

**AIR AMERICA, INC.**

**BOOK THREE**

**FEET WET**

**1962**

**BUDDIST ERA 2505**

**YEAR OF THE TIGER**

Harry R. Casterlin

---

# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
1. TRANSITION	3
Thailand	14
Udon	15
The Gun Flap	26
The Incident	26
Flight Crew Uniforms	28
Recreation	37
Housing	39
Transportation	42
Initial Trip Upcountry	49
The HUS-1 (H-34)	50
Russell	59
Feet Wet	63
Topography	68
Luang Prabang	77
Route-13	83
The Clinic	105
Humor	108
Paksane	110
Spillis	120
Embarrassed	121
Coble	123
Marriage	132
2. OCTOBER	135
Sayaboury	136
A Brief Meo History	140
Fuel	141
Haver's vs. Marshall's Lake	148
Padding	154
MR-2	159
Sam Tong	164
Long Tieng	168
Operating in the Mountains	174
The Northwest Region	181
Udon	186
A Badge of Honor	191

## CONTENTS

Tubbs	197
Nong Khai-Operations and Area History	201
Pat Landry	203
Neutrality	207
Kudos	207
Deadline and Chicanery	210
LP	212
Magic Box	214
Beavers	221
New Diggs	224
Thai Culture 101	228
Phe Leck	233
Gardner	235
DeStefano	238
Cox	240
Liar-Liar Pants on Fire	242
STO	245
History and Sightseeing	250
Geopolitical Crises	257
Laos	261
3. NOVEMBER	264
Moher	266
Down Time	267
China	270
Lao Politics	272
Howard	273
Ground School	275
Situation in Laos	277
Special Mission	278
Local Bad Guy	281
Treachery	286
Pakse	293
Burke	297
Saravane	307
Bolovens	317
Davis	324
Agencies	332
Flipse	339
Accidents	355
4. DECEMBER	357
A Disturbing Pay Issue	357

## CONTENTS

Upcountry	360
Buell	366
Vang Pao	381
Padong (VS-05)	386
Udorn	391
Bangkok	393
Religion and the Emerald Buddha	395
Brief Thai History	405
Purchases, Sightseeing and Serious Discussions	408
Concern about the Future	409
Relatives	411
The Snake Farm	412
The Southeastern Peninsula	415
Udorn	418
Learning Thai	419
Hope	421
Christmas	423
Back to Work	426
Final Flights of the Year	427
Loper	429
Laos	431
EPILOGUE	441
BIBLIOGRAPHY	444
GLOSSARY	447
PHOTOGRAPHS	
Boeing 707	4
Civil Air Transport 880M	8
CAT Air Hostesses	9
Air America C-47	16
Air America Volkswagen Bus	18
1962 AAM Helicopter Parking Ramp	19
AAM Administration/Operations Building	21
Prachapakdi Hotel	23
Bill Pearson in AAM Uniform	32
Thai Wooden Stilt House	41
Mapakdi Hotel	43
Jeep in Udorn	44
Static Samlor	46

## CONTENTS

Samlors in Town	47
HUS-1's on Parking Ramp	51
Aircraft at Wattay Airport	66
Mekong River Near Vientiane	74
Air View of Luang Prabang looking southwest	79
Nam Khan and Wat Phu Si at LP	81
Wat Phu Si looking southeast	82
Sala Phu Khoun	85
Route-13 South of Moung Kassy	87
H-34 Approaching Vang Vieng	88
Twin Peak karsts at Vang Vieng	89
Wooden Bridge on Route-13	90
Piney Woods on Route-4 North of Paksane	115
Gardner, Moher, Supon at Knight Wedding	133
Manual H-34 Fueling Operation	144
Helio Courier Pilot Landing at Long Tieng Early	171
Rough Terrain East of Long Tieng	178
Mekong River in Northwest Laos	182
Ban Houie Sai Across the Mekong	184
Nong Khai and Mekong	201
Pat Landry and General Parnet	205
Udorn Train Station	247
Tourist Boat Traffic in Bangkok	252
Charlie Weitz	264
Klong Jars in Thai backyard	288
Kha Villagers	299
Nick Burke	302
Mekong River 20 Miles North of Pakse	304
Pakse Bridge Across the Se Done	305
Phu Batiene Northeast of Pakse	306
Se Done Valley	312
Air View of Saravane Airfield	313
View of Phou Batiene looking Southwest	323
New Paksong on the Bolovens	324
Extinct Volcano on Bolovens	325
IVS Worker Joe Flipse	343
Edgar "Pop" Buell	372
Vang Pao at Long Tieng Loading Ramp	385
Ban Padong Airstrip	391
View of Bangkok over the Chao Phraya	399
Grand Palace and Emerald Buddha Complex	402
The Howard Estes Family	427

### MAPS, GRAPHICS, DIAGRAMS and Pilot List

Map of Laos	34
1962 Pilot Inventory	36
Graphic of External HUS-1/H-34	54
Graphic of Internal HUS-1/H-34	55

## CONTENTS

1:150,00 map of Udorn to Vientiane	65
Graphic of Lao and Vietnam Mountains	69
Lao Rivers and Mountain Bench Marks	72
Luang Prabang Graphic	80
Map of Thailand and Laos	112
Sayaboury Province in yellow	138
Sectional Map North of Wattay Airport	162
MR-4	298
Topographic Map of The Bolovens Plateau	323
Sectional Map of Plain of Jars	370

## INTRODUCTION

**F**ollowing my hiring by Air America and relocation to Thailand in September 1962, the remaining three months of 1962 with the Company were ones of anticipation, considerable frustration, and despair. Because of the American government's adherence to the tenets of the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos, and the accelerating slowdown in helicopter requirements in the kingdom, it appeared that neither our aircraft nor any of us crewmembers would ever again fly in the country, and I would be forever doomed to a First Officer status or even termination from the Company.

Because of the implementation of the Accords on Laos and our September stand down from overt operations in Laos, those of us in limbo were subjected to every rumor and daily innuendo that surfaced. At the time this was trying, but amusing in retrospect. The pressures and other factors associated with Howard Estes' and my underling status and naiveté, "sage" input from the "Old Timers," and their biases had the potential for a witch's brew of disturbing and confusing information. It was difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff, and easier to accept what was proffered to us as gospel.

During the checkout process and the little flying I was accorded, I flew with mostly competent and accomplished Captains. In their own inimitable way, all passed on knowledge, which, like a super ego, remained with me throughout my career with Air America. The acquired information, processed with my own revelations, helped me craft decisions that would ease me through many rough spots over the following twelve years. I also experienced battle damage to an aircraft that I was flying. This marked a first, but certainly not the last such combat encounter.

## INTRODUCTION

Without much field work in Laos, and little else to occupy one's time in a dull area, the interval would have been very tiresome had it not been supplemented by a female friend who introduced me to the Thai culture, including the society's customs and mores. It was an enlightening lesson in contrasts between the East and the West, one that helped me to become more tolerant of other people and their variations.

Regardless of the impediments involved in my upgrading to Captain status, I attempted to maintain some sense of equilibrium and looked forward to an improved 1963.

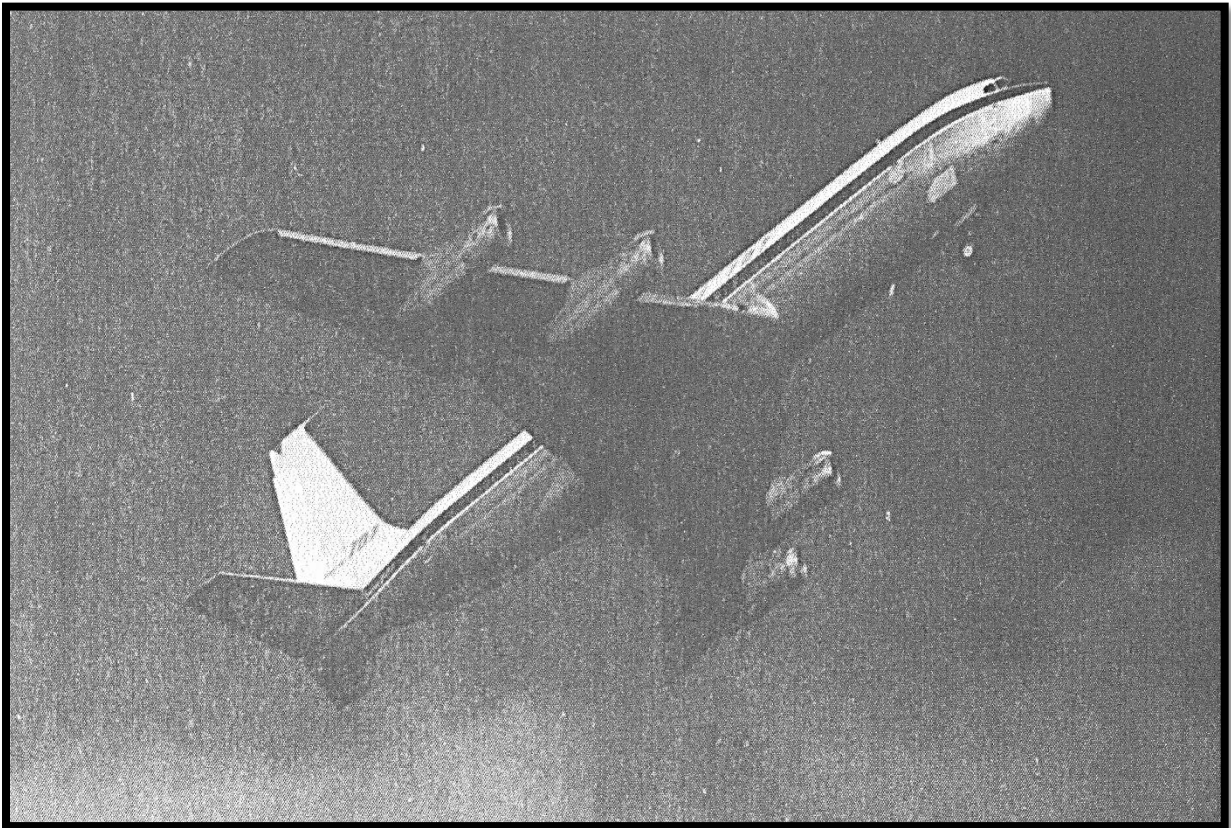
HRC



**O**n Monday evening, 10 September 1962, I departed my ancestral home in New Jersey for an adventure abroad. After boarding New York Airways, a recently formed helicopter air taxi company, I shuttled from Newark Airport past the green verdigris clad Lady Liberty and over the soaring buildings and busy streets of New York City, where my Father had labored for forty years, to the massive complex that encompassed New York Idlewild Airport, later to be named John F. Kennedy International Airport. After boarding the Northwest Orient 707 jet flight to Chicago, there was a considerable delay departing the gate while awaiting air traffic control clearance. Then, as we slowly taxied toward the runway, an aircraft in front of us blew a tire, sandwiching us among a long procession of other air carriers waiting for takeoff. This incident, and others previously experienced on airlines, made me wonder where my place in commercial aviation lay.

With the advent of international jet powered aircraft in 1958, the world had drastically shrunk in size. Many hours had been shaved off both domestic and international overseas flights, and the often-unreliable performance of turboprop airlines was reduced to minor maintenance annoyances.

I had never flown first class in a Boeing 707 and was bewildered, for after departing Chicago and the seatbelt lights were extinguished, there was a flurry of activity, with passengers hustling toward the limited overhead sleeping compartments. As a naïve air traveler, I had missed out claiming



A Boeing 707 in a climb. This early model commercial jet was far more comfortable and reliable than the vibrating turboprop planes.

one of the few first come-first serve sleeping berths. <sup>1</sup>

Fairbanks, Alaska, was as dark as the interior of a huge Buffalo septic tank that I had once ventured into in Dunellen, New Jersey, and very little of the state could be seen from either the air or ground. While the ground crew refueled our ship, we were allowed to disembark on the tarmac, and walk to the small air terminal. After hours of dehydrating cabin air conditioning and smoke, I gratefully inhaled the pure mountain air. However, I also felt the bitter cold, as, anticipating the hot, tropical climate of Southeast Asia, I was dressed in summer attire.

The Captain did not radio or announce "Feet Wet" while passing from the Alaskan land mass outbound over the Pacific Ocean, as I had done so many times during ship to shore movements during my Marine Corps tour. <sup>2</sup>

Losing a day crossing the International Date Line, we arrived late Wednesday evening at Tokyo, and Japan's Haneda Airport. Fatigued, and with frayed nerves, the baggage delay and processing through customs seemed unduly long and frustrating.

While waiting for the Nippers to get their act together, I struck up a conversation with a fellow passenger, who I learned was bound for the same destination. Howard Estes, a former U.S. Army warrant officer, hoping to earn a few dollars, had also opted for the life of a soldier of fortune. <sup>3</sup> The wiry, rawboned Floridian had temporarily left his family behind, with plans to

---

<sup>1</sup> These accommodations were later replaced by carry-on luggage bins.

<sup>2</sup> Feet Wet: A Navy-Marine term employed during shore to ship operations to announce leaving land and flying over water. The opposite, "Feet Dry" would connote movement from ocean to land.

<sup>3</sup> Soldier of Fortune: This phrase is not used in the literal sense, but merely as a figurative term. Although somewhat maligned for United States Government (USG) political reasons at times, we Air America employees never were mercenaries.

relocate them to Udorn after the three-month mandatory Company probation period.

A Company handler was assigned to ease our way through customs to a fine Western oriented hotel, where we would have a welcome rest before resuming our journey.

The following morning after breakfast, having a few hours to spend before continuing the trip to Air America's corporate headquarters at Taipei, Taiwan, while Estes searched for a barber shop, I elected to stroll through the hotel arcade. Still groggy from the long journey, but rejecting the tempting pleasure of a Japanese hot bath and massage, I entered a restroom to wash my face and attempt to restore some equilibrium. I noticed a short, well-built Westerner standing at one of the urinals with a swollen, bruised, and lacerated face no mother could love. He looked like someone had recently administered severe corporal punishment with the benefit of a two by four. Always a curious person, I asked him what happened. I discovered that he was a fly-weight professional boxer from the States, who had lost a match to a worthy Japanese opponent the previous night. I wondered what his rival looked like, and silently thought those gutsy individuals really earned their money.

We continued our journey to Taipei on a Civil Air Transport plane. CAT was one of several companies in the organization. Through political manipulations, CAT enjoyed a coveted Southeast Asian commercial route from Taiwan that justified its existence, and served as a cover for the airline's more clandestine activities. CAT was also one of the prime movers of Company employees throughout the extensive Far East system. <sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Stations existed at Osaka and Tokyo, Japan; Okinawa; Taipei; Seoul Korea; Hong Kong; Bangkok, Thailand, and other locations.

The elegant Mandarin jet, a Convair 880 painted with a golden fuselage and dragons adorning each side, was certainly one of a kind among all world carriers.<sup>5</sup> The interior décor was equally stunning. The expertly crafted cabin section paneling was complemented by a dark red background amid golden oriental dragons and roosters (phoenix). Thick red carpeting and plush wide seats added to the luxurious interior. From nose to tail the machine reeked of affluence and opulence. Such lush appointments had the desired effect of making one feel like an Oriental potentate.

Further reflecting the airline leaders' discriminating taste, the female attendants were selected from the finest, upscale Taiwanese families. Comely efficient stewardesses, dressed in fetching high-necked Cheongsams with eye-popping thigh-high slits, charmingly offered us sweets. They were lovely creatures, which made my youthful heart pound a little. Clinging to lithe bodies, their silk dresses appeared to ripple provocatively as they gracefully walked along the aisle. Not long after we established ourselves in our assigned seats and installed the mandatory seat belt, the delightful girls offered us steaming scented towels to refresh our faces and arms. It was certainly nice to be pampered, and I thought that American carriers had a lot to learn from the CAT airline. Thus relaxed in the pleasant surroundings, Howard and I enjoyed our final

---

<sup>5</sup> CAT's jet: In 1960 Civil Air Transport purchased a Convair 880M. CAT was the first Asian airline to operate jets in the Far East system. It began Mandarin service on 12 July 1961. Stuart E. Dew was one of the original Captains who flew out of Taiwan. During December 1967 the 880 was sold to Cathay Pacific Airlines and was replaced with a B-727.



The CAT Convair 880M with some of the plush interior decoration.  
Author Collection.



Smiling Civil Air Transport air hostesses.  
*Air America Log.*

leg to the "head shed," while swapping war stories to pass the time.

At Taipei, as opposed to the previous niceties we had experienced, a subtle change began to surface. Perhaps as an attempt to economize, Howard and I were housed together at the Prince Hotel on Chung Shan Road, not far from the Company headquarters building. A preliminary visit to the personnel office divulged that we would be moving on very soon, as there was an "immediate need for us in the field." Disappointed that there would not be sufficient time to sightsee, I was bitterly reminded of the time that while still in HMM-261 on the USS *Thetis Bay*, of the Chicken of the Sea's denial of ship's company liberty in Kaoshung, Taiwan.

Friday morning at the Air America office provided a whirlwind of housekeeping activity. I was required to sign numerous legal forms and scan Company manuals. While reading the text, I learned that I was worth 10,000 dollars dead, while conducting normal work, and twice that amount for demise during hazardous action. Since the paragraph was not specific, I attempted to read between the lines, but still wondered what it really meant.

Amid the paperwork activity, I talked briefly to key people in the organization.

During the required interview with Vice President of Flight Operations, Robert Rousselot, a man I had met earlier in Hong Kong with Connie Barsky, I was reminded of the immediate need for me in the field. The phrase marked a frequent repetition, one I was beginning to have doubts about and dislike. Bob was aware that I had recently been with the 3rd MEU in Udorn, and had talked at least twice to CJ Abadie about the job. Knowing this, the tall, imposing man indicated that he and President Hugh Grundy had completed a visit to the Air America facility at



Udorn in August. He stated that I would not recognize the present airfield complex, as all the old torn-up areas were now paved and many other improvements had been implemented since June. I accepted this information at face value, wondering how such a transformation could have taken place in the short time since I had departed for Okinawa and the States.

Then our pleasant, one-sided conversation changed. In what I perceived as an intimidating tone of voice, he stressed at length the Company policy forbidding employee possession of firearms. The former Marine strongly advised that, if I had a handgun in the bottom of my sea bag, to turn it in before leaving Taipei. Locking his stern, accusing eyes with mine, I protested, saying that I did not own or carry a gun with me. During this diatribe, he further impressed on me that having a weapon was the quickest way to termination. I had the distinct feeling that he did not believe me. By then, I was getting tired of his banal talk. I had just arrived in Southeast Asia and had no intention of breaking any Company rules.

Confused, I recalled seeing a crewman standing beside a HUS-1 helicopter on the Air America taxi ramp one afternoon. He was wearing a handgun just after arriving from Laos. Apparently, since I had left Udorn a big change had occurred. I wondered what happened to a man's right under the Constitution's Second Amendment to bear arms.

During the remainder of the session with the imposing Rousselot, although I knew quite a bit about the work in Laos, nothing was divulged regarding the nature of the job. Further information would come from my actual experience.

Overall, I considered the short, upbeat, standard interview a to-the-point pep talk. It was also apparent that Rousselot was a tough, no nonsense strong-willed boss. I was certainly glad that I would not be working directly for him. In addition, it

was evident that it would never pay to be included to his sierra list. I was relieved when the conversation was completed, and I eagerly departed his office.

All that remained of the check-in procedure was the flight physical. The tests went well until Doctor Lee asked me to squat. I had not anticipated this, and was not sure my stiff left knee would bear the endeavor. I had to force myself to bend down, and was just able to grunt my way through the maneuver. I was surprised that Doctor Lee was not able to discern that I had a problem; perhaps he chose to ignore my abnormal manner of crouching.

With Company processing complete, Howard and I were released until our scheduled flight the following afternoon. While in the Army Howard had been stationed in Germany and had never experienced a tour in the Far East. Therefore, as we wandered around the local area, I attempted to familiarize him with a few sights, sounds, and smells of Taiwan that were not unlike those characteristic of other Asian cities. By then, I was fairly familiar with these, particularly the odors, such as the repulsive ones that wafted from exposed sewerage (benjo) ditches lining the streets of Naha, Okinawa. From a distance, wrinkling my nose, I noted that products on the "honey buckets" (ox drawn carts filled with human excrement) were used on this island as a time-honored fertilizer to aid in growing vegetables.

Consistent with my life experiences, it was my custom to sample and compare the delights of ladies in various ports of call in the countries I visited. I was never fond of dark, smoky bars and night clubs, but appreciated their value as a meeting place for potential material. At one of these establishments, I made contact with a lady of the evening and arranged to visit her the next day at her apartment.

Arriving there, I discovered that she lived with several other ladies following the same profession. Male friends were present. The usual Asian card games were in progress. The chaos reminded me of the relentless clacking of Mah Jong tiles in the Philippines. There is nothing quite like the gathering of Chinese and the incessant hubbub associated with it. All were talking, laughing, and intent on making as much noise as they possibly could. If local color was what I desired, then local color is what I received.

Time passed much too quickly, and it was getting close to departure time for my flight to Bangkok. Finally, with introductions and pleasantries out of the way, I managed to corner my lass in an adjoining room. But what was this? I was shocked to see her bare abdomen covered with transverse parallel marks. Unaccustomed to the sight, I thought it might be some form of disease. It was at that time that this "man of the world" discovered that stretch marks were often associated with childbirth. This seemed contrary to the ancient profession, for prostitutes were not supposed to have children. It appeared I had a lot to learn.

Musing that I was forever cursed with women and flight schedules, I hurried back to the hotel. Fortunately, Howard had already packed my bag, leaving time for a quick shower prior to the final leg of our 12,000-mile trip from home.

Once established on the CAT aircraft, endearingly named the "Golden Worm" by some disrespectful wag, we continued our journey 500 miles to Hong Kong. While conducting what looked like a hairy final approach to Kai Tak Airport low over a high-rise antenna-festooned hilltop housing complex, I could see that a recent typhoon had piled debris high along the rock lined perimeter of the runway. Reclaimed from the bay, the airstrip looked like a dirty sword jutting far out into the dark bay.

Having visited the area twice before on a U.S. Navy carrier, I wondered how many more times I would return to this interesting place.

## **THAILAND**

It was late in the evening when Estes and I arrived at Don Muang Airport north of Bangkok. <sup>6</sup> Despite the gathering darkness, while descending the mobile stairway, I was struck in the face by a blast of scorching heat radiating from the black tarmac. I had experienced something like this on my visit to Las Vegas while cycling overseas, but that condition was accompanied by low humidity. Departing the air-conditioned plane into the sticky and steamy high humidity of Bangkok produced an instant sweat that created a distinct shock to one's body.

Far from being a modern international airport, Don Muang authorities required planes to park a considerable distance from the small terminal. Disembarking passengers were required to ride to the terminal in uncomfortable busses that we called "cattle cars" during USMC training at Quantico, Virginia.

The discomfort of the climate and the eighteen-mile drive to the city was forgotten when I saw the green and white Erawan Hotel. Reputed to be one of Bangkok's finest establishments, I had lodged in nicer places, but this one literally reeked of Asian quality. The furniture in my room was solid teak and the closets were manufactured from sandal wood, or some other aromatic product that exuded a most delightful fragrance. I was indeed impressed with these pleasant surroundings.

The next day there was a rush to get us to the airport, and our final destination: the field. Hurry, hurry, hurry. It had

---

<sup>6</sup> Bangkok: The actual name of the city was Krung Thep. It was shortened because the actual ancient designation for the city was quite long. The shortened version translated as the "City of Angels."

been that way the entire trip. Granted, at each stop we had been met by competent, friendly employees and treated very well, but there always seemed to be a gentle push to keep moving when I felt that I could use a rest.

After waiting most of the day outside the Air America terminal office, we were directed to an unpainted silver C-47 courier plane, piloted by a tall man with flaming, red hair. His name, naturally, was "Red" Fredricks, who flew daily "milk runs" to various airports in Thailand and Mekong River towns in Laos.<sup>7</sup>

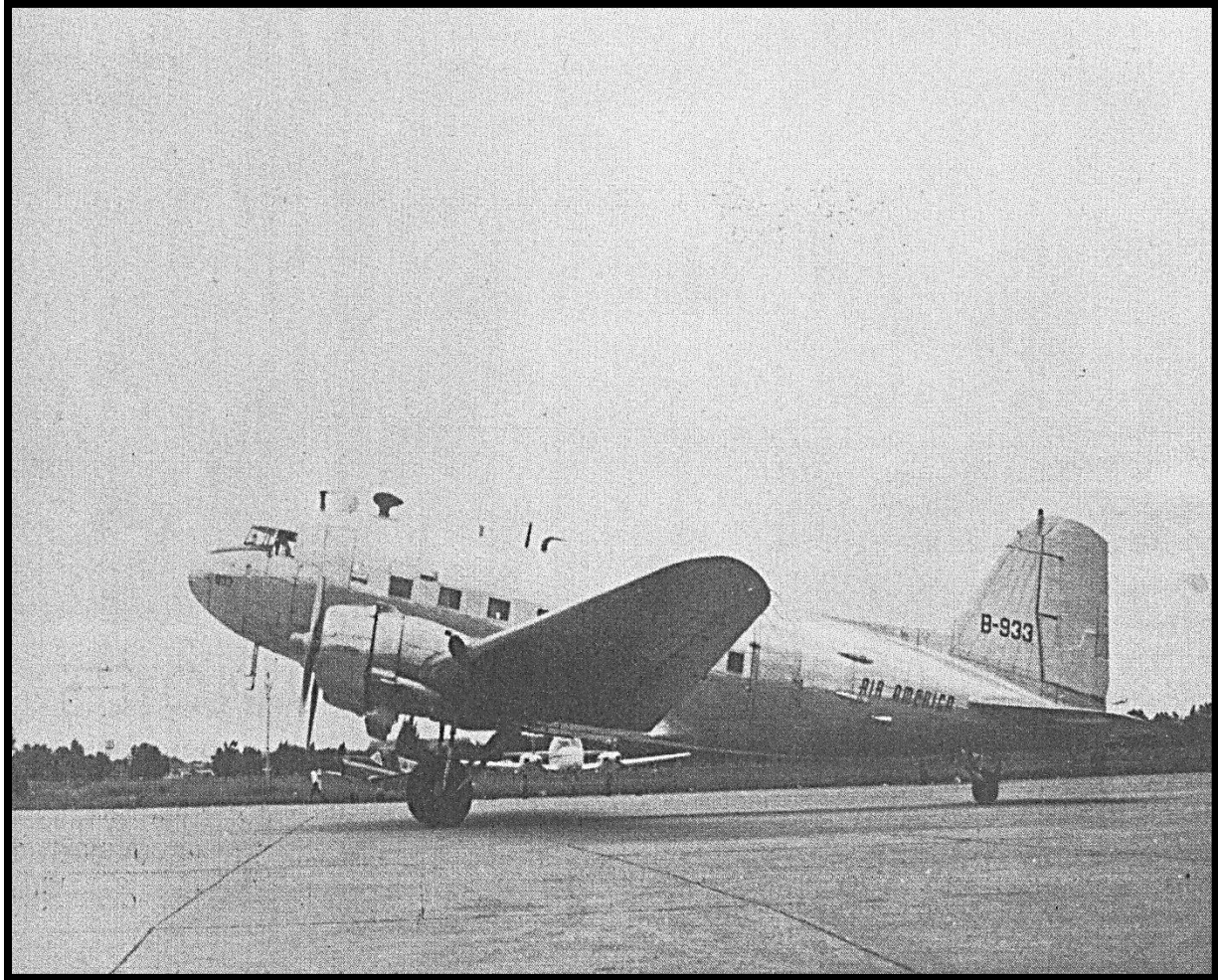
## **UDORN**

It was late afternoon when we arrived at the Udorn Airport and offloaded on the vacant concrete commercial ramp. This was to be my home for most of the next twelve years. Situated in a location a fair distance from the Air America facility, the area looked much the same as when I had left less than three months previously. Because of the continuing monsoon season, puddles of water stood everywhere.

It was disappointing. Now that we had finally arrived in Rousselot's highly touted "field," there was no fanfare, ruffles, or flourishes, not a single person to meet us. I again recalled previous intermediate stops where we had been assisted by the most courteous and helpful Company representatives. I had become used to this "kid glove treatment" and was confused by

---

<sup>7</sup> Milk Run: Non-hazardous contract flights carrying Customer and Vientiane Embassy staff, various VIPs, Company personnel, furniture, commissary goods, and the like to outstations. Civil Air Transport maintained a Douglas C-47 in Thailand during the 1950s to support the Thai Police Aerial Resupply Unit (PARU) advised by Bill Lair and funded by the CIA. Airdrops in Laos were performed from Thai bases. In June 1957 C-47 B-817 was awarded a contract with the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane, Laos.



The Don Muang Airport based Air America C-47.  
*Air America Log*, Volume 5, #7, 1971.

the lack of cordiality at our final destination. Although I was aware that we were in what could be considered the boondocks, with no shelter from the heat or elements, I silently hoped this latest development was not a harbinger of future events. Recognizing that I was exhausted from jet lag, and what energy remaining to me was fast being depleted by the residue of the day's oppressive humidity and heat radiating from the concrete ramp, I elected to reserve judgement regarding our pitiful reception until I had time to rest.

After what seemed an eternity, a driver arrived in a blue and white Volkswagen bus to deliver us to the Chief Pilot office. En route, we rumbled over the same rutted laterite taxiway and by the same shabby wooden buildings I remembered in June. The area was still messy and rudimentary. Where were the paving and gross changes "I would not recognize," that Rousselot had glowingly mentioned during my captive interview? Perhaps I had misunderstood him, or the improvements were so covert that they were invisible. If this was change, God help us.

Actually, some improvements had evolved or been effected, of which I was unaware. On 15 September 1961, the MABS unit from Okinawa (i.e. USMC) had made final transfer of all base functions to Air America, Inc. However, it was not until August of the following year that plans went forward for seven new construction projects in which the Madriver Operation was to be concentrated in a fenced area to enhance security, efficiency, and to reduce costs. The seven new construction projects included a future employee recreation hall. By June, some construction had begun on a drainage ditch beside the compound and parallel to the taxiway, while work on an aircraft work ramp and parking area in front of the hangars continued. August saw a supply building and hangar extension completed, but the area



A Company leased blue and white Volkswagen microbus leading an Air America C-47 in from the Chiang Mai Airfield. Known as "B-busses," common to most outstations, the vehicles were used for years, hauling employees and their gear to and from work.

*Air America Log, Volume 7, #6, 1973.*





A late 1962 summer view of the HUS-1 parking ramp and developing Air America compound. Separating the two was churned up land, unfinished perimeter fencing, and a fledgling drainage canal, later called the Mad River after the name of the contract. Within the main facility, the double hangar extension, and a supply building had been completed.

Air America Archives.

within the facility remained in disarray, both muddy and chaotic looking.<sup>8</sup>

The vehicle stopped in front of a barracks-like, weathered timber sided, and tin-roofed, operations building that perched on low stilts. The structure was approximately twenty feet wide, ninety feet long, and was roughly oriented on a north-south axis. At the north end an office consumed the full width of the building. The remainder of the structure contained several offices encompassing half the width of the building, with the remaining half a combination screened porch and hallway. Three sets of steps and screened doors adorned the porch side of the building.

The full width office had a sliding plate glass window and a counter opening onto the porch section. This contained an aircraft and ground transportation dispatch capability, and a message center. The second office contained CJ Abadie's Thai clerks, Bannie and Supone. Next to the clerks was the Chief Pilot office. Between an empty space lay Base Manager Ben Moore's office. Security Chief Jim Baron occupied the room next to Moore. The seventh and final office housed a small medical clinic staffed by kindly Doctor Kao and a Thai nurse.<sup>9</sup>

Captain Abadie's demeanor was polite but cool.<sup>10</sup> It was a reception opposite from what I had expected, and I had the impression he was not particularly happy to see us. Moreover, he appeared surprised, claiming that he had not been advised of our

---

<sup>8</sup> Air America Project Manager, Ben Moore's monthly report to Taipei, Taiwan Company headquarters. Information from Moore's well-crafted and always humorous text is liberally used in this book to describe a senior management eyewitness account of the building progress and other issues at the Air America facility.

<sup>9</sup> Jim Coble Email.

<sup>10</sup> We soon discovered that Abadie preferred being called Ab rather than Clarence. In later years, I learned from a friend who knew him when they were boys in La Place, Louisiana, he was then known as Manny.



A portion of the early Air America Udorn Operations-Administration building during a flood period. Employee mode of transportation parked in front.

CJ Abadie Collection.

arrival. Since Air America employed a system wide flight following system, I considered this omission curious--so much for our immediate "need in the field." <sup>11</sup>

Released by Abadie, we were driven six kilometers to the Prachapakdi Hotel. The two-story concrete structure was located on Prachak Road in a business district I had not previously fully explored. The establishment was owned and operated by a security conscious, strict Chinese couple, who allowed no women of the night or hanky-panky on the premises. The "Prach," one of three or more hotels recommended for Westerners, was reputed to be the best available, but it was not anywhere near comparable with the luxurious accommodations I had enjoyed on previous days.

Despite being tired, I spent a restless night on the wooden bed. Sans springs, wooden slats were covered by a thin mattress stuffed with hard packed cotton or kapok. Perhaps suitable for a slightly built Thai frame, the lumpy mattress was unforgiving to my soft Western body. With the shutters closed against nocturnal insect intrusion, the large second story room smelled strongly of mosquito spray. Devoid of air conditioning, the unfamiliar room was also hot, dark, and cavernous. Therefore, faced with these conditions, I dozed in a semi-wakeful state throughout the long night.

The room faced the main street. Further disturbing restful sleep, during early morning hours, the street exploded into a

---

<sup>11</sup> Jim Coble, Email. As CJ Abadie's assistant, Coble could not understand the lack of notification of our arrival at Udorn. Any message traffic between Taipei and Udorn regarding our arrival and need for hotel space and forward transportation to Udorn would have been copied to Udorn. Station to station traffic would have been generated covering our arrival-time-mode. Unless there was a complete breakdown in the system, he believed there was less than full attention paid to this cable traffic at the Udorn Air America facility.



The Prachapakdi Hotel in the Udorn business district. Reputedly the finest hotel available in town, Howard Estes, Jim Spillis, and I billeted here until finding a suitable rental house. Despite being a late 1960s photo, and except for vehicles, which were scarce in 1962, the hotel is largely unchanged as of the writing of this book.

Author Collection.

hubbub of noise and bustling activity, when both human and animal life erupted into the new day. Arising groggily, I vowed to never spend another night in that cursed room.

The understanding "Mama San" acknowledged my problem, indicating that more desirable rooms had not been available when I arrived.<sup>12</sup> As a result of our protestations, Howard and I were moved to a newer and quieter part of the hotel located to the rear of the inner courtyard. To conserve our meager funds, we shared a second-floor double room for three dollars a day. Using Yankee ingenuity, we added an extra mattress to our beds for increased comfort. For a small sum, Nun, our young houseboy, provided us with a plate of eggs and toast in the morning. This included copious amounts of hot Chinese tea. Around the clock a teapot, nestled snugly in a silver bucket that was lined and covered with quilted pads like a British cozy, sat on a table outside our door. Since the water was boiled during preparation and tap water was considered unsafe to drink, I consumed large amounts and soon came to love tea.<sup>13</sup>

The next few days were spent processing into the local Air America system. We gradually acquainted ourselves with the operation by reading Company manuals, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and conversing with pilots who comprised the station's helicopter and fixed units.

Except for Abadie, one of the first management types we met was base Security Chief, Jim Baron. A rotund person, Jim was a retired former Army policeman, who had spent several years based on Taiwan. Of all the personnel in Air America, Jim was the only

---

<sup>12</sup> Mama San: An endearing term GIs stationed on Okinawa and Japan used for older Asian females. As with most military slang, the label spread to other Southeast Asian countries, and was used in lieu of actual names that might have been unknown, or in the case of the Thai people very difficult for a Westerner, or even Thais, to pronounce.

<sup>13</sup> Today I drink two to three half liters of green tea while writing in the morning.

one to befriend Howard and me during our early days of "snapping in." Perhaps this was the case because we constituted no threat to him, as we did to the helicopter pilots in preserving their precious flight time. Possessing a Company Jeep, Baron introduced us to the local area and evening open-air restaurants. He was full of information, and we initially learned more about the overall operation from him than anyone else.

Surprisingly, Jim covertly sold weapons. Remanded to security by departing personnel and others anxious regarding a loss of their jobs if they did not relinquish their weapons, when Company policy stipulated that possession and carrying guns was cause for termination with prejudice, he amassed a large arsenal. I was amazed at his sideline, and never could understand how Jim was allowed to conduct his veiled arms business, especially when official Company policy was so adamant against employee possession of firearms.<sup>14</sup> I wondered if there was a clandestine unofficial policy sanctioned by local management.

Baron indicated that most pilots, despite the policy, still carried handguns upcountry, but he was largely unconcerned if they were kept hidden in their luggage. Since we had recently been read the riot act in Taipei by Rousselot, and did not recognize a need for one, we both declined a weapon purchase.

As Jim listed and described what hardware was available, he mentioned a unique piece that he called "Baby." This was a sawed-off double-barreled shotgun complete with a cleverly fashioned swivel holster that Ed Subowsty turned in when he was sent home for malfeasance. As the Subowsty incident was related

---

<sup>14</sup> Actually, the restriction on carrying weapons on board civilian crewed helicopters and planes was a State Department policy to satisfy Geneva Accords protocols.

to us, it was evident why Company policy had been altered since my military stint in Udorn, and why management was so adamant about employees not possessing firearms.

### **THE GUN FLAP**

Personal weapons had always been available to crewmembers either through the auspices of White Star Special Forces personnel, or pipelines of Air America crewmembers.

Since there was a Thai law prohibiting possession of firearms, and to minimize firearm incidents in town, secure gunroom storage lockers had long been established in the old administration building. Crews were encouraged to safeguard all weapons and ammunition there between upcountry flights. However, there was no actual accounting, and many times pilots took their weapons home to provide added anti-thievery insurance. This was more evident during the rainy season when some Thai men were out of work and the incidence of break-ins dramatically increased.

### **THE INCIDENT**

After a bout of serious drinking during the early summer, Ed Subowsty and his roommates returned to their rented house to discover the landlord, who might have been working for the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), a secret agency of the Thai police, rummaging through their letters and personal effects. Incensed at this invasion of personal privacy, they proceeded to rough him up and eject him from the house. Still angry and not satisfied with this action, Subowsty commenced to shoot holes in the Thai King's picture that was positioned high on the living room wall in a place of honor and customary Thai respect.

The event might have passed largely unnoticed locally had it not been for the disgruntled landlord, who reported the



pilots' action to local authorities. Shooting the revered King's picture threatened to become a political boondoggle in a country of sensitive people. Therefore, in order to preserve its favored status in the host country, Air America and VPFO Rousselot, with few available options, and under pressure from the Thai government, acted with haste. Within twenty-four hours, the well liked Subowsty and his roomie were terminated and quietly hustled out of the country. Jerry Souders, who was present and claimed he had not actually participated in the shooting, bribed the police with a carton of cigarettes, and was not implicated in the incident. It was fortunate that the episode was so easily resolved, for the principals could have received extended jail terms or worse by displaying extreme disrespect for the royalty.<sup>15</sup>

The Subowsty incident was not the only abuse of firearms, but marked the most flagrant, harboring disastrous potential political ramifications--that of Air America becoming persona non grata in Thailand, which was a remaining bastion of freedom and friend to America.

Reinforcing the Company's decision to eliminate individual firearms, there had been another shooting incident in Vientiane, Laos. Captain McNaulty, a fixed wing pilot based in Vientiane, was called "McNasty" by his peers. The reason became evident when, bored, drunk, experiencing a personal problem, or a combination of all the above, he began shooting flies off the

---

<sup>15</sup> Depending on the source, the story changed somewhat. Some individuals indicated it was the houseboy ruffling through items, but basic facts are as described--the King's picture was holed. Wayne Knight Email. In a completely different version, Wayne recalled there were four men involved in the incident, two former Marines and two former Army pilots. The shooting resulted over an argument regarding pistol marksmanship. Jerry Souders was vindicated by convincing investigators that he was drunk and passed out on the couch when the shooting took place. However, Jerry later told Wayne that he took part in the shooting.

ceiling of his room. Having emptied his pistol, he was reaching for his Thompson sub-machine gun when authorities smashed through the door. The perpetrator was apprehended and immediately ejected from the country. <sup>16</sup>

When employee weapons were eventually confiscated after the Subowsty incident, and unhappy crews complained bitterly to management about a need for a weapon upcountry, they were told to be content with the .22 caliber rifle contained in the survival kit. This was not satisfactory, and many individuals countered, wanting to know what good the flimsy rifle would be with a tiger charging them in the jungle. <sup>17</sup>

## **FLIGHT CREW UNIFORMS**

Bob Rousselot's Marine Corps service and stern long arm was evident in other ways. Initially, crews, wearing civilian clothes of choice, presented a ragtag undisciplined group that needed to be smartened up. Quasi-military discipline in the form of standard uniforms seemed one method to increase morale and cohesiveness among the increasingly rowdy crew members.

---

<sup>16</sup> Dan "Red" Alston interview in Mobile, Alabama.

<sup>17</sup> Wayne Knight Email. *"There were many factors involved in the weapon prohibition. In addition to ["Nooky"] Hagan's incident [with Bill Cook], there were a couple close calls with accidental discharges involving [Flight Mechanics]. Guys used to carry weapons around with them nearly in the open around Udorn. Wayne recalled [Flight Mechanic] John Wilson with a pistol at a party waving it around [I recall the ground mechanic doing this one time in the old bar, but did not know Wilson's handgun was merely a realistic looking plastic toy]. Some control had to be introduced no matter what may have been dictated by any far-off Geneva Accords. Tom Moher used to carry a burlap bag full of seven guns. Dan Gardner had a locker full of weapons. The first survival kit may have [arrived] during the gun prohibition. It contained an over-under 22/410 [caliber] rifle."*

Jim Coble Email. Jim was sure that all the factors mentioned "contributed to the [employee] gun policy, but the one that fronted was the combat status. The prohibition of guns was based on the legal point that if we were armed, we were combatants and would be more subject to being killed if captured. When the ruling came down from the 'head shed' he recalls no [crewmember] resistance."

In June 1962, while still in the Crotch during the Nam Tha flap, I had observed Flight Mechanic Bill Wilmot standing by the cabin door of a helicopter that had just arrived from Laos. The tall, handsome man looked most impressive wearing jeans, cowboy hat, boots, and a sidearm. To me, he smacked of someone representing the old West. Sporting such attire displayed individualism, a true representation of freebooting, swashbuckling men, consistent with my image of Air America personnel.

Apparently, management thought differently. In August 1962 a decision was rendered requiring all flight personnel to wear standardized uniforms.

Accounts of the uniform genesis varied somewhat, but the issue basically came to the forefront when members of the press began showing up where Air America crews operated in Udorn, Vientiane, and upcountry. After the media started writing about the Air America operation, and taking and posting pictures of flight crews, Washington leaders balked and ordered headquarters Taipei to rectify and improve the organization's image. Wanting to provide the operation with a professional image and blend in with other airlines, they placed Joe Madison, former Regional Director in Thailand, in charge of designing and supplying uniforms to outstations.

Ben Moore, CJ Abadie, and Jim Coble conferred to design the first attempts, and had prototype uniforms fashioned by local "rag butchers." All efforts were considered unsatisfactory. Ab and Jim modeled some versions. Ben snapped photos and forwarded them to Taipei for evaluation. After the first uniforms were rejected as jokes, Joe Madison coordinated with Ben Moore on several changes, until a suitable uniform was finally deemed acceptable and was authorized. A manual was published

delineating exact specifications, so Udorn tailors could manufacture them.

Before the uniform became standardized and mandatory for all flight crews, Captain George "Pinky" Eaton purchased one and wore it all the time. <sup>18</sup>

The changeover was so recent that there were no uniforms in the supply system. This necessitated having them made at a designated tailor shop in town. Even though we had not received our first paycheck, and would not for about a month, we were required to pay for them, and then be reimbursed.

Examples of the uniform hung in the shop. The two-piece polyester outfit consisted of prison gray trousers and a short sleeve shirt. Lending credence to former Marine aviator input in the design, zippered pockets were incorporated toward the lower calf at the outboard portion of the leg. These had existed on our Navy issued flight suits, and were useful for carrying survival items. It was optional to have a knife scabbard sewn on the right hip. The short-sleeved blue-gray shirt contrasted with the trousers, making us look like two-toned jailbirds. A light World War Two Eisenhower type jacket appeared a poor replica that movie actor Stewart Granger, might have worn in one of his jungle or safari movies. A bulky winter coat was functional in cold weather, but had a garish red and black lining. It might have been intended to use to signal an overhead aircraft should the need arise, but it really smacked of a bad hangover.

Rumor circulated that Madison had proposed that pilots wear a blue cravat in lieu of a tie. Perhaps the Company, wanting to dispel a perceived bush pilot image, had plans for us to parade

---

<sup>18</sup> Sources:  
Dan Alston Interview.  
CJ Abadie, Email.  
EW Knight, Email.  
Jim Coble, Email.

and pass in review. Since world-wide commercial airline pilots wore barracks caps, the Company wanted us to wear hats. It was not feasible for helicopter crews to do this in Laos, but it was senseless to fight the system. Even though a barracks cap was issued to all pilots, it was soon evident they were indeed too cumbersome to take upcountry. Instead, an ugly gray train engineer type hat was proffered that no one wanted to wear. Salvaging what was not a popular uniform, was a recent optional addition of a wide brimmed Australian type bush hat. It was patterned on a camouflage cover that had been adopted by U.S. Special Forces White Star teams assigned to Laos. Providing a jaunty look to our bunch, and shading the sun, the slouch hat became very popular with Air America crews.

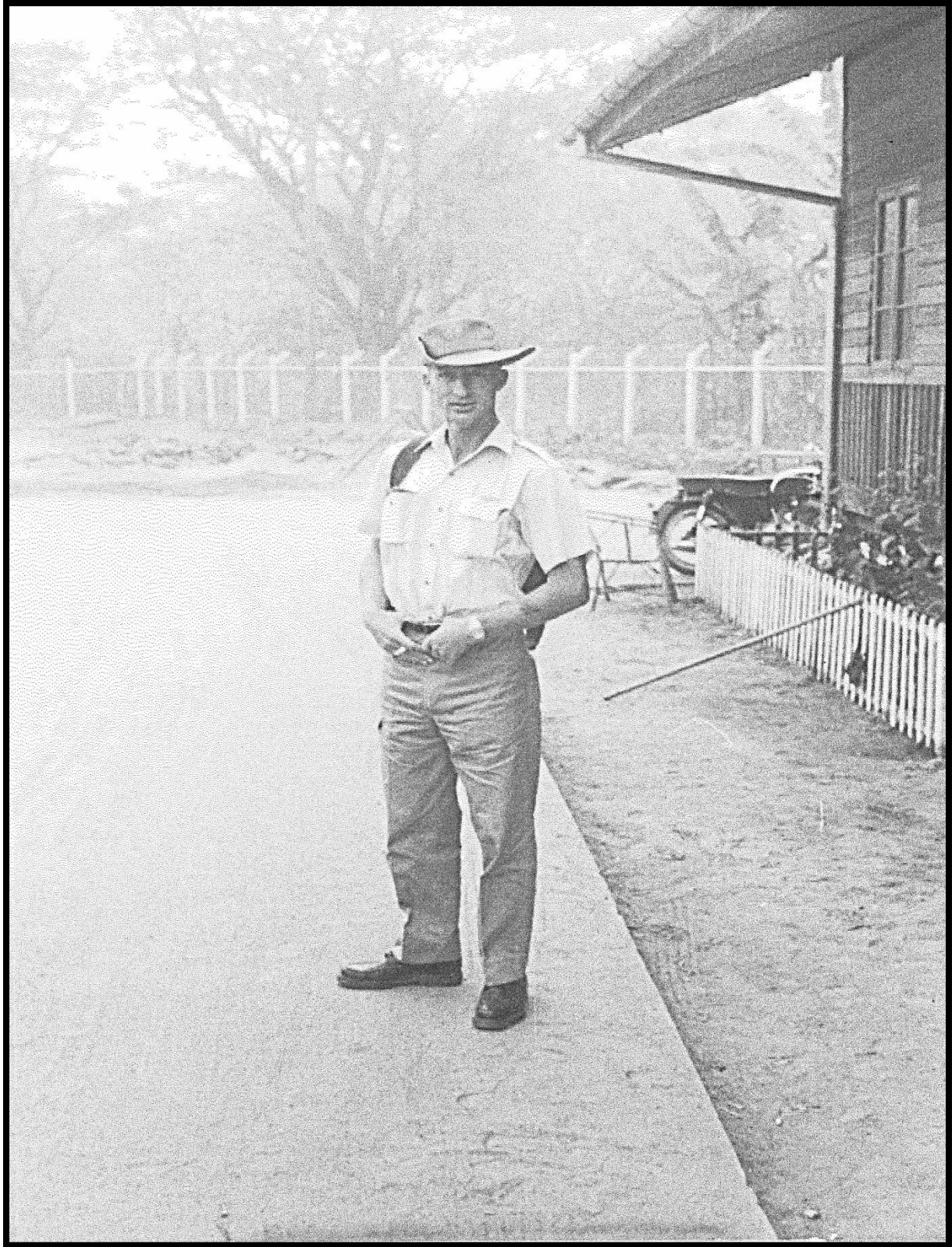
After measuring me for five sets of uniforms, the Thai tailor informed me that there would be a seven to ten-day delay before the clothes would be ready.<sup>19</sup> To round out the complement of uniforms, I had packed my Marine boots and Navy flight helmet. I was well served to do this, for the supply department had no boots and very few helmets to issue.

During the check in period a short red headed individual dressed in civilian clothes arrived in the compound. He escorted Howard and me to a wooden padlocked shack outside the confines of the Air America facility down the access road toward Tahan Thanon (soldiers' road) highway.<sup>20</sup> Inside the building a large situation map of the key shaped Laos graced one entire wall. The

---

<sup>19</sup> There were Indian tailors in town, but local management deferred to the Thai, perhaps to satisfy host country requirements to support the local economy, or because the Thai provided a more reasonable bid.

<sup>20</sup> I was not aware of and was completely naive regarding the Agency's AB-1 name, function, and operation at the time. This would be revealed later.



Captain Bill Pearson wearing the standard Air America uniform.  
Nick Burke Collection.

map and briefing that followed was almost incomprehensible and largely meaningless, as I had no experience in the country, and little reference to the current situation. (Even when my squadron participated in the 3rd MEU Nam Tha flap, I never saw a map of Laos.) Unable to ask intelligent or pertinent questions, it was akin to attending ground school on a new aircraft without initially seeing the unfamiliar item. Had I first flown in Laos the man's briefing would have been considerably more beneficial.

After Nam Tha fell to the enemy, there was a large decrease in pilot flight time, perhaps due to the rainy season, or a change in U.S tactics. Then, since the Geneva Accords on Laos had been signed on 23 July, pilots had been warned that flying would be drastically curtailed. August flight hours continued at a high level, but now it was obvious that the downturn had begun, with a predicted forty-five percent decrease from the May peak 2,800-hour month. Because any new influx of pilots marked a further dilution of flight time, ultimately reducing everyone's paycheck, there was an underlying passive, and even some overt vocal resentment to Howard's and my presence. We were not shunned, but I foolishly had anticipated a jovial fraternity or squadron type atmosphere of camaraderie. This never materialized.

Due to circumstances beyond my control, I was late to the "field," and Elmer Munsell was the last pilot upgraded to Captain in August. Prior to my arrival in Udorn, pilots traditionally only spent a month or two in the left seat learning the ropes. Since most hires had previous military HUS-1 (H-34) experience, a Lao area familiarization was normally the only criteria required for Captain upgrading. This advancement was very important, as pay differentials were substantial as to base and hourly hazardous duty pay (1,050 dollars vs. 650



A map of Laos similar to the one displayed in the Agency AB-1 hut.



dollars; ten dollars vs. five dollars). During my second June interview with CJ Abadie before leaving Thailand, Ab had indicated that two months area familiarization would probably be all that was required to become a Captain. Now the outlook for near term upgrading looked bleak. Obviously, the situation had changed, and although there had never been a requirement for helicopter First Officers before, we discovered that this would probably change. The disclosure was like a slap in the face. Making the situation worse, I had been told along the CAT-Air America pipeline that there was an immediate need for me "in the field." Naturally, I assumed that there was a shortage of Captains necessitating such a rush to Udorn. Now, sadly, I discovered that this was not the case. The revelation was disappointing, confusing, and smacked of the age-old military mentality of "hurry up and wait." Apparently, my timing was still poor regarding major events in my life, and I would have to periodically reassess my situation. Was I being jerked around like the on again-off again roller coaster encountered getting into the Navy flight school in Pensacola? Always the optimist, for the moment I elected to maintain a low profile and attempt to ride out the uncertain situation, hopeful that it would soon be resolved. <sup>21</sup>

Since the numerous helicopter pilots and Flight Mechanics were scattered throughout town, it took some time to become acquainted with all of them. While standing by for flights, I met several regulars, who, either in search of information, conversation, or a pathetic cup of coffee, frequented the former Marine snack bar across the taxiway, or the Air America compound. Other personnel rarely left their homes to make an

---

<sup>21</sup> I used to joke that I would be late to my funeral.

## Air America pilot roster as of 9/17/62

	Date of hire	Military branch
1. Abadie, Clarence J., "Ab"	7/28/60	USMC
2. Alston, Dan, "Red"	1/61	USA
3. Baker, Herb	1/62	USMC
4. Black, Viri	est 61	USA
5. Burke, Nick	6/62	USMC
6. Buxton, Don	3/10/62	USA
7. Casterlin, Harry R. "Dick"	9/13/62	USMCR
8. Coble, Jim	61	USMC
9. Conner, Jack	6/62	USA
10. Cook, Bill	est 62	USA
11. Cox, Barry "Fighter"	8/61	USMC
12. Crafts, Dick	4/2/61	USMC
13. Destefano, Guy	est 61	USMC
14. Eaton, "Pinky" <i>George</i>	8/61	USMC
15. Elder, Dick	12/16/61	USAF
16. Estes, Howard	9/13/62	USA
17. Gardner, Dan	61	USMC
18. George, John	61	USA
19. Halsey, "Skip"	1/62	USN
20. Hitchman, Bob	61	USMC
21. Jordan, Sam	8/4/61	USMC
22. Kanach, Julian "Scratch"	5/10/62	USA
23. Knight, Earl Wayne	11/21/62	USMC
24. Marshall, Mike	7/62	USMC
25. McEntee, Jerry	2/7/62	USA
26. Moher, Tom	6/6/60	USMC
27. Munsell, Elmer	8/62	USA
28. Nelson, Dick	7/62	USA
29. Pearson, Bill "Billy P"	9/29/61	USA
30. Reid, Ed	6/7/62	USA
31. Russell, "Russ"	2/62	USMC
32. Souders, Jerry	61	USMC
33. Weitz, Charlie	9/4/61	USMC
34. Wright, Don	1/62	USA
35. Zeitler, Bill	6/62	USA

Air America Udorn, Thailand 1962 helicopter pilot inventory.  
Compiled by the Author.

appearance at the field, except to collect mail, or depart on a flight north. Air America helicopter pilots represented a diverse group of men, roughly divided equally between former U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Army aviators. Although formerly military, Skip Halsey was an older type and could probably be called an authentic Alaska bush pilot. Representing the sole USAF pilot, Dick Elder rounded out the group. Noticeably missing were former Navy pilots. All current pilots were civilians, the last "temporarys" having phased out during the late fall of 1961. A few of the "temps" attached to the Madriver Operation, savoring the adventurous flying and big money, returned to their military units, hastily terminated all service attachments, and were soon back in Udorn. <sup>22</sup>

## RECREATION

When flight time contracted and fewer helicopter crews were required upcountry, the men experienced excess time off. Therefore, many socially minded pilots and a few Flight Mechanics gravitated to the snack bar to eat, drink, play darts, or gamble. Poker was always a popular activity, and became a

---

<sup>22</sup> Temporary pilots: A generalization applied to U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine Corps H-34 pilots, who by President Kennedy's and the Joint Chiefs of Staff direction, were "sheep dipped," or recruited, and removed from military pay rosters. The aviators were loaned to Air America during March 1961 to crew the sixteen bailed HUS-1/H-34s for the Madriver Operation to support the Royal Lao Government in the fight against communism and to help bolster the rapidly deteriorating Lao Theater.

