Simultaneously, Tony Byrne issued a blanket call in the blind for help on 119.1, the standard Air America VHF radio frequency. Almost immediately he established contact with Captain Harold Thompson (Harold was known for always carrying an umbrella) in Hotel-44, who was also working in the area. Thompson immediately began flying in their direction. As Tony was explaining their plight to Harold, he remarked to Stergar in his unusual, feminine voice, "*We are losing our primary servo system!*" Frank glanced at the console-mounted number one hydraulic pressure gage. Disconcertingly, the needle flickered twice and "went south" to zero. It was time for introspection and prayer for divine help.

Without the 1,500-psi servo boost pressure provided by the dual hydraulic systems to relieve the enormous flight stresses generated by the whirling rotor system, manual manipulation of the pure mechanical linkage of a myriad of push-pull rods and bell cranks was the only remote possibility of controlling pitch and roll forces in an H-34--and this action had been universally considered physically impossible. Poignantly, no one had ever previously encountered such a rare event and lived to tell the tale. It was believed that the rapidly moving forces produced vectors too arduous for one or even two humans to overcome.

Designed as an ultimate fail-safe component, the three-way hydraulic valve was considered inviolate by Sikorsky engineers: both hydraulic systems could or would **never** fail at the same time. There would never be a problem. Of course, the brainy draftsmen and engineers failed to factor crippling battle damage

¹⁰ Flight Mechanic Steve Sickler was a short, stocky, jovial type who drank a lot in the Air America bar.

to the system or component into their equation. Our instructors and senior pilots in the Corps all agreed it was virtually impossible to lose both servos, but in the highly unlikely possibility of this occurring, there was no recourse but an unsavory death. Naturally, since such an eventuality could ever happen, there was no published or unwritten emergency procedure for a dual failure. ¹¹

Restricted to fifty knots indicated airspeed (IAS) because of the auxiliary system loss, the aircraft had only flown about six miles from Lao Ngam, when it suddenly lurched to the left and pitched up uncontrollably and alarmingly into an unusual attitude. Straining against the restraining straps, Frank was lifted to the limit of his lap belt and shoulder harness, as the collective rose. The ship almost performed a Chandelle while seized linkages attempted to throw the ship onto its back. Instrument panel monitoring dissolved in a blur, and the helicopter commenced a shaking, climbing left turn. Sickler looked up from his Flight Mechanic's seat next to the cabin door into the cockpit and observed everything a blur.

Aware that they were in serious trouble, down below everyone began looking for a seatbelt for security. Don could only find half a belt, which he tightly held across his body. He attempted to brace for a crash with his right arm and legs. Compounding the problem, a passenger leaped up and began rushing toward the open cabin door. Don grabbed the individual and threw him backward toward the rear. ¹²

¹¹ Despite any seemingly unsolvable problem, Americans do not give up; displaying an innate will to survive, they innovate.

¹² While still in the Corps, the same thing occurred to the Author during a partial engine failure nine miles east of Udorn. Ten Thai soldiers rushed for the open cabin door while we were cruising at 700 feet, but Crew Chief Winters managed to push them back in their seats.

Frank was a generation removed from most of us old timers. However, despite his age (born in 1925), Frank was a fit, physically strong individual. With no options, and employing superhuman strength, he pushed forward and right on the cyclic, while at the same time stiff-arming the collective, trying to force it down. After Hotel-39 reached a reasonably level position, the vicious cycle commenced again. This occurred three times. The third gyration was the worst. Not only did the ship pitch up, roll to the left, but it started down and accelerated into a spin. If it had not been for the seat belt Frank would have been lifted to the top of the cockpit. The pilots collectively believed they were going to die and Frank never expected to recover aircraft control. ¹³

But he did. After managing to level the ship for a third time, Frank gained sufficient control to continue west in a shallow descent. However, pitch and roll vectors remained almost uncontrollable, and he was only able to continue level flight by maintaining a reasonable forward airspeed. Beyond caring about engine and transmission parameters, the Captain kept the engine running by manipulating the throttle grip. Using only small power applications he encountered no problem with tail rotor pedal yaw control. He took satisfaction that Thompson was en route to intercept them.

After additional wrestling, Frank realized he would never have enough strength to reach either the Done River or Kong

¹³ Hydraulic failures were never fun. The Author experienced two while in the Marine Corps; one onboard ship and another in the Philippines. A serious one occurred in a Bell 204B, only equipped with a single hydraulic system, while landing with a load of troops at Bouam Long. The controls froze and with the aircraft attempting to roll over to the left, it was almost impossible to manipulate them. A landing of sorts was effected only by sheer will power and adrenalin induced extraordinary strength that came from somewhere deep within.

Sedone, so he elected to attempt landing at any available place straight west from where they encountered the problem. Observing a large field ahead, he began a slightly steeper descent. Nearing the site, he judged the ship would roll over after landing, so he elected to land into the trees to remain upright.

Just prior to settling into the trees he told Tony to turn off the fuel switch. Misunderstanding the order, Byrne switched off the magneto switch. At this point, Frank eased up on the cyclic/collective pressure allowing the collective to rise to the full upright position. The H-34 began to pitch up and decelerate nicely, settling vertically into the trees with little or no ground speed. (Remember the aviator's adage: airspeed kills.) Contact with the trees caused rotor blades to shatter and shed, and without lift the helicopter went into a ten-foot freefall. The uncontrolled falling-leaf nightmare was nearly over.

As the helicopter settled into the trees, Don would later recall the whap-whap-whap sound of rotor blades contacting tree limbs and trunks.

The landing was very hard. Rotor blades wrapped around trees, the landing gear collapsed, tearing the air/oil oleo struts from the fuselage attaching points. This possibly contributed to a somewhat reduced "G" force and no one being severely injured or killed. Still, the flimsy aluminum tube and canvas bucket seats crumpled, resulting in some back injuries. Frank wore a large knife on his right hip, which wrenched loose and pierced the fuselage. Although it seemed like an eternity, less than five minutes had elapsed since the aircraft had begun the unusual and disconcerting airborne gyrations. ¹⁴

¹⁴ The helicopter crashed at coordinates XC1119, eight miles south southeast of Ban Saphat, and about eight miles northwest of Lao Ngam.



Hotel-39 resting in the trees after a crash landing caused by the complete hydraulic failure.

Courtney Collection.



Hotel-39 with the right transmission inspection deck down revealing to the Flight Mechanic a battle damaged "failsafe" three-way hydraulic valve. Splayed and ruined rotor blades display the extent of damage.

Courtney Collection.



Hotel-39 showing a rotor blade wrapped around a tree.
Courtney Collection.

Momentarily dazed, Don Courtney was badly injured but thoroughly amazed they were still alive. From his prone position on the floorboards, he noted blood dripping from between his eyes. His tongue discovered a gap between his teeth where two teeth had formerly been. Yet unknown and manifested later, in bracing for the crash, Don had torn knee ligaments. Furthermore, during uncontrolled pirouettes, the coccyx bone at the base of his spine fractured. He later reflected that he would have likely incurred fewer injuries if he had laid flat on the floor boards.

Seconds after the crash Don rolled out the door, which was then only about four inches above ground level. True to form, when the aircraft came to rest, panicked Lao troops scampered over the Case Officer's back and moved rapidly away from the ship. As Don began to rise painfully to his knees, he heard someone shout to put some distance between themselves and the ship in the event it caught fire or exploded. Concerned that he would not have the wherewithal to survive should they be required to conduct escape and evasion, he reentered Hotel-39 to retrieve his rifle and sack of personal items. Despite his injuries, he dragged these twenty feet to a clearing.

John Hurd had not appeared outside the aircraft. Tony, Frank, and Khamai, who were already standing in the adjoining field, ran back to the machine to check his status. John was discovered unconscious on the collapsed bench seat. Attempting to extricate him, Khamai lifted Hurd's shoulders, Tony pulled his right leg, Frank his left, without success. Concerned and wanting to help, Don climbed onto the pilots' backs, looked down between them and observed that John's buckled seatbelt was pulled up under his armpits. He quickly reached down and flipped the silver-toned quick-release catch, freeing John from the restraint.

While Thompson was inbound to the field, and Hurd was being ushered away from the ship, Frank removed his survival radio from his survival vest, switched it on, and herded everyone into the open. ¹⁵ Then he gave Sickler the preset radio and returned to the H-34 to retrieve his marked chart and logbook. He crawled up the right side of the lowered fuselage and stared into the cockpit, not believing the state of the controls. Tony's cyclic was in the upright normal position, but Frank's cyclic control was bent far forward. Danger prevailed, so there was no time to assess either detailed battle or crash damage to Hotel-39.

Hurd, now semi-recovered, walked to Don and asked where they were and what was going on. He was obviously not completely capable of comprehending the situation and kept repeating the same questions. Realizing his stressed condition, and attempting to be patient, Don tried to placate him.

Then the chugging of an H-34 was heard. Sickler fired an ineffective Very pistol round. More success was achieved by activating the day portion of a day/night smoke device. Don had an equal amount of trouble attempting to discharge his pen flare. He had carried the flares for four years, and over time they were probably rendered ineffective.

In what appeared as asset overkill, Twin Otter, Raven, and Hotel-44 pilots simultaneously arrived overhead.

Thompson landed in the clearing. It was past time to leave. They were still all suffering after effects from injuries and some degree of shock from the incident. This resulted in a heated discussion as to who should leave first and who should

¹⁵ Although a cold war warrior, Frank was always conscientious with survival equipment. Most crewmembers had heeded the difficult lesson from the Bob Caron incident north of Luang Prabang, and now wore their vests while flying.



Holding a Company issued survival radio, Captain Frank Stergar attempting to contact H-34 Captain Harold Thompson. To the right, Steve Sickler and Captain Tony Byrne observe.

Courtney Collection.



Steve Sickler holding a smoke flare aloft to indicate a wind direction for Captain Harold Thompson approaching the site in Hotel-44. Captain Tony Byrne to the right discharges a pen flare.

Courtney Collection.

remain at the site until another helicopter crew arrived. The discussion was resolved when Harold told everyone to board. Unaware of when an enemy patrol might arrive, being the heaviest armed individual in the group, Don waited last to board. Inexplicably, Tony, who did not appear hurt but was semi-out of his head, boarded and then jumped out and ran to Hotel-39. For some inexplicable reason, he returned with the wheel chocks.

Working with a heavy load, Thompson hovered to the far end of the field to take advantage of a longer takeoff run in order to achieve translational lift. In the process, he radioed his Filipino Flight Mechanic over the ICS to lighten the load. Out the door went Tony's chocks, the mechanics tool box, and fire extinguisher. For the passengers, it was a scary departure. Even using maximum allowable RPM and manifold pressure, Harold barely managed to clear the treetops.

When Thompson landed at Pakse. Byrne and Sickler were evacuated across the river to the Ubon USAF hospital for a medical examination. Hurd, the operations assistant, and Courtney were driven to a temporary field hospital just outside of town, staffed by competent Filipino doctors and nurses from Operation Brotherhood (OB).¹⁶ The men were diagnosed, temporarily patched up, and returned to the Pakse strip, where they boarded a Porter for Savannakhet. The damage to Don's knee would cause him to employ a walking stick for about a year.

Don Courtney had sufficient time to reflect on the incident's events and their miraculous survival. Partially monitoring the situation from below, as a semi-layman, realizing how lucky they were, Don concluded that only the pilots' muscle power had prevented the aircraft from surging completely out of

¹⁶ Before the Bolovens trouble, the Operation Brotherhood hospital was located at Paksong.

control. From his perspective, it appeared that they forced the collective down while it tried to rise. In doing so they bent a control arm, and also firmly grasped the cyclic stick so it did not begin gyrating wildly around the cockpit to damage knees and legs. He did not know how much useable mechanical advantage was still retained in the control system, but judged there must have been a sufficient amount and the pilots employed every bit to wrestle the machine to the ground. He conjectured that if the cockpit crew had been flying at a higher altitude, they might not have mustered adequate physical energy and had enough aircraft control to land. ¹⁷

A team returning to the crash site the following day to assess the viability of Hotel-39's recovery was unable to land. An unknown number of enemy had already ringed the area with foxholes and bunkers, so the Lima-11 Customer ordered T-28 air strikes to destroy the H-34 along with as many enemy as possible.

Frank Stergar did not escape the incident unscathed. Within a day or two his muscles ached badly from struggling with the cranky controls. However, in good shape from daily exercise, he

¹⁷ Military Region Three Case Officer Don Courtney was eventually assigned to the Nong Saphong (LS-235, listed as Keng Ka Boa in the site book) SGU staging base where some refresher training was conducted, the battalions of local defense troops assembled, obtained proper equipment, and launched on their next operation. Small teams were also marshaled there for long range missions to gather intelligence, capture enemy, mine roads, inspect crash sites, and as pathfinders parachuted into an area before the main force of heliborne forces. This task continued until the Lao ceasefire was declared. After that, Don became the Chief of Operations until the unit was dissolved. He was slated to remain in Military Region Three as the Agency eyes and ears under USAID cover. However, the AID chief in Vientiane recalled his presence from 1963, and because he was considered too well known, would not approve a position. Instead, Don and his family went to live in Udorn, where he commuted to and from Pakse, locating and terminating assets, only retaining a few teams he considered the very best.

had been spared a back injury and high "G" forces on ground impact because of his effort to stiff-arm the collective. This action prevented him from banging into the seat. ¹⁸

Tony Byrne was grounded for two weeks. He spent most of his time in and around the Club Rendezvous pool, pontificating, comically puffing on his pipe, and considering his mortality.

During the accident board investigation in Udorn, Abadie typically remarked that he would never believe a dual hydraulic failure had occurred: no one was ever supposed to survive such an event. ¹⁹ Stergar considered this statement incredible, for he had just survived such a life-threatening malfunction.

¹⁸ The Author had a squadron mate in the Corps who experienced an HUS-1 (H-34) engine failure at night and plunged vertically into the trees. Supposedly, engineers had designed the hard cockpit seats to minimize severe back injuries, but Jack Durrant still incurred an injury.

¹⁹ As there had been insufficient time to conduct a thorough inspection of Hotel-39 and the ship had been destroyed, other than crewmember eyewitness accounts, no positive evidence existed to substantiate or base a causal determination for the incident. However, airborne events following instrument observations and control malfunctions provided circumstantial and relevant evidence that pointed to a fail-safe hydraulic valve malfunction. As impossible as it seems from past history of the H-34, this is what the Author believes occurred that day. There is the remote possibility that a small amount of fluid was trapped in the hydraulic lines or servo system that enabled some minor control function.

Knight Email, Wayne heard about the incident when he returned from school, and failed to believe that both servos were rendered completely inoperative. Later, from his 3 September 72 servo incident when the S-58T flipped on its side on the Udorn parking ramp with Tom Moher, he stated that "ten people could not have possibly held the collective down."

Understandably, he was more than a little miffed. ²⁰

REVELATIONS

An interesting and revealing article composed by leading syndicated conservative journalists Evans and Novak appeared in the *Pensacola Times*, and most likely other national newspapers, later in the month.

Long Tieng Laos:

"Major General Vang Pao now shackled by Washington may soon take his irregular army of Meo tribesmen out of the Lao war-an event of catastrophic dimension for all Indochina. ²¹

At Long Tieng he told us he is nearing the end of the line. If the U.S. Government does not let him resume his offensive in the last remaining month of the monsoon, he cannot defend the PDJ north of here once the NVA invaders begin their dry season offensive.

²⁰ Frank Stergar Tape, Reflections of a Hotel Pilot Air America, 1965-1975: H-34 Dual Hydraulic Failure.

Don Courtney Emails, 08/20/02, 08/21/02, 08/27/02, 08/20/15, 08/21/15, 08/23/15, 04/24/15, 05/19/17 (2).

Author Phone Call to Don Courtney in Montana, 08/19/15.

Courtney, *A Ration of Luck*, Chapter-16, H-39, 3 September 1971, 146-153. Since Don worked from longhand notes recorded within a week of the incident, the Author considered these reflections more valid and reliable than some information that an aging Stergar provided years later.

Air America XOXO, UH-34D, H-39, JD Ford, 09/03/71.

²¹ As part of the package to fight the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese, when Agency operative Bill Lair convinced Vang Pao to join in the defense of Laos during January 1960, he promised Major Vang Pao that if the enemy situation ever became untenable, the U.S would relocate him and his people to the remote mountains of Sayaboury Province to live. Of course, as the war escalated to much greater proportions and refugees proliferated, this became an almost impossible task. Many Lao Theung and Meo refugees had been relocated to the Vientiane plain; tens of thousands more were settled at LS-272.

But this time, he will not fall back as in past years to defend Long Tieng. Instead, he will lead his army and the Meo people out of the war and perhaps Laos.

'If we go, Laos is dead.' It is no exaggeration. Abandoning Long Tieng would mean losing nearly all of northern Laos, quite possibly leading to capitulation by the government in Vientiane—a decisive victory for Hanoi in the generation long [Second] Indochina War.

No longer would four of its divisions be pinned down in Laos; no longer could the U.S. bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail with permission of the Royal Lao Government...

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma asked Vang Pao to slow down, but in fact, Washington's wish was a self-enforcing command. Vang Pao's army, trained by the CIA, depends on U.S military aid. The overt reason for Washington's order was a highly dubious argument by U.S policymakers that VP would somehow provoke Hanoi and disturb possibilities for negotiations. However, the underlying reason was official Washington wilting before incessant congressional attack against fulfilling commitment to Laos.

With his guerrillas now forced into untenable fixed [defensive] positions internal pressures are mounting on Vang Pao. Meo elders tell him they will not spend another dry season defending Long Tieng and want to migrate to Sayaboury in western Laos or cross the frontier into Thailand. ²²

As a Lao national, VP would rather stay and fight. But he feels he cannot ask his people to spill more blood without hope

²² At the end of August Meo clan leaders, concerned at what they perceived as diminished embassy and USG support for their cause, and a never-ending war, convened. Citing an often-used point during times of increased enemy pressure, they threatened to conduct a move to Thailand. Ken Conboy, 302.

of having their own land. Knowing their own homelands are too close to NVN ever to reclaim, he would settle for the PDJ.

Beyond that, his army is tired and under strength, actually some 4,000 below its paper strength of 10,200 [troops] (including many teen-age and even younger boys). In a tragic case of genocide ignored by American liberals, the young Meo manhood has been destroyed by the NVA..." ²³

The U.S. Embassy in Vientiane recognized the seriousness of the problem that could lead to Meo capitulation in Xieng Khouang Province:

"If the Meo suffer losses in the PDJ campaign this year, or if Bouam Long [LS-32] falls to the NVA, massive refugee movements will be generated from north of the PDJ, the Long Tieng area, and the Ban Xon [Son] Valley [LS-272], and impetus behind the Meo desire to pull out of the war completely will grow significantly. If the civilians began to leave Bouam Long. Moung Moc [LS-46], Long Tieng, of Ban Xon, heading west, it would be difficult to prevent his [VP] troops from joining their dependents in a mass exodus from MR-2." ²⁴

MR-2

The USAF AARS crews equipped with Jolly Green helicopters maintained superior rescue capability at both Udorn and Nakhon Phanom. However, because of the proximity of Air America helicopter crews to the action in the Lao Theater, and the need to immediately recover a downed airman before a man was killed or captured, Air America crews continued to participate in SAR work until the end of the war.

²³ Correspondents and celebrated newscasters Evans and Novak, *Pensacola*, [Florida] *News Journal*, 09/26/71.

²⁴ William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 86.

On 2 September a 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS) "Panther Pack", 432nd TRW F4D aircraft (according to USAF account) received serious "small arms damage" ²⁵ while attacking enemy concentrations on the northern Plain of Jars near Ban Len (Ban Lin from the map), located between Route-71 and Nam The. With the Phantom burning, both pilot and weapons system officer ejected and were somewhat incapacitated after landing.

The Bell 205 crew, consisting of Captain Ted Cash, Wayne Lannin, and Flight Mechanic Willy Parker (DOH 09/15/66), was conducting a resupply mission when an F-4 jet was noticed in the area. Later, they observed a ball of flame that Wayne said must have been a napalm drop. A short time later the unmistakable tone of an emergency beeper was heard over the airwaves.

H-34 Captain Don Henthorn and Flight Mechanic Ernie Cortez (DOH 07/05/65) were also working in the area. Homing on the UHF signal, the two crews immediately responded, heading north, using heavy smoke in the downed area for a backup fix. Cash arrived first, identified, and landed close to back seater Captain Ron Fitzgerald. Parker jumped out to assist him onboard, but even though conscious, Fitzgerald was incoherent. The man was too heavy for Parker to lift, so Lannin departed his left cockpit seat to help and both crewmen carried and placed him in the helicopter. Air America had achieved two more "Pluckees." ²⁶

About the same time, Henthorn landed and Cortez lifted PIC Major Jim Compton into the H-34 cabin section.

²⁵ The USAF account was slightly skewed. Bill Leary's September 1971 Notes and interview of the incident with eyewitness, former Air America Flight Mechanic Willy Parker. Parker stated that he heard a hung bomb dropped late, and fragments from the blast created the problem. Some of the narrative included is Parker's.

²⁶ Pluckee: A term adopted in 1965 by Captain Phil Goddard to describe USAF airmen rescued by Air America crews.

Continuously under fire, both crews were only on the ground for three minutes and were not hit. It was later considered quite fortunate that the rapid response did not allow the enemy time to organize and move into the downed area in force.

Still receiving groundfire, the helicopter pilots departed and delivered the men to a friendly site, where a Porter pilot waited to fly them to Long Tieng. After a USAF surgeon attended to their injuries, the two men were ferried to Udorn onboard a C-123.

A glowing commendation for the crews' action under combat conditions was later received by the Base Manager, CJ Abadie. Part of the missive stated:

"There is no doubt that their prompt, heroic action saved two lives that day. We will long remember and be grateful for their actions. We all hope that we may be of help if Air America crews ever face a similar test."

In addition to the kudos, the helicopter crews were invited to a party at the Udorn USAF officers mess.²⁷

Some USAF AIRA and 7/13th leaders, constantly concerned that Washington's political considerations were placing undue restrictions on Vang Pao's Plain of Jars operation, were pressured to increase dwindling air assets.

Shelling attacks, ground probes, and skirmishes occurred along the perimeter of the Plain. This forced irregulars to abandon outposts both northeast and southeast of the Plaine,

²⁷ LTC Charles Collins, Department of the Air Force, *Rescue of Downed F-4 Aircrew*, 09/08/71.

Author Note: It was acceptable to receive some recognition from USAF sources, but it would have been equally suitable to have reported correct facts.

The commendation appeared in the November 1984 Air America Club paper. Minor information came from *Project Get Out and Walk* that was crafted to briefly describe aircraft ejections.

without changing major positions. ²⁸ This prompted one general, on 9 September, to message:

"In the absence of any friendly offensive, the enemy will continue to be reinforced and will gain the offensive as the wet season draws to a close. Undetermined attempts will be made to dislodge friendly forces in the northwest and southeast portions of the PDJ and force them to withdraw to the south. This will put pressure on the high ground positions of Phou Theung and Phou Keng. Friendly forces will be on the defensive and will attempt to hold their present positions relying on strong support from artillery and Tacair, while friendly forces are stronger than they have been in the past due to the presence of new battalions and artillery support, it remains to be seen whether an all-out defense of friendly positions will be undertaken..." ²⁹

The enemy continued holding portions of the Plain of Jars northern reaches. Anticipating near term attacks in force, the government buildup continued. During early September, additional Thai forces and heavy weapons were shuttled forward from Long Tieng and Ban Na to bolster firebase positions. Two more fire bases were established; one at Stingray on Phu Seu's twin mounts and another at Panther on the Plain at the Ban Thang strip. With a mix of 105mm and 155mm guns, most of the seven interlocking firebases on both the high and low ground not only possessed the capability of protecting each other, but of hurling 155 high explosive shells toward areas of contention far to the north toward the Lat Bouak junction, and east toward Xieng Khouang Ville.

²⁸ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 09/07/71.

²⁹ William Lofgren, CHECO, 81, 82

Several measures were effected to enhance and provide maximum support to the thousands of Thai soldiers on the Plain of Jars.

Despite the ongoing monsoon, later in the month both Moung Phanh (L-106) and Lat Sen (LS-276) airfields were graded and compacted so C-123 STOL planes could deliver supplies necessary to keep the fire bases and troops in business. Front line Meo defenders were not particularly effective, allowing enemy patrols to freely move about the area. Attracted by the FSBs and noisy airfield work, on the 30th, Vietnamese sappers conducted an attack on Moung Phanh. By mid-October a FAR company was dispatched to Site-106 to commence area clearing operations.

Since the Thai battalions had proliferated, it was decided to train additional Thai English speaking civilians (FAGs) and assign one to each battalion to enhance "close" air support on the Plain of Jars and Vang Pao defense line.

Four weeks of ground school, in proper ground/air communications to ABCCC planes, and the operation of PRC-25 and 77 transceiver radios, was standard instruction in Udorn by USAF types seconded to AB-1. Then seven-day realistic training commenced to the west of Udorn around Nong Bu Long Phu in the Phu Phan Mountains. After that, if not immediately assigned to an upcountry battalion, to obtain additional English skills, the men were farmed out to various places like Pitts Camp to work as interpreters for Special Forces trainers. ³⁰

Long desired by DHEP's people in Udorn to service Unity forces medevacs, Bell UH-1D gunships were sanctioned for use by

³⁰ Billy Club: While visiting my wife's relatives in Udorn during January/February 1995 the Author met former FAG Billy Club at the Godnoma Compound on Soi Mahamit, where my family and I had lived from 1965 to 1967. Billy Club went to Long Tieng in 1972 and served as a FAG at the Delta November pad at Sam Tong. He admitted that he was afraid, but was compelled to earn money for his family.

USG and obtained from U.S. Army South Vietnamese stocks. The program, known as White Horse, was honchoed by old Lao hand Major Bob Moberg, who was formerly known as "Jack the FAC" when he worked for AIRA at Mounng Soui. As mounted weapons on Air America helicopters were still sensitive issues, Thai pilots were transitioned to the UH-1M helicopters. When deemed ready, White Horse crews, with Moberg or another AIRA pilot along, proceeded daily to Ban Son to conduct medevac missions. ³¹

THE FAMILY RETURNS TO SOUTHEAST ASIA

Early in the month I began tying up loose ends in preparation for the trip back to Thailand. I wrote checks to interested parties, we purchased clothes for the boys, and difficult items to obtain like toothpaste. Packing was always a challenge.

It was always sad to leave my elderly parents and was even sadder when Dad dropped us off at Newark Airport on the sixth. I know that our departure left a large void in their lives, for he later wrote to his good friends:

"Things are quite normal again in this household with Dick and his family gone for another year. It was quite hectic with a lively five-year-old and a more rambunctious two-and-a-half-year terror, who by the way is an accomplished engineer. Anything that could come apart, Pete could handle and surprisingly put it together again. Troublesome? Yes, but we miss them."

Because of the time change, we arrived at Haneda Airport, Tokyo on the eighth. The worst trip imaginable continued when we experienced a temporary problem obtaining connections to Bangkok. North West Orient refused to endorse the tickets to Pan

³¹ Ken Conboy *Shadow War*, 303-304.
William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 84.

American Airways and I thought I would have to pay 500 dollars for an alternate flight. It appeared that Krueger's curse was still affecting us. Traveling was never easy, but was becoming increasingly difficult as Civil Air Transport problems and the reluctance of the airlines to honor reduced airfares came to the forefront.

We were obliged to spend the night at a local hotel, and found Tokyo even more expensive because of a recent devaluation of the yen.

The following morning, I spent several frustrating hours on the telephone attempting to right the wrong. In the end I was told to come to the airport and continue the discussion. When we arrived, the problem had been resolved and we were allowed to continue our journey.

We reached Don Muang Airport on the tenth and it felt good to return to familiar territory. After a cab ride to the Montien Hotel, we rested and took the afternoon/night train to Udorn, arriving early on the twelfth.

Except for a dead car battery, Tokay and Ginleed had taken good care of the house and we found everything nearly the same. The grass patches had grown together and looked like a real lawn. Kun Jun took care of Pepsi in our absence, to the extent of placing a dachshund in the yard with her to keep her company. In addition, the dog had grown so large that it was difficult to recognize her.

THE LINE

As I expected, operations wasted no time scheduling me, and I was back in the saddle on Tuesday the fourteenth. Slated to RON for two days at The Alternate, Chauncey Collard, Rudy Serafico, and I deadheaded north on C-7A 430 to fly XW-PHE. Since Chauncy was still checking out, I logged IP time and only

handled the controls a minimum. Except for a couple of new firebases on the Plain of Jars not much had changed since the end of July. We were kept busy hauling sling loads from "Shep's ramp" to Mustang and other Thai defensive positions. With no enemy action noted, I attempted to stress hovering at the mandated maximum power, waiting for a gust or breeze to increase lift and aid us on our way through translational lift. Of course, the technique was an advisory only, and what the pilots did was their business.

The following two days were about the same regarding flight time (seven plus hours per day) with work assignments shuttling men and munitions to positions on the Plain of Jars. An enormous amount of energy was expended by helicopter and fixed wing crews in accomplishing this task. Even though we were saving time by hot refueling, actual flight was shortened somewhat by delays in the morning while the Customer received and collated radio reports from the field. And of course, it was still the monsoon season, which fostered periods of fog, low clouds, and heavy showers.

Depending on the location of our troops, contacts were relatively minimal. However, on the night and morning of the 15th and 16th, a company-sized enemy unit attacked a GM, occupying three elevated outposts in the foothills of the northern PDJ overlooking Route-71 with mortar and DK-82 recoilless rifle fire. Unwilling to withstand the shelling for long, the irregulars withdrew, leaving the area open to enemy movement.

An Agency summary stated:

"Apparently [the] enemy is concentrating forces against the irregulars on the northern PDJ. Coordinated artillery missions and the effective employment of Tacair had kept [the] NVA off

balance and incapable of massing for attacks on a broad front across the northern PDJ." ³²

On Thursday, Flight Mechanic Greg Burch (DOH 04/25/71) substituted for Serafico. We worked until late afternoon before riding to Udorn on 5-4576.

The next morning, I was back on the "Long Tieng Commute" (LTC) circuit, deadheading along with First Officer Paul Gregoire and Burch on C-7A 393, to fly XW-PHD. Because I was not training anyone, I shared thirty Plain of Jars shuttles with Paul. At day's end we copped a ride home on C-123K 5-4545.

More of the same followed on Saturday only with a slightly different cast of characters and machinery. Brian Johnson, Gary Gentz, and I went north to fly Papa Hotel Echo. Brian (DOH 05/31/66), an experienced, former Saigon Bell pilot, was still transitioning to the Twinpac, and was accorded most of the work that did not vary much from previous sessions. We were informed late to return Papa Hotel Bravo for maintenance, and chocked in well after dark.

During a break from the upcountry grind, I FCF XW-PHA with Bob Piggot and provided Johnson with a proficiency check. Since we finished soon after 1300 hours, I had time to do a bit of cavorting.

There are givens in life: pilots, attorneys, and doctors are acknowledged to be the world's poorest investors. Consequently, old timer stiff wing pilot Captain Lee Mullins became the latest pseudo-entrepreneur or con-man to dangle good deals in front of greedy pilots. This foolishness had been the vogue from the early days, when schemes to buy The Fund of Funds, build trimaran sailboats at Pattaya beach, win big at the dog races, and the casinos, manufacture cement blocks in Kuala

³² William Lofgren *CHECO*, 83-84.

Lumpur, purchase barrels of Scotch whiskey at the source, buy gold, silver bullion and coins, crazy stock market issues, and so forth. The list would go on and on. It seemed that if there was anything attractive to sell, someone would take his place in line and tout it. It never seemed to end.

Purely out of interest, not intending to purchase anything, I went to the Charoen Hotel to observe what Lee had to offer. He was pushing OTC warrants in a California start-up company named Saberdyne Systems, Inc. It was a holding company with interests in an invention, a plastic lens called Fantascope that adapted to other camera lenses to take wide angle horizontal photos. I liked the concept, but was not sure of the financial structure for the investors. Since I was off the next day, I went home to sleep on the proposal.

Realizing that the entire proposition was highly speculative, I purchased 3,000 dollars of Saberdyne confusing warrants. Never satisfied, Lee made the comment that I could afford to buy more. I should have walked away, for although paying a small amount of interest, the company failed to succeed and the good deal ended up in the growing trash pile of other good deals.

"ATTA-BOY"

Flying Hotel-89 on the twentieth with Flight Mechanics Rick Decosta (DOH 07/29/61) and PV Lorenzo (DOH 10/29/70), "Crazy Indian" Don Henthorn continued to be "Johnny-on-the-spot" when he and his crew rescued RLAFF T-28 pilot Warrant Officer Sourisack Savong on the Plain of Jars. Savong had been downed by enemy fire. Henthorn's second rescue in the region within three

weeks merited a kudo from Vientiane Air Attaché (AIRA) Chief Colonel Curry. ³³

Within a week Jim Cunningham returned a short thank you letter to Colonel Curry's office at the U.S. Embassy.

"...Air America is proud of the role that its pilots have been able to play in the rescue of downed airmen in Laos, and in turn we have reason to be thankful for the SAR efforts of USAF in our behalf. I shall pass your letter to our Base Manager [CJ Abadie] in Udorn, where Captain Henthorn is based, and I know he will make sure that your commendation is passed to Captain Henthorn and his crew, and made part of their personnel records..." ³⁴

Paul Gregoire, Flight Mechanic MA Leveriza (DOH 09/02/67), and I deadheaded to The Alternate on Caribou 430 to fly Papa Hotel Delta. After taking command of the ship, we were assigned a mission east to Mounng Nham (LS-63), where troops had launched north in August toward Route-7.

Site-63 had been the focus of excitement on 9 September. Pogo Hunter, Ray Purvis, and Leveriza had been refueling XW-PHB when the PIC of C-123 374 began a fuel drum airdrop. Three parachutes were delayed while exiting the rear ramp of the plane and one drum perversely drifted into the Twinpac's main rotor blade. Such incidents occurred from time to time over the years. ³⁵

After working surrounding hill positions, we returned to Long Tieng. Completing almost three dozen Plain of Jars

³³ Commendation from Colonel Hayden Curry to Vientiane Air America Base Manager, Jim Cunningham, 09/27/71. It is not clear why the commendation was not initially directed to the Udorn base manager. It was like the Udorn operation was relegated to a subordinate facility.

³⁴ James Cunningham letter to AIRA Chief Curry, 10/04/71; received in Udorn 10/15/71.

³⁵ Air America XOXO XW-PHB, CP/RW John Ford, 09/09/71.

shuttles, and with Paul conducting an equal number, we returned to Tango-08 landing after dark.

Wednesday morning, after breakfast at the Club, using Papa Hotel Delta, I began transitioning senior Captain Ed Reid. Tall Len Bevan (DOH 10/29/69) was the Flight Mechanic. Ed had attended the initial S-58T ground school, but was a holdout, preferring to fly the Bell while the Twinpac became a proven entity. But Ed was like that: always a contrary human until the very end. ³⁶ Since I had flown with Ed while earning my bones during early Bell missions, I wondered how he would accept my instruction. It was no problem. I had known and liked Ed for about ten years, and knew he was a careful, accomplished, and professional helicopter pilot, who had amassed a number of hours in the UH-34D. During two sessions lasting all day, I demonstrated the correct techniques and differences in the machine, and I was well pleased that he performed to standard. I tried to stress emergency procedures, first on the ground and then during flight.

The next afternoon I was called to the field to FCF Papa Hotel Alpha with Leveriza and shift supervisor, Ben Sabino. Ben was an old time Filipino mechanic with Air America since 1960. He had worked on H-19s in Bangkok and crewed on the H-34 when they arrived in Vientiane during December of that year. When the

³⁶ Because the Special Project was a highly classified "black" operation that no one talked about, I was not privy to and could only speculate as to the personnel involved. In later years, Charlie Weitz stated to Professor Leary that both Ed Reid and Bill Pearson were project members. Although they were both senior pilots, I seriously doubt this, as I never heard of or saw evidence of their participation.

helicopter buildup began in Udorn, he rotated there to work on the H-34s. ³⁷

The 24th was Ed Reid's first day in the field flying the Twinpac. Getting an early start because of operational requirements, and slated to RON, Ed, Bevan, and I ferried Papa Hotel Bravo north over the flatlands of the Vientiane flood plains paralleling the Nam Ngum, climbing over the defining Ritaville Ridgeline, crossing the morass of moist and heavily jungled mountains. Except for subtle changes in scenery and seasonal weather, the trip had been essentially unchanged for ten years. I was so familiar with the course to Long Tieng I figuratively believed that I could traverse it with my eyes closed. Overtly, Laos was a beautiful country and this represented only a tiny portion. I loved it.

MOUNG SOUI

It turned out to be an eventful day. The task force that had moved north from Moung Kassy to Sala Phou Khun, and then attempted to proceed down Route-7 toward Moung Soui, had been stalemated by four Deuanist Neutralist battalions ³⁸ since late August. Toward the middle of September, they were lifted over the enemy from their hilltop position into a deserted Xieng Dat strip.

Although not part of the Plain of Jars proper, Moung Soui was considered an important link, tying in Vang Pao's western flank. Pausing to marshal sufficient forces, on the 24th,

³⁷ Ben Sabino eventually obtained a rotorcraft license and worked commercially in Southeast Asia. He later lost his life while flying a helicopter.

³⁸ Lieutenant Deuane, a former friend and close colleague of Kong Le, had been indoctrinated and influenced by communist ideology. Consequently, this group split from Kong Le's Neutralists in 1962 and joined the Pathet Lao forces.

several dozen Commando Raiders were delivered to high ground four miles southeast, and southwest of Lima-108, by USAF CH-3s. Advancing slowly under A-1E cover, late in the day, the men entered the outskirts of Moung Soui, where small local enemy guerrilla units had previously faded into the brush. ³⁹

Crewing Papa Hotel Echo, Phil Payton, First Officer Ray Purvis, and Flight Mechanic Gary Gentz were supporting the PDJ/Moung Soui operation moving troops around the Houei Ka Nin (LS-38) area. At 1400 hours, while carrying twelve Meo troops at 12,000 feet, suddenly the tail dropped and the ship began a slight roll to the left (as in blade stall). Phil decelerated and a blade popped about a yard out of track (like a damper malfunction). After reducing the collective, the out-of-track condition was reduced to a foot. The pilot began a descent, with the aircraft humping badly. Puzzled by the severe vibrations, Phil stopped the descent. He began a lazy orbit and asked Gentz for his opinion.

Gary indicated that it was obvious that a blade on the rotor head was the problem. As part of airborne troubleshooting, he suggested Phil add a little collective. The blade popped out of track again. Alarmed, Gary said not to do that again. He advised, *"You are going to have to commit to a landing place, but don't pull anything [the collective] until the last minute. When you load that thing up, it could break whatever was wrong with the system."*

Phil circled down rapidly over rolling hills a few miles east of Site-38. There were rice paddies located at the bottom of the hill, but unaware of area security, he elected to land on

³⁹ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 302.
William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 89.

a hilltop pad. Gary said he would position the troops in the door and not to add collective until the last minute.

With Echo shaking and vibrating badly, almost in an autorotative descent, they arrived over the pad, leveling at the last moment. When the PIC added power, dust began rising around the helicopter, tending to obscure everything. Anxious to depart the sick beast, the troops obligingly jumped into the high grass at ten feet AGL.

Oddly, vibrations ceased on the deck. A static inspection revealed nothing amiss. This prompted Gentz to suspect the problem was located above the swashplate.

Because of questionable security, a new blade and maintenance team were sent upcountry the same day. After being delivered, installed, and tracked, Gary discovered the culprit, but not the cause. Believing it might be a blade problem, in trouble shooting he switched blades. The blade still popped out of track under a load. He said to his coworkers, "*Something is definitely wrong with that rotorhead.*" He examined the area again, and this time traced his finger to what was revealed as the problem: a cracked pitch change horn.

Further investigation revealed some interesting facts. At this time, the U.S. Army heavy maintenance facility overhauled rotorheads. Inside was a steel insert with two retaining pins. Part of the process involved paint stripping.

When the U.S. Navy previously held the contract to overhaul rotorheads personnel removed the pins, inserts, and then stripped the paint. After inspecting the parts, inserts and pins were reinstalled.

Perhaps to save time or money, the Army unit had left the inserts and pins in place. This allowed the volatile stripping solution to infiltrate between the steel and magnesium housing. In time, hidden corrosion formed from the inside out.

Gentz believed the load placed on Papa Hotel Echo at altitude, heavy weight, and entering blade stall that day, had triggered the event that caused the internal pitch change horn cracking at a weak point.⁴⁰

Early Saturday morning, while USAF helicopters prepared to shuttle a Neutralist battalion into the Moung Soui strip with an escort, we began briefly working the Plain. Then we and other Air America crews were assigned to lift another battalion into Lima-108. The operation took place without incident. Whatever enemy remained in the immediate area offered little resistance and soon vanished completely. Moung Soui was ours again--for a time.

"Some 400 Lao Army soldiers are now holding the town of Moung Soui, west of the [PDJ] which was occupied by irregular assault forces on 24 September. The town can serve as a base to support [VP's] irregular units on the [PDJ].

Just north of the Plaine, the irregulars have so far been unsuccessful in their attempts to reoccupy high ground positions near Phou San.

U.S. pilots report that the [NVA] appear to be moving increasing amounts of supplies to forward positions north and east of the Plaine.

The government has launched a drive to clear enemy units from high-ground positions northeast of [LP]. During the last dry season, the [NVA] used this area as a base from launching attacks on the royal capital, and the government hopes to deny it to the enemy during the coming dry season." ⁴¹

⁴⁰ Gary Gentz Interview.
Air America XOXO, XW-PHE, John Ford, 09/24/71.

⁴¹ CIA Bulletin, Laos: Government forces are consolidating their recent gains in north Laos.

This did not happen. Despite the enemy's' low morale in the area, plans were underway to retake Moung Soui. After eventually receiving necessary supplies, they moved forward and recaptured Lima-108 by late November, leaving the western flank open toward Long Tieng. ⁴²

The two-day stint at Long Tieng had produced almost twenty hours flight time and allowed Reid sufficient experience in the Twinpac to warrant upgrading. Leaving Bravo on the ramp we boarded a USAF C-130 that had delivered a late shipment of Peppergrinder ammunition for the thirty-five-minute flight to Udorn. It was the only way to travel.

Long Tieng commutes continued. On the 26th Ed, Len, and I deadheaded to The Alternate on C-7A 393 to resume flying Papa Hotel Bravo. Pending a formal, obligatory PIC check, Ed was on the verge of being released as PIC. Because of Ed's proficiency and assignment to work new frontline positions, I flew twenty sorties myself. Consistent with Long Tieng commutes (LTC), we left the machine on the ramp and deadheaded home on C-123K 54-617. ⁴³

On Wednesday, after a day off the schedule, Ed and Tom Neis (DOH 04/23/71) joined me in a one-hour FCF of Papa Hotel Echo. This was followed by Reid's upgrading check. Released as a PIC, Ed retained Echo and ferried Ray Purvis, Deak Kennedy, and me to Long Tieng to fly Papa Hotel Alpha. Because of the late start, I only flew four hours, but still conducted almost two dozen local sorties. I RTB on 293.

My last day upcountry during the month began with Purvis, Kennedy, and me boarding Caribou 393 at the Peppergrinder

⁴² William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 89.

⁴³ K-model 123: In order to enhance takeoff power from short airfields the STOL C-123 was retrofitted with under wing gas turbine pods. They were well received and took the guess work out of departures from the Long Tieng strip.

staging area for the morning flight to Long Tieng to resume flying Papa Hotel Alpha. After a little more than an hour sitting in the relatively comfortable red nylon strap seats, like C-7 pilots had done for years, the PIC identified and radioed his position, passing check point "Peter," and crossing the south gap. With the cockpit landing checklist completed, aligned with Runway-32, he began a steep approach into the Site-20A bowl. Then while passing the "numbers," he flared to touchdown on the macadam, rolled uphill, and made a sharp right turn into the parking/unloading ramp. Alpha was sitting where I had left it the previous evening, tail pointed toward, and perpendicular to, the eastern karst's face for security from enemy sappers or stray mortars. Leaving a scarce asset like the Twinpac in potential harm's way was a bit confusing. (Not counting XW-PHY in Taiwan we still had five S-58Ts.) I could understand the Customer's desire to conserve dwindling funds by reducing daily ferry flights, but the loss of a static ship did not seem logical.

After six hours and thirty minutes, and twenty sorties driving around the unfriendly Lao skies, we deadheaded home on another USAF C130.

It was fitting that, along with Larry Price and Charlie Brigham, I spent the early morning of 30 September FCF Papa Hotel Charlie, most likely in preparation for a later Special Project mission.

BOLOVENS

It was crunch time in the struggle to retake Paksong; it was imperative to commence now or wait until the following year and suffer the consequences. The serious nature of this proposition was evidenced by two factors in early September: The additional number of USAF sorties, and the introduction of

Savannakhet GM-32 SGU battalions to kick start and bolster the operation.

Starting on the 1st, Tacair pummeled enemy bunker and trench complexes along the road from Phakkout to Paksong. Despite Raven reports of much damage, the enemy continued to rebuild and fire on friendly forces, which failed to budge from Phakkout.

After its stint at Luang Prabang and best known for its part in pushing the 335th Vietnamese Regiment back from the royal capital, ⁴⁴ GM-32 was undergoing a week of refurbishing at Nong Saphong in preparation for a field deployment. This included the addition of a heavy weapons company. ⁴⁵

On the 10th a large portion of GM-32 was relocated by Air America cargo planes to the Wat Phu (L-107, PS-46) training base south of Pakse, on the right bank of the Mekong.

The following morning the Paksong offensive resumed. Commando Raiders, acting as pathfinders, were lifted to a spot four miles east of Paksong in order to secure a landing zone for the GM-32 battalions. While five artillery pieces opened up from Ban Gnik to keep the enemy engaged, and air contributed to support, GM-32 was lifted to the new landing zone. Once on the ground the men moved north and then west toward Route-23 and the Thevada mountains that bracketed Route-232. Despite serious opposition and casualties, GM-32 persevered, reaching and taking the Thevadas' high ground overlooking Paksong on the 12th.

The pincer continued to tighten when two Neutralist battalions were introduced four miles southeast of the town, augmenting GM-32's accomplishments.

⁴⁴ Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 419.

⁴⁵ Case Officer without portfolio, Don Courtney, was yet to undergo his harrowing experience in Hotel-39, his injuries, and a subsequent assignment to Nong Saphong.

By the 13th, the Thai FSB had relocated to Phakkout supporting FAR slow movement toward the agricultural station.