Because of difficult flying conditions, enemy hostility, and pay disputes, most military pilots did not remain long with Air America, and were allowed to return to their respective services. After Army pilot Ed Shore was captured in May 1961, no additional "Temps" were solicited and introduced to the equation. In order to adhere to the Geneva Agreements that specified no foreign military personnel were allowed in Laos, the "Temps" were replaced on a one-on-one basis by bona fide American civilians, who were normally experienced former military H-34 pilots.

high stakes affair. A partial list of serious poker players included: Captains Guy DeStefano, Bill Cook, Skip Halsey, John George, Pinky Eaton, Jack Connors, Dan Gardner, Jerry Souders, Mike Marshall, Charlie Weitz, and Dick Nelson. Flight Mechanics who participated were Carl Gable and John Timmons. Wayne Knight sat in on a couple of games, but the pots proved too rich for him. He left a game and did not play again after folding when faced with a 400-dollar bet. Nick Burke was a good poker player, but the family man never had sufficient money to match the payday stakes.

The diminished pay checks did not appear to affect the nightly poker games. They continued in earnest. The difference now was that there were an increasing number of personal markers and bogus checks in the huge pots. Perhaps some unlucky players counted on a quick return to flying in Laos and big money to cover their losses. Players never stopped drinking during the games, and this caused some debts to escalate. One older pilot, Dick Nelson, usually in his cups, lost so much money to the sharks (some players reputedly cheated) that he was barred from the games. Conversely, Jerry Souders, who did not play well, would get drunk and win regardless of his condition.

One evening Charlie Weitz amassed a great deal of money. Afterward he donned a Hong Kong purchased suit and drove downtown on his motorcycle for something to eat at the local noodle shop. When it was time to pay the bill, he opened a suitcase crammed full of his winnings and plucked a note out. At 0300 hours he drove to Nick Burke's house and pounded on the door to inform him about fulfilling this life-long fantasy.<sup>23</sup>

To me, addiction to chance seemed a puzzling way to mortgage one's future, but then again, crews had been gambling

---

<sup>23</sup> Wayne Knight Email.  
Mike Marshall Interviews.

with their lives ever since working for Air America. Always a poor card player, I chose not to participate, but I did frequent the games, particularly to absorb the Damon Runyon like conversations and learn what I could about upcountry work, and colorful war stories regarding the fall of Nam Tha, and the crew's efforts during this period.

## **HOUSING**

At the time of my arrival in Udorn a few stout-hearted families resided there. Because of a lack of adequate medical facilities, schools, unsanitary and primitive living conditions, and uncertain security, the Company had previously discouraged wives and children from locating to the town.

Some of the problem was prevalent at the beginning of the Madriver Operation. People began hearing rumors about enemy activity in the northeast. Communist terrorists (CT) reportedly had teams scattered throughout the northeast, with a concentration located west of Nong Khai, Thailand, along the Mekong River and another large group near Paksane.

Air America management was worried about security at the airfield. On several occasions, Thai guards reported brief encounters with CTs at the west end of the runway. Thai police reported incidents through the Agency's AB-1 division. As reports of CTs persisted, Air America personnel were cautioned not to venture out at night in certain areas, and people did not go far out of Udorn during the day. There was some suspicion that much of the reporting was circulated to obtain more American aid for the border police patrol units, and to keep Americans in check around town.

It is believed that signing the Geneva Accords on Laos in 1962 lessened regional tensions.

Blending in with the locals, Filipino and Chinese families arrived first, followed by one or two American wives. Captain Viril Black's wife and children were among early arrivals.<sup>24</sup>

Now, with plans for an expanded Air America facility, including additional "creature comforts," and paychecks already reflecting a downturn in work, dependents were beginning to relocate from Bangkok. At a fraction of what they had paid in Bangkok, many families had rented superior accommodations. Most Thai houses were stilt type, constructed of lackluster rough hard wood that abounded in northeast forests. Since malaria was nearly eliminated in the city, screens for doors and windows were considered by the common man to be an expensive and unnecessary luxury, and few houses were equipped with them. Better appointed Western style cement houses or villas complete with terrazzo floors were rare. They belonged to the wealthy or more sagacious Thai entrepreneurs, who had envisioned a need for upgraded foreign type housing that would appeal to Americans.

The majority of younger American employees tended to gravitate to compounds containing small single bedroom bungalows. Having Thai or Chinese wives, or girlfriends called temporary wives, they felt comfortable living close together. The concept afforded some protection against crafty Thai thieves, who were normally poor rice farmers, or samlor drivers out of work during the annual monsoon season that turned to crime to support their families.

Housing unit clusters were located in various locations throughout town, and assumed quaint names like Asian Acres.

Housing for Air America employees had increasingly been made available. It was considerably improved since the first influx of personnel early in 1961 had saturated the area, and

---

<sup>24</sup> CJ Abadie Interviews.



Although the city was modernized by 1996, the stilt type Thai house, common in 1962 Udon, still prevailed on the town perimeter. The structure was raised to take advantage of cooling air and to keep thieves, vermin, and ground insects out. The clay klong jar was used to collect and store rain water.

Author Collection.

people were forced to live in dingy hotels, and operate out of tents. Further enhancing the importance of these compounds was the ease of disseminating the daily flight schedule and the assembling of crews for early morning departures.

To defray the outrageously high rents charged by gouging, opportunist landlords, some crewmembers lived two to three in a large house. This arrangement worked well, as usually one or more pilots was always absent, either working upcountry, or on scheduled time off (STO). Other pilots with families still housed in Bangkok lived in the wooden Mapakdi Hotel, where rent was reasonable, and unlike in the staid Pratch, other services could be easily obtained.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

Modes of transportation in town were generally primitive, but functional. Most of the "old timers" owned Honda motorbikes or motorcycles imported from Japan (Honda was the leading manufacturer at the time).<sup>25</sup> Automobiles, as rare as authentic ice cream, were owned only by more privileged Thai like the governor, the owner and director of the fledgling hospital, and other high-ranking civil servants. Even the small number of Jeeps driven by Thai military officers and police were seldom seen in such a small town, containing few paved streets. These main roads ultimately petered out to dusty laterite side roads and paths near the township's outskirts.

To satisfy the populace's requests for items that could not be obtained locally, Thai drivers, maneuvering Japanese-manufactured trucks over questionable roads north, occasionally made the long journey from Bangkok to deliver luxury and consumables to business merchants. However few and far between,

---

<sup>25</sup> Old timer: Unrelated to age, this term referred to anyone more senior to you in the pilot group.





1990s picture of the original Mapakdi Hotel, one of two hotels located on Prachak Road, and utilized by temporary and permanent Air America crews in 1962. Located a short distance from city park, except for a paint job, the hotel was essentially unchanged inside. Although cars and trucks were common later, samplers and motorbikes were still in use.

Author Collection.



The universal Jeep was generally the only vehicle seen on Udorn roads during the fall of 1962.

Author Collection.

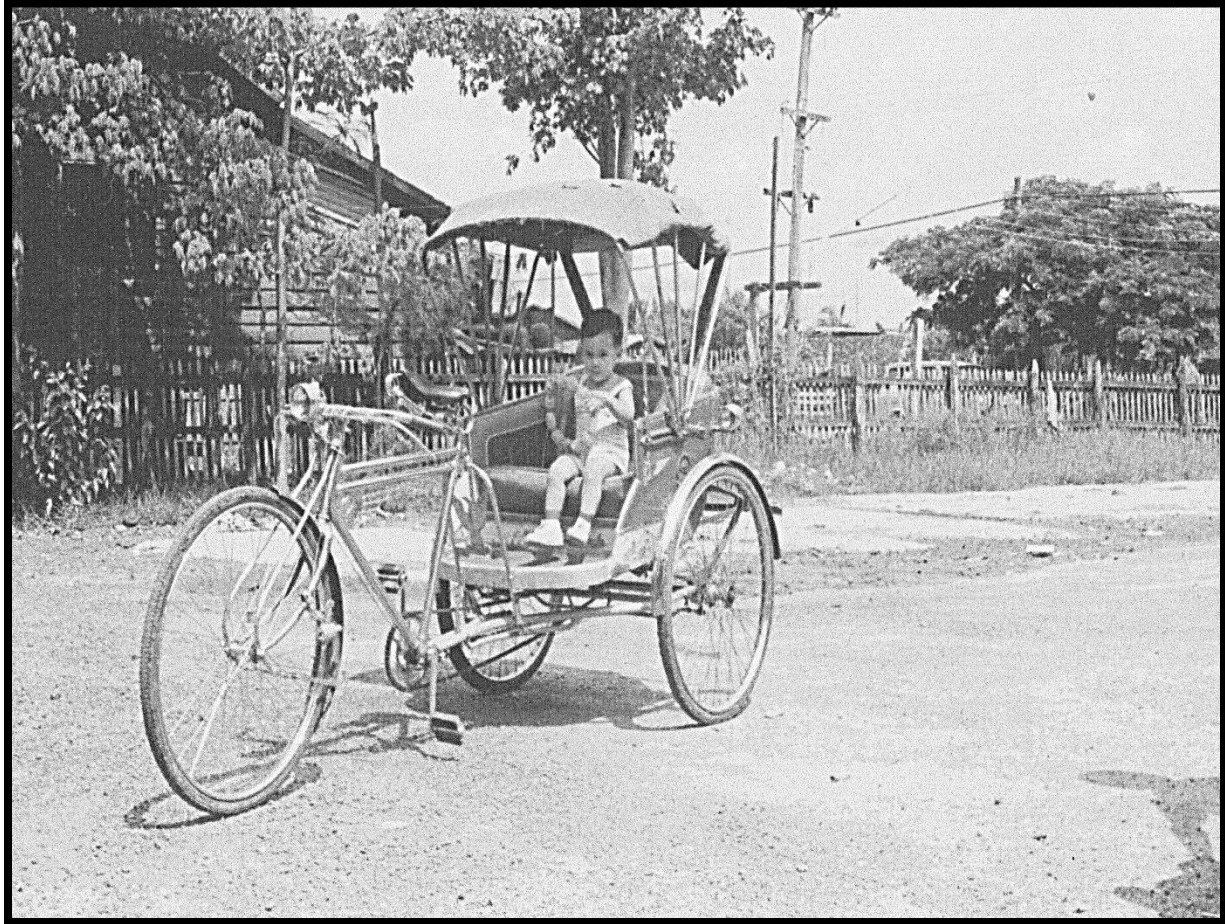
the vehicles were largely imperceptible to the man on the street.

Life in 1962 was leisurely in the northeastern town. There was no requirement to move at a fast pace, because there was nothing so important or pressing to require haste. Riding a bicycle, walking, or hiring a samlor, the one-manpower pedicab, sufficed for most transportation needs.

From the beginning of our tour, Howard and I resolved to conserve our limited funds and remain at the hotel until December, when the Company-mandated probation period was complete, and his family could be relocated. While not standing by at the Air America facility, during the mornings we were more or less captives at the hotel, supposed to be available at all times for test flights, or spur-of-the-moment flights upcountry. Afternoons were free, when we could board a samlor for one baht (a nickel), and leisurely sightsee without expending precious energy in the tropical climate, where conservation of that commodity was essential.

The samlor was a unique vehicle. It contrasted from the one-manpower pull-type rickshaw that, after a snoot full of beer, I had loved to race against other squadron peers throughout the darkened streets of Kowloon. The sturdy three-wheeled samlor was patterned after a large bicycle with a huge sprocket that provided considerable mechanical advantage to propel an attached passenger cab. The cab was equipped with an articulating cover to compensate for both sun and rain conditions. All the machines appeared alike in design and paint scheme. Cabs were painted red and shiny, and coated with varnish. Bright metal trim adorned other parts.

The samlors were generally operated by the society's lower classes, the poorest and most uneducated of individuals. Their black or blue loose-fitting shirts, shorts, and straw hat



Except for the option of walking, one of the early modes of transportation in Udorn was the samlor pedicab. Perched high on the seat, the machine was not easy to operate for a small-framed Thai. The Author's young son, John Richard, models a samlor.

Author Collection.



A bevy of samlors and drivers wait for fares in front of shop houses in the Udorn business district. A truck delivering items to a mercantile establishment is seen proceeding down the road.

Jarina Collection.

denoted their status in life. <sup>26</sup>

The samlor driver served a very important function for children going to school, townspeople venturing to the morning market to shop, or to visit friends. Rarely owned by the driver, the samlors were rented by the day from fleet operators, and the driver normally had to cruise the streets soliciting passengers, hustling to earn a living. Concentrated in certain locations throughout town were pools of machines and drivers patiently waiting for fares.

In general, I found the drivers lighthearted and helpful individuals. Wet weather was no problem for the passenger. In a matter of minutes, a canvas roof supported by shiny ribbed supports could be raised and secured over the cab. The occupant was further kept dry by a piece of strategically placed plastic sheeting. However, one's comfort level decreased as humidity rapidly rose in the enclosed space. The driver was not so fortunate. He only had his straw hat, and perhaps a plastic sheet thrown over his shoulders to shield him from the elements. We quickly discovered, as did the drivers, that more than one well-fed American was too heavy a load. Recognizing this, we compassionately attempted to hire two vehicles if available. Naturally, the driver tried to extort the maximum amount of baht from us, but if one held firm to the established Thai price for a ride, and this took some jawing at times, the mode of transportation was indeed inexpensive.

---

<sup>26</sup> It seemed that so much of the Thai culture and way of life was determined by uniforms. Civil servants, school children and the sort all wore distinctive clothing.

**INITIAL TRIP UPCOUNTRY**

Preparations for my first flight with Air America on Sunday the 23rd began with the early morning arrival of the B-bus driver to the Prachapakdi Hotel. At 0530 hours all the shops lining the street were still closed. The shuttered wooden doors and metal accordion gates and the empty street created an inference of solitude in the predawn setting. One could be fooled by this image were it not for a hint of smoke from indoor hibachi-type cooking fires, giving credence to the fact that Udorn was actually not asleep. Soon chaos would prevail, when shop doors sprung open, spilling humanity and their associated creatures onto the sidewalks and pavement.

The trip past two traffic circles, and south down Tahan (Soldiers) Road to the ungated Air America access road was relatively short, as there were no additional crew pick-ups that morning. The dusty road passed south of the runway, and led directly to the predawn flight line, where silhouettes of the helicopters were just becoming visible.

I debarked beside the cabin door of Hotel Foxtrot (HF) to join Captain Russell and Flight Mechanic Carl Gable.<sup>27</sup> The flight schedule distributed the previous evening specified that we would be flying thirty miles north to conduct a day mission out of Wattay Airport, Vientiane, Laos. After landing at the administrative capital, established by French colonialists in 1889, we were to receive both an intelligence briefing and work assignment from an unnamed Customer.

As we proceeded to load the aircraft and begin a cursory preflight behind Gable, I reflected on the nature of this

---

<sup>27</sup> Hotel Foxtrot: The international phonetic ICAO and military alphabet was used to assign call signs to the aircraft. Carl Gable, like Line Chief John Aspinwall, had been hired from the ranks of former Sikorsky personnel.

Madriver operation, and my involvement in it. Today marked a beginning for me upcountry. What would I encounter? I was both anxious and eager to get my "feet wet." I was disappointed that the work had been reduced and the prospects for a quick upgrading to Captain was diminished, but I was happy to be returning to the cockpit of a familiar machine.

### **THE HUS-1 (H-34)**

A brief description of the H-34 with graphics follows to better acquaint the reader with the visual and working parts of the extraordinary aircraft:

Ironically, this splendid Sikorsky helicopter, mainstay of the Crotch's vertical envelopment concept, was initially produced for the U.S. Navy to supplement anti-submarine warfare equipment. The machine first flew during March 1954. When it reached the Fleet, the Navy designated the helicopter HSS-1 (SH-34). Although Marine Corps planners were primarily interested in the development of larger equipment to implement platoon sized vertical envelopment concepts, in 1955 a few modified SF-34s were approved for USMC assessment and use at the Quantico, Virginia, HMX base. As problems with the development and manufacture of larger Sikorsky troop carrying helicopters escalated, and long delays became common, procurement of the HUS-1 increased. By February 1957, the first HUS was delivered to the Fleet, with my old squadron, HMR(L)-261, receiving the first machines at the New River, Jacksonville, North Carolina facility. <sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Lieutenant Colonel William R. Fails, USMC, *Marines and Helicopters 1962-1973* (Washington: History and Museums Division Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1978), 5.





The early morning flight line parking ramp displaying Air America's HUS-1 (H-34) aircraft.

Mike Marshall Collection.

A few days previously, while standing by at the airfield, I had reviewed the dry statistics and specifications of the HUS-1 in the Company-adapted flight manual: Model UH-34D helicopters are manufactured by Sikorsky aircraft, Stratford, Connecticut. The aircraft is designed for transportation of cargo and personnel.<sup>29</sup>

Configuration is a single engine, an all metal four bladed-fifty-six-foot diameter lifting rotor, and a four-bladed anti-torque tail rotor, and conventional landing gear.

The fuselage is all metal, semi-monocoque construction, and is comprised of three sections: the forward fuselage section, the tail cone, and the tail pylon.<sup>30</sup>

The forward fuselage section consists of the engine compartment, pilot compartment, cabin electronics compartment, and fuel lines.

The engine compartment is located in the forward portion of the fuselage section. The R-1820 Curtis Wright engine is installed completely reversed from that of a fixed wing aircraft (causing the main rotor system to rotate counterclockwise), with the drive shaft pointed aft and upward thirty degrees. An impeller and hydro-mechanical clutch (for engaging the rotor blades after start) is installed at the end of the engine shaft. Large clam shell-type doors, forming the nose of the fuselage, permit easy access to the engine for inspection and for maintenance.

---

<sup>29</sup> H-34: The Marine designation, HUS-Helicopter Utility Sikorsky-was changed to UH-34, or more commonly H-34 in September 1962. I continued to log HUS-1 in my personal logbook until December 1963. For purposes of this and future books, the term H-34 will be used. Information in this brief segment has been tailored so that the reader has a better understanding of the external and interior features of the HUS-1.

<sup>30</sup> Semi-monocoque: A construction technique by which, reinforced by longitudinal stringers, the helicopter fuselage is held together by both the skin and skeleton.

Above and aft of the engine is the pilot's compartment (pilot to the right, copilot to the left) which may be entered from the outside by recessed steps, or from the cabin. Dual controls installed in the cockpit consist of a conventional cyclic (stick), anti-torque pedals (rudder), and collective pitch levers, synchronized with the throttle to provide a constant speed. To prevent exceeding engine and transmission limitations, manipulating the latter two controls requires constant monitoring of instruments, particularly when hovering, taking off, or landing. The collective-throttle assembly also requires small amounts of squeezing, rolling, and up-down movements to maintain, increase or decrease power and revolutions per minute (RPM), in order to maintain, increase, or decrease power and rpm outputs. In these respects, helicopters require more work during peak loads. They are far different and more difficult to operate than fixed wing aircraft.

Directly aft of the pilot's compartment is the transmission compartment, housing the main transmission gear box, oil cooler, and hydraulic valves. The main drive shaft extends forward and downward from the main gear box, and is connected to the hydro-mechanical clutch. The main rotor hub assembly, to which the four folding main rotor blades are attached to aid in shipboard storage and movement operations, is splined to the top of the transmission drive shaft (called the mast). Drive train shafting extends from the main gear box lower housing aft to drive the tail rotor assembly.

Directly aft of the engine compartment, and below the pilot's and transmission compartment, is the cabin section, or troop compartment. Designed with the center of gravity and helicopter controllability in mind, it was placed directly under the main transmission and rotor system, with the pilots and engine in front being balanced by a long tail structure to the

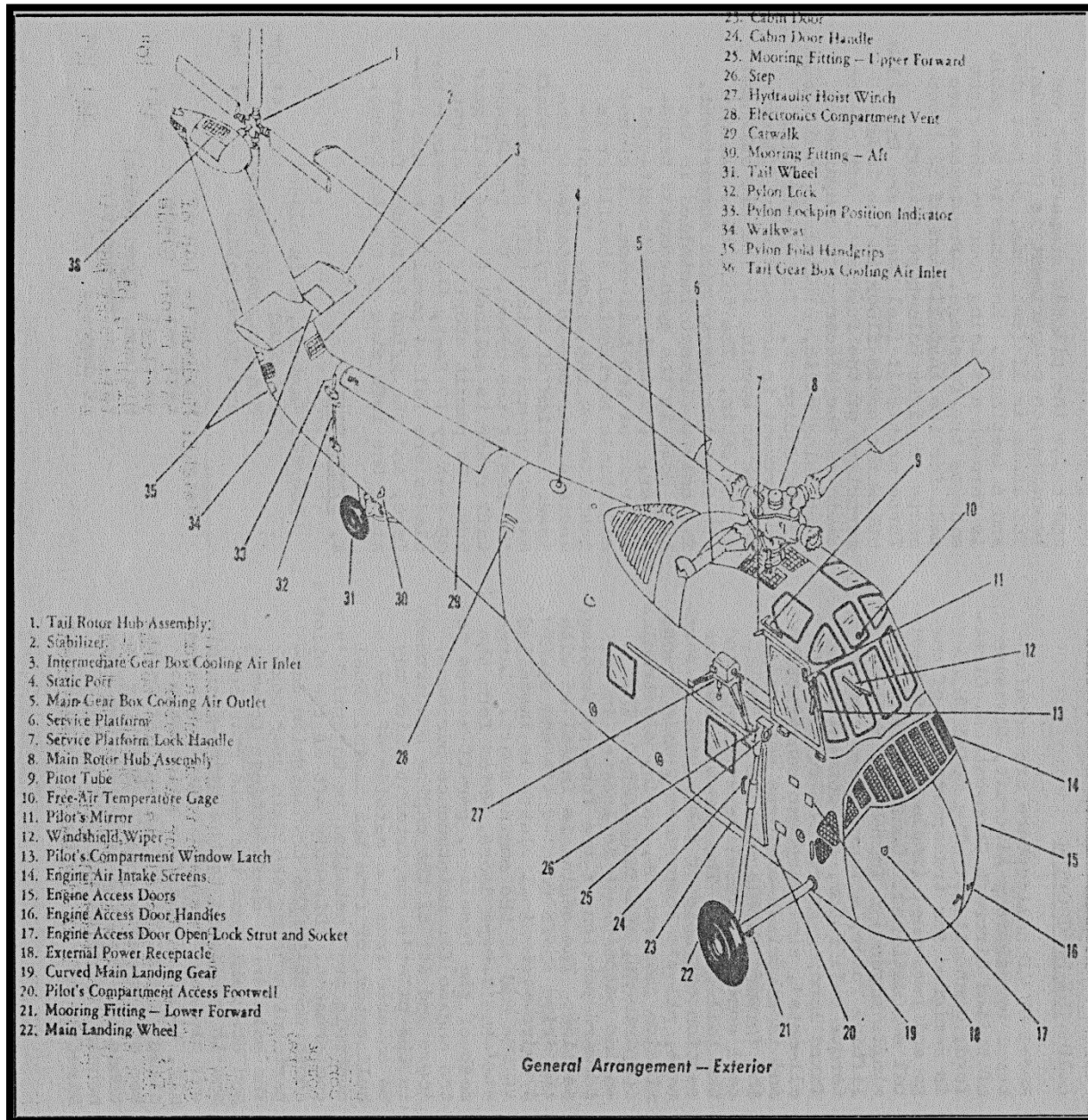
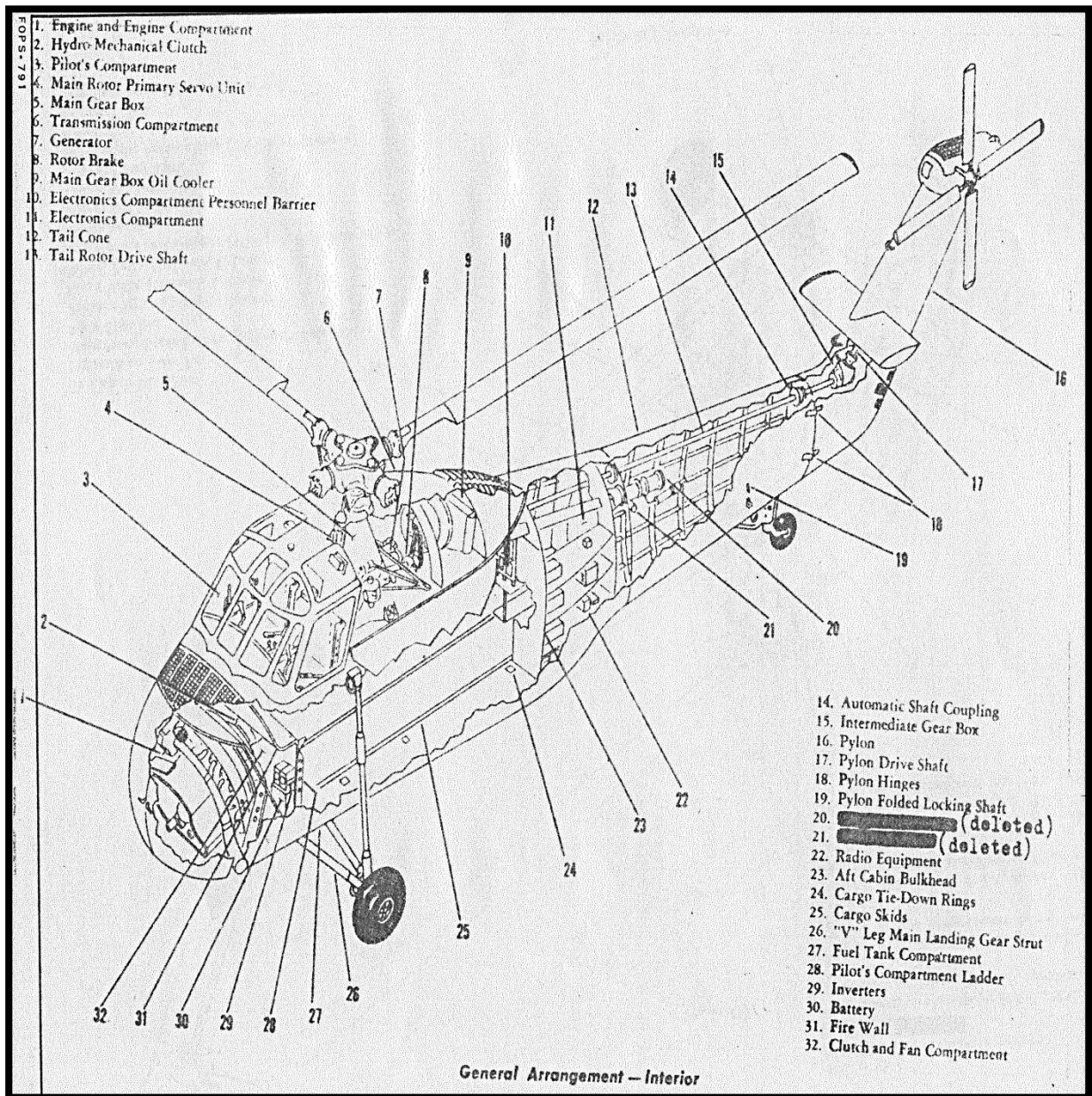


Diagram and description of the external HUS/H34 helicopter.  
*Air America Manual.*



Graphic and description of the internal HUS/H34 helicopter.  
 Air America Manual

rear. The cabin section is eleven feet long, five and a half feet wide, and six feet high. Entrance to the cabin is through a sliding door on the right side of the fuselage. Provisions are made for the installation of twelve canvas bucket-type troop seats, or eight pole-type litters. Three multi-cell fuel tanks (only the self-sealing forward cell is crashworthy) are installed below the cabin floor in the lower structure of the fuselage. An auxiliary power unit (APU) is located in the rear of the cabin to produce electricity and aid in starting the engine.

Located aft of the cabin section is the electronics compartment containing spring-mounted radio, electrical, and electronic equipment. Accessible through an opening in the aft bulkhead of the cabin, entrance to the electronics compartment is restricted by a releasable webbed net barrier.

The tail cone extends aft from the electronics compartment.

A folding tail pylon is attached to the rear of the tail cone. With the main rotor blades and tail pylon folded, the length and width of the aircraft is reduced from sixty-five-feet seven inches to fifty-six feet and from thirty-seven feet to fourteen feet. This feature allows more ease of movement, maintenance, or efficient storage, particularly aboard carriers. A ground-adjustable horizontal stabilizer is installed on the pylon. The intermediate gear box is installed in the lower portion of the pylon, and a shaft extends upward to the tail rotor gear box at the top of the pylon. A four-bladed anti-torque tail rotor mounted on the left side of the pylon is splined to the tail rotor gear box to prevent the fuselage from

turning in an opposite direction from the main rotors. <sup>31</sup>

All sixteen H-34 helicopters in Air America's inventory during September 1962 were former Marine aircraft. The ships were on loan (bailed) to Air America from military squadrons, and were carbon copies of ones I flew in the USMC. Two of the ships, having identical bureau numbers, were actually transferred from my squadron. The only noticeable difference in the machines was the lack of the words MARINES on the fuselage, the identification letters and numbers stenciled on both sides of the upper portion of the olive-green tail pylon, and on the engine clam-shell doors.

To most pilots who flew the H-34, the machine was a supreme workhorse, and the ultimate pilot-friendly aircraft. As a bonus, the sixty-five-foot wheel-configured helicopter afforded pilots a unique fixed-wing-like capability that was lacking in strictly vertical lift-skid configured machines. Terrain permitting, a pilot was able to roll the aircraft off or onto the ground, thereby conserving power and vastly improving payload capacity, especially at critical operating altitudes and temperatures found in Laos. It was a pilot technique machine, capable of performing work beyond anyone's expectation.

The massive Curtis Wright R-1820 radial reciprocating engine was especially loved by pilots, as its nine cylinders (called jugs) shielded much of the lower front end of the helicopter from small arms fire penetrating the cockpit. However, from an operational or combat perspective, a weak point

---

<sup>31</sup> Compiled from the *Air America UH-34D Aircraft Flight Manual* (1966), Chapter 6, Section 6.10.1.

Fails, William, 6, 7.

Despite the uncommon technical language, it is hoped that the reader will take time to peruse the text and examine the diagrams pertaining to the H-34. It will better enhance understanding of the enormous complexities and ongoing problems described in the operation of the complex machine.

did exist in the form of a poorly designed oil cooler mounted under the engine. One stray or well-placed rifle round, shrapnel, or grass-concealed stump could easily puncture the cooler's fins, causing oil to stream out, depriving the engine of necessary cooling and lubricating qualities, and leading to engine failure.<sup>32</sup>

Originally manufactured for T-28 aircraft, the 1525 shaft horsepower (SH), 2,000-pound engine (without accessories) found a home in the H-34. Despite some talk among Air America personnel regarding engine problems during hot season operations, the piston banger had performed an excellent job for me in the past. I had the utmost confidence in its reliability. On the one occasion when it failed, the power plant provided me adequate warning to plan and initiate a forced landing. Thereafter, I was firmly convinced that, even should an engine quit, given suitable conditions, I would be able to perform a successful landing. Recognizing that there were many diverse factors involved during any engine failure, I had first-hand experience, at least at sea level, regarding the aircraft's superb autorotative capabilities at almost maximum gross weight.

Given all its fine points, I still wondered about the ability of the machine to perform the work for me in the constantly changing atmospheric conditions, and high mountain pads in Laos.

I was not completely naïve entering this environment, as I had obtained some high-altitude experience in the hills of northern Okinawa, Baguio, Luzon, and a brief stint of mountain winter training in Greenville, South Carolina. I recalled Herb Baker, months before at Futema, Okinawa, relating hairy tales of Air America pilots exceeding engine-transmission limits to power

---

<sup>32</sup> Later metal shielding helped prevent such an occurrence.



them out of a difficult situation. At the time, I wondered what operation would necessitate such poor pilot technique. I held to the tenets that if you treated your aircraft, car, or any machine without care, it would ultimately let you down. I had always attempted to operate a helicopter with a light and caring touch as if it belonged to me. "*Treat them with respect and loving care as you would a woman,*" had been constantly drummed into me by past instructors. Indeed, I would smile when my squadron mate Charlie McLennon, with whom I frequently flew, attempted to rile me by claiming in his loud, brash tones, "*Casterlin, you fly like an old grandmother.*" The remark never bothered me. Considering the source, I took the comment as a compliment.

## **RUSSELL**

Captain Russell, my mentor for the day, had been a World War Two F4F Marine Corps Corsair pilot.<sup>33</sup> Even without experience in the machine, I could relate to the Corsair, as my colorful and talkative engine and airframe instructor at Pensacola had flown them off carrier decks. As part of his captive audience, I was subjected to his many sea stories. The jolly man was a self-admitted "Black Ace." You would think anyone who had lost nine aircraft would be loath to discuss the subject, but this man seemed proud of the fact. He related that

---

<sup>33</sup> Wayne Knight Email. Wayne gave Russell his area familiarization in the Luang Prabang area. While working in the Ban Houei Sai area, Customer Bill Young set them up with a story about a couple of captured Pathet Lao spies who had family in the area. They could not be turned loose, and sending them to Vientiane posed a problem. What was he to do, throw them out of an aircraft? Old Russell came forward and said they could use his aircraft. Just tie them up, blindfold them, and he would fly them as though on the way to Vientiane. Then they could be thrown out. Wayne was sure that Young was testing them, and Russ was the only one to take the bait. The spies were later sent to Vientiane on a C-47.

one day aboard ship squadron pilots were issued Corsair flight manuals. They were told to study the manuals that night, for early the following morning they would be flying the brand-new planes off the carrier deck. He continued to recount how the aircraft engines produced so much more power than older Navy-Marine planes that some pilots torque rolled their first takeoff attempt into the sea. Those who benefited from a quick foot and self-imposed on-the-job-training survived. This created a special class of pilots, who dwarfed ordinary mortals--ones with huge right thighs. As the "sea story" unfolded, the necessity of pushing and holding a large amount of right rudder on takeoff to counteract the huge amount of engine torque developed at full throttle caused a Corsair pilot's right leg to grow to enormous proportions. I was normally a sucker for a good story, but had to accept that one with a grain of salt.

Learning about Russell's Corsair experience also reminded me of Charlie Jones, the Officer In Charge of Maintenance, and later Executive Officer (XO) in HMM-261. During the battle for Okinawa, the six-ace major had flown nighttime all-weather Corsair interceptor missions. Related over a few cool brews at squadron happy hours, his many colorful accounts about his World War Two exploits still rattled in my head. I recalled that he was somewhat saddened by easily shooting down young Japanese boys.

I had been forewarned by wags at the Air America base regarding Russell's "idiotsyncrasies." It seemed that when the spirit moved him, the former Canadian landed at the first available spot to brew his favorite tea. This was performed on a small Sterno stove he carried for this purpose. I had no problem with a spontaneous tea break, if the sites he chose to land were in friendly hands. Additionally, I was briefed to be prepared for frequent stops for Russ to defecate. Apparently, he harbored

lingering intestinal problems from the time spent on South Pacific islands. If true, he was in a bad part of the world for this ailment that we called the "Code of the East." It was also rumored that he had not filed an Internal Revenue tax return in seven years. This could cause a person real trouble, as IRS penalties for not filing forms were severe. Although considering some of this behavior odd, I knew aberrant conduct was not entirely out of character for a few past and current Air America pilots.

One example of peculiar behavior was former Navy pilot, Pat Sullivan. When crew expansion for the Madriver Project began, CJ Abadie, against his better judgement, was forced to accept Sullivan into the helicopter program. His father, an admiral or a high stroke politician, was owed a favor by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Air America and Air Asia, George Doole. From the beginning, it was obvious that Pat was not a strong pilot, and over a suitable training period, Ab, not wanting to check him out as Captain, sent messages to the VPFO in Taipei stating that the man could not handle the job. Responses from headquarters always counseled Abadie to do the best he could with the man. More training was allocated, but it was not a good decision.

One of the pilots charged to train Sullivan noted that he was one of the nicest persons he ever met. *"He would do anything for you or help in any way."* Somewhere along the way, perhaps after being shot at or realizing he was in too deep for his experience level, he began going off the deep end. He was a nervous person, who worried all the time. After daily flights he was observed unpacking and packing his personal survival kit. Later his condition became noticeably worse. Living on Coca Cola and coffee, he chewed his nails to the quick and began losing his hair. Like the biblical Job, he suffered from skin

blemishes, mostly from insect bites. Since the jittery pilot constantly picked and scratched these bites raw, the open ulcers were always infected. As part of his act, he wrote and told any who inquired that he had incurred the wounds after being captured and tortured by the Pathet Lao. On another occasion, one of the H-34 pilots on scheduled time off (STO) in Bangkok, saw Pat wandering the streets wearing his large trench knife. When asked why he was carrying an exposed weapon in the city, the paranoid pilot vaguely replied, "They are after me."

Despite his failings, one of those miracles in life occurred, and Sullivan was finally elevated to Captain status. He was allowed to fly by himself, but was scheduled mostly to work in the lowlands around Mekong River towns.

Sullivan's luck did not hold. Assigned a major component slow-time break in flight, he conducted an unauthorized trip to Nong Khai, Thailand. While taking off overloaded, he landed on a stump. The aircraft crashed and burned. He casually watched the H-34 torch to white magnesium ashes. Akin to Emperor Nero allegedly watching Rome burn, Sullivan composed a lengthy poem. As only the blades and main landing gear struts survived the fire, he salvaged a portion of the fused glob of magnesium that was left, and proudly displayed it on his living room wall. Later, at the Air America facility he read the *Ode to a Burning Helicopter* composition to Captain Abadie. It was the final straw. Ab, certain that Sullivan had finally flipped, was less than amused. VPFO Rousselot went ballistic. Fortunately, before

injuring himself or others, Sullivan was terminated.<sup>34</sup>

Through hearsay and observation, I gradually discovered that almost every pilot in the outfit, whether demonstrating excessive wenching, drinking, gambling, dishonesty, oddness, spouting hyperbole, and the sort, displayed some quirk of character, and there were obviously a vast number of characters in the H-34 program from which to choose. Recipient of a psychology degree from Duke University, I was still interested in cause and effect as it related to human behavior. Therefore, it remained to be seen if these characteristics had always been present in the men, or were acquired defensive mechanisms to counter the stress and strain of combat flying. Naturally, I wondered if and how I would be affected, and if it might be time to hang out my shingle.

## **FEET WET**

After Captain Russell started the throaty engine, engaged the clutch mechanism and main rotor blade system, and checked the instrument panel for any irregularities, he began taxiing slowly toward the runway. Even at 0600 hours the day was already waxing hot and humid. As the great ball of flame peeked over the eastern horizon, and shed its rosy glow over the landscape, perspiration began to flow in the cockpit. Clouds of red laterite dust trailed our rotor downwash, while Russ deftly dodged large holes created by muddy conditions and ongoing construction activity. Pausing briefly at the intersection of the southern portion of the taxiway and runway, Russ conducted a

---

<sup>34</sup> Jack JJ McCauley, Letters, 01/15/91, 01/28/91, 01/25/94.

Earl Wayne Knight, Letter, 07/27/91.

CJ Abadie, Interview Author's house 05/30/96.

The accident at Nong Khai marked Pat Sullivan as a "Black Ace."

For additional details regarding Sullivan's problems and tenure with Air America see Book One, *Genesis: The Air America, Inc. Helicopter Program-Laos 1959-May 1962*.

final magneto check and lifted the machine off the ground, checking the power necessary to hover, and scanning the instruments. Satisfied that all was correct, he made a blanket call on VHF 119.1 announcing his call sign and intended takeoff direction.

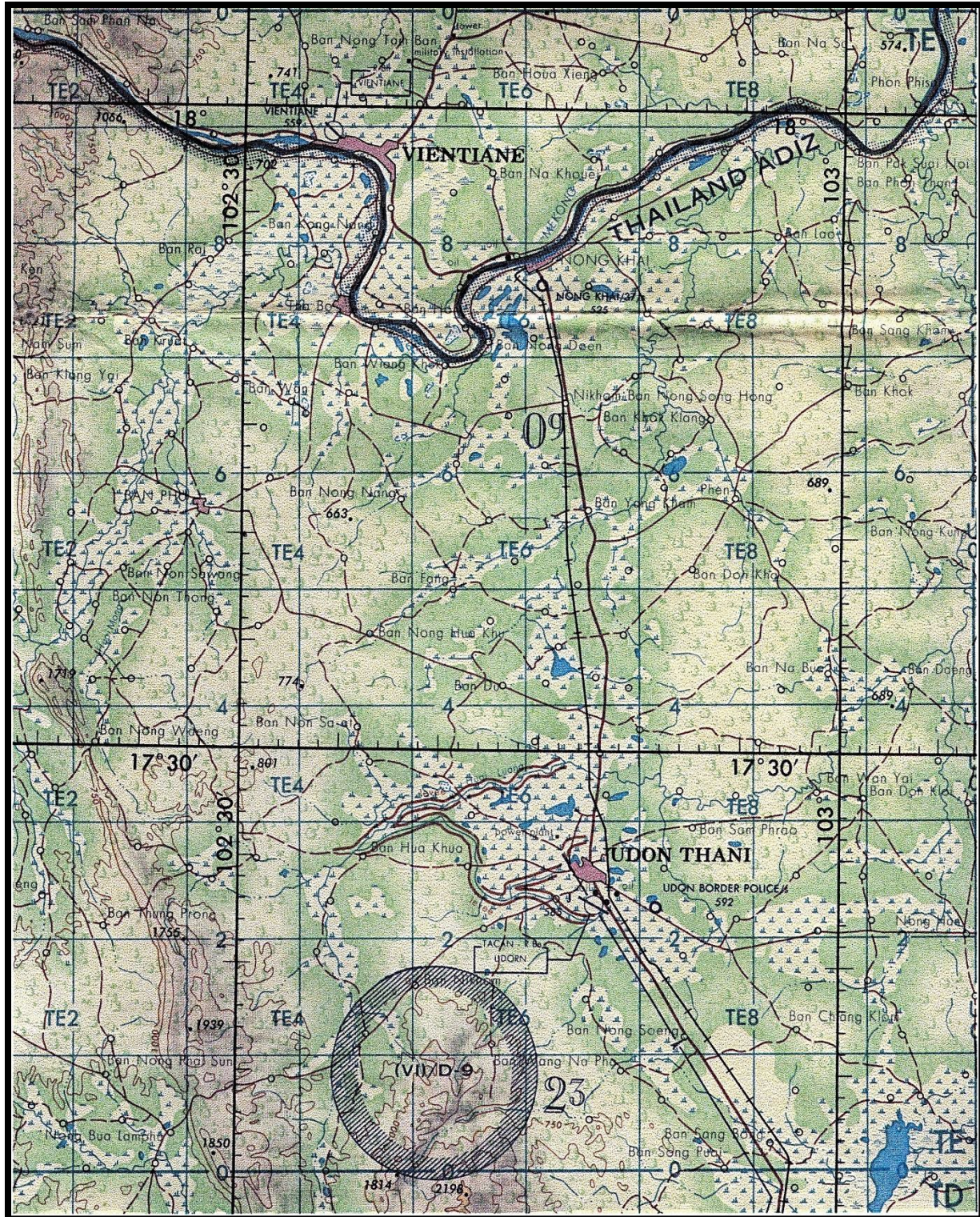
Once airborne, Russ set a northerly course at 800 feet for a relaxing thirty-minute flight over a network of interlinked, patchwork rice paddies toward Victor Zero Eight (V-08).<sup>35</sup> Once established on course and altitude, he called the Company flight watch station with the first radio call of the day, providing an estimated time of arrival (ETA) at our destination. These calls were required every thirty minutes when airborne.

Since the day was clear, the Mekong River came into view early. From my vantage point, I could see an inverted "dog nose" shape to the river that indicated we were on course for Wattay Airport. If I had a proper map, it would have looked, from a gross perspective, like Vientiane had been located in a curve near the bottom of a large funnel, as both sides of the river dipped south toward Thailand. None of the huge sandbars normally exposed during the low water period could be seen from the left seat.

Wattay Airport was located northwest of a city that stretched lazily for miles along the banks of the mighty Mekong River. Bursts of sunlight bounced from glittering tiles on the roofs of numerous Buddhist temples. After closing out the flight

---

<sup>35</sup> During early operations in Thailand and Laos there were no cockpit site books available to pilots. One recorded or memorized phonetic designations. Major airports in Laos were designated Victor (V), as in V-08 (Vientiane); V-45 (Luang Prabang). Upcountry sites were generally designated Victor Sites (VS) (VS-20-Sam Tong). Unlisted or newly constructed strips were known by the nearest village name. Thai sites, if listed at all, were designated Sierra (S), as in S-08 (Udon; S-09 (Bangkok). Most strips and sites were known or recorded by name only as in Nong Khai. The Author will note when these designations changed.



Airman's 1:150:000 map of the terrain from Udorn to Wattay Airport, Vientiane, Laos. The railroad paralleling the road leads from Bangkok to Nong Khai, located on the Mekong River.

Author Map Collection.



Early 1960s Wattay Airport undeveloped flight line. A mix of aircraft from the left include two Air America C-46's and one C-123. An American Embassy Air Attaché C-47 is parked to the right. Crew and mechanics' mode of transportation are staged in the foreground.

Mike Marshall Collection.



plan five miles from the airport, Russ switched from 119.1 to the 118.1 VHF frequency to obtain landing clearance from the tower operator.

Taxiing slowly toward the Air America loading ramp, we passed an overgrown junkyard of discarded or crashed fixed wing aircraft. Some that looked like C-47s (DC-3s) were painted green.

Wattay Airport was the maintenance and logistic hub for all U.S. contract fixed wing operations in Laos. The facility supported various activities for Air America, and a smaller competitive aviation organization, Bird and Son. Ostensibly under contract for the U.S. International Aid program (USAID), and sanctioned by Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma to implement refugee relief, the operation continued unabated, although on a reduced scale out of respect for the recently signed Geneva Accords on Laos.

The parking ramp was a study in chaos, as indigenous workers scurried about performing menial tasks. C-46 and C-47 cargo planes were being loaded by forklift handlers with palletized jute or burlap sacks of rice for airdrop. It was in these hectic surroundings that we secured Hotel Foxtrot, and then strolled to Air Operations and the intelligence section to receive our briefing and work assignment for the day. Gable remained with the ship to supervise fueling and loading.

After learning that I was a brand-new guy, the briefer pointed out the window at the flight line saying, "*The Russians are over there and we are over here. We go out and supply our side and they supply their side.*" This revelation was confusing to me as everyone flew out of the same base. I also learned that the green planes I had seen while taxiing in were indeed Russian Illyusin (IL-2) planes closely patterned after our C-47s. They were still used, but many were in obvious disrepair.

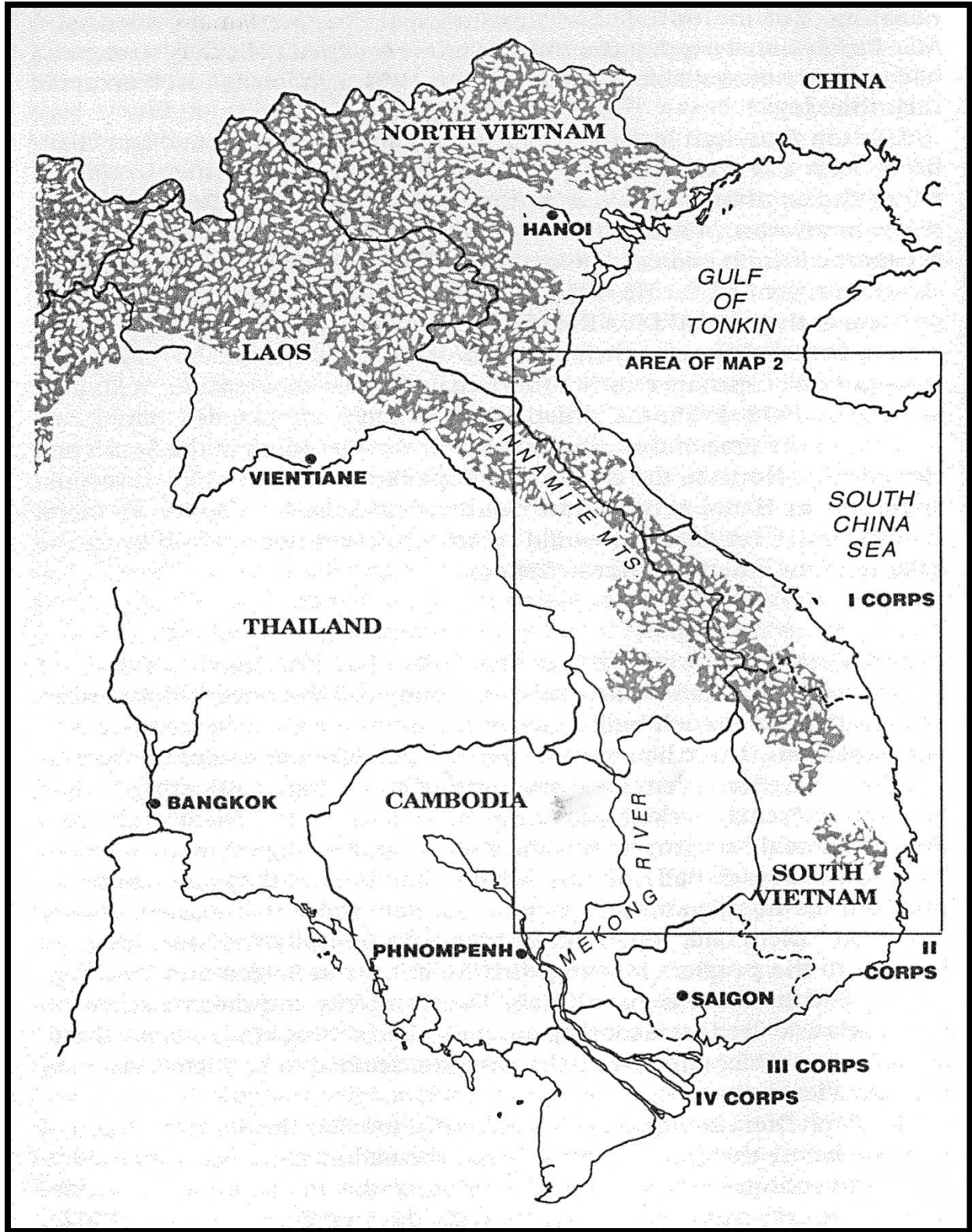
Finally, we were informed that the day's mission entailed resupply of landing zones in and around the royal capital of Luang Prabang (exclusively called LP by the pilots). In order to satisfy the 7 October deadline for all foreign military elements to withdraw from Laos, during the day we would be extracting the remaining White Star Special Forces personnel in the province. The latest area intelligence briefing consisted of a general route to fly and a sketchy area overview. Apparently, there were few formal battle lines established. Fluid, virtually unimpeded enemy movement precluded any real time knowledge of a local situation until actually arriving at a work site and talking to the local Customer.<sup>36</sup> In this backwoods environment of slow, unreliable, and often nonexistent communications, perhaps the best intelligence was still derived from pilots recently returned from an assignment to a particular location. In our quest to remain alive and healthy, we quietly briefed each other at common gathering places, generally the bar or the Air America compound. The system worked well during the quiet period of late 1962.

## **TOPOGRAPHY**

Southeast Asia was formed eons ago by the convergence of three of the earth's major crustal units: the Eurasian, the Indo-Australian, and the Pacific tectonic plates. The land mass had been subjected to a considerable amount of faulting, folding, uplifting, and volcanic activity over geologic time. Hence, most of the region was mountainous.

---

<sup>36</sup> Customer: To maintain the covert nature of our business, the term Customer applied to CIA Case Officers (no one dared use CIA in normal conversation). However, since we worked for other agencies, it was a broad generic term used for virtually any American-sponsored entity or person we were working for at the time (i.e., USAID, USIS, AB-1 or 713 (CIA), RO-ARMA Attaché). To stress the significance, the term is capitalized throughout all the publications.



Indochina's copious mountain ranges spilled over into both Laos and Vietnam.

John Prados, *Ho Chi Minh Trail: The Blood Road*.

The mainland was characterized by a series of north-south mountain ranges separated by a series of major river valleys and their associated deltas. Much of the region had been affected by the gradual, continuing collision of the Indian subcontinent with the Eurasian Plate over the past fifty million years. The boundary portion separating Laos and Vietnam with the Southeast Asian mainland, was relatively stable geologically, with no active volcanoes.<sup>37</sup>

Several mountain ranges fanned outward from the southeast corner of the Plateau of Tibet in China to encompass the entire mainland (Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia). The principal mountain range and easternmost feature of Indochina's mainland (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam) was the Annamese Cordillera, a system of mountain ranges often a number of more or less parallel chains in Laos and Vietnam. Many secondary ranges formed a nearly straight spine that curved gently northwest to southeast, with a steep face rising from the South China Sea at the east and a more gradual slope to the west. It constituted the watershed between the Mekong River and the South China Sea. The range provided few substantial passes between countries, the most important being the Keo Nua Pass in northern Vietnam and the Mugia Pass in Military Region Three.

The geologically complex range was composed mainly of limestone, sandstone, granite, and gneiss (a foliated metamorphic rock corresponding in composition to granite). In the north and in the south an exposed, folded crystalline basement was overlain in several places by basaltic lava flows.

---

<sup>37</sup> There was some evidence of volcanic activity. Fumaroles existed outside of Hong Sa in Sayaboury Province in Military Region One. Hot springs were located in upper Military Region Two in the vicinity of Phu Pha Thi.

The Bolovens Plateau in southern Laos (Military Region Four) was created by these flows.

Other mainland mountain ranges were interrupted by old blocks of strata that were folded, faulted, and deeply dissected. These portions formed either low platforms or high plateaus. The largest of these features was the Korat Plateau in eastern Thailand and west-central Laos. This area was more of a low platform, situated only a few hundred feet above the floodplains of the surrounding rivers. It consisted of a string of hills that directed the surface drainage eastward to the Mekong River. The hills ranged in elevation from 500 to 2,000 feet, with the highest altitudes occurring near the southwest rim.

The broad river valleys between the uplands contained most of the region's lowland areas. These regions were generally covered with alluvial sediments that supported much of the mainland's cultivation and population centers.

Within one of these valleys was the Mekong River, the longest watercourse of mainland Southeast Asia, with the largest drainage basin. After flowing 1,200 miles through southern China, the Mekong continued for nearly 1,500 miles through Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

Dominating the landscape of Laos were its inhospitable forest-covered mountains that constituted an impediment to travel. There were three prominent landscape features of the Lao interior. First, the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang Province (Military Region Two), consisted of rolling grasslands rather than a true flat plain, and provided a hub for communications. Second, the central provinces (Military Region Three) contained karst landscapes of caverns and severely eroded limestone pinnacles around Thakhet. Finally, the Bolovens Plateau in the south (Military Region Four) was covered by open woodland



Rivers and mountain bench marks in Laos. The circled number denotes Phu Bia, Lao's tallest mountain.

Dommen, 4.

and generally fertile soil. The only extensive lowlands lay along the eastern bank of the Mekong River. <sup>38</sup>

Since there was no pressure to arrive at a certain time, Captain Russell, seemingly too conservative to fly a direct route to Luang Prabang, elected to follow a 200-mile circuitous and convoluted river course. It was a considerably longer trip, but I thought such a journey would be quite interesting. I was not disappointed.

In September the Mekong River, Southeast Asia's longest river, was swollen to maximum from the annual monsoon rains. Springing from snow fed headwaters lying at more than 15,000 feet on the Himalayan-Tibet Plateau near the heart of the continent, after passing through rugged, remote terrain, the river penetrated Laos at Yunnan Province's southern border north of Moung Sing. At this point, the river had descended about halfway to the sea at 1,600 feet above sea level (ASL). Forming a border between Laos and Burma, it turned southwest along sheer cliffs for 120 miles to the tri-border of Thailand, Burma, and Laos (The region was later called the Golden Triangle after the illegal opium trade).

Below this point, the river was named the lower Mekong. Continuing to wind south, the mighty river and uncounted tributaries touched many of the 91,000 square miles of the land-locked country on its journey through Cambodia and South Vietnam to the South China Sea. Feeding the watercourse were numerous rivers that generally flowed west and south. During the rainy season, these tributaries inundated the Mekong with discharges of mud, sand, and organic matter washed down from adjacent hills.

---

<sup>38</sup> *Britannica* information derived from the Internet.



The Mekong River flood plain near Vientiane, Laos, was a flat area with marshes and meandering tributaries. A relatively high level of population lived in this region. Note the large island in the river. The boundary between Thailand and Laos was located in the center of the river.

Author Collection.



Besides providing a natural border with much of Thailand, the river exerted a considerable influence over the land and people living in the Mekong basin. As evidenced by the presence of riverside market towns, the river provided lines of communication (LOC) and trade zones where roads were scarce or often impassable at all times of the year. The Mekong contributed economically to both Thailand and Laos in the form of food, minerals, raw materials, and life sustaining water. Farmers living in the Vientiane-Nong Khai area could rely on annual flooding to restore silted nutrients to the soil, and enrich their rice paddy land for wet agriculture.

Significant navigation by large ships had never been possible on the upper reaches of the Mekong because of the impassible rapids at Khemmarat, and below Khong Island in Cambodia. Therefore, above these points, river commerce and travel during part of the year was restricted to shallow draft, flat bottom boats and long motor-propelled pirogue-type craft with long drive shafts, designed to glide over shallows without shearing a propeller (these were called long tail boats by the natives).

Neither of us possessed an adequate map. Like helmets and boots, maps were almost non-existent or in short supply. The few available charts, some swapped by other pilots, conditional upon the threat of death for losing one, were dog-eared and years out of date. Inaccurate in many areas, they showed large white portions designated as "relief data incomplete," particularly near remote, uncharted border regions. Called "one over the world" maps (1:1,000,000 or 1:500,000), the large charts were almost impossible to fold and unfold in the confined cockpit. However, they did provide a useful function during preflight planning to determine a gross heading to a destination. In time, I perceived that most successful pilots learned their way around

by following rivers, roads, repeated visits to areas, and committing all these facets of navigation to memory.

Although not the most sophisticated method of flying the shortest distance from point A to point B, I was satisfied that following the river would afford me an excellent familiarization with the Thai-Lao border areas. I was determined to follow what I could on the map and take notes of the more prominent terrain features and check points against the day that I would fly and navigate alone.

As we headed west from Wattay Airport, the wide, turbulent river appeared a dark chocolate color, derived from its heavily laden composites, and accumulation of 1,000 miles of silt and mud. Partially submerged logs, branches, and other buoyant objects jostled and jockeyed for position in the center of the wild, rushing water. It looked like a very hostile environment for anything to be immersed. At first, small villages were visible on both sides of the river. Then only twelve miles upriver, fewer were seen, as mountains encroached close to the high clay banks on the Lao side. Long valleys tapered northward through the mountains, and streams appeared to recede into distant pencil-thin silvery lines.

After an hour following a waterway that alternated between broad and narrow widths, we passed the Thai border town of Chiang Khan, and Ban Sanakhan on the opposite bank. Ten minutes later, we turned north and flew by Paklay (V-09), a west bank town, formerly supporting a French garrison in lower Sayaboury Province. As part of historical land swapping and a desire to protect its flanks, the entire province bordering the river had

been ceded to Thailand by the Japanese government during World War Two.<sup>39</sup>

Then my ultra-conservative pilot descended to what I considered a questionable altitude, although the visual reward was worthwhile, and a new experience for me.

Thirty-five miles north of Paklay, encroaching mountains appeared to narrow and pinch the river into a semi-venturi type configuration, which seemed to further accelerate the already swift current. At various choke points, even at high water stage, partially exposed wooded islands and white-water rapids were visible. Lofty mountain scenery was particularly impressive as we surged between the sheer gray-black cliffs and outcroppings. Aside from the breathtaking landscape, this portion of the trip was particularly exciting. Flying at low level, where objects and depth perception are more discernable and improved, one's perception of true ground speed is enormously enhanced. This sensation was part of the enjoyment involved in flying helicopters. Abundant jungle terrain was so thick on the east bank that no villages could be seen. Moreover, it appeared that the further north we flew, the higher and more massive individual mountains soared--fathers and grandfathers to the subdued hills we had already passed. Then, just when I thought I could not stand any more of this uncommon beauty, the river widened and the hills gently withdrew, as if inviting us into Luang Prabang.

---

<sup>39</sup> Following a cursory resistance, the Thai government capitulated to the Japanese. At the conclusion of the war, under French pressure, the entire province was returned to the Lao government.

**LUANG PRABANG**<sup>40</sup>

The port and small market town of Luang Prabang lacked modern industry. Under royal patronage, lacquering was practiced, as varnish was derived from the lac beetle found to the north in the Nam Bac area. Goldsmith and silversmith trades were performed by skilled artisans. Mercantile activity was largely provided by Indian and Chinese immigrants. Many Buddhist wats, highlighted by the hilltop Phu Si, a temple reputed to enshrine the Buddha's footprint, graced the town.

The region surrounding the town was one of the driest found in Indochina. About half the populace in the region were Lao, who raised corn, rice, and poultry. The upland sections were inhabited by the Khmu clans of the Lao Theung, while the highest elevations were occupied by Meo clans.<sup>41</sup>

Lima-54, with its long axis oriented parallel to the Mekong, was nestled in a natural basin at the junction of the Mekong and Nam Khan Rivers. At this point and to the north, this major tributary, and that of the Nam Ou, contributed to a considerable widening of the river in the monsoon season. Pressured by rivers, the northern portion of the town was shaped like an Asian "sacred member," pointing in the direction of potential danger. Phu Si, a centrally located hill, with a temple complex perched on top and on the sides, was the focal point of the town that originally had clustered around this venerated rise and expanded over the years.

During this portion of the year Luang Prabang was largely isolated, except for air and local travelers arriving by small

---

<sup>40</sup> Oden Meeker, *The Little World of Laos* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1956), 78.

Before the present name, Luang Prabang, home of the gold religious article, or Pra Bang, was adopted, the town was known in Sanskrit as Sisattanahuta. This could be translated into "the place of the hundreds of thousands of cobras."

<sup>41</sup> *Britannica*, information from the Internet.

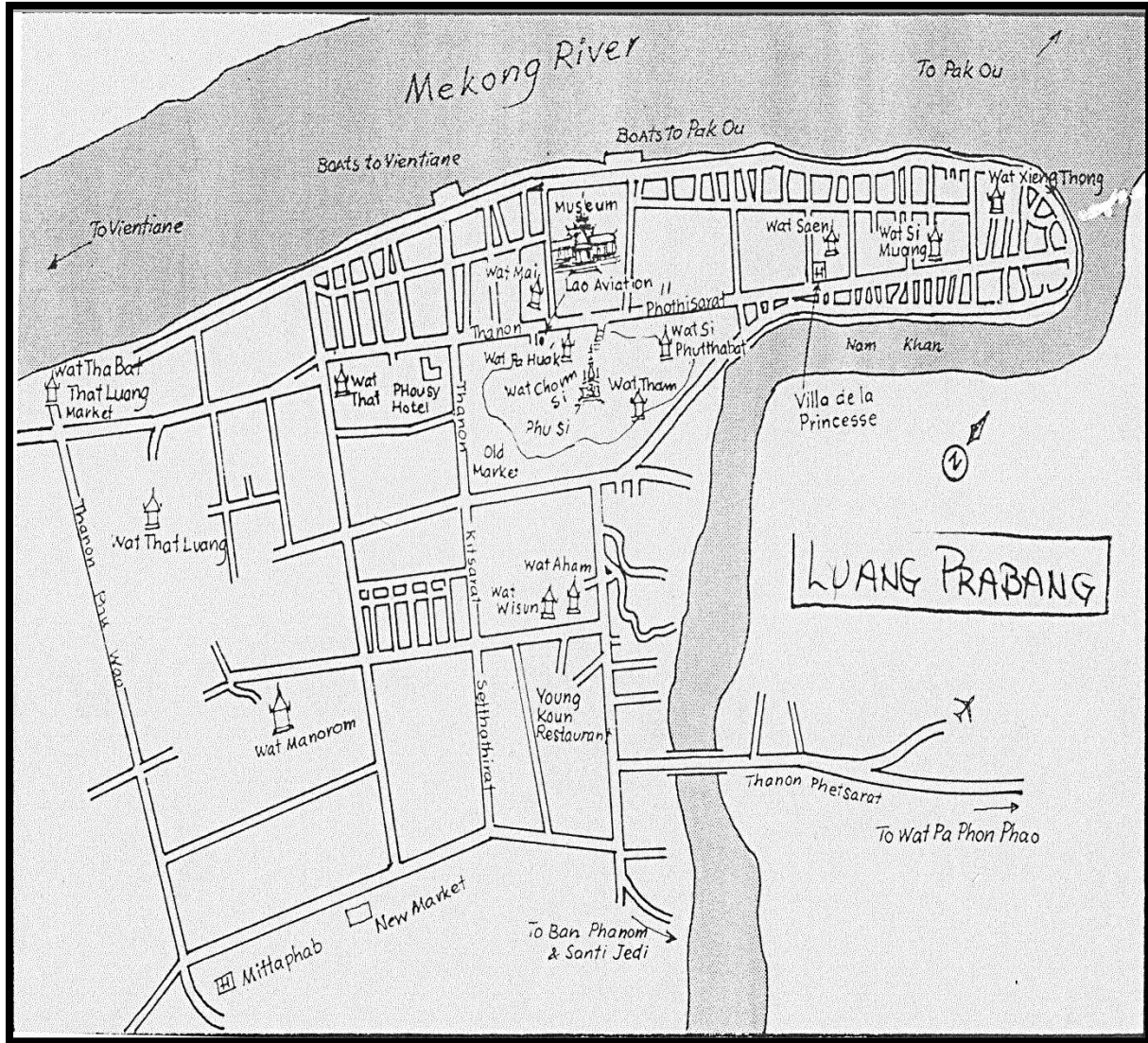


Looking north-northwest at Luang Prabang (V-54) and the Mekong River. The smaller river is the Nam Khan.

Author Collection, 1969. <sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> North of Luang Prabang the Mekong River flowed from the west. This photo shows vertical cumulus clouds in the distance. These convection produced clouds were formed over the river by temperature differences between the river and adjacent land.



Graphic of Luang Prabang showing the general area. The bridge across the Nam Khan leads to the airport.

Graphic in Monologue.



Southwesterly vista of the elevated Wat Phu Si from across the Nam Khan. Through smoke and haze, the Mekong River and a portion of Sayaboury Province are visible beyond the town of Luang Prabang.

Mac Thompson Collection, 1966.



A later colorized photo of Phu Si looking southeast toward mountain ranges. Part of the runway can be seen behind the mountaintop temple.  
John Tarn Collection.



boats or on foot. Of the three original Indochinese countries, mainly because of a grossly undeveloped transportation system, Laos was considered the best suited for air operations. Among several other factors, this tended to justify Air America's presence in Laos. Besides being a completely landlocked country, the few miserable roads were generally narrow, potholed tracks that wound through almost impenetrable mountains, covered with thick forest and abundant jungle. Except for foot traffic, most arteries were impassible to vehicular movement during the rainy season, and subject to constant harassment by hostile bandits and communists. In ancient times, for seven months out of the year, elephants provided the only mode of transportation. Even now, they were still employed by a few local residents.

### **ROUTE-13**

Perhaps the only road of consequence, National Highway 13 (Route-13), was developed during the French era. It extended 1,000 miles throughout Indochina and connected Luang Prabang with Saigon. The 250-mile section of road linking Luang Prabang to Vientiane was known as the Royal Road. Completed in the spring of 1943, it was planned and engineered by the present Prime Minister, Souvanna Phouma. Barely maintained to the outskirts of either capital, it was sometimes passable--depending on the status of bridges--during the dry season. Prior to the conflict, one had to be a stout-hearted adventurer, driving equipment such as a large multi-wheeled truck or a four-wheel-drive Land Rover type vehicle, and have sufficient time allotted to accomplish the difficult journey.

Aside from connecting the two important capitals, Route-13 also had strategic military value. Linked to feeder roads from the enemy-held Plain of Jars, it was a potential invasion route in both directions.

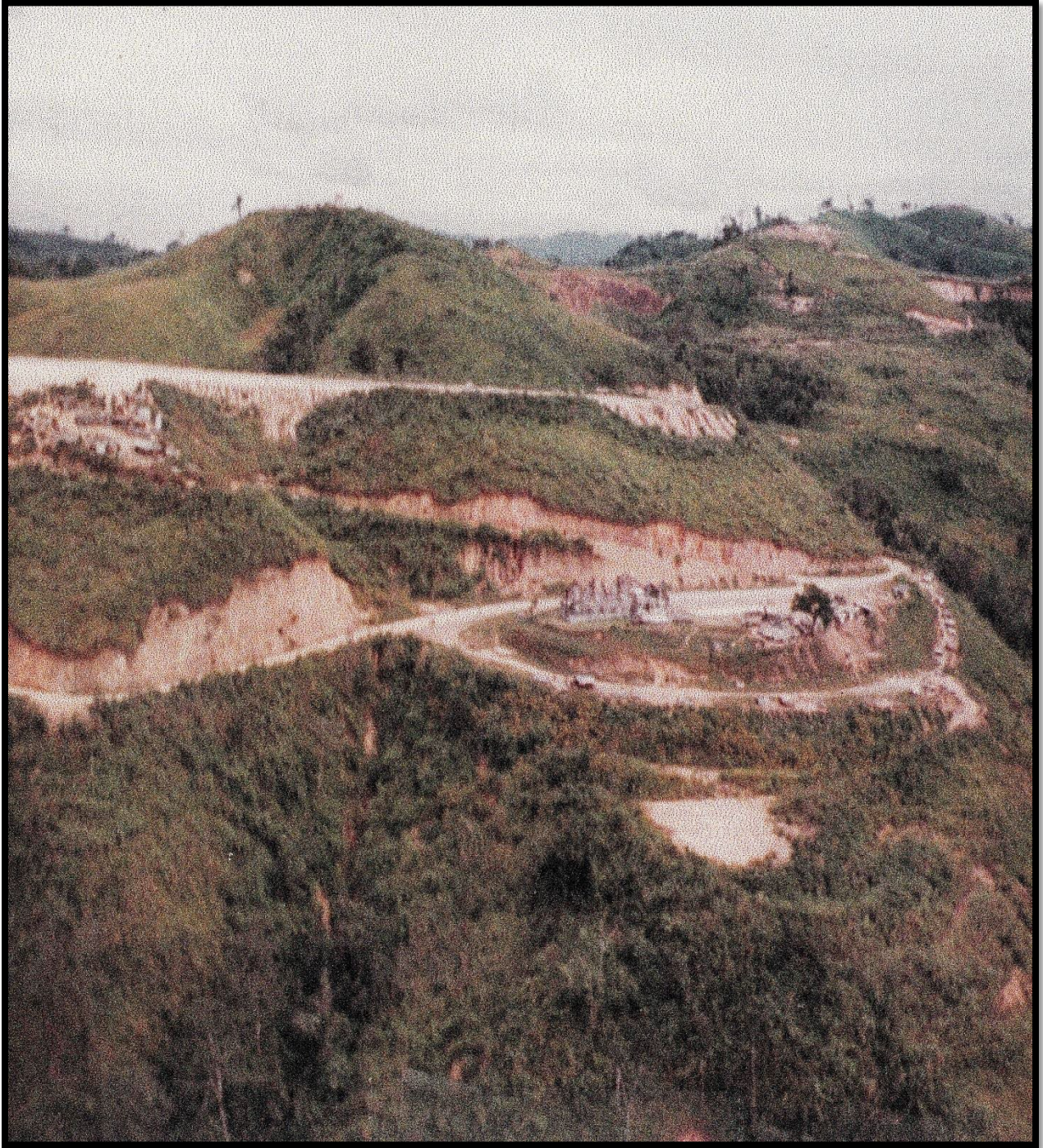
Route-13 to Vientiane was not only visually interesting, but also of historical import. Thrusting east across the mountains out of Luang Prabang, the road turned south and paralleled the Nam Khan before gradually ascending to heights of 5,000 feet. Twenty-five miles south of the royal city lay Ban Kiou Cacham, designated Victor Site Four. This was Meo country, comprising clans of a tough hilltribe that had, within the last hundred years, migrated south from Yunnan, China, to avoid bias and privation. Randomly scattered along the highest terrain, small Meo villages lay for several miles on both sides of the highway. During the preceding two years, White Star Field Training Teams (FTT), using VS-04 as a base camp, had recruited villagers in the fight against Pathet Lao aggression.<sup>43</sup>

From Kiou Cacham, Route-13 followed natural topographic contours, twisting along numerous hairpin turns until arriving at a "T" shaped junction at Sala Phou Khoun. This point formed the intersection of Routes 13 and 7. Route Seven was an important line of communication (LOC) that meandered easterly across the high, grassy Plain of Jars plateau into North Vietnam. Because of the relative ease of movement along these major arteries, control of Sala Phou Khoun was critical to contesting forces in either blocking or maintaining passage on the Royal Road. Located beside the crossroads, an abandoned stone French rest stop, shattered and pockmarked by shelling and gunfire, attested to the number of times the structure had changed hands in recent years.

Turning south at the junction, the stony, rutted road began descending through sharp bends. The treacherous track narrowed along this section, often providing a sheer cliff on one side and a precipice on the other. As the road descended to lower

---

<sup>43</sup> This area is described in Book One, *Genesis*.



The Sala Phou Khoun (Site-206) Route-13/07 road junction. Photo taken in later years shows road development. The stone French hostel is seen in a state of decay.

Author Collection.

elevations into valleys, ethnicity of populations changed dramatically. Contrasting to the Meo abodes set on the ground, stilted thatch houses of the Lao Theung ethnic group became visible.

The first wide valley encountered contained Moung Kassy (VS-153). Formerly a regimental headquarters of the Royal Lao Army, the town had been one of the many locations rotating between conflicting factions. Like most of the towns adjacent to or on the road, Moung Kassy belonged to the Kong Le Neutralists, faithful to Souvanna Phouma, but also believed to be chummy with the communists.

Fifteen miles below Moung Kassy the road burst through the broad Vang Vieng Valley (Victor-16). This lush area supported a number of villages, totaling about 1,000 people who lived in fairly substantial wood, bamboo, and thatch houses. Consisting of a large, fertile valley, blessed by numerous rivers and streams, it was also surrounded by towering mountains. Tall limestone karsts springing from the valley floor were liberally honeycombed with unexplored tunnels and caverns. Largely from such difficult topography, Vang Vieng had proved generally indefensible from a determined enemy. Despite this, located only sixty-five miles from Vientiane, the site, had always been considered of considerable military importance. During the recent past, Vang Vieng, as a regional Royal Lao Army headquarters, had accommodated smaller fixed wing aircraft, but after its 1960 loss to the communists Vang Vieng became an important Soviet regional air supply point. After changing hands twice in 1961, the area was currently controlled by Neutralist military forces. It must have been difficult for the unfortunate country folk to deal with the yearly political and military changes.

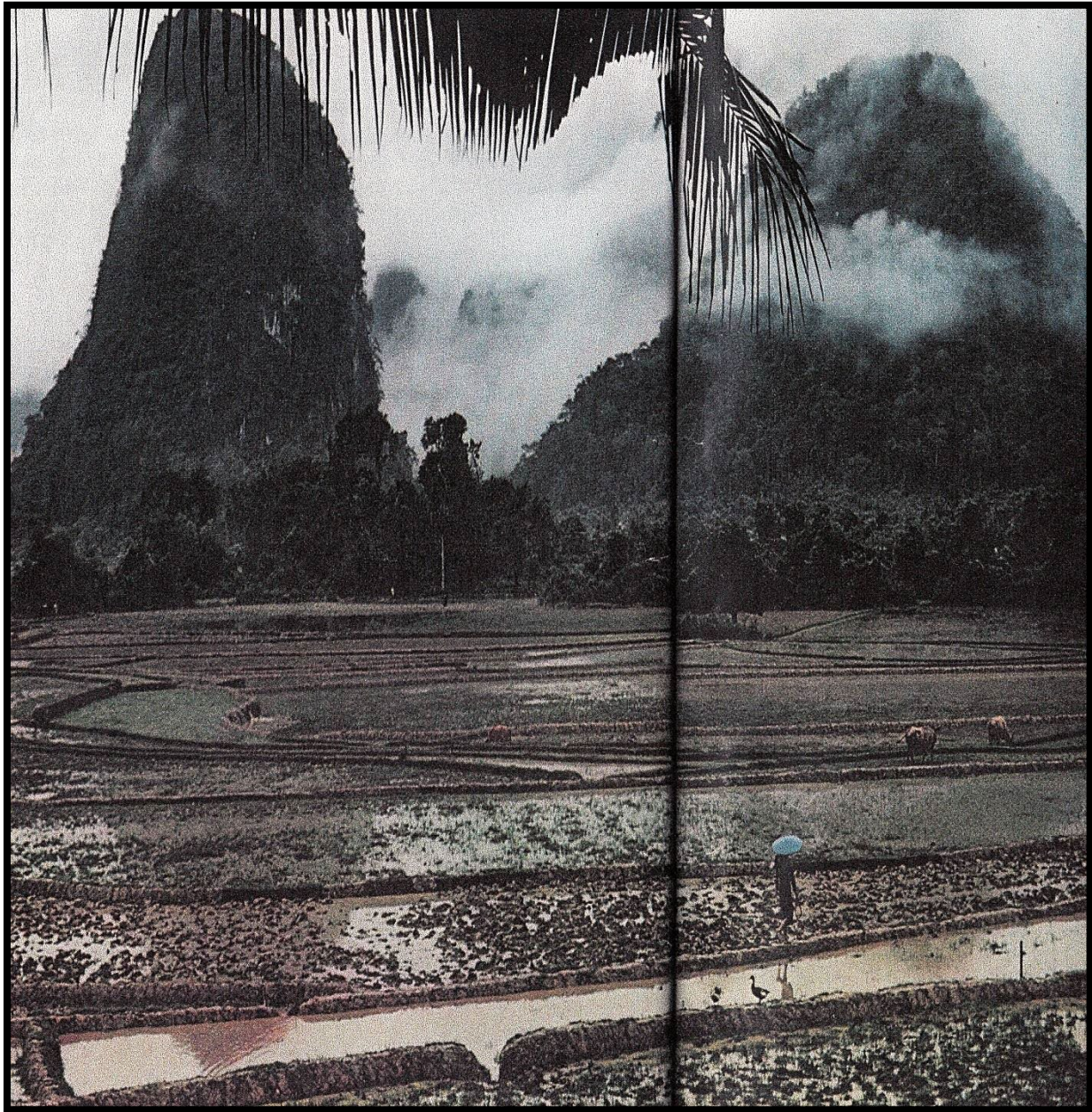


A portion of jungle-impacted Route-13 south of Moung Kassy.  
Mac Thompson Collection.



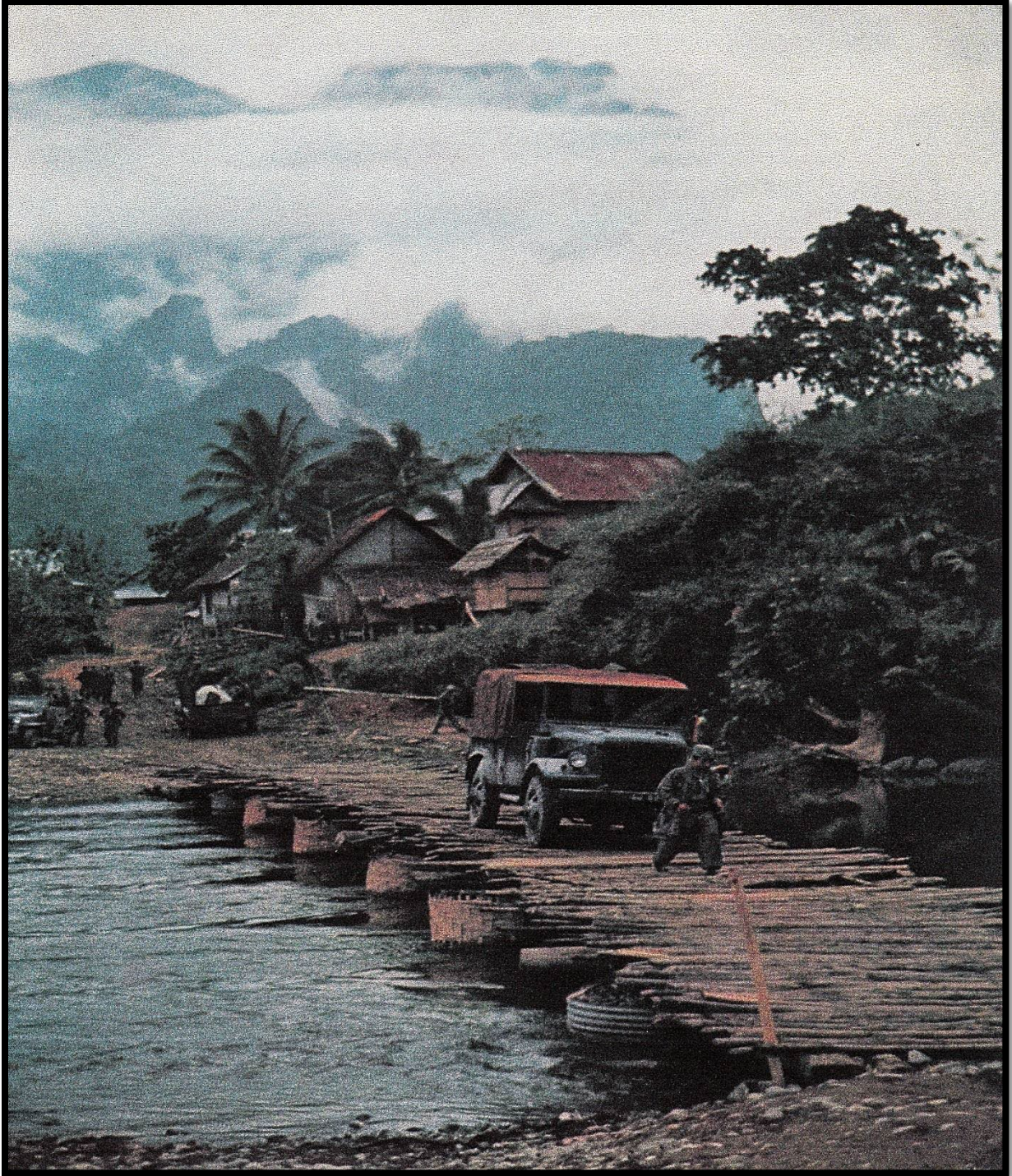
Silhouetted against towering clouds, a H-34 pilot approaches Vang Vieng for landing.

Ron Clarke Collection.



Distinctive limestone karsts rising more than one thousand feet from the rice paddy floor southwest of Vang Vieng. Karsts like these were named "Twin Peaks" and employed by pilots as checkpoints for sending position reports to flight-following radio operators, and other airborne aircraft.

*National Geographic*, Volume 134, #6, December 1968.



A temporary wooden bridge common to the type used on Route-13. During the annual rainy season bridges were often swept away by monsoon conditions and had to be rebuilt to accommodate vehicular traffic. This was why air support was so crucial in supporting the Royal Lao Government.

*National Geographic*, Volume 120, #2, August 1961.



Before the conflict had commenced in earnest several years previously, Doctor Thomas Dooley had chosen this location to erect a rough health clinic, and initiate his much-publicized medical crusade. Dooley found that driving the relatively short distance from Vientiane could not be measured in hours, as he and his party were often forced to repair numerous washed-out bridges before arriving at their destination two days later.<sup>44</sup>

Below the confines of Vang Vieng the narrow track wound around mountains, paralleled rivers, and was largely obscured by thick foliage. Finally, it crossed a wooden bridge over the Nam Lik at the battle-scarred village of Ban Hin Heup, site of the initial May 1961 peace talks. For several months during this period, UH-34D crews shuttled negotiators from Vientiane to the ongoing talks. The mission often presented tense situations, as crews never knew what mood to expect from the communists after landing. This was especially prevalent when the negotiation site switched to the small neutral village at Ban Namone, located deep in enemy territory, less than ten miles south of Vang Vieng. Pilots landed at a designated site and were surrounded by Pathet Lao soldiers carrying Soviet "burp guns." However, crewmembers were allowed to wander down the road toward a schoolhouse where the talks were to be held until a Russian helicopter, equivalent to the H-34, landed at the far end of the village. Then pilots were motioned back toward their ships by menacing barrel movements of the gun-toting guards. On subsequent trips, crews were required to remain at their helicopters.

---

<sup>44</sup> Thomas A. Dooley, M.D., *The Edge of Tomorrow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1958) 26.

Doctor Thomas Dooley, who died prematurely of cancer in 1961, wrote several books describing his humanitarian work in Southeast Asia, particularly Laos. Financed by the Medical International Cooperation Organization (MEDICO), which he helped found, he was still admired and talked about at this time.

At present, Hin Heup marked a demarcation line dividing enemy territory from the Mekong Basin controlled by government forces. From this intersection, after descending through sparse secondary forest and slicing through a gap in the mountains, the road emerged onto the Vientiane floodplain, where it widened and continued south in a fairly straight line toward the administrative capital. This portion, populated by lowland ethnic Lao farmers, passed through rice paddy fields and thickets of trees. For much of the way, the road was bracketed by western foothills and the twisting Nam Ngum to the east, until at the capital it turned south toward the lower river towns.<sup>45</sup>

There were other ancient byways around Luang Prabang. A rudimentary trail, loosely designated Route-4, led north through enemy-controlled territory through the Nam Bac Valley, and into Phong Saly Province. Beside a footpath paralleling the Nam Ou along a historic trade route from the Dien Bien Phu and Black River Tai country of North Vietnam, there was only one other artery of consequence into the Luang Prabang area. This was Route One, an undeveloped cart track that became a footpath not far south of town. Barely visible through the jungle on the east bank, the track ran southwest parallel to the Mekong for forty-five miles, where it arrived at a ferry crossing to the west bank. Marking an important invasion route in ancient times, the western Sayaboury pathway continued south, connecting scattered villages as it wound 120 miles to the Thailand border. The road system was maintained and more extensive during the French colonial administration, but after this ended, it was allowed to return to the jungle.

---

<sup>45</sup> The idea and selected items for describing the road were drawn from the excellent work of Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization* (New York: Praeger, 1971) 14.

Paralleling and adjacent to the Mekong, but separated from the town by the broad Nam Khan, the Luang Prabang airstrip was oriented on a heading of 06/240 degrees. Located almost 1,000 feet above sea level (ASL), the field was mostly devoid of permanent type structures. Exceptions were a wooden control tower on the north side of the runway, and an antenna-spiked shack perched on a small rise. This structure housed the Air America flight-following operations for the region. It was initially manned during December 1961. Like other Company communication centers in the country, it was staffed by Taiwanese radio specialists, who formed part of a third world contingent of personnel working for Air America. Living in harsh conditions, and required to scrounge many of their necessities, the Chinese performed a commendable job monitoring and providing coverage for our aircraft, on very high frequency-VHF-119.1 Mhz; and high frequency-HF-5568 Khz. They were also responsible for the operation of the only navigation aid in the area. The 400-watt low power non-directional beacon (NDB) operated only during daylight hours and, depending on an aircraft's altitude, had limited range.

At midfield, we taxied off the hard surface runway onto a dirt apron where several steel fuel drums were clustered. These red barrels were standing upright, with their white and black stenciled faces pointing skyward. Adjacent to the ramp stood a multi-purpose Customer and Royal Lao Army thatched warehouse and office. Before shutting down, Russell called the radio station to cancel our flight plan.

While Carl manually pumped two fifty-five-gallon drums of 115/145 octane aviation fuel into the tanks, we checked in with the Customer. The briefing was not particularly enlightening. I had no previous experience in the area, hence, could not relate to the current situation. I was just along for the ride, and, as

a naïve First Officer, it was doubly difficult being exposed to a new area. Since my life was in the hands of Captain Russell, his expertise in flying the machine and handling hostile situations was important. The old military cliché, "special trust and confidence," prevailed.

As with all individuals, especially pilots, reputation counted. Russell was no exception. Although Russ's prestige among his peers was not the highest, I was not concerned. He had served his time in hell as a World War Two combat pilot, and had worked for the Company for some time. I also learned from Mike Marshall, who had ridden with him in the past as a First Officer on familiarization flights, that, although a little squirrely at times, the Canadian possessed a tough, mean streak, and could become aggressive when riled.

During an August overnight stay at Pakse (RON), while en route to Saravane (Victor-44), Russ perceived that he had been shot at from the vicinity of a village fifteen miles north of the Plateau Des Bolovens. Like some other pilots, he took umbrage to ground fire. He became so annoyed that he wanted to return and destroy the village with a napalm type device--a fifty-five-gallon drum filled with gasoline, thickened by Tide detergent, with a thermite grenade screwed into the bung, and a string to pull the pin and activate the mixture. He had learned this technique from White Star Special Forces teams, who called this blend of explosive "Hot Soup."

Marshall, who suspected it was an innocent village, thought Russ was kidding. Then, realizing that the PIC was serious, he wanted nothing to do with the plan. Russell, very angry over this rejection, appealed to his Flight Mechanic, Louie Jones, who also refused to participate in the asinine plan. At this rejection, Russ waxed ballistic. Marshall was a large, rangy youth and, already fed up with his Captain, seriously considered

"kicking his ass." As a result of the crew's reluctance to join the pilot in the projected bombing run, it never transpired. <sup>46</sup>

We soon discovered that White Star personnel were still in the field. Attending to last minute details, they did not want to be retrieved until late afternoon. Rotating Field Training Teams (FTT) at intervals, units had been continuously stationed at Luang Prabang advising the RLA since the summer of 1959.

Working with what was considered by many as the world's worst army had not been a picnic. Stories abounded about Americans being abandoned or "run out on" numerous times by RLA troops during critical moments in the Pak Beng Valley, and then at Nam Tha. Timely extractions by H-34 crews had snatched Special Forces teams from the jaws of death.

Exhibiting behavior not restricted to Military Region One, time and again, when sufficiently pressured, RLA troops had run away from a fight, abandoning weapons and ammunition for the enemy to use against friendly forces. Sadly, FAR forces had never defended an important position long from an aggressive enemy, who took full advantage of the army's prime deficiencies in leadership and lack of motivation. Lao soldiers, generally of the Buddhist persuasion, were seldom inclined to kill humans, except by artillery shells, which were indiscriminate, and

---

<sup>46</sup> Mike Marshall interviews.

While still a First Officer, Marshall overnights and worked at Luang Prabang. He and Ed Reid mostly supported sites close to the capital. They conducted one long trip to the Ban Houei Sai (Victor-25) area to work. Mike was impressed with Reid, whom he considered an excellent pilot, navigator, and, unlike several pilots he had flown with, logged only the hours actually flown.

They RON at a large house on the river. Arising early to use the facility, he glanced through an open door up a road that passed by the house. At the top of a rise, he spied the funniest looking kid he had ever seen. The child seemed to be wearing a white coat and had a strange gate, like a side-to-side waddle. Attempting to be friendly, Mike stood up and waved. The "child" dropped to all fours and quickly disappeared into the brush. The "child" was a Gibbon.

therefore, they were not responsible. Predisposed to the indolent Lao lifestyle, they never presented a formidable opponent. To a Westerner this attitude was puzzling. If this was the case, it seemed that Laos was a country without any hope of holding its own against communism. The entire situation appeared ridiculous. No wonder I had repeatedly heard pilots sarcastically refer to the kingdom as the mythical "Land of Oz."

Since our primary duty that day was to extract White Star personnel, few flights were scheduled, and we had the option of deferring these until early afternoon. Dwayne Hammer, a blond haired International Voluntary Service (IVS) representative, who had initially greeted us when we arrived, suggested that we motor into town with him for lunch before all the shops closed for the daily two-hour siesta, adopted from the French era. Since we had not brought anything to eat, and were famished, this recommendation was most welcome. We boarded Dwayne's Jeep, clearly marked with a United States Aid for International Development (USAID) logo that consisted of a shield and clasped hands. Dwayne headed for the antiquated Bailey bridge that spanned the reddish Nam Khan and separated the town from the airfield. It appeared that the stocky, well-padded individual had previously squired Air America crews around town. Part politician, eager to please us, the informative American maintained a light banter as he described points of interest.<sup>47</sup>

After driving a short distance through a town that appeared even smaller than it had from the air, Dwayne stopped in front of an open-air corner restaurant. A large tree, girdled by a

---

<sup>47</sup> Interview with former USAID employee Vichit Mingrachata in Udorn, Thailand, 1 March 1995. Dwayne Hammer worked for IVS and then USAID at Luang Prabang for many years until he became too ill with diabetes to function. Fellow worker, Vichit recalled forcing sugar down Hammer's throat during one of his attacks to save his life.

broad whitewash ring, shaded a dirt patio. The Chinese proprietor, recognizing Hammer as a frequent customer, motioned for us to sit at one of the outdoor tables.

It appeared that green was a favorite color in this part of Laos. Different shades of green were everywhere. Chairs, Formica table tops, and table legs were green. Contrasting with the dirty white, fly-blown façade of the building, wooden trim, folding French doors, and shutters were all dark green. Inside, against a background of green paint were additional green tables. Other than the fact that the darker color more readily covered dirt and grime than a lighter one, I could not help wondering if, at one time, there had been an enormous fire sale on green paint. Overhead, green fan blades on long poles oscillated and whirled tunes, while the aroma of delicious Chinese cuisine wafted past our noses. To cap it all off, even soft drink bottles of orange soda were marked Green Spot. It was all too ludicrous. However, exuding its own charm, I thought that if I was searching for a Bogart-Casablanca-type setting, I would have to explore elsewhere.

In country only a short time, Dwayne indicated that he had eaten at this establishment a few times, so I inquired what he considered both safe and tasty. He recommended a favorite hot meal consisting of thinly sliced pieces of beef, onions and bell peppers stir fried in oyster sauce and served over white rice. In addition, since the area was renowned for watercress salads, one was ordered. It was all delicious. Truly an epicurean four-star meal--if one discounted the mid-day heat, the cheap Chinese porcelain-covered metal dishes and ceramic spoons, the annoying insects, and a distinct lack of décor. Sated and a little more than sleepy, I decided the experience and meal were well worth the pitifully small amount of kip the smiling, gold tooth Oriental requested.

Following the leisurely meal, we delivered "hard rice"--a euphemism for munitions--to hilltop fortifications a short distance northeast of the capital. Without exception, the landing pads were cut into the western slopes or in defilade below the crest of the hills. The proximity of the circular forts to Luang Prabang made me speculate as to the actual security of the important town. Luang Prabang had not been occupied by any enemy forces in recent years, so perhaps an air of complacency prevailed among those who currently lived there.

The royal city was the site of ancient rulers and the original Kingdom of Lang Xan, the Lao Kingdom of a Million Elephants. Despite this distinction, foreign incursions by Ho Chinese (Yunnan) bandits, Siamese, Vietnamese, and French punctuated the long history of the area. Even now, in a bizarre international arrangement, supposedly sanctioned by previously warring parties, the Pathet Lao--the military wing of the communist government--were reputed to be using the royal capital for rest and recreation (R&R), and as a logistical supply center.

Aware of the existing ceasefire agreement, the revelation of an enemy presence in the town was still difficult for me to fathom. The bad guys were allowed into our area, but we would certainly be hosed or captured should we venture into their territory. In a land of contrasts, I was learning very quickly about the curious political structure of the country. It was far different from anything I had ever read about, experienced, or expected. Who do you trust? Who do you avoid?

By mid-afternoon we were assigned to extract the remaining White Star team members from outlying sites. Before departing, Russ cautioned that during previous assignments he had noted that sometimes, while landing on unfamiliar frontline mountain pads, seconds proved crucial. He advised that, after touching



down, if confronted with such a situation, to maintain RPM near the takeoff range, and a little collective pitch in case the enemy fired on you. Reliable Flight Mechanics, whose buttocks were also on the line, were sensitive to potential combat conditions. Against such an eventuality as Russ was describing, Gable stacked a load of yellow pine boxes containing mortar and small arms ammunition close to the open cargo door. Then, should the situation warrant immediate departure, a slight nudge was all that was required to eject a majority of the load and lighten the ship. I was informed that this procedure had "saved the bacon" of more than a few crews.

Within a few minutes, Russ planted Hotel Foxtrot on the designated landing zone (LZ), a grassy knoll in defilade from eastern foothills. While M-1 carbine-carrying soldiers quickly offloaded cargo, two Americans boarded. Having been informed that the people would be ready to leave when we arrived, we waited impatiently for the last team member. Every minute that passed on the frontlines created a greater stress and concern to both of us. I do not know how many times, in anticipation of our tardy passenger's arrival, I nervously glanced up the trail toward the top of the hill.

Just when I thought I would explode from anxiety, a large man appeared at the top of the rise, sky lighted against distant mountains. He must have come from a considerable distance, for his unmarked Army fatigues were darkly drenched with his sweat. Before swinging into the passenger compartment, he flashed the international thumbs up signal, and motioned for us to depart. Wasting no time, Russ rolled the throttle grip to the 2800 RPM range, while simultaneously raising the collective to a power setting that would ensure an adequate hover for a 180-degree turn. Since the aircraft was well below maximum gross weight, a minor increase in manifold pressure, and slight lowering of the

nose during takeoff was all that was required to achieve translational lift.<sup>48</sup>

As we flew toward the airport, Carl put the Army captain on the headset to describe the reason for the delay. Despite the ceasefire, and perhaps as a farewell gift for our passenger, the enemy had chosen our arrival to initiate a light harassing fire and probes of forward positions. The minor action had kept the advisor busy with last minute instructions and guidance for his reluctant charges.

Our primary mission accomplished, the ship was prepared for the long trip home. Carl supervised and participated in topping off the three fuel tanks with volatile purple colored gasoline, and the oil reservoir with 1100 weight oil from a five-gallon jerry can that was part of the fly away-kit.<sup>49</sup>

Retracing the Mekong River south afforded me time to reflect on what I had experienced that day. For a day trip, we had flown a long way and accomplished little work. What we had done though was interesting, enlightening, and even a bit exciting. Since I was a newbie without responsibility, I could not help but wonder as to the pressures and demands on a Captain flying solo without anyone to help him navigate or share decisions. Now, with a day's experience, I was anxious to hasten the checkout period, so I could more closely participate in the experience, and discover what the conflict was all about.

---

<sup>48</sup> Translational lift: A condition unique to helicopters in forward flight. The process took place at approximately fifteen to twenty knots ground speed during takeoff in a no wind condition. At this point during the takeoff phase, an airframe shudder was felt with a yaw to the right. This resulted in increased lift that required reduction of power. With a headwind of fifteen knots or more, the aircraft was already deemed through translational flight at a hover.

<sup>49</sup> The nine-cylinder engine burned about one gallon of oil per hour giving rise to a pilot witticism, "fill up the oil and check the gas."

At last we turned southeast toward Udorn. We were still flying over mountains and would be for some time, when Russ reminded me of the Company policy to be out of Laos and the mountains by dark. It was good advice, based on logical reasoning. We were not Company night-qualified or proficient, and only the enemy reputedly flew at night in Laos. Moreover, in case of a forced landing, it was common sense not to fly a single engine helicopter, when you could not see the ground. This sound advice marked the beginning of a series of "thumb rules" that I would learn piecemeal from many old timers.

The sun was low on the horizon as we crossed a final ridgeline thirty miles from the Udorn base. At this point in the flight, the terrain flattened, broken only by a checkerboard of mirror-like rice paddies and sparse sugar palm trees standing at dike intersections to provide shade to workers. The closer we flew to our destination, hamlets and scattered huts became more numerous. I imagined that I could detect smoky odors from evening cooking fires wafting gently heavenward. Detached and safe in the security of my cockpit, the scene below us appeared peaceful. However, I could not help wondering what was actually occurring in this small part of the world in man's all-impelling quest to survive.

While I scanned the countryside looking for "home plate," I could see low rain clouds in the distance merging with the horizon and lingering there as if to remind us of the waning monsoon.

After Russ secured Foxtrot and totaled flight time in the logbook, I noted that we had flown nine hours and forty minutes. Seven hours and thirty minutes had been logged toward Project Pay. If approved by the Customer, this meant an extra five dollars an hour for a poor First Officer. Because of Customer

and Air America accounting policy, pay checks were mailed to our hometown bank and were deposited the following month.

Located west of the parking ramp, the Air America snack bar was the only place in town where one could obtain American style food. It was well patronized by Air America personnel. Formerly a MABS U.S. Marine Corps mess hall built after I left Udorn, it had been inherited by Air America when the 1962 Nam Tha flap terminated, and military troops returned to sea. The rough wood, tin roof, and open screen-sided building had seen better days. Similar in design to other hastily erected buildings across the taxiway in the Air America compound, the tropics had exacted a toll and the ugly structure was in an advanced state of decay. However, this was a planned demise. For some time, no further repairs had been made and only essential equipment was purchased. All profits from sales were accumulated for the planned construction of a recreation-dining hall in the main facility.

The snack bar housed a small dining area, which doubled as a movie room when available movies were loaned from the Army circuit, and a bar. It was also used for the legendary poker games still conducted even though paychecks had drastically dwindled. Dart throwing was a popular pastime, and some participants were highly proficient. In May, a competent, but somewhat emaciated-looking Chinese cook had been imported from Bangkok. The friendly man, who crewmembers referred to as Won Ton, performed a creditable job preparing meals from local produce and whatever goods were scrounged from the Vientiane U.S. Embassy-sponsored commissary.

Talk was generally stale for the group of men who had told all the jokes in their repertoire, and had pontificated on subjects in vogue. Lately, the seemingly innocuous snack bar had been the focus of considerable excitement and fodder for

conversation among personnel thirsty for colorful subjects to discuss.

Base Manager Ben Moore hired a Thai cook to assist Won Ton, and spell him on his time off. Captain Charlie Weitz had named the individual Alfred after the *Mad Comic* book character, Alfred E. Newman.

During lunchtime, spotting a cobra on the floor, Alfred suddenly bolted from the kitchen, screaming in an incomprehensible tonal cadence. So intent was he to avoid harm's way that he ran directly into a supporting teak pillar, at the end of the serving table. Bouncing off, he shook his head, and continued a rapid departure from the building.

Mike Marshall, Jack Connor, Red Alston, and others rushed into the kitchen to investigate the ruckus. They were just in time to see the equally frightened snake slither through a knothole in the floor. Spying two inches of the viper's tail exposed, Connors grabbed it and pulled. It was a foolish move, for the snake had discovered another hole. An angry snake's head reappeared, and Jack was fortunate to avoid a venomous bite. The serpent then disappeared underneath the raised building.

Gathering outside, the no longer bored patrons were able to observe the cobra wrapped around a post, and the event became a temporary source of entertainment, during what would normally have been a dull day.

Eventually, Dick Van Lear, a short, buck-toothed individual, obtained a .22 caliber pistol and blasted the intruder numerous times. Bold during trying situations, Jack Connor crawled under the shack and retrieved the reptile. Then he playfully tossed the six-foot monster in Marshall's direction as a joke, missing Mike by inches. Marshall was more than a little concerned for his safety, especially when he observed the

snake still wriggling after it hit the ground. Marshall was quite angry with Connor for some time after the incident.

The event was big news in the sterile environment. Ben Moore referred to it briefly in his September monthly report to Taipei headquarters. To avoid provoking probes regarding employee handguns, Ben sanitized the snake's demise, stating, *"the newcomer was given a severe reprimand with a stick."*<sup>50</sup>

There was another less innocuous story associated with the snack bar.

Red Alston had flown to Ubon, southeast of Udorn, on a day mission. CP Wyatt, his Flight Mechanic from Fort Worth, Texas, who later became a preacher, conned the Navy cook there out of a can of condensed split-pea soup.

It became standard procedure for crewmembers to sit in the snack bar and discuss what they were going to order. Of course, everyone was going to get the same food, a "quay burger" and fried potatoes. Nevertheless, they dreamed and talked about hors d'oeuvres, medium rare steaks, and pheasant under glass.

When the subject got around to Wyatt, he indicated that he was going to enjoy a large bowl of split-pea soup. A cry went up from the table, *"Where did you get split-pea soup?"* He told them about the cook at Ubon who had given him the can of soup.

*"Where is it?"*

*"Back there with the cook."*

When the normal everyday crowd began arriving, the guys asked Wyatt if they could have some soup after he was finished.

---

<sup>50</sup> Mike Marshall Interviews.

Dan "Red" Alston Interview.

Wayne Knight Email: Van Leer had been a gun owner in California and talked a lot about guns. He had some custom weapons made for some of the crewmembers.

Then Alfred came out of the kitchen with a plate of green glop. Alfred had fried the soup. <sup>51</sup>

Following an adequate repast of buffalo meat and potatoes, I called the Transportation Department on the crank type military field phone requesting a ride to the hotel. Drained from the excitement of the nearly ten-hour flight, on the way into town I nodded, while mulling over what I would relate to Howard about events of the day.

During the first few days after our arrival, in order to assimilate more of the operation and be readily available for a flight, the Chief Pilot obliged us to standby at the airfield. As mentioned, time was spent reading standard operating procedures (SOP) or drinking coffee, and yakking with pilots at the snack bar. These standbys afforded the opportunity to visit or check in with other departmental personnel such as supply and maintenance. The Company work force was multinational, composed of Americans, Taiwanese Chinese, Filipinos, Thai, and one Australian. Most seemed friendly, business like, comfortable in their jobs, and appeared as though they had been there a long time.

### **THE MEDICAL CLINIC**

One such visit was to the small dispensary at the far end of the administration-operations building. I had been forewarned that when ailing, the clinic was a good place to go for sympathy, but certainly for nothing more serious than a common cold. Doctor Kao, a thin, elderly Taiwanese gentleman, was in charge of the facility. Educated on mainland China, Kao belonged to old school methods as they applied to medicine. As one of

---

<sup>51</sup> Mike Marshall Interview.

many archaic practices learned as a young man, he advocated and stressed wearing a belly warmer to ward off most ailments.

The bespectacled man was forthright and honest with people, readily admitting that Air America did not provide him adequate funding for up-to-date pharmaceuticals and other medical supplies. A serious problem like appendicitis or a gunshot wound would necessitate evacuation to a Bangkok hospital, as the primitive Udorn hospital was not equipped to adequately treat Westerners.

I was particularly anxious concerning remedies for bullet wounds. Three years before, while undergoing Naval flight training at Whiting Field, Florida, I had suffered an allergic reaction to a tetanus toxoid booster injection. I had had skin sensitivity tests since then, and remained allergic to the horse derived vaccine. I cautioned the doctor about this, as I had been informed by medical people that such an injection might kill me. Then Kao surprised me with his knowledge. He said an alternate for the vaccine was a gas gangrene treatment. I did not like this, for it sounded like a disease in itself. Since a situation might arise in which I was unable to communicate, I decided that when my trunk arrived from home with my military dogtags, I would tape a label on them, indicating that I was allergic to tetanus toxoid. This, plus the good doctor's awareness, was all I could do.

Doctor Kao was assisted by a compact, dark-skinned Thai nurse, Bootsabong, who was especially skilled in administering inoculations. During the months ahead I was to appreciate her talents. In addition to several Company-required injections and medicines (typhoid, cholera, anti-malarial drugs, etc.), a prophylaxis for the hepatitis virus had recently been added to the system. An occupational hazard caused by unhygienic and unsanitary conditions at outstations, this nasty viral disease



had bedridden several pilots including Sam Jordan and Tom Moher. The most severe cases had cost the Company several months of employee services. Because of hepatitis' potential devastating effects on a victim's liver, gamma globin, a new serum, was developed by Japanese scientists. Extracted, derived from human blood, and cultured in chicken eggs, it was offered to boost an individual's immune system to counter the disease. It was a fairly new product with the duration of immunization not well understood. Therefore, at first it was administered to willing crewmembers every two weeks.

The two and a half cubic centimeters (CC) of serum was inserted intramuscularly in a hollow of the buttocks. Since micro needles were not yet developed, the injection was made by large needles we called horse needles. The mixture felt heavy, stung, and persisted for some time. Actually, it hurt like hell. The only redeeming factor to the drill was that "Boots" gently massaged the area, attempting to dissipate the jarring effects of the massive injection. Despite this quasi-sensual pleasure, no one looked forward to the mandatory injection, and some refused to take it. All were relieved when administration of the expensive shots was gradually extended to greater periods that eventually settled at three-month intervals. Although there was always doubt as to the serum's efficacy, there were no more reported hepatitis cases.

Thus far I had incurred no problem with diarrhea. I attributed my good fortune to a possible immunity built up during the previous year in the Far East, a good deal of caution, and an abundance of good luck. But Howard Estes was not so fortunate. Since arriving in Thailand, he had been suffering from the "travelers' disease." An affliction enjoyed by all at one time or another, we described the not-so-amusing condition for the afflicted, the "Code of the East." The attempt at humor

was reinforced by supreme jokester Bill Zeitler's occasional light vernacular that, "*Happiness was a dry fart.*"

## **HUMOR**

Despite an apparent lack of fraternity-like spirit in our diverse pilot cluster, it did not take long to note that certain forms of humor abounded. These were mostly related to the present situation.

There had been no lack of humor in the Marine Corps. During my early training, humor was generated in direct proportion to prevailing stress, pressure, and problems affecting the entire group. As "ground pounders" and members of the first officer basic school--we called this phase of training charm school. It involved transitioning from the spartan Quonset hut living conditions at Camp Upshur that we had taken for granted, to supposedly more pleasant accommodations at Camp Barrett, deep in the boonies of the Quantico, Virginia, military reservation where circumstances were often grim. The changeover was anything but smooth. Mind-boggling, still harassed by sergeants, we "Third Lieutenants," as we called ourselves, were subjected to frequent changes in Marine Corps school's policy by muddle-through, inept, dead-end officers seemingly incapable of planning two days ahead. Respect for these old-dog types was nonexistent among us young energetic Marines.

During a difficult eight-month period, humor was all that existed to sustain and help us maintain a semblance of sanity. It seemed that the worse conditions became, the more humor and wit emerged from the rank and file. There were many examples, which sometimes took a bizarre twist. A typical example occurred when the company was bussed in long gray "cattle cars" to a field location for map instruction. Soon after our arrival, the weather quickly changed and rain began to fall. Trapped in the

open without ponchos, and capping other recent problems, as precipitation increased, our moods turned ugly, and pent-up dissension marked the final straw. Spontaneously, to a man, we collectively rebelled. Unsolicited, 200 thoroughly disgusted officers began to slowly pace back and forth bellowing like cattle. Despite frustrated senior officers' attempts to establish a semblance of order to our disgruntled group, the "mooring and milling" continued. Frustrated, they eventually cancelled the class and ordered us back aboard the busses.

The incident produced interesting human behavior. I had never observed similar conduct at Pensacola or in the Fleet. In these more mature environments, such behavior probably would not have been tolerated. The seriousness of aviation and the desire to be part of it appeared to diminish any need for excessive humor, which might have been disguised by adult libations.

It now appeared that I had come full cycle. Joking was a great help in passing time that now weighed heavily on all employees. Many of the Air America pilots possessed an excellent sense of humor, which contrasted sharply with the management group's more sedate, dour, and constipated-looking faces. I was soon able to differentiate between the jocular Bill Zeitler, the dry sarcastic Ed Reid type, and all others sandwiched in between.

Story-telling also helped pass the time. There were several in the outfit who displayed this talent, but Bill Cook stood out head and shoulders above all the rest. His yarns were legendary, rife with excitement and local color. However, one factor predominated as Bill told and retold his tales. They were never repeated the same way. This was obvious to all listeners, but never hindered Bill in his entertaining. Furthermore, everyone knew that Cook lied, so no one objected that he exaggerated his accounts. I would soon receive a touch of his blarney.

**PAKSANE**

On Thursday the 26th, I was assigned to standby duty at the field with Bill Cook. While eating breakfast at the snack bar, he related an incident that occurred while he was working in the jungles of South America. After he had landed an oil exploration team in a remote area, a group of bandits sauntered into the clearing where Bill sat on a log smoking a cigarette. While exchanging pleasantries, the bandito chief sat down next to him. Placing an arm around Bill's shoulder, he assured the anxious pilot that his group of merry men meant him no harm. However, this was contingent on his relinquishing his watch.