Under the cover of darkness on the 14th, less than two dozen men from GM-32 entered Paksong on a reconnaissance mission. They reported only desultory gunfire. The die was cast. The 9th Vietnamese Regiment was generally surrounded, and likely demoralized from months of fighting and minimal subsistence. Consequently, as GM-32 units began pouring into town, the 9th began withdrawing northeast along Route-23 toward Thateng to fight another day. ⁴⁶ However, to cover their maneuver, blocking/delaying units were established at Phou Nongkin, while others remained at the agricultural station, or in the town. By noon on Wednesday, Paksong was generally free of enemy.

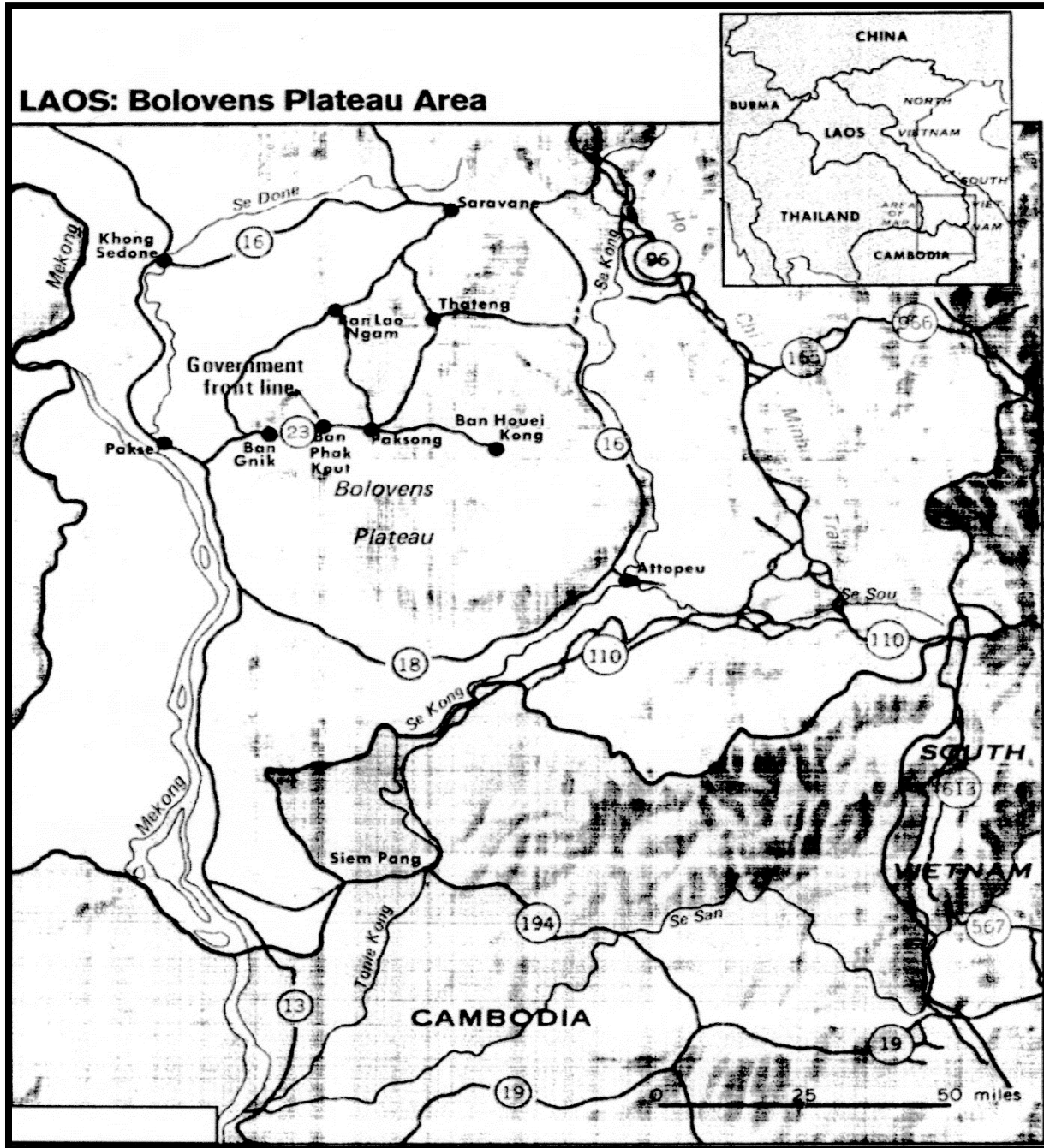
More friendly troops were lifted to a position one mile south of Paksong on the 16th, and two FAR battalions were delivered inside the town on the 19th to consolidate the victory and establish defensive positions.

By the 23rd, FAR forces entered the agricultural station, with the artillery unit and guns close behind to establish a new FSB.

Adverse weather settled into the area on the 25th, restricting air support and allowing enemy gunners to harass friendly units between the agricultural station and Paksong.

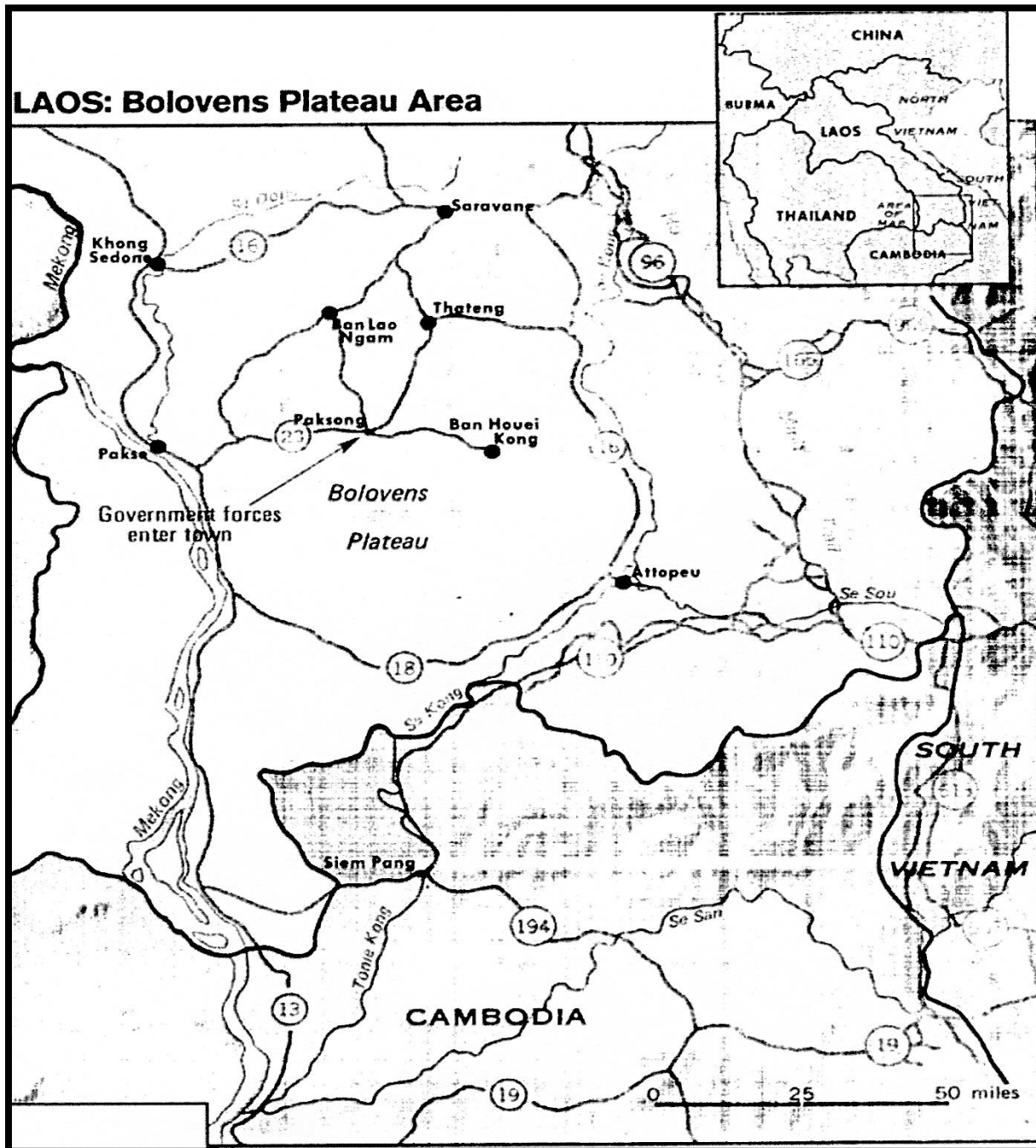
"...government forces are consolidating their positions in and around Paksong; they have occupied most of the important high-ground positions near the town. Determined resistance by elements of the 9th NVA Regiment, however, has so far thwarted

⁴⁶ Consistent with previous battles, in order to minimize casualties, both sides generally left an escape route.



Disposition of Lao government troops at Phakkout on Route-23 west of Paksong. Wat Phu was located about twenty miles south of Pakse on the west bank of the Mekong.

CIA Map, 09/07/71.



A 16 September graphic showing the area of government efforts to recapture Paksong. Most enemy forces withdrew toward Ban Thateng.
CIA Map.

all government efforts to open Route-23 between Ban Phak Kout and Paksong." ⁴⁷

Air power, in the form of strikes, air assault, and the aggressive, powerhouse efforts of the SGU units of GM-32 had been the prime catalyst for the victory. Unfortunately, the victory was costly and would not last. ⁴⁸

⁴⁷ CIA Bulletin, Laos: Government forces are consolidating their recent gains in south Laos, 09/29/71.

⁴⁸ Sources:
Ken Conboy, 306-397.
CHECO, Bolovens, 15-17.
Soutchay, 68.

"Nothing new in the war but look out soon."

Letter Home, 10/14/71.

October began on a down note for me when adverse weather prevented the C-7A cockpit crew of 430 from arriving at Long Tieng. After grinding around for about two hours without success, we returned to Vientiane to wait, talk to the fixed wing drivers, and have something to eat in the Air America cafeteria. The weather failed to improve in the mountains, and I was back in Udorn after 1400 hours, courtesy of the 5-4576 PIC.

Saturday was more successful. First Officer Mike Barksdale, Flight Mechanic Len Bevan, and I deadheaded north on Caribou 389 to fly XW-PHE and RON for a night. Monsoon rains had generally kept the war on the Plain of Jars in abeyance so, except for first calling the site FAG on the correct VHF radio frequency for current information on enemy presence and outgoing artillery, we encountered no problems. ¹ From past experience, we knew this could not last. After completing dozens of missions, we retired for the night.

Chuck Campbell was still our liaison Customer, and one most of us trusted for straight scoop. After collating overnight situation reports (sitrep) and obtaining Raven weather reports, the conservative man would brief and dispatch us.

After returning from the Plain across the "nipple," leading to the foothills through the "backdoor" and between Site-72 and

¹ Realizing that our continued support relied on providing valid and reliable information, and perhaps looking toward the future, I never encountered a FAG lying. If anything, the men were conservative in reporting and sometimes would not allow us to land if the situation was tenuous.

Phou Pha Sai ridge, if not carrying passengers, it was just a matter of approaching Shep's sling-load ramp located on the lower southern portion of the strip. A local trooper generally held up a cardboard placard displaying the coordinates and site signals. Then it was a matter of hovering over and hooking up the load, calling the tower operator for advisories, and departing through one of the four valley gaps in the direction of the landing zone. Since most of our work was in and around the PDJ, this normally was the west gap, which required a climb to clear the forested limestone karsts.

With an hour more air time, and additional local missions, we were more productive. I personally flew thirty-five sorties that day, five more than on the 2nd. We returned to Tango-08 on C-123K 7-6293.

Tuesday morning, Dave Cox, Deak Kennedy, and I boarded C-7A 389 on the Air America ramp for the flight to The Alternate. Local operations had settled on one to two crew RONs when the situation warranted and accommodations were available.

Flying Papa Hotel Delta, during the next three days, I averaged nine hours a day and conducted one hundred sorties before returning the ship to Udorn for a maintenance inspection. Taking advantage of the excellent flight time, we landed after dark.

I spent the entire day at the airfield on the eighth. Bob Davis and I spent most of the day FCFing Papa Hotel Alpha. We were still learning to cope with and institute fixes for unusual Twinpac malfunctions. PHA had returned from upcountry with the engines badly out of rig. It was almost impossible to parallel the Nf governors and mate the torques. Hovering on the ramp would set up oscillations in the Nf, Ng, T5, and torque gages. When increasing or decreasing Nf, RPM would over-or undershoot and cause oscillations. Troubleshooting involved changing both

Nf governors. When these steps and several test flights failed to solve the problem, changing the number one power section Ng governor eventually worked. Of course, all this work took time, but constituted a learning process.

Scratch Kanach required his semi-annual proficiency check. To satisfy this mandatory Company policy, later that afternoon we taxied Papa Hotel Echo to the infield to conduct the round of published and unpublished flight maneuvers. Although I was logging IP time, from years of association we knew how the other man flew. Consequently, we used the two hours to reacquaint each other with emergency procedures and any valuable information regarding the machine we had acquired since last flying together. It was also instrumental in standardizing our instructing technique. Following the flight, we repaired to the Club bar for a bit of refreshment.

TIME OFF

I was accorded STO for the following eight days. Tuie was pregnant with our third child and getting a bit heavy in front. She had no problem with morning sickness-that would come a week or so later.

Tuie had never been to Chiang Mai, so before her condition prevented travel, we planned a trip to the northwestern city. I purchased roundtrip tickets at the local Thai Airways office, but when Rick contracted his first serious cold since having his tonsils and adenoids removed, and Pete also caught a cold, I canceled the trip and obtained a refund for the tickets.

While I was busy working almost constantly for three weeks since returning to Thailand, Tuie was busy with home improvements. She had the Vietnamese carpenter who lived in the back of Khun Yai's compound build a playhouse for the children. It had a screened porch large enough for adults to stand, but

only a small door to discourage large people. In addition, she had a local metal working shop cut and weld pipes for a swing, trapeze, and large slide set. After the equipment was manufactured, delivered, and erected, the blue apparatus occupied a good portion of the yard. (I encouraged Rick to perform daily pull-ups on the trapeze to strengthen his upper body.)

Pepsi continued to grow. It was amusing to see such a large dog cavorting like a puppy. Not aware of her size and potential to do harm, she occasionally knocked the kids down. She loved me, and I consequently had a problem keeping her from jumping on me.

The pup was still learning. After supper I was on the elevated front porch and observed the dachshund Schroder had a green Gecko cornered in the small front garden. Pepsi, being overly curious, stuck her nose in the wrong place. Before I could react, the aggressive, fearless lizard latched onto the tip of her nose in a jaw-tightening death grip. In considerable pain, she shook her head violently side to side attempting to eliminate the reptile, but the tenacious Gecko only clamped down harder. In a panic mode, I grabbed a broom resting beside the French doors and began slamming the beast, finally discouraging it from enjoying further doggie Hors d'oeuvres. Pepsi got off easy that evening with only a nasty scar.

Schroder, whose breed was introduced to Europe for hunting, could take care of himself and was afraid of nothing. On the 13th he had a baby snake at bay in the yard. Before Pepsi had a chance to investigate, I elected to dispatch the reptile. We had our share of wildlife periodically in the yard, and I could only wonder what was next and might occur when I was away from home.

THE LINE

Long Tieng commutes continued. On the 17th, Mike Barksdale, Leveriza, and I rode Caribou 392 to Long Tieng. Our aircraft was Papa Hotel Alpha, which finally had been repaired, passed the airworthiness requirements, and been dispatched upcountry. We loaded our gear while the Flight Mechanic inspected the ship. A hasty briefing indicated that the situation had not changed much on the PDJ, but as if we needed to be told, we were cautioned to fly a little higher on the PDJ and keep our eyes open. Consistent with daily commutes, we deadheaded home on C-123 5-4576.

Commutes continued on Monday. Mike, Len Bevan, and I boarded Caribou 430 for a fifty-three-minute trip north. We conducted sling load shuttles all morning to the FSBs. Early in the afternoon, we had departed from Shep's ramp with a sling, and were headed through the west gap, when I smelled a heavy characteristic kerosene odor. Aware that we had a sizeable fuel leak somewhere in the front section of the aircraft, and concerned about fire--or worse an explosion--I jettisoned the load and reversed course. Assuming a serious survival mode, I screamed downward toward the congested sling loading ramp. Because of the high approach speed, upon reaching the ramp I was obliged to abruptly decelerate and land directly in front of a terrified American Customer, who thought I was arriving for a load. But we were down. I could sort this out and make apologies later after securing. Now we had to vacate the ship and investigate the primary source of the leak.

Removal of the angle gearbox compartment panel revealed an abundance of fuel puddled and sloshing about on the deck below, and just forward of the cockpit. In all my years of flying, I had never seen so much fuel collected in one confined area.

After unfastening wing nuts and removing stainless steel firewall panels, the leak was discovered emanating from the number one power section fuel control unit (FCU). Under pressure, the fuel had flowed down and backward into the angle gearbox area.

A must for Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) and the commercial market, Sikorsky engineers had designed fire protection systems for the S-58T. Fire warning light-sensitive sensors and fire extinguisher units were installed for each power section as counter measures in case of fire. In addition to fuel leaks, we had been having trouble with the sensors because of coking on the external glass. This required daily inspection of the element and in some cases, relocating the sensor to another place on the metal panel. There were two fire warning "T" handles inserted on the upper center of the cockpit instrument consol. The center portion of the handle would illuminate if activated by a fire detector. Pulling out the handle horizontally would shut off fuel supply to the pertinent fuel control unit (FCU) and activate the fire extinguisher. (Fuel could also be shut off by completely retarding the correct throttle.) The system was not perfect. Fire was serious, but if the situation allowed, one had to be careful that the indication in the cockpit was not erroneous and would prematurely shut an engine down. Of course, fire produced definitive indications like odors and smoke.

The problem ended our day. Alpha was grounded (AGP). Since no parts and mechanics would head north from Udorn that day, we were obliged to wait for transportation home. This came at the end of the day when the PIC of Papa Hotel Bravo was told to RTB.

We had been lucky that day, for I could think of many worse places that discovery of such a leak would have contributed to severe gastritis. It was also fortunate that the use of the high

flash point jet fuel, in lieu of the more volatile aviation gasoline, was the norm for more modern aircraft.

So far, the Twinpac had performed exceedingly well when operating properly. "Operating properly" was the key phrase, for so much was going wrong lately that the conversion to turbine engines was becoming a maintenance nightmare, over which we seemingly had no control. Although our expectations had been great, since the inception of the program we had experienced growing pains. As flight time was suffering, it was becoming tiresome, and we were increasingly the brunt of other pilots' humor. I tried not to think about it too much, but hoped our problems would not appreciably worsen. It was during times like this that I regretted switching from the Bell program.

The eighteenth marked my last flight upcountry in the month. There was relatively little combat activity as both sides expanded their forces in anticipation of an all-out battle when the rains diminished and ceased.

Despite air interdiction efforts on storage areas along Route-7 in the Ban Ban area that damaged or destroyed many vehicles, few measures, except periods of heavy monsoon rain entirely stopped the movement of men and material toward the PDJ.

"Rumors prevailed and on 30 October Deuanist ralliers indicated an attack on Moung Soui was imminent and that the enemy forces were awaiting food resupply before beginning an offensive. Morale of Pathet Lao and Deuanists in this area was reported low, but control of the Moung Soui sector would be valuable to the enemy since it would provide him an avenue to outflank Long Tieng from the north." ²

² William Lofgren, *CHECO*, 88, 89.

UDORN

"The past two weeks have been hectic. There have been program cut-backs all over the [Company] system with Vientiane being hit hard. Five [senior] First Officers displaced from there to our S-58T program. Three were needed and the problem came with the rest. If all had been used some of our junior First Officers who are checked out and good [pilots] would be displaced to another program or sent home."

Letter Home, 10/31/71.

My days of relatively easy instructor work with accomplished helicopter pilots were over. Stressful and distasteful days were ahead: no more "mister good guy." As one of only two legal Twinpac IPs, I would have to attempt transition and judge my share of the influx of pilots from Vientiane. In talking over the situation with John Ford, I got the impression that no one was particularly happy that these men were arbitrarily rotated to Udorn, where no helicopter slots were available. But our union had a firm seniority system specifying that, in case of pilot displacement, bidding would dictate the men's ultimate disposition.

Only between five to ten hours of maximum training, and preferably less would be allotted for each man. If he could not cut the program, he was out. I would be the hatchet man. The onus was on me to cull individuals who were hopeless, or deemed that retraining would take too much time. This was one reason I was never keen about becoming an IP: I did not like to judge other people. Knowing that no one is perfect, I believed in the "what goes around comes around" principle, for criticism in aviation has a way of achieving just that. Still, I had accepted the IP job and would have to do the best I could. As always, I would be fair, and at the same time minutely evaluate the

person's potential, for in constantly working the front lines, the nature of our business was deadly serious. A First Officer might be called on at any time to take command of a ship should a PIC become incapacitated during a mission. The Vientiane group's work would no longer constitute flying at altitude from strip to strip, with the security of two or more engines, and capable of continuing flight should one engine become inoperative. They had to be proficient and ready for any eventuality.³

None of the transferees were young or inexperienced in aviation; some had been in the Company system a long time.⁴ I did not have access to pilot files, but concluded that each man had some previous helicopter experience just to be considered for the Udorn program.

I would begin training Jim Demartini on the 19th in Papa Hotel Delta. Flight Mechanic Greg Burch filled out the crew.

Since we did not get started until after lunch, I began my standard ground training with a one-on-one emergency procedure skull session that included everything in the book and additional information I had accumulated from experience since flying the machine. The lesson plan I developed was quite thorough. I had researched the procedures, adding my personal touch. Additionally, Scratch and I had assessed and worked through the rough spots while flying locally together. Also, as S-58T Project Manager Bob Davis had issued another memorandum

³ In most cases, given the proper airspeed and weight, the S-58T could fly on one engine in cruise. However, engine failure during approach or in a hover would result in a controlled crash. Furthermore, it was not possible to takeoff on one power section except a long rolling run into a strong wind with an empty ship. Even then, as we did not practice such a maneuver, it was only theoretical.

⁴ Jim Demartini (DOH 01/14/70), Dick Graham (07/24/67), Stan Thompsen (02/07/68), Marquart. The fifth pilot never appeared, perhaps electing to transfer somewhere else or not to remain with Air America.

regarding the Sikorsky phase one torque limit program still in effect, I was obliged to inform and train Demartini accordingly.

After spending considerable time on preflight items to acquaint or reacquaint Jim with the H-34 airframe and components to ascertain if he had been studying and had retained any of Drex Morgan's ground school, I went on to explain differences and some of the complicated new engine conversion. Since he had previous H-34 experience, recall came flooding back and I was pleasantly relieved.

Demartini did equally well during our two-and-a-half-hour session. Consistent with my IP instruction, I demonstrated a maneuver, pointing out difficult or unusual portions, and then had the trainee perform. After that I would critique his effort. If it was performed to standard, or near standard, we would move on to the next maneuver; if not, it would be repeated until it was right. Jim was receptive to my instruction, a careful pilot, and reasonably proficient for this stage of training. If he continued to show progress, I expected that he would be released for a First Officer check well within the allotted time frame.

Following a day off the schedule and a standby at home, training resumed on Wednesday afternoon. Using Papa Hotel Bravo, I began with Stan Thompsen, a relative old-timer with the Company, but without any heavy helicopter and likely little other rotorcraft experience. Still, Stan was attentive, tried to learn, and worked hard, but he was obviously highly deficient flying the machine. Actually, his performance was pathetic. Like a novice, he was constantly behind the power curve, letting the helicopter fly him and not the other way around. Since the majority of our pilots were hired with considerable helicopter time, I was not used to conducting basic training, and really tired of demonstrating the same maneuvers over and over without any sign of progress. At the end of his first flight, Stan said

that he really wanted the program. A likeable person, he promised that he would study hard and show improvement. With only so much time to train him, I wondered if his enthusiasm would be enough. The next two flights would be a determining factor in showing if he would cut the mustard.

While flying Papa Hotel Bravo, Demartini, on the other hand, continued acceptable transition progress, and I had no reservations about recommending his upgrading capability. Two training flights in one afternoon was a handful, and we did not finish the second session until almost dark.

The following morning, I started early with Thompsen in Papa Hotel Charlie. Since the machine required an FCF, thinking the exposure would greatly benefit him (as a FCF did not count toward total training hours, it was considered a backdoor method we used for a trainee to acquire more cockpit and flight experience), I invited Stan to accompany me for the hour and twenty-five minutes it required to bring the machine up to an airworthy state. The session involved both static ground and gratis flight time. Hopefully he felt more comfortable in the cockpit, learned procedures, and perhaps attained more confidence. His determination to become a First Officer was evident and I could tell from his demeanor that he had spent time in a Twinpac cockpit going over the checklist. Pleased, I was determined to teach him all I knew about flying the S-58T.

For almost two hours, I attempted to teach Stan basic helicopter techniques and proper sight pictures for various approaches and proper airspeeds. ⁵ I did not even consider instructing emergency procedures, autorotations, or anything

⁵ Sight pictures: In general, these could be established using the wind screen for a novice, either by memorization or marking the screen with a grease pencil. It was a rudimentary procedure, but worked.

more complicated than standard approaches at this stage. Toward the end of our almost two-hour flight Stan began to conduct almost acceptable standard shallow, normal, and steep approaches to a hover and to the ground. However, at this juncture he had no concept of, nor could he perform, rough, confined area approaches of the kind necessary in Laos. And he was still considerably behind the helicopter. Despite my demonstrations and coaching, I did not believe he was going to make it.

HENTHORN

I was scheduled to fly Papa Hotel Bravo with Demartini in the afternoon after lunch, but while walking through the administration building, I encountered Captain Don Henthorn (DOH 07/10/68) in the rear hall leading to the flight line. The foyer was vacant at the time and Don, an instructor pilot in the H-34 program, began challenging me about checking out the displaced pilots, as they constituted a serious threat to our established people who, if not displaced to another program, would be sent home. (Many had already been moved from Saigon to Udorn, and there was nowhere else to go.)

As "The Crazy Indian" crowded and backed me against the wall and got in my face, I listened patiently to his intimidating rant. He made it abundantly clear that he was particularly unhappy with the qualifications and presence of Thompsen and Marquart in the helicopter program, and wanted them

both gone. ⁶

At the time, I was not completely aware of the Company/FEPA displacement methodology, and was just trying to do my job. Without going into too much detail regarding either man, Don aggressively made his point: get rid of both men. I did not say much. Noncommittal, I claimed that my ethics as an IP dictated that I would have to take a look at the men's potential. I indicated further that I would have to wait and see what would develop. With Scratch on home leave, I was the sole instructor in the S-58T program and had to perform my job as I considered necessary. That was what why the Company paid me "big bucks," and that was what I intended to do.

Don went off down the hall disgruntled. That was the end of the incident, but Don's untoward behavior and his reputation did nothing to enamor me to the man, and I avoided the guy as much as possible. This was easy, for we were never in the same programs and rarely crossed paths.

Here was another Company pilot who could be classified as a character, often driven by pure emotion, there was a good reason for Henthorn's nickname, "The Crazy Indian."

⁶ Don Henthorn had reputedly been a champion wrestler in college, and was a very aggressive person. Stocky and heavily muscled, he was built like a barrel. Even though I was a former college wrestler, I would not even think about rolling around with him like I did with a much friendlier Billy Zeitler in front of the Club one evening. I had already alienated Don in the past. One boozy night in the main Club bar I had foolishly made a statement that UH-34D drivers were not exposed to the same risks and tough missions as Huey pilots. Of course, I was completely mistaken. Out of the program for several years, I did not know what kind of work the H-34 crewmembers were involved in, particularly in the dangerous Pakse region. I did not know it at the time, but later someone informed me that Henthorn, who was listening to my diatribe in the corner, was so incensed at my implications that he wanted to take me outside and teach me a hard lesson. Fortunately, he was talked out of this, for I might not be here today to write this tale. This was a continuing problem with my uncontrollable mouth.

Some time before Wayne Knight departed on leave to attend school in California, Don entered the chief pilot's office to complain about a nearly botched SAR on the southwest edge of the Plain of Jars. Livid, and a very courageous person in his own right, he called the H-34 pilot involved in the rescue attempt almost every name in the book, including that he was a yellow bastard.

"When a fellow pilot was down, get him out, period. No screwing around and worrying about personal safety."

Wayne was somewhat confused and did not know what Don was talking about. From his vantage point, the SAR mission had been successful and he was not aware of any delays, as someone on the scene might have been.

Another incident tended to confirm Wayne's assessment of Don's deviation from a normal individual. The ancient Inca Indian game of Liar's Dice was a popular pastime played by Air America crewmembers for drinks. One night in the Animal Bar, Henthorn challenged Wayne to a slightly modified version of the game. He explained that it was a two-man game. Five dice were thrown on the floor and the man who recovered the most cubes was declared the winner. Considering the source and suspecting some manner of subterfuge, Wayne hesitated and thought about the proposition for a moment. To allay his concern, Don adjusted his bar stool to a position that would place Wayne closer to the tossed dice. Still suspecting a ruse, but because of the number of people in the bar Wayne was shammed into accepting the challenge.

Henthorn scattered the dice, but before Wayne could move, Don tackled him to the floor, then wrestled him to a standstill

and recovered all the dice. Although unhurt, except for pride, Wayne had learned a hard lesson. ⁷

Captain Mike Jarina was able to provide further insight into Henthorn's somewhat twisted personality. Charlie Weitz owned a brown Ford Mustang that he had purchased from a U.S. government worker. Always a character, Charlie hired a Thai girl, dressed her in a chauffeur's uniform, and tasked her to drive him around town and home after his late-night visits. Eventually, unable to endure Charlie's unconventional habits, she quit.

Henthorn bought the Mustang and used the car to drive to Pattaya to scuba dive and golf. Mike, being the expert diver, accompanied Don once. Half way to their destination, a front tire blew out. Don changed the damaged tire, then tossed the tire and rim into the bushes. Mike asked him why he had jettisoned the tire.

"It's no damn good."

Noting that Don was very emotional and compulsive, Mike acknowledged that the tire was no good, but he certainly would have to purchase a rim for a spare. Don thought about this and retrieved the rim.

Always intent on a challenge that involved some kind of gambling, on the way to the beach Don wanted to play golf. Betting for dinner, they played eighteen holes, during which Don called Mike an old man. In good shape for his age, and still a good athlete, Mike won the contest. During a return match, Mike won again for dinner. After the eighteen holes, Don wanted to play four additional holes. Mike agreed, but the younger man admitted that he was unable to continue the match.

⁷ EW Knight Emails.

The next time they golfed together, Don won, hitting the ball accurately a long distance. He had taken lessons, in order to win.

During the trip, Don wanted to race Mike in the pool. "*Old Man*", *I'll race you for lunch.*" Mike indicated that he could only swim one length.

Henthorn had a sense of humor and proclivity toward hyperbole. After returning from home leave, he told people that he had been to Hawaii and took part in a surf board contest. He did not win, but placed second. The story made the rounds. Finally, when challenged, he admitted that he did not know how to surf. ⁸

In contrast to Thompsen, Demartini continued to do very well, performing all maneuvers to standard or better, and meeting all my requirements for upgrading to First Officer.

Stan and I were scheduled together on Sunday the 24th. I told him to continue studying and thinking positively. Marquart was also slated for training. He had attended my emergency procedure ground school and followed us through a preflight one day on the flight line. I told him to study the helicopter handbook because I was going to question him about the H-34 before we flew.

I spent the early morning testing Papa Hotel Charlie. Since Scratch was on leave, beside Bob Davis who always seemed quite busy, I was the only pilot qualified to FCF Twinpacs. The workload was such that Tom Moher and his permanent FCF people had their hands full with H-34 FCFs, but plans were in motion to have them eventually include S-58Ts in the FCF program.

I met Marquart after I finished testing Charlie. Local scuttlebutt indicated that Vientiane management was happy to

⁸ Mike Jarina Interviews.

have gotten rid of him; it was Marquart's second chance in Udorn. I did not know the man, but in 1969 he had previously been in the H-34 program and failed to check out. Besides not being a very attractive individual, he had a reputation as being a very poor helicopter pilot. He was the ultimate deadwood, someone we definitively did not need or want in the Twinpac program. We preferred second pilots who were proficient and could fly under various conditions. ⁹

I had nothing personal against Marquart as such, but was quite biased as to releasing him to fly with accomplished S-58T pilots, who someday might need a qualified pilot to help bail them out of a dicey situation.

I knew the new people, recently arriving from the fixed wing program would initially be deficient in their technical knowledge and skill level in flying helicopters. Except for the engine and some other systems, the airframe and many components in the S-58T were exactly the same as on the UH-34D. Usually I used these training periods as learning sessions, but strangely, for a person who was previously in the H-34 program, Marquart knew very little about the machine. He failed to adequately answer many, even simple questions. This, plus his indifferent attitude, was difficult for me to understand. Angering me to the

⁹ Mike Jarina Interviews: On 23 August 1969, Marquart was flying with Mike Jarina while working at LS-15. Mike took off and established a sixty-knot climb. He then turned the ship over to Marquart, who immediately decelerated to forty knots. They were later in a traffic pattern and Mike asked his left seat occupant if he wanted to try and land the machine. While downwind on the approach he slowed to forty knots. He had no conception of what he was supposed to be doing. He was unable to read a map, hence undesirable as a First Officer. Others must have concurred, for Marquart was dispatched to Luang Prabang as a permanent First Officer. Later, when a fixed wing slot opened in Vientiane, he transferred to Caribous giving Porter Hough competition as a permanent fixed wing First Officer. For more information relating to this period see Book Ten, 1969. This is probably why Henthorn disliked the man.

point of extreme frustration, it appeared that he had not studied and had conducted absolutely no preparation for this flight. Moreover, despite my attempts to jack him up, he seemed quite blasé, detached, and even disinterested about everything. My resolve not to unduly waste time with him was reinforced as we continued through our preflight. It all peaked when I asked him a question regarding the function and location of the two inverters that converted direct current to alternate current. He thought a minute and referred to the number two inverter as the big one.

Disgusted, I was not interested in entering the cockpit with Marquart. Instead, I invited him to meet me in John Ford's office. When we were all together, I explained what I considered Marquart's deficiencies, his blasé and almost negative attitude. Moreover, I added that he did not seem to care if he checked out in the Twinpac or not. John, probably happy to get rid of at least one individual forced on us by Vientiane, was philosophical, saying little. Marquart failed to defend himself, was not upset, and seemed totally resigned to his fate. Perhaps all he wanted was a ticket home.

With one problem resolved, I adjusted my full attention to Stan Thompsen. Ford and I kept in touch as to Stan's slow progress, and I indicated that because of his eagerness to learn, I was willing to help as much as possible, as time would allow. It was kind of fun, for I had never trained anyone in basic flight maneuvers before.

I conducted two sessions. During the first I concentrated on teaching confined area (rough area) landings and takeoffs. Stan continued to show improvement, but was still not quite up to par. He seemed more comfortable, and actually was flying the machine, and not the reverse. The second flight was reserved for emergency procedures and techniques. We worked hard. At the end

of the four-hour afternoon, I judged that Thompsen continued to show progress, but was still not quite acceptable as First Officer material. And I would not allow our pilots to spend time and effort to teach an individual basic mountain work during the combat environment we were now working under.

During a conversation in the CPH's office, I indicated that Stan was probably salvageable, but required more instruction and practice. John listened patiently, and then said he would allow one additional training session.

Consistent with my one FCF per day, on Monday I spent several hours with Flight Mechanic Tom Neis in Papa Hotel Alpha, but only logged one hour. A first that I had never heard of before, or afterward, occurred while we were downwind in a left-hand approach pattern to the airfield. Suddenly, without warning, a very large, black rat dropped down from behind the right portion of the instrument consol. In an instant the rodent proceeded below into the passenger compartment and scurried into the tail cone electronics compartment. Tom was as shocked as I was. After landing, taxiing to the ramp, and securing, a thorough search was conducted. The rat was never found.

Flight duty began early Tuesday morning. It began with a FCF of Papa Hotel Echo. Greg Burch was my Flight Mechanic and Stan Thompson observed from the left seat prior to his final sanctioned training flight--a prelude to his pre-proficiency check ride.

More in a check ride than a training mode, that afternoon I had Stan perform while I observed. Because this flight represented his final allotted one, and we had a lot to cover, I let him make mistakes without repeating maneuvers. I did not instruct or talk him through the rough spots. Without coaching, he did not perform as well as during our last training session--perhaps he was nervous. It was also obvious to me that I had

been over instructing, carrying him through the more difficult maneuvers and, lacking natural talent, maneuvers that he might never perform to acceptable standards. It was disappointing, but everyone had bad days. Trying not to destroy his confidence, I told Stan to persevere, keep the faith, and continue to study.

I found myself caught in a quagmire. Since I had exclusively trained Stan, I considered it unreasonable and unjust for me to conduct a check ride that I firmly prejudged he would never pass. Therefore, I conferred with and asked Ford to perform this duty. Although John had transitioned to the Twinpac--he was also an early member of the Special Project--he did not have a lot of S-58T time, nor was he a qualified instructor pilot in the machine. For these reasons he refused my request. The other man in the office, Assistant Chief Pilot Dick Elder, was only Bell qualified. I would have to give the dilemma further thought.

With Thompsen temporarily in limbo, I continued local FCFs. Along with Flight Mechanic Phil Velasquez and other ground mechanics, we upgraded Papa Hotel Echo to upcountry status. Papa Hotel Charlie was another story. After an hour and a half of testing, a tug driver hauled the machine back into the barn for component changes. During further talks regarding our quandary in the CPH office, even though I had only flown with Hank Edwards once during his transition period, I decided to evaluate and check out Hank as a Twinpac IP, specifically for Thompsen's check ride if he was willing. I proposed my idea to Hank and explained the situation and my plan. He agreed, saying that he was willing to give it a try.

After a short FCF the next day, we flew Charlie to a U.S. Army chain-link fence-enclosed area south of the field near the Ramasuan radio intercept station. I had used this place several times before to conduct Bell training, as it was quiet, away

from the annoying airfield distractions, and had a fire truck with personnel available for emergencies. Since we had minimum time available to work, I attempted to standardize Edwards while conducting normal techniques and emergency procedures. During the course of our session, I attempted to explain what was expected of him, and that despite Thompsen's effort, I did not believe he was ready for upgrading. Of course, everyone was aware of the pressure to eliminate some of the Vientiane "deadwood" from our program. Still, Stan deserved an independent opinion. Naturally, it was preordained that Edwards would pass the IP check, and I thought that was the end of the Thompsen conundrum.

Stan and Hank returned to the Army facility that afternoon. I was in the Club bar having a cool beer, anticipating how it would all end when Hank entered, saying that Thompsen had passed the First Officer ride; he had done everything just right and Hank could not fail him. I was shocked and puzzled, for after the last time we flew together I was resigned to Stan's failure.¹⁰

"I checked out another IP to give him a check ride (all other IPs are on leave) as I didn't think it fair for me to give him the check ride after training him. He did well and passed the ride. There are those that are not happy with this

¹⁰ Hank Edwards Email. Hank was appointed to give Thompsen his final check ride. It was hoped by many that this would be Stan Thompsen's washout ride. This was accomplished under the auspices of FEPA. Hank was informed that his decision regarding Stan would be final. Stan provided Edwards a very good ride, so Hank signed him off. After this, Captain Bill Hutchison (later head of the heavy helicopter division) was barely civil to Hank. Later he saw the derogatory letter Hutch had written regarding Thompsen. There was friction between Hutch and Hank afterward, which extended into the cockpit several times. (Unlike Henthorn, Hutch never pressured me to get rid of Thompsen. Perhaps Don had acted as a proxy.)

[outcome], *but we were fair with the man and he is thought to be good enough* [to serve as a First Officer]. *We will see. Sometimes this IP job is a pain and not worth the seven dollars an hour that it pays."*

Letter Home, 10/31/71.

With no one else left to train, or machines to FCF, I had two days off. I then returned to FCF Papa Hotel Delta with Rudy Serafico on the final day of the month and was finished with the job by eleven o'clock.

BOLOVENS

Government forces had moved into Paksong town by mid-September. In order to fight another day, most elements of the ninth Vietnamese Regiment moved north toward Thateng leaving three maneuver battalions as harassing forces. This, plus foul weather, precluded clearing Route-23 fully to Pakse.

Mortar fire by mid-October, impacting and closing the airstrip to cargo planes, convinced military leaders that steps had to be taken immediately to open and secure the road between Ban Phakkout and Paksong. A multi-battalion force conducted a six-day operation, under fire, and linked up on 20 October. Three days later, with Thai soldiers spearheading the units, Route-23 was declared secure.

Clearing operations continued. Toward the end of the month. two separate thrusts were conducted, one to retake the high ground of the Thevada hills, and another at Phou Nongkin seven and a half miles north on the road to Thateng. Both were accomplished, the first on the 27th and the second on 29 October.

With Saravane and Paksong in government hands, Route-23 cleared west, and much of the high ground seized around Paksong,

most, but not all the objectives of Operation Sayasila had been achieved. Therefore, by the end of October, the operation was officially declared over.

However, the war in the south was not over. The operation was costly from the standpoint of government casualties and time to achieve goals. Proper defenses were not yet established in the two main battle areas of Saravane and Paksong. Moreover, LOCs 16 and 23 were still viable, and enemy logistic bases south of the Se Don and north of Lao Ngam were intact. The enemy still controlled most of the Bolovens, and with the monsoon season waning, the enemy was refitting and reinforcing to resume the offensive. The action in MR-4 was far from over. ¹¹

¹¹ *CHECO*, Bolovens, 16-20.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 307.

The annual monsoon morphed into a drier period in Southeast Asia as 1971 wound down toward its inevitable end. From intelligence gathered by various electronic, and human sources, and gross scuttlebutt, it became increasingly apparent to those of us working in the Theater, and also to Washington shakers and movers that the North Vietnamese Army was preparing for a more robust dry season offensive against RLG forces in Military Region Two.

The facts were convincing. Commencing in October and continuing through November, elements of the 316th Division's 11th Battalion and 174th Regiment conducted small-scale ground attacks and attacks-by-fire against Moung Phan Airfield, the prime logistics hub for Panther and other western FSBs. The enemy considered the site a prime obstacle to western area offensive operations, and was determined to put it out of business. ¹

THE VIETNAMESE ENGINEERS

Elements of the 316th support units prepared to enter Laos on 15 October. One, the 3rd Company of the 40th Training Battalion of the Capital Military Command's Group 1867, was eventually assigned to the 15th Engineer Battalion. Prior to crossing the border, the young men were informed that they would help the Lao revolution by serving as volunteer army soldiers. In order to blend in with the Pathet Lao troops, soldiers exchanged their traditional pith helmets for soft caps. They

¹ Instead of using the Xieng Khouang (Lima-22, LL) complex that was employed as a forward logistic base during the 1969 Plain of Jars operation, Moung Phan was considered out of enemy artillery range and more defensible.

also donned shirts with shoulder straps. In order to sanitize them, anything related to Vietnam was left behind.

Five days later during the march paralleling Route-7 toward the Plain of Jars, the unit was spotted by a Raven FAC pilot, who marked their location with a smoke round. After that the unit received its baptism of fire. That evening they reached a cave at the bottom of Phu Nok Kok at the western end of the Ban Ban Valley. ²

After receiving unit assignments, the next several weeks of training included specific missions involving techniques to:

"...build roads, build bunkers, locate and clear mines, and use explosive charges to breach enemy perimeter defenses...[After taking a position] we are assigned to defend fortified positions and we fight just like infantrymen."

Unit training concluded on 13 December:

"We spent most of the days learning about cluster bomblets, trip-wire mines, 'jumping' mines, toad mines, Claymore mines, detonators, satchel charges [and so forth]. There was little training on road-building..." ³

During early November, radio intercepts (some obtained at Moung Soui by Meo radio operators) from the North Vietnamese General Directorate of Rear Services revealed that sixteen long range 130mm field guns were being shipped from the Democratic Vietnamese Republic (DVR) to northern Laos. These large cannons, with a range of between seventeen to twenty-three miles, had the

² Phou Nok Kok: Translated as Woodpecker Mountain was controlled by Vang Pao's forces during the first Plain of Jars operation in 1969/70. It was the place where Case Officer Wil Greene earned his bones as the legendary "Black Lion.

³ Derived from the daily diary of platoon leader Xuandao, a 15th Engineer Battalion soldier, *From Hoa Binh to the Plain of Jars, to the historic opening battle at Ban Me Thuot*, Translated by Merle Pribbenow and provided to the Author by Jim Parker (Mule).

capability to far outdistance any large caliber howitzers Vang Pao's forces had available.

Further pointing to what was shaping up to be a vigorous fight, by late November it was revealed that an additional 6,400 Vietnamese and troops from the 312th Division and the 335 Independent Regiment had infiltrated Military Region Two. In order to protect supply routes and artillery positions units of the 226th anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) Regiment and the 335th AAA Division were deployed. ⁴

NARCOTICS

Although the U.S. military had never lost a battle in South Vietnam it was losing the war on drugs from the alarming numbers of young addicted men that had or were returning home from the war. The problem also contributed to increasing crime in the country.

The dilemma had not yet reached pandemic proportions in America, but constituted a distinct concern for the public and consequently their congressional representatives. Therefore, before narcotics destroyed our youth and nation, President Nixon, in concert with the United Nations, issued a decree on 17 June 1971 giving worldwide drug control top priority. Because of our presence there, Laos seemed a logical place to begin.

The growing of opium and manufacture of heroin had been part and parcel of Southeast Asian culture for centuries. Profits from drug sales and markups were enormous. Therefore, the trade involved greedy, high-ranking leaders of civilian and military organizations so that curtailing or even slowing

⁴ Derived from an Agency synopsis: XXCC, The 1971/1972 communist dry season offensive in northern Laos. The Author received this information from author William Leary, who in turn obtained it from former Agency Case Officer Chuck Campbell (code named White Top).

movement would be very difficult. Still, an attempt was accelerated by the Department of Drug Enforcement (DEA) and other agencies.

Always looking to stir-the-pot the ultra-left magazine *Ramparts* produced a lengthy article, *The New Opium War*, citing a historical account of drugs in Southeast Asia and "facts" impugning the CIA and Air America as being complicit in the trade.⁵

Rebutting the *Ramparts* article, the director of the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD) countered with a letter to a California congressman that was duly recorded in the House of Representatives on 2 June 1971:

"Charges made in the [Ramparts] article appear to be a part of a continuing effort to discredit agencies of the U.S. Government such as the U.S. Military, the CIA, and the Department of State, all...working actively with the BNDD in our worldwide effort to curtail international drug trade.

Actually, CIA has for some time been this Bureau's strongest partner in identifying foreign sources and routes of illegal trade in narcotics. Their help has included both direct support in intelligence collection, as well as in intelligence analysis and production...Much of the progress we are now making in identifying overseas narcotics trade can be attributed to CIA cooperation."