Before Cook could complete the jungle encounter story, the field phone buzzed. It was an operations department clerk alerting us to a mission. Like my previous flight, we were to launch for Wattay Airport, where we would be briefed and dispatched to a work location for the day. Confident that I would hear Cook's story again, perhaps slightly shaded, we headed for the flight line where Hotel Foxtrot was parked. Santiago, one of the many Filipino Flight Mechanics employed by the Company, was busy preparing the ship for departure. Along with other third country nationals (TCN), to reduce the cost of the operation, these men had been hired to fly from the beginning of the Udorn Maddriver Program at a fraction of what was paid to American Flight Mechanics.<sup>52</sup>

Later, with the Air Operations briefing at Wattay Airport completed, we headed south downriver toward the small Mekong town at Paksane (Victor-35). The sixty-eight-nautical mile (a

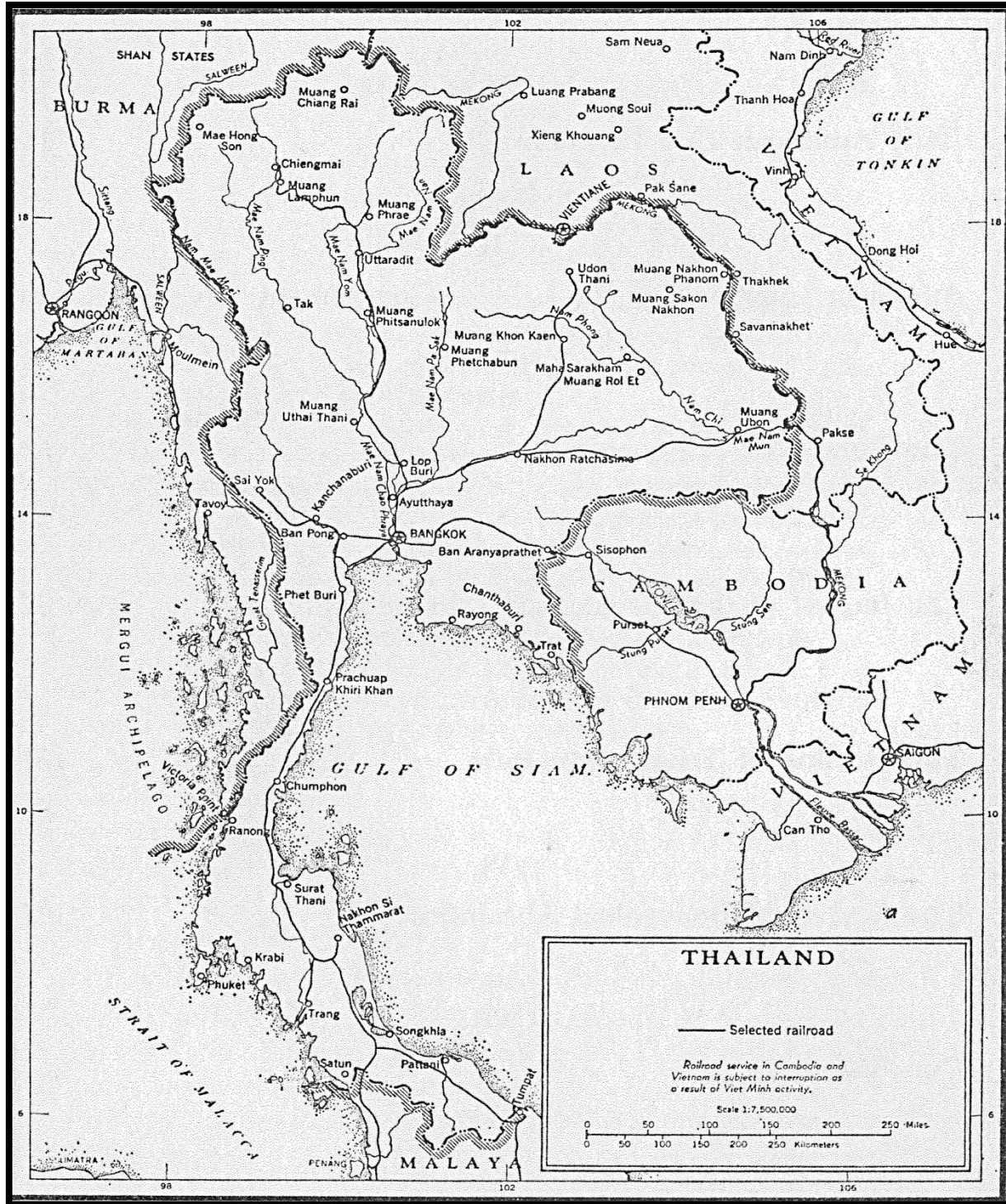
---

<sup>52</sup> Most Filipino mechanics were hired from the country's air force. Some older types had participated as Filipino Scouts during the World War Two conflict against the Japanese. Their pay scale was generally quite high, especially when the equivalent conversion from dollars to Philippine pesos was considered.

nautical mile is 1.1 of a statute mile) flight over parts of both Laos and Thailand proceeded over semi-populated, flat rice paddies and forested Mekong River plain. Official Lao government statistics indicated that the Royal Lao Army controlled the area along the river in most of the country. However, anyone who flew over Laos knew differently. In actuality, government forces occupied very little territory other than the larger towns along the river. Even here, one could be popped at by either friend or foe. This influenced most pilots to fly at 1,500 feet or higher, as that altitude was considered normally safe from .30 caliber small arms fire. The altitude also provided an improved capability to send and receive radio messages.

At a point thirty-three miles southeast of Wattay Airport, the Nam Ngum tributary poured into the Mekong River, and the sheer-sided eastern edge of the Pha Khaokhoay massif encroached close to the great river. With two rivers, Route-13, and mountains converging, one could not ask for a more desirable half-way checkpoint. Looking north, it was apparent that rough terrain was far more dramatic than that around Luang Prabang. The map Bill lent me showed bench mark elevations in these mountains exceeding 6,000 feet. Within twenty minutes we were close to Paksane.

The town was situated at the entrance of the Sane River into the Mekong. The town's name was derived from a combination of the river and the Lao word pak for mouth, literally meaning the mouth of the Sane River. This form of nomenclature was fairly common. Many Lao rivers, mountains, and towns were similarly named for distinctive characteristics or features. Colocated with the Thai river border, a sister town was often located there. In this case Bung Kan stood on the Thai side across from Paksane.



Map of Thailand and part of Indochina. Except for Ban Houei Sai in the extreme northwest of Military Region One, six prominent river towns (Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Paksane, Thakhet, Savannakhet, and Pakse) are charted from north to south. The general path of the Mekong River can be seen from Vientiane to Paksane.

At first glance, Paksane appeared to be just another small Mekong River town that developed through the ages from river boat trade from China or Cambodia. However, this town differed in that it was situated in a highly strategic location. It straddled one of two potential invasion routes, one from the Plain of Jars crossroads area to the government-controlled river provinces and the administrative capital of Vientiane. The other route, previously mentioned, co-existed with segments of Routes-7 and 13.

Route-4, an extended jungle footpath, had its origins in Military Region One on the border of Phong Saly Province leading to China. The trail merged with Route-13 near Luang Prabang and Route-7 at Sala Phou Khoun. From this location it wound through the enemy-held Plain of Jars, where it assumed its own identity, entering the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley (V-03) east of the Plain. The track then took a southerly course, following several river systems past the hamlet of Tha Vieng (VS-13) and into the Tha Thom (VS-11)-Ban Tha Si (VS-61 Valley, forty miles north of Paksane. That trail was the only viable way out of the valley, for to the south, 2,000-foot northwest to southwest-oriented ridges stretched thirty miles or more, preventing alternate east travel. Within this mountainous area, skirmishing and patrolling continued unabated for control of the trail, as it meandered and twisted through numerous passes. The path exited through a cut in the mountains at Borikhane, presently an RLA military strong point twelve miles north of Paksane. From there the road rolled through flatland pine tree forest, until it connected with National Highway-13 west of town.

Following Neutralist Kong Le's August 1960 coup, Paksane, fortified with gunboats, became a leftist Pathet Lao bastion. Under U.S. support and guidance, using Special Forces, Thai PARU, Air America H-19 helicopter crews, and other CIA assets,

FAR troops marched north from Savannakhet to Vientiane in November of that year, and Paksane reverted to Rightist control.

Currently the area was under Rightist jurisdiction and housed the headquarters for Military Region Two. It was commanded by General Khamkhong Bouddavong, a crony of FAR Army Chief General Phoumi Nosavan. Two years earlier, the scope of RLA responsibility and operations was considerably wider. Then, lodged deep in Sam Neua Province, Khamkhong's forces were pressured and easily forced out by invading communist units. Bill allowed me to fly a lot from the right seat. Under the auspices of White Star FTT (field training team) members, work in the Paksane area was enjoyable, and not demanding at the low elevation. Missions consisted of last-minute resupply shuttles to the Borikhane airstrip, and to small outposts on low flanking hills to the northwest. These positions were established as listening posts to discourage and contain any small unit enemy incursions toward the river town. FAR operations had contracted in this part of Military Region Two because of recent Pathet Lao and Neutralist advances in the Tha Thom Valley. Pending the success or failure of the newly formed coalition government in Vientiane, consolidation and improvement of RLA defensive blocking positions was underway.

As suspected, the verbose Cook kept me entertained throughout the day with numerous amusing and colorful stories. During one refueling stop he unexpectedly and boldly displayed scars on his hand and hip, and related a bizarre story regarding their acquisition by a disgruntled Flight Mechanic.

On May 21<sup>st</sup>, Cook and "Nookie" Haggan began the first day of a Pakse RON. Haggan, a large, rough, emotionally immature individual, with a reputation as a good Flight Mechanic, had





Undeveloped Route-4 in pine woods north of Paksane.

just returned from Washington D.C., after taking emergency leave to resolve family problems--perhaps an ill mother. During an early morning fueling process, he spied Cook, a heavy smoker, puffing very close to the helicopter. The established safety rule for smoking was fifty feet from an aircraft. Concerned about potential fire, he politely asked Bill to move away from the H-34. A Southerner, Cook had never treated Haggan decently. He always called him boy and other pejorative terms.

Bill called to him saying, *"Hey boy. Finish the fueling yet?"*

*"No, but I am doing it."*

*"Then hurry up boy."*

*"Don't call me boy! You know my name. Why do you always talk to me like that?"*

*"I'll call you the same thing I would back home. There you are a boy and here you are a boy."*

After uttering these provocative words, the former Louisiana resident, ever the jokester and agitator, flicked his cigarette in Haggan's direction. "Nookie," annoyed at the racial slurs, and perhaps still unsettled from the problems at home, snapped. Suddenly, he produced a .25 caliber semi-automatic pistol, and began pumping rounds at Cook's feet. Several shots were fired in quick succession. Cook, facing Haggan with his back to the helicopter, was hit by ricocheting fragments of metal in the thigh and hand. Following the initial shot, Cook's bogus racial superiority faded. As Haggan blazed away, responding to the hard-wired human fight-or-flight instinct, Captain Cook began the dash of his life.

At 0630 hours, a semblance of sanity finally returned to the parking ramp. Cook ventured to the White Star infirmary, while "Nookie" sheepishly returned to the hotel--considered little more than a sporting house--to inform Captain Dick Elder

about the incident. Elder was still asleep, for his H-34 was grounded awaiting parts (AGP). Professing remorse for his actions, and unaware that he had wounded Cook, Haggan recounted the ludicrous story, and then relinquished his gun to Elder.

After listening to the amusing details, Dick proceeded to the infirmary, where the medic was still extracting small pieces of lead from Cook's body. Fortunately, his wounds were deemed superficial, and Cook was declared fine.

After a C-46 crew arrived at the airport, Elder transferred Haggan's pistol to the PIC and, after relating the bizarre story, loaded the two antagonists for the trip to Udorn. Since the incident occurred in Laos, no charges were filed. However, the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane became involved, along with Air America management, and Haggan was terminated.

Wanting to observe Cook's behavior, VPFO Bob Rousselot had him journey to Taipei after he was shot by the "enemy." As he sat in Rouss's office for three days, while Bob conducted business, Cook wondered why he was there, for some sensitive business was conducted to which he believed he should not have been privy. Overall, he considered Rouss a hell of a guy and the smartest person he ever knew. Bill Cook was retained as an H-34 Captain, but the incident demeaned him. He was vilified and heartily disliked by some pilots. <sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> The Cook-Haggan incident was compiled from several sources. As usual, accounts varied slightly, but basic facts remain the same.

Mike Marshall, Phone conversations, 23-24 September 1991.

Dick Elder Letters, 08/09/91, 12/07/91.

Bill Cook input.

Wayne Knight Email.

Jim Coble Email. *"Bill Cook was an abusive individual, who tried to hide his abuse in what he perceived as humor. Nookie was a good guy with a short fuse when it came to race issues. From what he heard, Cook deserved to get shot--not for what he said to Nookie--but for being stupid for not realizing what he was dealing with."*

CJ Abadie Interview. One of Cook's cousins married an Abadie relation in Laplace, Louisiana. This might have had some bearing on Cook's retention.

Despite Bill's tendency toward hyperbole, he was a good pilot, and shared valuable information with me regarding flying in Laos. One of the most important, and one I never forgot and later passed on to other pilots I helped train, was "to eat all you could when food was available." There were no restaurants or gasoline stations in the jungle, and for years we were obligated to carry canned provisions with us or starve. Food and drink were generally not problems during single day flights, as a sandwich and soft drink purchased at the Air America snack bar would sustain us throughout the day.

Toward evening, after an uneventful familiarization in the low threat, flat terrain area which was wisely utilized for initial new hire training before an introduction to the mountains, we headed home. I was still flying. Barring unforeseen circumstances, management policy dictated that a helicopter should be parked in the chocks no later than sunset. Therefore, our departure was planned early enough so we would arrive at Sierra Zero Eight before 1820 hours. Time flown after this cut-off period during the month of September authorized a pilot to log night time, which paid slightly more per hour. Night time was a nebulous term and open to interpretation. In order to squeeze a few more dollars out of the system, some pilots employed tricks of the trade. Before actual dark, a short period of illumination known as twilight occurred, which was barely discernable to the normal person. On a clear day, because of the earth's curvature, flying west at altitude, using the interval between sunset and complete darkness, an aviator could stretch a day thirty minutes or more. But the piper always had to be paid; like a curtain slowly descending, descent to the ground would eventually envelop one in darkness.

Since there was no road to follow for navigation, I was a little concerned about flying directly to Udorn. Even if tuned

and operating properly, the automatic direction finder equipment (ADF) contained in Hotel Foxtrot would not home on the non-directional beacon (NDB) at the Udorn airport, until we were cruising at much higher altitude, or fairly close to the facility. Since we were flying at a moderate altitude, until this time I would have to fly and navigate.

Other than the Mekong River to our right, there were few distinguishing landmarks along our flight path, and the few available were difficult to read on a small-scale map. Therefore, I used simple time-distance navigation. I knew that factoring climb and descent into my calculations, and then flying a 220 degree no-wind heading for seventy-eight nautical miles for about an hour, should place me in the Udorn ballpark. To achieve this goal, it was important to accurately judge wind direction and velocity. Then, if necessary, correct into the wind to prevent excessive drift. Without this correction, strong winds could blow us off course. The school "thumb rule" was that a one-degree compass error in sixty miles would place an aircraft ten miles off a planned track. But in our case, there was a redeeming "fudge factor." Bill interjected that should our time-honored planning fail, there was a backup procedure: an iron compass was available. This was the north-south narrow-gauge railroad track running from Bangkok to Nong Khai, which conveniently passed through Udorn. If one missed Udorn by a wide margin, interception of the train track would be made at some point. This permanent check point was an excellent "gouge" for the lazy aviator, unless he failed to heed it and proceeded further west.

My fears were unfounded. Calculations worked perfectly, and we landed at our destination in time. Cook recorded eight hours and thirty minutes hours in the maintenance logbook. This included six hours and forty minutes project time.

**SPILLIS**

Although it was not logical to the normal individual, I soon discovered that the Company was still hiring pilots. After dragging my weary bones into the Pratch's hotel annex, Howard Estes introduced me to the newest hire, Jim Spillis. Jim, a former Navy type, originally furloughed from National Airlines. Like Red Alston, he had been working for Sunline Helicopters in his hometown of Miami, Florida. <sup>54</sup> The tall, dark individual had first heard about Air America when Alston went home to marry his sweetheart, Jane. Fed up with flying for Sunline, in rapid succession, Jim hired-on with the Company for money and adventure. Ironically, he recalled Howard Estes sitting on a couch in the Air America office the same day he arrived in Washington for an interview.

Like us, he was only in Taipei a couple days for normal paperwork processing and interviews. During the obligatory interview with Bob Rousselot, he was asked why he wanted to be in Southeast Asia, and how much flying he had done. Then a remark was made that it was apparent that he did not possess much H-34 experience. The VPFO informed Jim that he had been hired as a Bell pilot, but the 47G special project had been scrubbed. (Bill Zeitler and Jack Connor had also been hired for this program.) This was a complete surprise to Spillis, as no one in the Washington office had indicated that he was being hired for his Bell experience. Now, rather than attend ground school in Taipei for the required Chinese Airline Transport Rating (ATR), he was immediately routed to Thailand. Before he left the VPFO's office, Rouss asked if he had any debts. Jim

---

<sup>54</sup> It seemed like commercial airline pilots were prime cannon fodder in those days, as two Air America L-20 Beaver pilots, Phil Peary and Rusty Phillips, were also furloughed airline pilots.

countered, *"I thought you were going to pay me enough money so I did not have to worry about anything like that."*

Following a night in Bangkok, coincidences continued when Jim met Captain Billy Pearson, who had also worked a long time for Sunline Helicopters. Then one day the wiry blond Pearson had disappeared. Pearson, who was completing his monthly scheduled time off (STO), took Spillis under his wing and ensured that he was manifested on the C-46 shuttle to Udorn.

They arrived late and went to the snack bar, where a large party was in progress to celebrate the approaching Geneva Accords deadline, and termination of H-34 crew RONS in Laos. The gathering marked the first time all Air America crews had been together in Udorn since the operation began. They partied hard, and when everyone began drifting home around 0200 hours, Jim had no idea where he would spend the night. Since Captain Scratch Kanach's roommate, Bill Zeitler, was in the States enjoying a back-to-back scheduled time off (STO), Scratch offered to let him bunk at his house for a couple days, while he checked in and became oriented to the new life. <sup>55</sup>

Jim Spillis seemed a likable person and a welcome addition to our small First Officer group. However, at the time we did not have many positive things to relate to him regarding upgrading to Captain.

## **EMBARRASSED**

The following morning, I was summoned to the airfield to accompany Captain Abadie during a local test flight. Since being hired, I had not been subjected to a management evaluation flight. I assumed that the two Captains I had flown with had reported my progress, and now Abadie wanted to have a look for

---

<sup>55</sup> James W. Spillis Interview at the Author's home, 02/09/97.

himself. I never enjoyed check rides, generally considering them emotional drains, and rarely an accurate picture of one's actual performance. I usually tensed up at these times, so it was with some apprehension that I scaled the fuselage into the right seat of Hotel Sierra.

Although a few Southeast Treaty Organization (SEATO) forces remained in Thailand after the earlier Nam Tha flap, the airspace around the airstrip was seldom congested. During normal times, the old makeshift tower was only used twice a week to provide domestic commercial Thai Airways flight crews landing instructions. In lieu of a tower operator, as a safety policy a pilot was obligated to clear himself prior to takeoffs and landings, and conduct blanket radio calls "in-the blind" as to his intentions.

Following several preliminary maneuvers, I was beginning to feel more comfortable and confident when Ab asked me to perform a steep approach. A steep approach technique was generally conducted to clear an obstacle in a confined area. There were no trees available with a clearing suitable for rough area landing approaches in the immediate area. Therefore, Ab suggested that I use one of the taxiway's cul de sac parking areas to the southwest portion of the runway. From my Fleet training, when intercepting a proper sight picture at 300 feet AGL, I began the steep approach. Invariably they had been well executed, but I plumbered this one. I started the maneuver too high, entered the descent too late, ended up too steep on final, and had to go around. It was embarrassing, but despite a lack of a realistic obstacle and nervousness, I knew how to correct the problem. While I circled for another approach, Ab critiqued the maneuver. When I attempted to justify the poor approach and repeatedly interrupted him, he began shouting at me, "*Casterlin, don't ever interrupt me when I am talking!*" His outburst really shocked me,



as I never had anyone talk to me like that in the cockpit. I considered it rude unsuitable behavior, particularly for someone in his exalted instructor pilot position. Previous scuttlebutt from snack bar patrons had informed me that Abadie was a difficult person at times. Now it appeared that without trying, I had alienated the one person I most wanted to impress. After fifty-five minutes we terminated the flight and went our separate ways.

### **COBLE**

On Saturday, the 29th, Assistant Chief Pilot Jim Coble, Flight Mechanic Santiago, and I were scheduled to ferry white colored CIC-2 across the river to Wattay Airport to replace CIC-4, due for rotation to Udorn for the mandatory hundred-hour preventive maintenance inspection. Part of a fleet of four UH-34s removed from the Air America inventory in September, they had been recently transferred to the reconstructed International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICCS, or ICC). If one looked closely at the ships, the outline of the helicopter's original markings could be seen in relief through the hastily-preformed white spray job.

A unique organization, the ICC was charged by participating nations to oversee the Lao Accords. This involved investigating violations, and attempting to maintain the peace. The ships were manned by French crewmembers. Intending to balance political ideologies, the ICC was composed of neutral Indians, communist Poles, and western Canadian representatives. This mix never worked. The factions were problematical, and rarely agreed on anything related to ceasefire violations. The organization amounted to a façade. Because of members' inability to agree to investigate controversial incidents and restrictions in communist controlled areas, the organization had never been very

successful in the past, and there were serious doubts about its future. <sup>56</sup>

Jim Coble, a short, compact former Marine, had joined the Company with the original influx of early pilots in April 1961. When presented with the opportunity while still serving on Okinawa, he had transferred to civilian status and to Air America. I soon discovered that the "old timer" was considerably more affable to fly with than CJ Abadie. For this reason, I suspected that management might take a carrot and stick approach in its relationship with new pilots. Undoubtedly, Jim had been instructed to have a good look at me, so I was determined not to commit any further boo-boos.

I was relaxed and confident this time, knowing the way north to Wattay Airport from two previous trips there. Following takeoff, I established a 350-degree heading. Climbing to 700 feet, I leveled off and trimmed the aircraft to a level flight attitude, with the beeper switch located on top of the cyclic. <sup>57</sup> Then I engaged the automatic stabilization equipment button on the center pedestal between the pilot seats, and noted with satisfaction that the green light was illuminated and the gear was functioning properly.

The ASE equipment, working in conjunction with the servo system, was designed to reduce pilot fatigue. When it was working as engineers designed, by maintaining heading, altitude, and attitude established by the pilot under cyclic and pedal-free conditions, the "ACE" gear provided appropriate

---

<sup>56</sup> CJ Abadie Interviews. The entire CIC scenario was a political game. CIC helicopters did not fly much because of budget issues. The real problem was that they were not recognized by the enemy and their flights tended to be VIP in nature to airfields, which could have been performed by planes. Furthermore, the news media published unflattering accounts about the organization.

<sup>57</sup> Beeper switch: This was also called the Chinese Hat.

stabilization along the pitch, roll, and yaw axis. During normal flight, only occasional minor trim adjustments were required to compensate for the aerodynamic vagary known as dissymmetry of lift, which pitted the difference in lift between the advancing half of the counter clockwise rotating rotor system to the retreating half. Although it sounds complicated, the solution to the contrast was called cyclic feathering, and requires nothing more than one or two flicks of the thumb forward on the "Chinese Hat," or cyclic trim device, to compensate for a slight upward pitching movement. For an experienced H-34 pilot, this correction was barely discernable. Like many facets of helicopter operation, cyclic feathering was instinctive and normally an unconscious action for the experienced pilot--the aircraft pitches up, you push the nose forward. All this was probably explained to me at Ellison Field during the helicopter aerodynamic class. If so, I had long forgotten the instruction, or more likely was asleep, or dreaming about squiring the young lovelies in town.

Long ago, Crotch helicopter pilots had discovered that the ASE altitude mode caused constant up and down movements of the collective, and dramatically increased fuel consumption. Therefore, that channel was disconnected. This required monitoring of the collective pitch, but this was no great task.

While bulling with Howard and other former Army pilots, I learned that flying Air America H-34s marked their first experience using operational ASE. For those stationed in Germany and elsewhere, the mechanism never worked well, and there had been a distinct lack of trained technicians to correct and repair problems. Therefore, most Army aviators, not completely understanding the "black box" technology, or the fact that they could easily override the system, were afraid it might malfunction and kill them. They never engaged the ASE.

Satisfied that all console instruments displayed normal readings, I turned my attention to navigation. Selecting the weak non-directional beacon frequency (450kc) located at Wattay Airport, I knew 700 feet was insufficient altitude for an adequate line of sight to home on the NDB, and it would not be reliable until closer to the station. Harking back to basics, I calculated that thirty-eight nautical miles would take approximately thirty minutes, with five minutes tacked on to the end of the trip to allow for taxi and parking. My navigation and time distance estimate proved accurate, and it was with some relief that I spied the two distinctive loops in the Mekong River to my right, while the ADF needle swung obligingly toward the airfield.

After landing, securing, logging forty-five minutes, and turning CIC-2's logbook over to the respective authority, we talked briefly to a French ICC pilot, who indicated that his flying assignments could be dangerous. Despite the helicopter's distinctive white paint scheme and markings, crews were still shot at by Pathet Lao troops, who attempted to discourage entry into their areas. It made one speculate whether anyone respected ceasefires or accords.

Since there was no immediate requirement to return the CIC aircraft to Udorn, Jim and I, after arranging transportation with the Operations Manager-OM, or Oscar Mike, elected to visit the U.S Embassy commissary to purchase scarce foodstuffs unavailable at the Air America facility supermarket, or at the expensive Indian markets in Udorn Town. It was easy to envy Americans living in Vientiane with access to Western commodities. The small store in our compound was rarely stocked, and the occasional shipment, when received through the JUSMAG system, was immediately depleted by third world country and American families. Therefore, as there was no customs check or

policy regarding border crossings of food or any other products purchased in Laos, it was accepted that a flight such as ours would return loaded with commissary orders.

In ancient times Vientiane was called by its Sanskrit name as the place of sandalwood. Although marking the largest city in the kingdom, it was small compared to other administrative capitals in Southeast Asia. The city consisted of a mixed cosmopolitan community that, in addition to different ethnic Lao groups, included Americans, Europeans, Indians, Chinese, and Vietnamese. French expatriates, many of whom I discovered were anti-Gaullists, resided there along with diplomats and dignitaries from various western and communist nations.

French influence was everywhere. The city was designed with broad pleasant avenues, a multitude of flanking shade trees, deteriorating green-shuttered shops, and old, colonial style, frame or plaster houses that appeared a cross between French and Lao architecture. Open air restaurants, with patrons sitting at outside tables sipping tea or aperitifs, attested to the leisurely life style of the inhabitants.

Seen from the Volkswagen bus, the scene appeared peaceful, with citizens going about their daily tasks on bicycles, in pedicabs, or chatting with friends. However, it had not always been this way. Less than two years before, the city and its inhabitants had endured substantial violence and death by artillery shelling as a result of political differences. Effects of the civil disorder were still visible on the chipped and holed walls of some government buildings. Distrust and intrigue were common factors in this community that time seemed to forget. Evidence of a troika government was evident on every street corner in the form of police and military types, each wearing their individual faction's uniforms. Totally out of place, a disproportionate number of expensive Mercedes Benz

vehicles lined the avenues giving credence to what I had heard regarding greed, corruption, and unwarranted siphoning of USOM funds by Lao officials in high places.

Inside a compound surrounded by soaring security walls, Jim attended to the purchase of commissary supermarket items for the base grocery store and friends. With the delight of a kid in a candy store, I bought small cans of Vienna sausage and Beanie Weenies, perfectly sized to carry upcountry for snacks on the daily flights. The food would also serve to sustain me in case of a forced landing, or an unscheduled overnight in the field. I also purchased several cans of Campbell's Soup, and a case of canned whole milk. Since leaving America, I had craved these links with home. During the World War Two years and long afterward, my Mother served Campbell's Soup and sandwiches for lunch and read me the Bible, cover to cover--the begats were a bit too much. During the exercise, I became more addicted to the joy of eating soup than to religion, and still am.

One problem with purchasing items at the embassy commissary was that personal checks were not accepted, only U.S dollars. Despite obtaining cash from Bill Cook the day before, my funds were limited. Therefore, before checking out, I noted what would be desirable to buy on a later trip. Acquiring "green" was a constant battle for us, as limited funds were available at our base. Project Manager Ben Moore, after coping with several bounced checks, had to personally countersign an employee's check, and was careful with the distribution of funds. As an alternative, a Company-authorized money changer in Bangkok would cash checks after the office manager authorized it. One had to be physically present to conduct the transaction.

The CIC-3 flight back to the Air America facility was uneventful. (Forty minutes.)

On Sunday morning, as there was no requirement for me at the airfield, I presented our houseboy, Nuen, a red and white labeled can of Campbell's black bean soup to prepare for me. Pacing and glancing frequently off the balcony at the courtyard toward the kitchen, I smacked my lips, while impatiently anticipating the soup's arrival. Then when I thought I would burst, I spied Nuen hurrying toward the annex with a plate on a tray. A plate, not a bowl? This seemed strange. After climbing the stairs, smiling, he proudly presented me the "soup." The mess lay in a greasy, black clump in the center of a large plate. Granted, it had been stirred, but he had fried my precious soup. Unable to be angry at the youngster, after the trouble incurred purchasing the soup, I did not know whether to laugh or cry. Regardless, I learned a valuable lesson: do not take anything for granted that could be misunderstood in Thailand. It also occurred to me that Asians did not like to respond to the negative or admit they failed to understand something. I never forgot the day Nuen fried the soup and the incident became one of my favorite recollections and anecdotes.<sup>58</sup>

Now that the annual rainy season was nearly ended, I decided that I needed my own personal transportation. It was tiresome, unreliable, and a waste of time depending on the B-bus driver, Jim Baron, or others for a ride. Most of the pilots and mechanics drove Japanese motorcycles or scooters. Someone mentioned that Don Buxton was attempting to sell his wife's 50CC Honda Sportsman. Frank Blatz, a childhood friend who had served a Far East tour in the Crotch, had shipped one back from Japan.

---

<sup>58</sup> My incident had not been unique. At this time, I was not privy to Alfred's frying CP Wyatt's split pea soup at the snack bar. Years later, during a visit to Udorn, I met Nuen again at the Pratch. Then a grown man, he spoke English well, and had fought with the volunteer Thai forces in Military Region Two. He recalled the Black Bean soup incident and we both enjoyed a rousing laugh.

He talked glowingly about the machine's excellent maneuverability, outstanding gas mileage, and an abundance of fun. At the time I envied him, and thought I would like to own one. Here was my chance, so, after cashing another check, I purchased the motor scooter from Don for seventy-five dollars.

The machine was not fast, but I was not interested in speed, particularly after hearing about the numerous individuals who had crashed and incurred severe "Honda rash." In fact, it was not uncommon to see employees with their arms and legs bandaged and muttering, "*Those damn drunken motorcycles.*" One, Dick Nelson, a highly decorated Korean War veteran, had recently owned a helicopter operation in the States that failed. Dick almost received his final reward when a "drunken motorcycle" propelled him down the Air America access road, across the main highway and into a drainage canal, or klong. Besides being laid up with a dislocated shoulder blade, the accident was sure to cost him many dollars in lost pay, and Ben Moore was certainly thrilled by the event.

After learning how the machine operated, in addition to transportation, my new toy became a source of much fun. However, there was one problem. During twilight and nighttime operations, flying insects, some as large as a thumb, would nearly take your head off. Therefore, a pair of goggles was mandatory equipment against this hazard. Other potential problems at night were snakes on the airport road. As it was mating season, they were abundant. After sunset, small cobras, the earthworm of the East, wriggled onto Tahan Road from klongs and rice paddies to soak up the day's radiant heat, and, I suspect, to copulate. Morning would find numerous reptiles squashed and embedded in the pavement. I never saw a large one at night, but there were occasional tales from terrified bikers, claiming they had to



raise their legs and maneuver drastically to avoid a severe chomp from a rearing serpent.

Conflict with larger vehicles was rarely a problem. Aside from a few rice mills and cottage industry enterprises, there was not much demand for such transportation. Except for stocking a few commodities, particularly those consumed by Americans living on the local economy, there was little need for copious truck traffic so far north. Most supplies from Bangkok could be transported by the narrow-gauge railroad. Further thwarting vehicle traffic, the joint USAID-Thai Friendship Highway, an all-weather military-commercial road from Bangkok, was still under construction from Korat, and not scheduled for completion until 1964. Consequently, one could not venture too far south of the Air America access road before leaving the narrow, hard-surfaced road and encountering a pot-holed, dusty laterite ribbon.

One had to be constantly alert in town for people not accustomed to modern twentieth century machines. In their reverie, in which Lord Buddha dictates the outcome of all things, without a glance left or right, they aimlessly walked into the street, asking to be broadsided. This was a similar situation either with bicycle or samlor drivers, staged along the curb or maneuvering in traffic. Therefore, one soon became adept at bobbing, weaving, and beeping a weak sounding horn to alert the subject to your presence, and avoid a crash.

During this same period, Howard Estes bought an old Cushman motor scooter. Jim Spillis borrowed it one day for a chore. While turning at the first corner, he drove it into a klong. Despite a few minor dents and mud, the scooter was operational, and he had no problem driving it back to the hotel.

As the month drew to a close, the sour attitude among the pilots because of the dismal flight time--down forty-five

percent from the peak 2,829 hours flown in May--was ameliorated by an announcement that a contract had finally been signed for funding and construction of the employee recreation building. Initially planned in April, it was part of an overall project to upgrade the Air America compound's austere facilities, and personnel morale. As other projects were being researched in Taipei, plans went forward to build office spaces, shops, and a ground training room in Hangar One. It marked progress and was a very good sign. If all this announced construction occurred, then it was likely that the Air America Udorn operation would survive. It appeared that Bob Rousslot's premature observation that I would not recognize the Air America compound might actually come to fruition. <sup>59</sup>

## **MARRIAGE**

Wayne Knight first met Lai in the Bangkok Civil Air Transport ticket office. Later, he found himself on a flight to Hong Kong with her. He made a date to go shopping on their first day in the British colony. While walking along Nathan Road in Kowloon, they encountered Helio Courier pilot Joe Hazen. Joe confronted Lai sarcastically saying, "Thanks a lot." Thinking that he had a date with her, Joe was disturbed to find her with Wayne. Wayne and Lai had no idea what Hazen was talking about. Actually, he had a date with Lucy Wong from the Hong Kong CAT office, and had mistaken Lai for her. Thoroughly embarrassed, he apologized profusely.

---

<sup>59</sup> CJ Abadie Interviews. The Club was begun as a bar in the old Marine snack building at the elevated tent camp area northwest of the parking ramp. Ben Moore believed crews needed that facility to keep them out of town bars. Ben eventually moved the bar to the southern facility, and later initiated construction of the Club building, which included his quarters. A volleyball court provided a main attraction until the Seabees and Company employees volunteered to build a swimming pool.



Air America employees attending the Knight wedding. L-R, Captains Dan Gardner, Tom Moher (slightly smoked), and CJ Abadie's clerk Supon.  
Knight Collection.

Their marriage was planned for 21 September 1962. They had a large reception planned at the Pacific Hotel in Bangkok. Wayne purchased five wooden crates of French Champagne in Vientiane. He flew the boxes to Udorn in an H-34, and conned the New Zealand Bristol freighter crew into carrying the booze to Bangkok during the normal course of their duties. Stenciled on the cases in black ink were the words, "For transshipment to Laos via Thailand; Thailand duty not paid." Unfortunately, Wayne did not understand the implication of the markings, and was not intelligent enough to repack the bottles in a less revealing container.

A Civil Air Transport Ground Hostess, Lai was alerted to receive the Champagne at Don Muang Airport. Her position allowed her access to all the right people in the customs department, but she arrived late, and an unwitting customs official observed the cases being unloaded. Recognizing a blatant violation, he confiscated the Champagne, placed the New Zealand crew under loose arrest, and threatened to impound the Bristol freighter.

Lai arrived at the airport as all this was transpiring, and was able to rectify the situation, and take custody of the shipment. The problem could have been quite interesting had she not made this timely arrival.

The wedding was well attended by Company personnel. <sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Wayne Knight Email.

**O**n the first day of October, Jim Spillis flew with Captain Wayne Knight on a northern Thailand exposure trip. On the same day I was assigned to fly a day mission with Captain George "Pinky" Eaton, a carefree former Marine, and blond-haired Flight Mechanic John Elben in Hotel Echo (HE). I had heard that several pilots liked to read paperback books to relieve the boredom generated by long flights, perhaps mitigate anxiety, and make the day pass more quickly. "Pinky" was a reader, and reputed to be one of the most prolific, at times, consuming two books per day. <sup>1</sup>

This was projected to be another full day of flying. At the Air America loading section of Wattay Airport, Echo was topped off. The cargo compartment was loaded with boxed mortar shells, and small arms ammunition that was scheduled for Huai Hok, a RLA outpost located on low foothills adjoining the Mekong River, thirty-five miles upriver from the capital. After landing at the small position, I wondered out loud what the unit was doing in the middle of nowhere. After desultory speculation, we collectively decided that this must represent a blocking force or listening post designed to prevent or monitor clandestine

---

<sup>1</sup> Dan Alston Interview. *"Pinky Eaton was a tense pilot, sometimes throwing up before flying."*

Mike Marshall Interview. When asked, Eaton refused to retrieve a beleaguered White Star team on the Plain of Jars.

Frank McLendon Interview. *"Eaton's first name was George,"* something I never knew until this interview. Frank "Big Mac," knew him at the New River helicopter base in North Carolina. Eaton's wife Bonnie lived in Bangkok with other Air America wives.

Jim Coble Email. *"Pinky' suffered from fecal retention. He was as full of sierra as the Christmas goose. He was a senior captain in the Corps and big shot in his squadron. One of the 'legend in his own mind' types. Someone once told Jim, 'For months before I met him I had heard 'Pinky' Eaton stories. One day I met him, and he told me every one of them.'"*

enemy movement toward Vientiane, or report on infiltration into Thailand.

After depositing the munitions at Huai Hok, as per Air Operations instructions, we started north upriver for Paklay. From there we were to proceed to Sayaboury, the capital of the province, where we would support Meo tribesmen in the adjacent hills at Ban Phou Khong (VS-42).

Since this was my second trip into the area within nine days, reference to my notes, hastily scrawled while flying with "Russ" Russell, provided some confidence as to my general position. These fellows I had been flying with had most likely travelled over these corridors many times; hence, their apparent lack of concern for accurate navigation. I pondered if I would ever be as seemingly calm and casual as these chaps.

The stop at the short north-south grass strip at the river town of Paklay was only momentary, long enough to deliver a package and a few letters. It seemed to me an expensive method of sending a letter, but with few passable roads and difficult lines of communication this was the only viable solution. Moreover, it was still flight time. I recalled the humor regarding the "verbal message." During the period of White Star support, to legally "keep the clock running" (logging flight time), some pilots, flying mostly small fixed wing Beaver planes, arranged trips of hundreds of miles to deliver nothing but an oral message.

## **SAYABOURY**

Historically, Laos was cobbled together solely for political reasons in order to buffer Thailand from China and Vietnam. Forming a patchwork of old territories, Sayaboury, the only Lao province to lie on the west bank of the Mekong River,

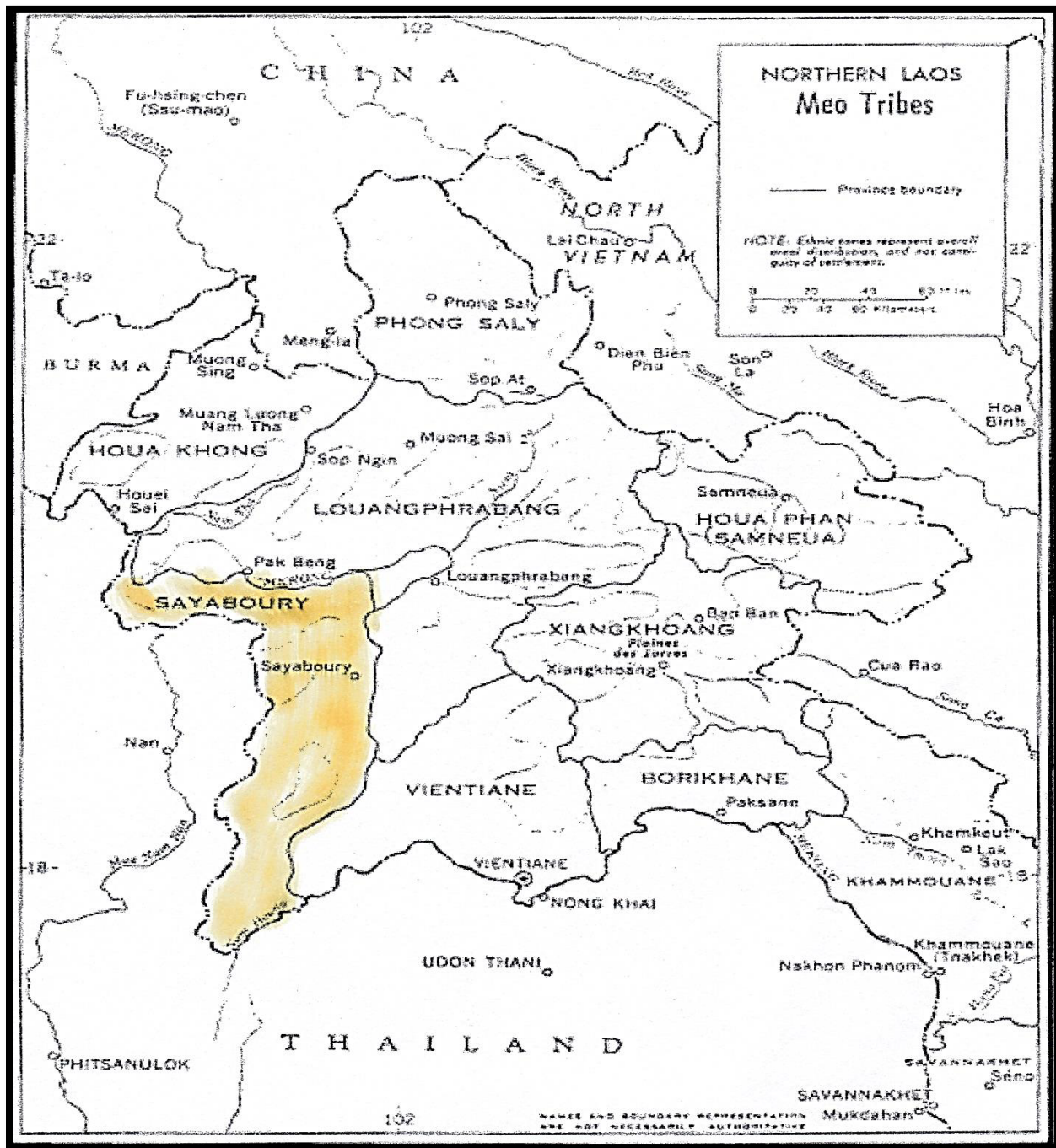
changed hands several times over the centuries. Laos gained complete control of Sayaboury Province during 1902-1904, when a series of treaties between Siam and France ceded the territory on the Mekong's west bank to France.

During 1941, as a sop for capitulation, and apparent cooperation in Japan's quest to control all Southeast Asian nations, Thailand, after lobbying for possession of Sayaboury, was awarded and reclaimed the province. Annexation made sense from the Thai perspective, for the west bank formed a natural border with contiguous Thailand.

Following cessation of hostilities and the return of French influence, during 1948 a French-Thai accord annulled the former treaty of 1941 and reestablished the original boundary, with the province reverting to Laos.

Topographically, the region was rugged, densely forested, and underdeveloped. Mountain slopes populated by semi-nomadic hill people--principally Meo clans--intent on survival, paid little attention to an unmarked international boundary. Consequently, families often inhabited both sides of the border.

Highly dissected, steeply sloped ridges and valleys characterized the region. Secondary ridges branching off at various angles from primary terrain features created difficult travel conditions, except along major valleys. Much higher terrain was so inaccessible to the normal individual that it was not administered by central governments on either side of the border. Ridgelines ranged from 3,000 to 6,000 feet above sea level. Flat to gently rolling valleys lay 1,000 to 3,000 feet below the ridgelines. The most rugged territory flanked the northern segment of the north-south range--generally over 6,000 feet--that formed the Sayaboury-Nan border.



The rudimentary and imaginary “left-handed ax head,” Sayaboury Province is highlighted in yellow. The Thai-Lao border is defined by high mountains that stretch the entire distance between Nan and Sayaboury Provinces. The Mekong flows downriver along the northern and eastern border.

CIA map-Highland Peoples of Southeast Asia.



All streams and tributaries drained into the Mekong, which formed the northern and eastern borders of Sayaboury. Rivers formed important arteries for movement of people and goods in long narrow pirogues to travel the Mekong. High powered maneuverable, shallow draft launches cruised rivers flowing through larger valleys, and supported heavy traffic despite numerous rapids, gorges, abrupt turns, and other navigational hazards. Rivers constituted the principal supply routes for province towns. Despite swift currents and dangerous rapids, launch-sized boats moved upriver as far as Luang Prabang during the high-water period between July and November.

Because boats were unable to negotiate the more difficult sections of the river during much of the low water period from December to June, most long-range river traffic ceased. However, local traffic was feasible, as launches were pulled and guided through rapids by hearty men wielding ropes and cables.

Broadleaf forests containing both evergreen and deciduous species blanketed the region, except valley floors and lower mountain slopes that were under cultivation.

Flourishing to 2,500-foot elevations, some parts of the region were rich in some of the finest stands of valuable teak wood remaining in Southeast Asia. The most extensive timber was near Paklay. Because of an undeveloped road system, elephants were widely used to move the logs. The remote province was once the center of capture-training-export of elephants. <sup>2</sup>

Visualizing an airman's chart (see map), Sayaboury Province described a left ninety-degree angle. It could be portrayed as a crude, ancient Asian ax head. Bordered to the east and north by

---

<sup>2</sup> CIA Intelligence Report, December 1968. Geography of Northern Thailand, Northwest Lao Border, pp. 1-2, 6, 14, 18, 21. (foia.ucia.gov/scripts/cgise).

the Mekong River; south and west by high terrain spilling generously into both countries, the area was inundated with mountainous jungle terrain, with a few valleys scattered throughout. The long, stout handle of the imaginary ax was ten to thirty miles wide and stretched south-north from the Thai border at Ken Thao for 135 nautical miles. The narrow head of the left-handed tool, never more than twenty miles and generally less than fifteen miles wide, extended east-west for ninety miles. The butt end of the ax head pressed against Luang Prabang, and the cutting edge terminated at the Thai border with a vertical spike jutting twenty miles north, intersecting the river, which then turned northwest toward Ban Houei Sai.

The capital and small town of Sayaboury, located six miles west of the Mekong River and close to the foothills of high mountains, lay in a long valley dotted with small Lao villages. Surrounded by rich paddy land, the area supported an estimated 2,500 souls engaged in double-cropping rice and cotton. The town had a small sawmill, and traded in forest products like rattan, bamboo, stick lac for varnish, and benzoin.<sup>3</sup>

The Customer's briefing conducted at V-23 was reassuring. Supposedly, there was little, if any, known enemy activity throughout the area. Of little importance or significance, the bad guys simply had no interest in the province. A few shuttles into the Meo redoubt at Phou Khong with supplies was the only assignment of consequence planned for that day.

---

<sup>3</sup> Doctor Charles Weldon, *Tragedy in Paradise: A Country Doctor at War in Laos* (Bangkok, Asia Books, 1999).  
Britannica. com.

**A BRIEF MEO HISTORY**

Although never instituted, when the Meo were first recruited to challenge the communist advance in Laos, AB-1 Chief Bill Lair planned to use the Sayaboury hill country as a fallback realm for Vang Pao and his people, should the communists ever succeed in chasing them out of Military Region Two.

The highland frontier of the Southeast Asian region and beyond was a refuge for minority people seeking escape from Chinese pressure during their southward expansion. Many of these minorities retreated down the valleys of major rivers. Migrations had continued into modern times. Thousands of Meo began entering Southeast Asia in the 1800s, and immigration continued because of communist oppression.

As a result of century-long migrations, diverse minorities numbering in the millions scattered throughout the highlands of south China and north Southeast Asia, with no regard for international boundaries. Thousands of Meo resided in North Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, and more than two and a half million were left in southern China.

The Lao constitution afforded the Meo and other ethnic tribes citizenship status. However, the people were neglected, and dismissed as inconsequential humans by lowland Lao. Fiercely independent, other than in Military Region Two several Meo clans had little reason to involve themselves in a national war. Loyalty extended to family and clan, not to a remote and distant government in Vientiane. Government-provided arms, when accepted by the average Meo male, were employed to protect the home and family from communist aggression. <sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> CIA Intelligence Report, April 1970, *The Highland Peoples of Southeast Asia*, 3,5. ([foia.ucia.gov/scrips/cgise](http://foia.ucia.gov/scrips/cgise)).

**FUEL**

Aviation gasoline for helicopters and small short takeoff and landing (STOL) fixed wing aircraft was an integral portion of the Lao air war. Lack of fuel in an assigned work area could present a problem--mainly getting home. At all major river towns with long, maintained runways there was rarely a fuel shortage. It was only in the back country that a problem could arise. To allay this possibility, we often carried two to three barrels of gasoline when dispatched to sites with a questionable fuel status. Naturally, one of the first items we checked when arriving at a site was the availability of H-34 aviation gas. Since fuel was often a scarce commodity, it was part of any trip planning to know where drummed fuel was located. Using pilot, Air Operations Vientiane, and Customer reports, attempts were made to maintain a running fuel inventory, and reorder the precious liquid when necessary.

From source to consumer, fuel supply was very expensive and the delivery process often complex. The fifty-five-gallon steel drums were manufactured and filled in Bangkok. Then they were trucked by a top government leadership-owned monopoly, Express Transportation Organization (ETO), to Nong Khai or other prominent river crossings, like Mukdahan to Savannakhet, and to Pakse. From the main transshipment location at Nong Khai, drums were barged across the Mekong to Tha Deua. Then they were trucked to Wattay, where they were either stored or loaded onto

cargo planes for immediate delivery to outlying areas. <sup>5</sup>

Air support became an even more expensive proposition if an upcountry air drop was required. Drums were palletized, four to a unit, with individual parachutes fitted to the drums. For this method of delivery, some fuel had to be removed from the drums to reduce and cushion the shock of ground contact. Depending on the suitability of the drop zone (DZ), and a pilot's experience and skill, there was usually a considerable loss of fuel. Even with properly rigged parachutes and good delivery technique, drums impacting uneven terrain might burst on impact. However, all was not lost. In an impoverished country where every scrap was utilized, expended chutes and steel drums were employed by natives as housing material, water cans, cooking pots, and other means to improve their miserable lives.

The hand refueling method was relatively simple, but depending on the fuel state, it could be time-consuming in a job where time was money. Topping off the three fuel tanks might require four to five drums. <sup>6</sup> With preplanning and indigenous help, an energetic Flight Mechanic could refuel a ship in a relatively short time. A more leisurely top-off might take the

---

<sup>5</sup> United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, Kingdom of Laos-Part-2 (Washington, D.C. United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, April 1970, 528, 531.

ETO: Express Transportation Organization. Contract trucks owned by members of the Royal Thai Government (RTG), and utilized for military cargo by direction of the Thai Minister of Defense. In 1953 USAID Laos contracted with ETO to haul transit cargo to Laos. U.S. military supplies had been transported by ETO when it was granted a monopoly by the Thai Cabinet for handling all transit and re-export cargo. All profit went to the Thai "treasury."

<sup>6</sup> A fully serviced helicopter held 266 gallons or 1543 pounds of aviation gasoline. With a fuel burn of approximately seventy-five gallons per hour, the maximum endurance of the machine, depending on ground idling time, was three to three and a half hours.

better part of an hour. Since we only logged fuel stops, and because of the lengthy time involved in this process, the aircraft's three tanks were normally completely filled and payloads (amount carried) substantially reduced on the first shuttles, then increased as fuel was consumed. In this case, we were partially protected if we were suddenly called to another site to work, or trapped in adverse weather. Moreover, since we were paid by the hour, we could minimize down time.

While we were being loaded for the first flight, I observed the refueling process: From a portion of the fly-away-kit, always carried upcountry and stowed in the rear passenger compartment, John Elben removed a silver painted manual wobble pump, a large right-angle metal funnel, and leather chamois. The Customer had already organized a team of locals who were rolling drums to the side of the helicopter. The first drum stood on end revealed a white top stenciled with the fuel type, the date filled, and a sealed bung. The protective seal was removed by pliers, and the bung plug removed with a crescent wrench, screwdriver, or other suitable tool. The gasoline odor and color were noted. This was important, for drummed fuel stored for more than a year, in addition to possibly being contaminated with excessive rust and water from temperature changes that induced condensation, might be unusable. A positive indication of turned fuel was indicated by a white color and a heavy hydrogen sulfide odor of rotten eggs.

There could also be a mistake in the grade of octane introduced into the tanks. The color of 115/145 octane aviation fuel consumed by the H-34 engine was purple. Colors of various octanes had been drilled into my memory by the "Black Ace" in the Pensacola pre-flight engine course. The memory jog (gouge) he gave to the class was unforgettable. "Rich Boys Get P----".



Field fueling operation of an H-34s center tank, conducted from mud-covered drums by a local native and Flight Mechanic using a hand wobble pump, funnel and wired chamois. The five-gallon Jerry can to the right contains 1100 engine oil.

Jarina Collection.

Ranking from the lowest to the highest octane gasoline: Red-80, blue-93, green-100/130, and purple-115/145.

After ensuring that the fuel was acceptable for use, the hand pump was inserted and screwed into the threaded orifice. The square, deep funnel was covered by a thick, high quality chamois wired fast to the top. Designed to trap rust and water, the device was placed into a refueling port on the right side of the fuselage. A drum was then jockeyed into position close to the filler opening, so one person could hold the fuel nozzle over the chamois-covered funnel. Another man, using long, slow strokes, pushed and pulled full throw on the pump handle. Slowing the procedure, depending on its thickness, the chamois reduced the fueling process, but it was mandatory for safety and had to be tolerated. In a pinch it was possible for one person to conduct the operation. A gentle tap on the side of the drum indicated the approximate quantity of liquid remaining, and when low, tilting the container would ensure transferring most of the gas to the bowels of the helicopter. While I waited impatiently, repetition of the labor-intensive process continued until all three tanks were full.

The northwesterly departure from the Sayaboury Valley to Victor Site-42 necessitated a high-altitude flight. At the boundary of the narrow valley, heavily forested hills popped up sharply, progressively increasing in height over the twenty-five-mile journey. I was still a relative neophyte at mountain flying, and gazed with apprehension and awe at the harsh terrain unfolding beneath us.

Our destination at Phou Kong was located at the 4,400-foot level on the west side of a sprawling higher mountain mass. High peaks and ridges encompassed and shielded the village in most quadrants, particularly the most dangerous north side. The



village housing the hardy mountain people looked more like a scattering of individual tightly-thatched dwellings as they flowed down the hillside. These people represented a Meo clan, organized along border region sites not long ago by Bill Young and Thai Police (PARU) specialists.

Long ago, during French colonial times, Meo men and boys had established their reputation as fierce, independent fighters who, unlike the dismal Lao troops, would not cut and run in the face of an enemy onslaught. They were a tough people, determined to protect their families and what they considered to be their form of life.

Visible from the cockpit, men were dressed in simple black shirts and baggy trousers that almost blended with their tan, leathery, sunburned skin. Most had long shiny black hair that some attempted to tuck under black berets. Tribal women were similarly dressed in black, but wore elaborate head coverings set off by colorful pieces of cloth and sashes around their waists. I had encountered many diverse types of natives in the Far East while in the Corps, but had to admit that these people looked different. Similarly dressed, a Priest, scarcely distinguishable from the Meo except for his height and Caucasian face, lived here and helped coordinate distribution of the supplies being offloaded. Originally from Italy, the man belonged to one of several denominations of missionaries working in Laos, who dedicated their lives to helping convert the animist tribal peoples to Christianity. In honor of his commendable work, Phou Kong was known as "The Padre's Strip."

During the return trip to Sayaboury, "Pinky" relapsed into his questionable habit of burying his nose in the latest cowboy novel. I was sitting in the right seat, but he never officially assigned me control of the ship. Instead, he simply trimmed the

controls for level flight, relying on the "ACE" gear to perform the work. I struggled with the conundrum of how any pilot could fly over what I considered the most hostile terrain in the world, oblivious to what was occurring inside and outside the cockpit. Unsure of exactly what to do, I monitored the instruments while alternately peering out the window at the tangled, jungle hillside, curious about where we could autorotate should the engine fail. In my eyes, there were no decent forced landing areas anywhere. Perhaps reading was indeed a defensive mechanism.

Finally, I could contain myself no longer. The cockpit attitude was too lackadaisical and beyond comprehension. Therefore, attempting to produce a semblance of coordination and sense, I told my Captain that I would "watch the store," and conduct any necessary attitude or altitude corrections. Still seemingly unconcerned, thumbing wildly through his trash book, not even bothering to look up, he grunted, "OK." Again, perplexed and excited, almost able to feel the adrenaline coursing through my body, it was difficult for me to fathom how any sane pilot flying alone in one of these noisy single engine beasts could be blasé enough to read, sleep, or doze. Yet many pilots maintained that reading helped calm their nerves and moderate the monotony of long days. I could not buy that philosophy. I considered such a mindset foolish to the point of absurdity.

### **HAYER'S VS MARSHALL'S LAKE**

Reading and resulting inattention to duty in the cockpit had caused problems for Air America pilots in the past. Jim Hayer, reputedly one of the more cocky and undisciplined of the early helicopter pilots, was a prime example of this.

There were two versions of the Haver's Lake story proffered that dramatically diverged. One was that after departing Savannakhet with supplies for an outpost, Jim Haver, who was reading a paperback book, fell asleep. After traversing the narrow Lao Panhandle, he arrived at the Gulf of Tonkin in the South China Sea. Acknowledging his error, he reversed course and landed at Lao Bao, a remote U.S. Army Special Forces "A" camp located just inside the Lao border.

In a second more accurate version, Haver maintained that he had not been reading. The problem was strictly weather related. Departing northeast from Victor-39 with cargo and his Flight Mechanic, adverse weather and circumnavigation constantly directed him east toward the coast. Seeing what he believed was a large lake, he commented this to his Flight Mechanic, who replied that it probably was the South China Sea.

Haver never attained a "feet wet" status, but eventually arrived at a large town he believed was Hue, South Vietnam, which supported a large military base only five miles from the ocean. Unsure of whether he was actually north or south of the de facto seventeenth parallel Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), he was committed to land because of a low fuel state. Still uncertain about the viability of the spot, he was cautious during the approach to a large ball field, or parade ground, in the center of the complex. To his relief, two "round-eye" white guys, surprised at the rare H-34 appearance, came running out of a brick building to investigate his arrival. American Special Forces advisors, they were hospitable, feeding the crew steaks and providing beds. At some point they radioed their Saigon headquarters with the ships and crew's location and obtained the correct fuel for the H-34.

The following morning Haver returned to Udorn. No one commented much about the incident, except for Jim's obvious lack of navigational skills. More significant, the legend of "Haver's Lake" was born and was perpetuated in a community of males starved for colorful stories.<sup>7</sup>

Later there was another pilot who also observed the Tonkin Gulf. It was similar to the Haver incident and actually involved cockpit reading.

This event involved tall, affable Texan, Mike Marshall before I arrived in Udorn. Mike, who had been elevated to Captain in the summer of 1962 was working at Pakse, and was assigned to fly for the Special Forces White Star unit at Saravane. He had been attempting to work the local area in the morning, but low clouds and fog curtailed serious efforts. Later, when the weather cleared, he was reassigned to work upriver at Savannakhet. While conducting pre-flight planning, he calculated an on-course heading of 330 degrees to intersect the Mekong River town, but incorrectly wrote 030 degrees on his kneeboard.

After launching from Victor-44 and climbing to 3,000 feet, he turned northeast to the incorrect heading. Accustomed to relaxing in cruise flight, letting the automatic stabilization equipment (ASE) perform the work and assuming a long flight, he resumed reading Harold Robbins popular paperback book, *The Carpetbaggers*. After thirty minutes, he glanced around, searching for the wide silver ribbon distinguishing the Mekong River. He was confused, and beginning to become concerned, when only mountains, bunkers, and fortified villages were visible. Then, while carefully searching the horizon, he thought he could

---

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed account refer to Book-1, *Genesis-Haver's Lake*.

discern the river. However, as he approached what he believed to be the Mekong, it broadened into a large body of water. Now really confused, he called down to his Flight Mechanic, Louie Jones, to inquire if there could be a large lake in their vicinity. Receiving a negative reply, he maintained the course while the lake loomed larger and larger.

By this time, it was obvious to Marshall that something was seriously amiss. Rechecking his kneeboard, he immediately noted that his heading was incorrect. It dawned on him that he had erroneously flown over an hour toward the Tonkin Gulf and the South China Sea, and he was probably now somewhere over the unfriendly skies of North or South Vietnam. Suppressing panic and a mighty urge to defecate, Mike hastily turned 180 degrees to the southwest, heading back to Saravane. Having learned a hard lesson, he vowed never again to read while flying. After arriving safely at V-44, he refueled, threw the cursed book away, and again launched for Savannakhet.

Fortunately, Marshall never heard anything from management regarding the incident. He also attempted to keep it under wraps. However, like all juicy anecdotes, it leaked and quickly made the rounds of the pilot force, probably as a result of narrating it to Bill Cook, supposedly one of his trusted friends. He further knew the word was out on him when Jerry Souders jokingly told him that on a recent trip to Saigon to retrieve an overhauled H-34 from IRAN, he looked out the commercial aircraft window and saw an H-34 flying near the Gulf of Tonkin. So far, the jury was still out on renaming Haver's Lake to Marshall's Lake. It remained so, and was only occasionally mentioned by old timers. During the early years,

the two incidents did little to curtail reading in the cockpit, and only faded later when the war resumed.<sup>8</sup>

It was late when we started back to Udorn. As our estimated time of arrival (ETA) was 1855, we would be terminating well after sunset. Despite management's standing orders to be out of Laos and on the ground by dark, Pinky did not seem to be concerned. After filing a flight plan with the Luang Prabang radio station operator, who would then forward the plan to Udorn over the Company high frequency net, I set a wet compass (river route) course south.

Having plenty of time to think, I reflected on what I had learned about the operation to that point. It appeared that during a day's assignment, we still performed very little useful work in relation to the great distances we flew. During day missions, half the twelve-hour period was consumed with en route ferry time, and another two hours involved refueling. This left minimum time to move the bullets, beans, bandages, and personnel necessary to maintain the operation. I had been assured by some pilots that in the days of outstation RONS, requirements had been different, and work considerably more organized. This opinion depended on who you talked to, as several members of the group were reputed to be lazy, not performing even to minimum

---

<sup>8</sup> Jim Haver Email.

Mike Marshall tape-Laos 1962-1964, March 1990.

Marshall Letter, October 1992.

Wayne Knight Email. Haver and Marshall were not the only Air America pilots to observe the South China Sea. On a very clear day Knight saw the South China Sea from the Lao Panhandle. During White Star flights out of Savannakhet to Lao Bao, they flew over Route-9 above 10,000 feet. Part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, this was a scary flight from a stressful and unknown perspective. The Trail was visible below, but to Wayne's knowledge he never drew any groundfire.

After Air America crews stopped making these trips, the pilots were informed that the village of Lao Bao was actually in South Vietnam (maps in the Author's possession indicate the ville inside Laos).

standards established by more efficient and hard-charging pilots. Just like any aviation organization, some pilots were strong and others weak. However, it appeared to me so far that no one unduly exerted himself.

The present lack of motivation and apathy regarding the job could be attributed to disappointment over reduced flight hours and project pay. In the past, pilots had been spoiled by the generous 2,000 dollar monthly pay checks. Indeed, the "big money" was what initially drew me to the job. Where else in the world could a helicopter pilot or anyone else my age earn that kind of money? Certainly, there was risk attached to the work, but was not risk synonymous with aviation, particularly helicopters? Before the recent slowdown, a pilot could work a year or so, then return to the States out of debt, and with a generous stake for the future. Now, a person was increasingly obligated to endure third world problems, including indigenous disease and boredom, without adequate compensation. For these and a plethora of other reasons, some pilots were considering leaving Air America's employment and Southeast Asia, if current flight time did not improve.

Project and overtime pay were considered the lagniappe, the vigorish of the helicopter program. The extra money made all the difference to a monthly paycheck. However, the "big money" afforded from project pay had not always been available. At the onset of the Madriver Project there had been no hazard, or so-called project pay. It was not until the spring of 1961, when Captain Tom Moher read the Madriver contract in Special Forces Commanding Officer "Bull" Simon's office, that a provision for hazard pay came to the attention of crews. This fact was instantly brought to Company management and contractor attention. Several months elapsed before the extra pay of ten

dollars per hour was allowed for American pilots flying missions in most parts of Laos. In the interim, before the policy could be implemented, "old timers" were told to maintain accurate records of their flight hours pending future payment. In the fall, after forwarding estimates to Taipei, they were to be retroactively reimbursed commensurate with the amount stipulated for consideration. In many cases, tidy lump sum payments were forthcoming. However, predicated on individual honesty, this method afforded a perfect license to commit larceny. Naturally, at least one person, Charlie Bade, reputedly took advantage of the situation by enormously inflating his project flight hour total.

Legend purported that Charlie departed Air America quite wealthy.<sup>9</sup> Tom Moher, considerably more realistic concerning this windfall, reported an estimate of what he had flown, and remained with the Company for the duration<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Wayne Knight Email. Wayne doubts that Charlie Bade made any real killing in submitting a request for back pay.

*"Charlie Bade, one of the original Air America helicopter pilots, went to Hong Kong and sold The Fund of Funds for entrepreneur Bernie Cornfield. Charlie returned to Udorn in 1962 to attempt to sell the Mutual Funds to Air America personnel. Something of a con man, during this trip he led Wayne to believe he was nearly broke. During his trip he stayed in Sam Jordon and Wayne's house."*

Charlie Bade was not one of Bob Rousselot's favorite people. On one selling trip, he hitched a ride on an H-34 from Vientiane to Udorn. Some of the "old timers" were aware that he was coming, so to conceal his arrival, he hid in the electronics compartment, while the PIC taxied to the ramp. After the aircraft came to a stop and a welcoming party, which included Abadie and Rousselot, gathered at the cabin door, Charlie, unaware of Rouss's presence, pounced from his hiding place strumming his guitar. It was quite a scene. Wayne believes that Rouss got pretty deep into Abadie for allowing non-authorized passengers on Company aircraft.

Charlie hung around for a few days and sold many mutual funds. Knight bought some for investment, and made a little money. Cornfield was later exposed for the charlatan he was.

<sup>10</sup> Jack JJ McCauley Letter, 01/28/91.



The fact that the contract had provided for project pay, which was initially withheld from the crews, was never forgotten by those who remained with Air America for years. Whether the "error" was committed through oversight or outright chicanery was never ascertained. However, those who were aware of the history were suspicious and distrustful of all Company motives. The "blunder" created long-lasting effects on pilots' attitudes and their loyalty to the Air America Company.

### **PADDING**

The present slowdown probably had an increasing influence on the falsification of flight time by some individuals, who had already committed a bit of larceny. This thievery was called padding. Since there was little or no control assigned to the method of logging flight time, there had always been a certain amount of creative writing ascribed to flight records. In some cases, padding was gross. Referred to as using the "magic pencil," there were pilots who took great delight bragging about inflating their flight time. Regardless of actual hours flown, many would not return to Udorn without logging at least ten hours. It remained a simple process to "leave the clock running" when shut down for refueling, weather, or a rest break. For a less-than-honest individual, padding was considered easy, as no one upcountry supervised or checked work actually performed, and logbook entries only reflected hours flown between fuel stops. During an operation that might entail scores of landings per day, this method made paperwork easy, but there was no official record kept of interim landings. For example, one might fly from Udorn to Wattay and log forty minutes, refuel, load cargo, and log one leg. Then he might continue to an upcountry site, work ten short shuttles, shut down to refuel, and legally enter three

hours in the logbook. An unscrupulous pilot, intent on cheating the system, might shut down at any time during the three-hour period, radio a required "operations normal," and rest for an hour or two. It was easy. In this way, the system was flawed and conducive to abuse. Management claimed to be aware of the more flagrant offenders. Indications were that they would be targeted and dealt with at the appropriate time. Despite this knowledge, the practice continued. The Chief Pilot's office occasionally cautioned pilots against padding, but did nothing to correct it. Obviously, the system would have to be revised. At the present time in my subordinate First Officer status, I had no control over what a Captain I was flying with did in the cockpit. Therefore, it was more logical to let him fill out the logbook and never question an entry.

Padding probably attained its zenith in helicopter operations during the White Star era. There was an abundance of rapport between pilots and Special Forces personnel when both sides continually "scratched each other's back" (quid pro quo). During one rainy RON at the large White Star Team house in Savannakhet, a Captain of an H-34 remained in bed most of the time. Flying only minimum hours throughout the period, at the end of the day he had the army radio operator transmit a total of ten hours flight time to Udorn operations. Curiously, the man was not consistent in his fraudulent behavior. During another RON at Pakse, when a First Officer was checking out, he related that this same pilot flew eight to ten hours per day without any padding. During July and August, the First Officer said he was instructed to log 159 hours with various Captains, but actually only flew eight-nine hours. He further indicated that the common practice was too much like stealing, but in his diminished role, there was nothing he could do about it. As a result of the

padding, the First Officer felt cheated out of a through area familiarization. <sup>11</sup>

Padding, as related to the "magic pencil," was not to be confused with the ".30 caliber pencil." During our first week in Udorn, Howard and I had been told by Captain Abadie that project pay was instituted to compensate crews for their helicopters getting shot at and actually incurring battle damage. Hearsay concerning the ".30 caliber pencil" arose during a dry period, when pilots were not taking many hits, and it was believed that project pay was possibly threatened. It was rumored among the group that enterprising pilots, to salvage their wages, began punching holes in the sides of their helicopters to simulate battle damage. I was never able to confirm the story, but knowing the crazy guys in the organization, the tale likely

---

<sup>11</sup> Mike Marshall Phone conversations, 23-24 September 1991. Jim Coble Email. Jim was sure there were instances where a few minutes were tacked onto a flight leg, or some over statement of project time was made, but nothing of any magnitude. Any wholesale cheating would have set off alarms, especially when things slowed down. During the slow period, Jim had to monitor flight times to assure that he could keep them balanced. He does not recall anyone being fired for padding, or anyone being placed on notice.

contained half-truth, and may possibly have occurred.<sup>12</sup>

While we proceeded down river at an advanced clip, a quick glance at Pinky, who was well into his second paperback thriller of the day, confirmed that I would be in control of the ship for the trip home.

Increasingly, my senses focused on my rear end, which had steadily numbed over the course of the day from vertical vibrations that had a cumulative effect. Reflecting on stories of the magnificent early days of aviation, when a pilot was reputed to have flown by the seat of his pants, I was well aware that a modern-day helicopter pilot also flew in the same manner. In my estimation, this was part of the charm of flying helicopters, an appealing and unique instrument in a high-speed technological age of electronic marvels. Still, I wondered how, with a deadened rear end, I would perform my job.

The Sikorsky cockpit, although well engineered, was never designed with pilot comfort in mind. We often speculated that engineers who developed the H-34 never flew in them and had no idea relating to basic pilot needs. Seemingly a condition common

---

<sup>12</sup> Jim Coble Email. Jim was surprised to hear the ".30 caliber pencil" story. *"Perhaps 'Pinky' was jerking his First Officer's chain."* Perhaps. During those early days I was a naïve mental sponge, eager to learn and absorb all that was said. As a First Officer for several months, I flew with many different pilots and obtained a good cross section of the stories, BS, and personalities.

CJ Abadie Interviews. *"Pinky could be a prick and often was."* There was no love lost between the two men. Ab was not very outgoing, mainly because he had a great deal of responsibility and had little time to sit around and be friendly. His attitude and demeanor were compounded by some of the guys who were spring-loaded to the piss and moan position, and others who wanted to get close to him for personal gain. Wayne Knight Email. Wayne does not believe the ".30 caliber pencil" was ever employed, but recalls a rumor that someone had fired .30 caliber rounds through an H-34 fuselage. He never knew "Pinky" well, and knew nothing of the man before arriving in Udorn. He believes that Jim and "Pinky" did not hit it off well, but does not believe anyone hit it off with either man. Wayne had the impression that "Pinky" looked at younger men with disdain.

to most Sikorsky products, the H-34 seat was very uncomfortable, and any flight of more than an hour would begin to bother me. Part of the problem, aside from vibrations, stemmed from the vertically sliding seat assembly. It was constructed of a hollow metal receptacle, into which was inserted a half box-like structure covered with a thin cushion. The seat was hard, totally inadequate for broad-shouldered pilots. Nearly every pilot employed an extra cushion to rectify the engineering oversight. Now that I had identified my problem, it would be a simple process to have my folks forward my green parachute pack cushion that I failed to have the foresight to include in my personal effects shipment. Consisting of a thick foam rubber covered with tough nylon cloth, it conformed to the exact dimensions of the seat. The pack, cleverly designed with an oval slit to relieve pressure on one's coccyx bone and anal region, this aviator's friend would help compensate for the engineering folly.

In the interim, Captain Billy Pearson suggested a solution. He indicated that removing the seat cushion from the cavity and placing part of it on the forward edge of the fixed seat created a tilt angle, which would relieve spinal pressure. This method worked, but I rejected it, for during a vertical crash one would be subjected to far greater forces on the spine than with the cushion flush in the box.

Another engineering novelty in the cockpit was the relief tube. Located to the left and below the pilot's seat, the apparatus consisted of a black plastic funnel and rubber tube that exited the helicopter belly. The device was a contortionist's dream. Out of necessity, I had used it in the past during extended ship to shore operations, but never while sitting down. A helicopter pilot normally exhibits extraordinary bladder control, but when pressure and pain to urinate became

urgent, and prospects of landing slim, I would transfer the controls to the left seater, unstrap, and in a half crouch, awkwardly and cautiously manage to perform the distasteful task. The process was not pretty or efficient, but although demeaning, it was all that was available. There could be one major drawback to the method. If one was cruising at high altitude in freezing conditions, there was a potential for the liquid to solidify, plug the end of the tube, and back up, causing embarrassing moments. Curiously, in a military aircraft designed for a cockpit crew of two, there was only one relief tube for the plane commander. Therefore, the co-pilot was required to climb down into the cabin section and use the door when nature called. Notwithstanding being dangerous, this method could be difficult to perform, as a strong slip-stream might blow his efforts back into the cabin.

We secured on the parking ramp well after dark. I am not sure if we earned it, but Eaton logged eleven hours and twenty minutes total flight time: nine hours and fifty-five minutes project, and fifty-five minutes night.

## **MR-2**

My upcountry familiarization continued the following morning. Fatigued from the heat and work, still attired in civilian clothes, I arrived at Hotel Sierra. Captain Julian "Scratch" Kanach was my mentor and cockpit companion for the day. Scratch had the reputation of a cool, competent pilot, who was very pleasant to fly with. More importantly, unlike others I had recently flown with, G-2 could not reveal any quirks regarding the man.

Scratch was part of the Kanach clan who resided and participated in the dairy farming community of Flemington, New

Jersey. Although not attending the same category high school that we competed with in football, baseball, and track, his home was not too distant from where I grew up. Actually, no town was too far from any other in the tiny state. Flemington, also renowned for excellent glass work factories and unique handicraft shops, was visited annually by my parents. Scratch and I had medicine in common. The tall, clean-cut individual had completed U.S. Army medic training prior to entering flight school. Scratch represented one of the former Army warrant officer contingent in the diverse mix of Marine-Army-north-south aviators that formed our integrated paramilitary organization. At this point, as a Navy trained aviator, I had only flown with one Army trained pilot, Bill Cook. Reflecting a rabid service bias, I did not believe any Army pilot could measure up to Marine Corps standards. How wrong I was.

The Air Operations Customer at Wattay Airport informed us that we would spend the day working at Sam Tong (VS-20), a recently established refugee village deep in the heart of Xieng Khouang Province (MR-2) and Meo country.<sup>13</sup> Actual names of Lao sites were not widely used, due in part, to non-familiarity, or to a requirement for secrecy. Sam Tong, translated as "Three Golds," was developed sometime after the fall of Padong in early June of 1961 to gather, house, and sustain displaced persons. It was also maintained as a distribution center to supply Meo refugee needs in the area. Air America and Bird and Son, working under the auspices of USAID contracts, and supported and sanctioned by the Lao Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma,

---

<sup>13</sup> Encyclopedia *Britannica*, Internet. French Plateau De Xiangkhouang, formerly Plateau Du Tranninh (Tran Ninh Plateau) during ancient Vietnamese holdings. The plateau constitutes a western extension of the northern Annamite Chain; it is drained principally by the (Nam) Ngum and Nhiep rivers to the south of the (Nam) Khan River located to the north. All are Mekong River tributaries.

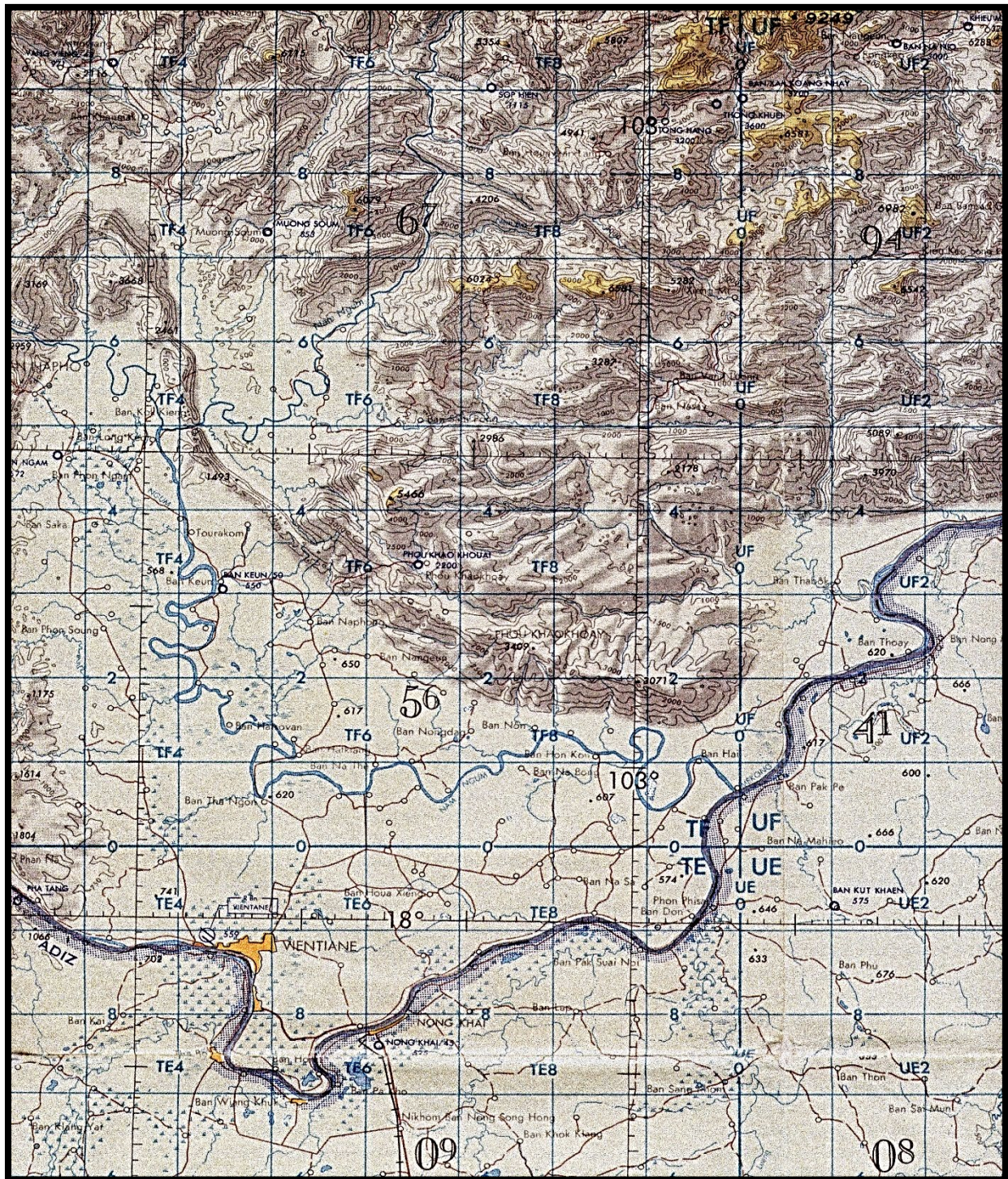
fulfilled this mission. Until recently, a large contingent of White Star forces had used Site Twenty as a base of operations.

After a forklift driver loaded four drums of H-34 aviation gasoline on our ship, we launched north for the seventy-one nautical mile flight across the Vientiane flood plains, and into the mountains. Assuming that there must be a shortage of fuel at Victor Site Twenty, I questioned Scratch about the load. Unable to ascertain Sam Tong's fuel status, he explained that it was general procedure to haul fuel when dispatched empty to a site.

Cruising at 1,500 feet above the ground (AGL) over the flat Vientiane plains that consisted mostly of rice paddies and scrub forests, I could clearly see the Nam Ngum, a swollen tributary of the Mekong River. Flowing along a distinct pattern of twists and turns, the waterway looked like a series of link sausages as it ran south and east to feed the parent river. Although Route-13 was not far distant to our east, it was barely visible from our track. Objects to our front were more distinguishable. The first mountain chains that consumed one third to one half of Laos began approximately thirty-six miles north of the administrative capital.

Reaching the periphery of the flat lands, we flew over a formidable twelve-mile-long ridgeline channeled and sliced neatly in two over eons of time by passage of the Nam Ngum. The ridge, a demarcation line for our flight path into the mountains, was also a predominant check point for reference and flight following. Named Ritaville Ridge by an obscure Frenchman, high flying fixed wing plane commanders passing the area generally reported over the position during marginal or inclement weather. Immediately to my right, the black, gray, and chalky white limestone cliffs and bluffs of Phou Kaonang soared well above us. It was impossible not to be charmed and





The area north of Wattay Airport was used in flight to Long Tieng and Sam Tong. The lengthy Nam Ngum is clearly visible and shows passage through the Ritaville Ridge gap. Route-13 and offshoots approach Wientiane from the north.

Author Collection.

awed by the ever-shifting terrain features that Laos presented. As we climbed to maintain obstacle and ground fire clearance, ahead of us, stretching as far as one could see, was a vista of east-west oriented parallel ridges, and green clad mountains of various magnitudes and shapes. They were so varied that a child's imagination might conjure up vivid images of animals and favorite storybook characters, as was possible in cloud formations on a summer day.

We were still not in the mountains after passing Ritaville. Another ten miles of lowland streams, rice paddies, and scrub forest stretched ahead. Just before the Nam Ngum emerged from higher ground, Scratch pointed out a small area that represented the former hamlet of Ban Veung San. It was at this approximate location, while en route to support Ban Padong (VS-05) during May 1961, that "sheep dipped" temporary employee Captain Ed Shore, flying H-34 Hotel Kilo, experienced a serious tail rotor malfunction, and was committed to a forced landing in enemy-controlled territory. Despite Company search and rescue aircraft crews scouring the area for several days, neither the aircraft, nor the occupants were found. (Kilo was later discovered camouflaged with brush.) Captain Shore, his American Flight Mechanic, and the American passenger were captured by Neutralist forces. Marched to Vang Vieng, they were incarcerated in several area prisons by the Pathet Lao and held until after signing of the Geneva peace accords the following year. Howard Estes and other pilots, who knew Shore before, or afterward in the Army,

stated that he returned to the U.S military after his release in August 1962.<sup>14</sup>

The mountains rose rapidly around us. Similar to ones I saw during the Luang Prabang trip, the peaks appeared to loom even higher the further north we flew. Re-setting the radar altimeter, we continued our ascent to maintain terrain and small arms clearance. As a "cherry" First Officer, mountains, ridges, and forests all seemed to merge and look the same to me.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it felt strange not knowing exactly where I was. A quick glance at my map showed that the river we were following pointed directly to Site-20. Then, paralleling the area to the south, it continued northerly, curved east, and lost its identity by joining other rivers on the northern portion of the Plain of Jars.

---

<sup>14</sup> For the complete story read *Reported to be Alive*, a book written by NBC correspondent and photographer Grant Wolfkill, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965).

In Wolfkill's eyewitness account, he refers to White Star team leader Special Forces Major Walter Moon, who had been captured when Vang Vieng fell to the communists during April 1961. According to Wolfkill's eyewitness account, Major Moon was murdered by his Pathet Lao guards on 22 July 1961, at the former International Voluntary Service station at Lat Houang, where Pop Buell worked on the Plain of Jars.

Prior to serving in Laos, Moon and his family were neighbors of my cousin, Chaplain Robert T. Anderson, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. According to Bob, the White Star project was so highly classified that Mrs. Moon had no idea of Walter's disposition until a later time during a church service held at the post chapel to celebrate the safe return of White Star personnel and Special Force's prisoners released from captivity.

Air America Captain Jack McCauley recalled Air America personnel using tracking grid patterns flying over Shore's helicopter the following day. However, the enemy had so cleverly camouflaged Hotel Kilo that the crews never saw it. As he had been instructed in the service, Ed Shore recommended that the crew seek the high ground and await rescue, but Wolfkill suggested that since the peace talks were beginning, they would not be harmed. They remained on the flat lands and were captured. It was a poor decision.

<sup>15</sup> Cherry: First time for something.

During the climb, as the Nam Ngum shrank into the chasm beneath us, I remarked that it was fortunate we had a definitive river system to guide us to our destination. Now that the navigational aspect of the trip was established, I began thinking about forced landing areas. Other than the river below us, there did not appear to be any suitable spots available. Mountains lining both sides of the river afforded only sheer slopes, or were heavily forested without visible openings for an H-34. On the basis of this observation, my first choice for an autorotation was the churning, rushing river water.

### **SAM TONG**

Finally, we departed the river. After crossing a few miles of mountainous terrain, we screamed over a long ridge and dove off altitude into a green bowl that marked the high plateau of Sam Tong. Aside from the picturesque beauty of the site, one noticeable feature was a red slash of clay that appeared to divide the upslope portion of the 3,800 ASL (above sea level) foot high valley into two segments. A small village was located downslope, a little distance from the north side of the strip, and a few hermit huts were scattered throughout the area. Except for a thatch warehouse on the south side, there were no other permanent or semi-permanent structures in sight. Prominently clumped in the center of the valley was an inverted, cone shaped limestone karst covered with trees, vines, and other tangled jungle growth. The lofty formation added to the ornate charm of the site. Now that we were in the heart of Meo country, I could feel my anticipation building, and I eagerly awaited any new experiences the day would bring.

As the fuel drums were being unloaded, a short, well-built, brown-skinned man wearing a cowboy hat scaled the side of the



A 1963 view of Sam Tong bowl from the north. More developed, the refugee and civil administration center for Xieng Khouang province was still not very crowded. The karst and airstrip are two definitive points in the valley.

Mike Marshall Collection.

helicopter, and presented us with a list of assignments to fulfill around the local area. He indicated that his name was Tongsar, a Lao national assisting Pop Buell, the head American at the site.

Since this period was supposed to encompass a peaceful consolidation phase in the Laos conflict, actual war work was held to a minimum. For this reason, under terms of the Accords, Air America helicopters were allowed to participate in refugee and displaced persons relief work. With the help of a guide, who pointed the way, we relocated families and their goods to already-established or developing villages to the south that, depending on their ethnic origins, were tucked away in ravines or located on narrow ridges.

Throughout the entire day we never journeyed north. We hauled everything the people managed to salvage from the brutal war, or were provided from USAID stocks. I wondered how the besieged Flight Mechanic could establish a semblance of order coping with parents, runny-nosed kids, pots, pans, blankets, chickens in rattan baskets, small pigs, and a myriad of other household items. After depositing one load of black clad Meo, we followed with another trip of both consumable and seed rice to help sustain the people until the first crop was harvested, or they were able to fend for themselves. None of the trips was very far from Site-20 by air, but would have presented a difficult journey on foot, considering obstacles--the rivers, the forested mountains, and other impediments to human travel.

Later, we were assigned to deliver soldiers and families to Site-30 (VS-20A). The Long Tieng Valley was located six miles southeast over a high ridge that was visible from Site-20. As we would be landing at a lower elevation, Scratch wanted me to gain valuable experience carrying maximum loads. Since this would

constitute my first maximum gross takeoff from 3,800 feet, I was a little nervous, but wanted to demonstrate that I was capable of performing it.

When the Flight Mechanic indicated that we were ready, I rolled the throttle slowly clockwise to 2,800 rpm, while simultaneously raising the collective lever. With satisfaction, I could hear the reassuring hum of the engine's thundering nine cylinders developing power. I noted that all instruments were "in the green" as the aircraft came to a smooth hover. With sufficient power available for a hover takeoff, I gradually rotated the nose forward. Inching ahead on the ground cushion developed by the rotor system downwash, I continued to raise the collective slightly, waiting for the tell-tale shudder indicating the ship was passing through translational lift.

Heading downslope at a forty-five-degree angle from the runway, Hotel Sierra felt heavy, unresponsive, and was not accelerating to climb speed. What was wrong? To the best of my knowledge, we were not downwind. Committed to a takeoff, I began to worry that I had loaded too much, or should have used the runway for a rolling takeoff. What if I settled into the ground hard, bounced, or struck a gully? Sweating more than normal, I conveyed this concern to Scratch, who casually suggested I add a little collective. Add a little collective? Yes, he was right. A quick glance at the manifold pressure gage indicated that in cautiously performing a minimum power takeoff, there was plenty of power to spare. Although a good training maneuver under the right conditions, it was not wise in this situation. Feeling foolish and embarrassed that I had not realized there was more power available and had to be coached, I took corrective action, and we were immediately on our way. Realizing my mistake, it was clearly evident that I still had a lot to learn about mountain

flying. Furthermore, it was opportune to have a cool, competent individual monitoring me to point out my errors. As it was important not to repeat them, I resolved to pay better attention to what I was doing.

## **LONG TIENG**

Almost completely surrounded by high mountains and several karsts, which from the ground protected and shielded the site from prying eyes and potential attack, Long Tieng was located deep in a grassy valley. In passing the common ridgeline during the day, I had only seen hazy western fringes of the valley. Actually, entering the valley, it appeared similar to Site-20 in some respects, but dwarfed the latter in sheer size and magnificence. The proximity of the two sites was confusing to the uninitiated, and there was no one more naïve on the subject than I.

Over time, through scuttlebutt and experience in the field, I learned that in 1962 Sam Tong was expanded and developed into a humanitarian refugee center sanctioned by the Lao government, and supported by the contract air assets of Air America and Bird and Son. Not so well known, the sister site at Twenty Alternate was a cover for clandestine indigenous training, radio intercept intelligence gathering, and Meo military activity. Gradually evolving in relative secrecy, the site was officially opened in September 1962, when most operational training was transferred there from the Pha Khao base. To confuse those not aware of the symbiotic relationship with Sam Tong, Long Tieng was, at various times, referred to by pilots as Sierra-30, Victor Site-98, Lima Site 20A, or, more commonly, The Alternate. Activities at the site were rarely discussed by crews outside its confines, nor could the words Long Tieng be found on any navigation maps. When



assigned to work there, we were simply going upcountry. For some time, only handpicked individuals, mostly favored Bird and Son pilots subject to constant evaluation, worked there. It was months before I became fully aware of the significance of the sanctuary. For some time, I was content believing that I worked exclusively for the assertive Pop Buell, and the USAID organization. Always interested in a cover, I am sure the Agency was satisfied with this arrangement and subterfuge. Notwithstanding early deceptions, Long Tieng and Sam Tong were to become my second homes, and over the next twelve years, I would spend the majority of my Lao adventure working there.

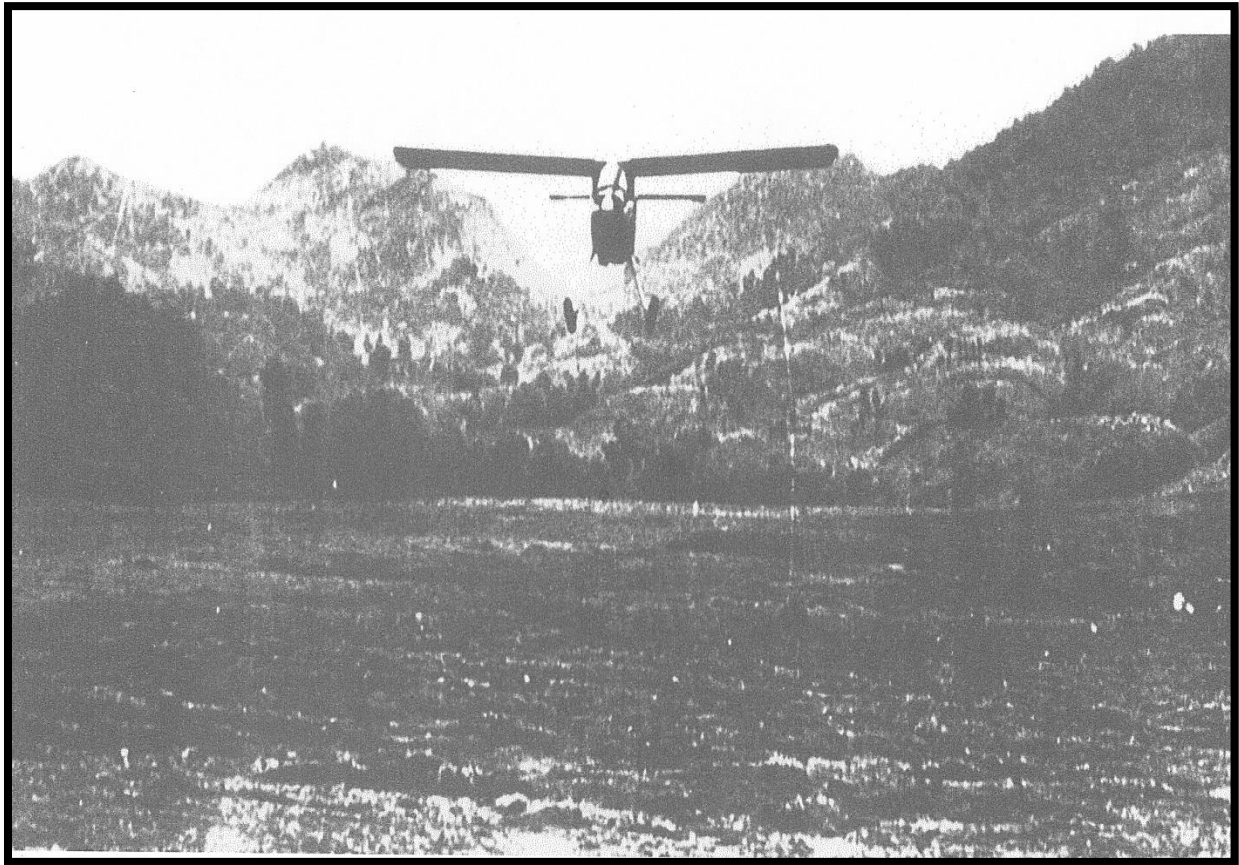
During the early 1960s the covert system worked well. Secrecy regarding the American-Meo participation in the Lao war was considered paramount. Consistent with the Agency need-to-know policy, what we did not see or learn, we could not talk about in the club bar at the Air America base. From the inception, there were no cameras or loose talk allowed. If caught, violations of these principles constituted grounds for termination with prejudice. Before too long, I was shocked to learn that the Customer did not encourage pilots to remain for more than their three-year contract. Any longer, they feared an individual would accumulate too much knowledge regarding the total picture, and the method of CIA operation in Laos. This mindset changed appreciably with the gradual recognition of pilot loyalty, reliability, work ethic, and proficiency working in the mountains with the Meo. That is one reason some of us remained for a decade or more. However, paranoia about secrecy never did diminish to any major degree.

During the spring of 1962, Case Officer Bill Young had reconnoitered and selected the Lao Theung site as possessing the greatest potential for a sizeable airstrip. Overall, it was

considered far superior to the more confined Pha Khao base, where larger aircraft had trouble landing or dropping cargo. After investigating and walking the valley, Colonel Vang Pao and AB-1 Chief Bill Lair agreed, sanctioning it for a new base of operations.

The Long Tieng Valley sloped to the east. A generally northeast-northwest oriented long axis stretched for three miles. The narrower one to two-mile width tapered up to foothills that rose into a towering ridgeline to the north that afforded protection from unwanted visitors. Gaps in the west, east, and southeast quadrants provided entry to the valley for helicopter and STOL traffic during both fair and foul weather. The southeast approach was only suitable for larger cargo planes that were restricted to air drops. A dive or climb was required for entry or exit in most of the 3,100-foot valley. High points surrounding the area were heavily forested, except for the bare ultra-sharp edges of limestone pinnacles, and nature's airborne seeding process had even attempted to cover these.

A small hill rose toward the west gap. This was shielded, like sentinels guarding a fortress gate, by higher limestone karsts blocking three-quarters of the opening. Contiguous to the hill on the north side were additional massive karsts that girdled a large cul-de-sac area. Toward the east side of this mini-bowl, nestled against the karst, were a scattering of huts that comprised a small thatched village. Like a dirty finger, a short northwest-southeast oriented sod runway sliced through the bowl, terminating near the village karst. Although mostly overgrown, the upper portion stood out, contrasting with the green, gray-black imagery distinguishing the bowl. South of the rudimentary strip, backed against lower hills, a few more rude native huts dotted the landscape.



A very early photo of a Helio Courier pilot approaching the Long Tieng landing strip through the southeast gap.

Landing upslope, to minimize power and dust, I used a time-honored roll-on technique. It was a simple maneuver. Using a nose high attitude, one touched the tail wheel down first and then let the fuselage "fall through, cushioning the front gear with the necessary application of collective and rear cyclic. This technique was performed at a relatively low speed, and was one which could be used at high altitudes to produce added performance. An adaptation of this maneuver was the three-point landing. At higher speeds, mostly used for covering large distances quickly or "hot-dogging," the running landing required a hard surface runway and precision timing, touching down without side-to-side movement. <sup>16</sup>

After rolling a short distance, I taxied toward a small dirt ramp near the village, where a native signaled to us to park. Two long bamboo and thatched structures that served as multi-purpose operations, radio, warehouse, and administrative buildings stood on the bank. Wasting no time, supervised by a tall bearded man, we were loaded with troops for the old Meo training base, located eight miles southeast at Pha Khao (Victor Site-14).

---

<sup>16</sup> Whenever executing one of these maneuvers, I was reminded of an embarrassing experience at Ramey Air Force Base, Puerto Rico. A few of us, bored with the lack of female companionship at Roosevelt Roads, decided to spend the weekend at Ramey, where female nurses were attached to the hospital. Noting that the runway was unusually long, I told the co-pilot we were going to conduct a high-speed running landing and demonstrate to the Air Force "pogues" our fixed wing talents. Hell, we could fly both airplanes and helicopters, while they were limited to planes. After obtaining permission from the tower, lining up on the center line, and surging down the asphalt at low level, I touched down in excess of eighty knots. It was a beautiful landing, one of my best. However, in my haste to show off, I had neglected to unlock the main gear brakes. As we rolled down the runway, before I could depress the top of the tail rotor pedals to release the brakes, heavy smoke poured from both sides of the wheels. Yes, I certainly made an impression that day.

**OPERATING IN THE MOUNTAINS**

We would be departing on a slightly declining, flat strip with a substantial load, so another running takeoff was indicated. I was determined not to foul this one up. Since there were no high-altitude performance charts available (no one wanted to use them, for we would have been unable to legally operate with any but light loads), rules of thumb for takeoff at altitudes well above sea level had evolved for either a hover or running takeoff. Performing essentially the same technique as during operations in the service when payload weights were unknown, one would attempt to hover the aircraft into the wind to check for adequate power reserve. If a three to five-foot hover was not possible, then a reduction in weight was indicated. Conversely, should excessive power be available, at the pilot's discretion, additional weight could be added.

Some planning had to be exercised while departing with a heavy load and terminating at a higher elevation, since there might not be sufficient power to cushion the landing. Therefore, success working at higher elevations depended largely on a pilot being aware of the approximate altitude and dimensions of a landing zone. Unfortunately, this critical information was not always available from a Customer or loader. Many times, this forced us to "wing it" from a map, ask another pilot over the air for advice, or just take a chance. Successful airmanship always required erring on the conservative side, especially at an unfamiliar landing site. The technique of overloading the machine for a roll off, flying to a distant location, while burning off fuel en route, was generally well accepted by most pilots, especially if there was a STOL strip or a short space to roll on at the destination.

However, there were several other factors to consider when working in an overloaded condition. Although under no time constraints to complete a mission, one factor was the power requirement and time to climb to cruise altitude. Besides burning large amounts of fuel in a prolonged climb, often there were high ridge lines to cross, and, with a low rate of ascent, it was sometimes necessary to circle or "S" turn until able to attain sufficient altitude for passage. Crossing altitude was important, as high winds, generating deadly down drafts and airborne venturi effects could cause one permanent grief.

Another consideration working in an overloaded condition was the aircraft vibration level. A very heavy load at altitude with speed could create extra stresses on the rotor system, which was felt in the cockpit as heavy vibrations. Sometimes these vibrations could be moderated by reducing airspeed. Not all pilots believed in this method and often pushed the aircraft beyond its limits, causing I suspect, extra wear on moving parts.

In order to enhance lift, the H-34 was designed with a fully articulated rotor system. To facilitate this feature, the system was equipped with numerous working parts, each depending on the other for proper operation. Flapping, hunting, and pitching moments were closely associated with main rotor blade functioning. One or more worn parts in the system could effect an out-of-track condition. If all four rotor blades were not in near or perfect track, and opposing forces were not balanced, very uncomfortable vibrations could occur. Therefore, with the type of flying we conducted, constant tracking was necessary to produce a smooth flying aircraft. But this was normally only accomplished during maintenance inspections at Udorn, or if a rotor system component was changed. In extreme cases where a

pilot could not stand a vibration, a tracking flag might be sent upcountry. Since Customer field requirements were heavy, unless a pilot entered an excessive vibration "squawk" in the maintenance logbook, a quick turn-around would be effected and a vibration not corrected. Also compounding and complicating the problem was the fact that most vibration levels were highly subjective, and dependent on what an individual pilot felt. Since not every pilot had maintenance test experience in his respective service, and individual vibration tolerance levels differed greatly, corrective maintenance was made all the more difficult.

A final and more critical factor to consider while flying in a high-level overloaded condition was potential blade stall. Similar to an airplane wing, a helicopter rotor blade depended on the same aerodynamic principals for lift in forward flight. A large loss of lift on the upper rotor surface could cause advancing blade, or more commonly during a state of compressibility retreating blade stall. The nature of our high-altitude operations, linked with the H-34s touchy articulate rotor system, caused us to be continuously susceptible to this condition.

Two of the determining factors necessary to produce blade stall--high gross weight leading to high blade loading--and high-density altitude--were usually present during mountain operations. When a combination of steep turns, turbulence, high airspeed, and low RPM were added to the equation, a stall could more readily occur. If not immediately corrected, the stall could result in a violent pitch-up of the nose, a tendency of the helicopter to roll to the stalled side, and a complete loss of aircraft control. Fortunately, to preclude entering this condition, the system had a designed safeguard. During the

manufacturing process, rotor blades were tapered to sense the onset of stall at the blade tip, and then to work toward the blade root. To an experienced pilot, incipient stall was recognized by a vibration or shudder felt through the cockpit-mounted cyclic stick. Upon detecting such a warning, it was paramount for the pilot to initiate immediate emergency action. This could be accomplished by one or a combination of procedures, the most important being to lower the collective, thus reducing power and airspeed. Other options involved increasing RPM, reducing the angle of bank, or severity of a maneuver, and descending to a lower altitude.

To diminish the possibility of this condition occurring, and to keep the bird flying, it was rare that I would fly at high airspeeds, unless with a light payload and at lower altitudes. Usually, a machine's vibration level would indicate what airspeed to fly. The inherent comfort level at altitude with a load seemed to be in the range of sixty to seventy knots.

If the ground was fairly level, without many ruts or potholes, a running takeoff was easy and fun to perform. Actually, the maneuver was similar to a "tail dragger" fixed wing takeoff like the Beech C-45 (SNB) I had flown during Pensacola training. After determining the power requirement, I increased RPM to 2800. Then I added a little power, lifting the fuselage to a point where it became light on the main gear, and then used enough forward cyclic to start the helicopter rolling. As ground speed increased, I smoothly raised the collective and continued to ease the cyclic forward until the tail wheel came off the ground. With a minimum shudder, the aircraft accelerated through translational lift, and it was now my option as to the exact point to become airborne. This could be determined by experience and feel. Since we were light on the air-oil oleo



struts, on a rutted strip, there was a tendency to bounce from side to side on the main gear. This could be uncomfortable and damaging to the machine. Therefore, with a slight aft application of cyclic, I brought the ship into the air at forty knots.

As we staggered airborne and cleared the southeast gap, I was amazed to see even higher terrain in the distance. Referring to an old "one over the world map" I had scrounged, I discovered that the highest elevation near Pha Khao was Phou Bia, a mountain charted at 8,600 feet above sea level. Having heard that many bench mark elevations in Laos were only approximations made by French Priests, I asked Scratch about the accuracy of the estimate. He offered that Phou Bia was reputed to be the highest mountain in Laos, but, because of the demonstrated inaccuracy of maps and uncharted areas, who really knew the actual altitude? <sup>17</sup>

I really did not require a chart to inform me that I was entering a realm in Laos containing the highest mountains I had ever flown in. Flying in such terrain was both sobering and impressive. Prior to accepting employment with Air America, I had never conceived of working in such conditions. It was a bit unsettling, a definite eye-opener that prompted me to speculate about the survivability of such a job. Concerned, I queried my partner about my doubts. Never showing much emotion while flying, Scratch allowed that once one became accustomed to working in these conditions, it was not too bad. He continued to

---

<sup>17</sup> U.S. satellite and photo reconnaissance mapping techniques later verified Phou Bia to be the tallest mountain in Laos at 9,246 feet. Bench marks from old maps had been in error by more than 1,000 feet. This was adequate reason for helicopter pilots not to fly IMC within uncontrolled Lao airspace unless absolutely necessary.

affirm the obvious. The higher you went, the more caution was required.

Pha Khao was situated deep in a bowl sheltered by high terrain. Strategically located in the western foothills of the Phou Bia massif, it was easy to understand why the site had been selected to replace Padong as the Meo headquarters and training base. From the air it appeared that any enemy would be hard pressed to invade Site-14 over the harsh terrain and easily defensible passes. A clay STOL strip terminated just short of a mountain, prompting me to wonder how many more formidable sites were scattered throughout this part of the country. Certainly, there must be a pattern to their locations. Once in the hollow, I could see how confined the valley actually was.

Without knowing most of the story, I was aware that a C-46 had crashed the previous year while air-dropping supplies here. Five crew members had perished in the accident, and ammunition had cooked off for days. With an incident like this, it was understandable that there was not much room for error in these mountains. I speculated that a combination of resupply problems and a need to expand had prompted the operation to move to Site-30 during a period of relative peace and hostile inactivity.

As the day wore on and I became more attuned to the immensity of the terrain, I gained more confidence flying in and around the unfamiliar setting. At first, it had been like a baby taking its first steps. The majority of the work consisted of strip-to-strip operations, and I found the pilot techniques I had employed during the hundreds of hours of previous experience in the USMC served me well in performing the tasks.

More relaxed, I began noting prominent river valleys and a few potential forced landing spots. Despite flying at relatively low levels, in most areas the forest and jungle beneath us was



Rough terrain east of Long Tieng included Pha Khao surrounded by sharp limestone karsts and backed by the cloud-shrouded Phou Bia.  
Author Collection.

so thick that it was impossible to distinguish trails or anything moving. I speculated that aerial reconnaissance in this country must be a nightmare, with the bad guys able to roam undetected at will. Also, it was not reassuring to reflect on the jungle's capability to swallow a man or helicopter, perhaps for all time. In addition, some flying was positively eerie to the uninitiated. A low altitude flight between two parallel ridges capped with overcast conditions could impart a weird sensation of being trapped in a narrow tunnel.

Late in the day, as we departed south from the Site 20-30 area, I felt good. I had learned a considerable amount about the area and mountain flying. As at New River, with apt guidance from experienced and talented pilots, I knew that I would soon be performing a credible job. Operations choice of a Captain had been wise, for above all else, Kanach had let me do most of the flying and make my own mistakes. My little boo-boo at Sam Tong had not seemed to faze him, but I wondered what his report to Abadie would be.

We secured with nine plus thirty hours; eight plus twenty being project time.

## **THE NORTHWEST REGION**

The following morning, consistent with operations check-out policy, I was scheduled for a daily flight in Hotel Alpha. This helicopter was one of the first ships Air America received from the Corps. Captain Don Buxton, my mentor for the day, was another former Army warrant officer. By now, largely because of my positive experience with Scratch Kanach, my Marine instilled bias against Army aviators had waned considerably. Furthermore, Don, a short rotund individual, had been free with helpful

information, and recently sold me his wife Julie's 50cc Honda, at what I considered a fair price.

The mission, still assigned by the Air Operations office at Wattay Airport, was to again support the Padre's Strip at Phou Khong in Sayaboury Province. Perhaps because the area was off the beaten path, more emphasis was accorded this region. It would be a day in which we traversed Military Region One ground I had previously covered, and new territory to the far northwestern reaches of Laos.

After completing the required work in the Site-42, Victor-23 region, we were reassigned more than a hundred miles northwest to the Thai village at Chiang Khong. Although we would only have enough time to drop off our load and start back to home plate, I was happy, as it would constitute an interesting sightseeing trip.<sup>18</sup>

We headed generally north until intersecting the deep channeled Mekong River at the top of Sayaboury's imaginary ax. Remaining over the river, we turned west, flying over varying widths of churning water that hugged both banks and sliced through steep-sided mountains and hills. There were few settlements seen along this stretch. In a slight loop north, the Nam Beng tributary flowed southwest into the parent Mekong. Although pinched by sheer mountain sides, and largely indistinguishable from altitude, my chart indicated that the upper reaches of the Beng River flowed through broad valleys. One of the only good checkpoints along the portion of the river was the remote village of Pak Beng that lay in the folds of a steep mountain. More easily identified was a pinnacle adorned with a circular dirt fort, which gave the impression of

---

<sup>18</sup> Home Plate: Military term for a base of operations.



The Mekong River in northwestern Laos. Most streams in this part of the country flowed through steep-sided valleys. Because of the difficulty of movement and harsh terrain, population levels were not high. Fighting in the western portion of Military Region One never approached the same proportions as in Military Region Two.

Author Collection.

squeezing its head. From our altitude, it was impossible to determine if the fortification was occupied.

After twenty minutes of negotiating deep-sided gorges, the river turned north. To the west and close to the river, a massive mountain chain formed the north-south Thai-Lao border. This wall stretched twenty miles to a point in the imaginary axis. For the entire province, it looked like it would have been simpler for cartographers had the river been designated the border.

Not long after passing the Nam Tha's (River) entry into the north side of the Mekong, we made an "S" turn, changing course to the northwest. Here the terrain on both sides of the river changed abruptly from fewer towering mountains to gentle, rolling hills and valleys.

Within a few minutes, we approached our destination at Ban Chiang Khong. Actually, twin towns collocated there, separated only by the Mekong. On the right bank, perched on the Lao side of the river, a cluster of rusty tin roofs marked the one-street town of Ban Houei Sai. A few low hills were silhouetted behind the town. This region marked both a historical and a significant meaning for me, as during May, under enemy pressure, Royal Lao Army troops had fled Nam Tha, which had led to the Third Marine Expeditionary Force's introduction into Thailand. <sup>19</sup>

On the opposite bank at Chiang Khong, a rudimentary strip was located a short distance northwest of the small village,

---

<sup>19</sup> During ancient times the Chiang Khong-Ban Houei Sai area had yielded semi-precious gems, with mica, iron pyrites, and other magnetic ore mixed in with the river sand. Before the days of motor traffic, Chiang Khong was largely isolated by virtue of lengthy, difficult overland travel. Even on the accessible river, a downstream trip to Luang Prabang required several days by boat and triple that on return.



Part of Ban Houei Sai, Laos as seen from a boat crossing the Mekong River from Chiang Kong, Thailand.