The letter went on to delineate specific locations and explain opium and heroin production in several Southeast Asian countries, the history of the trade, and some principals

⁵ Browning and Garrett, *Ramparts*, Volume 9, #10, May 1971.

involved.⁶

In September the Royal Lao Government enacted laws prohibiting commercial production and marketing of opium and its derivatives. In a country where opium was previously legal, and at least sixty licensed opium dens operated, these laws would be difficult to enforce. In order to ameliorate the effects of the laws on hill tribe farmers who produced the poppies, the USAID agricultural arm was charged to generate and develop cash crop substitutes for opium.

During November, the new opium law was implemented and U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency agents were allowed to open an office in Vientiane. Their task would be to attempt to enforce the new laws and train a special indigenous police force and customs agents for broader coverage. The men soon made an arrest, but because of political stalemates and the fact that there would be no more FAR military leaders left to conduct the war, the U.S. Embassy made no effort to implicate or prosecute top Lao leaders in the drug trade. Everyone knew who these men were, but they were generally inviolate.

Naturally, the new program took time to implement:

"...The U.S Customs Service provided advice, training, and commodity assistance to the Lao Customs Service. The U.S. provided similar assistance to the Lao National (civilian) Police, and to the Military Police. The DEA similarly worked with the Groupe Special d'Investigation..., established

⁶ BNDD Director John Ingersoll's letter to House of Representatives Charles Gubser, 06/02/71, *Ramparts Magazine* misrepresents role of Central Intelligence Agency in fighting against importation of dangerous drugs.

Even though there was a hue and cry by some authors and reporters during and long after the war was over, no tangible proof ever surfaced that Air America pilots were active and willing participants in the Southeast Asian drug trade.

*specifically for the purpose of narcotics enforcement and attached directly to the Office of the Prime Minister..."*⁷

Air America's Personnel Manual had contained a policy against smuggling on Company aircraft since 1957. The detriment to this infraction was termination with cause. In early 1972, the Company established a Security Inspection Service (SIS) to satisfy USG efforts to control the movement of drugs. When the program got up to speed, inspections by SIS teams and sniffer dogs were staged at Lao and Thai airfields, but deadheading pilots were not unduly harassed. The exercise was a nuisance factor in that when returning late and tired from upcountry on a hot day, one was delayed from enjoying a cool one. As we were not the offenders, we had nothing to fear from the drug inspection process, but since crewmembers carried concealed weapons and the inspectors were Thai, there was always the possibility that our firearms would be confiscated or the Thai police informed, which never happened. There were few cases where a crewmember refused to be inspected and those who did always lost and had to account for their actions. In the final analysis we were not the problem, which was never properly addressed.

I can only recall one instance where there was a potential problem. Flight Mechanic Joe Siaotong's bags were being inspected, and some small tubes of old looking morphine were discovered. By way of explanation, Joe stated that he had obtained the morphine syrettes from a U.S. Army medic, and carried them in his RON bag to administer to a crewmember in case of a severe injury. Since the Thai inspector had no idea what Joe was talking about, he wanted to confiscate the items.

⁷ Joe Leeker, *Air America in Laos-3*, Humanitarian Work, *Illegal Drugs in Laos*, 16, fn 84, Narcotics Control Program.

Those of us present, happy that Joe had enough foresight to carry the pain medicine, loudly protested and finally Joe was allowed to keep his morphine.

The Udorn SIS unit worked under the leadership of the Air America Director of Security. The handball court was used to train the dogs, their handlers, and inspectors, and there was a distasteful rumor going around that the dogs were intentionally addicted to drugs for which they were supposed to search. (This has been confirmed by my daughter, who is a DVM.)

The baggage checks, although of much concern, were never very invasive. Bags were placed on the ground for the dogs to sniff. Not long after the SIS program inception, physical searches became random and continued for the rest of the time we worked in Laos and Thailand. ⁸

UPCOUNTRY

I had trained Stan Thompsen, a dislocated pilot from the fixed wing program, and much to my amazement, he had passed his First Officer check ride with Hank Edwards. Despite this accomplishment, I was not quite satisfied with Stan's performance, I did not think it wise to turn him loose to fly with other Twinpac pilots until I had a chance to provide him with supervised training in the mountains, and observe his demeanor under the added stress of combat conditions.

⁸ EW Knight Emails, 11/25/00, 11/26/00.

We all were aware that General Vang Pao allowed infirm or terminal Meo to use drugs to reduce pain. I sat down next to an old timer at The Alternate one day while he had his toke from an opium pipe. Twice while RONing at Pakse, I entered a government authorized opium den, once out of curiosity, the second time to show an interested Australian couple.

Without belaboring the distasteful issue, in previous books I have mentioned some accounts of incidents our pilots had with Lao pilots or Lao army officers moving drugs in Lao planes or helicopters.

On the first, Stan, Rudy Serafico, and I ferried XW-PHE to Long Tieng. I had not been there for twelve days but nothing much seemed changed. A briefing failed to reveal much more than I had gathered earlier from FIC Udorn.

With the weather cooperating, we had a very good day, logging ten hours that consisted of numerous sling load deliveries and landings to landing zones within the Vang Pao line around Long Tieng and Sam Tong. After demonstrations, Stan participated and did a creditable job. Of course, because I had to closely monitor his landings, I obtained little rest and was relieved when the day was over.

It was much of the same on Tuesday, with maximum work within our sphere of operations. Everything was fine until the afternoon, when I landed on a low stump on the Plain of Jars and slightly damaged the belly at station 316. It was very embarrassing for me, lending itself to a kind of a "do what I say, not what I do" situation. On one hand I was trying to instill confidence in Stan, and on the other hand, fouling up. With all the problems we were having with the Twinpac, we did not need this, but it happens.

Our RON over and Echo requiring minor sheet metal work we RTB and landed about dark.

The following morning, I was scheduled to FCF Papa Hotel Charlie and conduct proficiency checks with Lloyd Higgins and Charlie Weitz. I still was not aware that Lloyd and Charlie were in the Special Project, and although I was instrumental in providing airworthy machines, their business was not my business.

That afternoon Bob Davis held a meeting for available Twinpac pilots to discuss lingering problems. There had been some problems with refueling aircraft upcountry that we had to live with because the Customer was not contractually obligated

to assist us. With the advent of fuel tankers and hot refueling, we had been spoiled. Now, the absence of this equipment and return to manually hand pumping fuel from drums caused unhappiness among crews, mainly because it required hard labor and cost crews flight time.

Another problem related to failed cargo hook solenoids resulting in prematurely dropped loads en route to a landing zone. Although the cause was largely unknown, Bob recommended that the cargo selector switch not be maintained in either the on or automatic position, but in the safe position during cruise.

Bob reemphasized the importance of recording daily malfunctions in the logbook. Finally, he divulged that phase one of the Sikorsky program that limited the amount of power we were allowed to use was still in effect. But Sikorsky representatives were arriving in Udorn about mid-month, perhaps with information concerning this.

The next four days involved FCF duties or proficiency training. On the fifth Tom Neis and Jim Hyder assisted in the all-day testing of Papa Hotel Charlie. Testing resumed the next morning with Papa Hotel Charlie finally being released. In the afternoon, using Papa Hotel Delta, I administered a proficiency check to "Pogo" Hunter.

The seventh involved two FCFs--PHE and PHD--with Rudy Serafico. Echo was cleared for upcountry work, but Delta failed to achieve an up status and was remanded to the hangar for ASE electronic work. The ASE problem persisted the following morning.

Mid-morning on the ninth, Mike Barksdale, Chuck Low, and I boarded C-123K 5-4555 for Long Tieng to fly Papa Hotel Echo. Having arrived late, we commenced sling load shuttles to Plain

of Jars firebases. We worked late and caught the last fight south on "triple nickel."

The Sikorsky representatives arrived early. We spent two days in classes and were deluged with charts, schematics, overlays, and facts and figures. We hashed over past problems incurred with the S-58T since the conversion and received answers to a few questions. Of course, these men were only technicians and had little or no idea regarding our work conditions. Nevertheless, the exercise was a sounding board, and I think that those who attended came away with some added knowledge about the Twinpac. The best part, however, was the lifting of the power restriction.

JIM PARKER

CIA contract employee Jim Parker and his wife Brenda arrived in Udorn during early November. They entered the pushbutton lock two-story block building I called the "White House," located adjacent to the Air America parking lot and in the same area as CASI parking and the Q Warehouse. The structure was home for the 4802nd Joint Liaison Detachment (JLD), the Agency command center for military and black operations in Laos. They were greeted by Deputy Station Chief Jim Glerum, a sophisticated Princeton graduate and well-dressed person. Next, they were ushered into another room and introduced to Chief of Base, Pat Landry, who had assumed that mantel since AB-1's Bill Lair rotated to the States in 1968.

It was an active environment, where both men and women moved rapidly from map board to map board as latest information was radioed from Vientiane or from upcountry. Accompanied by Glerum, Jim met Chief of Operations George Morton, formerly a Special Forces Army colonel. George proceeded to brief Parker that their mission was primarily to keep several Vietnamese

divisions out of Nam and preserve Laos as a free country. Of course, there was a lot more, including the situation in Military Region Two. Some of this included latest intelligence that two enemy divisions were moving along LOCs to challenge Thai forces on the Plain of Jars. Action was expected soon.

"Other CIA officers oversaw air operations, photographic and communications intelligence, order-of-battle assessments, and coordinated military operations and requirements with 7/13 Air Force headquarters..."

Eager to obtain a field assignment, much to Parker's dismay he was informed that he would be assigned a Military Region Two desk officer's job. ⁹

HOBO-42

Enemy AAA gunners were still exacting a heavy toll on our military planes in the Barrel Roll region, and in spite of USAF SAR capability, Air America pilots still participated in rescue attempts.

While I was standing-by at home on the 14th, an incident occurred around the Plain of Jars that was unusual in the annals of SAR operations.

PIC Brian Johnson and First Officer Paul Gregoire had been hauling ammunition for hours from Shep's sling load ramp at The Alternate to Lion fire support base (FSB), and later a drop zone on the PDJ to King Kong, when they heard a radio call from a Raven FAC that an A-1 Skyraider had recently crashed east of

⁹ James E. Parker, Jr., *Codename Mule: Fighting the Secret War in Laos for the CIA*, Naval Institute Special Warfare Series (Naval Institute Press: Annapolis, Maryland, 1995) 25-27. Parker attended the University of North Carolina. Until he passed from cancer, we had a standing bet of five dollars on the winner of North Carolina-Duke basketball games. Bill Leary, *The CIA and the "Secret War in Laos: The Battle for Skyline Ridge, 1971-72*, 6.

their position. A hot area, including 37mm and 12.7mm guns, the plane had been impacted by an AAA shell and an airfoil had folded up at the wing root. With the plane spinning wildly out of control, the two pilots were observed ejecting inverted, close to the ground. There were no beacons or radio calls forthcoming, and although prognosis of the crew's survival was dubious, their actual physical condition was unknown. As Johnny on the spot, assistance was required from Air America pilots the Air Force knew were always present and willing to help.

Brian quickly deposited the load and headed twenty miles east for the area in question. Another helicopter crew in Bell Papa Foxtrot Juliet was on the way.

A single crewed Hotel-54 was the first helicopter on scene. The downed pilots were found almost immediately on a slope at the bottom of trees and heavy brush. Separated by about ten feet, both pilots were still secured to their ejection seats, and were not moving. Only their drogue chutes had deployed. The pilot of Hotel-54 indicated that he and the Flight Mechanic were not equipped to handle the situation and there was no place nearby to land.

Brian indicated he was only a few minutes away and would attempt to recover the bodies. While Brian hovered at forty feet over the scrub trees, Paul climbed down into the cabin section to better assist and operate the hoist, while the Flight Mechanic descended with his M-16 to assess the situation and check the men for signs of life. From his vantage point in the cabin door, Paul could see both pilots positioned relatively close together and he was reasonably certain that they were dead. What was first considered a rescue attempt now became a recovery mission.

There was some urgency involved in quickly completing the operation. The burning A-1 was located 200 feet up a hill.

Ammunition was cooking off and, like most SARs it was a given that enemy forces could not be far away.

When the Flight Mechanic reached the ground and exited the horse collar, he struggled uphill dragging the cable to the first ejection seat. Then he attached the hook to a D ring on a parachute riser and signaled Paul to reel in the cable.

However, when the cable was fully retracted, the pilot, his parachute pack, gear, and seat were still a few feet below the cabin door. Everything was estimated to weigh at least 350 pounds, pushing the maximum allowable weight and tensile strength of the hoist cable.

While Johnson continued to maintain a steady hover, Paul strained for a few minutes without success to vertically lift the unit into the cabin. There was a brief discussion with Johnson about lowering the seat to the ground and have the Flight Mechanic reattach the hook closer to the seat. Because communication with the mechanic was dubious, and they had already expended too much time in the area, the pilots decided on another attempt. Finally, with a desperate surge of waning strength, Gregoire managed to raise the apparatus to a position where he could grasp the seat and wrestle it into the helicopter. Aching from a wrenched back and completely spent he signaled Johnson to depart.

Their Flight Mechanic was still on the ground, but the three-man Bell crew was waiting patiently for Johnson to clear the spot in order to recover the second pilot. This time, Johnson's Flight Mechanic hooked the aviator directly to his parachute harness, vastly easing the task of hoisting him and the Flight Mechanic onboard.

The result of ejecting inverted so close to the ground was patently grim. On the way back to Long Tieng Paul observed the bottom of the ejection seat facing upward. Underneath, hardly

recognizable as a human, the pilot's body appeared like a bag of skin and bones. Paul placed him gently on the floor the best he could, but his arms and legs were intertwined with his head on the bottom of the pile laying on his right cheek. On closer examination the man's skull appeared to have been pulverized, because the maximum width from temple to temple was not more than two inches. After landing at 20 Alternate, the bodies were removed from the seats, bagged, and loaded into a C-130 for the trip to Udorn.

A few days later Gregoire was interviewed at the Chief Pilot's office by a USAF flight surgeon who was mainly concerned with the extent of the pilots' injuries and how they had occurred. During initial give and take, it was revealed that the major had no idea of Air America's mission, or how the Company functioned. Moreover, he was reluctant to tell Paul what the A-1 crew was doing. A little miffed, Paul reminded the doctor that Air America pilots had recovered the bodies and knew exactly where the Air Force had been operating. The doctor was still confused as to who and what Air America was, but did acquiesce to answer a few questions.

However, still stingy with information, he indicated that every major bone in each pilot's body had been completely shattered at ground impact. Estimates indicated the men had punched out at less than fifty feet. One pilot was only on his second mission, but the PIC was vastly more experienced having flown twelve missions. The incident was unique in that it had never happened in quite that way before nor afterward.¹⁰

¹⁰ Paul Gregoire Emails, 02/16/97, 02/18/97.
Mac Thompson Email, 08/05/03, Air America S-58T Rescue. In this narrative, Paul Gregoire's recall differed slightly from his 1997 Emails to the Author.

The morning after the SAR, Mike Lappiere (DOH 09/30/70), Deak Kennedy, and I deadheaded on C-123 617, the first available early flight to Long Tieng. We took command of Papa Hotel Alpha, one of the ships involved in the A-1 SAR. After logging a little over eight hours, and thirty personal sorties shuttling supplies to outposts and the artillery positions, I secured for the RON. Although no one talked openly about the impending offensive, the atmosphere was noticeably strained and lacked the normal sardonic humor.

The sixteenth was more of the same: supply the fire support bases and try to remain out of the range of potential roving enemy patrols. After my average thirty sorties and nine hours, we caught USAF C-130 NCA home.

The next seven days of STO were then spent in Udorn.

THE MONEY SQUEEZE

With the war winding down and public dissatisfaction still apparently prevalent among the more vocal types, congress continued to act. Military funding for the Nixon Administration's policy in Laos was the key issue. The Symington Committee had already partially studied this matter in 1969 and with the advent of the April Moose-Lowenstein report, renewed efforts to place a limit on spending were underway.

On 17 November the Symington Committee proposed a maximum ceiling of 350 million dollars on military aid to Laos. This was implemented in December for fiscal 1972.

The stipulation caused Deputy Chief (DEPCH) and CINCPAC to forward recommendations to improve Theater cost effectiveness. The burden fell on the Department of Defense, which was paying increasing aid costs because of the Meo, SGU, and Thai volunteers, to coordinate the diverse elements.

Convinced that cuts were pre-ordained, DEPCH-JUSMAGTHAI, Brigadier General John W Vessy commanding, relocated to Udorn on 1 September. Although monetary savings and coup rumblings in Bangkok may have been the prime movers, with Air America, the Agency, and USAF located at the base, the shift definitely placed the unit closer to the action.

The entire unit was present and operational by 17 November. Now it was believed that logistical support for FAR/FAN/SGU would receive increased organizational emphasis. Moreover, as the senior military advisor to Ambassador Godley, DEPCH would now be able to provide a permanence formerly lacking in logistic matters. ¹¹

REVOLUTION

"Thailand is in a bit of turmoil since the revolution, but everyone insists there is no problem."

Letter Home 11/19-20/71.

During the first day of my STO, Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn, in a bloodless coup, terminated constitutional rule and seized full power. His reasons were many, including political problems and the disturbing situation inside and outside the country. Terrorists operating in the north, northeast, and south received clandestine support, funds, and weapons from abroad, and were increasing efforts to attack police and military units.

Citing an intolerable situation and a threat to national security, Thanom annulled the constitution, dissolved parliament, disbanded his cabinet in favor of a five-man

¹¹ CHECO.

National Executive Council (described as a revolutionary council), and declared martial law.

Thanom pledged to continue Thailand's pro-United States and anti-communism foreign policy.¹²

For the man on the street, at least in Udorn, there seemed to be no change in everyday life. On the 20th, we were invited by Tuie's cousin, Khon Kaen, to a border police party. Discussions revolving around the recent change in government and martial law did not seem to affect people's confidence and enthusiasm regarding Thailand's future. Everyone was willing to "bend with the wind" to achieve national goals.

Tuie was feeling unwell, and resting a considerable portion of the day. Along with my Father, we were all hoping for a girl this time, and expected the baby's birth in May.

Heralding a stressful time for the family, Tuie's "mother and father" separated and Plang was dividing his time between our house and a nearby wat on the western side of the Nong Khai highway. From my limited observations, he took a lot of verbal abuse from Cham. We felt sorry for him, and as he had nowhere else to go, insisted that he stay with us.

Cham was quite vindictive. Incensed that we were harboring Plang, she arrived at the front door one evening raising hell. It was quite embarrassing, for she complained loudly about our transgressions. I was happy when she finally tired of venting her venom and departed. Thais were normally quite stoic and

¹² John Bowman, *Almanac*, 292.
Syamada, *History of Thailand*, Chulalakorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.
Foreign Relations.

peaceful people, but beware when they became aroused. ¹³

I was back at work on the 24th, monitoring Bob Davis' semi-annual proficiency check in Papa Hotel Charlie. These rides were becoming, to my satisfaction, more of a learning period and review of emergency procedures.

The following day was an all-day FCF of Papa Hotel Alpha with Flight Mechanic Leveriza.

"Not much right now. I haven't been flying much as I am close to my limit for the year. ¹⁴

I have started running to improve my health. Now if I can stay off the booze maybe we will have something..."

Letter Home 11/26/71.

Despite my high flight time, I was scheduled for a RON at Long Tieng. On the 28th Jim Demartini, Velasquez, and I caught a 354 Peppergrinder run. While ammunition was being disgorged on the ramp, we walked to Papa Hotel Bravo, our assigned ship.

¹³ I lent Khun Plang a small amount of money to build a stilt type house in a new compound across the street from his favorite temple. At sixty-five, he planned to let religion occupy the remainder of his life. After the house was completed, he lived in it for a short time until the two reconciled and he moved back home.

At the end of January, I wrote home, 01/27/72:

Tuie's parents are back together and have been for some time. The uncle [Cha Tha, who was actually Tuie's father] Tuie's mother's brother, who lives in Pattani..., came to talk to her. He convinced her it was all a misunderstanding and that she was wrong. She listens to him as he is a very convincing and sincere person. It made me happy because it lessened some of the tension around here. Tuie is still on the outs with her mother [actually her aunt], as she can't forget the trouble her mother made...

I had no aspirations of being a landlord, so the house was eventually sold to our friend Jarun, the town veterinarian.

¹⁴ EW Knight Email, 11/25/00. "1,000 hours for the year was always the [pilot] target limit, but during certain periods of high activity, management obtained extensions to 1,200 hours. In the beginning there were no limits."

During the abbreviated day, most shuttles were conducted to Plain of Jars FSBs.

Work continued on Monday and proceeded satisfactorily. Thousands of FAR, Thai, and Meo faced superior numbers of three North Vietnamese Army divisions formed in a semi-circle to the north. Despite this, morale appeared high and communications with FSB FAGs were cheerful. Supply lines to the Plain were maintained intact by fixed wing and helicopters, and allied air still provided a few daily sorties. Therefore, preparations went forward for an anticipated mid-January offensive. ¹⁵

After logging over eight hours and thirty sorties, we deadheaded to Udorn on CASI aircraft Papa Hotel Foxtrot (PHF).

MR-4

At the beginning of November Paksong and Saravane were still under RLG control. After the severe beating they had received from Allied air, several Vietnamese battalions had pulled back north into the Toumlan Valley to reinforce, but many remained on the Bolovens Plateau, at the Thateng logistics base on the Route-23 Road from Paksong to Saravane, and in areas in between.

In order to cope with the large North Vietnamese Army units fielded in Military Region Four, starting in July the table of organization structure of irregular and regular units was modified from battalion (BV) to larger regimental (GM) strength. Two training sites in Military Region Four were devoted to accomplishing this task. Staffed by Special Forces personnel or Agency Case Officers, one of the irregular (SGU) training sites was located at PS-18 in the hills northwest of Pakse adjacent to

¹⁵ *CHECO.*

the Mekong River; the other was south of Pakse on the Mekong's west bank. At PS-18 GMs 41 and 42 were formed.

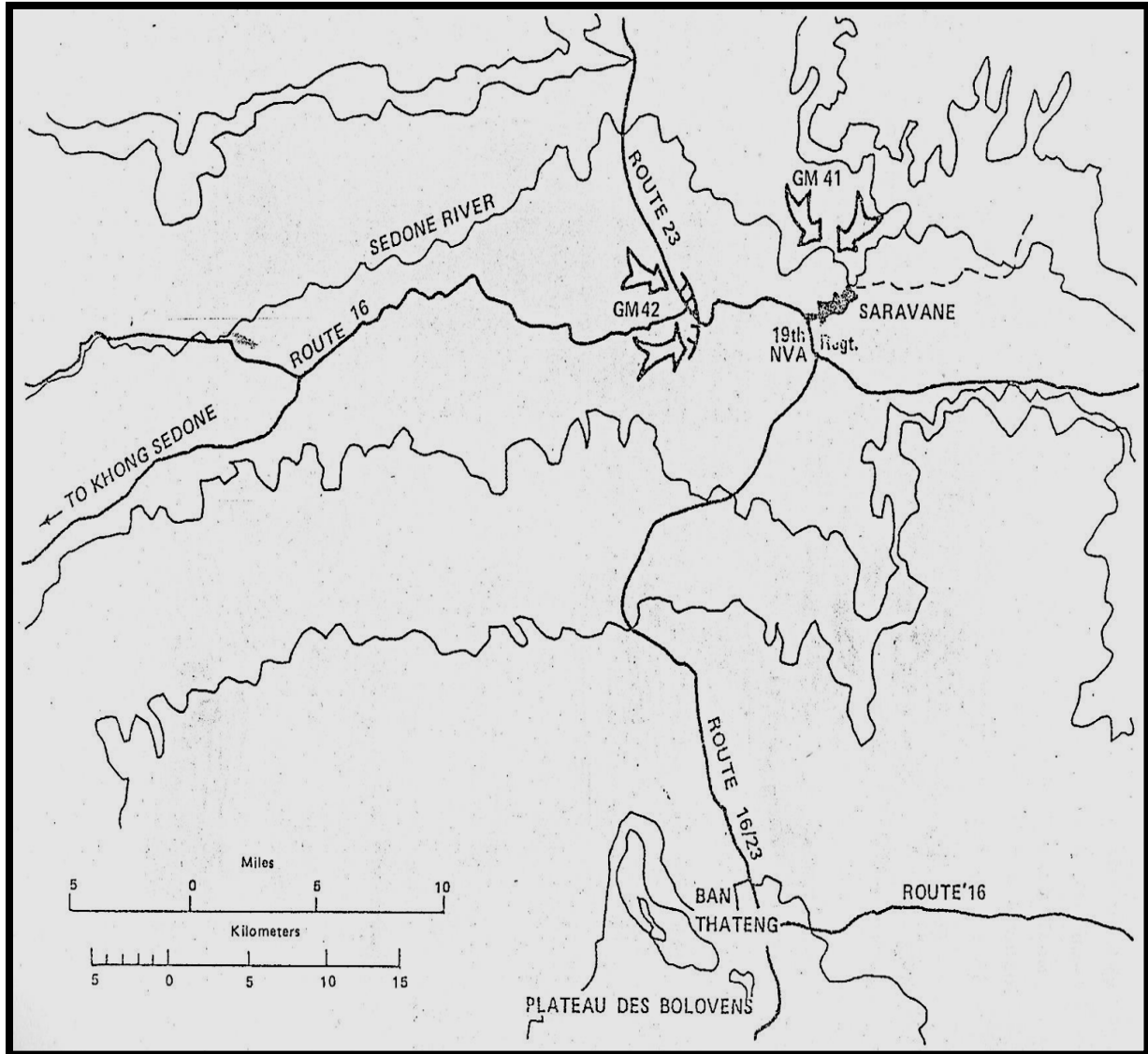
Savannakhet's GM-31 September movement into Lao Ngam had left Saravane generally unoccupied. Therefore, elements of Vietnamese troops had moved in to fill the void.

On 16 October, newly reformed and "trained" GM 41 and 42 were challenged to return Saravane to the government fold. GM-42 was lifted by USAF CH-53 crews from PS-18 to a point west of Lima-44, where they marched southeast, engaged the North Vietnamese 39 Regiment, and waited for the second phase of the pincer attack.

With the 39th occupied, within two days GM-41 was lifted just north of town. Surprised by the alacrity of the Special Guerrilla Unit movement, the enemy wilted, and by the fourth week of October the two regiments were in total control of the Saravane area.

Taking advantage of a situation that would surely not last indefinitely, GM-41 was tasked to comb and clear "bread-basket" rice paddy land southwest of Saravane purported to harbor the enemy's 46 Battalion. The operation kicked off on 1 November. Good progress was made. With the help of Allied air, by the second day the first objective had been reached at the crossroads of Routes-16, 23, and 231, twenty-three miles southwest of Saravane. Phou Kong Noy (bench mark 1,319 feet), a lower hill a few miles west of the Phou Kong summit (2,241 feet), commanding and overlooking the junction, became a reinforced FSB supported by one battalion.

By the third and fourth, numerous enemy contacts occurred. The next day, villagers indicated that the 46th Vietnamese headquarters, alerted to the SGU's movement, had moved to an unspecified location the previous night. With no significant contacts made, a battalion advanced to Ban Lavang, eight miles



Map of the battle to recapture Saravane in Military Region Four.
 Rivers are depicted as wavy lines.
 Soutchay, 75.

south of Thateng on Route-23. Another battalion moved even closer to the enemy stronghold.

On nine November, the operation was canceled and the GM-41 battalions began moving back toward Saravane to rest, refit, provide area defense, and prepare for future operations. ¹⁶

It was imperative to continue aggressive offensive operations to keep the enemy off balance and deny him territory in which to operate. This became northwest of Saravane. clear when a road watch team spotted four Vietnamese battalions equipped with heavy weapons in the Toumlan Valley, twelve miles Allied air assets hit the area, resulting in a reputed high killed-by-air (KBA) count. Throughout the month Raven pilots continued to discover evidence of tank and truck activity. ¹⁷

Despite losing Saravane and Paksong, enemy forces still held the Thateng area (lost three years before) and logistics Route-16 stretching nineteen miles east to Ban Phone and the Se Kong Valley, where the road turned north and paralleled the Se Kong, eventually linking up with Route-96. ¹⁸ It was believed that successful interdiction of this LOC would deny enemy supplies to conduct a protracted war on the northeastern Bolovens and in the Se Done Valley.

To initiate this plan, with the aid of coordinated allied air, GM-41 would invest Thateng, and GM-33 would return to Military Region Four from Nong Saphong, Savannakhet to conduct the Route-16 segment. GM-33 was ferried to Saravane by C-123

¹⁶ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 308.
CHECO, Bolovens Campaign, 21.
Soutchay, 72-73.

¹⁷ On one such foray into the valley, H-34 Captain Emmet Sullivan encountered enemy tanks mounting 12.7mm guns. For obvious reasons, he did not investigate further.

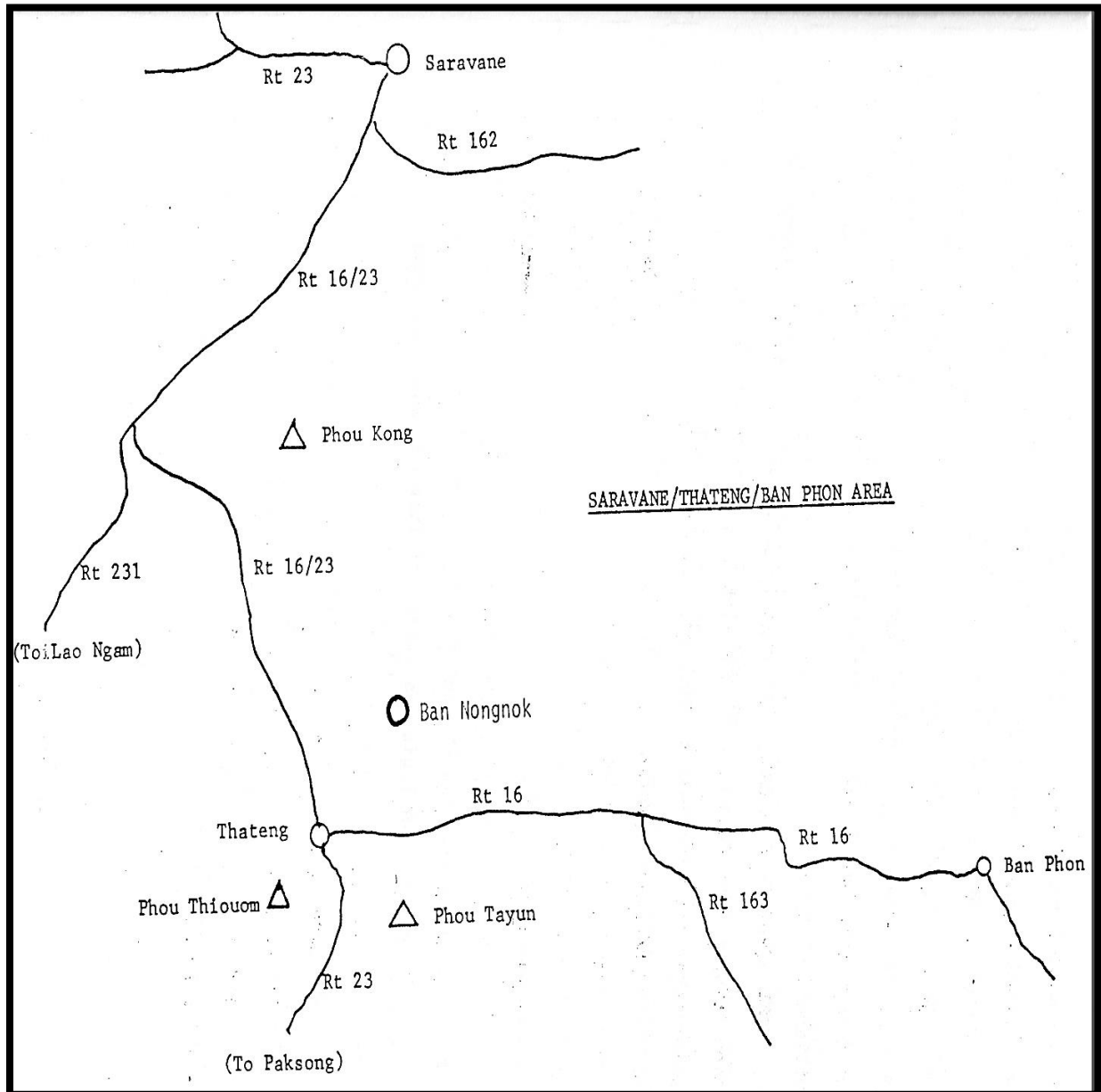
¹⁸ Before the advent of the Ho Chi Minh Trail Igloo White sensor program, we conducted many road watch missions in this area that contained one of the numerous enemy base areas along the extensive Trail system.

pilots on the 19th. All SGU units from both regiments were ready by the start date of 21 November.

In the morning, troops from GM-33 and gear were loaded on ten USAF and several Air America helicopters. Escorted by A-1 pilots, they flew shuttles to a landing zone north of Ban Phone that had been prepped by air strikes and secured by Commando Raiders. The lift was successfully accomplished before noon without incident. After organizing their forces, the battalions moved down into the Ban Phone Valley and occupied the town. This was followed by establishing perimeter defenses one mile around the village.

The same day, three battalions of GM-41 moved south toward Thateng. By the 23rd units reached Ban Nongkok, an enemy hospital complex three miles northeast of Thateng, and waited while Tacair struck Phou Thiouom, a long mountain range overlooking Thateng and Route-23 from the west. This high ground had been used effectively as a fire base in the past to control the narrow Thateng divide, and intentions were to do it again. Following the pounding, a special team was inserted to secure the summit. The fourth GM-41 battalion was loaded at Saravane for delivery. However, heavy enemy fire was encountered, requiring some delay while A-1 pilots worked to suppress the fire.

During the action, two H-34s received battle damage from mortar and small arms fire while on the ground at XC 4600, just south of the mountain. Hotel-88, crewed by DW Felder (DOH 11/02/66), Emmet Sullivan (DOH 11/26/69), and FC Manalo (DOH 07/09/66), incurred hits to a main rotor and a tail rotor blade. Hotel-86 was crewed by Dick Lister (DOH 01/10/86), Gerry Toman (DOH 06/12/68), and CA Monserrat (DOH 06/13/66). Their ship was impacted more severely with damage to all main rotor blades and



Graphic displaying principal objectives of the GM-41 and GM-33 offensive as described in the narrative.

CHECO, Bolovens, 24.

the transmission oil cooler. In addition, both Lister and Toman received minor wounds. ¹⁹

After the GM-41 battalion was firmly in place on Phou Thiouom, ²⁰ crew-served weapons were placed on top to form a fire support base. These included a 75mm howitzer (later augmented by another pack howitzer), three large recoilless rifles, and three 81mm mortars.

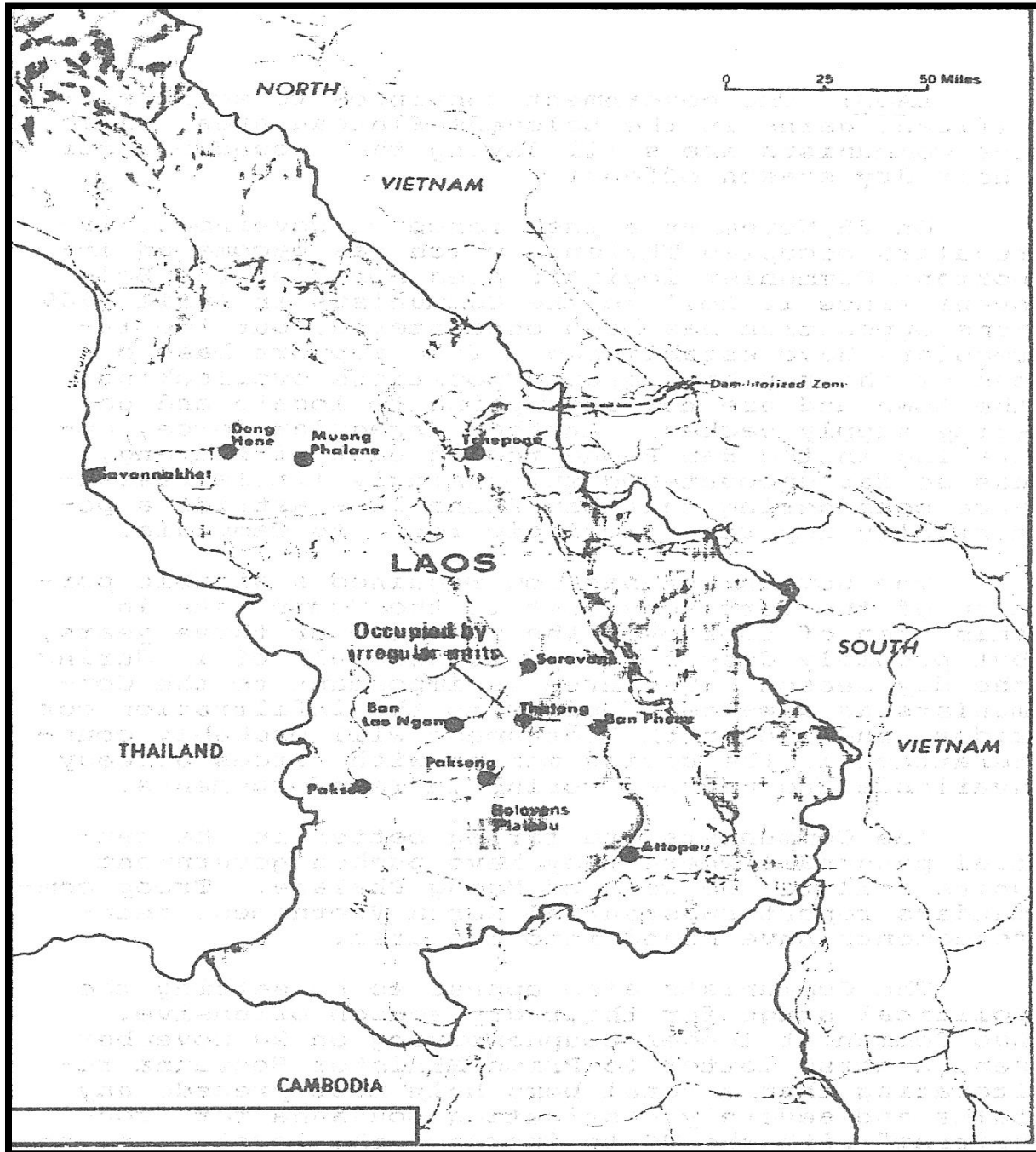
All units were in place by the 25th, and with two other reserve SGU battalions advancing from the south, Thateng was occupied on the 25th. Throughout the operation fighting had been relatively light and several caches of foodstuffs had been discovered.

"On 25 November a task force of government irregulars occupies Thateng, which has become an important communist logistical area north of the Bolovens since it fell to the communists in April 1969. Some opposition has been encountered, but the irregulars have established a fire support base on one of the key high ground positions overlooking the town and are now attempting to locate and destroy supply caches. Another irregular force, operating in the Ban Phone region east of Thateng, has so far encountered surprisingly little resistance considering that Ban Phone lies astride a potentially important logistic route to Cambodia.

The government has now regained a sizeable portion of the territory lost to the communists in this area of Laos over the past two or three years, but probably does not hope to hold all

¹⁹ Bill Leary November 1971 Notes. Perhaps Toman was wounded twice in the Military Region Four area. When Gerry worked for me in the 1980s, he showed me his scar and indicated that he had been shot in the fleshy portion of his neck at Saravane. Joe Leeker, the *Aircraft of Air America, Hotel-86, Hotel-88.*

²⁰ During August 1967 we lost John Cooney and Earl Bruce when John crashed into the south side of Phou Thiouom during inclement weather.



CIA map, 11/27/71 displaying areas of contention in Military Region Three and Military Region Four.

of it during the dry season. The area is important to the communists as a western buffer to the infiltration corridor, and the North Vietnamese will probably counterattack in the coming months with forces already available and may well bring in reinforcements.

The communists are faring better in the central panhandle [MR-3] where they have pushed government units well to the west of Moung Phalane. Troop commanders report substantial North Vietnamese reinforcements have moved into the area.

The communists also appear to be setting the political stage for their dry season offensive. Lao communist leader Souphanouvong on 20 November sent a harsh letter to Prime Minister Souvanna reiterating that a total bomb halt must precede any talks and severely castigating Souvanna for 'conspiring' with the U.S. to increase the level of fighting." ²¹

Elements of GM-33 found the Route-16 blocked east of Ban Phone, and enemy contact was considered minor.

By the 28th, the regiment was ordered to search and clear the road west toward Thateng. Within two days, contact was made by enemy units on the surrounding high ground, and a truck park discovered and vehicles destroyed. ²²

²¹ CIA Bulletin, Laos: The government continued to score significant gains in the Bolovens Plateau area, while the communists are still laying the groundwork for their dry season offensive, 11/27/71.

²² Ken Conboy, 308.
CHECO, Bolovens, 22-26.
Soutchay, 74, 77.

Enemy supply activity along Route-7 gradually increased as the rains tapered off, then ceased, and the roadways dried. As a result, USAF assets destroyed or damaged sizeable numbers of vehicles in the Ban Ban Valley, in the vicinity of the 7/71 Nong Pet junction, and in the Khang Khai-Phong Savan areas. (Because of possible ceasefire negotiations, Khang Khai proper on the northern Plain of Jars was still off limits to Allied bombing.) Despite the positive interdiction results, from all indications it appeared certain that the enemy would move on the Plain as early as mid-January and then resume their offensive on the Long Tieng complex.

*"In north Laos pilots have reported improvements in the NVA roads east of the PDJ. Pilots report a new road now links Route-7 in the north with Route-4 in the south [Route-72] that will allow supplies to be trucked along the eastern rim of the Plaine. They have also noted increasing numbers of enemy troops in the area southeast of the Plaine."*¹

THE ENEMY

The coming dry season offensive to destroy Vang Pao and the Thai forces on the Plain of Jars, breaching the outer defense line, and liberating the San Tong/Long Tieng complex, was shaping up to be a very large, aggressive, and ambitious undertaking. It also had other far-reaching implications.

North Vietnamese military high command plans remained basically the same as initially envisioned:

"...the Vietnamese and Lao Party Politburos and Central Military Party Committees decided to conduct a number of

¹ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/07/71.

relatively large offensive campaigns of strategic significance in Laos during the 1971-1972 dry season in order to distract the enemy's attention and **create favorable conditions to allow our forces to make preparations for our 1972 strategic offensive in South Vietnam.** After making a [mid-year] detailed study and assessment of the strategic deployment and the balance of forces of the two sides we and our Lao allies [the Pathet Lao] selected the Plain of Jars-Long Tieng as the area in which we would conduct a major campaign.

The Campaign Command Headquarters affirmed the [original] formula for the conduct of the campaign: Powerful attacks, attack swiftly, attack when victory was certain, seize opportunities, attack continuously, employ combined arms coordination as our primary method for destroying enemy forces holding fortified positions, also pay special attention to attacking enemy forces operating in the open when they move up reinforcements or tried to escape, closely coordinate our offensive attacks to seize ground with defending key, vital areas, while fighting, strive to work to strengthen and consolidate our forces to ensure that we could fight continuously for a protracted period of time." ²

As the battle unfolded, North Vietnamese historians recorded that their forces slated to participate in the campaign were listed as the 312th and 316th Infantry Divisions, and the 335th and 866th Volunteer Army Regiments. These were to be supported by the 16th and 42nd Artillery battalions, four battalions from the 226 Regiment/365 Antiaircraft Division, sapper-reconnaissance battalions from the 19, 27, and 41 Dac

² Ho Khang, Chief Editor, Military History Institute of Vietnam/Ministry of Defense, *National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2007, History of the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation, 1954-1975, Volume 2: The Decisive Victory in 1972.*

Cong, one tank-armored battalion, and three engineer battalions. Pathet Lao units involved were nine infantry battalions, three local force companies, one artillery battalion, and local guerrilla militia forces well acquainted with the terrain.

When top leaders of the 335th Regiment were alerted at their Nam Bac headquarters north of Luang Prabang, troops were mustered and began moving toward the Plain of Jars.

From the Western view estimates of enemy strength were fifty battalions numbering 12,200 men deployed in both Xieng Khouang and Houa Phan Provinces. Of these, fifteen Vietnamese battalions were poised on the north, east, and southeast flanks of the Plain of Jars. One battalion was deployed south of Bouam Long.

This total number greatly outnumbered government forces that included: nineteen battalions of SGU, ten battalions of Thai, and four FAR battalions.

ENEMY CONSTRUCTION ENGINEERS

"This morning (14 December) the entire company was briefed on our mission, which is to participate in an offensive campaign codenamed **Campaign Z**...the deputy platoon commander passed along additional information to me unofficially. He said that this campaign would be different than the one fought last year because our forces were very strong this time...for the first time we now had 130mm artillery guns in the [PDJ]."

The following day the men moved forward, marching all day through patches of jungle until reaching a small rock cave near Ban Na Hin, Phou Keng on the western Plain of Jars (this was close to GM-21).

On the 16th:

"My platoon was spread out along the road to check the condition of the road and search for anti-tank and anti-

personnel mines from the Ban Son[g] area [nine miles north of Phou Keng] to Ban Na Hin at the foot of Phou Keng in order to allow the tanks and the infantry of the 174th Regiment to move forward to make their attack...we only conducted reconnaissance and made surveys to prepare to eliminate obstacles. We would only be allowed to carry out the elimination of the obstacles after our campaign artillery opened fire, and the obstacles had to be removed within 30 minutes." ³

Consistent with their meticulous planning prior to any offensive, the Vietnamese began early reconnaissance forays of Plain of Jars and outer Long Tieng defenses.

During late November into early December, 866 Independent Regiment elements were encountered roaming seven miles east of Long Tieng. Having recently arrived from Nam Bac, first units of the 335th infiltrated the Moung Phan area and commenced surveillance of Moung Phan and Phou Keng defenses for future targeting. The 312th Division's forces were assembled east of the PDJ north and south of Route-4, while elements of the 165th Regiment (General Nguyen Chuong commanding) probed Phou Theung defenses. Other units reconnoitered government positions east and south of the Plain of Jars, including Phu Seu. ⁴

After an overall reconnaissance of the battlefield was complete and collated, leaders in charge of Campaign Z concluded: *"...the assessment of the Front's senior commanders*

³ Diary of Comrade Xuandao, courtesy of James Parker; translated by Merle Pribbenow.

⁴ CHECO.

Merle Pribbenow, accomplished linguist and translator: Dinh Dinh Lap, ed., *History of the 335th, 766th, and 866th Vietnamese Volunteer Army Groups...in Laos*, 67, Military History Institute of Vietnam, *People's Army Publishing House*, Hanoi, 2006. From the comprehensive archives of Author Bob Sander.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 323.

CIA Synopsis XXCC.

was that the enemy's defensive strongpoint system in the Plain of Jars was quite solid. In particular, the Phou Theung Ridge (enemy spelled this as Phu Tang) line was very important dominant terrain and the enemy had stationed...troops, and one composite artillery battalion equipped with 105mm howitzers and 4.2-inch mortars on top of this ridge to defend it. It could be said with the intention of Phou Theung Mountain was a great steel gate that blocked the route of our army's attack into the Plain of Jars [from the Xieng Khouang Valley; graphic shows geographical locations of the impending battle]. ⁵

DECEMBER

Like the calm before a storm, my flying assignments began on a slow pace. With the military situation in flux one never knew when the bugle would blow or the drums beat as a signal to enter the fray.

I was assigned standby at home on Wednesday, the first day of December, to FCF a ship that never exited the hangar.

The following afternoon was consumed by a FCF of XW-PHD with Flight Mechanic Leveriza. After a long session that lasted until suppertime and included ten landings, the ship was still not acceptable and was towed back into the barn.

Saturday became an all-day FCF affair of Papa Hotel Delta at the airfield. This was followed by Billy Pearson's

⁵ Major General Nguyen Chuong, *My Military Career*, 3, 9, Youth Publishing House, Hanoi, 2005. Chuong's memoir regarding the 1971-72 Plain of Jars-Long Tieng Campaign, translated by Merle Pribbenow and forwarded to the Author by former Case Officer at Long Tieng Jim "Mule" Parker.

General Chuong was not new to the Military Region Two battlefield. In the previous three years, the experienced leader had commanded the 165th Regiment during many battles, including those at Xieng Khouang Ville in 1969 and at Ban Na (LS-15) in early 1971.

proficiency check in XW-PHC during the afternoon. Greg Burch crewed both assignments.

MANAGEMENT

On the sixth, I was assigned to FCF Papa Hotel Charlie with Burch. During the course of the morning, I briefly flew with tall, gray haired Managing Director Paul Velte, ⁶ who, together with others from Washington and Taipei, were in town on a Southeast Asia visit and orientation of Company installations.

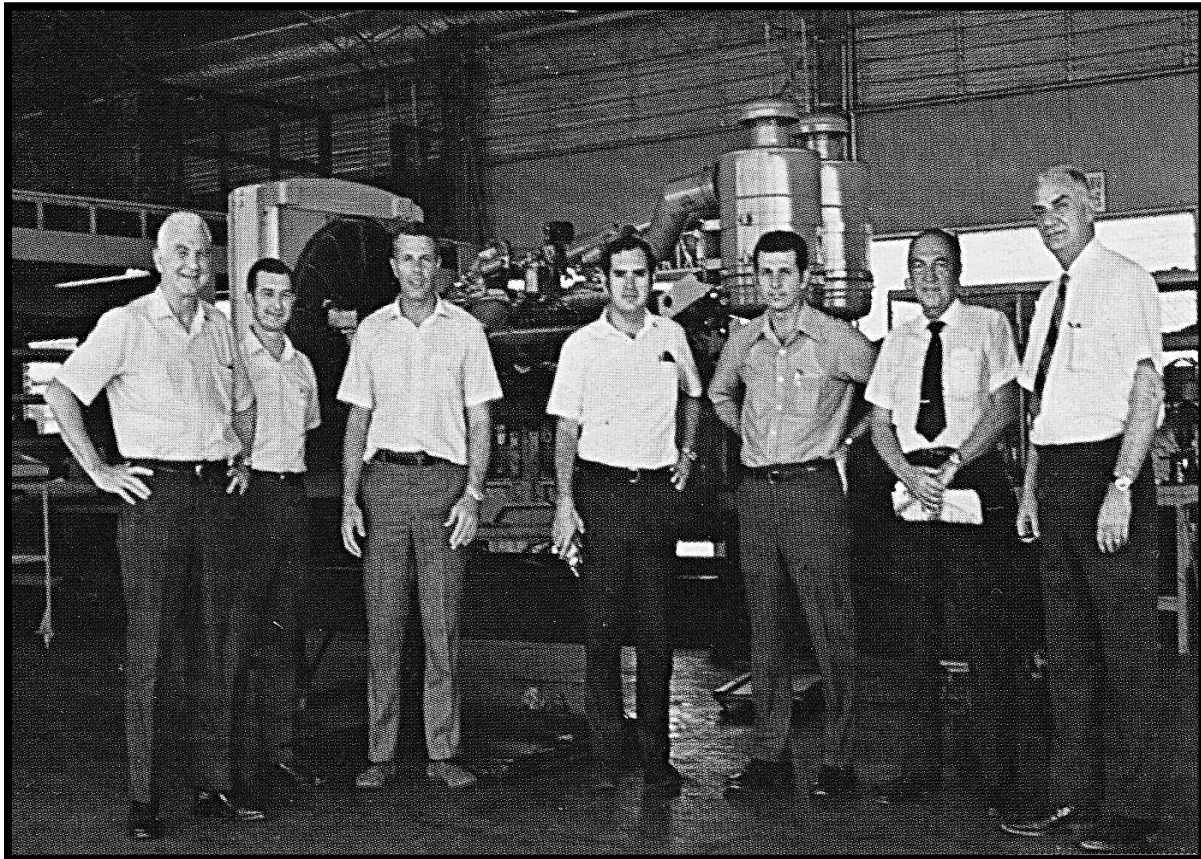
In any large organization management changes constantly evolved. As of December 1971, the immediate top chain of command and titles in the Air America organization in Washington and Taipei offices were:

Paul C. Velte, Managing Director; Hugh L. Grundy, President; Jim Walker, Vice President of Flight Operations.

In Udorn:

Clarence J. Abadie, Vice President Udorn; R.G. (Dick) Ford, Assistant Vice President Udorn; John D. Ford, Chief Pilot Rotary Wing Udorn; Dick W. Elder, Assistant Chief Pilot Rotary Wing Udorn; Jack L. Forney, Assistant Vice President Technical Services Udorn; George B. Young, Manager of Ground Maintenance; W.B. Burlison, Manager of General Maintenance; R.A. Hyneman, Supervisor Utilities; Claude Nelson, Personnel Manager; Bill M. Palmer, Senior Operations Manager Udorn; Pisidhi Indradat, Chief of Security Udorn; Mike Kandt, Operations Manager Udorn; Tom Kothe, Supervisor Fixed Wing Udorn; Charley L. Lane, Administrative Assistant to the Vice President Udorn; L.S.

⁶ Paul Velte formerly held the position of treasurer-comptroller of Air America. He replaced the "retired" George Doole, who still exhibited considerable input into operations, and sat on the Pacific Corporation board of directors.



Air America management in the Udorn facility powerhouse. L-R, Hugh Grundy, President; John Ford, Chief Pilot Rotary Wing Udorn; Jack Forney, Assistant Vice President Technical Services; George Young, Manager Ground Maintenance Udorn; CJ Abadie, Vice President Udorn, Jim Walker, Vice President Flight Operations (Taipei); Paul Velte, Managing Director.

Air America Log, Volume 6, #2 January 1972.

Vestal, Assistant Chief of Security; P.G. Krings, Manager of Ground Safety.

The string of Twinpac FCFs continued on Tuesday, which necessitated all day work on Papa Hotel Alpha with Chuck Low. Courtesy of Bob Davis and Tom Moher, I possessed a comprehensive check list of items to employ on an FCF that was both time consuming and laborious. The local work took me out of the front lines, which denied me first-hand information of what was happening in Military Region Two. For this I checked daily with the folks in FIC and reports from returning helicopter crews. From their input it appeared that things were quiet on the Plain of Jars--too quiet.

Papa Hotel Alpha was returned to the flight line in the morning, and I managed to get her airworthy by early afternoon. ⁷

Because of my high yearly flight time, CPH John Ford approved a full two weeks off, during which we intended to spend a few days off enjoying life and swimming in the Gulf of Siam in southern Thailand at Songkla, and visiting Tuie's southern relatives in Pattani. The trip would, of course, depend on upcountry operational requirements.

After a FCF of Papa Hotel Bravo with Greg Burch on the ninth, Larry Price joined me for a flight to Long Tieng to work and RON. Despite the late start, I conducted twenty sorties, and Larry an equal number, before securing for the night.

We worked the entire following day supplying the FSBs. Since there was not much action except nightly probes occurring, there did not seem to be an urgency to go the extra mile. After logging eight hours and twenty sorties apiece, we caught a ride to Udorn on C-123-4324.

⁷ Men like to refer to their machines in the female gender.

S-58T FCF FLIGHT REPORT & WORKSHEET

A/C No. _____ DATE: _____
 NAME: P) _____
 O) _____
 T/O: _____ LAND: _____ TOTAL: _____ A/F TIME: _____
 LOGS: _____ W/B: _____

PRESTART		COMMENTS	ENGAGEMENT		COMMENTS
S	UNS		S	UNS	
		INST. MARKINGS TWIST GRIPS BEEPER TRIM (17 \pm 4) BATTERY (24) NF BEEPER PLACARDS FIRE DETECTION FUEL QUANTITY CLOCKS SEAT BELTS/HARNESS CAUTION PANEL			ENGAGEMENT TRANS. OIL PRESS. #2 INVERTER CONTROLS INSTS. & CLOCK SERVO CHECK RADIOS & RAD. ALT. UHF (R) (T) VHF (R) (T) HF (R) (T) L.F. (C) TACAN (DIE) TRAFF. HOIST, LIGHTS, HOOK TRACK
START		COMMENTS	TAXI - RUN UP		COMMENTS
S	UNS		S	UNS	
		STARTERS FUEL SYSTEM ENG OIL PRESS IGNITION/INTERLOCKS FLIGHT CONTROLS FUEL CONTROL GRIPS GND. HYD. PUMP SERVO INTERLOCK #1 INVERTER ROTOR BRAKE INSTRUMENTS STICK TRIM CYCLIC SLOP			ENG. T HANDLES BRAKES STRUTS TAIL WHEEL ASE: WARM UP PITCH, ROLL, YAW OVERRIDE PEDAL RATE (24 \pm 3) RELEASE (2 $\frac{1}{2}$ SEC) YAW PROPORTIONAL MAN/AUTO INTERCONNECT T5 TRIM NF RIGGING ALT. CORR \pm

	POWER ASSURANCE CHECK						ENGINE TEMPS. #1				#2		COMMENTS
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	
CP													
N4													
T5													
OAT													
PALT													

S-58T FCF (test) Flight Report and Worksheet.

FLIGHT	COMMENTS
<p>S UNS</p> <p>HOVER TURNS (R.M.I.) HOVER CONTROL (SERVOS OFF ON) ASE: ON, STAEILITY TRIMMED HOVER YAW STABILITY YAW TRIM YAW OVERSHOOT</p> <p>COLLECTIVE PIAS HF BEEP CONTROL VIBRATION LEVEL COLLECTIVE BALANCE & FRICTION THROTTLE HIGH PITCH STOP TORQUE LIMIT & BALANCE (- 3%) HIGH SPEED STAEILITY AIR SPEED, T&E, RAD, ALT., RMI RADIOS: TACAN, LF/ADF, TRANSPONDER DAMPER CHECK (RATE CLINE, VGI STEY COMPASS) CRUISE VIB's: T.P.P. AUTOROTATION -2.5% (10,700 Lbs. TURNS CHANGE 2% for EVERY 92. 600 Lbs. 40°C=9.5%, 30°C=9.1% 25°C=9.3% 20°C=9.2.5% 15°C=91.5% 1 FULL TURN OF FITCH CHANGE ROD IS 3% Nr ASE: YAW STAEILITY ROLL CANCELLOR YAW TO ROLL ENGAGE</p> <p>STICK JUMP: ASE STEY/AUX SERVO OFF ASE OFF/AUX SERVO OFF PRIMARY SERVO OFF/ON</p>	
<p>RECORD INSTR READINGS IN MAINTENANCE LOG BOOK</p>	
<p>PARKING BRAKE _____ DROOP STOPS _____ ROT BRK _____ IDLE RPM #1 _____ #2 _____</p> <p>COAST DOWN #1 _____ #2 _____</p>	
<p><u>VIBRATION COMMENTS (TYPE):</u></p> <p>RUN-UP: _____ LOC. STRONGEST: _____</p> <p>HOVER: _____ TRACK (H.R:T.R.) _____</p> <p>T.O.: _____ IN CONTACT: _____</p> <p>CRUISE: _____ POSS. SOURCE: _____</p> <p>AUTO: _____</p> <p style="text-align: right;">PILOT: _____</p>	

AOC SCOTT

U.S. Air Force Major Jesse Scott returned to Laos for his second tour and was assigned the billet of Air Operations Commander (AOC) at Long Tieng. He boarded a C-141 for the flight to Udorn and an Air America Volpar to Vientiane. Colonel Curry was the Chief Air Attaché attached to the U.S. Embassy staff. Jesse found better qualified people in charge, and a large difference in the operation that was more oriented to field personnel.

Scott arrived at The Alternate on or about 10 December. At that time there was a fleet of twelve T-28s six O-1s, and two RLAH H-34s based at Long Tieng. These aircraft were manned by six Meo, six Lao pilots, and ten American Raven forward air controllers. Other Air Force types at the site included a radio operator, an intelligence officer, intelligence sergeant, line chief, and one person to supervise the bomb dump. In addition, two civilian mechanics were present to conduct minor maintenance on the equipment.

Scott's duties revolved around being the air liaison officer (ALO) to General Vang Pao in related matters dealing with tactical air. Jesse and Chief of Unit (COU) Dick Johnson attended the daily late afternoon Joint Operations Center meetings with various American heads, Vang Pao, and available army troops commanders (Larry Martin was the USAID/RO representative, U.S. Army Colonel Charlie Burlington, the Assistant Air Attaché).

After the meeting, Scott and Johnson walked to Vang Pao's house for supper and to discuss problems and future plans. Following this, they returned to the American compound on the

hill for the nightly briefing and general discussion with all the CAS ⁸ officers from each unit and every Raven pilot.

Responding to Vang Pao's requirements, Scott and his Lao counterpart-controlled T-28 operations as to sorties and target location. T-28 pilots were sanctioned to strike targets without a FAC, but Ravens aided them to a limited degree. On the other hand, as per rules of engagement, it was mandatory that U.S. air strikes were controlled by FACs in Raven boxes, the designated areas around friendly positions.

As to U.S sorties within a certain time frame, military channels could be time consuming and long. Jesse would huddle with General Vang Pao for his input, and then forward this request to the Director of Operations at the embassy in Vientiane, where the subject was examined, polished, and sent to the Barrel Roll working group. If approved, the request would be sent to 7/13th Air Force at Udorn for action.

In the case of troops in contact (TIC) in the field, Scott had discretionary power to act immediately. Cricket would be informed and attempt to obtain "a divert," carrying the correct mix of ordnance for the job.

Scott considered the forty-three-year-old Vang Pao the best source of contact and control over the military effort in Military Region Two. Unwilling to delegate authority, Vang Pao attempted to run everything himself, sometimes to the point of exhaustion. Wearing many hats, the spectrum of his world was very broad, including that of being a military warlord and of a civil authority. In addition to the demanding field work, he would journey to villages and solicit aid from the people,

⁸ CAS: Controlled American Source, a euphuism used for CIA or Agency.

recruit soldiers, and brief pilots. He also had to entertain visiting American dignitaries.

When Jesse arrived at Long Tieng the military situation was very quiet, and defensive tactics revolved around a series of "secure," mutual supporting fire support bases on the Plain of Jars and on southeast and south high ground on the edge of the Plain. The overall intent was to deny Vietnamese soldiers penetration and movement, with 105mm and 155mm artillery fans covering the entire Plain of Jars.

There were many rumors spreading like wildfire, including the introduction of 130mm cannons and possibly tanks, but these weapons had not been sighted. ⁹

PARKER

Temporarily relieved of boring desk duties in Udorn, on the 10th, Jim Parker received permission to obtain a familiarization of Long Tieng and environs. He and a peer acting as his mentor flew north on an early morning Air America cargo plane.

As the pilot approached the runway through the southeast gap, Jim could see two howitzer batteries where the Thai headquarters were located. Between the airstrip and hills shrouding the southern valley, numerous houses stood, as monuments to what could have been called a very large population area before enemy attacks. Many people had subsequently returned to the valley after the area was stabilized, but others preferred the safety of Ban Son to the south. Like walls, tall limestone karsts stood at the end of the strip. A large macadam parking-loading ramp was lodged between these sentinels and

⁹ United States Air Force Oral History Program, Interview #663 of Major Jesse E. Scott, by LTC VH Gallacher & Hugh N Ahmann, 6 April 1973, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, 60-64, 67-71. Obtained during a research trip to Maxwell AFB on 08/31-09/02/94.

others on the far side that bracketed and protected the ramp. Various buildings lined the periphery of the northwest ramp. These included a parachute loft, storage facilities, and a stone air operation building. An ammo dump was located to the north between the ramp and the long, high mountain ridge guarding the valley.

While kickers began offloading pallets containing Peppergrinder items, Jim observed the hubbub of activity and met an American and Meo from air operations. They were Jeeped up the hill to the SKY compound that included sleeping quarters, a mess hall, a bar with a connecting bear cage, and a headquarters building built to withstand severe punishment. Within a relatively short time, Parker met Chief of Station (COS) Dick Johnson and many Case Officers.

Since the purpose of Jim's trip was area familiarization, a trip to the Plain of Jars was immediately arranged. Jim and his "pard" boarded a Twinpac--perhaps the Author's--bound for King Kong FSB. As they approached the southern PDJ howitzer positions were visible in the distance, of the kind he was familiar with from his Vietnam experience. To the front were defensive positions in depth, encompassing trenches, bunkers, and perimeter wire.

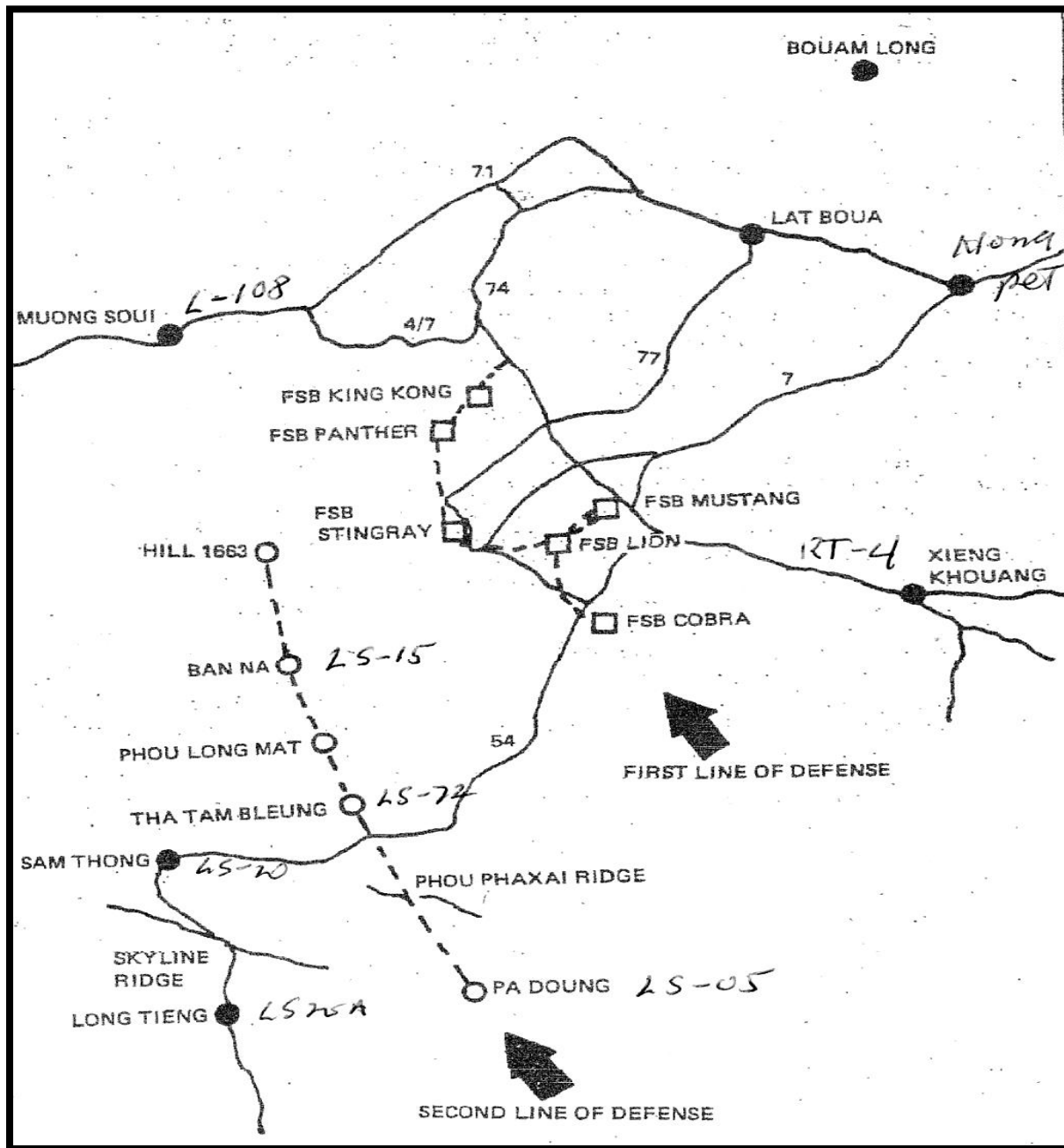
Once landed, Jim had a better opportunity to view the expansive site from the top of the command bunker.

"The perimeter had three interconnecting rings with firing ports. Well-fortified mortar pits were [located] behind the command bunker. In front for a hundred meters, the saw grass had been burnt to the ground and strands of barbed wire overlapped circling rows of concertina wire. The commander said the whole area to the front was laced with mines; in some sections, mines were two deep...he was probed often, he had not lost a man since the North Vietnamese began their buildup...and did not doubt the



A Thai defensive position located on the Plain of Jars, overlooking lowland, surrounding hills, and ravines.

Parker Collection, 67.



Early December Plain of Jars defenses, interlocking Thai fire support bases, and numerous LOCs. Three mobile Meo battalions ranged north and west of the FSBs. To the rear, the Vang Pao Line guarded the critical Long Tieng-Sam Tong complex. Enemy Route-54 from the Plain of Jars through Ban Hin Tang and Site-72 was later constructed to Sam Tong to accommodate tanks and heavy artillery.

Anthony, 352.

ability of his men to hold off any type of full-attack. In addition to his own interlocking fire, local artillery could be brought [to bear] within seconds, plus flare and gunships...were usually on station [at night]."

That evening after supper at SKY headquarters, discussions revolved around what ifs and what to do about the impending situation. Reports arrived that more Vietnamese had arrived from the north, and large trucks were spotted by a northern patrol who believed they might be carrying tanks. If correct, this could drastically change the balance of power in the upcoming "mother of all battles". The revelation stimulated a little concern for those present, for tanks had rarely been employed in Military Region Two and the relatively inexperienced Thai, however courageous and confident of their capability, had never faced such armor. Moreover, their defenses were ill prepared nor their weapons equipped to cope with an armored threat. There were ongoing proposals for Vang Pao to send his troops north of the enemy to harass and disrupt the enemy's rear and flanks. The general was not keen on this suggestion for fear of losing too many irreplaceable men. Then Bag, Frank Odum, postulated that there would be no attack until the entire area was enveloped in adverse weather. During these conditions Allied air would not be able to operate and close air support unavailable. The fight would amount to strictly a mano y mano, slug-fest affair.

The following morning after the clouds cleared, Jim Parker accompanied Digger (George O'Dell) in a Twinpac to Bouam Long.

George was going to replace David "Redcoat" Campbell, who was long overdue for time off. Aside from being the highest mountain mass in the area Site-32's, defensive positions were formidable, consisting of trenches and foxholes protected by moats, concertina wire, bamboo punji sticks, and mines.

By afternoon Jim and his buddy were on the way south to Udorn.¹⁰

I had been off for two days, and on the thirteenth was not previously scheduled, when the Company B-bus driver arrived at our gate tooting his horn. Apparently, there was some kind of problem upcountry that required addressing.

After checking in at 0920 hours I was assigned to fly Papa Hotel Echo with Dan Cox and Len Bevan. We arrived at Long Tieng just before noon and, along with another S-58T crew, were briefed for a long-range road watch team mission of Route-6 in the Sam Neua Province area, to gage what suspicious equipment the enemy was introducing to the battlefield.¹¹ After successfully completing the mission, we returned to The Alternate to RON.

Tuesday morning, we began work early, shuttling sling and internal loads to the FSBs on the Plain. It was generally humdrum work, but of late had a smell of danger in the air as to how long it would be before the balloon went up. After securing Echo at the end of the day we boarded 5-4576 for the return trip to Udorn. The next two days were then spent on the parking ramp performing local Papa Hotel Bravo FCFs with Charlie Brigham and Rudy Serafico.

GENERAL CHUONG--COMMANDING OFFICER OF THE 165TH

The primary enemy assault was planned to destroy Lion and Mustang's artillery capability. But first Phou Theung, the elevated fire base overlooking the two sites and commanding Route-4, had to be neutralized, reduced, and captured.

¹⁰ Jim Parker, 26-30, 32-34, 36-37.

¹¹ Sam Neua Town was an important marshalling site for war materiel delivered there from the north and east. Route-6 led south from the town into the Ban Ban Valley, and activity along this LOC had been spotted from the air.

Long before the offensive commenced, the 165 Regiment of the 312th Division established headquarters in Ban Tham Cave on the periphery of the Xieng Khouang Valley, north of Route-4 and five miles north-northeast of their primary objective at Phou Theung. From there General Chuong and other principals departed early one morning to conduct a multi-day detailed reconnaissance of the Thai defensive positions at Phou Theung. It took seven hours of difficult slogging from Route-4 to reach Hill 1,200, southeast of, and a little more than a mile from Phou Theung.

"There we set up Observation Post One, because from this hill position one could see all of Phou Theung, rising up with three mountain crests that looked like three bald heads. The crests were at different altitudes but all were the same color, the color of red dirt. From this location with a telescope one could clearly see the three-layered parallel trench-lines. The block-houses (bunkers) along each trench-line were built of sandbags piled up like upside [down] rice-bowls, each covered with a tin roof. Five layers of barbed wire completely surrounded the enemy outposts which were assembled into three separate strong-points. However, the enemy positions looked lonely and isolated, surrounded by the vast mountain forest with no civilian houses to be seen and no roads leading up to the positions. The enemy troops in these positions were totally dependent on helicopters and parachute drops for supplies. We took turns observing the enemy positions while we discussed battle plans, selected attack sectors, agreed on the location of spearhead units, identifying targets and enemy firing positions, and the locations of our assault positions, our heavy weapons firing positions, and our command posts and recorded all this on our maps."

The following day the group ascended Hill 1000, less than a mile southwest of Phou Theung, to obtain a more refined

reconnaissance of the objective. While at Observation Post Two, a helicopter landed on a pad near Hillcrests two and three. From the activity they concluded that Hillcrest Two (Foxtrot Echo) housed the 609 Battalion headquarters.

For the final reconnaissance analysis in preparing plans before the assault, units from the three battalions were assigned to reconnoiter perimeter wires of each enemy hard point. Because of the need for secrecy, and the proximity to enemy guns, this phase marked the most labor-intensive and hazardous portion. During the night, illumination flares and hand grenades were launched and guns fired with abandon from the Thai positions.

With all the necessary information required to conduct the battle for Phou Theung, leaders returned to the assembly point.

Since his battle plans had worked at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and at Ban Na earlier in the year, Chuong intended to employ identical tactics: siege followed by assault.

"We will tightly surround and besiege the enemy, [so they are isolated from supply helicopters]. [Then we will] gradually move our forces forward to the perimeter wire, cut and secure openings through the enemy's perimeter defenses, destroy a portion of the enemy's fortifications [with heavy weapons and artillery fire] and kill a number of [personnel] to affect the enemy's morale and make them frightened...For each enemy position we will use just one infantry company plus all of our heavy weapons firepower to achieve the necessary destruction...[Then] we will shift to Tactic Two, which will be an assault to completely overrun the position and annihilate all of the enemy's troops. We will organize the attack like an attack on enemy forces occupying solid defensive fortifications. We will use a powerful assault force complete with a first attack echelon, a second attack echelon, and a reserve force.

Attack cells will be designated to assault and hold the bridgeheads into the enemy positions and to advance deep into the center of the enemy position."

Battle hardened Chuong understood his enemy very well. Because of a lack of communication, jealousy, and lack of respect between so called "Allies," the Meo unit tasked to protect the lower ridges were considered no factor, and would be easily swept aside with the minimum of troops and effort.

The plan was approved by the division commander, who agreed to furnish the 165th with an artillery battalion with 120mm mortars and sufficient ammunition to achieve success. Morale was considered high throughout regimental ranks in anticipation of victory. ¹²

THE SIERRA BEGINS

During early evening on 16 December, GM-21 FAG Poppy reported troops in contact at his position just north of Phou Theung. To the west, on the opposite side of the Plain in the Moung Soui area, Butterfly FAG reported TIC. That night, USAF gunship Spectre-13 reported mixed accurate and inaccurate 37mm, 57mm, and 23mm AAA fire from three locations in the Ban Ban Valley area. ¹³

Following several months of thoroughly reconnoitering the battlefield, planning and practicing tactics in their sandboxes, and moving supplies into position, the enemy was ready and primed to commence action. Mid-December was selected as the tentative time frame for the communist dry season offensive: Campaign Z. Buildup of North Vietnamese forces in the regions of

¹² General Chuong, 5-10.

¹³ James Parker, *Timeline for the 1971-1972 Battle for Skyline*, 08/07/11. Jim's information covers reports from both Thai and Meo Forward Air Ground controllers during the critical period.

Phou Keng (in the south) and Moung Phanh (in the west) preceded commencement of the battle.

Surprising everyone on the Western side, timing of the major attack was two months earlier than previous year offensives. ¹⁴ Thus, began the enemy systemic reduction of our Thai-manned fire support bases.

Responding to the activity, Tom Sullivan, Flight Information Center (FIC) representative at Long Tieng, relayed reports to Udorn and Vientiane FIC offices:

"PDJ throughout period 0700-1700L had numerous troops in contact; also incoming ordnance with numerous WIAs. The buildup continues and the enemy is slowly applying pressure." ¹⁵

At 1400 hours on the 17th, Lion FAG Booster (Suthat), located on the southeast Plain of Jars, reported one ranging round of 75mm fire impacting at BG-605's position at Foxtrot Hotel, but no explosion was heard. Four additional rounds impacted outside the wire south of Lion, with negative results. Firing ceased at 1430 hours. ¹⁶

"Pads started taking incoming at 1815." ¹⁷ Throughout the late night of the 17th, and early morning of the 18th, forward based mobile Meo units were attacked in the eastern sector:

At 2240 hours ABCCC Alleycat received a report from FAG Yukon, located near Lat Houang, of a ground attack by 300 enemy

¹⁴ CIA Synopsis, XXCC.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 353.

¹⁵ William Leary December 1971 Notes-Sullivan FIC.

¹⁶ Thai FAG Booster's reports of the battle. Without modern computers, artillery ranging had to be done largely by observation. This required forward observers that often had problems getting into position. Therefore, to conserve ammunition for the big push only a few rounds on the target were deemed necessary.

¹⁷ FIC Tom Sullivan, 12/17/71. Tom and Jerry Connor were our briefers at Long Tieng and Ban Son.

¹⁸ Jim Parker *Timeline* for late 17 and early 18 December 1971.

troops. Hot Dog near Mustang reported an assault on his outpost at 2300. Hot Plate and Poppy, both in the Phong Savan area, reported continuing TIC from 0450 until Alleycat RTB Udorn. Quiet Man near L-22 reported the same. Attacks were widespread. North of Long Tieng, Tiger Mobile reported TIC at 0410 hours. ¹⁸

316TH DIVISION

Phase one of Campaign Z, overseen by Major General Le Trong Tan, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the People's Army of Vietnam, and commander of the Joint Vietnamese-Lao Army, officially began on the evening and early morning of 17 to 18 December under the cover of darkness, low clouds, and heavy rain. The remainder of the 316th Division not already located in forward assembly positions surged west on Route-7, through the Ban Ban Valley, and past the 7/71 Nong Pet crossroads. From there, units moved further west along Route-71 until reaching the expansive Moung Kheung Valley (Lima-109). Accompanied by T-34 tanks, like ancient Roman warriors, Vietnamese infantry troops rode proudly to battle on armored vehicles.

"At 0445 hours on 18 December, after a 30-minute preparatory bombardment, the 174th Infantry Regiment...assaulted and took the headquarters of Vang Pao's GM 21 at Na Hin and the headquarters of his GM 23 at Ban Sut [Sanchot].

At 1100 hours on 18 December enemy troops disintegrated and began fleeing. Our forces pursued them [west] to the Moung Phan [Phanh] Airfield and surrounded and attacked enemy forces in the area [south] on Five-Crest Hill." ¹⁹

¹⁹ North Vietnamese Army history of the 1971 Campaign Z as translated by Merle Pribbenow.

Third Company of the 25th Engineer Battalion had been prepared for the battle by a motivational letter from the Central Military Party Committee.

"Entering battle for the first time, the new soldiers from Hanoi were a little afraid but were very eager and determined [to excel]. Every man shouldered his weapon and his shovel, pick, route marking post, explosive charges, etc., and marched out along his assigned route.

...the tanks moved out from the jungle tree-line to begin to move down their attack route. In order to maintain secrecy, from the tree-line to the holding line where they would wait to launch the attack, the engineers who guided the tanks had to walk slowly, without any lights and keep noise to the absolute minimum.

Sometime after 0400 the guns began firing...As our 85mm 122mm, and 130mm guns were shelling enemy targets at [Ban] Na Hin, my platoon immediately moved forward to the tank's route. Large trees were knocked down with explosive charges and their trunks formed a [log] road. In two locations where the tanks had to cross water-filled rice paddies trees were used to form a [corduroy] road to prevent the tanks from getting stuck in the mud. Dirt and rocks were used to fill in places where the route passed over old bunkers, fighting trenches, and water-filled ditches. Under the light of artillery explosions, the route for the tanks quickly took shape, marked with a row of wooden route markers around which white pieces of cloth were tied and even engineer soldiers waving pieces of white cloth to show our forces the way. Our tanks and the infantrymen of the 174th Regiment quickly advanced to the positions at which they would

wait until the artillery barrage shifted fire to the rear, at which time they would attack the enemy." ²⁰

THE NVA 165TH/312TH DIVISION

At 1700 hours on the 17th, it was still daylight when 165th regimental battle units moved stealthily toward Phou Theung.

"A thick mist descended on the mountains. The forest gradually disappeared into the blackness of night. The regiment had to wind its way upward through the rocks as it advanced. The higher we climbed, the thicker the mist became, and the wind also grew cold. All of the soldiers were carrying very heavy loads. In addition to their own weapons and ammunition, they also carried bamboo baskets and canvas sacks to hold dirt for building firing positions for our heavy weapons [on the steep slopes].

Occasionally an artillery shell or a gunshot from the enemy positions would streak over the treetops. Finally, the entire regiment was in their siege attack positions...right next to the perimeter wire. No one had gotten lost and the enemy still had no idea of our presence...By this time the regiment had Phou Theung completely surrounded and I was confident that the enemy forces now had no way to escape.

At 2300 hours, while the battalion officers in the various attack sectors were identifying and confirming each target and the enlisted men were digging their fighting positions, at Crest Three...the enemy sent out a patrol to the helicopter landing pad. They spotted our soldiers digging foxholes, fired their weapons wildly, and then ran back to their position. An illumination flare immediately was fired from Crest Three, and grenades were thrown out from the perimeter in all directions...

²⁰ Comrade Xuandao's diary.

When they saw that there was no response fire from us, they stopped firing and throwing hand grenades, but they continued to light up the area with illumination flares. [This enabled our people to obtain an accurate picture of] the target and readjust our fighting formation and our heavy weapons firing positions, particularly the heavy weapons positions, in order to better accomplish our assigned missions." ²¹

"At 0500 hours on 18 December, 7th Battalion/209th Regiment/312th Division opened fire in a deception/diversionary attack against Ban Quay, in order to enable 141st Regiment/312th Division to deploy its heavy weapons into firing positions."

At approximately the same time as the 316th Division moved into final battle positions, 141 Regiment of the 312th Division (commanded by Division Commander La Thai Hoa) moved west on Route-72 through Xieng Khouang Ville toward Lat Houang, Mustang and Lion FSBs on the eastern Plain of Jars. The outer Meo defensive perimeter charged to protect this sector failed to wait for contact, and prematurely departed the battlefield at high port leaving Phou Theung, Lion, and Mustang firebases and their Thai infantry wide open to communist fire and maneuver tactics.

"At 0930 hours: Campaign artillery conducted heavy bombardment of enemy artillery positions and enemy troop concentrations on Hills 1241 [foothills of Phou Theung-Tom Tom], Phu Seo [Seu]. Phu Hua Xang, Phu Tang [Thuang], Hill 1210 [east of Finger Ridge], northeastern Phu Ton [Mustang], and Phu Keng [likely Kouay]...to cover the deployment of the 141st and 165th

²¹ General Chuong's account, 17 December 1971, 12.

Regiments into position to surround enemy forces at Phu Ton, Phu Ton, and Phu Keng." ²²

THE DECEMBER DEBACLE SEEN FROM THE LAO GOVERNMENT SIDE

Communist activity increased. Under considerable pressure, Lulu, Hot Plate, and Sunshine abandoned their positions and moved west toward LS-275 at Ban Thang. At 1100 hours, another attack commenced on Meo units at the southeast portion of the Plain of Jars. The enemy attacked Cripple, located southwest of Phou Theung, Pressure-02 (Phison) at the southern base of Phou Theung, and Yukon. At 1400, King Kong, Panther, and LS-275 were attacked. Site-275 had been temporarily abandoned earlier because of heavy artillery fire.

That night Cripple, who was still southwest of Phou Theung, reported ground attacks and TIC continuous; the FAG also reported tanks north of Phou Theung. Pressure-02 (Phison Suwannamajo) ²³ at Phou Theung reported intermittent heavy ground assaults from 1820 to 1945 hours.

Across the Plain of Jars at Phou Keng Rossini (Somchai) reported tanks to the east on the Route-7 spur leading to L-22.²⁴

"On 18 December NVA units, supported by highly accurate artillery fire, launched simultaneous attacks on all irregular positions and fire support bases on the northern and eastern edges of the Plaine. Several irregular [Meo] battalions screening the northern [FSB] were disbursed and are regrouping near Xieng Khouang. Their withdrawal leaves a gap between the

²² North Vietnamese history of the 1971 Campaign Z on the Plain of Jars, translated by Merle Pribbenow.

²³ Some FAG names were obtained from Jim Parker's *Timeline, Battle for Skyline Ridge*, 18 December 1971 to 4 April 1972, Author's Copy 9 of 17.

Other FAG names were obtained from a FAG Operational Report dated 04/25/72.

²⁴ Jim Parker *Timeline* for 18 December.

government's [FSB] on the northern and southern edges of the Plaine." ²⁵

On a local level, Case Officer Bag Odum's prognostication proved spot on. Weather indeed proved the catalyst to the battlefield openers.

"The enemy attack was timed to coincide with a period of bad weather, low ceilings, and low visibility. It started with an artillery barrage against our FSB. The extended range of the 130mm [guns] permitted them to pin down our artillery. Our artillery was ineffective in that it was limited in range." [Employed against the French at Dien Bien Phu and during Lam Son-713, this battle proven tactic forced the Thai into bunkers, allowing the enemy to move to the defensive perimeter called hugging. Then, when the barrage was lifted, it became easy to shoot the defenders emerging from their bunkers.] ²⁶

At the same time there were MiG warnings in the Barrel. All aircraft were pulled out. Cricket dropped out. MiGs patrolling the border succeeded in emptying the Barrel of any American support [to include both jet and propeller aircraft]." This was exacerbated by F-4 losses in Sam Neua Province that drew almost all the already scarce USAF assets away from the battlefield. Meo and Lao T-28 pilots attempting to fill the gaps incurred grievous losses from AAA fire, with two planes shot down the first day and four others so badly damaged that they could not fly. Except for friendly evacuations and enemy mopping up operations, government control of the Plain of Jars was considered over within three days. ²⁷

Early morning of the 18th, Vang Pao, Hardnose, and the Thai Commander Chewthai Sangtawweep (AKA Saen), ranking general

²⁵ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/20/71.

²⁶ Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 353.

²⁷ Major Jesse Scott, AOC at The Alternate, 72

assigned to The Alternate, were ferried to the heights of Phou Seu to conduct a hands-on overview of the Plain of Jars situation, and to attempt to halt the Meo retreat from the front lines and form a hasty defense line. Consistent with many December mornings, heavy fog and mist enveloped and concealed the Plain, but large explosions and gunfire could be heard. ²⁸

At 0400 Lion received twenty 122mm rocket and 85mm Long Tom rounds from the northeast. Phou Theung also received incoming fire. There were no casualties, and fifty rounds of counterfire were mounted. With ranging fire complete, enemy artillery fire ceased at 0530 hours. At 1000 hours artillery and rocket fire resumed at five-to ten-minute intervals. Rounds landed all day, causing confusion.

Booster heard over the common fox mike radio net that most friendly positions were being bombarded by enemy artillery fire. This was especially the case at Mustang and Lima Site-343 (Ban Na Thorn UG 0744). Just two hundred meters to the east of Lion, Meo gunners located at Tango India (TI) spiked their 105mm howitzer, torched artillery shells, and withdrew to the west.

PHOU THEUNG

By 0100..., our entire regiment had finished moving into and building our siege attack position [and] our communications network was set up and working. Communications were in place with our observation posts and sufficient ammunition and rice had been brought up to our fighting positions to enable us to fight continuously for seven days.

²⁸ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 324.
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, "One 800-man Meo regiment incurred fifty percent casualties. For almost two weeks after the battle only half the 4,000 Meo troops had been located," 437.



Agency Case Officers Chuck Campbell-Whitetop (standing center) and Mike Ingham-Hardnose (sitting) monitoring the situation and addressing needs of the troops.

Parker, 114.

At 0400 our soldiers responsible for cutting paths through the enemy's perimeter defenses had cut through the barbed wire and secretly placed claymore mines and explosive charges to blast through the obstacle network; our troops had dug communications trenches, and our officers at all levels were checking and supervising their men. The soldiers ate breakfast at 0500 in order to be ready to open fire on schedule [at 0600].

Also, in the eastern primary offensive sector, to create a diversionary action and allow the 312th artillery guns and heavy weapons located in the Xieng Khouang Valley to be positioned forward, at 0500 hours the 209th Regiments 7th battalion commenced an attack on forward units of GM-22 at Ban Quang [Quay] south of Route-4. ²⁹

...shortly before 0600 the fog and mist was still thick, covering the entire area...The enemy position was covered by a thick, blinding mist and we could not see anything at all...I had to wait until the weather improved...[Soon afterward] the field telephones began ringing. Both superior command levels and subordinate officers were calling asking when we would open fire."

Then, about 0700 Division Commander La Thai Hoa called General Chuong wanting an explanation of why the 165th had not opened fire at the planned time. Chuong explained:

"...My unit has the enemy position tightly surrounded and my men are right up next to the perimeter wire, even including our 12.7mm machinegun battalion and our 75mm recoilless rifles. If our artillery can't see the target and cannot fire ranging rounds and just goes ahead and fires blindly, their fire will be ineffective, and this will certainly affect the fate of my soldiers..."

²⁹ Ho Khang, ed.

[Within a relatively short time] a cool wind began blowing and the mist and fog seemed to break up immediately. Fragments of thick cloud broke apart and blew away with the wind. I could now catch glimpses of the enemy position through the dissipating clouds...

...At 0800 the order to open fire was given; the cluster of enemy strong points on Phou Theung was immediately covered in bright flashes of fire. Smoke from the exploding shells boiled into the sky and spread out to envelop the enemy position. When we shifted from bombardment fire to destructive fire aimed at individual targets to support our soldiers carrying explosive charges as they moved forward to clear breach-points in the enemy's perimeter defenses, the surprised enemy put up only very weak resistance. Apparently, they were still hiding in their underground bunkers.

After about ten minutes, the enemy finally began to respond ferociously as artillery guns from the [PDJ] began firing at the area around the enemy strong strong-point, forming a ring of fire around the position. Enemy shells struck our troops formations...[our soldiers] continued to rush forward through the openings in the enemy's perimeter wire, capturing enemy fighting trenches and tightening the siege ring...

The battle became even more ferocious once enemy aircraft appeared, and the sound of their engines seemed to rip the very sky apart. Bombs were dropped in clusters, and artillery shells exploded in volley after volley. However, the advantage of our close-quarters posture enabled our siege attack plan to continue to advance deeper into the enemy position, and our heavy weapons firing positions provided effective fire support." ³⁰

³⁰ Recollections of General Chuong, 13-15.