Mac Thompson Collection, c 1966.



which wound without design along the high river bank. As at Pha Khao, the short clay runway abruptly terminated against a mountain. Anxious for us to work the area, Bill Young, the area coordinator, was waiting to greet our crew.

Following the fall of Nam Tha, youthful Case Officer Young had left the Pha Khao-Long Tieng area and permanently relocated to the northwest to help organize friendly tribal units scattered throughout the region. After the Geneva Accords were signed in July, he was forced to move from Ban Houei Sai to the Thai side at Chiang Khong. He initially stayed in a small, matchbox-type hotel with a U.S. Army intelligence officer. As he had done at Ban Houei Sai, a few months later he had a house erected on the banks of the river.

Late in 1962, there was still a restriction on the usage of helicopters and fixed wing in Laos. For this reason, the Lao support apparatus was located on the Thai side of the Mekong.

Necessary war materials were delivered from Takhli by C-123 crews to the military base at Chiang Rai. In addition, a PSP strip existed in the middle of a rice paddy south of Chiang Khong that was also used for deliveries.<sup>20</sup> However, this runway was generally only available during the dry season, as a heavily loaded C-123 might bog down in the mud during the monsoon period, and be unable to depart. After delivery, goods were transferred from these two locations by trucks to a small intelligence-gathering camp north of town, which Young had supervised building. From there he clandestinely distributed the supplies across the river.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> PSP: World War Two developed pierced steel planking that interlocked to create an acceptable runway in less than acceptable environments, like jungle or marsh land.

<sup>21</sup> Bill Young Interview, 10/19/95.

Unfortunately, it was too late in the day to conduct any work, so, after unloading the cargo and passengers, and refueling, we departed for the three-hour flight to Sierra-08.

"Stretching the day," Don logged eleven hour fifty-five minutes, one ten night, and nine plus fifty-five project. It was a long day in the saddle, and the late arrival at Udorn warranted a meritorious day off the flight schedule. Thirty-two hours in the preceding three days flying in the Sikorsky vibrator was tough on my unaccustomed youthful body. Even during the hour rich operation of Tulungan at San Jose, Mindoro, Philippine Islands, the ship to shore movements of Operation Shufly in Soc Trang, South Vietnam, and the 3rd MEU adventure in Udorn, Thailand, I had never flown so much during such a short period.

## **UDORN**

Curiously, night flying began in October for a select few individuals. On the Fourth, Mike Marshall was in the process of getting smashed in the bar when operations called on the field phone soliciting pilots for night training. The inebriated Captain foolishly volunteered, and did little else but scare himself. It was a good object lesson, which he kept in mind while night flying on the seventh and 13th. Of course, we all wondered what the emphasis on night flying was leading to.<sup>22</sup>

The rains in the Udorn area had generally eased, and the days turned very warm. From those who claimed to know about such specifics, I was informed that the northeast would continue to experience warm weather for a time. Then, with evenings gradually cooling into December, nights would be fairly cold, but daytime temperatures would soar into the eighties. Usually

---

<sup>22</sup> Mike Marshall Interviews.

the cool season lasted only two months, after which heat would return with a vengeance. Such was life in the tropics. I was ready for some of the advertised coolness, for I was tired of the constant layer of sweat covering my body.

Stopping at the Company-authorized tailor shop, I learned that my uniforms would be ready in three days. I was anxious to obtain them, as I felt out of place flying in civilian clothes. While examining some finished items, the smiling proprietor showed me the newly authorized Australian bush hat. Popular with the crews, and lately adopted by Air America management, the cover would be a welcome supplement to the convict gray uniforms, and provided us with a slightly jauntier appearance. I was so happy with the addition of the hat that I temporarily forgot my anger at having to pay for this initial issue out of my own pocket.

Since September had been a short month, money was tight. The slim wages were partly because project pay was delayed a month, while paperwork was processed through the Customer accounting system. Another aspect of compensation bothered me. I could understand a base pay differential between Captains and First Officers. That was standard in aviation. However, while flying over hostile terrain, all risks were equal. Therefore, five dollars per hour project pay for a First Officer, as opposed to ten dollars for a Captain, did not seem reasonable. Hazard pay was even lower for Flight Mechanics, particularly the Filipinos. Nevertheless, despite the difference in pay, a substantial number of hazardous hours flown in a month would produce a sizable check, and stave off poverty for a struggling First Officer. I had joined Air America to earn and save money; all other considerations were secondary. Most employees sought the same goal. Several pilots confessed to arriving overseas in

debt. After working for a while, the excellent pay had made them solvent again. Now the lucky ones could afford to sit comfortably earning Captain's wages, while waiting for the war to resume. I did not arrive in Southeast Asia poor. Banking my monthly flight pay since its inception, I had saved a considerable sum of money while in the service. Still, it galled me to consider that I might have to endure an extended period of time at a lower rate of pay than I had envisioned.

Then Abadie dropped a bombshell on Howard, Jim, and me. Under what he indicated was Customer pressure, headquarters Taipei indicated that we would not be upgraded to Captain until management was satisfied that we were familiar with all areas in Laos currently worked. Apparently, the process of checkout was now in their camp and not related strictly to war needs. From an employee's viewpoint, this smacked of delay, and did not sound reassuring. Although seemingly another roadblock to my checkout progress, at the rate I had been flying in various areas, the new requirement might be satisfied in a short period. Toward this end, flying in Laos would have to remain steady. I was a proud person, and I did not like getting jerked around by anyone. Like a festering boil, my resentment of the system and the people involved began to increase.

Meanwhile Estes, anxious to relocate his family by Christmas, was making inquiries about bringing them to Southeast Asia early at Company expense. As new hires, we were still subject to the Company's ninety-day probation period, during which we could be terminated for innumerable infractions depicted in the Company Personnel Manual. Company policy was clear regarding dependents. During the probationary period, no one would be granted transportation at Company expense. Yet

Howard was persistent, believing he had a good chance for an early relocation.

I had originally planned to remain at the hotel until Howard's family arrived, but life at the Pratch was wearing thin. Therefore, after discussing the subject, the three of us agreed to seek and rent a suitable house together in town. Then, when Howard's family arrived, Jim and I would find other accommodations of our own. In the meantime, to save money, we would split the rent three ways, and hopefully by December, be upgraded to Captain status.

On Thursday, Spillis and I strolled into the Pratch lobby and noted two ladies sitting beside the reception desk chatting with Mama San, Boonchoo Punsiri. I recognized the Western woman as the wife of a maintenance employee at the airfield. The other was a comely Thai lady I had never seen before. Relatively light-skinned compared to darker northeastern women, she was dressed in a complementary low-cut yellow dress that was refreshingly different from the standard sarong and blouse seen throughout town. She appeared neither young nor old, but of an age difficult to judge in this part of the world. Her round face, jet black hair, and bright, shining smile all added to her charm. As she possessed the positive attributes of a modern Thai woman in the backcountry, Jim and I were instantly attracted to her.

During the ensuing conversation, Amara--roughly translated as Fairy--disclosed that she normally worked in Bangkok as a guide-translator for the World Travel Service. She was now on vacation visiting her parents. Learning that we were looking for a place to live, and having a language disadvantage, she graciously volunteered to meet us the following day and assist in the undertaking. We were both ecstatic. We had been presented

with a solution in the search for a house, and would enjoy the company of a lovely English-speaking Thai lady. Unfortunately, whatever aspirations I had for house finding were dashed when the flight schedule arrived at the hotel, disclosing an early flight with Captain Tom Moher in Hotel Alpha.

As previously mentioned, just after arriving in Udorn, Howard had made friends with Air America Security Chief, Jim Baron, who was also staying in the Pratch. An older person, he had retired from the Army in Taipei, and was awaiting the arrival of his Chinese wife Penny and their new baby. As one of his perks, Jim was issued a Jeep. In fair weather, he often drove us to a corner open air Chinese restaurant for supper. The beanery was located across from City Park and, like any other place within the confines of Udorn Town, was not far from the hotel.

The heavy-set Baron, whom I suspected suffered from a minor case of emphysema, was used to supping on decent Asian cuisine, recommended hot fried rice and fresh green onions served upright in a filled water glass.

By now, Jim Spillis had flown a couple of times. As we munched on the delicious food, we talked about some of our recent experiences without reprimand from the Security Chief, who was interested as to what was happening upcountry. Spillis indicated that he had met Pop Buell at Sam Tong, and had lunch with Colonel Vang Pao and his staff at Site-30. During the meal Jim was astonished that everyone dipped rice and soup from a common pot. He received a laugh from us when he added, *"But at least everyone had his own spoon."*

**A BADGE OF HONOR**

Friday, 5 October, marked a memorable day in my upcountry checkout. Crews were still obliged to stop at Wattay Airport for a nose count, as per the multi-nation Geneva Accords on Laos. Some pilots let their First Officers fly, and I was in the right seat of Hotel Alpha.

Tom Moher, a respected "old timer" and senior helicopter pilot, had the distinction of being the first permanent helicopter pilot. Living in Udorn since 6 June 1961, he had been the first employee to establish his wife there. Right from the start, I learned that we had a lot in common. Tom was a former Marine who had been a squadron member of HMR-261 in Okinawa. He exuded a tough exterior common to people from New York City. Tom had survived Company purges, enemy gunfire, and the entire horse sierra accompanying the job. A down-to-earth person, who loved to talk, he recalled initial operations at Udorn in large tents, and how he was unbelievably issued a commercial airline Captain's uniform, complete with a heavy overcoat and barracks cap, when first hiring on with the Company. At the present time, Tom was the only helicopter pilot in the organization without a Civil Aviation Board (CAB) commercial helicopter license, but pressure was mounting on him to obtain one.<sup>23</sup> Tom possessed a good knowledge of the system, its individuals, and he freely shared it with me.

After Moher commiserated with me about my First Officer status, he launched into unforgettable stories regarding some of his past escapades. Most of the pilots were brimming with interesting stories, especially the ones related in the privacy

---

<sup>23</sup> CAB: The Civil Aviation Board was a precursor to the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA). We had recently submitted our licenses to the CAB for a re-designated rating.

of the cockpit during long ferry flights to a work area. Tom was no exception, and because of his superior credentials and candor, his stories were more credible. <sup>24</sup>

Our Flight Mechanic for the day was Cornelio "Pappy" Pascual. Reputed to have been a courageous guerrilla leader in the Philippines during World War Two, Pappy emerged from the conflict a highly decorated national hero. Like all Filipino Flight Mechanics I had met, the thin, dark-skinned man was a friendly person, eager to please. His age showed and the toll of years of harsh jungle living was written on his lined, weathered face.

After arriving upcountry, we conducted a few missions in the VS-20-30 areas moving supplies to outlying villages. Claiming that he knew the area like a book, Tom never referred to a map. He was amazing, instructing me to turn at this rock outcropping, or that bend in a river. He indicated that I would navigate like that someday, but at the time, I did not believe him.

Mid-morning, we were loaded with a few items and passengers for a long flight to the Meo Site-42 in Sayaboury Province. It appeared that considerable emphasis continued to be accorded that area. <sup>25</sup> This was almost a repeat mission of the one on the third: same site, same aircraft, only a different route over harsher terrain. Launching westbound, we soared past bad guy sections of Route-13, still controlled by Kong Le's turn-coat

---

<sup>24</sup> Tom Moher Oral. Tom was a magnificent spinmeister, but, like many vivid stories of the pre-1962 era, some dimmed in memory, have been embellished, or refreshed by other sources. For the Nam Tha operation and his attempt to purloin an H-34, see Book One, *Genesis*.

<sup>25</sup> I was not aware at the time that Sayaboury was a fallback area of last resort for Vang Pao and his people should the situation warrant.



neutralist faction. Naïve as I was, I considered any mountains or terrain below us to be no-man's-land, of which to be wary.

As we over headed a point more than halfway to our destination, terrain began rising. Squirming in my seat, I became increasingly uncomfortable at our diminishing altitude above ground level (AGL). Despite our original cruise altitude AGL, we were now actually flying at a lower altitude over higher ground, and were well within what I had been informed was small arms range. It would be infinitely wiser to adjust to a safer altitude by eyeballing the mountains ahead and monitoring the radar altimeter, which was preset on 1,500 feet. For an unexplained reason, Tom would not allow me to climb to reflect the higher elevations ahead. Although there were officially no hostilities in the country, jockeying for key positions continued in some sectors. Furthermore, all opposing factions were aware that we flew unarmed helicopters, and that they could take pot-shots at us with relative impunity.

The pilots I had flown with recently generally respected the 1,500-foot minimum AGL thumb rule, claiming the odds of being hit diminished the higher one flew. It was sound advice. Not truly a "magnet ass," Moher did sport a semi-colored reputation of low-leveling and incurring battle damage several times in the past. <sup>26</sup> When I again evoked the better-to-be safe than sorry slogan, and tactfully recommended that we climb higher, he insisted that he had flown over the area before and it was friendly. Then he sheepishly disclosed that he disliked flying high because of the possible danger of fire or a

---

<sup>26</sup> Magnet Ass: A term used for a pilot's affinity for incurring more than average battle damage.

transmission failure.<sup>27</sup> There was not much I could do. Moher was the senior man in the program and Captain of Hotel Alpha. In this training phase, I was obligated to trust his judgement. However, despite a cockpit mate's rank of seniority, I was not above taking independent action should the situation warrant.

While still at MCAS New River, North Carolina, I was a co-pilot on a maintenance ferry flight of three double-crewed HUS-1s to the Naval Air Repair Station at NAS Jacksonville, Florida. Outside Charleston, South Carolina, a threatening line of thunderstorms prompted the conservative flight leader to land in an open field and wait for the storms to pass. We were in a trail position to land last.

During the descent, I observed what could have been a cause for our demise. Captain McKillop was inadvertently descending directly into high tension power lines. Without hesitation, I ripped the collective controls away from the PIC and pulled up on the lever with all my might. This ceased our descent into death and proved enough for us to clear the deadly lines that certainly would have burned us to a cinder.

As a junior officer, I waited for repercussions for my bold action, but later in the evening, the captain, appreciative of my lifesaving action, bought me drinks, and arranged a most satisfactory liaison with a young lovely.

To assuage my obvious fears, Tom launched into a monologue regarding his experience with groundfire. He repeated that most hostile elements in Laos were aware that we were not supposed to carry weapons, and we were powerless to shoot back to suppress the fire. If not hit, more than half the time you did not even

---

<sup>27</sup> Mike Marshall Interview. Tom Moher refused to fly higher than 1,500-2,000 feet. He had seen a buddy in the Corps catch fire at high altitude and burn to death attempting to land the helicopter.

know you were being fired at. In any volley of fire, most rounds would pass between the whirling rotor blades, with only one out of eleven achieving contact. What he divulged was encouraging, but I still believed it was prudent to attain proper clearance, for it seemed relatively easy for an experienced gunner to hit a large lumbering beast that was low and within range.

Whack! As Tom was chatting, we were hit. A distinctive whining ping, one I would never forget, was followed by a series of clattering noises, as the round penetrated the helicopter's thin skin. From the sharp crack of the report, I estimated the rifle fire had come from a ridgeline close to our left side.

I simultaneously advanced the mixture control lever forward, added power, and then attempted to call Luang Prabang. Sweating profusely, Tom assumed aircraft control and added additional power to gain speed, while we both scanned the instrument panel for signs of engine or transmission problems.

Scrambling around the cabin deck, his ears ringing from the reverberating tuning fork like report, Pascual was unable to discover any damage in either the passenger or avionics compartment. This was reassuring, but academic, for we were still flying. Since there was no immediate need for a forced landing in an area where there were few available, we radioed an abbreviated report of the incident, and refiled for Sayaboury Airport. Hearing our calls, Captain Charlie Weitz and Jim Spillis, who were working in the vicinity of Luang Prabang, generously offered to remain aloft and provide a VHF flight-following capability to our destination. It was reassuring to note that others in our group cared about our predicament, and were willing to help.

We were not out of the woods yet. Other than being aware that the battle damage was somewhere aft, we did not have clear

knowledge of the damage incurred. This would have to be determined at Victor-25, if we made it that far. Despite the mounting tension, a forced bravado pervaded the cockpit.

Tom joked, *"They would make terrible duck hunters. The boys are still lousy shots, and are still not leading us properly."* He went on to indicate that because of their inability to properly lead the target, most airborne hits were aft to non-critical parts of the tail cone or pylon sections of a helicopter. Grinning and bobbing my head condescendingly, not knowing how to respond, I maintained silence. Naturally, I did not mention Tom's obsession with flying low in a questionable area, but I could not help thinking, God help us if the bad guys ever learned how to shoot properly. Reassuringly, the H-34 was a large, strong machine, capable of taking many hits without incurring serious damage. The word among crews was that it usually got you home.

Thus far I had survived my first "moment of truth." Now I knew what it was like to be hit, suffer the anxiety of the unknown, and its impact on my psyche. Although my heart had raced a little at the time, the experience had not been too bad. I had speculated about such an event for a long time. Now that it had actually occurred, the incident seemed to elicit a dream-like quality. It happened so suddenly that, reacting instinctively, one did not have time to reflect on the implications of the unusual event until out of danger. It was obvious that previous training was important. Despite pressure, one first continued to fly the aircraft. There was no alternative. Feeling good as we neared our destination, I believed that I had reacted well under fire, and it had been an effortless way to "pop my cherry." Satisfied that I was now the

newest member of the gang bloodied in Laos, I wondered how the next escapade would unfold and be resolved. <sup>28</sup>

After securing beside the short, well-maintained strip located within the confines of Sayaboury Town, a thorough inspection of Hotel Alpha revealed that a single .30 caliber round had penetrated the left foldable honeycombed transmission deck door. But there was additional damage. Travelling at almost maximum velocity, the projectile hit the transmission oil cooler blower behind the major component. At this point the missile split into several pieces, splattering hot shrapnel out the louvered turtle-back fairing. Fortunately, with all the metal fragments flying around, no main rotor blades were hit. Yet, there were nine holes of various shapes and sizes in the ship, causing unbelievable damage from the duck hunter's single bullet. I was certain that the Maintenance Department would be thrilled to hear about the extent of battle damage.

Tom relayed the damage list, the worst involving the transmission oil cooler blower, to Udorn over the high frequency (HF) net. He was advised to further assess and repair whatever was possible. In addition, a maintenance team and parts would be dispatched to Sayaboury as-soon-as-possible. In the meantime, we were grounded (AGP), and the prospects of a good day with high project time faded commensurate with the fleeting hours. <sup>29</sup>

## **TUBBS**

There was a pleasant and interesting upside to the shooting incident, which would not have occurred while performing normal work. As a direct result of the grounding, I met a gregarious

---

<sup>28</sup> I would be hit by gunfire from the ground many times over the next few years.

<sup>29</sup> AGP: A maintenance acronym used in messaging for aircraft grounded parts.

and informative missionary, the Reverend Tubbs. Aptly named, the stout fellow drove to the wounded helicopter in an open Jeep. After introducing himself and learning our plight, he invited Tom and me to his house. Since there would be a considerable delay involved before the maintenance team arrived, considering the fierce heat of the day, we readily accepted. On the way, I learned that Tubbs worked for the interdenominational organization, Christian Missionary Alliance (CMA), and that he had been working in Laos since 1955. Prior to this, he had spent most of his early missionary vocation in China, leaving the country in the late 1940s, just two weeks prior to Meo's communist takeover.

The small town was interesting. All the commercial and residential buildings were solidly constructed from hardwood, but were unpainted and appeared to be very old. Buildings were scattered at random, leaving grassy areas where water buffalo grazed.<sup>30</sup> The outside of the Tubbs' wooden residence appeared very sturdy. The Reverend indicated that when Sayaboury belonged to Thailand, most of the buildings in town had been erected by Thai artisans using local lumber from the excellent teak growing throughout the area. As employed during past centuries, elephants were still trained and used in local logging operations, the only real industry common to the region. Thai influence persisted, with many old people still able to read and write Thai.

Stepping inside, we were introduced to the equally portly Mrs. Tubbs, who kindly offered us a cool glass of water, assuring us that it was safe to drink. I was impressed with the excellent accommodations in such a remote site. The sizable living room, appeared comfortable, with a short-wave radio. It

---

<sup>30</sup> Charles "Jiggs" Weldon, *Tragedy in Paradise*.

was appointed with creature comforts beyond anything I had seen in Udorn. At the side of the room sat a refrigerator, an item I considered an ultra-luxury in such a backwater place. Again, I marveled at their lifestyle, seemingly more advanced than any of us had in Udorn.

We learned that the old timer was truly a dedicated Southeast Asia hand, who professed to have logical answers to Red containment in the region.<sup>31</sup> When asked about his security, the reverend indicated that the Pathet Lao were not aggressive, and had no current interest in the province. He continued that if enemy forces did conduct a thrust into the area, he would be forewarned by friendly Meo villagers. His work with them, which he looked a little over weight to perform, normally took him far into the hill country, and almost always required walking great distances. Occasionally, Air America was employed to drop him at remote sites. Tubbs disclosed that because of his intelligence gathering potential, he was on the Agency's good guy list. Then, unexpectedly, he shed some light on the recent emphasis and support accorded the province. Since the White Star team's recent departure, a void had been created in direction, supply, and requirements among area hill tribes. During ensuing intrigues, to continue the flow of rice and other supplies, some Meo leaders had been taking advantage of the situation to consolidate their power among clans. Therefore, to forestall any serious problems before they spun out of control, USAID was attempting to increase its influence in the region. Father Jerry

---

<sup>31</sup> Generally, this type of individual did possess good ideas pertaining to solving political and geopolitical problems, but on my level the viewpoints were wasted.

Orsino, the priest I had seen at Site-42, had been attempting to smooth the transition to a peacetime economy.<sup>32</sup>

By early afternoon the maintenance team from Udorn arrived and began repairs on Hotel Alpha. Since it would be some time before the ship was airworthy, we were invited to visit a nearby Operation Brotherhood (OB) hospital. The only significant contract funded by USAID, OB was staffed solely by Filipino doctors, dentists, and nurses. Though the clinic was housed in a dismal looking bamboo and thatch building, the inside looked like a first-class operation with the required tools at hand. Operation Brotherhood was ostensibly sponsored by the Manila and Vientiane Chambers of Commerce.

With OB units scattered throughout Laos at Vientiane, Paksong, and Attapeu, it far surpassed the Dooley Foundation's function, and partially filled a medical need in a country with virtually no indigenous doctors or hospitals. Recalling the poverty and sorry health of the Nigeritos living outside Olongapo, Philippine Islands, I wondered if OB services might have been better utilized in their own country. Later, when talking with Flight Mechanic Ben Naval, I learned there was an excess of doctors and nurses in the Philippines, and the OB program provided a welcome escape valve for them.

It was late when Pascual and the maintenance crew completed repairs. As they piled into Hotel Alpha's cabin, another dark

---

<sup>32</sup> Wayne Knight Email: Wayne did a lot of work at the bug-out strips near Sayaboury Town and in the valley during the White Star period. The captain in charge of the team once said that he asked some of the local residents what they thought allowed the helicopter to fly. A local man volunteered that he noticed just before takeoff, the man in the cabin always talked into a little black thing in front of his face (the ICS microphone). He believed the man was calling for God to lift the machine into the air. He was probably one of Reverend Tubbs' flock.



recovery was envisioned at the Udorn strip. Tom let me drive home.

After a long flight, I lined up on the northwestern portion of the runway, and with only the landing light for illumination, conducted a perfect three-point run-on-landing. The greased landing was so smooth that it impressed all onboard and elicited an unexpected quip from Moher, "*Are we on the deck yet?*"

We chocked in with six hour plus thirty minute day, thirty minutes night, and five plus five project.

After being hit with Tom Moher, who I was sure was itching to tell all about the incident, I felt my status would be somewhat elevated within the pilot group. Perhaps after handling my baptism under fire well, a closer bonding would occur. But strangely, battle damage was not deemed a badge of honor by all hands. Some individuals were proud to claim that they had never been shot. They professed to be embarrassed by a hit or concerned that it might jeopardize their job. Therefore, some refused to report battle damage, hoping it would be overlooked or charged to another pilot. After the incident, my spirits and attitude improved considerably, and I felt a step closer to the operation. I perceived myself to be less intimidated and defensive among those who appeared to flaunt their greater experience and seniority. I knew what I could do with the helicopter, but I still had to prove myself, and to do that, flying would have to remain steady so I could obtain more chances to demonstrate my ability.

### **NONG KHAI OPERATIONS AND AREA HISTORY**

On Saturday, the sixth, I was again scheduled to fly in Hotel Foxtrot with Bill Cook out of Nong Khai, Thailand.



Later photo of Nong Khai strung out along the Mekong River. The road from Udorn ran through the airport, which had not been improved much from early days.

Author Collection.

Deviating from the norm, we would fly directly to the site and receive our instructions.

The town of Nong Khai, scattered along the south bank of the Mekong River, was located thirty miles north of Udorn at roads end. It also marked the terminus of the narrow-gauge railroad track from Bangkok. Like much of the northeast region--called Isan by natives--the land between Udorn and Nong Khai consisted of flat rice paddy, or barren fields interspaced with a dotting of tall sugar palms present for shade. Because of salt-impregnated, inferior soil from past ocean events, few passable roads, and unreliable climate conditions, the region was not highly populated, and probably supported more water buffalo than humans. In sum, the area appeared like a difficult place to live or prosper.

Nong Khai was established after the sacking of Vientiane and forced evacuation of all its inhabitants in 1829 by the army of King Rama 3rd in retaliation for an attack on his kingdom. Now the town was a waypoint for the exchange of people and goods flowing to and from the Vientiane trading area. Since no bridge existed across the river, intercountry traffic was performed by barge, and a wide assortment of boats, via the Tha Deua landing, which was situated a short distance downstream from the administrative capital. Highly visible from the air, and south of the Thai town lay a red laterite airstrip, contiguous with the unpaved north-south artery leading to Udorn.

We landed, kept the blades turning (the clock running), and waited, curious as to what lay ahead.

### **PAT LANDRY**

Beside the strip stood a barrel-chested man wearing a flowered Hawaiian shirt more suited to a Saturday picnic or

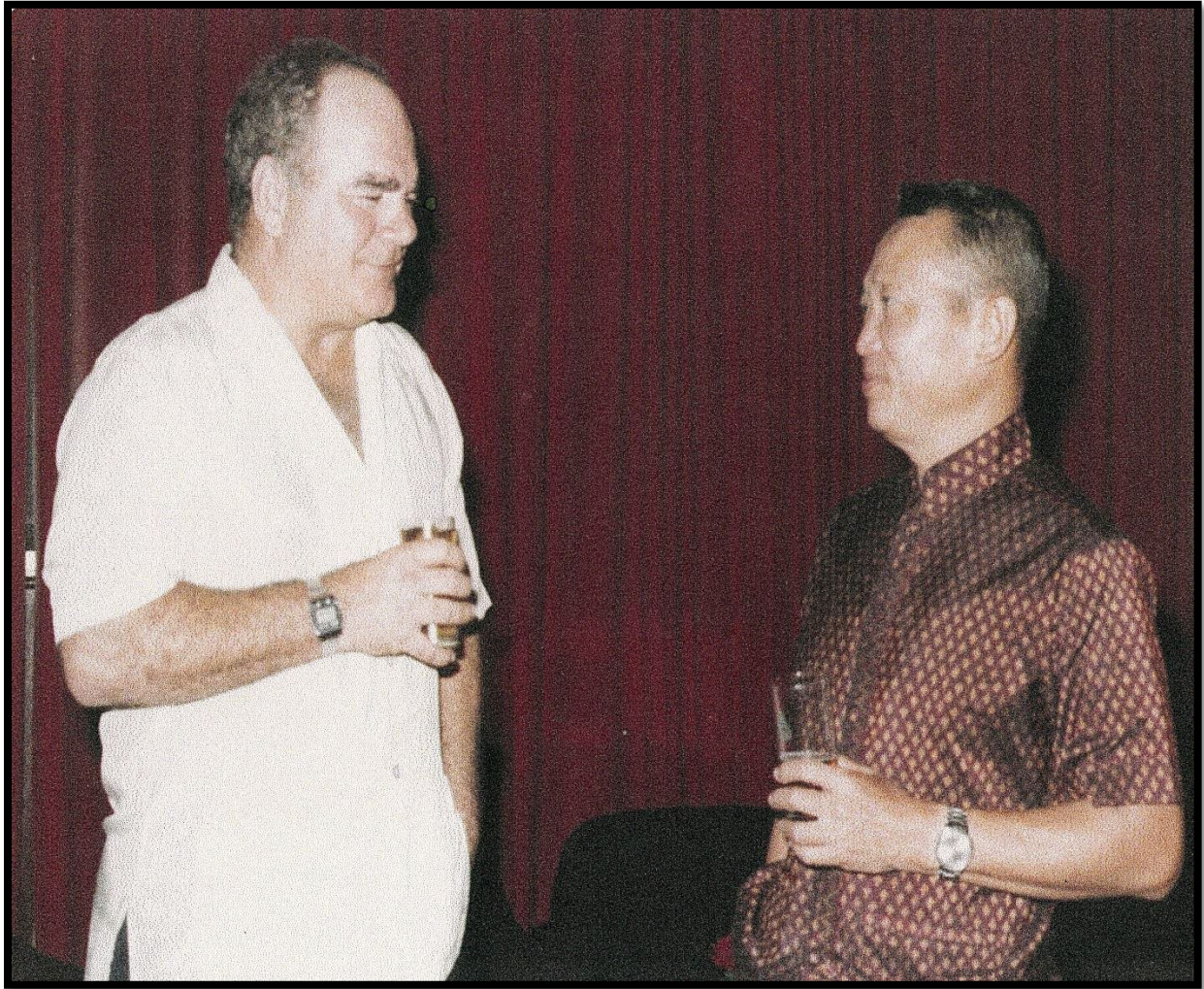
beach party. He had an impressive and striking resemblance to the movie actor Ernest Borgnine. This would mark my first contact with Pat Landry. I had heard this tough-looking guy's name whispered in conspiratorial tones by those who thought they enjoyed knowledge about something you did not. From this occasional banter, I was aware that Landry was involved with the Thai border police. I also heard that he was the number two Customer after Station Chief Bill Lair at AB-1.<sup>33</sup>

Landry had an interesting history. Following World War Two, the newly formed CIA intelligence Agency wanted to assign Pat to Asia. Not interested, he countered that he would rather return to Texas. However, after only two years of duty in Europe, he was tired of dealing with numerous hard-headed bureaucrats, changed his mind, and accepted an Asian tour in Indonesia.

In late 1960, the Lao war was deemed critical. It appeared that the entire country would fall to the communists. Early in January 1961, Bill Lair, Landry's classmate at Texas A&M, persuaded Vang Pao and his Meo followers to adopt a CIA-sponsored program, and help thwart the rapid communist advance through Laos. During this period, Landry departed Indonesia for Vientiane. For a short time, he was assigned upcountry to Ban Na (VS-15) with the second group of CIA Case Officers that included experienced men like Tony Poshepny and Jack Shirley. There he monitored and supervised Thai PARU and Special Forces' training

---

<sup>33</sup> AB-1: An acronym for administration building (or a nonsense syllable of unknown origin) was a generic term assigned to obfuscate CIA participation and dealings out of Udorn. Housed in a drab building south of the Air America access road in the Royal Thai Army compound, it headquartered the operation's few shadowy Central Intelligence types, generally known as "spooks." AB-1 was a euphemism that persisted for years after other designations (such as JLD) were substituted to obscure the CIA name and its connotations.



In later years, Pat Landry enjoying a casual drink with Thai General Parnet.

Pisidhi Indradat Collection.

of Meo recruits, until recalled to assist Lair with a mounting Vientiane work load.

After March 1961, anticipating a constant communist threat to Vientiane, and to better facilitate their operation, the two agents moved their headquarters across the river to Nong Khai. Despite the town's proximity and ease of daily commute to Vientiane, it was still not considered adequate for their needs. With Udorn more defensible, secure, and centrally situated with a hard surface airfield which could better support their operations, it readily became obvious that the small town would be a preferred location. Therefore, within a few months, while the transition of Air America to a civilian operation was still ongoing and some Marines were still in the field, they moved their operations to Udorn. They were initially housed in one of two abandoned Thai barracks shared with Air America and AB-2, a casual radio intercept operation run with experienced Chinese radio operators. Later they moved to the 333 Thai headquarters near the Air America access road. The men remained there until the mid-sixties, when escalating Theater requirements and security warranted construction of a permanent, more high-tech structure.

Despite current implementation of the Geneva Accords, the Lao training operation continued, but at a much-reduced level. Unofficially, Pat worked with the Thai Border Police Patrol (BPP), but was still plugged into the Lao equation. One BPP platoon was attached to AB-1. Through this unit, the PARU, and their superiors, it was possible to conduct clandestine

operations and maintain a sharp eye on the Lao situation.<sup>34</sup>

Beside the combination road-air strip sat a large open-topped six by six truck, from which several equally casually dressed Thai men scurried about unloading unmistakable yellow wooden ammunition boxes. One of them, who Pat called Peech (Captain Pichit) appeared to be the leader. While our Flight Mechanic Rick DeCosta stacked ammunition boxes inside the cargo compartment, Pat handed Cook a list of coordinates that delineated sites located south of Vang Vieng. Here was my answer. It was obvious that these shuttles would bypass prying eyes in both Udorn and Vientiane in a "last ditch" clandestine effort to beat the 7 October deadline. So much for Lao neutrality. (Seven hours plus fifty minutes, five plus fifty-five project time.)

## **NEUTRALITY**

At a 28 September 1962 Washington, D.C. Cabinet meeting on Laos, President John Kennedy took the following action:

*"[He] authorized the withdrawal by October 7, 1962 of the remaining elements of MAAG Laos in accordance with the Geneva Agreements.*

*[He] approved a review of intelligence data concerning Viet Minh withdrawals from Laos in order to ascertain what*

---

<sup>34</sup> Pat Landry Interview at the Shell building across from the Montien Hotel on Suriwongse Road Bangkok, Thailand, March 1995. CJ Abadie Interview. "Landry had a Thai wife-girlfriend, so he was at Nong Khai because of that and other operational reasons. He had activities going on that required only a few people to know about. We tried to make the Customer happy. There was much transiting across the river at this time and the BPP was as much in Laos as in Thailand. In the far northwest, the Chinese [KMT] teams were also involved, and the BPP aided them. Tony [Poe] was sent there to handle the situation when they were getting pushed down to the border areas. The CIA was involved with them for a long time and Air America had made drops into China to support them."

*information could be given the RLG [Royal Lao Government] and the ICC [International Control Commission] in Laos without jeopardizing the integrity of intelligence collection.*

*[He] supported the retention of U.S. combat forces in Thailand pending a further review of developments in Laos."* <sup>35</sup>

## **KUDOS**

Special Forces White Star brass were very appreciative of the support some Air America pilots had performed for the Field Training Team mission in Savannakhet. Since medals could not be awarded to civilians, this appreciation took the form of glowing letters forwarded to favored pilots.

Wayne Knight received one of these missives dated 20 September 1962.

*"As our mission here in Laos draws to a close, I wish to express my most sincere appreciation for the outstanding manner in which you have supported this Military Region.*

*While over the extended period many of the pilots have flown missions in this Region, we have come to know best those of you who have flown here primarily. We have felt, and you have demonstrated, that you are definitely a member of the team.*

*Your professional ability, your dedication, and your willingness to undertake any mission regardless of time, weather and other hazards, have earned you the respect, admiration and friendship of your military associates, both American and Lao. Your efforts have made possible accomplishments which would not have been otherwise possible.*

*On behalf of all members of MAAG Military Region 3, I wish to extend our most sincere appreciation and our very best wishes*

---

<sup>35</sup> National Security Action Memorandum #189, 09/28/62.



*for your continued success in all future endeavors.”*<sup>36</sup>

Although the overall performance of a pilot counted with Special Forces personnel, often an isolated incident stood out in memory.

Sometimes White Star personnel excelled because of their special talents. During late 1961 and 1962 a medic who was well equipped to perform sensitive circumcision operations was assigned to Pakse. A few of the more adventuresome White Star types opted for the procedure. After such an operation a sergeant returned to his forward training base at Saravane (V-44).

Following a full day's work, on 20 August Wayne Knight was overnighing at the site when the major in charge of the unit asked Wayne if he could medevac the still bleeding sergeant fifty-two nautical miles southwest to Victor-11. Looking out into a hostile dark sky, Wayne had reservations about the trip. The night was black as pitch, with isolated thunderstorms noted to the south, mainly over the Bolovens Plateau. Not content to wait until morning, the commanding officer insisted that Wayne launch immediately, indicating that it was a life-or-death situation. Pressured, but now convinced of the need to evacuate the man, Wayne, the Captain, along with Flight Mechanic Johnny Sibal, and the afflicted sergeant launched at 2300 hours.

The trip proved uneventful, as lightning flashes illuminated southern hills, and from altitude the lights of Pakse were clearly visible from a great distance. After receiving an abbreviated coded message, the "A" Team communications specialist at the Victor-11 team house was

---

<sup>36</sup> Robert C. Roth, Colonel, Infantry Chief. Headquarters Region 3, Military Assistance Advisory Group to Laos, Savannakhet, Laos, 09/20/62. Forwarded to the Author by EW Knight.

alerted that an H-34 was inbound with a seriously wounded patient. As a show of support, twenty or more anxious White Star personnel gathered at the airport to meet the aircraft.

After parking and securing his helicopter, Captain Knight noted the great disappointment, and then levity among the group when they discovered the sergeant only suffered from a hemorrhaging penis.<sup>37</sup>

Another letter followed the first to Knight from the Pakse White Star unit:

*"I wish to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for your performance while flying in support of operations in the Pakse, Laos [MR-4] area. Without the support of pilots like yourself, all but minor operations would have been virtually impossible.*

*Your cheerfulness, skill and desire to fly under the most arduous and hazardous of conditions earned you this thanks and admiration of all Special Forces troops in this area. You reacted as more than merely a pilot but took an active and sincere interest in the problems encountered by the various field teams, and your sound, mature judgment concerning the use of aircraft made you a valuable and welcome member of our operation.*

*Should I again be involved in operations such as these in Laos I would deem it a privilege to have you serve with me..."*<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Wayne Knight Email.

<sup>38</sup> Carl E. Mererlich, Major, Infantry Commanding, White Star Mobile Training Team, APO, 153, U.S. Army, 09/24/62. The Author has to assume that letters of appreciation were forwarded to other Air America pilots. Forwarded to the Author by EW Knight.

**DEADLINE AND CHICANERY**

Seven October was the date agreed upon by representatives of warring parties at the Geneva negotiations for all foreign elements to be out of Laos. With the departure of the Special Forces White Star Control Team on the sixth, our side had generally complied with the agreements.<sup>39</sup> In theory, Laos could now attempt to press on with nation building under a coalition government. However, there remained a great deal of doubt and cynicism within the Western camp regarding any but a superficial withdrawal of North Vietnamese Army forces--or Viet Minh as they were still called at this time--from the kingdom. With only a few documented Vietnamese exiting through International Control Commission (ICC) checkpoints, there were intelligence estimates of thousands of North Vietnamese Army forces remaining in place.<sup>40</sup>

At first, the consensus among Udorn-based pilots, most speculation and a large amount of wishful thinking, seemed to be that the "balloon would go up" very soon. We should hang on, as our fortunes would recover. Such an enemy, loath to admit that they were even in country, certainly was not likely to concede any political settlement that did not fully benefit them. Besides, Lao coalition governments had been undertaken in the past without lasting success.

Logistics support of Neutralist troops in the field was considered essential to the Prime Minister's power base. Early in October, Souvanna Phouma forwarded letters to the Soviet and

---

<sup>39</sup> Two Agency men, Tony Poe and Vint Lawrence, remained at Long Tieng to advise Vang Pao and guerrilla warriors.

<sup>40</sup> Throughout the entire war, North Vietnamese leaders never admitted to staging troops in Laos.

U.S. Embassies requesting bilateral air supply of isolated Neutralist troops.<sup>41</sup> But this effort could not be conducted for only one faction. Further complicating the muddled situation, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, under Article Six of the Geneva Accord, agreed to continue and even increase the Air America airlift of USAID supplies to Meo "refugees," who proliferated on the "wrong side of the tracks," deep in enemy zones of influence. Why not supply them? Were not the Soviets and Hanoi leaders still blatantly providing tools of war to the Neutralists and Pathet Lao? To conduct this supply mission, 14 aircraft were contracted from the Western camp to fly 1,000 sorties per month.

## **LUANG PRABANG**

Balancing the airlift scales between contesting entities, the Soviets were also busy moving men and supplies. During 10 to 12 July, shortly after an agreement had been reached to integrate the various factions in Laos, the Pathet Lao were quick to respond and take advantage of the situation.

During the period, Wayne Knight and Ed Reid were conducting some area familiarization work in the Luang Prabang area. On one of the days, Wayne, Ed, and Flight Mechanic John Wilson had returned to land at the royal capital when they observed four Soviet Illushin-14 planes circling overhead.<sup>42</sup> The American crew was surprised and had no idea what was happening. They flew close enough to see the CCCCP logo (without a hammer and sickle)

---

<sup>41</sup> Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization*, 334-335.

<sup>42</sup> Soviet IL-14: The IL-14 was a nose wheel twin engine passenger aircraft with bubble Perspex (tough transparent acrylic plastic) windows throughout the fuselage.

and then pulled away, as past incidents with Soviet aircraft had proved hairy.<sup>43</sup>

The IL-14 pilots experienced problems communicating with the tower, so one of them landed and a crew member went to the tower to talk the others in. They parked near the tower, unloaded a full complement of heavily armed troops, and commenced refueling. They all placed support struts under the tails of the aircraft while unloading.

Wayne landed, while a number of Americans gathered on the small hill above the refueling operation and began to heckle the Russian crews, but they never got within fifty meters of them. The Russians waited nervously together until all the ships were fueled. They were all dressed in civvies and could have passed for Americans had their hair not been so long. Knight doubted the crews lived in Vientiane, for the only aircraft there were IL-2s. This led him to believe that the flight had probably emanated from Hanoi. Moreover, exposure to Americans in the capital would have ameliorated any nervousness with foreigners.

The pilots cranked up in preparation to depart, but a crewmember with long, curly, flaming red hair had a problem removing the pin of the tail support strut. The pilot of the ship was not helping, as he was revving the engines up, creating a blinding dust storm by the tail.

The other three aircraft had already departed, while "Red" still attempted to remove the pin. While the anxious pilot was really working over the throttles, the Americans began yelling, "Get a hammer." Of course, "Red" could not hear them, but soon

---

<sup>43</sup> Wayne Knight recalled a story related by an Air America fixed wing pilot about pulling alongside one of these aircraft only to see a machinegun on a tripod mount being moved into the doorway. These Soviet aircraft were not often seen, but following this incident, they were accorded a wide berth.

another crewmember popped out with a hammer. After striking the pin several times and eventually resorting to using a larger hammer, they finally removed the pin. Then "Red" jumped onboard the IL-14 as the cabin door was being closed. Anxious to leave the foreign devils behind, the pilot did not taxi and line up on center line of the runway for takeoff. Instead, he departed directly from the parking area.

Wayne kept his Honda 125cc motorbike at Luang Prabang. As he was riding it to the Air America hostel, he found himself behind a truckload of the "integrated" Pathet Lao troops. In an attempt to put on a good show, they had been issued sparkling new gear. A full tube of rice and unlaced new shoes hung around their necks. <sup>44</sup>

Aware of enemy disdain for the Geneva Treaty, the John F Kennedy government was not totally inactive. Using care not to overtly violate the Geneva Protocols, during October the Requirements (RO) and Air Attaché (AIRA) offices were established in Vientiane. Composed of retired military officers (civilians under the accords) designated to assist continuing Lao military needs, for cover, the Requirements Office was integrated into the U.S. International Aid organization as RO/USAID.

With the approval of Prime Minister Sarit's pro-Western Thai government, logistic supplies were funneled through Thailand to Laos, either through Nong Khai by land transport and boat, or directly by air. In tandem with the measures implemented in Vientiane, to coordinate and supervise requirements and deliveries to Laos, Deputy Chief Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group Thailand (Dep Chief JUSMAG Thai) was formed in Bangkok.

---

<sup>44</sup> Wayne Knight Emails.

The Air Attaché was charged with authorizing RF-101 (Voodoo) jet aircraft photo reconnaissance missions from Don Muang Airport to scrutinize enemy border and trail activity, and movement on the Plain of Jars. All activity was conducted in a legal manner under loopholes afforded in the Accords. <sup>45</sup>

### **MAGIC BOX**

Because of Customer and flight requirements, management policy continued to evolve at the Udorn base. Now it entailed night flying. During the early days Abadie talked to VPFO Rousselot at length regarding the subject. Since there was no night training program established, a lack of viable and reliable navigation aids available in Laos, deficient helicopter instrumentation, and various other reasons, the two men, including Chief Executive Officer George Doole and President Hugh Grundy, were adamantly opposed to night flying, except during an emergency situation.

For increasing instances when aircraft returned to remote sites after dark, and the occasional times the Customer required night work, a "Magic Box" concept became a hush-hush priority in the CPH office. This project was based on a visual glide slope landing system similar to the one we had previously used in the Marine Corps. The device enabled a pilot to operate at night into a remote confined area without lights. Somewhat like a camera mounted on a tripod, the apparatus consisted of two narrow red and green angled beams of light, emitted from a front lens. When positioning the "box," it was the Pathfinder team or ground personnel's responsibility to ensure sufficient green beam elevation to assure a normal glide angle for clearance of the highest obstacle along the approach path. Flying into the

---

<sup>45</sup> Information derived from various Lao histories.

red beam indicated a low approach, and a need to adjust altitude. Once the system had been successfully demonstrated, and given a prearranged azimuth and altitude to intercept the beam, a blacked-out helicopter could clandestinely insert troops into a remote landing zone at night.

The process was much like a primitive Instrument Landing System (ILS), which commercial pilots successfully used at airports. The difference was that in the boondocks no one was closely monitoring the pilot's progress on specialty radar. Depending on a ground team's experience and expertise, and the pilot's proficiency level, the system generally worked well; if not, the operation could be extremely hairy. For obvious reasons, special trust and confidence were required during such an operation.

Since there were no "Magic Boxes" in the Air America or Customer inventory, Udorn management began cobbling together a system equivalent to the proven military device. During the spring of 1962, when ACP Jim Coble was in Hong Kong, he purchased the necessary colored glass. When all the materials were gathered, a box was constructed, including flashlights and glass covers.

This was followed by several night flights, performing approaches to the box and attempting to tune it, so a perfect approach could be conducted by intercepting and flying down the green beam. During March, the ersatz Magic Box was first deployed at the end of the runway. To the credit of the designers, the device actually worked, but only marginally because it was not close to the quality of an actual device. The primary problem related to a requirement for appropriate lenses to focus the light into a narrow, coherent beam. In addition, light intensity was diminished, rendering beam acquisition



difficult in anything less than total darkness. And there was no way to aim the beam without first conducting an approach to it. Because of these faults, although sound, the concept, along with the box, was placed on hold as being too crude, and potentially dangerous for crews to employ in the field. <sup>46</sup>

The day after the Geneva Accords on Laos became the norm, interest in the Magic Box was resurrected. In order to circumvent the accords, people were likely being prepared for special clandestine night missions in Laos. If any were performed, I was not privy to them.

Jim Spillis and Jim Coble conducted approaches to a box located on the grassy infield between the runway and taxiway. Others who had never previously practiced with the device participated. Having flown the box before in the service, I was not required to fly. This was acceptable to me, for I was never too keen about night flying in a single engine machine. <sup>47</sup>

Pilots are at loose ends without work in their chosen profession. In the days succeeding the Lao stand down, hourly flight time tapered off so significantly that a sense of hopelessness and despair increasingly pervaded the helicopter pilot group. Except for bits and dribbles, it did not appear that we would ever fly again in Laos. And the situation was exacerbated by well-meaning wags who quipped, "You ain't seen nothing yet." To a man, we questioned if flying was actually finished, and how long we would be retained. For the present there was no answer. This was a development management feared the most. What would happen in such a fiery group of young men

---

<sup>46</sup> Jim Coble Email. "If there had been serious Customer interest, a 'real' Magic Box from the Corps or Army would have been forthcoming."

CJ Abadie Email. "It was a good attempt."

<sup>47</sup> Jim Spillis Interview and Flight Time Report.

with already sagging morale issues? More important, what direction would the explosive energy of the pilot force take that was normally consumed during the tense, sweaty hours of flying? Already there were manifestations of a trend unfolding in the increased drinking, the excessive gambling, and the lost time motorcycle accidents.

Under Bob Rousselot's apt direction, Project Manager Ben Moore, ACP Jim Coble, and Chief Pilot CJ Abadie comprised a strong, experienced management team that attempted to maintain the stability of the Madriver Operation during a very trying period.

Since my arrival in Udorn, it was clearly obvious that management's trend had been to increasingly effect more control over the diverse and motley groups of former military pilots, who had been allowed to run wild for so long. The VPFO, a former Marine, was a strong proponent of military regimen. This resulted in the recent retrofit to standardized uniforms. In addition, pending the construction of a second-floor classroom in hangar number one, ground schools and professional upgrading, in some form, were planned for the future. Also, ominous hints from local management suggested that Rouss wanted to conduct the operation more like a military outfit, but on our end, this was discouraged. I sensed a quasi-military atmosphere tightening, potentially threatening our individuality.

During the slack period, I detected some underlying animosity and resentment evident in our group. Not uncommon to an ego driven pilot force, this antipathy now surfaced, mostly among those ready and willing to leave and go home. There were an abundance of opinions and dissention by pilots either on "thin ice," or who harbored a real or imaginary grievance of management types, and those aggressive individuals jockeying for

survival. One Captain, Pinky Eaton, was very vocal, even going so far as to lash back at Abadie's semi-sarcasm. Pinky's action did not seem too intelligent, and I thought would certainly result in his eventual termination, but he did not seem to care.

In those confusing days, it was impossible to obtain an unbiased view regarding the operation or a particular person. Being a new guy had distinct advantages. Because I was not sure of my position or about what others said, I could objectively listen to all sides of an argument. Except for management, initial pecking order among the group was not well defined, but it soon became evident by observing who helped out in the Chief Pilot's office, and who had Ab's ear. (Some called this brown-nosing.) It became increasingly apparent to me that pilots were not treated equally. Some people were favored over others when flights were scheduled. The undertones of dissatisfaction were understandable, as the operation was winding down, and there was an excess of machines and men that obviously could not stand. The only question was how long would the job last? Because of the increasingly gloomy mood and paranoia settling over employees, having a degree in the art of Psychology, I half-seriously joked that perhaps it was time I quit flying and hung my counseling shingle in front of a clinic to help stressed out pilots.

On a positive note, we now had more time to visit and get to know each other. Small knots of pilots would form daily at the Air America facility to discuss latest rumors. Leaders of the groups were rife with anecdotes, which varied depending on who related them. Further stirring the disgruntled force, word was received that the Washington office was still hiring

pilots.<sup>48</sup> This was unbelievable. The revelation was not well received, and tended to blow everyone's mind. With almost forty pilots in place, if the rumor was proven true, what could upper management be thinking? Now we First Officers would be in an excellent position to relate to the pilot force's sour feelings when we first arrived to ultimately dilute their flight hours. Any new arrivals would not only delay our checkout process, but also slice into our already meager flight time and project wages. Referring to one of Abadie's favorite phrases, "bad news," it was not a reassuring development.

The latest revelation perpetrated another unsubstantiated rumor that under the Madriver contract, the Company received 5,000 dollars for each warm body in the field. There may have been some half-truth to this disclosure, but more believable among us low echelon types was scuttlebutt that the Company was hiring so that management could cull out dead wood and improve

---

<sup>48</sup> CJ Abadie Email. There was an established manning level, and the pipeline was purposely long to obtain qualified H-34 pilots. The Company wanted to maintain a certain level of pilots in case they were needed. People quit constantly and seldom gave management advanced notice.

pilot quality and manning levels. <sup>49</sup>

From a First Officer's viewpoint, the developing situation was even more frustrating and confusing. After the initial rush to get us into the field and checked out, what would be our fate now? Obviously, we would not be upgraded any time soon. Without work there was no requirement for more Captains. However, in the past there never had been permanent First Officers assigned to the helicopter program. What would happen to us? It appeared that our only salvation would be a quick return to war in Laos, and that possibility did not seem likely in the near future. Queried daily as to our status, the only information Ab had for us was directives issued from Bob Rousselot's Taipei office. And we had to be tactful regarding these inquiries, for of late Abadie's temperament, never the most glowing during quasi-normal

---

<sup>49</sup> CJ Abadie Email. There never was any intention of weeding out anyone. The weeding out was usually done by the employees themselves, when they made it impossible to keep them after some infraction. We only understood one side of the "weeding" process, but often did not know the whole story. There were many reasons for letting employees go during this slow period, and some of the reasons could not be disseminated or revealed to other employees. The person being terminated would often embellish things to make himself look good and place blame on the Company for letting him go. Ab believed most personnel were provided every benefit of the doubt and Ben Moore was very even-handed with crews.

*"The rumors were not good for the successful outcome of the project."* The Company was paid for actual expenses incurred as per the contract, plus a fee and general and administrative costs (G&A). This covered the costs of operating the management and support operations at Taipei, Washington, and other locations where there was no way to directly bill the contract. Locations like Taipei headquarters lumped costs together and spread the costs among the several Customers and agencies they supported. The accounting function of the Company and of each contract was audited every year by the General Accounting Office (GAO), and they authorized or corrected the percentage spread for the contracts being supported. They sometimes had direction from higher headquarters to "load" one of the other contracts so as to have budgets work out at the Washington level, to avoid drawing attention to an operation that might be sensitive.

times, had taken a turn for the worst. Reasons offered by those "in the know" for his sour attitude were family problems and daily memos or "nastygrams" from the head office demanding to know what was happening in Udorn.

Then Dick Chambers arrived. This newest First Officer, a stocky, fair-headed individual, became another low man on the totem pole. Seemingly carefree and personable, he received an introduction to Udorn society by way of a house party. He enjoyed it so much that he passed out alongside a klong long before the party ended. Discouraged by the inaction, Chambers only remained a few months and then left Air America.

## **BEAVERS**

Disgruntled First Officers and the falsification of helicopter logbooks were not the only problems noted in Udorn. They were also prevalent in the L-20 Beaver program. A DHC-2 contract had been let in April to support Special Forces White Star teams in central and southern Laos. Eight stripped down former U.S. Army aircraft, piloted by Air America personnel, hauled supplies to outlying training camps, and airdropped to troops conducting field maneuvers. However, the Army aircraft could not compare with the outstanding STOL characteristics of the proven Helio Courier.

The program engendered tragic losses. Soon after its introduction, while demonstrating its viability in Military Region Two, two pilots, including the Chief Pilot, were killed during an overloaded takeoff from a short strip at Xieng Dat, southwest of the Plain of Jars.

Continuing trouble in the "snake bitten" Beaver program came to light when new Chief Pilot, Bob Ferguson, was terminated for shady dealings in Vientiane. As a parting shot, while

processing out in Taipei, the disgraced pilot blew the whistle on the group's general padding of flight time. Incredibly, this admission of guilt was self-incriminating, for as leader of the program, he had taught many of his pilots how to fudge the logbooks. Ferguson was replaced by Simon.<sup>50</sup> This revelation regarding the falsification of flying records caused a stir throughout the Company. It quickly escalated into the largest flap since the Subowsty shooting of the Thai King's picture incident. VPFO Rousselot, pressured and highly concerned about repercussions from the Customer, and potential competition offered by Bird and Son, was eager to set an example and clean house. Therefore, he initiated the only option available, firing several prime offenders and allowing others to resign.

To the Company's relief, a normal course of events eliminated the Beaver program. After Colonel Simon's Special Forces teams were withdrawn from southern Laos, and the October Geneva Accords deadline passed, there was no more need for the Beavers, and the program was scrapped. While the pilots awaited disposition, with the stench of the padding flap fresh in management's nostrils, and an investigation continuing in Taipei, the L-20's were stacked like cordwood against the western parking area's perimeter chain-link fence with other

---

<sup>50</sup> EW Knight Email. Wayne, who knew Captain Simon well, indicated that he was not a good manager and was relieved in September. "*Simon was a nice guy, but that program did not need a nice guy.*" He was not implicated in padding.

cast off machinery and junk. <sup>51</sup>

I had met most of the remaining Beaver pilots soon after arriving in Udorn. Rusty Phillips (who I later learned had graduated from Duke University with a forestry degree), Paul Severson, Bob Abrams, Milt Olsen, Phil Peary, and Jim MacFarlane were a few others in the group. A few men were new arrivals, others had barely survived the purge, and, without a program, had been reverted to a First Officer status. Some never flew the Beaver, and, like Howard, Jim, and me, felt out of place as First Officers in an organization tailored mainly for Captains. Because of their circumstances and questionable future, we easily bonded with them, and they were closer to us than our helicopter peers. Hoping to ride out the investigations and eventually fly the Helio Courier, we gravitated towards each other to commiserate our plight. Until some of those affected

---

<sup>51</sup> Professor William Leary, 1992 Outline.