Not allowed by superiors to withdraw, the stalwart defenders on top of Phou Theung remained in place. At 1400 hours a CASI Twin Otter flown by Captain Dan Cloud air dropped ammunition to a Phou Theung battalion. Thereafter, enemy AAA fire restricted further resupply. XW-PHP was hit in a fuel cell while flying near Lat Houang. A 12.7mm gun was reported north of the Route-4 throat leading into to the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley, and an enemy English speaker, using the call sign Poppy, was attempting to lure XW-PGU over the gun. ³¹

Vietnamese military records disclosed:

"The fighting lasted the entire day. Many of the enemy's fortifications and weapons had been destroyed and they had suffered a significant number of casualties. They were forced to hunker down low in their bunkers to fire back. We also took casualties and were forced to readjust and realign our fighting formations and dig deep siege trenches right up to the enemy's trench-line. I gave the order at 1900 hours to continue the attack and that all units must finish clearing their assigned breach-points through the enemy's perimeter defenses during the night." ³²

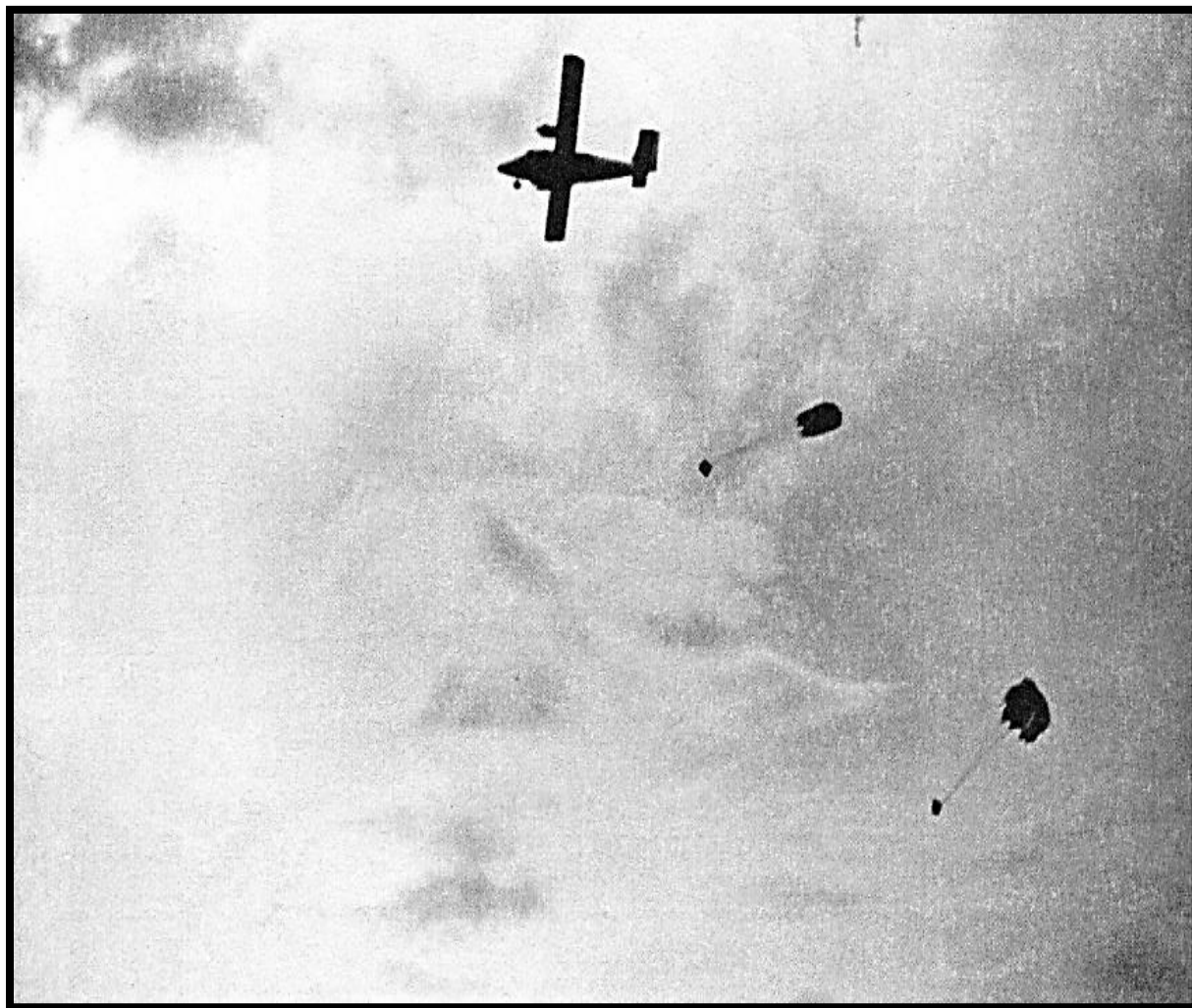
AN UNUSUAL AND CURIOUS CHAIN OF EVENTS

Marking a series of Allied aircraft losses, seven Allied planes were downed between 17 and 19 December. Three F-4s and two AT-28s were lost on the 18th; one F-4 on the 19th.

The events occurring next, whether previously contrived by Vietnamese military leaders or purely circumstantial, obviously

³¹ FAG Booster's account of action on 18 December 1971. Ken Conboy, 324. Bill Leary-Sullivan report filed with FIC Vientiane and Udorn.

³² General Chuong, 15.



Twin Otter pilot air dropping critical supplies to troop positions on the Plain of Jars. Although hazardous duty, the Otters were considered easier to load, faster, capable of accurate delivery, and more difficult to hit by ground fire than larger fixed wing planes.

Jim Parker Collection, 68.

contributed to the fall of the Plain of Jars. ³³

After President Nixon ordered the cessation of bombing in North Vietnam, airfields had been improved and a few were moved closer to the Lao border. Consequently, MiG-19 and 21 fighter pilots occasionally became more aggressive, trolling along the border or actually entering Laos when the opportunity for success was apparent. When a Bandit ³⁴ call was broadcast over UHF and VHF Guard frequency by the ABCCC controller, pilots either dove for the deck, or scattered, and immediately departed the Plain until the all-clear call was issued. Normally, our MiGCAP F-4 cover was sufficient to deter border penetration, but this too was sometimes tardy or lacking.

During the evening of 17 December, while conducting a reconnaissance escort mission north of Mugia Pass an F-4E Phantom 2 was shot down by a SAM-2 missile. The crew consisting of Gunfighter-82A-Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Blissett and Gunfighter-82B-Lieutenant Michael Murray ejected. ³⁵ Both men were located that night by a Pave Nail (OV-10) aircraft employing high-tech infra ray (IR) filter on the pilot's strobe lights, and a sophisticated laser-LORAN system. ³⁶ USAF planes remained in the general area all night. Four A-1 Sandy pilots (01-04) arrived at first light and relieved the orbiting FAC pilot.

³³ During the war, an unwritten rule prevailed for downed airmen. For morale purposes, an attempt had to be made to recover the crew, otherwise no one would be willing to conduct the dangerous assignments. No matter what was going on, aircraft were diverted for SAR duty and the war stopped for a time until the pilots were recovered, declared captured, missing in action, or dead.

³⁴ Bandit: Aviator speak for a known enemy aircraft. Bogy was the nomenclature for an unknown aircraft.

³⁵ 82A-82B: Letter designations following a call sign signified the PIC, ie. (A) or the weapons systems operator (WSO-B).

³⁶ Emitting only a subdued rosy glow to the normal eye when close, the light was easily identified using night vision glasses (NVG). We used this same infra-red (IR) paper on lenses to cover our lights during nighttime Special Project work.

Next, two HH-53 Super Jolly Green crews arrived, with Jolly Green-30 crew conducting the rescue.

While general Vang Pao and the Thai commander were still located at the Phou Seu site attempting to assess the fighting on the southeastern Plain, additional air-to-air drama was unfolding in upper Military Region Two marking the heaviest single day loss of American planes since December 1967.³⁷ Using an often-used sports metaphor, a rare "trifecta" or "hat trick" of F-4 Phantom losses commenced.

Falcon-66, crewed by Major Louis Hildebrand and Lieutenant Ken Wells (432 TRW, 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron), departed Udorn at 1250 hours in an F-4 to assume a MiGCap orbit near the border in northern MR-2. (This effort was intended to provide us protection from enemy aircraft crossing the border during a road watch team extraction.) Falcon-67 was fragged to accompany Falcon-66, but was temporarily delayed because of a mechanical problem. After topping off fuel from a tanker PIC Major Hildebrand headed for altitude and his assigned orbit, which included much of the region, including the Barthelemy Pass area. Soon afterward the jet was engaged and disabled by a MiG-21 pilot-delivered heat seeking missile. The aircraft crashed in the vicinity of Ban Pong (UH 2465) and Route-6 between Sop Hao near the border and Sam Neua town. Two parachutes were sighted, but no survival beacons or voice radio was heard. Despite an ensuing SAR effort, the airmen, having been captured, were not found, and were declared missing (MIA) at 1501 hours.

Years later, enemy records from that day revealed:

"At 1319 hours our radar picked up three groups of F-4s operating over Mounng Lat and a section of two aircraft operating over Lang Chanh-Hoi Xuan. The Air Force headquarters decided to

³⁷ John Bowman, *Vietnam Almanac*, 294.

launch our MiGs. (The Mig-21 force placed on combat alert consisted of four two-aircraft flights of MiG-21s.) In order to ensure secrecy and create the element of surprise the Air Force headquarters command post ordered the MiG-19s to operate in the Northwestern region.

At 1312 hours a flight of MiG-19s took off and flew up to Van Yen.

At 1320 hours a flight of MiG-21s took off and flew up to Suoi Rut.

At 1322 hours the command post picked up a group of F-4s flying from Sam Neua toward the Xuan Airfield. The command post decided to direct MiG-21s to intercept the attack bombers to prevent them from attacking the Xuan Airfield. After directing [the pilots] to the designated battle area, the command post informed the pilots that the target was 15 degrees to their right at a range of 15 kilometers.

When he spotted a single F-4 flying in front of him, Vo Sy Giap immediately informed his [number] 1, Le Thanh Dao (The F-4 was one of a two-aircraft F-4 section-call sign Falcon 66 from the 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron assigned to provide cover to a flight of helicopters landing [extracting] special forces troops in northeastern Laos). Dao increased speed, got behind his target, and at a range of 1,200 meters and with a good sight picture, he calmly pressed the button to fire an R-35 [air to air] missile. After seeing that the missile was speeding straight at the F-4, he quickly pulled his aircraft into a climb to break away. As he did so, he yelled to his [number] 2, Giap, to make a follow-up attack. Giap turned his aircraft and headed toward the target, but then he saw that the F-4 had been hit by

Dao's missile and was on fire, so he decided not to pursue the target any further..." ³⁸

Falcons 74 and 75 departed Udorn at 1514 hours for a Barrel Roll strike. Falcon-74 was crewed by Major WT Stanley and Captain L. O'Brien. Lieutenant Colonel Ken Johnson and Sam Vaughan were in the cockpit of Falcon-75. En route to the target area, Motel requested the flight to join the SAR effort for Falcon-66. The pilots complied after first refueling and delivering their ordnance on a target.

"As Falcon 74/75 entered the Fish's Mouth [on the border], Red Crown advised that two MiG's were at 12 o'clock at 75 and 35 miles. [Eager for combat] both F-4 [pilots] jettisoned [their fuel tanks] and lit [their] afterburners to pursue the MiG's."

Deep into North Vietnam and after burning fuel at an unsustainable high rate, Falcon-74 elected to RTB. *"Red Crown then advised Falcon-74's [crew] that four bandits were closing on [their] 6 o'clock position. Falcon-74 broke left and made two 360 degree turns, [after which] the MiG's disengaged. While turning south, [the crew observed] three to four SAM missiles. The crew evaded the SAMs and then noticed 85mm and 37mm AAA fire. Falcon-74 continued south at low level because of the SAM threat."*

Perilously low on fuel the men ejected.

³⁸ Jim Parker Email, 07/16/17. The Falcon-66 downing account emanated from researcher and translator Merle Pribbenow. The Vietnamese side of the story is told in a number of Vietnamese sources, but perhaps the most definitive account is that billed as their definitive book on air combat during the Vietnam War. The book was written by a group of seven different authors, all but one of them former MiG pilots, who had access to official Vietnamese Air Force records. The Mig-21 pilot credited with shooting down Falcon-66, Le Thanh Dao, was one of North Vietnam's top-scoring pilots and Falcon-66 was the first aircraft he shot down.

Note: The R-35 missile was one of the Russian names (the other was the K-13) for what NATO designated the A-2 or the Atoll, which was a Soviet copy of our Sidewinder missile.

Prior to this event, in the confusion of "the fog of war," they had reported to the control ship aloft that Falcon-75 had gone feet wet, intending for U.S. Navy helicopters to rescue them.

Actually, after being impacted by a MiG missile, the Falcon-75 jet was damaged, but still able to remain airborne. However, low on fuel, the engine flamed out, necessitating an ejection. The pilots managed to land intact, but both men were subsequently captured and delivered to Hanoi prison camps.

Adverse luck continued:

"On 19 December 1971, Falcon-82 and Falcon-83 departed Udorn at [1623] hours to strike several antiaircraft gun positions. While they were orbiting seeking target information, from their airborne forward air controller [Laredo-17], 37mm antiaircraft rounds were fired at them. Falcon-82 was transmitting but stopped abruptly. When Falcon-83 reacquired Falcon-82, the aircraft was enveloped in flames and headed for the ground. Falcon-82 impacted within seconds. No chutes were observed nor were any beeper signals received."

Much to the detriment of the evolving Plain of Jars situation, the F-4D losses resulted in diversion of all fast

movers in order to participate in the ongoing SAR efforts. ³⁹ ⁴⁰

A ROAD WATCH MISSION THAT EVOLVED...

By chance Air America pilots participated and became involved in the evolving chaos in upper Sam Neua Province on the 18th. The road watch team we emplaced on the 13th reported encountering problems with the enemy. Pursued, they were moving rapidly to a more secure area and requested an emergency evacuation.

The Alternate Customer responsible for the team radioed the team's problem and requirement for an emergency extraction to AB-1 Udorn. As these requests were always honored to ensure a team's continued participation in the hazardous work, the information was relayed to the CPH's office for implementation.

³⁹ *Air Power History*, 32, Winter 2014, Volume 61, #4. Information regarding Gunfighter-82 and Falcon-74.

POW network Internet, Biography Leland L. Hildebrand.

POW network Internet, Biography Samuel R. Vaughan.

Gunfighter-82 SAR, Skyraider Internet.

Project Get Out and Walk, (mbenshat@aol.com), pilot ejection lists.

Combat Operations in North Vietnam, Velocity: Speed with Direction, 140, General O'Malley Air University Press, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, 140-141.

James Parker *Timeline* for 18 December.

Author Note: Like other obfuscating USAF reports, events related to aircraft losses this day were varied, with confusing and conflicting facts, especially relating to time frames. By employing several accounts, the Author has attempted to present a fair and factual narrative.

⁴⁰ Victor Anthony, 353. It should be noted that previous air-to-air combat had occurred more than three years before. Consequently, bombing vs. air-to-air combat skills had been emphasized during USAF pilot training. Therefore, aircraft and crew losses were attributed to inexperience, inferior tactics, and a lack of discipline.

Captain Charlie Weitz, Chuck Low, and I were hastily summoned from home and departed the airbase at mid-morning in Papa Hotel Bravo to join another Twinpac crew at Long Tieng for the high priority mission. ⁴¹

Flying in a Twin Otter Jim Rhyne (call sign Author) was assigned mission commander to spot, assess, and identify the team before we conducted the actual recovery. Accompanying Jim were Case Officer Don and a Meo talker who would establish contact with the team that was still en route to the Landing zone. The team carried a small UHF radio that the Otter electronics equipment was capable of tracking.

As we passed over the western fringe of the Plain of Jars, the weather appeared relatively good and intermittent explosions could be seen between breaks in the clouds. Because the area was considered hot in upper Military Region Two, there were two MiGCap jets dispatched from Udorn and a pair of Skyraiders assigned for escort.

Twenty-five miles southwest of Sam Neua Town, the radio operator onboard the King SAR control ship issued a blanket call on Guard requesting help in attempting a SAR of a MiGCAP F-4 that had been shot down. ⁴² Jim replied that because of mission

⁴¹ As very senior pilots, normally Charlie and I were not scheduled to fly together, but were selected and called to the airfield due to the importance of the mission. Moreover, we had participated in the team insertion five days before (but not in the same helicopter) and there were only a few people available who were intimately familiar with the Sam Neua area. Unfortunately, I did not record the other crew, mission coordinates, or other details.

⁴² Jim Parker Email, 07/13/17. At that time, we had no idea that we were capped by F-4 pilots and that MiGs were active in the area. It was much like the situation in the Na San Valley of North Vietnam during June 1965, when MiGs were headed north to intercept Phil Goddard and me while we were exiting the country after an aborted SAR. It is truly amazing, and a little unsettling, to learn these facts years afterward.

requirements, which specified a narrow five-minute window to extract the beleaguered team, we were unable to help at that particular time. He also requested the downed MiGCAP plane be replaced. A few minutes after the conversation, Rhyne heard an emergency beacon pinging on Guard channel for a short time. Assuming it was from a downed F-4 crewman, he attempted to establish and remember the approximate location the signal was emanating from.

After Jim's onboard crew located, identified, and ascertained that the landing zone was quiet, we were directed to the team's position. Charlie and I conducted the extraction without incident.

Departing the landing zone with our charges, we headed for Bouam Long for fuel. Because of other pressing commitments, the A-1 pilots wanted to leave us, but Jim requested that they remain our escort until we reached the safety of Site-32. Then he contacted King to inform the radio operator that he was returning to the likely area where he had heard the beacon, to investigate and perhaps spot downed crewmembers. We heard this conversation and indicated that during and after the fueling process we would maintain a radio watch and respond should we be needed. This was the correct procedure, for as per our SAR SOP, to ensure that we would not be blindly milling about an area burning fuel, we did not launch until a pilot was sighted.

Rhyne commenced a search, flying parallel lines and listening for anything significant. Guaranteeing plenty of endurance, he had topped off his main fuel cells and wing tip tanks prior to departing for our mission. Moreover, because he had been flying slowly to accompany us, his engines had not consumed much fuel.

The USAF sent some help to Jim during the search. The first to arrive were two A-1 Skyraiders. In a typical fashion, they

were not sure where they were or where to fly. Using directing finding (DF) steers, Rhyne vectored the pilots to his position and instructed them as to their location on the map. He then suggested they search in a westerly direction and he would go east.

Then an OV-10 Bronco pilot arrived in the area and began looking around. He was over a cloud formation, and every time he attempted to depart the cloud cover, large caliber AAA fire was launched at him. Jim obtained his position using DF and flew in that direction. When he could see the plane, it was directly over Sam Neua Town. Jim suggested that the pilot proceed northwest to avoid the artillery fire, but the pilot refused, saying he could not go that way. The King controller heard this and said to follow what the Air America pilot advised, as he knew the area. The pilot complied, and Jim never heard from him again. He also never heard from the A-1 pilots.

There was an appreciable increase in radio traffic regarding MiG activity dashing into Laos from North Vietnam; the calls were the most numerous he had ever heard on the radio. Calls cluttered and crackled over UHF Guard frequency (243.0) giving the type aircraft and direction of flight. *"This is Deep Sea (from the Fleet in the Tonkin Gulf): Bandits. Bandits, Course 200 degrees."* This was followed by a point of reference from Bullseye (Hanoi). Later, Jim surmised that North Vietnamese Air Force leaders were using these incursions as a ploy to suck USAF support away from the Plain of Jars offensive, and it worked to a large degree. Attacking USAF pilots would jettison their loads and follow the MiGs who would lead them into North Vietnam, where surface-to-air missile site personnel were waiting patiently to launch their deadly missiles at them.

Jim began trolling the area, hoping to spot parachutes or smoke, but he observed nothing identified with downed airmen.

Then he heard a distress call on Guard saying, "*I am heading 210 degrees and do not know where I am and have a very low fuel state.*" Not long afterward, Jim heard the eerie whining of an emergency beacon. The signal over 243.0 locked on his Radio Magnetic Indicator (RMI) instrument, and plotted southeast, about 130 degrees from his position, so he headed in that direction.

He was flying low near mountain tops to avoid MiG encounters and had flown fifteen miles when ground fire suddenly erupted. An AK-47 round struck and disabled the right generator, which necessitated reducing the electrical load, as the Twin Otter's systems required considerable power when all electronics were operating.

At the same time, the signal from the beacon ceased and the DF needle lost its lock, so he reversed course in order to return to the general area where he had first heard the beacon. Suddenly the beacon began its intermittent pinging again. The Otter mounted a very sensitive electronic receiver, using an amplified signal to pick up road watch teams' low-powered beacons. Jim was surprised to learn that this capability allowed him to receive a signal from a great distance, even though he was at a low altitude.

During the track toward the potential downed site, the Case Officer yelled over the intercom, "*There's a MiG!*" Jim immediately dove for the trees and flew down the side of a mountain as close to the foliage as possible. Once at the bottom of the mountain, he turned and saw the exhaust of a jet flying away. There was no doubt that the pilot had spotted the Otter and Jim was confused as to why they had not received fire. (Two weeks later he met the F-4 pilot who was flying the aircraft, who claimed that he was merely looking at Jim's ship.)

After the excitement, Jim began tracking the emergency signal again to the southeast. Nearing the area where he had taken ground fire, he diverted to the west. The signal was registering stronger and he sensed that he was closing on the location. Planning ahead, he raised King and requested the helicopter pilots be notified on the VHF 119.1 MHz frequency. Inform them to launch to the east and contact the Otter, who would then vector them to his position.

Jim continued toward the locked direction-finding needle. When he was about to be blasted out of the cockpit by the increasing signal strength, he radioed the standard request over Guard frequency, *"Beeper-Beeper come up voice."*

A moment later: *"This is 74 Bravo."* Jim asked if he was all right and received an affirmative answer. Then he spotted a parachute in the trees and continued over the area. The 74B back seater said he was hidden and asked if he should he come out in the open. Jim told him to remain hidden, that help was on the way, and he was in a plane that had no capability to rescue him. Then he asked if 74 Alpha had ejected safely.

"Affirmative." Jim called 74A and received an answer. Then he requested a hold down on the survival radio transmitter button. A short transmission followed and Jim recorded a bearing and headed toward the pilot. Passing over a mountain he saw the man's chute. Then Jim recommended that the downed pilot remain hidden.

Next Jim called King and discovered that the Twinpac

helicopter pilots he requested had never been contacted.⁴³ He relayed that he had achieved a visual sighting on both the crewmembers and that their conditions were good. Low on fuel, he needed to depart soon. He had no maps of the downed area but made an educated guess of the coordinates. So that there was no misunderstanding as to what he transmitted, he explained the information twice.

Then a LORAN-equipped Pave Nail pilot arrived. He was in the area overhead at 12,000 feet, reluctant to descend through broken cloud layers into hostile, mountainous terrain. Despite his low fuel state, Jim climbed to the OV-10 pilot's altitude and joined on his wing. Then the two descended and flew over the parachutes while LORAN fixes were recorded, but the weather was deemed too bad and it was too late to brief crews and mount a SAR that day.⁴⁴ Moreover, MiGs were still active along the border, waiting to dart across and take an unsuspecting victim.

Leaving the SAR business to the experienced OV-10 pilot, Jim departed for home. With few options available to him, he flew directly across enemy territory and landed at Udorn late in the day with only 180 pounds of fuel remaining in his tanks. Conserving fuel had paid off, for the ship had been airborne over seven hours.

USAF F-4s and pilots were not the only aircraft losses that day. At 1610, enemy groundfire brought down a Lao AT-28. A

⁴³ Inherent jealousy reigned between our organizations. Most likely the Air Force wanted to handle its own SAR business. With dozens of planes in the air warding off MiG incursion and looking for downed airmen, our participation was probably deemed insignificant and unwanted.

Not hearing anything for hours, following the non-participation SAR, we departed with our charges to RON at The Alternate.

⁴⁴ USAF briefings often required hours. They included the known situation, weather, escort aircraft, and all sorts of other details. Furthermore, the ships were often based hundreds of miles from the target.

subsequent SAR was unsuccessful. An hour and a half later, FAG Cripple, located southwest of Phou Theung, reported that a second T-28, Chao Pha Khao Red-02, had been shot down attacking enemy tanks in the Lat Houang area. The pilot in this case also was not recovered. ⁴⁵

It was dark when Jim Rhyne made his way to the Rescue Control office on the USAF side of the RTAF airfield. He knocked on the door and was promptly refused admittance for lack of proper clearance. He explained that he was involved in finding the F-4 crew and wanted to debrief intelligence. He persisted and finally gained admittance to a map room. A crew standing around a large table was talking about the location of Falcon 74A and 74B. Jim entered the conversation saying if they would let him see the map, he could show them exactly where the men were. However, citing that he did not have clearance, they refused to let him look at the map. Like a person experiencing an out-of-body experience, Jim listened from the periphery as they talked about the downed crew. Then someone pointed to a position on the map, *"Author saw them here."*

Another person replied, *"The OV-10 pilot said they were at this position."*

A third individual interjected, *"Yes, but Author actually saw them."*

At this point, bursting to interject what he knew, and finally unable to keep silent any longer, Jim explained that he was the Author who they were quoting, and if they would just let him see the maps, he would show them exactly where the crew was located. At last the men understood that Jim was indeed the person they were talking about, and finally let him look at the

⁴⁵ Jim Parker *Timeline* 18 December.

map. He was able to pinpoint the position of the crew almost to the exact contour line. The pilot was right on the border.

During the night, Vietnamese troops climbed the mountain looking for the airmen. Back seater 74B later told Jim that he saw them discover his parachute hanging in the tree, and then fan out searching for him, but they searched in vain because he was too well hidden. Perhaps further contributing to the enemy's lack of success in capturing the airmen, controlled by Alleycat, A-1 pilots orbited overhead the entire night.

Throughout the night information from the Pave Nail equipment was examined and employed to design pilot protection boxes that LORAN equipped aircraft could use to deliver area denial ordnance in spite of heavy weather. In addition, three dimensional topographical maps enabled rescue crews to plot a viable instrument approach OV-10 pilots could fly to lead Sandy and Jolly Green pilots through adverse weather into the high mountain valley.

The enemy was waiting for the rescue ships in the morning. Although the low Jolly Green-62 ship was damaged by ground fire and recovered at Bouam Long, the men were extracted at 1513 hours with the use of abundant air power and copious amounts of effective riot control gas. ⁴⁶

Captain Jim Rhyne never discovered why the two Air Force pilots were forced to spend the night in the weeds. He believed that if King had called the Twinpac pilots like he had requested, the men could have been rescued that same afternoon

⁴⁶ *Air Power*, 32.

Gas: The gas used that day was probably CS, a choking, vomiting gas that I had been exposed to in a general-purpose tent at Quantico, Virginia, during atomic-biological-chemical (ABC) training. After inhaled, a person believed they were going to die. Moreover, it was nearly impossible to function at any normal level until clearing one's airways with fresh air.

without a hitch and the Vietnamese would not have had sufficient time to move into the area and establish an ambush. ⁴⁷

Captain Charlie Weitz rotated home that afternoon. He was replaced by First Officer Dick Graham, another Vientiane pilot who had recently been transferred to Udorn, having been displaced from the fixed wing program because of Company cutbacks, the FEPA seniority system. Nine years my senior, the U.S. Navy veteran had been an Air America employee for four and a half years, flown in the Caribou and C-123, and as a Captain in the Porter program.

MAIN ATTACKS

After diminishing FSB Phou Teung's capability to participate in support of other fire bases, and in order to destroy the core of Thai defense on the Plain of Jars, the major portion of the Phase One Vietnamese offensive was conducted at FSBs Mustang and Lion. Action continued on the southeastern Plain, with Lion's Foxtrot Gulf and Foxtrot Hotel pads taking

⁴⁷ EW Knight Email, 12/07/00 sent to the Author, containing a comprehensive James Rhyne Email describing the events of 18 December 1971 sent to Jim Hurst, 12/06/00.

Aftermath: When Jim was in the Udorn USAF hospital in February recuperating from a serious injury incurred over the Pak Beng Valley an F-4 crash occurred during takeoff. The hospital was alive with activity while getting ready to receive the injured. Since a hospital was the best place to be to learn the latest and best information, Jim heard the pilot had been killed. The back seat pilot ejected low and landed on his back. When they brought him through the open ward for overnight observation where Jim was in bed, he saw that the man was black. Rhyne asked the nurse if the man's call sign might be 74B. She left and later returned with a nod in the affirmative. Jim then asked for assistance getting out of bed into a wheelchair and to the man's room. When he entered the room he said, "You do not know me, but a couple months ago my call sign was Author." At this revelation, the pilot leaped out of bed and hugged Jim grateful that he had saved him. They had an interesting visit reliving the experience.

Jim later heard the man had been rotated home, as ejecting twice from a cockpit was deemed quite enough for any person.

the brunt of enemy fire. To forestall total disaster, at 1630 hours a twenty-man Thai patrol departed Foxtrot Gulf at the Lion complex to investigate a bamboo grove a mile west of Lion where it was believed enemy with heavy weapons were concealed. This was confirmed at the cost of six casualties. Booster called FAG Bounder Control (Amnaj-also Office) located at Foxtrot Lima on Phou Seu for an airstrike on the area, but since the gunship had other duties, Lion artillery attempted to maintain harassing fire.

Radio chatter indicated that every pad was receiving some kind of weapons fire. At 2000 FAG Phison, Pressure Two, at Mustang pad Foxtrot Zulu (FZ), was urgently calling for an airstrike in the LS-343 area, where enemy were hiding and using wooded ravines for a rally point.⁴⁸ Despite a noticeable lack of air power during the day, allied gunships were available at night. By 2045 Spooky 02 began firing on the position, resulting in heavy enemy casualties.

Enemy guns commenced salvoing BC-607/2 at Fox Zulu Mustang complex at 0700 hours on the 18th, and continued until 2100 on 19 December. Unable to withstand any more pounding, twenty men pulled out heading for Phou Seu. At 0600 four enemy soldiers were encountered. Hand grenades wounded one Thai. M-16 counterfire drove the ambushers away and the men arrived at Stingray's (FAG Sanya, BC-610) location at 1200 hours. Wounded were evacuated by helicopter crews at 1515.⁴⁹ Phou Seu suffered one KIA and three WIA. Also, at 2000 a Spooky gunship supported Whiskey-02 (Prinya Inthakhuen) at Phou Theung's 609 Battalion.

⁴⁸ FAG Pressure Two was later killed in the process of withdrawing from the Plain of Jars.

⁴⁹ Operations Report from Keun Anusri, rigger at LS-343, depicting what might have been a typical experience for withdrawing troops.

During the early evening, at the southeast corner of Mustang the enemy was almost on top of Foxtrot Yankee. At 2000 Spooky was working for Cripple at Foxtrot Mike pad. Later, at 2030, a light was observed south of FY moving in the direction of Lion. It was believed that a truck was delivering enemy reinforcements and evacuating wounded. Stingray battery fired at the location, but results were unknown. Between 2200-and 0600-hours, enemy forces approached Mustang's defensive positions trying to sever the barbed wire. Supporting fire was requested from Lion. ⁵⁰

THE THIRD DAY OF THE OFFENSIVE

"All stations of PDJ mostly worried. By 0630 the entire PDJ was subject to both incoming and TIC, Casualty counts are sketchy and poor communications hamper accurate compilation as to numbers and locations. Entire northeast PDJ has been lost as well as portion of southeast PDJ. Tanks were reported in support of enemy forces northeast PDJ..."

LS-20A not overly secure from a repeat of last season." ⁵¹

Nineteen December marked a critical day for Plain of Jars defenders. The morning dawned on a dismal note with few air support sorties or resupply missions envisioned for beleaguered Thai troops at the FSBs. Up to fifty American aircraft and crews were involved in SAR work in Sam Neua Province, leaving only a diminishing fleet of relatively ill-equipped, slow-moving indigenous-piloted T-28s to conduct support missions in high

⁵⁰ Booster field reports on the evening of 18 December 1971. Voice communications between field units, relay station, and Task Force Vang Pao-Mustang.

⁵¹ Tom Sullivan's continuing accounts to Vientiane and Udorn FIC units.

threat areas, to perform tasks never intended for a converted training plane.

Helicopter crews at Long Tieng were ready to begin work early. However, a lack of comprehensive information regarding the confusing battlefield situation, poor weather, and Customer concern as to our welfare all combined to initially keep us on the deck. Although we were thirsting for action, they were right, for Continental Otters had been hit, and T-28 pilots shot down, by the enemy's abundant AAA and groundfire. The odds were definitely against us.

Late in the morning, after overnight radio reports from FAGs and radio operators at still active FSBs were collated and analyzed, Case Officer Chuck Campbell allowed a few of us to launch on local supply missions, and some were sent to the Plain of Jars periphery like Phou Seu for wounded and key principals. Here "Hardnose" Mike Ingham, who was in charge of the Thai FAGs, attempted to observe ongoing events under the cloud cover, and coordinate troops in his sector.

While the battle continued to rage in the southeast sector of the Plain, low ceilings and visibility restricted us from observing exactly what was occurring. Following a six-hour day in the air, and twenty sorties, I secured for the night.

Twin Otters were the Customer's aircraft of choice to airdrop to the besieged fire bases. They were considered the best mechanism to load and were fast, which allowed more drops and afforded less battle damage than a larger cargo plane. In addition, they provided a small radius of action that allowed tighter drop zone patterns, leading to more accurate drops at the smaller positions. The Otter turboprop engines also

encountered fewer maintenance problems than reciprocating engine configured fixed wing aircraft. ⁵²

Three CASI Twin Otter pilots (Dick Douglas, Dan Cloud, and Ed Dearborn) ⁵³ and one Air America Otter pilot (Captain Don Romes) attempted resupply missions on the Plain of Jars during the day. On the way to Long Tieng during the morning Cricket relayed accounts of the night's activity. The situation appeared very bleak. The main firebases at King Kong, FAG Rossini, Mustang, Tom Tom, and Cobra were still active, with Mustang and Tom Tom receiving heavy fire from 130mm canons.

The Alternate Customer's initial assignment tasked the three CASI Otter pilots to deliver 155mm ammunition to King Kong. The ammunition was loaded with impact parachutes that would be dropped by a kicker from 7,000 to 10,000 feet. ⁵⁴ Dick Douglas conducted the initial drop. As Ed Dearborn prepared for his run, he observed three 12.7mm AAA guns open fire 400 yards west of King Kong. The gunners were firing so rapidly that dust clouds billowed up from the tree line revealing their general location. The air drop was curtailed while the pilots requested the artillery base to silence the guns. However, neither howitzer fire nor air support were available. The Vietnamese had systematically surrounded King Kong and Rossini with anti-aircraft weapons, which made T-28 support tantamount to suicide.

Following quick loadings at The Alternate, the next resupply missions were Mustang and then Fox Bravo at Lion, Fox Echo, and other hilltop positions which were under severe close-

⁵² Bill Leary December 1971 Notes: Interview with TJ Thompson, aerial delivery/resupply specialist in Military Region Two.

⁵³ All highly experienced and senior pilots, Douglas had flown for Bird and Son in the early days; Dearborn flew for Air America until CASI bought out Bird. Romes had flown for Air America for a number of years.

⁵⁴ Impact parachutes that opened at 200 feet were developed at the Intermountain organization. Bill Leary interview with TJ Thompson.

quarter duress on Phou Theung. They were running perilously low on ammunition, particularly hand grenades for the close quarter fighting taking place on both sides of the helicopter landing zone. Eight miles to the west, at Phou Seu, Hardnose watched in awe through a telescope as the Otter pilot flew low up the south side of the mountain to conduct a masked quick delivery. While Cloud conducted the first grenade drop at Foxtrot Echo, 12.7mm and 37mm fire commenced from the north. Turning right after the drop, his ship received battle damage to the left wing. Bracketed by 37mm fire, a round burst inboard of his right wing, damaging the flap. As relatively accurate 37mm fire enveloped Cloud's Otter, he beat a hasty retreat to safer environs and evaluate the battle damage. At the time further attempts to drop at the positions were terminated.

The third mission during early afternoon to drop at Hotel Delta and Hotel Yankee, located at the base of Tom Tom, was assigned to Dearborn and Romes. The situation was desperate, with Tom Tom taking 130mm fire. Vietnamese troops were on the hill breaching the barbed wire. After advising the Thai to hunker down in their bunkers, T-28 pilots salvoed anti-personnel cluster bomb unit (CBU) ordnance on the enemy, with some positive effect. Next, encountering only light ground fire, Dearborn dropped at Hotel Delta from 2,000 feet, observing only one out of seven chutes opening.

While 37mm shells exploded some distance from his plane, Romes conducted a second drop at Hotel Yankee. During the drop, FAG Tom Tom's battery was receiving heavy incoming. The situation was obviously critical, with the FAG pleading for help and resupply. The man painted a dismal picture, indicating that over half of his unit was dead or wounded, and the enemy was in the process of destroying perimeter defenses. He was not optimistic as to the position's near-term survival.

Another attempt was made to supply battalions at positions FB and FE. Six T-28 and two Otter pilots were involved. About halfway to the drop zones, the armada came under heavy AAA fire and Cloud's right tire was shredded. The mission was scrubbed.

Copious enemy anti-aircraft assets provided a good excuse for Customer caution in dispatching aircraft to the Plain. At 0630, still unidentified as to type or size, enemy heavy weapons fire was impacting the western most FSB at King Kong.⁵⁵ The attacks continued throughout the day. By nine o'clock, November Mike and November Echo pads reported eight casualties. Before noon, a large caliber gun was spotted west of Moungh Phanh, firing on Panther battery.

The eastern side of Mustang began receiving heavy weapons fire on Foxtrot Mike at 0720 hours. Twenty-five minutes later, the enemy was observed reinforcing near FY.

At 0830 Lion began receiving 85mm fire that impacted near a 105mm howitzer. Suspecting the incoming was directed from an area east of Mustang between FY and FM, and acceding to a request from FY, two 105mm guns opened fire on the area. Every time Lion fired, the battery received relatively accurate counterfire by 75mm recoilless rifles. Besides making the Thai gunners reluctant to shoot, this confused them as to the actual location of enemy guns. Such an enigma at the base prevented Lion from providing beneficial and productive fire support.

About the same time a combat patrol of fifty-seven men were engaged with the enemy and unable to break contact. By late morning the men returned to Lion having incurred nine MIAs, to include the commanding officer.

⁵⁵ Never having experienced such large guns that delivered huge explosions, for a time, FSB defenders were unaware they were being shelled by long range 130mm canons.

At 0950 six enemy tanks were spotted moving southwest along Route-4. This added an entirely new dimension to the battle, as the Thai infantry possessed no intermediate range anti-tank weapons, such as the LAWS rocket launcher device, to cope with the threat.

Between artillery barrages, enemy infantry moved toward Fox Victor and Fox Zulu, both north and south of Mustang command post.

REINFORCEMENTS

As defenses and positions on the Plain of Jars were sliding down the tubes, three Thai irregular battalions undergoing training at Kanchanaburi, and intended to reinforce positions on the Plain (BC-616, 617, 618 consisting of 1,403 men), were detached from training and flown to Long Tieng by Air America C-123 crews. Deliveries began on 20 December, too late to benefit or influence the outcome of the battle. Therefore, BC-616/1 was shuttled to Tha Tham Bleung (LS-72) to block enemy intrusion from the Hintang area. BC-617 was moved to Phou Long Mat in order to marshal troops evacuating the Plain and provide security. Another battalion, BC-618, originally slated to occupy Hill-1663 near Ban Na to help shepherd stragglers to safety, after enemy probes, was held at south and southeast defensive positions in the Long Tieng valley. ⁵⁶

⁵⁶ FRUS 1969-1976, Volume 20, Southeast Asia, Document 147, Editorial Note.

Task Force Vang Pao NR 5369, to DHEP/Sopone, Addition Daily Situation Report NR 299/14, Tongkoon, 12/21/71.

TF VP NR 5363, to DHEP/Sopone, Task Force VP Radio Message NR 5353 Dated 20 Dec. 71, and NR 5354 dated 21 Dec 71, Tongkoon, 12/21/71.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 327.

PHOU THEUNG'S FINAL HOURS

"Thai troops at Phou Theung fought with honor. They endured [attacks from] three waves of enemy troops from 0700 18 December through the 19th when surviving troops were forced to withdraw."⁵⁷

By 0500 the three battalions of the 165th had accomplished most of their assigned tasks of breaching perimeter wire defenses. The siege attack plan was working, despite heavy artillery bombardment and air strikes. During the night, enemy (government) resistance measurably diminished.

"At 0800 I gave the order for a heavy artillery and heavy weapons bombardment of the enemy positions. I thought that our opportunity to overrun and take Phou Theung [the attack phase] had arrived."

Then Chuong issued orders for assault units to be in attack position by 1500. The artillery barrage would commence at 1600, and during the next half hour, he wanted the troops to be in the first trench ready to begin the main attack. ⁵⁸

The downward spiral for the Plain of Jars operation continued. Late in the morning, King Kong fired in support of Phou Theung, but received counterfire following each salvo. On Phou Theung Mountain, fighting was vicious as coordinated enemy units severed the first strands of wire at Fox Fox, and by noon engaged defenders at Fox Echo in hand-to-hand combat. Lion was asked to provide supporting fires for FE, but was unable. By 1300 the position was being overrun. During mid-afternoon one hundred percent casualties, with thirty percent KIA, were reported at FE. The deputy battalion commander, S-3 officer, and

⁵⁷ NR 5345, Summary of BC's fighting at Plain of Jars between 18-20 December (BC-603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 601), to DHEP, DHON D/CMDR, HQ 333, 12/24/71.

⁵⁸ Chuong, 16.

heavy weapons platoon commander were killed. With no supervision or discipline, the remaining troops scattered and many were systematically killed. Only BC-609/2's company commander escaped, and eventually returned to Long Tieng with an account of the battle.

Fox Fox had not reported. In addition to friendly casualties, many enemy troops had been killed--300 confirmed by a recon plane. The Otter pilots continued resupply operations to positions throughout the day, receiving only scattered ground fire. ⁵⁹

From his vantage point on Phou Seu, Mike Ingham was highly conflicted and emotional over the plight of the Thai boys trapped in untenable positions.

"...we had put [the Thai] in a very tough position and were now unable to support [them]...I had some really heart wrenching radio conversations with some [FAGs who worked for him] who were in the final throes of being overrun. The worst part was that there was little I could do. The situation was much too tough to expect much out of Air America and CASI, and the USAF was invisible." ⁶⁰

CHUONG

The 165th Infantry Regiment opened fire, beginning the attack on the Thai battalions at Phu Theung (BC 605, BC 607, and BC 609).

⁵⁹ Bill Leary December 1971 Notes: Ed Dearborn account of resupply attempts on 19 December 1971; Mike Ingham interview.

Note: After the Plain of Jars loss, CASI chief Pilot Ed Dearborn, bitter at his perceived Air America's non-participation (except for Don Romes) wrote a negative report. However, he was not privy to the Twin Otter's value to the Agency's Special Project program. Moreover, two of the three ships were filled with expensive and difficult-to-replace electronic equipment.

⁶⁰ Bill Leary 1971 Notes recorded from a Mike Ingham interview.

"At exactly 1600 hours our artillery began a heavy bombardment...our troops were ready and waiting at the assault location...after the artillery shifted fire to the rear, the telephones began ringing as my battalions reported that our troops had launched simultaneous assaults...6th Battalion had pushed their way through the breech-point, crossed Trench-line Two and three, planted our [victory] flag on top of the enemy outpost on Phou Theung's Crest One, and were spreading down both the trench-line to suppress the guns that were still firing from the enemy's underground bunkers."

Capturing all the Thai hard points was not easy. The 4th battalion's 1st Company was stalled at the breech-point leading to Crest Two because of heavy weapons fire.

"It was not until 2100 hours that 4th Battalion finally reported that it had planted its flag over the enemy position on Crest Two...the battalion reported that it was still trying to eliminate enemy troops who were holding out in underground bunkers."

The remaining Thai, lodged deep in a large bunker on Crest Three, continued to resist enemy appeals to surrender, and desultory attacks by relatively inexperienced troops using hand grenades and satchel charges at the bunker's entrance. Additional explosive charges were ordered and the reserve unit summoned to complete the job.

"At 2300 hours the regiment finally completed its mission of totally annihilating Thai Army Battalion BC 609 at the Phou Theung strong-point complex and of dispersing the Lao puppet army battalions stationed on this ridge." ⁶¹

At 1630, lacking contact with Fox Delta, Booster reported that battalion headquarters on Phou Theung had most likely been

⁶¹ Chuong, 17-18.

lost. Half an hour later, FAG Whiskey-02 relocated west to FE. Before dying, Voltage S-3 officer Pingo-BC-609, radioed for King Kong to fire high explosive airbursts directly over his position, but the effort did not stop the assault. At 1930 hours, the FAG was still reporting from FE.

The enemy withdrew at 2030, but resumed the offensive at 2115. Whiskey-02 was still reporting at 2330, but that was his final contact. He was probably no longer alive. As enemy moved into abandoned positions, they were quickly employed as observation posts and choice positions to fire down on Lion and Mustang bases.

Demoralized and defeated, with no more appetite for battle, the few remaining survivors began moving away from the mountain toward Lion and Phou Seu. At 0120 hours, Tom Tom established contact with ABCCC control ship Alley Cat and indicated that he had departed Phou Theung.

The enemy continued surrounding Phou Houng Cobra battery, five miles south southwest of Phou Theung. Before noon, defenders observed an enemy 82mm mortar firing. Four Deuce and 81mm mortar counterfire commenced from Fox Alpha and Fox Romeo. Heavy incoming fire continued all day, but base guns remained operational. At 0440, System reported TIC. Somewhat off the beaten path, the FSB acted as a radio relay station for units that had lost contact with Task Force Vang Pao. Close to Khang Khao, the site became a pressure relief valve and a potential rally point for withdrawing battalion units.

At the end of the longest day, Tom Sullivan forwarded a report to the Flight Information Center (FIC). Most information was supported by initial radio reports to Task Force Vang Pao at Long Tieng. Because of the elevated state of confusion and cross radio talk, like almost all first accounts, some information was not entirely accurate:

"Lima-108 and all positions were overrun by enemy supported by five tanks. [Under pressure, the Meo at Mung Soui chose to abandon their howitzers and withdraw south toward Ban Na. The site was not actually occupied by the enemy until the 21st.] Reports of many WIA and KIA. On the PDJ most ground was lost to enemy supported by tanks. King Kong is surrounded, as are Mustang, Lion and Cobra [FSBs]. Stingray has taken incoming [A Dac Cong unit had moved south of the FSB]; there are enemy forces just west of Panther." ⁶²

LION AND MUSTANG GO DOWN THE TUBES

"[With Phou Theung lost] the enemy then threw their weight against Mustang, Lion, King Kong, and Panther."

Radio contact was lost with two-thirds of the FAGs during the night.

*"After the loss of Phu Theung, the enemy troops at Phu Ton [Lion] became frightened and [some] began to flee. In light of the situation, the Campaign Headquarters directed the 141st Regiment to move quickly to seize and occupy the Phu Ton area."*⁶³

Fire base reduction continued. Heavy weapons fire into Lion positions caused substantial casualties and some units pulled back to headquarters battalion at Fox Gulf. Then, at 1700 hours, it was learned that Tango India and Fox Hotel were lost. Enemy 75mm recoilless rifle fire from these positions ignited Squad Two's ammunition storage facility and 105mm charges in huge explosions. The fire direction center was severely damaged and communications disrupted. At the same time, all infantry positions were also heavily engaged. Since they were unable to protect themselves internally, Booster requested air strikes on

⁶² Bill Leary December 1971 Notes-Sullivan FIC, 12/19/71.

⁶³ North Vietnamese Army history.

FI and FG. Nothing was available. Appeals for support from Stingray and Panther helped somewhat, but the artillery units also had other commitments.

With two 105mm howitzers out of commission, the two 155mm guns not useable, and with enemy surrounding all Lion's positions, the situation became untenable. Therefore, at 1900 the commanding officer made the decision to withdraw from battery headquarters when the opportunity presented itself. This information was passed to infantry battalion commanders, who concurred. By 2000, under covering fire from a Spector gunship, the men departed and rallied two kilometers to the southwest, intending to walk to Phou Seu, which was also under attack from the south. Lion was gone.

"At 2245 hours on 19 December the 141st Regiment attacked Phu Ton [in force]. The bulk of the enemy troops there had already fled, so we were only able to annihilate the few troops who were still there." ⁶⁴

The same enemy technique employed at the Lion complex was also employed to reduce Mustang. First, artillery was tactically employed, so that gun crews and infantry were unable to emerge from their holes. Under the shelling umbrella, Vietnamese infantry continued moving closer, eventually surrounding the positions. Artillery was then replaced with heavy indirect mortar and infantry fire and maneuver tactics. Adding to the terror and general confusion, was the introduction of tanks that ran amuck, overrunning infantry positions, squashing fighting holes, men, and bunkers.

⁶⁴ North Vietnamese Army history.

During the night, several tanks were reported at four locations: Two south of Phou Keng, six north of Phou Theung, one at Finger Ridge, and two in the Phou Keng area. ⁶⁵

Naturally, attrition was high on both sides during the peak of the battle. When the situation was deemed desperate, Vang Pao's T-28 pilots dropped cluster bomb units (CBU) on some positions. Enemy bodies were dragged off the wire perimeters, after which, there was another wave of attackers.

Ground attacks commenced at 1630. During the next half hour, five hundred screaming, whistle blowing troops commenced an attack on Fox Tango, the northern most battalion position. Other artillery positions were unable to help because of heavy incoming fire. With all battalion units partially surrounded and subjected to heavy ground attacks, survivors began withdrawing to Mustang battery. After seizing FT, enemy troops were observed closing on FV, the battalion forming the northern perimeter, and the battalion headquarters at Fox Zulu located on the southern perimeter. The 4.2mm mortar battery at Zulu was under fire and could not participate in any support.

Helping to slow, if not stop enemy attacks, at 1850 Spector gunship arrived on station working for FAG Cripple, and located at the Fox Mike headquarters pad. At 2100 hours, Spooky-55 was working for Mustang. At 2200, Spector-26 replaced Spooky. After helping Mustang, Spector moved west to support King Kong. Twenty-five minutes later, mutual artillery support was sought from Stingray and Panther batteries to engage enemy tanks. They were unable to comply, as Panther was also receiving incoming fire. Panther still had the capability to support some friendly units, but was limited as to sector coverage, since all howitzer tires had been flattened by shards of shrapnel.

⁶⁵ Jim Parker *Timeline*-reports for 19 December.

Tanks became the ultimate enemy terror weapon, and key to final victory. At 2250, Soviet style T-34 tanks were reported at Fox Mike (BC-607). Soon afterward, radio contact was lost, and by midnight the site was considered overrun. The headquarters unit (BC-603) at FT was still fighting until the tanks arrived.

The nightmare on the Plain of Jars was not over. After 0800 on 20 December, troops making their way toward Stingray were ambushed. The BC-603 commander was killed and the S-3 officer wounded.

WESTERN PDJ FIRE SUPPORT BASES

With enemy tanks encountering difficulty maneuvering over the rain soaked, marshy terrain of the northwestern Plain of Jars, and with the assistance of USAF gunships, King Kong and Panther bases managed to survive the night. At 1800 hours, enemy movements were observed north and northeast of Phou Keng, but King Kong was unable to provide protective fire because of heavy 130mm barrages. Fifteen minutes later, troops in contact were reported on the hilltop, and air support was requested. By 1900, with enemy units approaching the perimeter wire, AC-130 gunship Spector-05 was working for FAG Rossini. Spector-05 (the crew reported 16,000 rounds of 23mm and 37mm AAA fire from a location one mile north east of Phou Seu) was relieved by Spector-55, who arrived at 2039. About an hour later, Stinger-26 was working for Rossini (who reported heavy TIC and incoming during the night), and then King Kong's position, which was still receiving 130mm fire that destroyed two 105mm howitzers. ⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Voice communications between field units, the relay station, and Task Force Vang Pao.

Task Force Vang Pao message numbers 5323 and 5356-to DHEP/Sophos.

FAG Booster after action report.

Ken Conboy, 325.

Jim Parker *Timeline*.

"Exploiting their victories, at 0320 hours on 20 December the 335th Infantry regiment, using creeping siege tactics, attacked the enemy clusters at Phu Keng [mountain], one by one, ending in the complete destruction of two Thai battalions (BC606 and BC 608)" ⁶⁷

Other areas were impacted. To the north of the Plain of Jars, FAGs Bad Man and Hunter at Bouam Long reported many enemy forces in their respective areas.

THE FINAL DAY OF THE ENEMY OFFENSIVE

An Agency bulletin reported on the 20th:

"During the night of 19 December, communist troops supported by heavy artillery fire and tanks overran irregular positions and two fire support bases near Phou Theung. The northern [FSB] near Phou Keng are also under heavy attack.

The accuracy and intensity of enemy ground fire has precluded all resupply [except for some Otter missions] and medical evacuation operations on the Plaine. Four USAF F-4s have been downed over north Laos since 18 December. One of these planes was shot down by a MiG. Two Laotian T-28s were also brought down by AAA fire over the Plaine on 18 December. Air observers have spotted five heavy guns, probably some of the 130mm field guns recently brought into Laos, emplaced in Khang Khay. Heavy airstrikes have been called in on the guns but no damage assessment is available.

The communists also overran Phou Pha Sai [located at the northwestern end of the long Padong Ridge], the principal highpoint between the Plaine and the government base at Long Tieng. Elements of at least two NVA regiments have been observed

⁶⁷ North Vietnamese Army history.

in the area in the past few days [large caves at the eastern base of the mountain range provided concealment].

The North Vietnamese are clearly making an all-out effort to sweep the Plaine clear of government forces as quickly as possible. If they succeed, they will probably move toward the Long Tieng complex. Much will depend on the government's ability to reestablish its defense line." ⁶⁸

Supplementing the Agency report, after overnight and early morning reports were received and examined at Long Tieng, Tom Sullivan prepared his daily FIC brief:

"More ground was lost on the PDJ...big gun batteries as well as the FAG positions were lost overnight. Lima-106 (Moung Phanh, L-108 (Moung Soui), LS-343 (Ban Na Thom), LS-347 (Moung Phanh north), LS-348 (Ban Ha), LS-350 (Ban Hasi). LS-275 (Ban Thang), and L-22 (Xieng Khouang) were all either overrun or friendly control was abandoned throughout the reporting period [which ended at 1700].

Six tanks were reported at 2143 [hours] 19 December to have overrun the Mustang and Lion gun positions. The majority of the friendly troops that have been able to walk out of their positions are en route to both the LS-15 (Ban Na) and LS-20A stations.

Enemy big guns were reported on the eastern part of the PDJ being pulled by trucks. The caliber was reported to be in excess of 100mm." ⁶⁹

"From 18 to 21 December the 18th, 27th, and 41st Sapper Battalions mounted surprise attacks on Phu Pha Sai, Phu Seu, the headquarters command post of Vang Pao's army and the airfield,

⁶⁸ CIA Bulletin, 12/20/71.

⁶⁹ Bill Leary 1971 Notes: Sullivan Report-FIC, Situation 1700/19 Dec-1700/20 Dec 71.

killing a number of enemy personnel and destroying four enemy aircraft." ⁷⁰

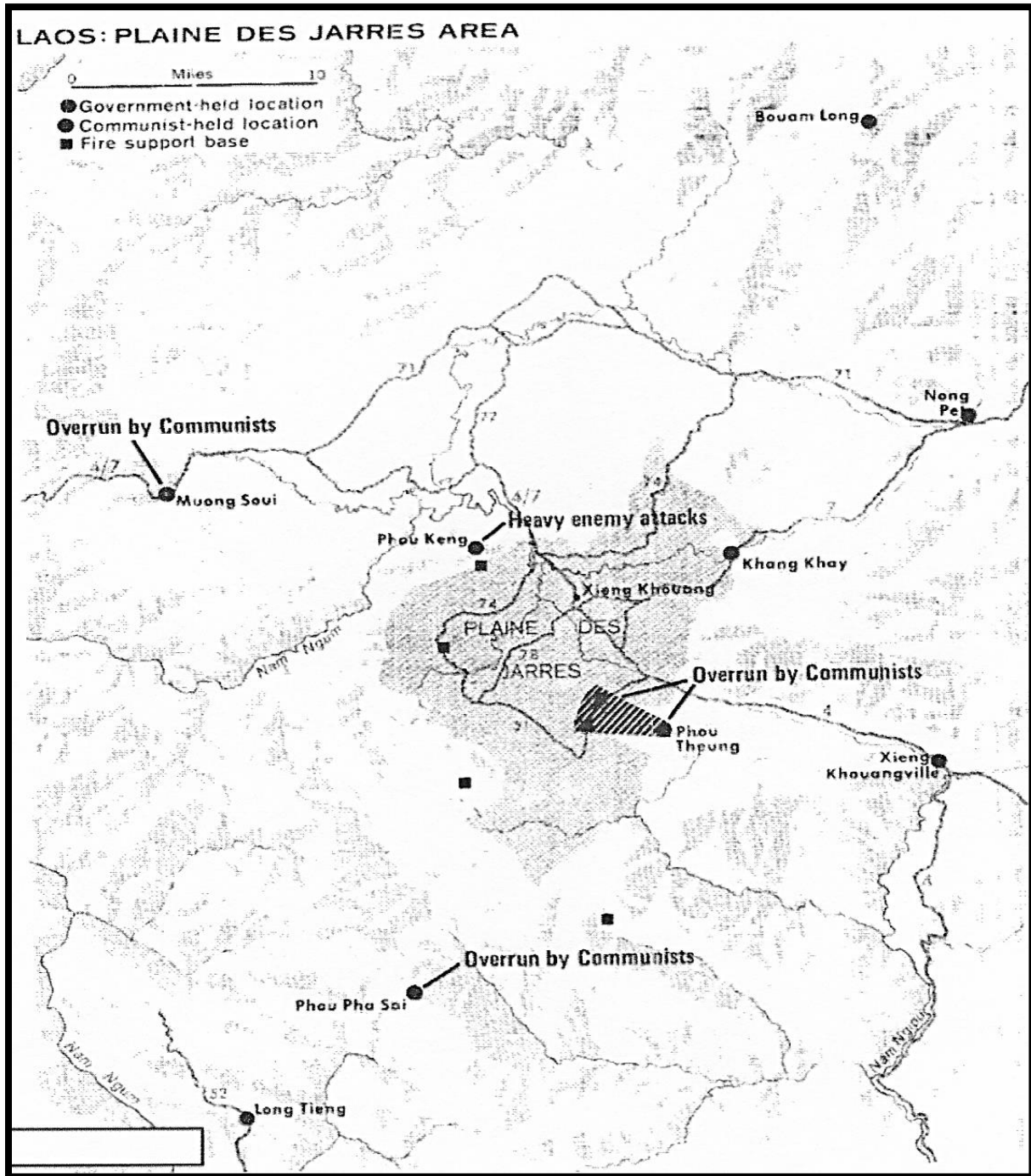
Morning of the 20th, like others preceding it over the Long Tieng Valley, dawned dark and dreary, adequately reflecting our black moods. We were confused, and thoroughly disliked what was reported happening on the PDJ. However, we realized that without adequate air support to counter the abundant AAA, tanks, and heavy weapons fire, our forces were virtually powerless to slow or stem the enemy onslaught.

Rolling up our troops was commonplace for the combat-experienced and aggressive North Vietnamese Army, but we dreamers believed that with all our resources (twenty-four well-placed howitzers, and other crew-served weapons providing interlocking fire) it would be different this year...wrong.

With all the fire support bases except King Kong, Panther, Cobra, and Stingray, silenced, or rendered ineffective during the night, and most surviving troops either relocating to safer positions or beating feet in full retreat, we were temporarily held on the deck by Air Operations until a more comprehensive understanding of the battlefield situation was collated, and a logical plan of action devised.

First reports, although somewhat disjointed and garbled, were received from still viable field units, relayed through hilltop FAGs, and then forwarded to Task Force Vang Pao about 0830. Many walking wounded from eastern FSBs, and as-yet-uninjured, but demoralized troops, moved toward designated rally/medevac points at Panther base. Fighting all the way, other units had been on the move toward Stingray for some time, and had incurred injuries and deaths from enemy ambushes.

⁷⁰ North Vietnamese Army history.



CIA map of the Plain of Jars situation on 12/20/71.

Panther's troops at the November November headquarters pad were still fighting and accepting withdrawing units from other areas. As the number of wounded increased at the Panther location from troops abandoning firebase positions to the east, a better appreciation for the situation was obtained. Recognizing that a window of opportunity to act was narrow, Chuck Campbell and Hardnose tasked us to mount a WIA evacuation while we could.

In order to navigate in the iffy weather, and to create aircraft separation, we picked our way between low clouds and began a strung-out twenty-mile daisy chain, over Sam Tong, past Hill 1663, and west of Ban Na. At the edge of the Plain, we descended under the low overcast and proceeded to the Panther area at an altitude just inside the small arms envelope of 1,500 feet. Disheartening to observe, parachutes with loads still attached, littered rolling hills at abandoned sites where they were sure to be retrieved by the enemy. I bitterly reflected on the fact that the ordnance would eventually be used against us.

Once over the landing zone, when the FAG signaled all clear and there was a lull in incoming, I wasted no time landing.⁷¹

Landing under fire was not the prescribed work of the day for us "unarmed" civilian helicopter pilots. This was generally quite unusual and not often expected by Customers--except by Kayak during the Ban Na offensive. As always, the work was predicated on volunteer crews. No one was forced to place his "six" on the line, but during uncommon times, with so much at stake, everyone did. Nevertheless, the old-timer philosophy of

⁷¹ The seriousness of the situation afforded no time for the supervision or training of a new pilot. Normally during these hairy missions, I conducted all landings and takeoffs and allowed Dick Graham to fly inbound and outbound routes.

survival had developed over time; we would take a look at the situation and attempt to fulfill the mission if at all possible.

There was little time for Chuck to triage the hordes of troops wanting to leave the Plain of Jars. We had to rely on the discretion and selections of the FAG and whatever officers or noncoms were present. In contrast with past Meo evacuations, discipline prevailed, and there was no mobbing the helicopter. Therefore, without considering payloads and maximum gross weight, wounded in action, and whoever else needed to evacuate, were rapidly loaded. Then, depending on whether I could hover, I took off and headed for Long Tieng.

ESCORT

Although marginal weather prevented normal air coverage, we did have A-1 assistance that morning.

USAF pilot Byron Hukee arrived at Nakhon Phanom in the fall of 1971, and was assigned to the 1 SOS. At the time, there were only twenty-eight A-1 Skyraiders remaining at the base.

Following a check ride supporting government troops in northern Laos, he had been released to fly combat missions as a wingman on 3 December. The mission entailed bombing targets with Mark-82 iron bombs. The only criticism he received from the check pilot was that he needed to "jink" more to avoid potential enemy AAA and small arms fire.

On the 20th, after a two-hour flight from Nakhon Phanom at 120mph to Long Tieng, Byron and his lead pilot rendezvoused with our helicopters. His account of the mission follows:

"The weather was nearly down on the ridgelines so we had to pick our way between the cloud bases and the rocks and keep the



Supply and evacuation of Thai troops from the western Plain of Jars. The Author was probably piloting Papa Hotel Bravo when this photo was taken.

Parker Collection, 119.

choppers in sight. ⁷² *As a wingman, I had to watch my flight lead and cover his six for ground fire.*

The choppers made several shuttles from the hard site to LS-20A...

Following the completion of our escort duties, we struck at one of the enemy positions from which the friendly forces had been receiving incoming mortar and artillery fire. The position was on the top of a small hill on the southwestern perimeter of the PDJ. Since the low cloud cover precluded our normal 30 degree dive bomb attack, we had to use a more shallow dive angle of 20 degrees to keep from going in the clouds...there was a tendency to lower the release altitude to get the bombs on target...[Because of this hazard, A-1 pilots had to be careful not to incur bomb blast damage.] ⁷³

Because of adverse weather and abundance of AAA, except for two Hobo-41 escort Skyraider pilots--which I do not recall seeing--no friendly air was available. ⁷⁴ I suppose the enemy was busy elsewhere, for no one reported receiving groundfire during these shuttles, which incorporated at least three round trips and lasted until 1000 hours, when heavy artillery fire began impacting the area close to our landing zone, making further

⁷² I detest the slang word chopper. The machine should correctly be called a helicopter.

⁷³ Byron E Hukee, *A-1 Skyraider Combat Journal* (Washington: Fruitland Press).

Byron Hukee would continue to support Long Tieng during the 1972 battle for Skyline.

⁷⁴ During the entire day I observed no friendly air or air-delivered explosions. I thought this strange, as we were able to work under the overcast with excellent horizontal visibility. Discounting the ongoing SAR missions funneling air assets away from our theater, it occurred to me that USG had elected to walk away from a situation that leaders were not particularly fond of from the beginning. Moreover, the contingent of White Horse gunship Hueys and crews specifically established to support Thai irregulars on the Plain of Jars and retrieve wounded, was noticeably absent from the battlefield.

evacuations untenable. Until that time, we had evacuated many souls.

By 1140 hours tanks were in position to move on the firebase. Thereafter, the troops were challenged to fend for themselves, moving south toward Ban Na or some other viable rally point.

Customer attention then focused on evacuations from Phou Seu, where wounded and stragglers from Lion, Mustang, and Tom Tom were constantly moving, or gathering more men on their way to temporary respite in Kum Leung Cave, or to friendly Thai positions on Phou Long Mat. Moreover, early morning incoming fire and an infantry attack on BC-610, Bounder Control's FL position at 0200 hours, had created many battalion casualties (nine KIA; twenty-four WIA). Stingray firebase's usefulness was probably extended temporarily by the timely arrival of a Spooky gunship, which inflicted many enemy casualties. But the handwriting was on the wall, and at 0800 the commander of the 610 Battalion assembled all his officers to converse and plan withdrawing from the site. Outnumbered, he could see no reason to pursue a lost fight. He relayed his request to Singha at Long Tieng, but failed to receive an answer.

As intermittent artillery fire landed in the area, BC-603, 607, and 608 battalion troops from Mustang streamed through Phou Seu. This caused quite a stir among the BC-610 troops who had packed their gear and were ready to leave at a moment's notice.⁷⁵

Phou Seu was a fairly large mountain range incorporating two commanding peaks. A "V" shaped lower saddleback ridge between high points was used as a landing zone. Surrounded by higher terrain to the east and west, a small, narrow landing pad

⁷⁵ Hammer's after-action statement, gleaned from Bounder Control (at Foxtrot Lima), who witnessed the fight starting at 18 December until 20 December, when Bounder Control withdrew.

lay in defilade and, except for indirect fire, was generally immune from small arms fire from the Plain of Jars. This did not apply to heavy weapons and AAA fire from the north. For the first time, I had reason to doubt FAG Bounder's word that everything was fine, particularly when everyone was aware that the enemy noose was tightening. Everyone was also mindful that, with other FSBs gone, emphasis was being directed toward Stingray, and it was only a matter of time before the base would be heavily impacted. It was generally believed that the enemy had not yet occupied the southwest corridor below, so, disregarding wind direction and velocity, I began approaches from this sector. To compensate for unknown winds, and to mask my approach from the north, I remained low and slow. Flying close abeam the hill mass, I maintained a high-power setting until the saddle was in sight. Then, almost hovering out of ground effect, I popped up and onto the landing pad. Many troops were anxious to leave, but the pad's 5,000-foot elevation precluded removing excessively heavy loads.

Following the initial evacuation, all normal work was placed on hold pending other field requests. Because the situation was in flux, between medevac missions we shut down to await new developments and direction during the ongoing confusing situation.

CASI Otter pilots Dick Douglas, Al Adolph, and Ed Dearborn were the only fixed wing participants on the Plain of Jars that morning. Working under the same conditions we encountered, they attempted to supply survivors and stragglers from Tom Tom, Mustang, and Lion. Dearborn conducted one drop at Cobra battery, which had not yet been hit as hard as other FSBs. Ed encountered a large quantity of inaccurate small arms fire.

Douglas and Dearborn air dropped at Panther, where the situation was becoming increasingly stressful, as two T-34 tanks

and the 148th Regiment of the 316th Division were spotted at 1140 hours moving rapidly west toward the FSB. Soon afterward, selected units were ordered by Arrow Control at Long Tieng to withdraw and join elements of Mustang en route to Ban Na and Phou Long Mat. ⁷⁶ The order was reiterated for the remainder of the base to withdraw at 1600.

Observing the first units pull out, CASI pilots only conducted air drops until noon, when everything was considered basically lost, except for King Kong battalions. Surrounded, there was little chance of their wholesale escape.

"By 1300 local, our efforts were confined to picking up the wounded and survivors of the fire bases. Most of them were working their way back to LS-15...The majority were shell shocked and most were suffering from wounds, exposure, or shock in one form or another." ⁷⁷

The situation did not yet warrant every man for himself, but lacking air support and continuing to endure enemy pressure, the need to withdraw must have been paramount in every man's mind at the remaining positions.

With incoming impacting BC-606 positions on Phou Keng all night, the battalion, along with experienced FAG Rossini, began withdrawing to King Kong at 0830. By 1000 hours, the enemy was firmly established on top of the mountain, with troops observed dragging heavy weapons up the slopes to fire down on King Kong.

Just before noon, blanket orders to withdraw were issued to most battalion units remaining on the Plain. BC-606 and King

⁷⁶ It often required time to plan, organize, and effect an orderly retreat that might require intense fighting. Sometimes the withdrawal route was blocked by enemy forces, which planned in advance to ambush the columns.

⁷⁷ Bill Leary December 1971 Notes: Ed Dearborn interview. Voice communications between field units, relay, and Task Force Vang Pao-Panther, 12/20/71. Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 326.

Kong units were instructed to move south toward designated rally points at Ban Na, Phou Long Mat, and the cave. Some units had already pulled out, while others, fearing high daytime losses, chose to remain until they could use the cover of dark. King Kong requested ammunition drops and air support to cover a withdrawal, but like all other requests, bad weather precluded the effort. At 1530, Task Force Vang Pao ordered King Kong to exfiltrate. Following this transmission, communication was lost. As of early afternoon, a low ceiling on the Plain still prevented allied air from any kind of participation.

When the Customer requested volunteers to conduct medevacs from Phou Seu, bored from sitting on the ground, I was first in line. Knowing full well that the enemy noose was tightening, I contacted Bounder Control for the latest information regarding enemy disposition. (Unknown to me, pressure on the site was indeed increasing in the form of mortar fire and enemy probes. Moreover, the battalion was packed and ready to withdraw.) The FAG was relatively noncommittal. He indicated that Hardnose was not present. They were surrounded, and were receiving intermittent artillery and mortar fire. Next, I asked him the obvious question, "Were any friendly patrols protecting the flanks?" I had to ask this, but even before the stony silence that followed, I already knew the answer. There would be no assistance or protection from shaky troops, reluctant to move an inch from their tenuous positions.

Apprehensive that a round would strike my ship at any moment created an exciting atmosphere for the approach. Except for considerably tightening my flight pattern and anal sphincter, I employed identical techniques to land as I had that morning. The entire operation was apparently becoming much worse than a deadly game of Russian roulette.

While Chuck Low loaded "wounded" men, I noted expressions of fear and anxiety on the faces of those individuals we left behind. This made me wonder how I looked to them.

As the day wore on, and missions continued intermittently on a selective basis at Phou Seu, I began wondering how long we could continue to successfully land there without experiencing an unfortunate incident. With every landing, I was becoming more apprehensive, and filled with a sense of impending doom. Moreover, a sixth sense, developed at great risk over the years, warned me that something adverse was going to occur before the day ended.

By 1400 hours, Thai radio operators at Long Tieng continued ordering Stingray units to withdraw to various rear rally points. Other troops from Mustang and King Kong had already moved off the Plain of Jars through Phou Seu to Ban Na and Phou Long Mat.

While officers pondered the safest route off the mountain, heavy weapons fire greatly increased, destroying Stingray's entire ammunition stock. Air support was requested, but, as had been the case all day, none materialized.

Cobra troops remained in place, providing a relay station transmitting messages from the field to Long Tieng and back to units. Moreover, Phou Houang became a temporary rally point for many stragglers. Several messages ordered the troops to withdraw. Before noon, a twix specified Site-15, Phou Long Mat and Kum Lueng Cave as safe zones. Later, withdrawal orders recommended a route via Khang Kho. As the only fighting unit still relatively intact, later orders were issued to pull out.

AS YE LIVE BY THE SWORD...

"XW-PHB shot down at UG009325 by ground fire. Crew rescued.

No injuries. Aircraft left at site. ⁷⁸ Oil line was hit."

FIC Tom Sullivan.

Later in the day, with Phou Seu's landing zone essentially unsafe for further evacuations, we were taking an enforced interlude in flying. Just when it appeared that no further work would be forthcoming that day, Chuck Campbell arrived on the ramp and asked if I would search for Thai FAGs who were reported moving south toward rally points. No other information was available as to their status or enemy disposition. Additional reports would have to be obtained through local Forward Air Ground (FAG) reports and our three pairs of eyeballs.

Chuck Campbell was certainly no legendary Tony Poe, but as former Marines, we had bonded and developed reasonably good rapport over the past few years. He knew that I was reliable and would go the extra mile should the situation dictate. Bored from sitting on the deck, and as a means of observing the situation, plus a way to obtain additional flight time, I readily agreed to crank up and look for our men.

En route to the Plain of Jars back door, I noted that the weather had not appreciably changed since morning. The estimated 3,000-foot ceiling still lingered over the Plain, portending early darkness. However, visibility underneath the cloud layer was excellent. From the edge of the Plain, five or more miles north of my position, in the direction where Lion and Mustang had been located, we observed long columns of troops winding west. They certainly were not our men.

⁷⁸ First battle reports are always skewed. The aircraft was recovered within the hour.

I trolled at altitude around Phou Seu's eastern and southeastern sectors, hoping to spot or have stragglers radio that they required transportation back to Long Tieng. During the course of my orbits, I discovered what appeared to be a friendly position (UMT UG0233) located on a low semi-circular ridge about two and a half miles southeast of Phou Seu, not far from the foothills of the southern edge of the Plain.

After a while, Boulder radioed that a group of eight wounded and fatigued Thai FAGs (one might have been Booster) were in the hills below him and required help. At first, I had difficulty understanding exactly where they were located, and attempted to ascertain that this was an authentic request, not some enemy English speaker attempting to suck me into a trap, as had happened to pilots in the past. After several radio exchanges between principals, Boulder insisted that this was a valid evacuation request.

Thinking the men in question might be located in the vicinity of the hill I had recently reconned, I returned to overhead the site, but the person wanting to be extracted radioed, indicating he that could not see me anymore. I then turned 180 degrees and flew about three miles west until he spotted my ship. Now I obtained a visual on the small group. They were plainly in sight, clumped together in the open on a grassy knoll girded by low secondary growth tree lines. Further observation revealed no discernable perimeter defense. It was not a good position from the aspect of a potential enemy ambush. Nevertheless, the talker assured me all was quiet. They were all in bad shape, either wounded or exhausted, and could move no further.

This presented another calculated risk, after we had taken so many that day. By then, other helicopter crews were busy conducting final evacuations from Phou Seu. Before descending, I

told Chuck Low, who had achieved a reputation as an expert and accurate gunner, to be extra diligent during the extraction. Then I radioed a blanket call over the Company VHF frequency apprising other pilots of my intentions. I approached generally on a south to north axis, keeping what I considered might be trouble areas to the front in sight.

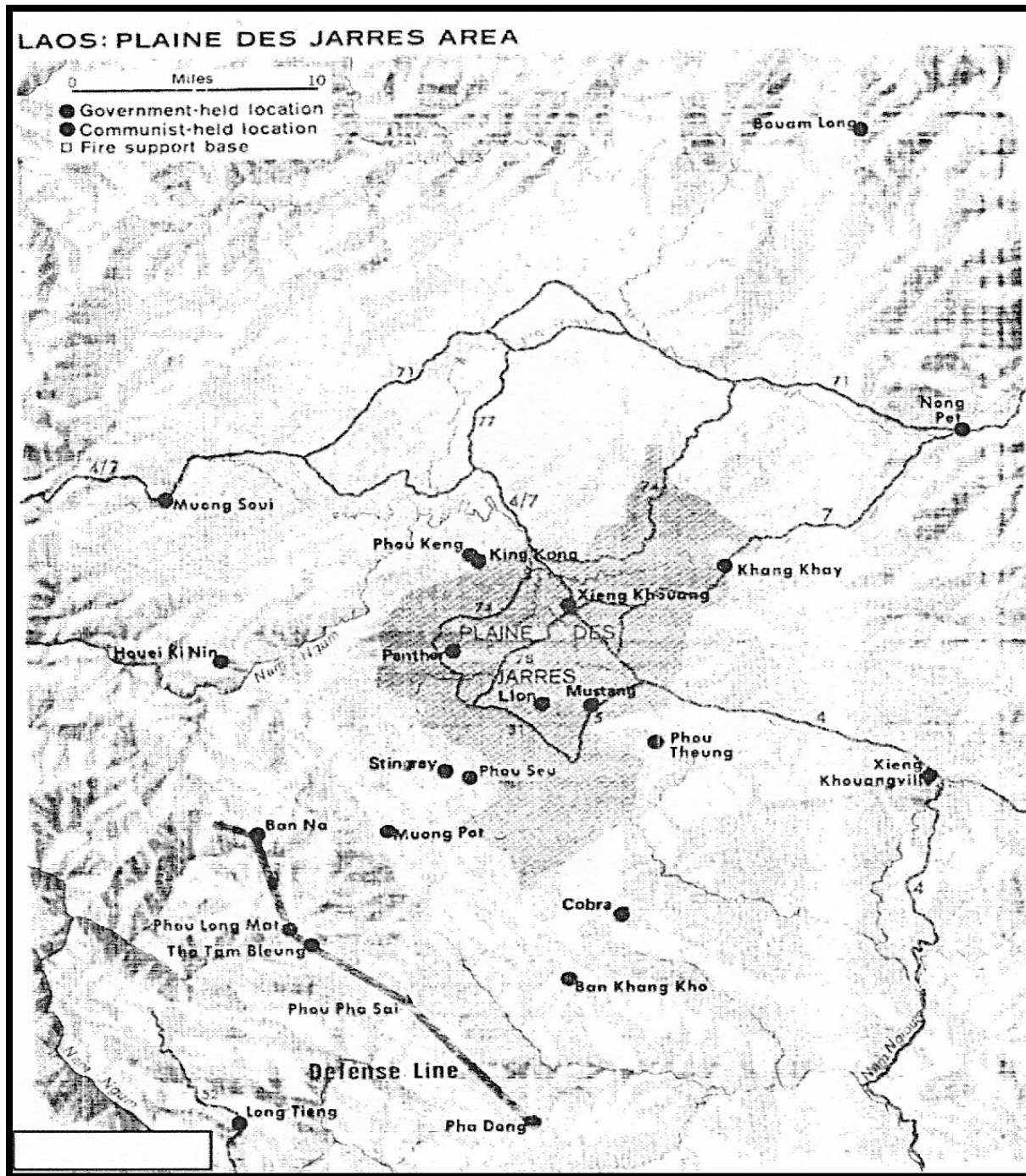
After touching down next to the troops, half the mission was complete. ⁷⁹ As the men began loading, I could see that the FAG had spoken the truth, as almost all of the eight men were smeared with blood; some appeared gut shot. ⁸⁰ Despite their pain and suffering, several men managed to look up at me and smile in gratitude. I noticed the massive gold chains laden with Buddhist images hanging from their necks. It reminded me of Captain Nikki Filippi's gigantic gold chain that his wife Maria had given him for protection.

We were not out of danger yet. We needed to get back in the air immediately and head south. Pulling maximum power, I broke ground, planning to circle the landing zone, gain sufficient altitude, and avoid potential small arms fire before heading south over the foothills toward the Nipple and back door leading to The Alternate.

I was in a right-hand turn, three quarters of the way through my first circling ascent, when loud groundfire erupted. Either the Thai boys had been pursued, or the enemy had prepared a trap. It sounded like several guns were firing. Almost immediately, Chuck began counterfire out the cabin door, trying to match his single Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifle against the

⁷⁹ This thumb rule reflected on my days in the service when it was explained to me that a mission was never fully successful if you did not return.

⁸⁰ This is one reason we liked to work for these men. They invariably had been very truthful in dealing with us, and this influenced me to go all out to help them this day.



XW-PHB was hit by groundfire on the southern Plain of Jars, generally two miles east (to the right) of Phou Seu (Stingray FSB). A Meo site was temporarily located on a low hill a short distance northeast.

CIA Map.

enemy thunder. It was noisy as hell for a few seconds, and then was followed by deafening silence.

The rounds had snapped so close to the ship that I suspected we had been hit, but there was no indication of a problem--yet. In case we needed to land, I continued a right turn, intending to head toward the Meo site I had previously reconed.

Just then, I felt left pressure on the cyclic stick. What now? Were we hit in the control system? Then, almost instantly, the controls were free to my touch. Dick Graham had either consciously or inadvertently momentarily decided that Long Tieng and the cover of trees and hills were to the left, and that was the way to fly to avoid the fire. Fortunately, probably when he felt my control pressure, Dick instantly released the controls.

As always in our business, there was an intangible factor involved while flying with new pilots: you were unaware of how a man would react under the stress of enemy fire. Some of us old timers had been flying, either in the cockpit together, or in adjacent aircraft, for years. Therefore, we generally knew what to expect from each other: mainly who you could rely on and who was suspect. With the advent of permanent First Officers, some probably without any single pilot command experience, a PIC did not know what to expect during tight situations. Granted, there had been little crew briefing before this mission, and no time to discuss the situation once we were fired on, but I temporarily steamed over Dick's suspected action. ⁸¹

⁸¹ In later years, Dick Graham professed no recall of handling the controls at the time mentioned. Unusual things happen during the heat of battle, and selective memory becomes a primary factor after so many years. In retrospect, and in the heat of battle, perhaps I was wrong. Although unlikely, while in a hard-right turn, the cyclic might have contacted his inner right thigh or some other obstruction, but this does not explain the left cyclic pressure.

However, at this juncture I did not have time to pursue this, and had to focus on vacating the hostile area. While maneuvering, my eyes remained glued to the instrument panel for potential signs of trouble. At first all appeared satisfactory. Then the angle gear box oil pressure needle began a slow decrease toward zero. My heart flopped in my chest.

This was not a good development, for of all the emergencies possible in the machine, gear box failures could pose the most severe and worried me the most. There was nothing published pertaining to an angle gear box's reliability. Hence, the durability of this unit remained an unknown quantity. It was universally accepted that the sturdy component was a robust piece of hardware. It had to be. Part of the drive-train, the unit was designed to receive engine horsepower (torque) through the combining-reduction gearbox, and horizontally by a stout driveshaft. After reduced engine power entered the angle gear box, torque was further reduced by heavy gears, and redirected upward to the main transmission, where gears again reduced torque that went to the main rotor system.

When the Twinpacs were first assembled, I had inquired as to the reliability and durability of the new combining and angle gearboxes from Sikorsky technical representative John Kindaybal, and later from Sikorsky technical representative and regional playboy, Archie Loper. Neither one could provide an acceptable answer regarding the endurance of the new components, especially after operating without lubrication. In the case of the angle gearbox, except for saying, *"It was constructed to similar U.S. Navy specifications as the main rotor blade transmission,"* they were not well enough versed on the subject to answer my question and were reluctant to talk about it. (Scuttlebutt indicated that the main transmission was bench tested for twenty to thirty minutes without oil.)

Therefore, I could only logically assume that after a gearbox lost oil and adequate lubrication, turning at high RPM, gears and bearings would become extremely hot from friction and eventually seize. The ensuing stoppage would probably cause shafts to shear and thrash about; no torque would be transmitted to the main rotor transmission and main rotor blades, and an autorotation would be impossible. No one was willing to venture a guess as to how long it would take before a total seizure occurred.

The pressure drop to zero indicated a considerable loss of oil; the amount was moot. Should we attempt to return to Long Tieng and the gearbox fail, our survival would be in question. With no opportunity to disengage the engines from the main transmission and allow the main rotor blades to freewheel, we would plunge to earth like a falling rock, crash, and surely die. Therefore, as in the case of any serious emergency, before a problem escalated beyond control, the only logical action would be to land as soon as possible at the first available safe area.

To alert peers to my plight, I radioed a Mayday call in the blind, and continued east toward the last Meo position on the Plain.⁸² We landed without a problem. A few minutes after I landed, two Huey crews converged on the ridge. While the wounded Thai were being transferred to one Bell for transfer to Long Tieng, Low and Flight Mechanic Ortillo from Captain Jack Knotts' ship, N8512-Foxtrot, began hastily checking Bravo for more serious battle damage. It had to be quick because we were unsure if the position was in range of enemy recoilless rifle, mortar, or even larger caliber weapon fire.

⁸² That was my first and last Mayday call with Air America.

While I was standing tall beside my wounded ship, again considering my mortality, a young Meo officer quietly appeared beside me. He inquired in broken English if I was going to remain long at his position. As we gazed north, speculating about the encroaching hordes of North Vietnamese troops weaving like snakes with impunity across the embattled plain, he indicated that headquarters had ordered him to withdraw, and he intended to move his unit out soon. No Meo soldiers would be at the position in the morning.

Then Chuck walked toward me, holding a partially severed angle gear box oil line. The enemy patrol had peppered us in several places. Low next reported a damaged and leaking aft fuel cell, along with bullet holes in the main rotor blades and fuselage.

Concerned about the planned Meo withdrawal, I was damned if at all humanly possible to avoid, if I was going to leave Bravo on the ground for the enemy to trash. (We only had five machines and each one represented a good portion of our paycheck.)

We would return to The Alternate with Jack to learn if there was another S-58T on the ramp from which we could scavenge an angle gearbox oil line and sufficient transmission oil to fill the component. If the part was available, we would return, effect quick repairs, and ferry Bravo to Long Tieng. The plan was logical and sound, but depended on two important variables: parts availability, and no enemy offensive on the ridge. The latter was problematical, for our ship was sky-lighted on the ridge for all to see.

With daylight fading early because of the pervading overcast, our window of opportunity to act was quite narrow, so Knotts ferried us to Long Tieng at maximum speed.

Just like it had been planned, two beautiful Twinpacs were parked close to the karst on the lower east side of the ramp. I

could have shouted for joy as the two Flight Mechanics scrambled to obtain the proper oil line and a jerry can of transmission oil.

While the frantic activity was underway, I instructed Bob, The Alternate air operations chief, to pass information about what we were planning to both Vientiane and Udorn Operations Managers. Next, I attempted to dissuade Dick Graham from returning to the Plain of Jars with me. Speculating about what awaited us at the site, there was certainly no sense in exposing both of us to potential danger.

Dick refused to comprehend my logic, and insisted on returning to the downed ship with me. At that instant, my respect for the man soared. All thoughts of what I assumed had happened in the cockpit disappeared. Moreover, it never ceased to amaze me what times such as this revealed about people, and that it was never wise to hastily prejudge anyone. Throughout the years of our helicopter program separating men from the boys, there were instances where individuals, who no one ever believed capable of excelling, did so during trying situations.

Captain Knotts deposited us close to Bravo and then returned to an overhead orbit should we require additional assistance. Low and Ortillo went to work immediately, conducting repairs, filling the gearbox with oil, and looking the ship over for additional battle damage that might negate a "safe" ferry flight. In no time we were ready to start the engines and perform a leak check.

After I climbed into the cockpit and prepared to spool up the number one engine, I realized that I might have committed a serious error. In my haste to land the helicopter before something failed, I had forgotten simple basics and landed on a slight nose-up incline (actually there were few level spots on the ridge). We had not been away long, but as gravity drained

fuel aft from the forward tank in this configuration, there might not have been enough fuel remaining in the forward tank to start the engine.

During normal times there was a possibility that fuel could be drained from an aft tank and transferred to the forward cell, but this would require a container and precious time that we did not have. It also presupposed that there was fuel available in one or the other tanks. This was an unknown, for the aft non-self-sealing bladder was punctured and still leaking. The situation could easily develop into another Mike Marshall incident.⁸³

Before electing the fuel transfer option, I attempted a start. Fortunately, my fears were unfounded. The engine wound up like designed. With both power sections on the line, angle gearbox pressure reassuringly within the green arc, sufficient fuel available for the short trip to The Alternate, and a thumb up from Chuck, we were ready to launch. Now all we had to worry about was the gearbox and main rotor blades holding together. I was not particularly concerned about the gearbox. The short time between noticing a drop in pressure and landing was relatively minimal, and residual oil on the gears should have provided sufficient lubrication to prevent internal damage. Still...?

The helicopter entity was looking down on us that day. It was nearly dark when we touched down on the Long Tieng ramp and parked next to the other Twinpacs. Everything had clicked for our team. For once, the ubiquitous Murphy curse was absent. Only one hour had elapsed from the time we landed on the ridge to the recovery completion. I was tired from all the stress, but happy that we had recovered our helicopter from the enemy clutches.

⁸³ For the exciting and extraordinary Marshall incident in upper Military Region Two see, Book Five 1964.

The last C-123 out of town was waiting for us on the runway. While removing my RON gear and bagged AK-47 from the cabin section, I noticed that in the confusion of transferring from our ship to another Bell, some of the Thai boys had left two twenty-four karat gold chains, replete with Buddhist images, on the blood-spattered plywood deck. Wearing several of these images myself while flying upcountry, I assigned good luck to them. I would have liked to add a few more to my collection, but I was not willing to abscond with someone else's religious articles.⁸⁴ The chances of the Thai ever returning to The Alternate were slim to nonexistent. In case they did, however, I carried the articles to the operations shack, explained the situation to the people there, and requested that after a reasonable period, if no one claimed them, they be remanded to me.⁸⁵

My crew had already boarded 54-617, a C-123 "K" model, equipped with jet turbine assist engine pods to enhance the plane's STOL takeoff characteristics. All the red bucket seats lining the cabin were occupied. Apparently, because of rumors of sapper probes and attacks on the valley that night, there was a last-minute rush of all nonessential personnel to "Get out of Dodge." After bumming a long-anticipated cigarette, I flopped

⁸⁴ For years, while flying in Laos, I not only considered the odds of survival during combat situations, but treated the Asian religion with extreme respect. It might be farfetched, but as I have completed this section and talked with my Thai wife, for the first time since the incident, I realize that the items left in the ship might have been left as a token of gratitude for me, sort of a payback for contributing to the men's survival that day. Thai people were like that.

⁸⁵ Within a short time, sappers destroyed the air operations building. As I was on vacation, sick leave, and the action at The Alternate was considered serious when I returned, I never saw the gold chains or Buddhist images again. In retrospect, I should have taken the talismans home and made an attempt to find the owners.

down on some undelivered rice sacks lining the center aisle. Then I caught Chuck Campbell's eye and smiled knowingly as if to say, *"Well I made it back despite the situation."*

An incident smacking of such import required an initial report. The XOXO worked its way through Company channels and evidently merited recognition. The telegram to headquarters read:

"XW-PHB lost angle gearbox oil pressure as a result of battle damage to [an] angle gearbox line. A successful forced landing [was] made at UG009335 where security is poor. [The] crew [was] picked up by N8512F and returned to Long Tieng. [An oil] line [was] removed from PHD which [was] on [the] ground at 20A. Parts and crew returned to [the] forced landing site, accomplished emergency repairs, and returned [to] 20A where it is presently undergoing inspection." ⁸⁶

The following day a message from headquarters Taipei arrived in Udorn:

"Please convey to the crews my appreciation for a job well done in the successful forced landing and recovery of XWPHB. This is yet another in a recent series of similar incidents which could have become major accidents except for the efforts of the flight crew members and maintenance support team involved. [My incident was not unique. Twenty-four aircraft incurred battle damage during December; three were shot down.] It is recognized that the tactical situation in your area is becoming increasingly hazardous, and the continued exceptional performance of both operations and technical services personnel

⁸⁶ Air America XOXO, S-58T XWPHB, John Ford, 12/20/71.

under such conditions is particularly noteworthy. All may take pride in being associated with these accomplishments." ⁸⁷

As I then went on vacation, and the war moved on, I nearly forgot the incident. However, after all the details were revealed regarding the momentous day, over the next few weeks, kudos kept arriving from Company hierarchy:

"Your recent display of professionalism in the successful forced landing and recovery of XW-PHB was indeed outstanding. Your airmanship quite possibly averted a major accident. Such exceptional performance certainly reflects highly on yourself and our company. Please accept my appreciation for your superior performance." ⁸⁸

"It gives me great pleasure to pass on to you the attached letter of commendation. Permit me to add my own 'well done.'" ⁸⁹

THE WITHDRAWAL CONTINUES

As we were in the final stages of Papa Hotel Bravo recovery, with all government resistance generally over, viable Thai units still on the Plain of Jars were either preparing to withdraw or were already in the process of retreating without benefit of Allied air. Unable to breakout out of the enemy cordon earlier, elements of King Kong separated into smaller units and departed their positions at dark. Harassed while withdrawing, they lost men.

⁸⁷ Timely message from the Assistant Vice President of Flight Operations (AVPFO) in Taipei, Taiwan to John Ford CP/RW Udorn, Thailand 12/21/71. Subject: S58T XWPHB Incident 20 December.

⁸⁸ Memorandum/Commendation to the Author via CP/RW and Base Manager from the VPFO, Jim Walker, via the Company President. 01/11/72; received Udorn 01/26/72.

⁸⁹ Memorandum to the Author from John Ford, CP/RW Udorn, 02/27/72.

Every unit had incurred losses and all artillery pieces, except one, were destroyed or damaged. Some medevacs had been accomplished, but no KIAs were retrieved.

Still under artillery attack, the last two units at Stingray (Phou Seu) and Cobra (Phou Houng), the only remaining battalions generally still intact, were ordered by Singha to act as a conduit and waypoint for retreating units until 1600 hours, then pull out, and move to rally points in order to fight another day. Out of the original twenty-four howitzers only one 155mm gun remained. However, every time the tube was fired, the gunnery team sustained accurate 60mm mortar incoming fire and was forced to shut down, making the gun virtually useless. Attacked and mortared, some troops were wounded and killed.

A final meeting was called by the BC-610 commander to discuss the route to safety, a spot to rest, troop assignments, and the placing of rear troops. At 1730, after disabling their weapons, BC-610 began an orderly westerly march. Wearing green uniforms, heavily armed with M-16 rifles, many loaded magazines, and full packs, 444 troops created a line about one kilometer in length. The situation remained normal that night. ⁹⁰

The enemy was protecting its LOC east of Padong Ridge and moving more troops toward Phou Pha Sai. At 2145 hours, Showboat, located southeast of Khang Kho in the hills overlooking the Nam Siam, reported troop-in-contact.