James M. MacFarlane. Air America Beaver and fixed wing pilot letter to Timothy N. Castle, 04/24/88. Jim MacFarlane later worked for Bird and Son and Continental Air Services.

CJ Abadie Email. The padding issue was always suspected, even in the larger fixed wing programs. The Helio Courier program was another suspect area, and some helicopter pilots were also suspected of padding flight time. The issue came to a head in the Beaver program because one or more pilots informed on others. Unequal flight time in the various programs was at the root of the problem and some new pilots were not happy.

Many pilots padded their flight and hazard times and were eventually caught. Rousselot journeyed to Udorn to investigate the incident. The padding and a few other things helped to end the Beaver program.

EW Knight Emails. Beaver Flap: Nearly all the pilots were padding their logbooks. Padding was an ongoing problem, but for much of our time in Laos there were not enough hours during the day to do much serious padding.

When details regarding padding surfaced, Rousselot arrived to conduct what became known as the "Grand Inquisition." He interviewed all Beaver pilots individually, and immediately sacked some. However, others like Paul Severson and Rusty Phillips fooled him and escaped unscathed. Milt Olsen and Bob Abrams were unaffected. Bob Gains, who used to boast about how much padding he was doing, was sweating blood while the interviews were going on, but he survived.



departed or went into other programs, we became the coffee shop's age old "misery loves company" group.

Perhaps the most interesting member of the stiff-wing pilots was Milt Olsen. No matter how bad the situation, Milt possessed a unique ability to make one laugh. The tall, bald-headed humorist had quite a history. "Uncle Milty," as he was later called, had been an investor in Chicago's highly speculative commodities market. Maintaining a poker face, he related in his home-spun comedic manner that he had attained a killing of 100,000 dollars in one week investing in soybean futures. Then, before anyone could react in awe, he quickly added that he lost an equivalent amount the following week. The riches to rags adventure led to his decision to join the ranks of Air America as yet another destitute pilot. Although difficult to believe the unsubstantiated yarn, I never tired of hearing Olsen's story.

## **NEW DIGS**

At just the proper time to elevate our spirits and present us with a new perspective on life, we moved from the hotel to a western style house. Fairy seemed to instinctively know her way around town, and we looked at and priced several dwellings throughout the area. Howard, desiring the best accommodations for his family, understandably was difficult to please. Since I had been either flying or standing by at the airfield, I told him that I would go along with anything he chose.

Finally, on the 10th, he settled on a house he liked. It was located on the main road directly across from airport property, and not far from the Air America access road. Brand new, the two story "American style" house's lower portion was constructed of concrete, stucco, and a stone façade. The second

level consisted of wood, and the roof was topped with the standard galvanized tin. Well-appointed, it was painted throughout. Unlike many furnished rentals, there were screened windows, western type toilets, and black and white terrazzo floors downstairs, which flowed out to the front porch. A banister staircase led to three bedrooms with beautifully stained and varnished floors. I was well pleased with Howard's choice. For functional living, the house far exceeded in beauty and potential any other Thai residence I had seen.

However, living in a primitive environment, there was a downside to the property: the surroundings. The entire area around the house was unattractive, and the pleasant interior ceased at the front door. Situated off the road behind a one pump Shell gas station, no lawn, shrubs, or trees were available in front to provide shade and please the senses. Sharp laterite stones covered hard ground that was bound to tear up youngsters' knees.

In addition, the abode was positioned close to the main road with a rustic, open-air noodle shop to the south side of a dirt road. There noisy samlor drivers casually congregated with their pedal-machines, eating or waiting for fares. A narrow alley plunged between the two structures leading to the landlord, Mister Singwa's Thai style house. The rear of the main house butted against a stagnant pond that formed a moat-like buffer between both houses, and served as a protection from thieves.

I could envision us living there, but there was still the matter of high rent. During a period of ongoing negotiations over the amount Singwa wanted, the dark-brown man exhibited an obviously well-rehearsed poor-mouth, sing-song routine, claiming the house had cost him a lot of money to build. I had no reason

to doubt him, but our wages were meager, and we could ill afford to pay him an outlandish price.

With American families arriving daily in town, the Udorn landlord protective association remained very strong, and they normally received the rent they wanted. We attempted to point out that with the war across the border on hold, we did not earn much money anymore, and with over building, rents were destined to soon plummet. It took continuous haggling, but with Fairy's assistance translating and cajoling, we were able to bargain Mister Singwa down to a more reasonable 3,000 baht (150 dollars) per month. Surprisingly, there was no contract to sign. A simple handshake sufficed. As I extended my right hand toward his, I noted that his first three fingers were nicotine-stained a heavy yellow-orange color from smoking the ultra-strong Falling Rain cigarettes. An occasional smoker myself--mostly other people's--I wondered what the man's lungs looked like.

Recalling the grim Subowsty account, I did not consider a prying landlord living so close to us particularly desirable. The potential for mischief was just too easy. Therefore, at Howard's insistence, through Fairy, Singwa assured us that he would not enter the house unless invited. As part of the agreement, the shrewd man insisted that we employ his maid, a relation who I suspected would monitor and report our activities. Also, as we paid her, he would likely have her services free.

Like most other Udorn rentals, the house was furnished, except for glasses, dishes, and other objects to produce a more habitable place. Fairy was instrumental in the purchase of these items from town vendors, and supposedly obtained the best price available. However, it was difficult to determine if one ever received a fair price in Udorn, as the buying structure, based

on racial lines, was three tiered. The all-purpose shop-houses, lived in and run mostly by Chinese, had separate prices for Chinese, Thai, and Americans. I wondered if we were charged a hidden mark-up on the total price, as the "guides and helpers" arranged with shop owners in Hong Kong.

It did not take long to confirm that the move from the Pratch had been worthwhile. We were very happy to enjoy privacy away from the public eye at a place we could truly relax and call our own. Thanks to the gas station owner, we even had our own little zoo. To the rear of his establishment there was a tethered bear cub with which Spillis enjoyed playing.

Most American personnel were disgusted with the artificially high rents and constant pressure by landlords to increase them. Before and during the time we had been house-hunting, there had been considerable discussion among pilots about the feasibility of building one's own house. Those who were really interested, and investigated this possibility, said that for one to two thousand dollars, and by mutual agreement, one could have a fairly decent house erected on a Thai's land. The kicker was that you could live rent free for your entire tour, and then sell the house back to the Thai national for half price. Basically, the longer you remained in Thailand, the cheaper the cost of housing.

Theory and appeal were excellent, but reality was another factor. I would have liked to proceed with such a project, except for two factors. First, from experience, pilots found most landlords to be inherently dishonest and unpredictable, promising one thing and then doing another. Secondly, except for a few minor articles published in *Time Magazine*, the military *Stars and Stripes*, the *Bangkok Post*, and whatever current rumor we could analyze and distill, no one could accurately judge the

true Lao situation, or the Company's future status in Thailand. Therefore, it seemed wise to wait until events became clearer.

The aggressively charming Fairy finally selected her paramour. Second man out, Spillis, although a little chagrined about her choice, was generally good natured over the competition and we remained friends. When I was not working, she would take a samlor to the house. She was always welcome, as her laughter and sunny disposition immediately lifted everyone's spirits. We were frequently together, mostly riding around town on my Honda, shopping, eating, or visiting. Asserting that it was improper for a Thai lady to straddle the rear seat, Fairy would only sit side-saddle on the bike. This created a distinct imbalance in the lateral center of gravity, making it difficult to maneuver the small vehicle, especially in a turn. Aside from this lady-like quirk, we enjoyed our time together. From then on, my exposure and opportunity to achieve a first-hand knowledge regarding the Thai culture increased enormously.

### **THAI CULTURE 101**

One pleasurable experience Fairy and I shared was frequenting local restaurants. Since Thais enjoy eating, usually in small amounts four to five times a day, there was no lack of establishments in town to choose from. Asian cuisine marked a welcome change from the greasy breaded veal cutlets whipped up by young Alfred at the dingy Air America snack bar.

At first, I selected foods with which I was familiar: pork, chicken, shrimp, or egg fried rice--called Khao Pot. I reasoned that this fare would be well cooked, reducing the chances of contracting "the code of the East." Although sound in theory, the result did not always follow the logic. Meat, as it had been cooked for thousands of years in Asia, was customarily sliced

thin and then rapidly flash-cooked in a concave wok.<sup>52</sup> Depending on the chef, in order to retain a desired flavor, the meat might not be fully cooked. In a country with universal refrigeration, and strict hygienic regulations, this might be acceptable, but not in the fly-blown, cockroach-infested country of Thailand. I had to keep reminding Fairy to insist that the waiter inform the cook to make sure my meat was thoroughly cooked.

Most selections appeared Chinese in origin, a standard in Asia. In time, I sampled authentic Thai preparations with care, as they initially seemed particularly odiferous and odd looking. However, once past my nose, the food tasted surprisingly good. At that point I understood what was meant by the Thai saying, *"American food smells so good, but tastes terrible."* Until I became used to the various mixed odors of garlic, onions, and exotic herbs, I was thankful that the shops were open air, where the heavy cooking vapors would filter into the air and escape, hopefully contributing to the demise of a few vampire mosquitoes.

One would think a combination of hot spices and pungent garlic would cause severe halitosis to the diner. This was true. The way Fairy addressed the social aspects was to suck on a Thai breath preparation, akin to the small, black pellets of Sen-Sen that my heavy cigarette-smoking Father used to mask the tobacco odor when I was a small child. The Thai equivalent, also tasting like licorice, was quite effective, but I did not particularly like the taste, opting instead for a slice of chewing gum.

My education continued. After sitting down at an open-air restaurant table, I noted that Fairy carefully examined her eating utensils and then polished them vigorously with a napkin.

---

<sup>52</sup> Wok: A curved, efficient Asian frying pan designed to rapidly stir fry meat and vegetables.

Thinking this action rude in a public establishment, something I would never consider doing, I admonished her and received a terse lesson regarding the ills of airborne dirt and flying insects. She also selected an uncovered straw from a container and inserted it into a Green Spot soft drink bottle. Then, with a small amount of liquid in the tube, she withdrew it with her finger over the exposed end to keep the fluid from draining out. She then reversed the straw and allowed the orange liquid to flow out, theoretically cleansing the inside of the straw. I never did discover how the outside of the straw was cleaned.

Considering that Thai customs were certainly different from those I was used to, I recognized that I was receiving valuable health tips, ones that would last me throughout my stay in Thailand.

I was never officially briefed regarding the customs and mores of either the Thai or Lao people, and, like all newcomers, had to learn by trial and error. A culture class was something that could have easily been conducted in Taipei during the check-in process. Even an abbreviated handout on Thailand would have proved helpful. But at this time American companies never addressed this aspect of working overseas. Perhaps with a military mentality still prevalent at the "head shed," Air America bureaucrats did not believe we would or should mix with the locals.

There were many taboos in Thailand, probably more than one would ever learn if he had not been born in the country. Some were so obscure that it would be easy for an uninitiated foreigner, or Farang as the Thai called us, to violate without knowledge. If one attempted to conform to the Thai way, allowances were easily made for most minor offenses, and a gentle reminder was usually sufficient to the wise. With Fairy

to ease me through the cultural and social niceties, it gradually became ingrained in me what to do and what not to do. Closely attuned to my ignorance, she was quick to apologize to her countrymen for my mistakes, and at the same time alert me to the error. It was a positive way to learn. When sitting, it was somewhat difficult to remember while crossing your legs not to point your foot at a person. This was a supreme insult, as the bottom of the foot, besides dirty, constituted the lowest part and meanest of the body. Consummating an urge to pat a cute child on the head was equally offensive, and would initiate uproar from the parents regarding the loss of the child's soul. Some customs did not appear consistent. In contrast, foreigners could be treated differently. I later observed Thais and Chinese--sometimes it was difficult to differentiate which was which--touching the heads and hair of blond American children, and fondling their fair skin. Topping this, I observed fat Chinese women rudely laughing at equally heavy American women.

The contrasts were ludicrous. One morning, while I was leisurely browsing downtown shops, a tiny, shabbily dressed old lady walked up to me, gently grasped my arm, and began to stroke the numerous black hairs. By then I understood a little Thai and realized she was marveling that my skin and hair were beautiful. Shocked at first, I thought she might be begging or soliciting, but it soon dawned on me that this was not an affront; she was just not familiar with hairy occidental men. I also considered that she might be a bit balmy, or recently arrived from a remote village. Consequently, I took no offense at being accosted in such a manner, and found the incident amusing. How much nearer could I get to local color than this? Aside from the apparent double standards to which I was slowly being exposed, it was



important to remember that I was only a guest in the country, and subject to the whims of the people.

I was already aware of the supreme respect and courtesy in Thai lifestyles, especially to the Royal Family. I learned to Wai in the formal Saswadi greeting and departure by placing my hands together, and then raising them to neck level, while bending forward slightly. Replacing the Western handshake, the gesture provided a little exercise and was great fun. Any display of affection between a male and female in public was discouraged; hand holding or touching in any manner not condoned. To a naïve foreigner this taboo could be confusing, especially when young people of identical gender could be seen holding hands, an act that would certainly evoke homosexual connotation in the Western world. But this expression of friendship was fine in Thailand. It was all very strange, and required a thorough reevaluation of old standards. One time, while Fairy was present in the house, I was upset about some minor item. Venting my anger, I kicked the door and swore. Admonished, I discovered that Thais frowned on cursing, or more likely, the combination of a display of anger and swearing.

From past associations with Asians at Quantico, I should have known better. While undergoing Officer Basic School at Camp Upshur, among the Asian contingent of Chinese and Vietnamese attending the course, there was an older Taiwanese officer, Shiu, who abhorred swearing. To jaded Marines this was the wrong thing to profess. At night, in the dim, stark surroundings of the platoon Quonset hut, to elicit Shiu's reaction and prompt a little humor, Boston jokesters Paul Costa, Art Conley, and others would direct the worst possible language in Shiu's

direction. They never tired of hearing the reply rolling off his tongue in guttural English, "Bad Words." <sup>53</sup>

From the time a Thai child could reason, emotional behavior was suppressed, and the people professed to possess no cuss words in their language. It was difficult for me to believe the worst curse word one could utter was being called a dead elephant.

### **PHE LECK**

Fairy had a friend in town she liked to visit. Of course, during our explorations, she dragged me along. Phe Leck was the proprietor of a tiny notions shop on Prajak Road. Actually, more like a stall, her booth was tucked neatly between Chinese, Indian, and Vietnamese businesses on the long street that led to City Park. Wearing a normally body flattering sarong, Leck was a dark, obese, gross looking individual, bulging in all the wrong places. Making her even more disgusting, like other country folk living in the northeast (Isan), she was addicted to chewing the slightly narcotic betel nut. I speculated that she masticated the concoction to minimize the effects of bad teeth or gum problems. A poor imitation of Bloody Mary in James Michener's first book, *Tales of the South Pacific*, Leck's lips and mouth were deeply stained dark red from constant and prolonged use of the slightly narcotic berry. <sup>54</sup>

Capping her ludicrous appearance, a disgusting looking wad of areca nut and lime, mixed with turmeric and wrapped in a cigar-like green siri leaf, bobbed in her mouth as she struggled

---

<sup>53</sup> Because of the presence of three colleges, the Boston area was an excellent recruiting source for potential Marine officer candidates.

<sup>54</sup> In past years black or stained teeth were prized as a sign of beauty, but the habit was not as prevalent later among city folk.

to talk. Periodically, like a tobacco chewing baseball player, "Bloody" would project a soggy mess of the nasty mixture into a yellow porcelainized chamber pot. Now I realized the sources of blood-red stains along the roadside and other public places. Aside from Leck's charming habit and appearance, she was a nice person.

Fairy initially introduced Leck as her sister. They were so different in appearance that I could not believe this. Later I learned that Leck was not a relative. The term sister was a generalized term employed by women to describe almost any female friend. As the two women gossiped in increasingly loud voices, I had the distinct impression they were about to engage in fisticuffs. But they were not squaring off. Soon they were shouting and laughing at one another. It was confusing. I did not believe either one was deaf, and could only conclude that it was a peculiarity of the tonal language.

Fairy was easy to get along with, and we bonded well. Although the subject was casually broached, initially there was no sexual activity in our relationship. While in Udorn, Fairy was living with her retired parents--her father had been a Thai army major--and insisted on her being home at a decent hour. Citing a need to observe Thai sensitivity, she was frank about maintaining a suitable image. It was all show, for in a small town where everyone knew the other's business, gossip was intense, and there were few private places available for a private liaison. Aside from being a desirable woman, she was a compartmentalized person, believing that everything had its proper time and place. I did not consider the denial coy or a rebuff, rather a whim. Respecting her decision, I did not push the issue. Although I could feel sexual tension building, I knew that it was only a matter of time until we would be mutually

enjoying one another's bodies. To this end, we began formulating plans for a trip to Bangkok, where, lost in the city bustle, there would be sufficient time to properly explore each other.

In the interim, there was an ample supply of willing girls of the night at the Jutebox to offer pleasant temporary relief. With requirements for conversation limited, usually all that was required for a temporary liaison was a query in pigeon English, "*Hey honey, you want go my ban?*" Supposedly kept in the Air America family, the unsophisticated young maidens, not far removed from jungle villages, were fiercely protected and passed around within our group with the intention of avoiding disease. Far from being commercial objects of the flesh found in the hard-core bars of the big city, the petite delights were friendly, did not demand payment, and usually relied on our generosity to survive. In a hot country where people did what came naturally, casual sex was considered normal. For a single man, it was a most satisfactory arrangement.

## **GARDNER**

With the northeast long neglected, the Thai government, possibly prodded by the U.S., finally began taking steps to gather information and monitor communist border crossings and insurgency throughout the region. To support this program and fill the void in our program created by the Geneva sanctions, in addition to supplying Thai Border Police posts, our daily missions included resupply of U.S. Army Strategic Command--STRACOM or what we called STARCOM--personnel in the field.

Responsible for strategic forward radio relay in the region, the main STARCOM unit was located on Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) property, a short distance from Thaharn Thanon--soldier's, or airport road. Numerous manned relay sites were

scattered throughout the northeast. Without proper roads or dedicated air support, the signal unit relied on our assets to transport parts, groceries, and bi-monthly pay. We had other ties to STARCOM. The unit processed our mail through the Army Post Office (APO) system, but mail delivery depended on the "daily" New Zealand Bristol flight and the whims of the clerk in charge of dispensing mail.

A small Post Exchange (PX) was collocated in the same building as the post office. Depending on what was available, we were allowed to purchase toilet articles, soup, and canned food--Beanie Weenies, Vienna sausage, etc.--that we could carry upcountry for emergencies, or when hunger prevailed. To keep in touch with the world, slightly dated Stars and Stripes newspapers were available. Supplies were funneled through the Philippine commissary system, and, as none of us rated PX privileges, the arrangement with Air America was strictly a decision of the local base commander.

Following more than a week of idleness, on Sunday the 14th, I was assigned a STARCOM supply mission with Captain Dan Gardner and Flight Mechanic C. Decosta in Hotel Bravo. Gardner had been hired from an HRS (S-55) squadron in Hawaii, and he had considerable problems transitioning and checking out on the H-34. At the time, warm bodies were needed quickly, so Abadie had no firm policy about corporate headquarters sending him a decent pilot as a new hire.

Gardner, a former Marine, had a sullied reputation among the pilot and Flight Mechanic group: he was known as "Dangerous Dan." The name stemmed from his eccentric actions, noted by all hands. At times of his choosing, he would tighten the collective friction knob on the throttle and lever, then climb down from the cockpit into the cargo compartment to obtain a drink of

water, urinate out the cabin door, or merely relax on a passenger seat. This would normally be acceptable with a second pilot in the cockpit, but at this time pilots flew solo. He would often sleep while in a cruise mode to a site, and place all his faith in the ASE equipment. Because of wind drift, this foolishness would cause anxious moments while attempting to resume the proper track.

Dan's pejorative nickname was likely derived from many sources, but primarily from Carl Diggs, a six-foot four-inch Temporary Flight Mechanic legend, who could singlehandedly lift a fifty-five-gallon drum of aviation fuel and pour it directly into the chamois covered funnel. The word was out on Gardner, and Carl, a senior mechanic, was the only person who would volunteer to fly with him. The flight was a disaster. Late in the day Gardner was flying above a solid undercast in an area north of Paksane. Running low on fuel, he managed to find a landing spot on top of a peak sticking out of the clouds. The crew was obliged to spend the night on the mountain. Later, after recovery in Udorn, Diggs was heard to say, "*I ain't never goin to fly with dat man no more.*" <sup>55</sup>

It did not take long for me to understand that Dan was a loose cannon. In contrast to others I had flown with, he was not

---

<sup>55</sup> EW Knight Email.

John Fonburg Letter.

Mike Marshall Email.

CJ Abadie Email. "*Dan received the name because some pilots thought he was dangerous. The condition was always a part of flying. There was always someone pilots labeled as unsafe and it is sometimes not accurate, and just one guy's observation of a single occasion which gets put into a general statement, and if he tells it often enough to the right audience, it becomes fact.*" [This is correct and the basis of advertising campaigns, and in politics. Tell it often.]

Author Note: For more insight into Gardner's character and quirks, see Book One, *Genesis*.

a talker, and had to be grudgingly drawn into conversation. Since he did not allow me to sit in the right seat and fly, I had adequate time to observe him. And I disliked what I saw.

Showing total disregard for altitude, airspeed, and technique, his basic air work was horrible. It was difficult to believe that I was flying with a former Marine aviator. He was rough on the controls and failed to pay attention to cruise altitude. Dan, if he ever knew, had forgotten the old adage, "Treat your helicopter like it was a woman."

When we reached the Echo Four Alpha area, without benefit of a reconnaissance, he placed Bravo in a screaming, uncontrolled dive toward the deck that caused the machine to shudder and my rear end to pucker. What did this guy have against the H-34? It appeared that he hated the machine and did not particularly care about what he was doing. Then, without even a hover, he plunked the aircraft down hard on a low hummock. This was equally disconcerting, for the ground was covered with high grass, rendering any potential object in it invisible. Landing at the spot was unnecessary and ill conceived, for there were other better landing zones nearby.

Following shutdown, I rushed below to inspect the underside of the aircraft. As suspected, there was a stump directly under Bravo's belly. Gardner had been lucky that day. By mere inches, he had missed spearing a hole in the underside, perhaps penetrating a fuel tank and stranding us in the field. When informed about the near miss, Dan shrugged and seemed unconcerned. Were others so blasé? Such an attitude and total disregard for his aircraft and crew was difficult for me to fathom.

There was a long wait for the passenger, so, hoping to avoid the direct sun and heat of the day, we climbed into the

cabin section. Increasingly, I wished that I had brought along some water. As we lounged on the uncomfortable bucket seats and minimized activity, the introvert began to open up a little. Breaking long periods of silence, he allowed that he had studied criminal justice at Hawaii University, but flunked out and joined the Marine Corps. He also had the dubious distinction of being the only current helicopter pilot wounded in Laos. Toward the end of January, he had been shot in the wrist thirty miles northeast of Vientiane. He did not divulge further details about the incident, and I did not pressure him for additional information. Despite Gardner's peculiar personality, at the end of the day I felt that I knew him a little better (five plus thirty hours).

## **DESTEFANO**

The next day Guy Destefano and I were assigned to support the Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP). The elite para-military organization, formed in 1955, was funded through USOM and administered by the CIA. Until that time, the mountainous border regions surrounding the seventy-one provinces comprising Thailand had never been properly patrolled for illicit trade or communist incursions.<sup>56</sup> Even as of this date some BPP camps surrounding the south and western portions of Sayaboury Province were just starting to be activated. Listening posts were established to gather intelligence and monitor subversive and bandit movement along the northeastern border. Normally supplied by Air America C-46 and C-47 airdrops from Bangkok, occasional helicopter flights to exchange personnel or deliver fragile

---

<sup>56</sup> For an enlightening history regarding the evolution of the Thai Border Police see: Thomas Lobe, *United States National Security Policy and Aid to the Thailand Police*, Monograph series in world affairs, Volume 14, Book-2.



radios and parts that might be damaged in a drop were now necessary. As our program in Laos was now in limbo, and since Thai helicopters were scarce, our services were utilized.

In the early 1950s Customer Bill Lair had been instrumental in initiating BPP training. Now that fighting had ceased in Laos, he and Pat Landry oversaw daily field operations, and intensified efforts to secure the northeast from insurgency.

We launched early in Hotel Lima for the Nong Khai base (Sierra-22). The mission would ultimately require a change of ships. Constructed with thousands of moving parts constantly attempting to wear each other out, one never knew when a machine would break down. This time, because of a small oil cooler leak, we had to return to Udorn and exchange Lima for Hotel Alpha (one hour plus fifteen minutes).

After another preflight and transference of our equipment, we returned to Nong Khai for an assignment that took us to the Thai-Lao border on the west side of Sayaboury Province. The two flights we made to the outposts extended our fuel endurance to the maximum. Located high in the mountains and lodged deep in the jungle, the LZs were dwarfed by intimidating terrain. The region was so rough that we might never have found the sites had not our Thai guide been chatting on his hand-held radio to BPP personnel on the ground.

The camps must have been new. Freshly cut bamboo and other refuse surrounded the landing areas, creating such danger to the helicopters that a low hover was all that could be accomplished at one landing zone. Except for children at a leper village on a typhoon-devastated island off of Okinawa, I had never seen such happy smiles as I did from the isolated troopers we supplied that day. The two flights, although tiring, were interesting,

and a welcome relief from the mounting tension and boredom of Udorn.

Throughout the long day, the well-padded redhead, a welcome contrast to "Dangerous Dan," had been a delightful cockpit partner. The former Marine's dry humor, ready wit, and total disdain for Udorn management kept me in stitches. However, Destefano's reputation preceded him. Like other padders of flight time, he was not above "taking a little black" in the logbook (eight plus thirty). In addition, as a big winner at the wild poker games, he was under suspicion of cheating. It was obvious from the New Englander's banter that he was not in this business for the long term. How different each pilot I flew with seemed. No pilot was a pea in a pod. But generally, everyone professed to have similar goals; some to get out of debt, others to amass a stake, to attend school, or to create a future business.

## **COX**

Barry Cox was not a typical helicopter pilot. Besides being able to spell helicopter correctly, he was much too intelligent for the business. This was confirmed when he indicated that he could read, write, and speak a little Thai. I was duly impressed. "Fighter," as some called him, could read street and storefront signs, written in the confusing script that most Americans referred to as squiggles and worms. I was not awfully good at learning foreign languages, and could only dream that someday I might do the same. "Fighter" was another short timer. The tall, wiry redhead's primary goal was to return to Connecticut and study law. I considered this a worthy ambition. Perhaps I could eventually do something similar, but, for the present, I had no other goal than to earn money--a great deal of

money--to achieve financial independence. With my limited talents, experience, and education, Air America appeared the only company in the world where I might be able to quickly fulfill this goal.

On the 16th, Barry and I drove Hotel Victor to Nong Khai to accomplish additional BPP work and conduct a penetration into Laos, while circumventing the Vientiane-based ICC watchdog unit. (Four plus thirty.)

It seemed that appearance of our green helicopters in Laos triggered more animosity in the enemy camp than any other aircraft. In contrast to silver cargo planes, H-34s were high visibility devices associated with all the aspects of combat. Extremely noisy, flying at relatively low altitudes, they were easily observed. Adding to the animosity, in the recent past they had been used to aggressively pursue Royal Lao Government aims in the factional conflict. The helicopters were universally recognized as military hardware, associated with the U.S. Marines and war work. For these reasons, and not to overtly violate the Geneva Accords, critical resupply missions had to be performed clandestinely. It marked a weird time in the conflict. Even the English version newspaper, the Bangkok Post, reported that elements of the North Vietnamese Army had never departed Laos on the appointed date. Therefore, it was heartening to note that our team was still willing to participate, and not allow supply and movement to be one-sided.

### **LIAR-LIAR PANTS ON FIRE**

Because of the minimum number of transportation vehicles, distribution of daily flight schedules was still restricted to a few hotels and two or three compounds containing flight crews. Since moving from the Pratch to Singwa's house, the closest

schedule for us was posted at the Air America facility. Except for bugs and dust, I had to contend with on the main road, I did not mind driving to the Air America facility, as I could obtain a bite to eat, chat with peers, and perhaps obtain the rumor of the day.

Every day toward evening the flight schedule was displayed on a cork bulletin board outside the Chief Pilot's office. Operations was still located in the original barracks-like structure between the disused tennis court and a sister building that was slated to become the new operations area when work was completed on the long-promised recreation building.<sup>57</sup>

It was dark when I entered the empty screen porch. Outside, people were milling around the shadowy compound talking, laughing, and forming plans for the evening. Under the subdued light of a naked light bulb suspended from the ceiling, I scanned the short schedule and failed to see my name. This was understandable. I had already logged sixty-six hours, and other First Officers still had to fly. Any more time would boost me over the magic number of seventy hours into overtime. Short of a miracle, this was not going to happen. Therefore, with STO on the 20th, I suspected I was through flying for the month.

Suddenly there was a loud explosion in the courtyard. Shocked, I wheeled around toward the noise. Seeing nothing but dark shadows and hearing titters and giggles, I assumed someone had tossed a cherry bomb. When I turned back toward the bulletin

---

<sup>57</sup> Tennis court: It was never used as such. Cement was probably bought or obtained by cumshaw from the contract construction outfit. Wayne Knight Email. This was only used as a volleyball court and was not initially paved. Jungle rules prevailed on the grassy area. Slamming over the net and net contact was allowed. The top strand on the net was reinforced with a 3/8-inch steel cable, creating some terrible cases of cable rash. Wayne fell through one of the small pit water drains and still bears a scar from the damage. Out of my league, I would not play with the big bruisers.

board, I faced an angry and stern-faced Captain Abadie. Also startled by the noise, he had charged from his office and, unable to spot the offender in the darkness, challenged me to tell him who had thrown the bomb. I did not have a clue as to the perpetrator and told him so. It was my habit to smile a lot. Perhaps the elfin grin in my face or something else about my demeanor prompted the query. Protesting once again that I had not seen the offender, although I had a vague suspicion that Pinky Eaton was behind the blast, only seemed to anger the boss more.

Staring at me through his dark, penetrating eyes, he shouted, "*Casterlin you are lying!*" Then, without waiting for my reaction, he shrugged, whirled around, and stomped back into his office. Obviously, it never occurred to him that I could not see in the dark either. I stiffened at the outburst. I was extremely offended at being called a liar, and considered the various options available to me. Liar? I had been raised in a home that did not condone lying. Even my own Father never accused me of that. Also, as an Eagle Scout, I had always adhered to Boy Scout tenets concerning prevarication. Even if I wanted to lie, the fabrication would have been written all over my face.

History supported this assumption. There was an early incident at Training and Test Regiment (T&T), Quantico, Virginia, when my platoon Sergeant Steigerwald, whom I liked and highly respected, began berating me during a platoon inspection regarding some stray, offensive looking nostril hairs. As the over-the-hill Gunny pressed his florid face close to mine in order to emphasize his argument and create further intimidation, I noticed that ugly black hairs flowed over his large, bulbous nose. The situation was ludicrous. My first reaction was to laugh, but that would have made a bad situation even worse. As

the old boy continued to harass me in front of my peers, I stifled all desire to chuckle and became outwardly serious.<sup>58</sup>

Prior to attending the Officer Candidate Course (OCC), I had seen the Jack Webb movie, *The DI*, which revealed several questionable methods employed in training to whip raw recruits into cohesive fighting units. By the time I was being trained, the unfortunate and well publicized 8 April 1956 Ribbon Creek drownings at Paris Island had severely limited Marine drill instructors' training options, particularly any direct corporal punishment. As college graduates, aware that intimidation was restricted to verbal abuse, we were obliged to go along with the program, but at times such harassment would chafe at my sensitivities.

As my mood changed from levity to anger, I must have displayed what I was thinking on my face, for the sergeant sneered sarcastically at me, *Candidate Casterlin, what are you looking at? Do you hate me.?*

Trying my best to remain calm, I replied in my most assertive candidate voice, "No, sir!"

Staring me directly in the face, as if he had preplanned his response, the Gunny cooed in a cajoling voice, "*Casterlin, then why are you looking at me with fuck you written all over your face?*" His interpretation of the moment was spot on. He had called the spade a spade.

As I had done during the Quantico incident, I swallowed my pride and departed the compound. I was well aware that I would lose any confrontation with the chief pilot, particularly with a

---

<sup>58</sup> Although not as intense as the initial training of enlisted recruits at Paris Island, it was the Quantico drill instructors' intention to intimidate us officer candidates, so that we would conform to the Marine Corps way.

Company-oriented person who was looking for excuses to terminate excess pilots.

I left the porch shaking my head, confused about the chap I worked for. Management by intimidation did not appear to be a proper tool to employ for grown men. I had not figured Abadie out yet, and as he would not let anyone close to him, perhaps never would. Ab was an enigma. Perhaps his policy was, you have to get along with me, but I do not have to do the same with you. How could such a person properly run any organization and gain respect of his people if he behaved like this and thought everyone lied to him? Perhaps this is why I had constantly heard so many detrimental things said about him recently. Moreover, if this was the treatment we could expect, no wonder so many people were visibly and vocally unhappy.

## **STO**

Current Company policy, depending on the number of days in a month, ensured each Company pilot six or seven consecutive days off the flight schedule. Referred to as scheduled time off, it initially had been conceived by management to encourage pilots to vacate the sterile atmosphere of Udorn and improve their morale. Lately, with abundant time off the flight schedule, pilots were congregating in the compound and office, asking questions that could not be answered, and generally disrupting the status quo. Therefore, STO served a dual purpose of boosting employee morale and getting them out of management's hair. <sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Wayne Knight Email. "At least in name, STO had not been initiated when he was hired. Because of heavy flying, time off was awarded on an ad hoc basis. In 1962 he had breaks from flying during February, April, May, June, and July. Some were taken in Bangkok. He took eleven days off in September to get married."

The Company did not care where one went on STO as long as they knew where you were should a hasty recall be necessary. With back-to-back time off--the last week of a month and the first of another--it was possible to journey to CONUS on one of the world's international commercial air carriers. As a member of the International Air Transport Association (IATA), Civil Air Transport rated many reciprocal agreements with other airlines that afforded deeply discounted tickets. Using a ninety percent discount agreement between CAT and German carrier Lufthansa earlier in the month, Bill Zeitler travelled on first class from Bangkok to New York and back to Bangkok. The round trip only cost him 240 dollars. Upon return, he reported that the flight had been wonderful. Great food was served, including beluga sturgeon caviar, quality booze, and everything else imaginable. I was tempted to take the journey, but because of money considerations and checkout policy, it was a little too soon to go home. Perhaps next year, when and if I was upgraded to Captain, I could take advantage of the good deal.

We were also allowed free travel within the CAT system. The Convair 880 flew to Japan, Korea, Okinawa, Taiwan, Philippines, and the very popular port of Hong Kong. Because of travel problems to and from Udorn and the necessity to make quick connections, coordination and close attention to detail was required in scheduling flights. The little time off available to us usually restricted one to a Hong Kong trip, and the efficient people who worked at the CAT office on the corner of Pat Pong and Suriwongse Roads diligently attempted to make this possible.

For those who only desired a change from the dust and provincial nature of Udorn, Bangkok was the preferred choice for time off. Easily accessible by rail, it was a modern city



catering to tourists, one that was not too expensive, and one that afforded most Western amenities.

Since Fairy was restrained from intimacy in Udorn by perceived parental obligations, she agreed to accompany me to Bangkok, show me the sights, and consummate our ripening relationship. I was convinced that this was the right thing to do. Also, following a relatively good month of flying and the firecracker incident, I felt that life in Udorn was closing in on me, and I was ready for diversion. To his credit, I agreed with Abadie's fatherly advice, "*That in order to survive in the Thai environment, one needed a woman for diversion,*" was spot on target.

Following a two-baht (ten cents) samlor ride to the train station, Fairy purchased two second class tickets for an overnight ride on the state-owned wood burning train.<sup>60</sup> The saying that you get what you pay for was correct. Although inexpensive, this proved a gross mistake in judgement, for it entailed sitting up all night on a hard-wooden bench. Unable to find a comfortable position, sleep was impossible, as the ancient machine roughly rocked mile after mile south over the narrow-gauge track.

Morning mercifully arrived. Following a breakfast of runny eggs, toast, butter, jam, and Ovaltine, liberally laced with condensed milk, I revived sufficiently to observe the countryside whisking by. Like a movie film, the landscape rolled endlessly before me. Lush was the only adjective I could conjure

---

<sup>60</sup> Traditionally one baht—a nickel—would be sufficient to take an individual anywhere in town, but the train station traditionally required double that amount.



Udorn train station.  
Author Collection.

to describe the scenery: trees, jungle-like growth, and canals seemed to tie everything together. It presented a remarkable contrast to the arid land and sparse vegetation and trees in my sector of the northeast.

We arrived early, pulling into a concrete unloading platform in the high domed Hualamphong rail terminal, located on Rama 4 Road, deep in the heart of the city. Certainly not Asian architecture, the structure had been designed and built by German engineers. Appearing like a huge glass and stone Quonset hut, it looked very different from the fortress-like façade of New York City's Grand Central Station.

To ensure that we did not sneak on the train at the Don Muang, Bang Sue, or Sam Sen stations located a little further north, we had to part with our punched tickets at a guarded turnstile located between two kiosks. The procedure did not appear efficient, but provided menial employment for someone.

While we proceeded along the long concrete platform toward the front of the building, I began experiencing a sinking feeling. As a result of the sleepless night, I felt dreadful--funky, sweaty, and dopey--like I had been on a binge. I made a mental note to never book the second-class torture session again.

I did not have any experience with the vagaries of Bangkok taxi drivers, so Fairy, who was an aggressive person, dickered for the ride to the hotel. After obligatory bargaining--installed meters were not used--for a reasonable fare, we boarded one of the thousands of small Japanese-manufactured vehicles for a short trip to the western part of town. While madly dashing down the crowded streets, the driver and Fairy maintained a continuous dialogue in the tedious tonal language. Not knowing what was being said was bad enough, but to one

feeling unwell, and not accustomed to a constant barrage of Thai, the sound grated on my nerves. Despite the early hour, it was already hot when we arrived at the hotel. I was happy to hop out of the cab, as the under part of me had already begun sticking to the plastic seat covering.

The Royal, a Chinese style hotel, was located in the old part of the city, far removed from the more glittering tourist areas, that ensured us considerable privacy for our long-awaited tryst. Fairy was casual checking in at the reception desk. It almost seemed like she had done this before. Anything but luxurious, the hotel had a small lobby and coffee shop. The high ceiling rooms were equipped with whirling fans on long poles, like those installed in the Pratch. I had lodged in nicer places, but the Royal was cheap and adequate.

The next few days included a whirlwind of sex and tourist activities that exceeded my expectations, tended to wear me out, and provided far more local color than I could hope to attain by myself.

## **HISTORY AND SIGHTSEEING**

The Chao Phraya River flowed to the sea not far from the hotel. Called the River of Kings, the lengthy waterway wound through and separated Bangkok from Thonburi. Both locations were originally trading posts guarding the approach to the legendary city of Ayutthaya located forty-seven miles upriver. The river, along with others with origins in the northern reaches of the country, irrigated and annually replenished soil of the central Thai plains that contained the country's major rice and fruit growing areas.

In 1882, King Ramathibodi--shortened to Rama 1--the first modern hereditary monarch, was a former successful military

commander, who was chosen by leading nobles to lead the people. For strategic and esthetic reasons, he began relocating the Thonburi capital from the west bank of the Chao Phraya to a small, flat Chinese fishing village called Wild Plums.<sup>61</sup>

After digging a canal to create a protective island, thousands of Cambodian and Laotian captives from previous military campaigns, built another canal and a huge fortified wall with bricks removed from Ayutthaya's ruins. Two years were required for construction of a complex of buildings and monuments, including Wat Pra Kaew, where the revered Emerald Buddha was placed. Only then did the king order construction of the Grand Palace, and renamed the village Khrung Thep, or City of Angels, as the former capital at Ayutthaya had been known.

Both cities were crisscrossed with intersecting tree-lined canals, which, in the absence of roads, were used for transportation and trade. The watercourses provided the life of the city, giving Bangkok the tourist name of "Venice of the East." Filled with brown, mucky water, the canals were used for everything relating to human activity: bathing, swimming, washing clothes, and other mundane purposes. They also provided a natural drainage for annual floodwaters, and as a waste disposal that dumped effluent into the Gulf of Siam, twenty-five miles southeast of the city.<sup>62</sup>

With the advent of modern roads, the canals gradually assumed a backseat in the life of the city and its people. Becoming archaic, they interfered with modern progress and were destined to be destroyed. Lately, the Bangkok Post contained

---

<sup>61</sup> Originally only foreigners called the city Bangkok. Bang after the word town; kok plum-olive.

<sup>62</sup> Information culled from various books and publications. Steven Van Beek, ed. *Bangkok* (Hong Kong: APA Publications, 1989). Alex Waugh. *Bangkok* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971).

numerous articles offering pros and cons of plans to backfill the cooling waterways and remove majestic shade trees in order to widen arteries believed important to city commerce.

In order to obtain a taste of the city's water life, Fairy recommended an early morning floating market trip. Since she was an experienced tour guide, I deferred to her judgement. But when she said we would have to arise before dawn, recalling the unpleasant train trip, I wondered about the astuteness of her judgement.

Early the next morning we made our way to the main ferry dock where, to accommodate early morning traffic, several long-tailed, canopied boats bobbed in the murky water. To enhance flexibility, and see more in the allotted time, she hired a boat solely for our use. Surprised, but not questioning her motives, I noted that her haggling netted us a vessel for fifty baht (two dollars and fifty cents) an hour. In contrast to other craft that were loaded to the gill with elderly tourists, we were soon put-putting down the dark-colored river in reasonable comfort.

Boats and local people congregated at the designated morning market. Fruit, vegetables, other produce, and consumables were sold from small pirogue-type vessels one might expect to see plying Louisiana bayous. Propelled by straw-hatted women and young girls, the narrow, flat-bottomed boats were piled high with colorful wares. Busy and chaotic was the only description I could apply to the scene. Darting here and there, the ladies seemed to accomplish their tasks without accident or incident. They were always smiling, as if they really enjoyed their work.

It was indeed different from anything I had previously experienced.



Monitored by a Thai traffic policeman, tourist boats ply Bangkok's numerous waterways. This is the type vessel I rented for fifty baht per hour to visit the morning market, Wat Arun, and the Royal Barge sheds on the Chao Phraya River.

*National Geographic*, Volume 132, #1, July 1967.

Leaving the hubbub of activity, we continued downriver to visit Wat Arun, an imposing 200-foot multi-towered religious shrine on the west bank that combined the aspects of Buddhist, Hindu, and Cambodian architecture. The wat, completed in the early 1800s, consisted of four pavilions at the base depicting the important periods in Lord Buddha's life: his birth, enlightenment, gathering the first converts, and his death.

The Temple of the Dawn was aptly named, as affixed to the main tower were countless shards of multi-colored pottery, porcelain, and glass that brilliantly reflected rays of the early morning sun. Like a multi-windowed high-rise building, the bouncing rays spectacularly distinguished the revered landmark for miles.

At this early hour, I was the only foreign tourist at the site. Always a museum hound, I spent time examining various nooks and crannies, including the rear portion of the wat. Upon return to the front, Fairy and the curator were beside themselves laughing at me. Confused, I inquired about their mirth. Apparently, with my curious nature, I was the first and only Farang they had ever seen walk to the rear of the wat. Normally, tourists just looked at the front, snapped a picture, oohed and ahed, and quickly departed. Obviously these two people did not know me very well. I relished a good laugh as well as anyone, but I was beginning to notice that Thais were habitually amused by foreigners' ways, and enjoyed poking fun at them. This peculiarity seemed to be contradictory in a country that prided itself on politeness and courtesy. Admittedly, I still had a lot to learn about Thai people. Therefore, without further mention of the incident, I shrugged off the perceived slight as another cultural difference.



From Wat Arun we proceeded slowly upriver against a gentle current to the Royal Barge sheds, where elaborate ceremonial long boats were stored. These were only used once a year on 25 October during the procession of Tod Krathin, the laying down of the Holy Cloth. In a few days, along with thousands lining the Chao Praya banks, we would watch the ancient pageant as numerous boats floated downriver to Wat Arun, where the King and Queen would venerate the attending monks with gifts and new saffron robes. Onboard the gaily flagged barges, hundreds of the King's subjects celebrated the occasion with loud music and laughter.

The Royal Barge floated in the center of the spectacle. The boat was 164 feet long with a towering carved seven-headed Naga (snake) perched on the bow. Fitted with gold-colored oars, the craft was propelled by a unit of a hundred men dressed in period scarlet coats. The monarchs sat amid-ship on an elevated throne. From all this, it was easy to discern that Thais loved uniforms and pageantry.

Thais loved their monarchy. The youthful King Bhumibol Adulyadej had been born in Massachusetts. Ninth Rama in the Chakari Dynasty, he ruled his country as only a titular head of state. The evolving Thai society, after a bloodless coup in 1932, adopted a constitutional monarchy patterned on the English parliamentary system. In reality, Thailand now functioned under military martial law, and was firmly controlled by strong man Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat, whose brother I had met earlier in the year at Mukdahan on the bank of the Mekong River. Wholeheartedly supported by USG, Field Marshall Sarit was perceived an ardent communist hater, who delighted in conducting public executions of suspected perpetrators or government dissenters in town squares of the northeastern provinces.

Reputed to be the uncle of Lao Commander in Chief Major General Phoumi Nosavan, Sarit had led another bloodless coup in September 1957 and wrested control of the country from long ruling Prime Minister Pibul (Pibun) Songkhgram. When Pibul and police director General Phao Sriyanoda, Sarit's arch rival for power, fled the country during a turbulent time of political strife, Sarit transferred many of the U.S.-equipped police force's assets to the army. To consolidate his grip on the country, Sarit appointed his crony General Thanom Kitikhachorn to be Minister of Defense, and General Praphas Charusathien to be Minister of the Interior. <sup>63</sup>

By January 1958, Thanom had become Prime Minister, but elements in the cabinet, concerned about Sarit usurping absolute control, planned a counter coup. Before this came to fruition in November, the general staged a coup. He retained power and was not challenged again. <sup>64</sup>

With such a recent violent history, it appeared to me that Thai politics came "out of the barrel of a gun." I had heard from some of our pilots that police and army hierarchy were still at odds over leadership, with the army currently tipping the scales in its favor. Considering all the dire rumors, I had not seen any tangible evidence of military rule. Contrary to what was occurring in Vientiane, there were no soldiers on Bangkok street corners. In my narrow view, there was no curfew, or overt oppression, and the people seemed happy. Therefore, I decided that as long as I was not directly affected, I would not be concerned. It was also important to remember that I was a guest in Thailand and must adhere to its laws and politics.

---

<sup>63</sup> Following Sarit's death in 1963, these men's names will appear in later books as principals in Thai history.

<sup>64</sup> Thai histories.

Besides, political maneuvering almost anywhere was strange, and Asian politics were far beyond ordinary Western comprehension.

The remainder of our waking days were consumed by eating, attending first run movies in huge Cinerama screen theaters, or browsing jewelry and silk shops. We also visited various popular temples scattered throughout the city where I learned to Wai properly, light joss sticks, and "make merit," by placing gold leaf squares on Buddhist statues.

It had been an outstanding trip encompassing a little sex, a little education, and a substantial exposure to the local color and culture of Bangkok. At the end of the STO I was tired, a bit confused about my feelings for Fairy, and reluctant to return to the narrow confines of Udorn Town. Aware that we had only scratched the surface of the ancient civilization, I was already planning the next trip to Bangkok.

### **GEOPOLITICAL CRISIS**

During my week in Bangkok, I had been so busy and isolated from Western influence that I missed press releases regarding what was called the Cuban Missile Crisis. Unknown to me before I left for Bangkok, the world was rapidly approaching the brink of a nuclear war, perpetrated by blundering superpowers and the audacity of the Soviet Union.

Upon my return to Udorn, I was briefed on the current situation by Spillis and Estes, who were seriously concerned. This was understandable, as both my roommates were from Florida, and had family or relations close to a potential conflict. However, I also considered the implications of a nuclear holocaust on the eastern seaboard and my family in New Jersey. The thought was chilling. Should "the balloon go up," certainly New York City, the financial hub of America, would be targeted.

The waiting and uncertainty of the situation was disconcerting. If hundreds of offensive nukes began flying, we would probably be temporarily untouched in Southeast Asia. But it was sobering to consider that eventually, perhaps like that portrayed in Nevil Shute's Armageddon novel and movie, *On the Beach*, nuclear radiation fallout from winds circling the earth would inevitably affect everyone. If this did not kill the planet's inhabitants, then prolonged nuclear winter would complete the job. <sup>65</sup>

From past acquaintances and experiences, I knew a little about Cuba, and considered how our relationship with the country had changed over the years. While I was attending Duke University, Dictator Fulgencio Batista, with U.S. approval, ruled the island paradise with an iron hand. Through some of my wrestling friends, I became acquainted with sons of wealthy Cuban landowners who were studying at the university. They bragged that to keep the peace, their fathers overtly supported Batista, while secretly funneling money to the emerging leader, Fidel Castro, who was gathering supporters in the Sierra Maestra Mountains. Generous beyond comprehension, the students invited a few of us lesser mortals to their homes during a Christmas break. Poor as a church mouse, I did not have the small amount of airfare required, but those who took advantage of the offer talked glowingly about the hospitality and lavish lifestyle of the Havana rich.

As the increasingly popular nationalist leader Fidel Castro gained strength among the people, the excitement of the guerrilla movement caused some of us more militaristic types in

---

<sup>65</sup> I later learned that individuals who had completed their military obligation and were awaiting separation were temporarily frozen in place. Hired by Air America in 1963, Marius Burke was one of these persons.

In retrospect, I was fortunate to have been released early from my regular service obligation.

the Kappa Sigma Fraternity to lust after adventure. Consisting of a diverse group, a few in the fraternity were Korean War veterans attending the university on the GI bill; others were Platoon Leader Candidates (PLC) for Marine commissions, and a few like me, bored to death with school, were drawn to ventures that might provide temporary relief from the mundane existence.

One evening, my non-academic, usually "smoked up" roommate "stuttering" Al Williams entered our room with a wild, but interesting, proposal for running guns and ammunition to Castro in Cuba. I thought, with Al's flair for dramatics, it might have been a pipe dream hatched in a dingy Durham ratskeller or chili house. When confronted, he maintained that the plan was legitimate, but replete with cloak and dagger implications. The scheme entailed driving fast World War Two PT type boats down the inland waterway to Florida and making a ninety-mile dash with the goods to remote parts of the island. With only sketchy details of such an undertaking, for several days we discussed the pros and cons of the risks and rewards of the potential operation. Eventually, when no tangible offer or further information was forthcoming, reality of the façade surfaced and the idea faded into the dustbin of history.

Then later, while undergoing flight training at NAS Pensacola, Florida, I met a few Cuban naval personnel attending the same training. Before we finished the course, Castro had marched into Havana and deposed Batista. It soon became evident that he had deceived everyone and was exposed as a communist. For reasons I did not fully understand, our government decided to allow the small number of Cuban students to complete training. Of course, as the last to complete the program, they achieved more than their share of notoriety and good-natured ribbing.

During May 1960 I received my coveted "Wings of Gold," along with Octavio Soto, a particularly friendly and well-liked chap. Over the course of training we had discussed politics relating to the Cuban situation. Soto appeared neutral and as confused over the state of affairs as the rest of us. Knowing that he was slated to return to his homeland, we jokingly advised him to paint his propeller spinner bright red in recognition should hostilities erupt between our two countries.<sup>66</sup>

I saw a small part of Cuba when the former Jeep carrier, the USS *Boxer*, sailed into Guantanamo Bay in the fall of 1960. Viewed from the flight deck, the island was beautiful. Peninsulas, covered by green hills, pinched pale blue waterways sheltering remote coves and lagoons. As we ploughed our way toward the isolated Naval base, I thought that wonderful skin-diving opportunities must exist here.

With these more pleasant memories still fresh in my mind, I wondered how top world leaders could have possibly stumbled into this dire situation. I thought it certainly must have been bad judgement exercised after the Bay of Pigs defeat that convinced Castro and feisty Khrushchev that they could get away with such boldness at our expense.

Then, during the darkest hour, Jack Kennedy resolutely stiffened his back. Somewhat redeeming himself after the discouraging Bay of Pigs disaster, he ordered an effective naval and air blockade. He insisted that the Soviets dismantle the

---

<sup>66</sup> Octavio Soto: No one had to shoot Soto down. In the 1980s, while Chief Pilot of Helicopter Charter in Kenner, Louisiana, I received a resume from an Octavio Soto, who was seeking employment flying helicopters in the Gulf of Mexico. The date he graduated from the Naval Training Command was exactly the same as mine. From his application, I learned that he had retired after a career in the U.S. Navy. Therefore, I surmised that Soto had not returned to Cuba after flight school, or had escaped and returned to the USA. Unfortunately, I did not have an opening for him.

missile launch bases and remove all nuclear devices from Cuban soil. After a few days of nervous posturing by both sides, the immediate threat to the world appeared to be over. The Soviet bluff and attempt to impose their power and will on our hemisphere had not worked.

The Monroe Doctrine remained intact. At great loss of face to other communist countries, the Soviets began to dismantle and ship their missiles back to the motherland.<sup>67</sup>

## LAOS

Lao political dealings were also beginning to wax sour. There were reports from the leftist faction that Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, by agreeing to continued airdrops for displaced and starving Meo refugees, was accused of moving closer to the Rightist faction. Souvanna had been Prime Minister for a year, and although his solitary power base consisted of Kong Le's Neutralists, he recognized the government's right-wing assembly as the primary political authority.

It was a period in which opposing political parties jockeyed for power through intense propaganda campaigns and influence peddling. Moreover, seeds were sown for the beginning of a political collapse and dissent between Neutralist factions.

---

<sup>67</sup> Wayne Knight Email. Wayne was on home leave in Phoenix, Arizona. October 23 was his birthday and he was glued to the TV. He really believed Premier Khrushchev would test the U.S. intentions. CJ Abadie Email. He does not believe there was much discussion about Cuba. *"We had our hands full with the conflict we were in at the time, and management wasn't involved in any planning. Can't say what Taipei or Washington, D.C. had up their sleeves. [Abadie] thinks George Doole was looking into a way to get himself involved in some way, as he liked these things and was a great planner."* Jim Coble Email. *"To the best of his knowledge they did not know about the crisis. There was no message traffic he was aware of and he doesn't recall anyone picking up information on the radio. There was no status briefing from any of the Customers. Perhaps Ben [Moore] was briefed, but it did not seep down to the grunts."*

Additionally, trouble had also been brewing between Kong Le's military and the leftist Pathet Lao for some time. Communist supplies, formerly air dropped, and now funneled through Hanoi into Laos by truck, were increasingly being diverted to Pathet Lao forces, causing Kong Le's troops to run perilously low on supplies. This situation was brought to the attention of Souvanna Phouma, who again passed the dilemma to both the U.S. and Russian embassies. The Soviet Embassy promised Kong Le the use of transport planes that had previously flown the airlift from Hanoi to the Plain of Jars. However, because of Hanoi's policy to squeeze Kong Le, there was a delay of aircraft to Vientiane for several weeks.

Ambassador Leonard Unger was cognizant that through subversion, and without Kong Le's support, Souvanna would lose his core base of power, and the coalition might fail. Therefore, pending Kong Le's acceptance, he authorized supply flights to the Neutralists. Taking advantage of the festering problems on the Plain of Jars, and recognizing a potential opening in factional differences, on 31 October, an Air America Caribou piloted by Captain Ed Eckholdt flew diplomat William Sullivan to the heavily fortified Xieng Khouang Airfield, located near Ban Ang in the center of the Plain of Jars, for a meeting with Kong Le. Sullivan's mission was to probe Kong Le's actual commitment to the communists. Attempts to sway Kong Le toward the Western camp included promises to fly needed supplies to his forces.