More AAA became active on the Plain and Stinger-22 reported 23mm and 57mm fire from Phong Savan. ⁹¹

⁹⁰ CIA Synopsis, XXCC.
Summary of BC's fighting at Plain of Jars, 18-20 December, DHON, Deputy Commander, Headquarters 333, 12/24/71.
Statement of Hammer's input of Bounder's experience during the loss of the Plain of Jars.

⁹¹ Jim Parker *Timeline*.

THE ENGINEERS

"At a company meeting, our political officer gave us the good news that we had won the initial battle of this campaign. The engineer battalion [the 25th] had completely fulfilled the mission it had been given. The 316th Division had annihilated or dispersed two regiments of Vang Pao's troops and two Thai battalions.

Our company commander briefed us on our new mission: to move out immediately for Nam Siam [Siam] to build a supply and movement road for our artillery and tanks to use to attack Sam Tong-Long Tieng."

The Meo commanding officer at my hilltop forced landing spot had been correct. Like Swiss cheese, the enemy moved uncontested through this area that night, and our helicopter would not have been recoverable on the 21st.

"Last night the [3rd] Company marched through Ban Phon [located at the southern end of the Nipple that marked the back door to the PDJ. Native trails proliferated in this area.] and then established quarters in a cave about half-way up a mountain side from which it would carry out its mission. Nestled in between the rocky mountain [containing] the cave the 2nd Company was located. [Beyond] a lower ridge the Nam Siam Stream was located...During the dry season there was no [flowing] water and so the Nam Siam streambed was like a road lined with rocks. The streambed was relatively flat and easy to cross except for a few places where large boulders lay in the middle of the streambed.

Standing in the entrance to the cave, on the right-hand side, going upstream, was Loa Ken Cave. More than a kilometer from the cave entrance, on the left-hand side, was a road that was being built as a shortcut to [Ban] Hintang. The place where the road crossed the streambed was called the Nam Siam Ford...from the peak of the mountain in which Loa Ken Cave was

located to the Nam Siam Ford and as far as the eye could see, the area was covered with thick green vegetation, like a forest carpet that completely concealed the streambed.

Because the new road had only reached Nam Siam..., the ammunition, rice, and supplies sent forward had to be collected and stored in rock caves and grottos near the ford, so this area was called the Nam Siam warehouse area." ⁹²

TUESDAY

The day after my harrowing experience on the southern Plain of Jars, I reported to operations at 1030. The intent was to return to The Alternate with a Flight Mechanic, a maintenance team, and sufficient parts to repair Bravo and ferry the ship south to Udorn. Along with blades and toolboxes, we boarded 54-617.

The weather front still lingered in the region, which did not allow fixed wing landings at Long Tieng. Therefore, the PIC of the C-123 returned to Wattay Airport, where we ate lunch at the Air America restaurant and waited for weather improvement. Because of a reasonable threat of enemy incursion into the valley, there was urgency to fly helicopters out. By the time the weather cleared enough to allow fixed wing crews to work under marginal conditions, it was too late to effect repairs, so we returned to Udorn.

"The communist offensive was larger in scope and better coordinated than in the past. It was not confined to the PDJ; to the west Moung Soui fell [on the 21st] and Deuane dissident neutralists overran several RLG positions...in west Xieng

⁹² Xuandao's diary account of observation and activity during 20 and 21 December 1971.

Khouang Province and the east Luang Prabang Province border region." ⁹³

At 0545 hours, Pa In from the Stingray unit reported seven artillery personnel from Mustang were part of the column, and that Boon Plode was seriously wounded. Other men who came from BC-607 were Kuntha, Mathar, Sakchai, Pundes, and Sakol. FAGs from Panther were close behind with troops from Panther. They were en route to Ban Na and would soon require resupply. ⁹⁴

BC-610 troops, consisting of FAGs Office, Whip (Amnuay), Wild Bill (Wiboon Suwanawong), Hammer (Sangar), and Catfish, continued moving west at 0700 hours without encountering enemy contact. Continuous rains that soaked uniforms and equipment created miserable hiking conditions.

It appeared that Ban Na was doomed. As part of the overall offensive to clear government forces from the area, after taking Phou Keng, the 174th Regiment moved south-southwest toward the friendly rally point at Site-15. Investing the area by the evening of the 21st, enemy forces overwhelmed Hill-1663 and began firing on Ban Na. Over the next three days, morale-challenged Thai troops already at the site, and others withdrawing from the Plain of Jars, moved on toward Sam Tong. ⁹⁵

At 1700, the BC-604 unit from the abandoned Cobra base encountered TIC between four and five miles west of Phou Seu. The radio operator reported weather was still not suitable for

⁹³ CIA Synopsis, XXCC. North Vietnamese Army history recorded that on 19 December Lao troops attacked and gained control of Moung Soui. During the days that followed, Lao forces continued the attack by advancing to Moung Phin, Sala Phu Khoun, and Moung Kassy.

⁹⁴ TF Vang Pao NR 5272, 12/22/71, Situation report for withdrawing units.

⁹⁵ Ken Conboy, 327.

air support. That was the end of radio contact until the following day. ⁹⁶

The enemy presence was everywhere creating diversions. At 1933, FAG Parka, located two miles northeast of Long Tieng, reported a TIC near his position. Spooky-01 and Spooky-08 supported him from 0015 to 0155 hours. Falcon-86 reported a suspected radar van on Route-71 south of the Route-72 junction. Stinger-25 reported numerous 37mm rounds fired from three guns in the Phong Savan area. Strike aircraft damaged one truck during the night. ⁹⁷

Sappers, possibly the same unit that initially engaged Stingray from the south, probed Long Tieng with heavy weapons from the direction of the King's villa at 2130. Task Force Vang Pao requested that Alleycat provide illumination flares, but this was not possible, for a MiG reportedly overflew the Plain. Five probes and infiltration teams continued to harass the valley until 0310, when the attack was broken. Friendly fire and illumination flares dropped by a Lao C-47 pilot temporarily discouraged the enemy commandos, but they continued returning to the fray.

Major Jesse Scott provided an eyewitness report:

"...they pinned us down in our compound, or they succeeded in getting through our perimeter defenses and into the valley and got a sapper team up to the T-28s. [At the time] I had ten T-28s and six O-1s on the ground. We had dispersed the O-1s as best we could, [but] there was no place to disperse the T-28s...[parking ramps had been established on both sides of the runway.] As it worked out, we played into their hands...We had

⁹⁶ Task Force Vang Pao NR 5372-DPEP/SOPONE 12/22/71, The situation report of Task Force Vang Pao unit between 211800-220600 Dec 71: Communication with the withdrawing units..

⁹⁷ Jim Parker *Timeline*.

10 to 13-year-old Meo guards, but the [sappers] succeeded in blowing up two O-1s and damaging a third airplane. They killed one of my Lao mechanics and then pinned us down in our compound with B-40 rocket fire.

[No T-28s parked on the ramp opposite the O-1s were destroyed or damaged.] One [sapper] was killed at the T-28s...by the time I got there, a couple of my pilots were already out and they had taken some buckets and drained some gas out of the T-28 and were going to cremate the individual right there on the spot. There were three sappers killed [by the Meo youngsters]...They...mutilated one body...[and] were draining gas...to burn the other one. [Fearful of the flames igniting the T-28s, Scott managed to dissuade them of their intent.]

Once again, the weather was bad, about 300 feet overcast and [there] was no way to [obtain] any air support...We did get a message out [to Cricket] saying that we were under attack and then the radio operator had to shut down.

One Lao AC-47 was successful in dropping some flares into the valley. I don't understand how [the pilot] did it...maybe he [recognized] a couple of peaks...

As a result of [the attack] the decision was made to move all the Americans out. I did get permission to stay [overnight at Long Tieng] the next night...Vang Pao didn't feel that our compound was secure in view of what had had happened the previous night, so he asked us [three Americans] to come down and live at his house which was more secure.

The next evening [we] pulled out and went to shuttling [to Long Tieng]." ⁹⁸

⁹⁸ USAF Oral History, AOC Jesse Scott. 78-80.
Task Force Vang Pao NR 5372, Long Tieng area.

"PDJ, L-108, and all airstrips have either fallen into enemy hands or are unusable. Sam Tong is still friendly, with a small number of security troops there.

Aircraft 52-Lima took two small arms hits in the left wing [three miles west of Moug Phan] at TG925500. XW-PHF took 37mm burst at TG930440 [near Ban Khong west side just off the PDJ]; no damage to the aircraft.

LS-15 and LS-72 remain in friendly hands and are centers of rally and resupply. Enemy concentrations mostly three miles east of [Site]-20A.

[Morale: About 800 troops abandoned the base at Ban Na without a fight on 25 December and some of the irregulars suffered moderate casualties as they filtered southward...Because Ban Na commands infiltration routes into the Sam Tong and Long Tieng area, it has figured prominently into the last two communist campaigns. If the communists are able to move into Ban Na in strength before the irregulars reoccupy it, they will have gained a major tactical advantage at little cost. ⁹⁹]

20A under attack between 2030 21st and 0630 22nd; enemy withdrew. 20A hit by rockets and mortars 0300-0500 on the 21st. Enemy sapper attack 0300-0500 on the 21st destroyed two O-1Fs and minor damage to two O-1Fs. Three enemy soldiers KIA. Refugee evacuation took place throughout daylight hours on 21/22 December, with majority of refugees evacuated by PM 22nd.

At this time there is no accurate estimate of enemy strength or equipment available. Report of PT-76 tanks (total unknown) and field guns larger than 100mm in caliber have been observed by recon. The movement appears toward the southern PDJ using inclement weather conditions to maximum advantage. Air

⁹⁹ CIA Bulletin, Laos: The situation in the Long Tieng area, 12/27/71.

activities on 21 December were curtailed due to low ceilings and visibility." ¹⁰⁰

The large Thai column withdrawing slowly from Phou Seu made little progress on the 22nd. They were very tired and without food, as the weather remained zero-zero in their area. ¹⁰¹

"Weather improved late AM 22nd and air operations resumed normal operations. FIC/20A will continue to function until station becomes untenable as declared by customer. Crews now receive general local briefing which changes constantly by the hour." ¹⁰²

Requests were issued to other military regions for troops to fill defensive gaps created by Plain of Jars requirements. When weather permitted, GM-31 from Savannakhet began arriving by Air America airlift to help reinforce the Vang Pao Line. These men were then heli-lifted to positions stretching from the Ngum River to Site-72.¹⁰³

Other defensive means were underway:

"The Lao government is continuing efforts to rally forces to defend Long Tieng. Six 155, six 105mm, and six 75mm howitzers are being moved to Long Tieng ASAP." ¹⁰⁴

[Eleven new guns, and crews to man them, arrived on the 27 and 28th; twenty-five additional guns were on the way. Thunder battery, crewed by both Thai and Meo, was established near the King's villa. Samson and Candle were erected in the same area. This area had a road network from the valley floor to effect

¹⁰⁰ Bill Leary 1971 Notes: Sullivan, 20A, to FIC Udorn/Vientiane. During the fog of war, as always, some facts were skewed, but most were correct.

¹⁰¹ FAG Hammer's Statement.

¹⁰² Bill Leary 1971 Notes: Tom Sullivan report to FIC Vientiane and UTH.

¹⁰³ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 327.

¹⁰⁴ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/22/71.

timely delivery of ammunition and not rely on helicopter delivery. ^{105]}

ENEMY CROWING

"After the first days of our offensive, our forces had won a great victory because we had taken maximum advantage of the element of surprise. Our units continued the pursuit, ambushing, surrounding, hunting down, and killing or capturing more than a thousand enemy troops. Because of this annihilation of the enemy's forces, on the night of 22 December the Campaign headquarters unanimously concluded that all sectors and all units had accomplished their assigned missions in an outstanding manner. At the same time the headquarters decided to bring Phase 1 of the offensive to an end.

From 22 to 30 December the Campaign Headquarters realigned its forces, assigned new missions to units, and continued to prepare roads and to prepare the necessary supplies and logistics support to support the next wave of attacks." ¹⁰⁶

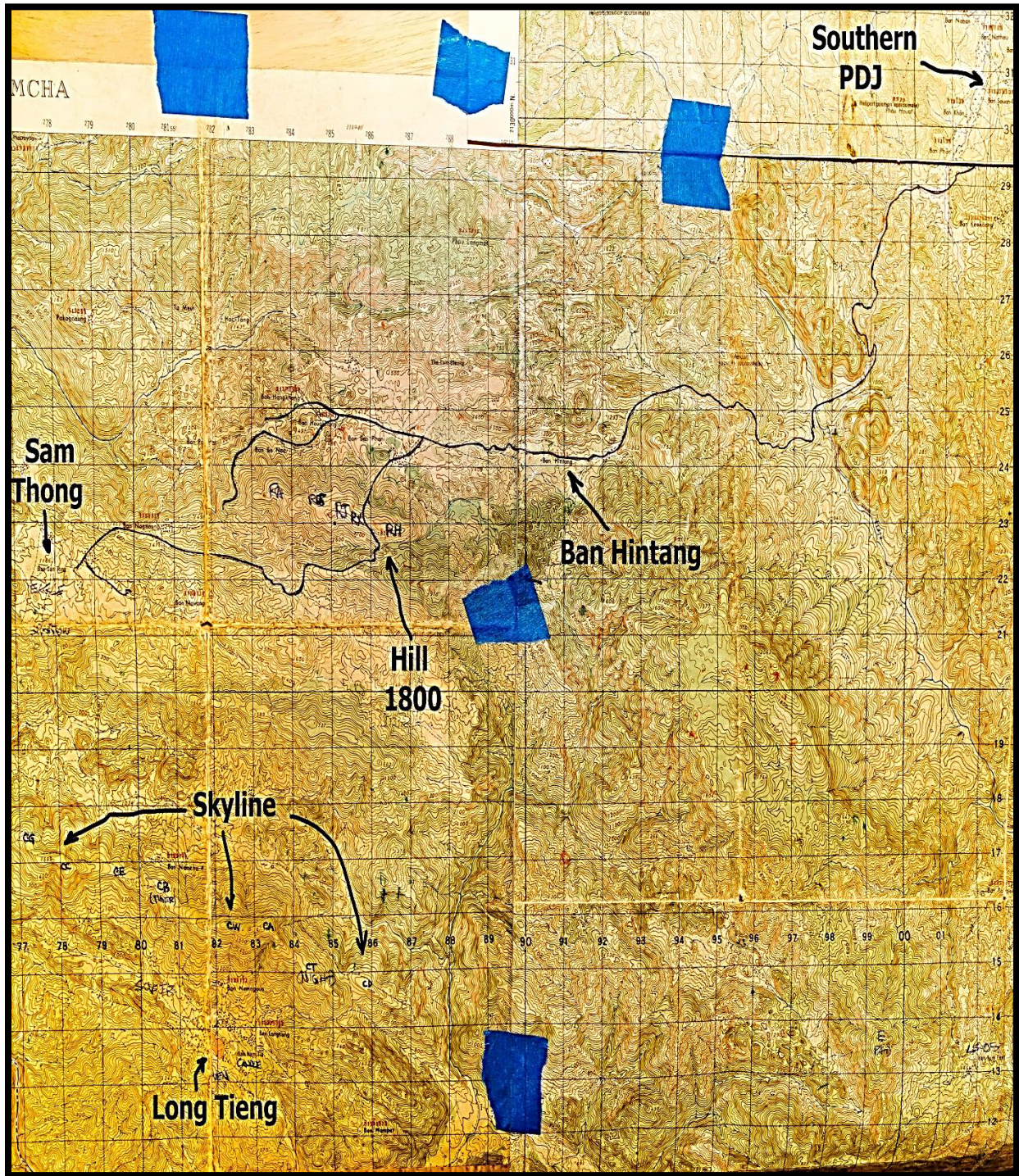
ENGINEERS

"Today we began work on the road [to Sam Tong]. The road had already taken shape from Ban Phon [southern portion of the Nipple] up to the Nam Siam Ford. 2nd Company was responsible for the pass leading down to the Nam Siam [Siem from the map] Ford. Since the route over the pass had been built by 7th Battalion/209th Regiment during the period it was serving as the campaign reserve force, the pass was named the D-7 pass. We took over responsibility for the pass and strengthened and improved the road over the pass to prepare the way for the supply trucks,

¹⁰⁵ Ken Conboy, 328.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 438.

¹⁰⁶ North Vietnamese History.



A mosaic of three taped 1:50,000 maps showing the approximate alignment of Vietnamese Route-54 leading from the "nipple" on the southern Plain of Jars to Sam Tong. The Nam Siem Ford is located to upper left. For siege purposes the road was completed in early 1972.

Former Raven pilot Steve Wilson.

tanks, and artillery to move forward to the inner line during the Phase 2 attack. The enemy knew about the road but since they were fighting to hold their ground out in the Plain of Jars the enemy temporarily left the new road alone...since we had not yet begun to use it for transportation purposes, the road had not yet been hit by enemy bombs. Because of this, we engineers were able to work freely and without concern all night building the road." ¹⁰⁷

THURSDAY

Political ramifications:

"Prime Minister Souvanna appears to be in no mood to make concessions to the communists despite the reversals suffered by government forces on the Plaine des Jarres.

On 21 December Souvanna received another tough letter from Lao communist leader Souphanouvong [his half-brother]. The letter allegedly was drafted on 16 December, just before the North Vietnamese offensive on the Plaine was launched. Souphanouvong promised bitter defeats would be forthcoming--both in the Plaine and in south Laos--if the government did not accept the communist demand for a complete bombing halt. The Soviet ambassador in Vientiane also urged Souvanna to accede to the demands.

Souvanna firmly rejected any bombing halt without 'matching concessions' and adequate guarantees from the communist side--both of which are unlikely while the enemy offensive is in full swing. The prime minister instead asserted that Laos would defend itself with all available means, and he repeatedly stressed to U.S. Embassy officers the need for increased U.S. air support.

¹⁰⁷ Xuandao diary for 22 December.

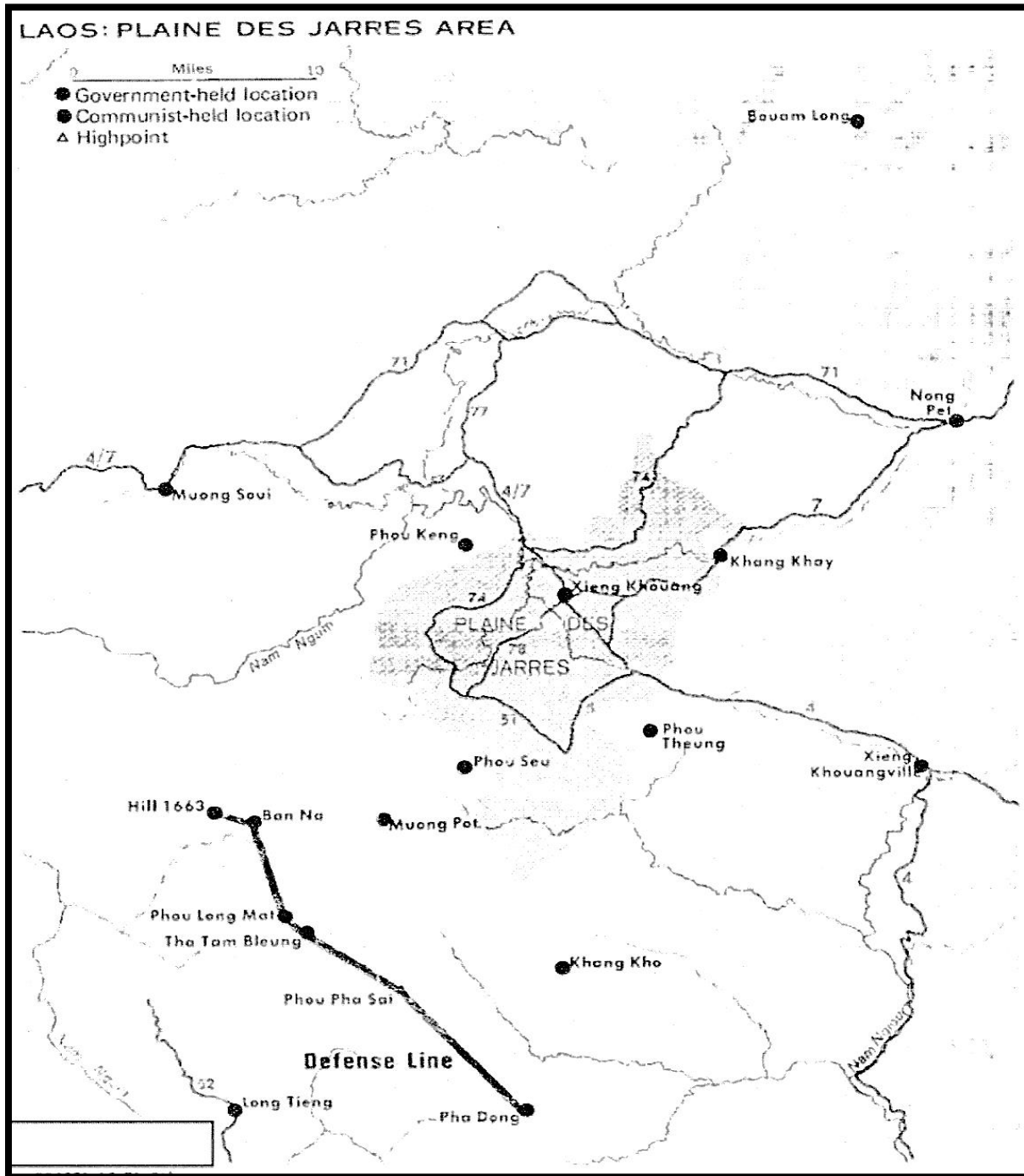
The communists probably have little expectation that Souvanna will capitulate to their demands at this time. The letter is designed in part to provide a justification for their present offensive. Souvanna has never shown himself willing to bow to communist military pressure in the past and this seems to be the case in this instance. Despite the military reverses, a tough line by Souvanna will probably be supported by most of the powerful figures in the country. In past years, battlefield setbacks have led to rightist criticism of Souvanna's policy of neutrality rather than of his refusal to be more conciliatory in his dealings with the communists."

Military:

"The tactical situation has changed little during the past 24 hours. Irregular units retreating from the Plaine are beginning to regroup along the proposed defense line between Ban Na and [Padong]. Meo civilians have withdrawn from Long Tieng Valley and are moving south toward refugee centers. There is no evidence of panic among the people or the troops.

It is not clear how far the North Vietnamese have penetrated south and west of the Plaine. The communists may intend to move against Ban Na, which was the focal point of their offensive last dry season. Bad weather has hindered aerial reconnaissance, and the irregular troops are not yet well enough reorganized for reconnaissance patrolling. The [NVA] may be regrouping and resupplying their forces, but they appear to have kept at least two of their eight infantry regiments in reserve and probably would have fresh troops available if they want to move westward quickly..."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/23/71.



23 December CIA map showing government troop pre-planned fallback points at Mung Pot, Khang Kho, Ban Na, and the Vang Pao Line.

The main force of the BC-610 battalion from Phou Seu was still making slow progress toward Mounng Pot (Hill-5456, five miles northeast of Site-72), when a man was spotted defecating on the trail. No fire was exchanged at this time out of concern that the man was a friendly trooper. Then twenty enemy troops emerged from the woods demanding in Meo and Thai languages that the men disarm. During the shootout, heavy AK-47 and M-16 fire ensued, resulting in two friendly KIA and five WIA. After ten enemy soldiers were killed and six wounded during the exchange, the remainder fled toward a cave.

In order to be more flexible, the Thai separated into two groups. Office, Wild Bill, and Catfish accompanied battalion headquarters. Whip and Hammer went with the troops. All were without gear. The two groups rallied at a predetermined point in the afternoon before proceeding to separate locations.

O-1F pilots, Raven 23, 24, and 29 scouted the area and helped direct T-28 pilots unload on enemy positions. Throughout the day, helicopter crews arrived to evacuate wounded and sick men to Long Tieng.

Since the men were very tired and discouraged, BC-610 only made further progress of one kilometer before stopping for the night. ¹⁰⁹

"...the general drove over to my [AOC] building...pointed to a [densely wooded] karst in the eastern portion of the valley and said there was a 130mm gun forward artillery observer group in the karst who will direct fire for the 130mm weapon.

Major Scott questioned [the man] how he knew this. 'Well, some of my troops have seen footprints and saw them leading up into the karst. It's very important that we bomb it with the T-

¹⁰⁹ FAG Hammer Statement for 12/23/71.

28s.'" [Vang Pao was a very intuitive individual who relied heavily on his gut feelings.]

On the basis of Vang Pao's information, napalm and CBU were dropped on the karst. Vang Pao was spot on. On the 27th, after scaling the karst, Meo patrols discovered a map of the valley with marked offensive routes. Also, a Chinese artillery sighting device, depression tables were found.¹¹⁰

Flight Mechanic Phil Velasquez, a second pilot, and I crewed Papa Hotel Alpha to The Alternate. During the ten-hour flying day, conducting three Special Missions, and forty sorties, we positioned troops to forward positions, retrieved stragglers and wounded, and delivered them to the overflowing hospital for emergency treatment.

During the course of the day, I observed T-28 pilots take off, turn left, drop ordnance on an eastern karst inside the valley, and return to the airstrip within minutes. Naturally, I wondered as to the purpose. At day's end, before we departed for Udorn, the white limestone face of the karst was exposed, charred, and still smoking. That ended my 1971 upcountry flying. For the rest of December, I enjoyed STO in southern Thailand.

That night Lulu situated west of Ban Na, reported the loss of his position, with five men wounded during the 2045 attack.

Office, Jackhammer, Whip, and Wild Bill were last reported nearing Mounng Pang east northeast of Ban Na. The men were without food, had many casualties, and were being pursued.

Uptight-19 reported 23mm fire from Tha Lin Noi (LS-18). Gunship Stinger-26 reported hundreds of 37mm and 23mm AAA

¹¹⁰ Jesse Scott, 75.
Ken Conboy, 328.

projectiles during the night. Air strikes destroyed four trucks and damaged eight others. ¹¹¹

VIETNAMESE ENGINEERS

"This afternoon, after some OV-10s began circling overhead, we moved up to stay right next to the road. Tonight truck [drivers] will transport supplies into the Nam Siam area. The mission of us engineers is to maintain and repair the road and to escort the trucks as they drive down to the ford, deliver their goods, and then return [to Ban Phon before morning]. In order to preserve secrecy and deceive the enemy, when the trucks leave we engineers have to erase all traces of their tire tracks.

At 1000 [hours], more than 10 truck [crews] transporting ammunition, and rice drove down from the pass. Accompanying them were two C-100 bulldozers from the Front headquarters, assigned to help build the road to Hintang. Sometime after 0100, the truck convoy left..." ¹¹²

FRIDAY

BC-610 walked to Moung Pot. At the base of the hill mass, they observed seven enemy troops around the entrance of their cave. The FAG contacted Raven-24 and requested airstrikes. Results were unknown. After this, the men continued around Moung Pot...They slept from 0200 until 0700 on the 25th. ¹¹³

It did not require only enemy action to create havoc.

"20A, LS-32, LS-63 areas [relatively] quiet overnight.

¹¹¹ Jim Parker Timeline for 23 December.

¹¹² Comrade Xuandao's diary for 23 December 1971.

¹¹³ FAG Hammer Statement for 12/24/71.

Two [Air America] aircraft (613 and 97X) destroyed at 20A when [the pilot of 97X] struck a fuel drum with the propeller. No injuries, but both aircraft totally destroyed.

1,300 new troops at LS-20A to be deployed throughout the area." ¹¹⁴

"After the PIC of Porter N197X had been briefed by the customer, he taxied out between two parked C-123s. As he swung slightly to the right for better vision, the propeller struck a sealed drum of JP-1 fuel which had been off loaded from a C-123. The burst drum ignited almost instantaneously and the PIC evacuated the Porter immediately through the cargo door. The burning aircraft, due to the slope of the ramp, rolled tail first into the right rear side of 54613 which was about to be off loaded. The burning Porter plus the burning JP-1 flowing down slope under the C-123K caused the latter to start burning. The PIC and First Officer in the cockpit and the AFD in the cabin evacuated via the rear door...The PIC of C-123K sustained slight scratches on his hand and knees when he fell to the ground after evacuating the aircraft." ¹¹⁵

Action increased on Christmas Eve. South of Ban Na, Hot Plate reported a ground assault on his position at 2010. In the hills north of Site-72, Small Man (Python) reported an attack on his position at 2255. Tom Tom, located west of LS-72, reported a ground attack on his position at 2325.

To the east, in the vicinity of Phou Pha Sai, Tiger Mobile reported 60mm and 82mm mortar fire to Cricket during the day. T-

¹¹⁴ Bill Leary December 1971 Notes: Tom Sullivan, 20A to FIC Udorn and Vientiane, reports for 1700/23 Dec.-1700/24 Dec.

¹¹⁵ Bill Leary December 1971 Notes.
Air America XOXO.

Joe Leeker-account is slightly different, stating the Porter propeller contacted a large rubber fuel blivet.

28 pilots supported the position. At 0200 hours the FAG reported a ground attack on his position. ¹¹⁶

CHRISTMAS DAY

At home Rick and Pete enjoyed a good Christmas and we all had a lot of fun. Having just experienced a stressful incident on the 20th, it meant a lot to me to be alive, uninjured, and with my family. The children did not have much time to play with their toys, for I had two weeks off (back-to-back STO) and we had purchased tickets on the overnight train the next day for Bangkok. During this trip we intended to tour southwest Thailand including the island of Penang.

"...All is well. We are departing tonight on the train and will try to get to Penang. [Perhaps as a compassionate gesture, I was allowed my first back-to-back STO in a long time. All of us were going to visit Songkla and "Uncle" Cha's family in Pattani.]

You have probably been reading that the PDJ fell to the commies. Well, I was right there in the middle of it. I managed to get shot down for the first time. Nothing serious as they [hit] one of my oil lines. We went back [to Long Tieng] and replaced it and flew it out. Another atta-boy for the kid! Things look grim now and I'm glad that I have two weeks off. I knew this was coming so wasn't surprised. Actually, I was not surprised that I was shot down either. It is probably this sixth sense that we have developed over here that keeps us alive..."

Letter Home, 12/26/71.

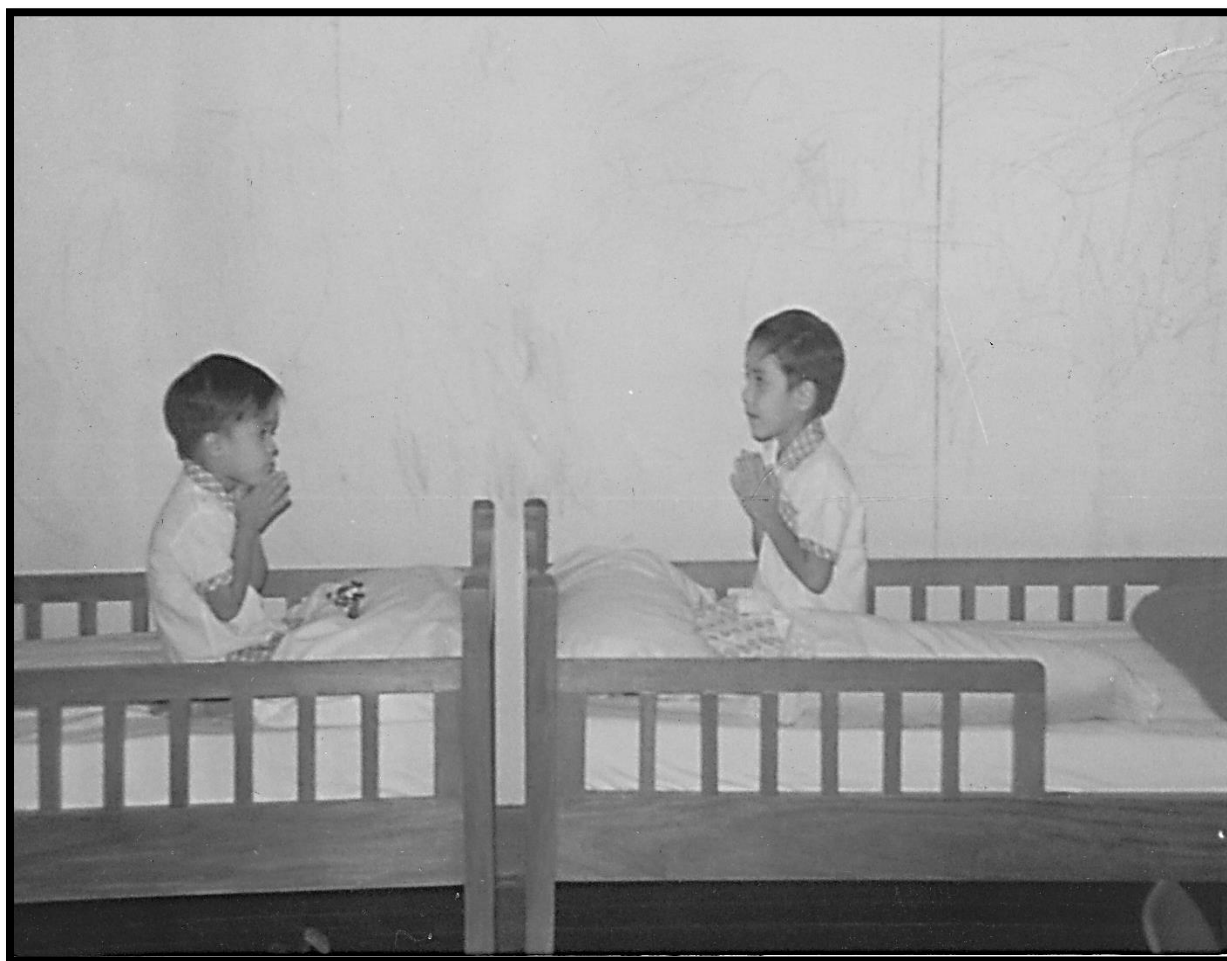
"Sorry to hear the commies retook the Plain after all the hard work to keep them out. Today's account in the paper said

¹¹⁶ Jim Parker *Timeline* for 24 December.



Rick and Pete singing a carol, while climbing the stairs for bed on Christmas Eve.

Author Collection.



Children's prayers prior to sleep.
Author Collection.

the Royal forces have chased them off some hill and intend to keep them off.

Nixon is withdrawing more of our troops next month and this news certainly must give comfort to the enemy."

Letter from Home, 01/16/72.

"The dirty bastards shot me down for the first time ever. It really wasn't any problem as I had a place to go [the only remaining site]. We are really getting our asses waxed presently and are praying for rain to slow their advance [we were getting some, but it was hampering our own air too]. The Stateside coverage has increased on the business over here, so I suppose you know much of what is going on."

Letter to Tex McGill in Steamboat Springs, Colorado.

MR-2

Of course, the war did not stop because of a Western holiday. At 0815 hours, a mean-spirited Santa abruptly arrived at Long Tieng, not in a reindeer driven sleigh, but in the form of five 107mm rockets. Except for holes in the ground, no other damage was noted. ¹¹⁷

It was not pleasant upcountry for Thai men en route to safety from Phou Seu. BC-610 encountered incoming fire and observed enemy presence that resulted in two KIA and ten WIAs. The enemy fired when planes airdropped supplies. The next day the unit arrived at Phou Long Mat. ¹¹⁸

At 1843 for the second time in two days, Lulu, at a position in the hills west of Site-72, was ejected by attacking enemy.

¹¹⁷ Sullivan-FIC 1700/24-1700/25.

¹¹⁸ Hammer Statement for 12/25/71 and 12/26/71.

South of Bouam Long, Bad Man was supported by Stinger-26 from 1900 to 1945. Hot Plate reported a ground attack. ¹¹⁹

ENGINEERS

"We have had two quiet, peaceful nights. This morning L-19 and OV-10 aircraft began flying overhead, more than they have done during the previous days, circling back and forth over the road. Perhaps the enemy reconnaissance teams and the aircraft have caught the scent of the presence of this dangerous transportation and supply road.

Tonight, we engineers have an especially important mission—to support the movement of the 130mm guns into firing positions at Nam Siam.

The artillery [unit] has moved its [guns] into its firing positions in caves right at the base of the mountain, below the cave where 2nd Company is quartered. This is scary—we could easily end up getting hit by attack that is aimed at the artillery guns." ¹²⁰

SUNDAY

Apparently, even though it was not mentioned publicly, the loss of the Plain of Jars and other enemy violations struck a nerve in the Nixon Administration. The day after Christmas, and continuing for five days, in the largest escalation of the air war since November 1968, U.S. assets began striking communist airfields, missile sites, AAA emplacements, and supply depots. Many reasons for retaliation were cited, but all were related to

¹¹⁹ Jim Parker *Timeline* for 25 December.

¹²⁰ Xuandao diary for 25-26 December 1971.

South Vietnam (officials were still generally reluctant to reveal the extent of the air mission in Laos).¹²¹

Cobra, on Romeo Ridge overlooking the Ban Hintang Valley, reported incoming 82mm mortar fire. To the north of LS-72 Hacksaw (Phichest) reported 82mm mortar fire. Raven FACs supported an attack by fire for Bad Man at LS-32.¹²²

ANOTHER BAD DAY ON THE PDJ

From 25 to 27 December H-34, Bell, and Twinpac crews conducted evacuation missions for Thai personnel departing the Plain of Jars. As the enemy controlled a great portion of the Plain and was patrolling the escape routes, the operation was quite hazardous.

As on the 20th, much emphasis was accorded to retrieving FAGs. Since the FAG radio operators worked for Mike Ingham (Hardnose), he felt responsible for their welfare, and, weather permitting, spent all his time in fixed wing aircraft looking for them. Paramount in his search was finding Rossini from the Panther/King Kong area, who had withdrawn during the cover of darkness on the 20th. Rossini was embedded with King Kong FSB and infantry units. At dawn they were detected and had lost several men to enemy fire. After evading for five days, Alleycat was eventually contacted and the information passed to The Alternate.

During the course of several searches, Hardnose discovered Rossini and the group of command officers moving along a riverbed. Envisioning a rescue attempt, he returned to Long Tieng to organize and mount a mission of seven mixed helicopter crews.

¹²¹ John Bowman, *Almanac*, 294.

¹²² Jim Parker *Timeline* for 26 December.

To show the way, Mike accompanied Captain Brian Johnson in an S-58T. Crewing the most powerful ship, and as senior pilot, Johnson was the designated leader. Brian elected to assume SAR duty. After making positive radio contact and identification with the troops, helicopter crews landed in sequence to extract the happy men.

The mission was considered successful. The armada was on the way back to The Alternate when someone spotted smoke from a grenade wafting up from trees. Without positive contact it would be risky to investigate, but all efforts were being devoted to finding and extracting Thai who were continuing to flee the Plain. Therefore, *"it was not unusual to have them try whatever means they had at their disposal to flag down the aircraft that were looking for them."* Since Johnson's aircraft was empty, and nothing could be seen from altitude, he elected to descend to 500 feet and investigate.

Captains Joe Lopes (DOH 06/11/68) and Fred Fram, and Flight Mechanic Fred Alor (DOH 09/13/68) had been upcountry in an H-34 participating in search and rescue attempts since the 25th. Remaining 500 feet above Brian, Joe also descended. After leveling off, ground fire began, striking one S-58T power section and rendering it useless. Another round hit a main rotor blade spar of the H-34.

Although all onboard the Twinpac heard the noise, the Flight Mechanic radioed that he believed the sound emanated from the open cabin door banging against the fuselage. Shortly afterward Johnson announced "Oh Shit," the pilot standard exclamation reserved for times of dire trouble. *"Now we will find out whether these things fly on one engine."* Of course, as designed by Sikorsky engineers, and as long as airspeed was maintained, flight was possible. Maintaining limited torque and

reduced power, flight continued through valleys and hills to Long Tieng. ¹²³

C-123K-6293 IN MR-1

On the morning of 27 December, the crew of Captain George L. Ritter, Captain Roy F. Townley, Kicker Ed Weissenback, and Kicker Khamphang Saysongkham departed Wattay Airport for Udorn. There the C-123 was loaded with rice and other supplies for Ban Xieng Lom [LS-69A] in Luang Prabang Province.

En route, radio calls were made to Company radio facilities at course changes over Sayaboury (LS-23) and Hong Sa (LS-62A). The latter was the final communication from the crew.

Search and rescue operations ensued for several days without sighting. The men were subsequently declared missing in action (MIA).

The following day Captain HH Boyles, First Officer DE Morris, Kicker D Stone, Kicker P Sumanin, the crew of C-123K 545 received battle damage northeast of Xieng Lom while searching for Ritter and crew. The plane was heavily damaged with hits to the windscreen, right elevator, right wing leading edge, hydraulic lines, and the cargo door.

Hostility continued in the area. On the same day, while flying a medevac near Xieng Lom (LS-274/69B), Captain Dan Carson, Flight Officer Ron Zappardino, and Flight Mechanic Bobby

¹²³ Ken Conboy, 326.

Bill Leary December 1971 Notes: Interview with Mike Ingham.

Bill Leary December 1971 Notes: Interview with Fred Fram.

Author Note: Fred Fram, who had been shot down north of Luang Prabang in February, along with Bob Caron, and rescued just before dark, was not amused by the Plain of Jars incident. He and others believed Johnson lacked the necessary upcountry experience to expose the others, when he elected to troll for unknown persons. Moreover, had Brian lost both engines, three men would have been on the ground, and a dangerous all hands SAR committed to recover them.

Barrow, crewing Bell 204B N8635F, were hit in the engine and tail boom by heavy small arms fire. ¹²⁴

"Fixed wing operations will be [conducted] at LS-272 while rotary wing will [continue] at 20A" ¹²⁵

"The battle for Long Tieng is once again shaping up as a test between government's efforts to reconstitute and reinforce its fighting forces and the communists' ability to move troops and supplies into the rugged terrain west of the PDJ. On the government's side, 3,000 irregulars, including 1,200 recently arriving from Savannakhet, have increased Vang Pao's force.

The communists have not yet swung into heavy action since taking the PDJ a week ago. The 866th Regiment is the only regimental force that has been positively identified south or west of the Plaine. But increasing numbers of small enemy units are appearing in the valleys between Long Tieng and the Plaine and the communists appear to have pressured the irregulars out of Khang Kho on the south side of the Plaine this weekend.

The collapse of morale may be due to the flight of 30,000 Meo dependents from the Long Tieng valley." ¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Townley, Roy Francis, Compiled by Task Force Omega, Inc. The crew's fate was tracked. A radio intercept in August 1972 alluded to an American aircraft being shot down in December 1971. Another source in October 1972 reported 293 being shot down in the vicinity of Mounq Sai in December 1971. Three Americans and one Lao were captured and incarcerated. They were purportedly later moved to North Vietnam. More information was received in 1973 regarding two of the men. Reports filtered in over the years regarding the status of the men, but today they still remain MIA.

Bill Leary December 1971 Notes.

Joe Leeker information regarding the 545 and 35F incidents.

¹²⁵ Bill Leary December 1971 Notes: Sullivan-FIC-1700/26-1700/27.

¹²⁶ CIA Bulletin: Laos: The situation in the Long Tieng area, 12/27/71.

TUESDAY

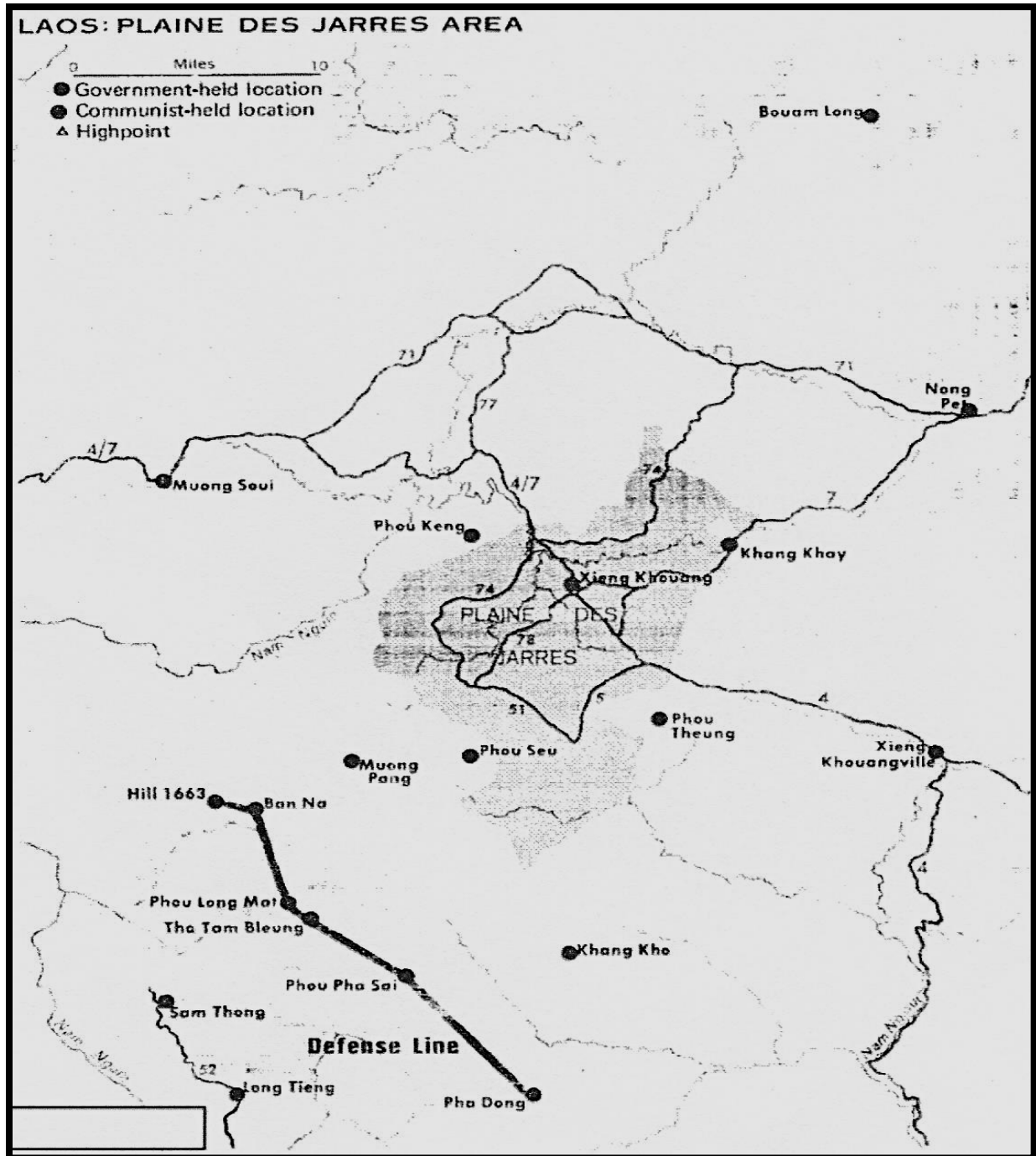
"The North Vietnamese are continuing to reposition and resupply their troops north and east of Long Tieng. Air observers report heavy enemy activity in the area around Moung Pang [three miles east northeast of Ban Na], suggesting that it will be used as a base to support a thrust by elements of the 316th Division toward the northeastern end of government's defense line around Long Tieng. The Moung Pang area is honeycombed with caves that the NVA has used to protect troops and supplies in the past.

Air observers have also noted continuing heavy enemy activity on the southwestern edges of the Plaine, and area which could serve as a base for offensive operations by elements of the 312th Division.

Little progress has been made in closing the gaps in the government's defense line at Ban Na and Phou Pha Sai. Enemy occupation of these positions would severely handicap the irregulars' ability to mount a stable defense of the Long Tieng complex. The demoralized state of many of the irregular troops suggests that units from other military regions will have to bear the brunt of any new fighting around Long Tieng.

The manpower deficiency was soon addressed. On the 30th and 31st, Savannakhet unit dispatched an experienced and effective four-battalion task force totaling over 1,000 men to Long Tieng by C-130 aircraft. GM-30 was advised by SuperMex (Eli Chavez). After offloading at Long Tieng, the unit was heli-lifted to positions north and west of Phou Long Mat, with the primary purpose of marshalling retreating Thai from the Plain of Jars.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Bill Leary January 1972 Notes: Interview with Jim Barber. Savannakhet's GM-31 Regiment had arrived in Military Region Two on 22 December and was positioned between Sam Tong and ridgelines forward of Long Tieng.



CIA 1/28/71 map showing the location of Moug Pang on the periphery of the Plain of Jars in relation to Ban Na and the Vang Pao defense line, fronting the Long Tieng complex.



The Long Tieng AT-28 parking and loading ramp and the exposed bomb and ammunition dump prior to the 31 December shelling.

Two battalions (BC-121, 122) arrived from Luang Prabang and were placed on western Skyline. They were later repositioned south of The Alternate to prevent enemy infiltration.] ¹²⁸

Hanoi has issued a lengthy propaganda statement extolling the victory of the 'Lao Liberation Forces' on the Plaine and restating the communists' claim to this area. The statement seeks to convey the impression that the communists' current offensive was in response to government attacks against 'liberated areas.' It makes no reference to communist goals beyond the Plaine or to Long Tieng itself. This suggests that the communists do not want to commit themselves publicly to an objective they are not certain of achieving. ¹²⁹

Captain Brian Johnson found himself inside the barrel again on the 28th. While flying XW-PHE in the Tha Tam Bleung area (with the crew of Brian, Dave Cox, and Tom Neis), the number two power section chip detector light illuminated. After conducting a precautionary landing on the Site-72 strip, inspection revealed a small amount of metal on the plug. Because of the lack of security at the site, Johnson was advised to ferry the ship to Ban Son (LS-272) for further inspection of the magnetic plugs and oil sumps. After determining there were no additional metal particles present, the PIC of Papa Hotel Alpha, who had covered Bravo the entire time, escorted Johnson to Udorn. ¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Ken Conboy, 327-328.
CIA Bulletin, Laos, 01/03/72.

¹²⁹ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/28/71.

¹³⁰ Air America XOXO, XW-PHB, Precautionary Landing, 12/28/71, JD Ford.

At Lima Site-32, Bad Man received incoming fire. Showboat on Padong Ridge reported a ground attack to Alleycat. However, because of adverse weather, no Spooky gunships were launched. ¹³¹

WEDNESDAY

Ambassador Mac Godley and Chief of Station Hugh Tovar visited Long Tieng. During Tovar's last visit on the 21st, Vang Pao appeared to be *"losing his grip and his troops drifting beyond effective control."* Now he and his troops appeared considerably more stable and able to form cogent defense plans.¹³²

"Air operations will continue at 20A until either the runway becomes unusable or the enemy denies us access or occupation. It is strongly recommended that only personnel assigned on a high priority business be given transport to 20A as seats for rides are at a premium and becoming worse." ¹³³

Cobra, located southeast of Phou Pha Sai, reported TIC. South of Long Tieng, Raven FACs supported an attack-by-fire at LS-37 (Moung Phun). ¹³⁴

PHASE TWO OF THE COMMUNIST OFFENSIVE

Enemy military history recorded:

"We advanced south to continue the attack and fought off enemy counterattacks. After readjusting its forces and completing all necessary preparations, on 31 December 1971 phase two of the Plain of Jars-Long Cheng (Tieng) offensive campaign began [and continued until 6 April 1972]. All campaign-level and

¹³¹ Jim Parker *Timeline* for 28 December.

¹³² Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 438.

¹³³ Bill Leary 1971 December Notes: Sullivan 20A to FIC UTH VTE, report for 1700/28 Dec to 1700/29 Dec.

¹³⁴ Jim Parker *Timeline* for 29 December.

unit artillery forces and all unit artillery guns were used to conduct concentrated bombardments of Long Cheng [Tieng], the headquarters of the Royal Lao Government's Military Region 2, and the Tham Lung Airfield [correctly addressed as the Lima Site-72 Tha Tam Bleung strip] to enable our infantry to launch decisive attacks on enemy troops defending the enemy's intermediate defense line in order to liberate Sam Tong and Long Tieng.

The 148th Infantry Regiment/316th Division was given responsibility of conducting the attack in the primary attack sector with the goal of taking Phu Moc [the combined CT, CW, and CA pads on Skyline] and then advancing on to Long Tieng.

The 165th Infantry Regiment/312th Division was assigned to make the attack in the important secondary sector to seize the Na Vang Hill Line [Hills 1516-Golf pads at TG9021, 1978-Delta pads at TH8721, and 1737 DK pad at Sam Tong, TG845195] with the goal of splitting the enemy in two in the middle of the intermediate defense line and Long Tieng.

The 174th Infantry Regiment/316th Division was assigned to move out from Ban Na and to penetrate deep to join the 141st Infantry Regiment/312th Division in attacking and capturing Sam Tong." ¹³⁵

Latest friendly intelligence stated:

"Both government and NVA forces are maneuvering into positions for renewed fighting in the north. A 320-man irregular force is moving three miles north of Sam Tong to take up high

¹³⁵ Military History Institute of Vietnam Ministry of Defense Chief Editor: Colonel Ho Khang, *History of the Resistance War against the Americans to Save the Nation, 1954-1975*, Volume 7: The Decisive Victory in 1972. (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2007).
Jim Parker Email, 07/26/17.

ground near Pakagnoung [a village four miles west of Ban Na]. So far it has not met with resistance." ¹³⁶

FAG Hacksaw reported a truck convoy near the Echo Lima pad at Mounng Pang. Air strikes destroyed seven tanks. At Bouam Long Raven pilots supported attacks-by-fire for Bad Man and Base Pay (Sanyan). ¹³⁷

VIETNAMESE ENGINEERS

"Today we began the attack against Sam Tong-Long Tieng. The 130mm guns based at the foot of the mountains opened fire this afternoon. When we heard the guns begin to fire, we went out to the mouth of the cave to watch, clap our hands, and cheer the men. The smoke from the real firing positions and the fake firing positions filled the entire valley." ¹³⁸

SCOTT

Despite thwarting enemy efforts to install forward observers on a karst in the Long Tieng Valley to provide accurate firing information and allied aircraft searching for the large guns, 130mm shells began exploding at 1530.

"They picked the turnover from the day Barrel Roll frag [Cricket] to the night frag [Alleycat] and bad weather."

Heavy artillery fire was anticipated by the first of January, so AOC Major Jesse Scott had already relocated most of the critical T-28 support equipment to Ban Son. This initially included O-1 Birddog spotter planes, FACs, and Air America

¹³⁶ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/30/71.

¹³⁷ Jim Parker *Timeline* for 30 December 1971.

¹³⁸ Xuandao Diary, 31 December 1971. The presence of false firing positions caused damage estimates to erroneously report destroyed or damaged guns.

mechanics. However, being several minutes closer to the action, FACs still elected to use The Alternate to refuel and reload rockets. AT-28s and crews were based at Wattay [Except for helicopter crews, all fixed wing operations had been working out of Ban Son for a week].

"They did succeed in blowing up the T-28 bomb dump, our building, and the ramp...We had shelters to go to behind the karst where the [enemy] weapons couldn't reach...Air America did a fantastic job in getting in between artillery rounds and getting everyone out.

The artillery barrage had let up, so I drove to Vang Pao's [stone] house [on business]. The general was still in good spirits. He said, 'Come in and eat dinner,' so I ate dinner.

Then they started firing again. One CAS [Agency] man was going to stay there that night [actually both Mike "Hardnose" Ingham and Frank "Bag" Odum were present]...

The artillery incoming got pretty heavy, so I got back up to the strip...I was by myself. But a Porter pilot came in and we departed. We circled [overhead]. It was hard to believe that with the amount of rounds that we were taking that it was all 130. [I] thought maybe that they had moved something up closer. As it was, it was the 130 firing. Under the clouds you could see the flash of the weapon. In fact, you could hear the weapon fire...Then it would be a minute or so before the round would get there. ¹³⁹

¹³⁹ When I returned to work in late January the enemy was still shelling The Alternate with 130mm cannons. Most of the shells landed on top of Skyline Drive. I first observed the "splash" of an artillery round, typified by an upward "V" shaped black cloud, followed by a loud boom reverberating throughout the valley. To me, the artillery was not as terrifying as the indirect fire of rockets that landed in the valley. The 130mm gun posed one of the larger threats to the air operation as far as denying us use of Long Tieng; it drastically diminished our sortie rate.

We got some air up there. The ambassador would not allow single-engine airplanes, the in-country resource T-28s of the Ravens to fly at night. But in view of the circumstance, I went ahead on my own and authorized them to stay up. We got some TAC sorties on and I think damaged one and destroyed one [gun] that first night--got some divers in--not, I don't think [with] the best ordinance but whatever was available. The enemy had the 130mm guns very well protected with 37mm and I think a little bit of 23mm and of course 12.7mm [AAA guns]. The Ravens could get in, but it was pretty tense trying to work it in an O-1 with all this stuff.

[After the first day] we definitely couldn't work [at] Long Tieng. Our entire ordinance had been destroyed. Our building was gone...We moved everyone back to Vientiane. The [FACs] would stage O-1 aircraft forward to Site-272 and stage out of there during the day because it cut down their in-transit time to the [PDJ]. The T-28s [and pilots] continued to operate from [VTE], and we moved our maintenance support package to [VTE]...The intent was that we would live at Ban Son. Actually, our chief of unit or the senior CAS representative for the region, wanted to move to Site-16 at Vang Vieng...an area protected by neutralist soldiers. The Forces Armee Royale [FAR] didn't feel that the security was good enough to set up an operation there. [Moreover], the Air Attaché didn't want to use the T-28s out of there because it was a dirt strip, so we were forced to leave our T-28s at [Vientiane].

I [subsequently] worked out of Ban Son. CAS set up the JOC [Joint Operations Center] at Ban Son. Vang Pao stayed at Long Tieng with a limited force, and I would shuttle between Ban Son

and Long Tieng each day to liaison first with Vang Pao and then with the CAS chief of unit and their people." ¹⁴⁰

"The North Vietnamese have continued to probe and shell government positions in the defensive line northeast of Long Tieng, but no significant ground attacks have been launched. The enemy build-up east of Long Tieng is apparently continuing; one irregular survivor who returned to friendly lines at Padong on 29 December reported that it was impossible to move overland to Long Tieng because of the number of [NVA] troops in the area.

The government has again begun preparing Ban Son [LS-272], a refugee center 20 miles southwest of Long Tieng, to handle T-28 aircraft, thereby reducing dependence on the Long Tieng airstrip." ¹⁴¹

After Major Scott departed for Vientiane, under the cover of weather, darkness, and artillery fire, the enemy began to advance slowly up a portion of Skyline Ridge's steep northern slopes. Hardnose Ingham was at Long Tieng when shelling began. He spent the night evading incoming.

"My link to the outside was Digger [O'Dell] who got roused out of a New Year's Eve party...so that he could fly above the valley, act as a communications link, and keep me from getting lonely...the shells that were falling were much larger than anything I had seen before and I thought the dreaded 130s had arrived. As I knew no one would believe it without proof, I went out the next morning and gathered up some of the shrapnel and sent it down to Udorn to be analyzed...the dimensions of the war had changed." ¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Air Operations Center (AOC) USAF Major Jesse Scott printed interview obtained at Maxwell USAFB relating an eyewitness account of the initial 130mm cannon assault on Long Tieng, 75-78, 84-86.

¹⁴¹ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/31/71.

¹⁴² William Leary December 1971 Notes: Interview with Mike "Hardnose" Ingham.

Digger recalled:

"We had an all-night CASI Twin Otter over them. I was one of the first up there...It was awful: [at 2200 hours] the valley was taking heavy fire and fuel and ammunition dumps were exploding. It was almost a surreal experience." ¹⁴³

Raven pilots supported a TIC for Hot Dog and an attack-by-fire for LS-20A.

Positions on Skyline had been hardened and reinforced by forces that had previously withdrawn from forward defenses. The enemy was opposed by Thai infantry battalions, BC-616 to the west and BC-617 to the east on Skyline Ridge. In reserve, BC-608 was staged in the valley below. Lao battalions, BC-121 and 122 from Luang Prabang were also located on the west side.

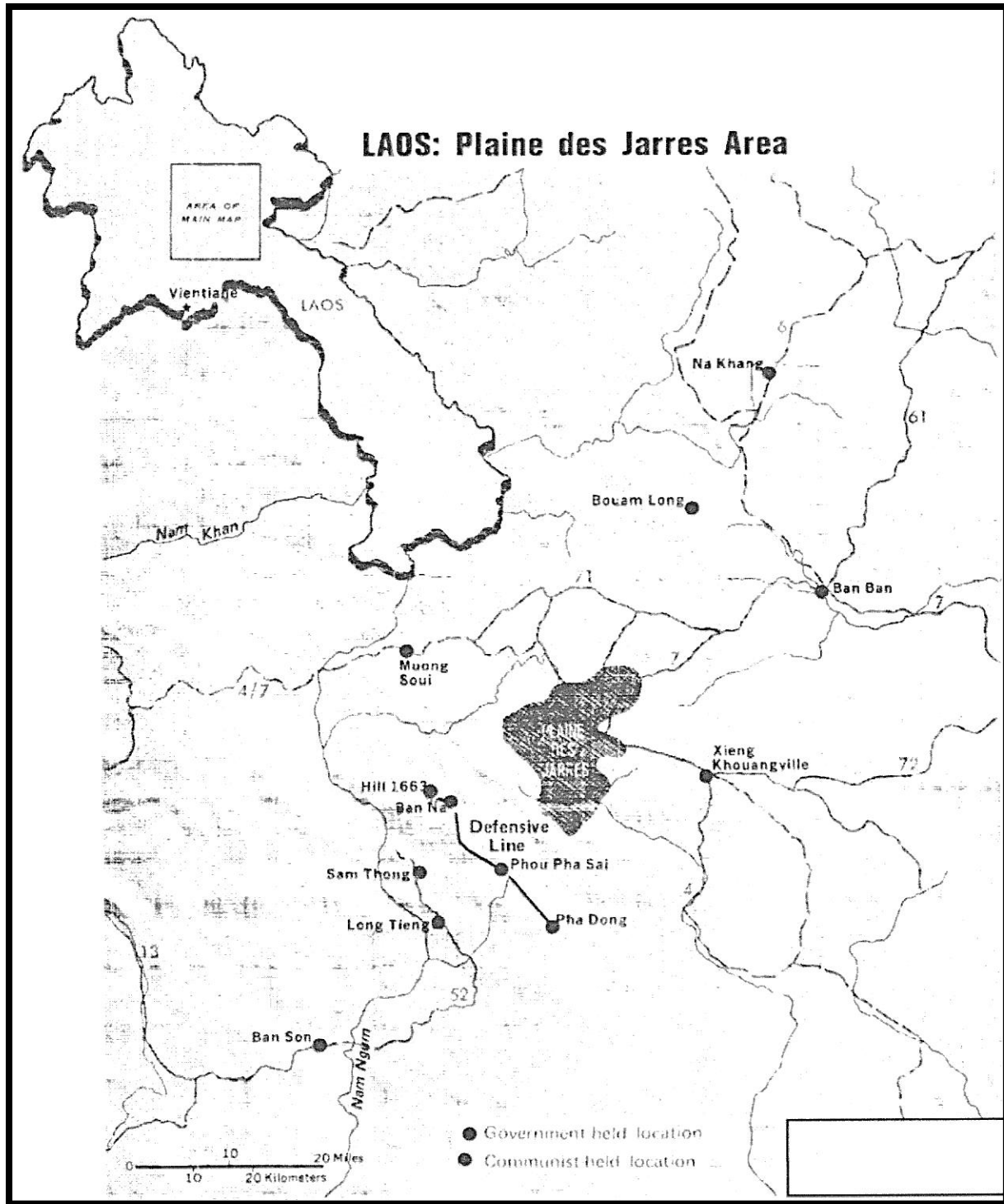
Two well experienced SGU battalions from Savannakhet, GM-30 and GM-31 advised by SuperMex, Sword (Jim Lewis), and Jim Barber, were still located in forward positions.

Digger's Meo-depleted GM-21, GM-23 (Ringo-Tom Matthews) battalions initially held positions guarding the east and west entries to the valley, and then were moved to Sam Tong. To the east at Padong, two battalions GM-24 (Kayak) and GM-22, deemed in fairly good condition, were charged to hold the site.

The outnumbered and fluctuating defense line held, but no one knew for how long...

In the meantime, with local people departing in droves to villages and high ground around the base, Vang Pao, discouraged and suffering his usual mental funk after losing face once again, moved his command post to Ban Song Sai, thirteen miles southwest of The Alternate. The general was visited by Vientiane's COS Hugh Tovar and AB-1 Chief Pat Landry, who were

¹⁴³ Bill Leary December 1971 Notes: Interview with George "Digger" O'Dell.



Year-end graphic showing the approximate location of opposing factions in the Military Region Two Plain of Jars/Long Tieng area.
CIA Map, 12/31/71.

surprised at his unannounced relocation. They found the general distressed by a bad head cold and complaining bitterly about the total lack of USAF air support, a key defensive measure, during the Plain of Jars final days. Obviously a sick, demoralized man, Agency personnel convinced Vang Pao to accompany them to Udorn, where he was promptly hospitalized with pneumonia, which temporarily removed him from battlefield command duties. ¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 438.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 329.

As in lower Military Region Two, December was a month of government reversals at Thateng, Saravane, and Paksong in southern Laos, when enemy offensives commenced to clear government forces from the sector north of the Bolovens.

On the third, an enemy battalion attacked an irregular battalion at Ban Thateng. This stimulated a request for additional air support.

On the northern front late Monday night, 5 December, the long-anticipated enemy attack on Saravane began with light probes. Despite Paksane-based AC-47 gunship support through the night, three or more Vietnamese battalions attacked at dawn. When numerous Tacair strikes failed to curtail the push, by 1430 hours the FAR commanding officer ordered his men to withdraw to the north and west. As a result, Lima-44 was lost again, and the enemy began moving trucks and tanks from the Toumlan Valley into the town.

The loss of Saravane could not have heartened the Thateng defenders, for the road to their positions was now wide open. Consequently, on the night of 9 December, enemy battalions, supported by four tanks and mortar fire, struck the troops at Thateng. Bitter fighting raged until 0430 hours. At daylight, and continuing all day, Ravens were able to direct Tacair. The site held, but enemy pressure continued to build.

Two days later, planning to strike the enemy at Saravane before they could consolidate their victory, while FAR battalions regrouped twenty miles to the west, four irregular battalions located at Thateng were ordered to proceed north toward Saravane. Except for a small number of units remaining in

defense of the area, and the task force still operating along Route-16, Thateng was largely unfortified.

After refitting, to effect the semblance of a pincer movement, within a few days the western column began moving toward Lima-44. By the 20th, the government's Thateng regiment was in attack formation four miles south-southeast of the town.

During the following three days, air strikes and ground assaults commenced with good results.

Commanders at Pakse, considering their dwindling assets and overall potential, concluded that even if Saravane was recaptured, the exposed site would be difficult to hold. Therefore, the push on Saravane was cancelled and both eastern and western units were ordered to march toward Khong Sedone (LS-289). ¹

PAKSONG

"The North Vietnamese captured Paksong for the first time since last May. An extended government counteroffensive--costly to both sides--finally regained the town in mid-September, but the [NVA] kept their units in place nearby and almost immediately began preparing for a new offensive. Additional communist units--at least some from the 2nd [NVA] Division--were brought into the area north of the Plateau last month." ²

On the Bolovens south of Saravane and Thateng, Paksong had been probed several times in November. However, sizeable enemy attacks had been forestalled by strong government moves at Thateng and along Route-16. Moreover, Thai troops defended high ground north and east of Paksong, with BC-613 located on Phou Nongkin, and BC 614 positioned on the two Phou Thevadas. To the

¹ CHECO, Bolovens, 26-30.

² CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/29/71.

west, they manned FSB Lighting. By the 13th, having been under attack from enemy artillery and infantry pressure for several days, even though supported by RLAF assets and fire base artillery, BC-613 withdrew to the Phou Thevadas On the 7th.

The next day, intent on reoccupying Phou Nongkin, four battalions ambushed an enemy force north of Paksong. Within two days, the enemy struck back, ambushing the government battalions and scattering part of the unit west.

"Government forces suffered a new setback on the Bolovens Plateau. A four-battalion irregular task force attempting to take a high point [Phou Nongkin] eight miles north of Paksong was dispersed on 16 December by a NVA battalion. Part of the irregular force has withdrawn to Ban Phakkout on Route-23 west of Paksong; the remainder has not been located.

To the north, two irregular task forces, which have been under increasing enemy pressure for the past two weeks have concluded their sweep operations near Thateng. During the month-long operation the irregular force destroyed several enemy trucks and small supply caches while drawing a strong NVA force to protect this sensitive area.

The dispersal of the force near Paksong and the withdrawal of the Thateng forces will make it easier for the North Vietnamese to move men and supplies into the Bolovens Plateau. The communists may soon move on Paksong, which is currently defended by seven government battalions." ³

The Phou Nongkin area was considered sufficiently important in interdicting Route-23 and protecting Paksong that BC-619, from the Royal Thai Marines, were introduced and lifted to Paksong on the 20th. From there the battalion moved beyond the

³ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/17/71.

Phou Thevadas. Achieving contact the next day, the battalion departed the field.

By the 27th the Thevadas were abandoned, as the two Thai battalions withdrew to Paksong.

Only pausing to rest momentarily, Thai and Neutralist battalions continued retreating west on Route-23 past Ban Gnik.⁴

*"...the North Vietnamese appear ready to launch an attack on government positions near Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau. Air observers [Raven pilots] report large enemy troops concentrations, numerous tank and truck tracks, and many new AAA positions north of the town. Shelling has increased and morale is reported as low. The North Vietnamese appear to be trying to isolate government units and stop their resupply and medical evacuation operations, probably hoping that these tactics, which have proven effective in the past, will cause the government to abandon the positions without an all-out ground assault."*⁵

"The government forces that abandoned Paksong yesterday are trying to regroup along Route-23.

Air observers have reported [NVA] troop and armor concentrations just north of this area, however, and it is likely that any enemy show of force would cause the government troops to withdraw farther west. Only one of the eight government battalions that pulled out of the Paksong area suffered significant casualties; the others withdrew before any concerted enemy attacks were launched. Four 105mm howitzers and five trucks were abandoned in Paksong [Tacair destroyed the equipment]; two other 105s were moved westward with the retreating troops.

⁴ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 328-329.
CHECO, Bolovens, 31-32, 34.

⁵ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/28/71.

The North Vietnamese clearly have put a high priority on wresting control of the Bolovens from the government. It provides them both a buffer zone for their main infiltration corridors to South Vietnam and Cambodia and the option of opening new routes just east of or even across the Plateau.

There is no evidence that the North Vietnamese intend to depart from their long-standing policy and attack the Lao population centers along the Mekong River. They may, however, make a greater effort than before to threaten the town of Pakse in an attempt to keep government forces tied down in defensive positions away from the infiltrations corridors." ⁶

"Four Neutralist battalions that abandoned Paksong two days ago have returned. Three of the four battalions have dubious staying power but are the only forces defending Paksong after the withdrawal of irregulars.

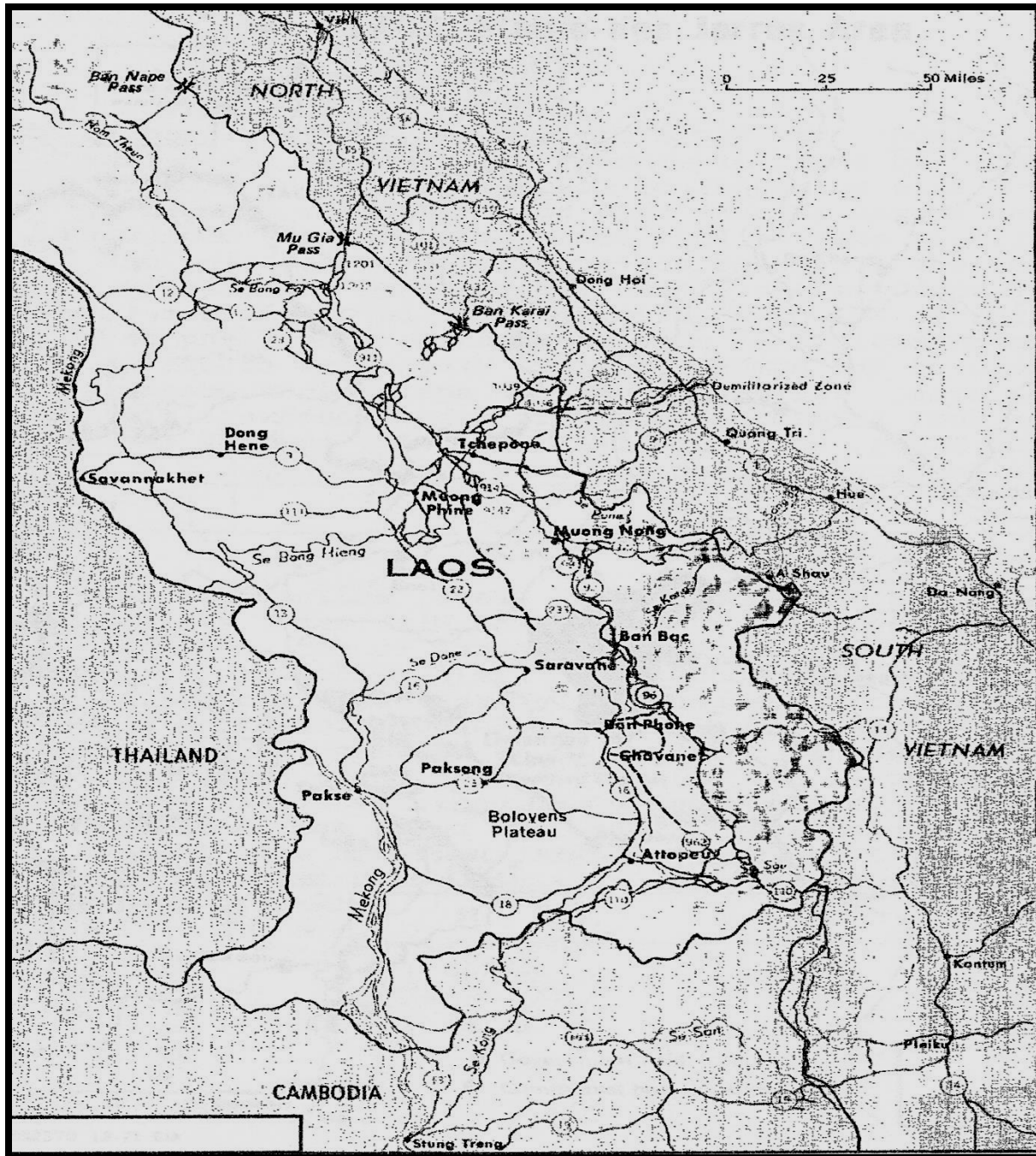
Supported by artillery fire and accurate USAF bombing, the GM-42 Regiment would hold until the first week in January, when another attack inflicted so many casualties that the surviving troops left the field. ⁷

MR-3

Communist units appear to be maneuvering into position near Dong Hene on Route-9 in the western panhandle. The town has been under sporadic rocket attack for the last week and civilians reportedly have begun to leave the area. Air observers [Raven pilots] reported that the communist units appear to have bypassed the government blocking positions north and south of Dong Hene. Patrol clashes have increased farther west along Route-9, and enemy units may also plan new raids against

⁶ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/29/71.

⁷ Ken Conboy, 329.



Military Region Three and Military Region Four showing the year end eastern Ho Chi Minh/Sihanouk Trail systems in eastern and southern Laos.

CIA Map, 12/31/71.

irregular training sites north of that area. Lao Army commanders believe the NVA offensive is designed to disrupt the Lao National Assembly elections scheduled for 2 January." ⁸

COMMUNIST ARTERIES

Despite liberal aerial interdiction, there was no stopping enemy improvements to their logistical routes through Laos.

"Communist work crews, adding to the web of roads now in the Ho Chi Minh trail system, are providing further alternatives to choke points in the central panhandle [MR-3]. Field readouts of photography of November and December show a fifty-two mile north-south road almost completed through the central panhandle. This road is between and parallel to Routes-23 and 99.

In the Ban Phone area [MR-4], two other roads are under construction eastward from the Se Kong River. These new roads and additions that are being made to existing roads will improve access to the tri-border area, south Laos, and Cambodia." ⁹

⁸ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/30/71.

⁹ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/31/71.

"We didn't get to Penang but went to Songkhla, Pattani, and Yala...It was a fairly educational trip and quite worthwhile..."

Letter Home, 01/09/72.

After arriving in Bangkok early on the 27th and obtaining cash from the Company-authorized money changer on Patpong Road, I purchased tickets for the family on Thai Airways to Songkhla (Songkla). Songkhla was a remote beach resort, located on the southwestern peninsula, adjacent to the Gulf of Siam. Not commercialized or patronized like Pattaya across the Gulf on the eastern peninsula, the old government hotel sat on a point of land surrounded by one hundred-year-old cedar trees. Modernization had not yet touched this area, and the hotel was something of a throwback to the dark ages, with mosquito nets and ceiling fans in the bedrooms, which reminded me of the government hotel in Hua Hin. The climate was conducive to abundant plant growth. Lovely twenty-foot-tall hibiscus bushes bursting with multi-colored flowers covered the wall of one side of the building. Across the street was a park with topiary bushes neatly cut and fashioned into animal shapes like those at the Bangkok Zoo, but considerably better fashioned.

Water surrounded the hotel on two sides. The eastern beach was rocky--again like at Houa Hin--with wave action too strong for the children to swim. The northern side had an expansive sand beach that sloped gently down toward calmer, shallower water. Even in December, the warm salt water was refreshing to both body and soul, but I questioned the water safety when I spotted a flowing drain pipe leading from the hotel to the water's edge. Shade, beach chairs, and efficient waiters kept us



Trick photo of the Casterlin boys produced by a walk-on photographer at Songkhla, Thailand.

Author Collection.



A seaside picture of Tuie, Ricky, and Peter, along with local Thai children against the backdrop of the western Gulf of Siam.

Author Collection.



Dad and Pete sitting on Mermaid Rock.
Author Collection.



The virtually deserted sandy swimming beach at Songkhla. The water here was shallow with moderate wave action. Cedar trees in the background line the peninsula.

Author Collection.



Another view across the bay of the trees and hills in the background.
Author Collection.



Tuie displaying her gorgeous and captivating smile, and Pete lounging under shade trees and umbrellas.

Author Collection.

well supplied with crab, Singha beer, coconuts, and other consumables. The experience provided a laid-back Asian luxury and ambiance at its best.

Like all Thai seaside towns, Songkhla was originally a fishing village, and to a large extent still was. One afternoon Rick and I walked to a boatyard where a new fishing vessel was about to be launched on its maiden voyage. With typical Chinese fanfare, and to appease the malevolent spirits, create luck, and inspire a little fun, bow mounted firecrackers were lighted as the boat slid down the incline into the water, amid much cheering.

Two days later Tuie's "uncle" Cha Tha arrived from Pattani with a borrowed Jeep and a car. After visiting his good friend, the provincial governor, he drove us into town, where a few damaged structures that once housed the Japanese high command stood as a monument to Allied bombing during World War Two.

PATTANI

That afternoon, the kids and I elected to ride in the open Jeep to take advantage of the cooling air flow, while Tuie rode in the car. We motored south over a narrow twisting road that looked like it had been hacked out of the jungle. One could almost reach out and touch the growth that had advanced to the hard-top boundary. Some of the villages we passed had tall poles with caged birds at the top. I was informed that expensive song birds were kept in the elevated cages during the day to take advantage of the cooling breezes.

Located on the Gulf of Siam, Pattani was originally a small fishing village. Khun Cha Tha, a Musablert and brother of Cham (Khun Yai), had originally established his dentistry practice in

the northeast at Sakon Nakhon. ¹ However, when his good friend and political leader, Tieng Serikhan, was purportedly implicated in communist (or Isan separatist movement) activities during Prime Minister Sarit's rule, for protection from guilt by association, family members and others arranged for Cha Tha to be transferred to southern Thailand. ²

When European world powers, focused on trading were busy slicing the world into colonies and annexing portions of Southeast Asian nations' territories, Siam, unlike other countries in the region, struggled to maintain its status as a free country. In 1826, Rama Three, a wise Siamese King, in order to counterbalance French eastern influence, signed a treaty with the British Southeast Asia Company whereby sovereignty over four Malay states was acknowledged in exchange for British ownership of Penang and trading rights in other provinces and Malay states.

In order to remain independent, other bilateral treaties were signed during the rule of the realistic Mongkut (Rama Four). His son Chulalongkorn (Rama Five), more Western-oriented than any of his predecessors, continued to play one nation against the other to maintain a free nation. In the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, Siam relinquished claims over four Malay states, but retained Pattani Province, which was then divided into Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat Provinces. ³

¹ Khun: The prefix was used as a sign of respect for either gender.

² Politics was convoluted in improvised northeast Thailand by aggressive individuals seeking autonomy, or government recognition and aid for the neglected region. Unfortunately, communist mania prevailed at the time; scapegoats were sought and treated as examples. Udorn Province Governor Suphat Wongwhathant, who was married to Khun Yai's niece Klua Won, was forced by the government to execute his friend Serikhan in the village square.

³ Wikipedia-Internet: Northern Malay states and Siam.

Consequently, over many years, and like "bamboo bending in the wind,"⁴ Thailand integrated what would become the lower southwestern peninsula, and also a Malay Moslem culture and language that encompassed eighty-eight percent of the area's population. In a predominately Buddhist country where wats prevailed, few present in Pattani were in favor of the town's Grand Mosque.

We spent four days at Doctor Cha Tha's two story wooden house that was provided to him by the government as a perk in exchange for his dentistry work at the nearby hospital. He and his wife Khun Yai Noi were raising three girls and two boys, so, to supplement his inadequate civil servant salary, he also conducted a small practice in the small town.

We were assigned a side room in the lower portion of the wooden house. A fold-up mattress and a large quilt were provided for us to sleep on and a mosquito net fashioned overhead--it was hot and the windows were left open at night. After the first night I discovered many insect bites on my body from mosquitoes, ants, or bed bugs. Tuie wanted to go to a hotel, but I felt that this would be a slight to Cha Tha and his wife. Besides, we would lose some of the flavor of living with a Thai family. To forestall further infestation, I purchased a can of DDT spray from a local store, which I liberally applied to the bedding and surrounding room. Using the insecticide and liberally airing the bedding somewhat helped resolve the problem.

Cha Tha was well-known and enormously popular with almost everyone in town, and he often invited friends to the house for drinks and food. His wife, Chan Ma Nee, never said anything, but as keeper of the purse, I occasionally noted a distinct sense of displeasure in her demeanor. Moreover, she was not loath to ask

⁴ Thai proverb.

Tuie for money to purchase food, or perhaps to satisfy her proclivity for the Thai disease. ⁵

Most religion in the southwestern Thai peninsula was Moslem, with the Malay language primarily spoken in homes, although Thai was taught in the schools. There was a large mosque in the center of town and only a handful of Buddhist wats available for Thai worship.

The Moslem influence was so great that for the minority Thai living in the town pork products were fairly difficult to obtain. People who desired the product depended on local Chinese farmers living outside of town to raise, slaughter, and hand deliver the meat to government workers' houses in order to circumvent the ancient Moslem taboo. ⁶ This deficiency was supplemented with abundant fish and seafood.

Strangely, giant prawns (large shrimp that we often enjoyed butterflied and deep fried in breadcrumbs at the Air America Club) were famous in Pattani, but noticeably absent from the local market. During an afternoon trip Tuie and I made to dockside in a borrowed car, I observed the prawns being loaded into large wooden crates that were being packed with ice. Hoping to purchase some for our table that night, I was informed we could not, for the fishermen were under contract to air freight them to Japan. Considering this a terrible travesty, I inquired how I could obtain some. I was informed by the boat captain that I would have to join the crew during an overnight fishing trip.

⁵ The Thai disease: A card playing addiction that seemed to be innate with the Thai ladies.

⁶ The Moslem religion forbids the handling or eating unclean pork products. One has to assume that the effects of the trichinosis roundworm parasite from uncooked pig fostered this Middle Eastern aversion to consuming pork. The same taboo is also observed in the Jewish orthodox culture.



Pattani's Grand Mosque with Author mugging with a camera, the boys, Cha Tha, and his children.

Author Collection.



The Grand Mosque minaret used by Moslem religious leaders for the purpose of calling worshippers to prayer.

Author Collection.

Naturally, without preparation and notifying my people, I was not prepared to do that.

Cited as a delicacy, one evening after our daily travels, Cha offered me turtle eggs, which never solidified after boiling because of a thick, leathery shell covering. Even after consuming a strong Singha beer, I did not particularly like the strong salty taste. Later, I suspected that I might have developed an allergy from them.

Before attending Saint Joseph's elite Catholic boarding school in Bangkok, my wife's formative years were spent in Pattani. She attended grade school and two years of high school in a building close to the beach, where cooling breezes wafted through open windows. At the time one could swim in the adjacent ocean. During ensuing years, the beach topography changed drastically. When we visited the beach, the west side of the peninsula was nothing but mud flats for as far as one could see.

Two of Tuie's good school friends were twin Moslem sisters whose father was either the mayor or a high official in Pattani. Marring her appearance, one of the sisters had disfiguring scars on her face from a severe case of acne or smallpox. After the girls learned that Tuie was in town, we were invited to their home for lunch. I did not particularly enjoy the experience, for I disliked sitting on the floor. Moreover, the packed room was extremely hot, the food unfamiliar, and few people spoke Thai.

Considered movie star handsome in his youth, Cha could also sing well. His talent was demanded and aptly displayed when New Year was celebrated at the hospital on the evening of January second. A leading monk had passed earlier, preventing any celebration for fifteen days. During the party we were introduced to many leading town principals.

Cha Tha was friends with the governor and an attorney, who owned an old car and who took us sightseeing in the surrounding area.

Later, the lawyer shared his interesting past with me. As he explained, with allowances for my poor Thai, he was fifteen years old when the 25th Japanese Imperial Army Division invaded the Malay Peninsula on 8 December 1941, allowing for time differences, the same day as the perfidious attack on Pearl Harbor. Pattani beach was preselected as one of several invasion landing beaches, with the intention of wheeling south and conquering British-controlled Malaya in a pincer movement.⁷

The lawyer was one of 150 local area Boy Scouts assigned to the 42th Thai Infantry and Pattani Provincial Police, who attempted to defend the southern shores of Thailand. They persisted for three hours, until Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram capitulated under the threat of devastating bombardment to Bangkok from Japanese capitol ships in the gulf. During the brief fighting, five scouts lost their lives.

While Tuie rested at Cha's home because of her advancing condition and the hot, humid conditions, Cha, Lawyer, another friend, Ricky, and I visited several interesting area sites. Always a history buff, I wanted to visit some ancient wats in jungle areas, but because of active communist patrols (or Malay separatists), who had already murdered nine teachers and closed several schools in the province, we were restricted to visiting areas relatively close to town that were still considered safe. So far, the better protected cities and towns had not been impacted by insurgents.

⁷ The sandy beach was fine for the enemy landing, but mud flats beyond presented a degree of difficulty for the three-wave landing force that consisted of infantry troops, a bicycle corps, and heavy armored vehicles.

One place visited was a brick factory. I had already seen a smaller version of this in Udorn with Khun Tha, when we were considering building a house on property he and Cham owned further down Adulyadet Road.

Another stop was made to a small rubber tree plantation, where workers sliced tree bark in circles and gathered a white sap. Other workers smoked balls of latex, while adding the raw product to rotating spits to cure the rubber blobs for export or shipment to processing plants. Since the men were akin to our American sharecroppers and paid by the kilo, numerous wood chips found their way into the raw product.

Next, we went to a manufacturing plant where various rubber items were produced. Courtesy of the establishment's manager, Ricky left the factory with a large bag of rubber bands and the title of the "rubber band king."

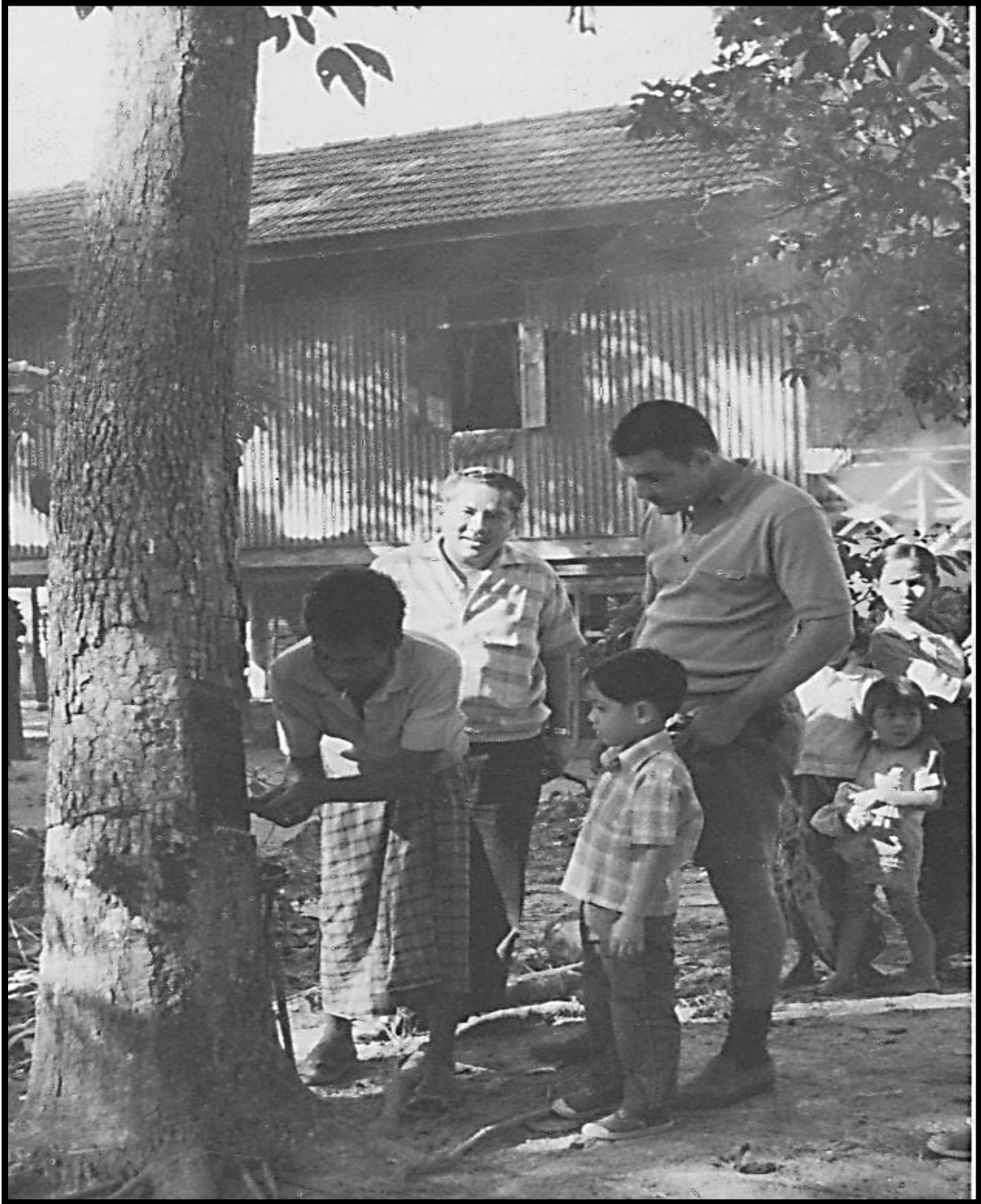
During the 1500s, the first bronze cannon was reputedly manufactured close to the sea in an area of southern Pattani Province. Near this site on the shore road were the decaying ruins of a historic structure an ancient Chinese prince was erecting in the memory of his deceased princess. According to legend, the structure was never completed because each time workers attempted to place a roof over the building, lightning strikes or some other freak of nature destroyed their efforts.

Following a long day of sweltering sightseeing, we returned to Cha's house for adult liquid refreshment and conversation before dinner. Before this started, Cha, whose English was limited, said to me, "*Dick, take a bath.*" The way he said it tickled me. However, I understood that he was merely being polite, and I probably exuded a gamy odor that offended the sensitive noses of people who never sweat like Westerners. Since there was no heater or shower in the bathroom, I did not particularly relish a cold dip bath from the large klong jar,



Cha's attorney friend, the owner of the rubber plantation, Ricky, and the Author.

Author Collection.



Watching a plantation worker stripping bark to induce the flow of rubber latex.

Author Collection.



The historic roofless building described in the narrative.
Author Collection.

but, after completing the ablution, I had to admit that I felt much refreshed.

Another day we drove south of Pattani to Yala Province. Yala town was relatively unimpressive. The standard small shops and round-about traffic circles with clock towers reminded me of many other small towns in Thailand.

One morning Ricky and I toured the old Chinese section of Pattani on one of the kids' motorbikes. I was impressed with some of the ancient buildings that included temples and funerary towers used for cremation ceremonies.

Finally, the time arrived to depart for Don Muang on Thai Airways. Southern Thailand had been great fun, educational, and enormously interesting. I looked forward to revisiting the area in the future.

While we were in Bangkok, we visited the upscale Bangkok Nursing Home where Doctor Somsack Pencharc practiced. The doctor was the Queen of Thailand's personal gynecologist, and would deliver our third child. After conducting a thorough examination, he determined that the baby was quite low for this early stage, and caused Tuie pain because her bones were separating to accommodate the child's development. Consequently, the doctor advised Tuie to stay off her feet and rest.

The ramifications of our vacation were not manifested until after returning to Udorn, and will be addressed in the following book. ©

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