As a sop to Kong Le's claims against his chosen brothers, and to counter American moves to supply him, the Soviets informed Souvanna they would terminate their airlift to Leftist and Neutralist factions on the PDJ. They offered to transfer ten aircraft, including one helicopter and pilots to the Laotian government, to create a fairer and more equitable distribution



of supplies. At the same time, a few North Vietnamese soldiers had departed Laos through the ICC checkpoints, but thousands more were still reputed to be scattered throughout the country.<sup>68</sup>

With very little information filtering down to us in Udorn, we could only speculate about how these unsettling events would influence our operation.

Toward the end of the month, Howard met Earl Young, a drilling expert, who ostensibly worked for the United Nations organization. An older man, Earl was tasked to explore the northeast and punch holes in the jungle floor, looking for potable water. Still assembling his team and waiting for equipment, Young was looking for a temporary place to stay, so Estes invited him to reside at the house. An interesting person, he remained with us for two weeks before leaving for the field.

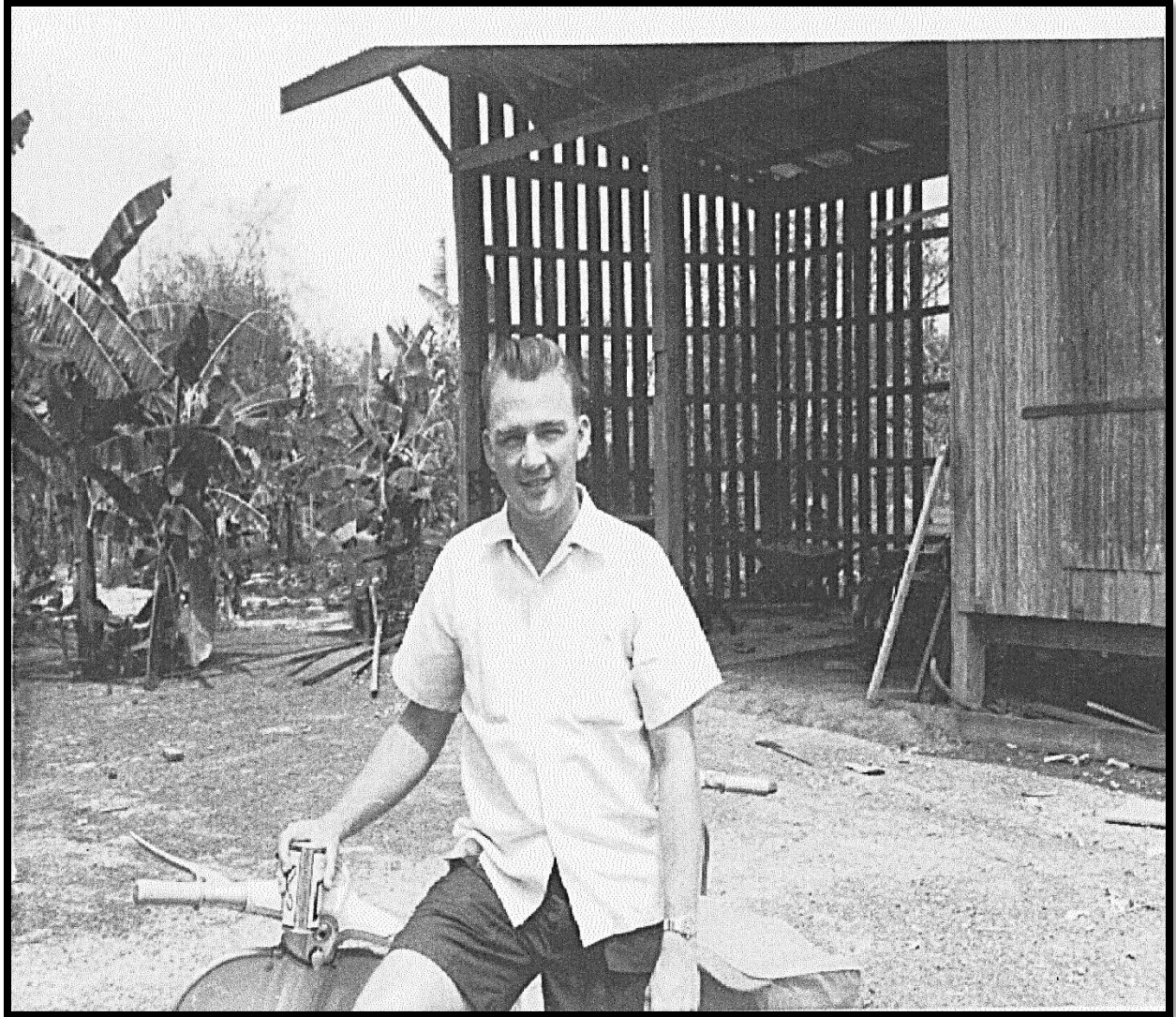
---

<sup>68</sup> Lao history.  
Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, 334-335.

**W**hile Estes and Spillis slipped off to Bangkok on STO, Captain Charlie Weitz, Flight Mechanic Jim Wilson, and I crewed Hotel-15 to Vientiane on Thursday, the first of November. We were redirected to Nong Khai for a border outpost mission. (Three plus five.)

A highly respected pilot, Charlie was portrayed as one of the strong men in our organization. Originally from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and exuding confidence, the big fellow was a prime example of a forceful individual, with an ability to do nearly anything. Because of these qualities and his generosity, he was easy to admire, and was a natural leader. Local management thought the same, for while the RLA Nam Tha and Beng Valley operations were underway, Charlie had been a de facto lead pilot at Luang Prabang.

Weitz had been a living legend in the Marine Corps. I had met the blond, crewcut Captain at the New River Bachelor Officer Quarters (BOQ), while he was processing out of the service with the intention of joining Air America. Long before, my squadron mates, who knew Charlie overseas, had related his many exploits. His reputation as a wild person with an enormous drinking capacity preceded him wherever he went, and would forever set Weitz apart from the masses. From what I heard and observed, Charlie had not changed his ways since joining Air America. Whether drinking, whoring, playing cards, or merely on STO, his vast appetites were renowned. After returning from STO in Bangkok or Hong Kong, he bragged not only about his exploits, but that he had spent the massive sum of 1,000 dollars a day.



Captain Charlie Weitz in front of his bungalow with an obligatory can of beer, and wearing the uniform of the day,  
Nick Burke Collection.

During these wild episodes everyone was Charlie's friend, including parasites, free-loaders, and numerous fair-weather friends. <sup>1</sup>

## **MOHER**

Friday marked another two aircraft day. Captain Tom Moher, Flight Mechanic Gene Lloyd, and I first conducted a round robin trip to Vientiane, and back to Udorn in Hotel November. (One hour thirty minutes.) Then, after a brief test flight, we were back in the air headed north to Sam Tong for an abbreviated day trip to conduct local assignments. (Six plus fifteen hours, four plus forty project.)

As during the October flight with Tom, I continued to be amazed that the man was able fly anywhere locally without a map, and always seemed to know exactly where he was. He was helpful, teaching me how to read terrain features, memorize prominent rock formations, and turns in rivers. He possessed no special intuition, just excellent recall. In the early days, the "old timer" had been forced to navigate in this manner and, given the luxury of a "safe" flying environment, I elected to follow his example. Even though I harbored considerable doubt, he reassured me that I would be able to do the same someday. The New Yorker stressed that during periods of inclement weather, it was important to possess low level navigation clues in order to fly and make money.

Tom did not pad time, preferring to earn his money. Like most other pilots, he disliked shutting down other than to refuel. During the day, "keep it turning and burning," was the pilot's creed. I was indeed lucky to fly with some premier

---

<sup>1</sup> For additional information regarding Weitz's colorful libertarian lifestyle, see Author's Book One, *Genesis* and Book Two, *The Crotch*.

pilots, and I considered Moher in this category. It was not difficult to admire Tom, his work ethic, his principles, and his earthy nature.

### **DOWN TIME**

I probably would have flown more during the early part of the month, but I soon began experiencing serious head and sinus congestion. Ever since returning from the outstanding STO in the Thai capital, I had felt a cold developing. The onset of this problem reminded me of a Marine gunny sergeant's prurient advice prior to a coveted weekend pass, when he admonished the platoon to cover up after sex and not "sleep too close to a crack." The quip resulted in a hearty laugh, and its intent was duly noted.

As the microbes continued to multiply, not having time on my side, I attempted to work, hoping to sweat the cold out of my body. Then, after a painful test flight with Captain Viril Black, I realized how far the illness had progressed, and feared developing a severe ear block which might damage my eardrum and ground me for a long time.

At the medical clinic, Doctor Kao was sympathetic to my condition and provided me with a few cloromycetin tablets, his antibiotic of choice. Then he admonished me for not wearing a highly-touted belly warmer and, with kind words, sent me home to die. Miserable, I lay in bed for most of a week trying to shake the Asian curse.

It was difficult to rest in November, as temperatures would soar to uncomfortable heights by noon. In addition, like clockwork, I suffered what I believed were painful sinus attacks. Pressure would build around my cheeks and forehead, causing a severe headache. Even my teeth hurt.

Since there had been no appreciable improvement in my condition, I began to wonder what exactly the problem was, one I had never experienced before. I had been reasonably healthy during my military tour, and during the first month in Udorn. Perhaps I had enjoyed Bangkok too much. A radical change in diet, increasing carbohydrate intake at the expense of protein, linked with a change in weather may have proved too much for my system to tolerate. Also, there were numerous colds and viruses floating around at this time of year.

The only respite during the sick period occurred when Fairy arrived at the house, usually during late morning, to hold my hand and minister to my needs. One of her talents was the Thai massage. This consisted of an ancient method whereby pressure was applied to both femoral arteries for a prolonged period. The sudden release of pressure allowed blood to surge back into my extremities, causing a very pleasurable, and hot-rush feeling. Following this treatment, she performed other equally delightful joys, calculated to lift my spirits and help coax me back to health.

While I was still weak and susceptible to her womanly wiles, the subject of marriage arose again. We had previously discussed the problems involved in such an interracial union. Apparently, in her family it was not uncommon to cross cultural and racial boundaries. Her sister had married an American Army officer and was living in the States. Observing the relationship first-hand, Fairy had lived with them in Denver, Colorado, for fourteen months. With this in mind, I wrote home to feel the folks out and prepare them for the possibility of future matrimony.

As I began to slowly improve, Doctor Rice, as the transliteration of his name might be called in Thai, had Nurse Bootsabong administer a daily B complex injection to speed my

recovery. At this stage I would do anything to feel better, and those who had received the shots claimed that they actually helped. Like gamma globulin, injected to the hollow portion of my buttocks, the 2ccs of the heavy oil-based preparation stung and hurt. Even Boot's gentle rub of the area failed to alleviate the pain. Before I could get my trousers up, soon after entering my body, I could taste the strong mixture in my mouth.

Strong advocates of vitamin intake, both medical people dispensed vitamin B and C tablets like candy. Having taken Hudson multi-vitamins for years, I appreciated this approach to nutritional health. Moreover, I could understand the need and value of food supplements in this part of Thailand, where the soil was poor, and one was cautioned not to eat uncooked vegetables for fear of contracting parasites.

As the cold and sinus attacks lingered, frustrated at the inability of our medical clinic personnel to cure me, I paid a visit to the U.S. Army Signal Corps doctor. After listening to my symptoms and bellyaching about our deficient clinic, he provided me with some yellow Clor-Trim anti-histamine pills, and assured me that I would soon feel better. Having taken the decongestant in the Pensacola training command, I was familiar with the medicine. They did help, and shortly afterward I was able to function like a human again.

During this period, I was encouraged by the construction work in the Air America compound. Operations had moved into the long barracks-like building directly south of the tennis court, while work was underway on the proposed combination recreation hall, snack bar, and bar in the old building. Area paving was supposed to follow. Much of the funding for the project was derived from snack bar profits, and a little-known provision in the Madriver contract which allotted monthly recreation funds

for every employee present. A Seabee unit located nearby was also improving the main runway. <sup>2</sup>

The progress and expenditure of funds was a good sign. Even though helicopter flying had appreciably diminished and we were not working upcountry, it looked like we might survive for a while, unless the U.S. military moved in. This worst-case scenario was always a possibility, and if it occurred, we would certainly be out of a job.

## **CHINA**

When world news continued to be unsettling, revelations in the Bible were correct, stating that wars and rumors of wars would always prevail. After the Cuban Missile Crisis had been averted at the eleventh hour, the Bangkok Post reported that Chinese forces had invaded India. It appeared like the balloon would go up there, and probably affect us in some manner.

The primary concern in Asia throughout 1962 was China, its huge population, and continuous famine problems that had failed to be solved by purchasing grain on the world markets for five years. Moreover, failure of the 1958 economic policy had also caused massive unrest.

Questions arose in world capitals as to communist China's leaders' possible intent to aggressively extend its boundaries into neighboring countries' "bread baskets" in order to provide more food for its overwhelming population. <sup>3</sup> This problem and other threats to regional peace stimulated large scale U.S. military air programs (MAP) to the governments of Thailand, Pakistan, Laos, and South Vietnam.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ben Moore monthly facility report to Taipei headquarters.

<sup>3</sup> Even if Thailand, Burma, and South Vietnam came under China's umbrella, it is doubtful that there would have been sufficient food available to feed China's starving masses.



Disconcertingly, China's leaders did not bluff. The massive military participation in Korea displayed Mao Tse-tung's resolve to pursue political-military objectives without considering the cost in men and machines.

Since the capture of the mainland by the Chinese communists in 1948, Western thinkers speculated that the communists intended to expand their hegemony until they dominated the entire Asian continent. Their covert meddling in both North Vietnam and Laos, providing military advisors and supplies to the Viet Cong and the Pathet Lao, tended to support this theory.

History revealed that the Chinese were an aggressive people, capable of extending their authority into Tibet, and exerting control in other southern provinces. Therefore, it is not surprising that attacks commenced on the extensive border region and into neutralist India in the fall of 1962. In part, this offensive was likely associated with the internal rice famine, and to a requirement for a diversion. Although there had been a continuing border dispute between the two countries, the Chinese action was unexpected.

Surprisingly, after conducting a successful military operation deep into Indian territory, China abruptly ceased attacks, and over time staged a unilateral withdrawal from India. Although accomplishing little in tangible terms, the effort displayed China's massive military power to other Asian

countries.<sup>4</sup>

### **LAO POLITICS**

In addition to the Chinese-Indian situation, the Bangkok Post reported Neutralist Kong Le's displeasure with his deteriorating situation on the Plain of Jars, and his desire to reacquire Vientiane. Also, Souvanna Phouma, harassed by all factions who perceived him as vacillating in political decisions, out of frustration considered relinquishing his Prime Minister position. Amid all the political maneuvering and accusations, agreements were signed increasing assistance to Lao refugees, and Air America cargo flights were authorized to continue upcountry without arms delivery. At least temporarily, it appeared that the pot was beginning to simmer, and I half expected fighting to erupt in Laos again. Further lifting my spirits, rumor and speculation circulated regarding potential Air America contracts in India and Vietnam.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk forwarded two telegrams to the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane related to the continuing problems with the coalition government:

*"Laos situation reviewed at meeting with the President [November] 8. Lao internal politics discussed together with U.S. assistance programs. It was emphasized that our efforts are and will continue to be directed toward full support of Souvanna but*

---

<sup>4</sup> Segment sources:

Asia (1962) [Back in Time] *World Book Online Americas Edition*.  
*Communist China: Ruthless Enemy or Paper Tiger* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1962).

Frank Darling, (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1965).  
*Vietnam and Southeast Asia: Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate* (Washington: U.S. Printing Office, 1963).

Author Note: In the 1990s, a TV series suggested that extreme starvation in China had discouraged further escalation of the Chinese-Indian conflict, thus negating a tough decision for USG.

*if coalition fails we must try to assure Souvanna and true neutrals will be on our side and responsibility for collapse of Geneva Agreements clearly on [Pathet Lao.] President...desires Ambassador Unger continue to emphasize to Phoumi that he must sincerely and practically cooperate with Souvanna to assure a wide non-communist front, not just the Phoumi Savannakhet faction..."*

*"Presidential meeting on [November] 8 reconfirmed authorization and emphasized desirability for assistance to neutralist forces through established MAP [Military Assistance Program]. If processed through Souvanna, fulfillment of reasonable requests can be used to demonstrate further our determination to support Souvanna's efforts and as a means of widening gap between neutralists and PL forces. Assistance should also be used as means of establishing regular channel of contact with Kong Le and other neutralists...For present, supplies should be generally limited to selected health and comfort items... and should be screened by Country Team with advice from DepChief JUSMAG as may be desired..."*<sup>5</sup>

During one of my daily sojourns to the airfield for a B complex injection, Captain Abadie cornered me outside his new office. After inquiring about my health, he said that I was ready for upgrading to Captain. I may have queered my immediate chances for check out at the time by piping up that I had not been to any of the southern work areas and would like a good familiarization there. It was a sound decision. I felt strongly that to ensure chances of survival, I should know all the work

---

<sup>5</sup> U.S Department of State, Foreign Relations 1961-1963, Volume 24, Laos Crises, #433, 434, 11/09/62, 4:50 pm, Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Laos, Rusk, Washington. Internet, (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjff/53993.htm>).

areas well, and what better time was there than this lull in the conflict.

## **HOWARD**

Estes was desperate to relocate his family to Udorn. He talked about this incessantly at the house. With the aid of Captain Abadie, he continued making inquiries and writing letters to Taipei headquarters attempting to have his probation period waved. Then, when this obsession bordered on seriously affecting all of us, he was notified that his family would be allowed to proceed to Udorn on 12 December. However, the capitulation by headquarters was not without strings. Taipei stipulated that Howard would initially be responsible for paying the dependent airfare, and then be reimbursed after his probation period was completed.

Invigorated, he began planning for his family's arrival by designing a hot water system for the house. The reason for this addition was simple. Singwas's rental was not equipped with a provision to heat bath water. Efficient propane gas flash heaters were available for purchase at an appliance store in town, but taxes for appliances were very high and, claiming he had spent all his money building the house, the landlord refused to obtain one for us. A few American families, like the Alstons and Connors, had installed the heater, which relied on a constant water pressure to start and sustain the unit. Even in town, where water was piped from the reservoir, pressure was often too low to consistently use such a device. Since we lived beyond the city limits, there was no water piped to homes along the airport highway. Therefore, rain water, normally used for drinking, had to be caught and stored in cisterns or large klong jars. This small amount of water was not sufficient for American

appetites, so water was hauled by truck from the town reservoir and pumped into large galvanized metal tanks located on top of elevated wooden towers. The 400-gallon receptacles gravity fed a house, and created sufficient head pressure to operate a flash heater.

The impending cool season meant enduring numbing cold showers in the early morning. Shaving with a razor could only be accomplished by heating water on a stove, or using an electric razor that required conversion to fifty cycles. Later in the day, radiant energy from the sun, coupled with a low water level in the interconnected tanks, often raised the water temperature to a more comfortable level. These periods were considered precious, reserved for carrier "Navy showers" of short duration, so all could equally share in the luxury. <sup>6</sup>

Prevented by our money problems from purchasing an expensive flash heater and the propane tanks to power the unit, we discussed painting the water tanks black to enhance passive solar heating. This idea was eventually discarded as inefficient. In the end, Howard's scheme of building a solar heating system received the nod. He purchased a long length of plastic tubing from town and plumbed it into the downstream water pipe. Then he fashioned several loops, and oriented the translucent hose toward the sun. The simple system worked well, so well that without a cold-water feed, would almost scald one by midday.

---

<sup>6</sup> Navy shower: Because of a constant lack of water on the older ships, one was encouraged to wet his body, shut off the water, soap down, and then rinse the soap off. This method was very efficient and saved precious water.

## **GROUND SCHOOL**

Attempting to soak up some of our free time and keep us out of mischief, VPFO Rousselot directed that we conduct ground school covering subjects related to the HUS-1. It was only recently that this was possible. Along with the expansion within the Air America facility, for the first time a newly completed loft on the left side of Hangar One provided necessary space for most of us to gather. Those not flying, on leave, or on STO were required to attend these informal sessions. Except for a few interesting "sea stories," not much new material was divulged, and it was obvious to all hands that the instruction was purely a make work project. Since Air America Udorn was still a bare-bones operation, our professional library was sadly deficient in helicopter or aviation publications. With little information available regarding the machine, Ab reviewed general subjects contained in the Navy Training Operations Manual (NATOPS). Over time, former fixed wing Beaver pilot Captain Bob Abrams conducted an impressive review and update of Airline Transport Rating (ATR) material.

With a chance for self-expression in front of a captive audience, the classes generated considerable pilot interaction. The period marked the beginning of what would be called all pilot meetings (APM), creating the rare opportunity for most of

us to gather at one time. <sup>7</sup>

My health problems were not over. Just as I was recovering from the cold and sinus attacks, I began encountering a lower gastrointestinal infection. For the first time since I had lived in Asia, Howard's "Code of the East" had finally stricken me. Again, I worried that the lack of a balanced diet, a change in eating habits, or reduction in protein and vegetable intake, might have something to do with my problem. Preferring to eat a dish of cooked fried rice downtown, I rarely ate at the grubby snack bar. This was particularly so since the versatile Chinese cook, Won Ton, during a routine chest examination had been discovered to be tubercular and was sent home to Bangkok. There was initial shock among those who patronized the snack bar, and business probably suffered for a short time while a suitable replacement was sought. Good cooks were not easy to find locally, and it was even more difficult to entice one to our outback region. In the interim, Won Ton's duties were assumed by Alfred, his jolly young assistant, who initially encountered trouble cooking a greasy veal cutlet.

### **SITUATION IN LAOS**

A memorandum circulated in response to Ambassador Leonard Unger's message acknowledging the possibility that the Souvanna

---

<sup>7</sup> CJ Abadie Email. In the past there had been several serious aircraft accidents in the Madriver Project. Consequently, the Company and Customer were interested in what formal schooling was being conducted to review emergency and normal procedures to enhance pilot professionalism. Naturally, since there were no facilities available, there was no formal schooling. When the hangar loft was completed, the first attempts were made at training. Those in control wanted to pattern the training program after the military, and provide initial and recurring training in a documented form to cover insurance matters and criticism from the outside.

It was slow at first because the Maintenance Department was relocating from the other building opposite the tennis court to new hangar area offices.

government might soon fall. He recognized that there was no alternative leadership to continue a neutralist orientation in the government. A suggestion was made that the U.S. should continue to maintain the Souvanna leadership in place.

*"...it is time once again to evaluate possible unpleasant contingencies and devised alternate ways of meeting them..*

*Harriman feels the best immediate course of action is to assist Unger in propping up Souvanna and encouraging increased support of him by Phoumi and Kong Le. An approach will be made to Kong Le for this purpose shortly.*

*State will attempt to expedite ICC investigation for [Viet Minh] presence in Sam Neua and Tchepone without waiting for the Lao investigating Commission to act. <sup>8</sup>*

*Harriman and Forrestal recognize the need to approach the Russians on the question of Viet Minh presence and use of the Panhandle corridor..*

*State is busy devising alternative governments which we might support in case Souvanna fails and partition results. One alternative...is to support a Phoumi administration and rally as many Vientiane neutrals and Kong Le sympathizers as possible. The second alternative is to exploit the reported conversations between certain FAR generals and Kong Le neutralists looking toward formulation of a combination neutral-right wing government that would exclude Phoumi..." <sup>9</sup>*

Within three days Ambassador Unger forwarded a telegram to State regarding the latest situation in Laos:

---

<sup>8</sup> No doubt this stipulation stimulated the Special Mission conducted on the 24th.

<sup>9</sup> Foreign Relations, Memorandum from the President's Military Representative's Naval Aide (Bagley) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Taylor), #435, Washington, 11/14/62, Situation in Laos. Internet.



*"Despite recent lessening in surface tensions in Vientiane past few days, we believe [Prime Minister] Souvanna's recent statements of intent to resign are serious as well as being tactical moves. If situation worsens and his pessimistic assessment is further strengthened he may act...within a few weeks...*

*Souvanna's task made immovable in his eyes...by virtual collapse of center...In political terms, pyramid constructed at time of Plaine des Jarres agreement has become inverted, with Souvanna the balancing point at the bottom rather than at apex...*

*Major deciding factor in outcome present situation will be Pathet Lao actions. Recent behavior and anti-Souvanna propaganda suggest PL must now foresee early collapse of coalition (Viet Minh determination to retain substantial forces in Laos may in part also reflect such an expectation)...*

*At this precise moment U.S. leverage with [General] Phoumi is reduced...we have limited aid to withhold, and we have been pressing him on variety of matters to act in good faith despite clear faithlessness on communist side...*

*Neutralist group offers little promise in terms reforming Troika along present lines...we see no one equally acceptable who approaches Souvanna-who is willing-in ability command loyalty and active support...*

*We doubt Kong Le 'lost' to other side and inclined [to] credit statements of his present mood indicating preferences for alignment with some conservatives and U.S. to continuation of present and uncomfortably exposed position. At same time we do not believe FAR as weak or Kong Le forces as strong as picture presented by Souvanna's advisors. ARMA reports have indicated perilous state Kong Le forces PDJ area. Open renewal of PL military action would undoubtedly find significant portion Kong Le units chewed up in quick order. Kong Le nevertheless is only*

*strong element of power in support of neutralist position...while it seems most unlikely...any significant segment of FAR would subordinate itself to Kong Le, agreement for cooperation between them no longer seems absurd..*

*We will continue and increase efforts [to] sustain Souvanna's will, urge his supporters to give him real assistance and seek ways depress what we sense as growing hunger of extremists on both sides closing for kill. We estimate long run chance of success about even, if we get through present critical period..."* <sup>10</sup>

### **SPECIAL MISSION**

AB-1 occasionally authorized a sensitive mission that necessitated Abadie or Moore's attention. Such activities had been occurring from the beginning of the program, with Base Managers Doc Lewis, Tom Tucker, and Ben Moore participating. Following an alert from AB-1, they might discuss the mission with Pat Landry, Bill Lair, or whoever was responsible for the project. Should the special mission be deemed "routine"--not a penetration into China or Vietnam, but in Laos, where Air America was operating under the guise of a USAID operation or some other innocuous cover--the Customer might not consult with Udorn management, but merely conduct the mission.

Udorn management eventually learned of a few "compartmentalized" missions after the fact. <sup>11</sup> They were of a type CIA operatives did not want to disclose prior to an event.

---

<sup>10</sup> State, Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, #436, Vientiane, 11/17/62, 7 p.m. At the end of the message several future political and military problems were listed. Internet.

<sup>11</sup> Compartmentalized: Agency missions so highly classified that only those directly involved were privy to details. This was done not only to protect the principals, but to also ensure success.

Because of the potential political or hazardous nature of a mission, they knew that Udorn management likely would not approve it. Then the Agency would be obligated to pursue their goals through back channels, namely George Doole in the Washington office. Even then, the proposal might be squashed because Doole was quite cautious about exposing Air America and its overseas operation.

These special missions continued periodically for the duration of Air America's operations in Laos. They would reach a peak in 1971, when a Special Project unit was formed by volunteer pilots, managed by a special Agency branch.<sup>12</sup>

Pilots had not conducted much night flying until the "Magic Box" practice was resurrected in October. Mike Marshall and Guy Destefano had flown two plus five hours night on 13 October. Further night warm-ups occurred that month.

On 20 November Marshall and Dan "Red" Alston performed a local night flying proficiency flight at Udorn.

Two days later, the daily flight schedule listed a two aircraft flight specifying Dan Alston as mission leader, along with Mike Marshall and Flight Mechanic Stash Wyatt. A back-up, or SAR ship, was crewed by Guy Destefano, Bill Cook, and Gene Lloyd. The schedule portrayed a fictitious destination in southeastern Thailand, but the exact spot was not revealed in print. That morning, Dan was pre-briefed by an Agency individual regarding the actual location to a position in Thailand, where he would receive a further briefing, and commence the mission.

The crews launched during the late afternoon for a Thai Border Police camp at Ban Fang Lang, located along a main road twenty-two miles west of Pakse, Laos. More than two hours later, AB-1 Customer Pat Landry met and briefed them. The predawn

---

<sup>12</sup> The Author was part of this Special Project program. Operations will be covered in detail in later books.

mission entailed extracting a Thai agent from an area north of Pakse in the vicinity of Saravane, where the man had relocated from a trail watching operation. <sup>13</sup> An unspecified signal would be deployed by ground personnel at the proper time to identify the pickup site.

Stunning the crews was Landry's casual statement that if one helicopter went down for any reason, it was to be promptly destroyed with hand grenades. For political reasons, and with the mission directly violating tenets of the Geneva Accords, the Customer did not want to leave an intact helicopter behind as evidence of U.S. chicanery. Since an H-34 was still a helicopter, whether burned or whole, this procedure seemed curious and hardly acceptable, and it silently called into question Landry's sanity. This was Mike Marshall's initial encounter with Landry. He looked at his friend Bill Cook and then quietly inquired as to the bozo who was instructing them to burn a helicopter. Discussion continued, and grenades were issued to the Flight Mechanics. Should it become necessary, the center fuel drain petcock would be opened and a grenade lobbed underneath the aircraft. <sup>14</sup>

It was still pitch black when crews were awakened during the early morning hours. Breakfast was already cooking on a charcoal fed hibachi pot. When Alston lifted the pot lid, an intact chicken's head stared him in the face. Despite this, the brew was considered tasty.

With Red Alston leading, the crews departed well before dawn. Blacked out, they flew time-distance headings toward

---

<sup>13</sup> Even during this early period, when political problems existed in Vientiane, there was interest in Washington regarding North Vietnamese activity in the country, and on the extensive (Ho Chi Minh) trail system that wound through Laos into South Vietnam.

<sup>14</sup> Dan Alston did not recall a briefing to destroy an H-34 with grenades should one become disabled.

Saravane, and then the extraction point. After milling around in the dark looking for the site, ground personnel heard the noisy helicopters, and ignited a fire in a steel drum that could only be seen directly overhead. Following a few circles, Destefano spotted the glare from the fire, and they descended to execute the pickup. During false dawn, the helicopter pilots landed in a dry rice paddy south of Saravane, not far from a village. Within three minutes the Thai agent boarded with a duffel bag.

Benefitting from the early morning light, crews returned to the BPP camp. (Two plus fifteen project, one plus fifteen night.) There was no debriefing. After fueling, they departed for Udorn, wondering who the man was, and exactly what the mission entailed. Without a "need to know," they never asked or discovered any mission details. <sup>15</sup>

### **LOCAL BAD GUY**

By the 24th, I was well enough to fly again. A day trip with Pinky Eaton and Carl Gable in Hotel-14 to Chiang Rai far to the north near the Burma border did much to restore my equilibrium after the recent sickness and lack of flying. (Ten plus fifteen, one plus fifteen night.)

Then an event occurred at the house that marked the most exciting incident since had I experienced battle damage with Tom Moher. About 1230 hours Jim Spillis awakened me from a deep sleep, indicating that he had heard loud noises from the first floor. Hugging the banister, we crept stealthily down the staircase, switched on the light, and discovered Howard curled

---

<sup>15</sup> Segment Sources.

CJ Abadie Interviews.

Mike Marshall Interviews. This was the only Special Mission Mike participated in, and the only one he was aware of.

Dan Alston Interview. This was the only mission he could recall during his time as a Air America helicopter pilot.

in a fetal position at the foot of the stairs. Through gritted teeth, he painfully said that he also had heard noises downstairs. While investigating in the dark, he clashed with an intruder on the first step. The adversaries grappled across the room, causing the commotion that Jim heard. Howard lost the contest. The Quemoy (Thai thief) ripped his pajama shirt, raked his chest with his nails, kicked him in the groin, and fled through an open window. <sup>16</sup>

Yelling for Singwa, I looked through the open window at the pond behind the house. Owing to the narrow time element, there should have been ample evidence of the burglar's departure. However, reflection of light on the calm surface failed to reveal a ripple. It was puzzling. Apparently, the phantom had mysteriously disappeared without a trace.

After gathering courage, Spillis and I charged outside shouting, "Quemoy! Quemoy!" The commotion woke Singwa, and with his less than efficient help, we organized the samlor drivers (among whom might have been the thief), and conducted an unsuccessful area search.

During the after-action critique, we considered that perhaps the Quemoy had been lurking in the house when we retired. But more likely, Jim had failed to properly secure the wooden shutters. There was also a possibility that the burglary attempt had been an inside job.

We were not the only Americans who had problems with bandits. Between rice growing seasons, always a slack period of the year, many farmers and other tradesmen were out of work. Still required to provide livings for their families, some

---

<sup>16</sup> During the brief struggle with the thief, Estes actually incurred a cracked rib. Unwilling to be grounded, or have anything influence his pay or chance to be upgraded to Captain, he did not reveal this injury to us.

individuals turned to a temporary life of crime. We were informed that the hardcore types could be vicious, and if discovered plying their trade, might kill an unsuspecting party. In retrospect, Howard had been extremely fortunate, as apparently, the man had not been armed.

Within the small American community, we achieved a certain amount of notoriety, and more than a little good-natured ribbing over the incident. We resolved to be more vigilant at night, ensuring that all doors and windows were properly secured. Because of the firm Company policy regarding firearms, acutely aware of our probation period, we took the next best course of action, arming ourselves with stout sticks, knives, and flashlights against the possibility of future intrusions.

As a result of the suspicious break-in, I took a fresh look at Singwa, and particularly the maid. In the process of observing them, I was shocked and upset to discover the young girl had not been boiling our drinking water. Instead, she merely dipped rainwater into transparent liter-sized glass bottles from the red klong jar--a gigantic clay "Ali Baba" like container--positioned under a down spout at a corner of the house. Then the unsophisticated servant placed the uncapped bottles in the refrigerator. When I had Fairy confront Singwa with this revelation, he responded with the frustrating Thai stock catch-all-phrase, mai pen rai--it does not matter. Then, with a casual wave of his nicotine-stained fingers, he offered that storing and using rainwater to drink was a time-honored method for Thai people. Quite simply, drinking water was collected during the rainy season, and the jar covered to keep out dust and insects. It was good water. What was the problem? Obviously, the weasel lacked even a rudimentary knowledge about parasites or disease prevention. Still recovering from my



A typical Thai middle-class back yard showing klong or water storage jars used for bathing, laundry, or watering plants. Normally, the jars were red and varied in size. Against the fence is a spirit house common to every household to venerate and appease spirits.

Author Collection.



illness, which included a nasty bout with the GIs, and looking for reasons contributing to my condition, I exploded. The man was impossible, a complete jerk. The ignorant person failed to even see mosquito larvae breeding on the surface of the water, or comprehend that in stagnant, untreated warm water, bacteria multiplied exponentially in a relatively short time. Furthermore, I disliked the landlord's attitude, so, after considering our limited options with my roomies, I consulted with Fairy to obtain a new maid who, when properly trained, would perform the work we desired, and was unrelated to the property-owner.

In short order we had a new cleaning lady. Sang La was a plain looking, shy, diminutive person, who did not speak a word of English, and had never previously worked for a Farang. However, under Fairy's guidance, she soon took up the slack, where the other part-time maid had been deficient. Our house was a large one to clean. After the rains ceased, dust filtered into everything. Still, for the pitiful sum we paid her, she appeared faithfully each day and, without complaint, attended to her chores.

As dust grew deeper on unpaved roads, bugs thicker in the evening, and flying less, we searched for familiar activities to help us maintain a sense of equilibrium. For a short time during the afternoon we played hardball in a vacant lot. But the pastime was soon abandoned, for extreme heat and the numerous holes in the field were considered too dangerous for serious play. Moreover, I could not afford another knee injury. One of our members refused to use deodorant, and this social deficiency was noted from far away.

With the arrival of additional families in Udorn, married pilots' morale rose. But living conditions and lifestyle had

still not measurably improved since the Company relaxed its policy on dependent relocation.

Each person reacted to the Udorn environment in his own manner. Mike Marshall's wife Kay had recently arrived with baby Neal. Appalled at the rapid accumulation of dust filtering into their screened bungalow, she required her maid to scrub the wooden floor of the small house three times a day. In addition to the problem of keeping help, her phobia was the talk of the community.<sup>17</sup>

### **TREACHERY**

Then an incident occurred in Laos which shocked, angered, and shook all of us to the core. Smacking of the infamous Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Captain Fred Riley and his crew were shot down on the Plain of Jars during a government sanctioned cargo delivery. The tragic event revealed unfettered communist aggression and the stark reality of what was emerging in the country.

Since late October there had been more trouble brewing within the neutralist camp on the Plain. Ostensibly loyal and supportive of Souvanna Phouma, some soldiers led by Colonel Deuane Sunnalath actually leaned strongly toward the communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese party lines. Propaganda increased and attempts were made by both left and right factions to influence wavering Neutralists to take the other's side.

The void created in the field after termination of the Soviet airlift was to be filled by the West at the request of Souvanna Phouma. In a strange manner, it appeared that America would now be supplying all three factions, either directly or by

---

<sup>17</sup> While attending an annual helicopter refresher course at the Bell Helicopter factory at Hurst, Texas in 1988, I visited the Marshalls. Baby Neal was then six feet seven inches tall.

proxy. Despite this, continued "rice" drops to the Meo and RLA by Air America cargo planes were particularly grating to the communists.

Early in November, General Singlao, Commander in Chief of Pathet Lao forces, announced that any unauthorized civilian or military aircraft discovered in his airspace would be shot down.

In the ho-hum Lao political climate, the ultimatum was ignored. On the 24th, in an attempt to curry Kong Le's favor and influence him to rejoin the RLA, a supply mission hauling fifteen tons of rice and one ton of salt into the Xieng Khouang Airfield was requested by the USAID contracting officer. Supporting this request, Ambassador Leonard Unger's Embassy and the Customer obtained diplomatic immunity from Souvanna Phouma's government for delivery of the goods on the 27th.

Tuesday morning, with assurances of safe clearance into enemy-controlled airspace, a three aircraft contingent, consisting of a C-123B (N5004X) and two C-46s (154 and 914) departed Wattay Airport for the Xieng Khouang airstrip located in the geographical center of the Plain of Jars. Following a routine flight north, the aircraft joined up and held at check point Delta over Ban Na (VS-15). The flight continued to orbit just off the southern portion of the Plain of Jars, awaiting landing clearance from Xieng Khouang tower. Finally, at about 1245 hours, with the aid of a Lao interpreter on board 154, clearance into the First Indochina War French garrison was granted. The pilots proceeded in a staggered flight configuration.

The C-123, crewed by Captain Fred Riley, First Officer Don Heritage, and Aircraft Flight Specialist (AFS, generically called a kicker) Charles Swain were slated to land first on the pierced steel planking (PSP) runway with 12,800 pounds of rice.

Next the unthinkable occurred. According to Ben Coleman, Captain of 154, after crossing over the airfield, and on a downwind leg between 500 to 1,000 feet, 04X was savaged by heavy 37mm and small arms fire. With the commencement of anti-aircraft fire, the two C-46 pilots veered off to the right to vacate the area. Riley proceeded southwest until radio contact was lost. With the right engine hit and crippled by the unexpected ground fire, Riley's aircraft continued flight for three and a half miles before crashing into a rice field.

Kicker Charles Swain was the lone survivor. Late in the afternoon Swain was med-evaced to Vientiane by a Lao L-20 pilot.<sup>18</sup>

In his words, eyewitness Swain related the following account:

*"We must have been on our base leg. We were not over 1,000 feet when hit. The gear was down. I heard an explosion and saw a flash near the right wheel well. There were two hits in the aircraft, one near the right engine, and it seemed there was another near the leading edge of the left wing, although I only heard an explosion on the right side. I couldn't believe we were hit. Fred asked about fifteen seconds after the explosion what had happened. I looked in the wheel well and there was no damage. We made one turn, I don't remember a turn after we were hit. If there was one, it must have been very slight.*

*The pilot said, 'Go lower. Go lower.' There was no firing after we descended. I could see the right throttle was back. The right engine was still turning, but I don't know whether the power was on. We went lower and lower. Perhaps after a minute the copilot said to get rid of the load, but it was too late.*

---

<sup>18</sup> Professor William Leary, 1962 Notes. Undocumented statement in the Air America archives, University of Texas at Richardson, Texas.

*They seemed to be trying to follow the terrain. Then I saw the terrain rising. Fred never said anything more. The sound on the intercom was bad and I heard the pilot and copilot talking, but I could not understand it, except the copilot saying to keep low.*

*Then I saw the tops of the trees. I sat down and we hit as I was getting my seat belt on. I was conscious all the time. There was no blackout. I was on the right-hand side of the plane, which was turning to the left. I was underneath a lot of stuff. I went up to the cockpit, which was a solid mass of metal. The whole nose was jammed. The nose gear seemed to have come up into the cockpit. There was a lot of gas coming out of the right engine. There was a hot smell and I saw some smoke. The back end had broken off at the ramp. The back end of the aircraft was up with the tail section off. The back cargo piled up, but the front chains held--at least one held.*

*I had to drop about ten feet [to the ground] to get out of the plane because it was tilted up.*

*We were on the PDJ in a little rice valley. It was very marshy where we hit. There was a little irrigation ditch about three feet high. Then I went back to the plane. Some natives had come around and I went back for the first aid and survival kit. Some farmers were unloading the plane to get into the front.*

*Kong Le's men arrived about thirty minutes afterward and formed a perimeter. There was not much they could do. They were going to take me in a truck, but the Beaver [pilot] came and landed on a ridge. They carried me about 300 yards in a stretcher. The natives were standing around and seemed real shook up and they seemed upset when they saw me with all the*

blood.”<sup>19</sup>

It was assumed that the two cockpit crew members were immediately crushed when impact with the ground collapsed the nose section and tons of rice hurdled forward into the forward compartment. The mangled bodies were recovered the following day by a recovery team consisting of Embassy Doctor Shultz, Frank Janke, and others.

Message traffic circulated on the 28th in Washington regarding the shooting down of an America Plane:

*"This was a flight duly authorized by Souvanna and had been cleared to land by the authorities at the Planes des Jarres airfield. This incident occurred against the background of reported difficulties, including possible armed clashes, between PL and Kong Le forces in the Planes des Jarres. The character and extent of this activity is not known...Souvanna is very concerned and understands the implications of such PL action within an area nominally under neutralist control.*

*...at the 8 November meeting with the president it was decided to approve provision of some U.S. supplies to Kong Le forces in the Plaines des Jarres area. Assistance rendered so far on this authority has consisted of blankets, medical supplies, and basic food items. However, in the past few days, Souvanna has requested U.S. assistance for these forces that goes well beyond the approved comfort items...*

*A telegram has just been received in State from Governor Harriman which contains a number of recommendations on the aircraft incident. These include activating the ICC, asking the*

---

<sup>19</sup> Charles Swain statement recorded by USIS representative, Norris Smith immediately after Swain's arrival to Vientiane and while he was undergoing medical treatment. The Author assumes that Swain was in considerable pain and shock.

In order to preserve the essence of the incident and Swain's words, the Author employed sequential events, a minimum of editing, and paraphrasing.

*British to press the Soviets for corrective action, urge the court-martial of the PL battery commander, press Souphanouvong to make a public apology, and delay withdrawal of the [U.S. Army] Battle Group from Thailand..*

*A crucial lack of information on exactly what the situation is in the Plaines des Jarres between Kong Le and Pathet Lao forces makes it very difficult to decide on any action other than ICC investigation and the development of more facts..Other military actions can be considered as the situation clarifies. I recommend you oppose any action to hold any part of the Battle Group in Thailand and await results of diplomatic actions now being initiated.”<sup>20</sup>*

As a result of the perfidious incident, incipient quarreling and bickering between Kong Le and Deuane heated up, and Pathet Lao diplomats verbally attacked the Air America supply effort. It was eventually discovered that the Neutralist Phetsareth Artillery Group had precipitated firing on the C-123. But when Kong Le's associate, staunch anti-communist Colonel Ketsana Vongsounvan, attempted to arrest the guilty gunners (it was assumed the gunners had been infiltrated by Pathet Lao factions), he was prevented by Pathet Lao troops. For his efforts, there was an unsuccessful attempt on his life before the year was over.

Immediately after the tragedy, Souvanna halted Air America flights to the Plain of Jars, and asked the more politically acceptable Soviets to resume their air supply.<sup>21</sup>

The affair served to further confuse a convoluted political situation that baffled most Lao watchers. The event reiterated

---

<sup>20</sup> Internet source. Memorandum from the President's Military Representative's Naval Aide (Bagley) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Taylor), #437, Washington, November 28, 1962.

<sup>21</sup> Arthur J. Dommen, 240

how nasty and dangerous the Plain of Jars environment had become for airborne supply missions. Over time, the enemy had amassed more than sufficient 12.7mm and 37mm AAA weapons to discourage casual incursions of unarmed aircraft into their turf. Therefore, it should not have come as a great surprise that they would use lethal action to perpetrate an incident to display their power and further their agenda.

Recent history supported evidence that the communists were serious. For example, in early February an Air America C-46 had been shot down near Xieng Khouang during an air drop. Then, in March, a U.S. military attaché C-47 went down in flames after being hit near Xieng Khouang. The crew had been clandestinely scouting the area at the behest of the Air Attaché office in Vientiane. Finally, late in August, a RF-101 reconnaissance aircraft was hit near Phong Savan, located on the eastern portion of the PDJ. The pilot managed to return to Don Muang safely. By early November, U.S. Air Force reconnaissance flights had been terminated, and no more aircraft had been hit or downed on the Plain of Jars until the Riley incident.

Our pilot force in Udorn was stunned by the disquieting news about Fred Riley and crew. Without knowing all the details, most of the old timers thought it had been stupid to have sent aircraft into that area. As several people knew and liked Riley, there was considerable conjecture, anger, and disgust over USG and Ambassador Unger's perceived inaction in the days following the downing of 04X. Again, we were unaware of the behind scenes maneuvering. Reflecting our political naivety, we considered it criminal to let the commie bastards get away with shooting down one of our planes without retaliation. Our comrades in arms had been lost through no fault of their own, and we did not like



it.<sup>22</sup>

## **PAKSE**

Marking my final area checkout before satisfying the Company's Captain upgrading requirement, beginning on Thursday the 28th, the final three days of the month were spent flying Hotel Bravo in the Pakse area with former Marine pilot Nick Burke, and Flight Mechanic Ben Naval. Often referred to as the "country club of Laos," Jim Spillis had worked there with Captain Dick Crafts toward the end of October, and indicated that the experience had been both relaxing and interesting. While there, he had observed what he regarded as the most beautiful scenery in his life, particularly on the broad Bolovens Plateau, one of three such formations in the country. The crew even conducted one flight far down the Mekong River to Kong Island near the boundary of Cambodia.

Pakse represented the last sizeable river town and port on the Mekong's long journey south toward Cambodia, Vietnam, and into the South China Sea. Bordered by South Vietnam to the east, Cambodia to the south, and Thailand to the west, the Military

---

<sup>22</sup> Jim Coble Email. "Fred Riley was one of the fixed wing jocks he got along with very well. He had an easy-going manner and a great sense of humor.

There were many crewmembers that wanted to load up aircraft with anything that would burn or go boom and fly up to the Plain of Jars and inflict some punishment on the perpetrators. This was true for both helicopter and fixed wing crews. Ben Moore and Fred Walker had their hands full keeping the fire dampened down."

CJ Abadie Email. "This was just one more occasion when we all felt that our crews were being dispatched by Customers who were not as well informed as they should have been...so often they confirmed the situation at a location by only a pilot report that he landed safely, or he got shot at on approach. There were far too many incidents like this, and the pilot-to-pilot briefing and exchange of maps were the only good G-2 for a while. It got better when the Customer recognized the need to have better intelligence and placed capable people in the field with instructions to work with people."

Region Four region was considered to be of considerable strategic significance in the overall South Asian Theater. Linked together with the sizeable Bolovens Plateau, it was thought by some deep-thinking military planners to form a critical invasion route by the North in any potential attack on South Vietnam, as the area-controlled entry into the lower Mekong Valley. With this in mind, prior to the fall departure of foreign forces as per Geneva Accords protocols, Special Forces Colonel "Bull" Simons' White Star Field Training Teams had attained substantial progress recruiting and organizing diverse tribal groups into self-defense units and trail watchers in the region.

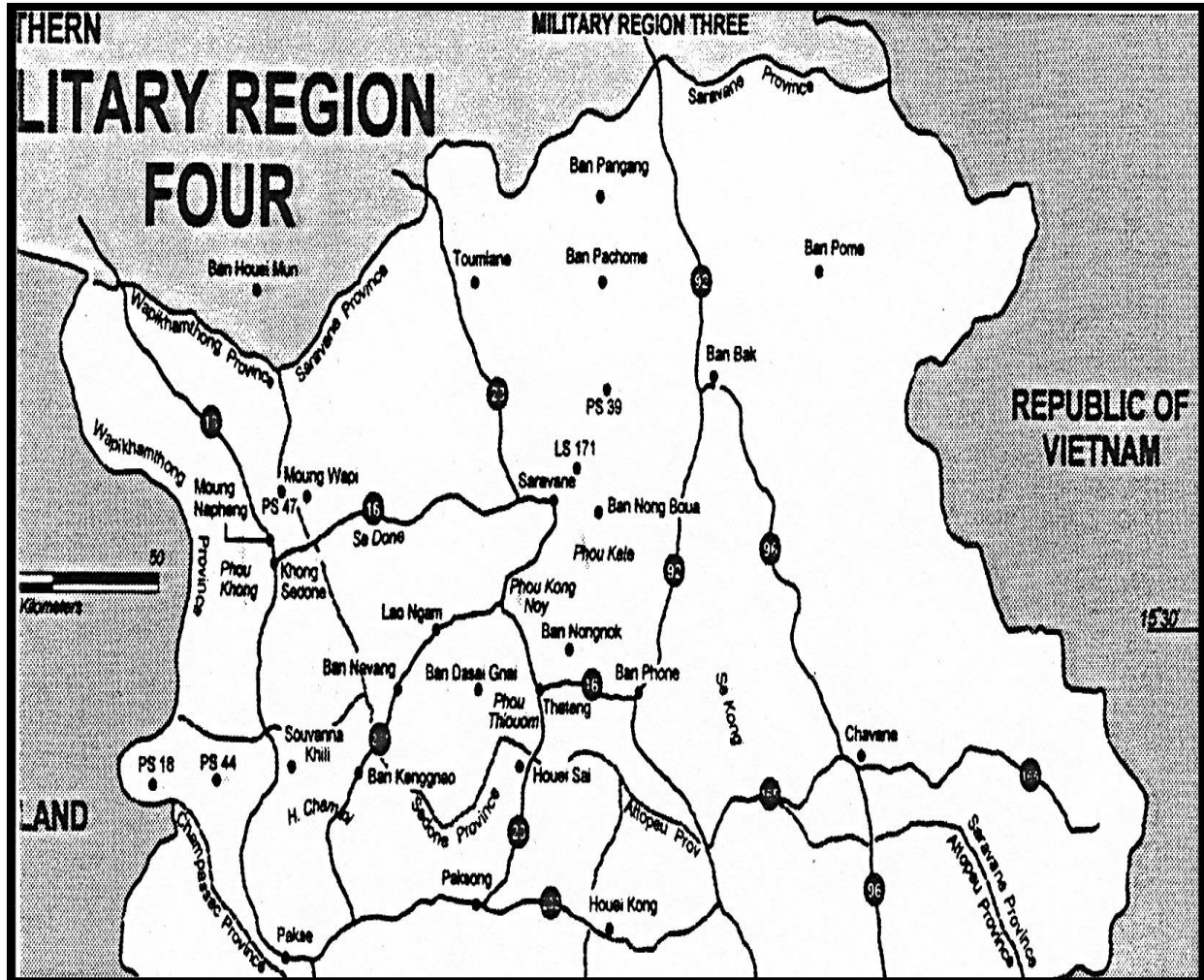
Emphasizing the importance of the Kha tribes--a generic and pejorative term for various ethnics--training program, White Star teams 4,6,12,17,31, and 44 passed through the Pakse area. Scattered at many locations, camps, or administrative sections, were established at or near Attopeu, La Ta Sin, Paksong, Houei Kong, Phou Kate, Saravane, and Pakse. Designed to work in twelve-man units, the White Star units frequently divided into six-man teams for efficiency. Potential candidates were recruited from many areas, including Thateng, Ban Nong Boua and the Bolovens. <sup>23</sup>

There had been no helicopter crew RONS at Victor-11 for some time. We were briefed that our mission entailed working for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). During late November, Ab informed us that future Lao flights would probably be confined solely to USAID tasks. Instructions from

---

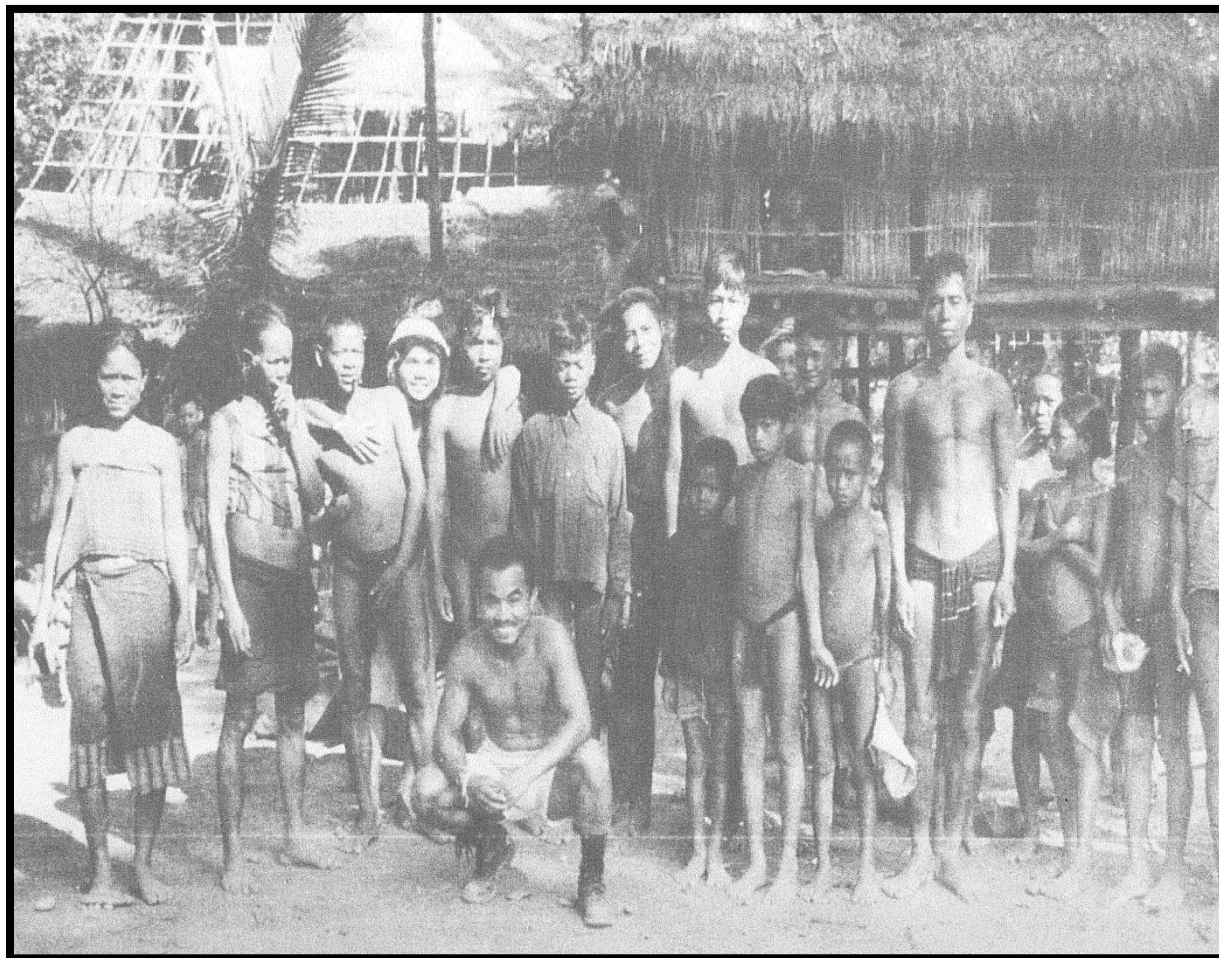
<sup>23</sup> Shelby L. Stanton, *Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975* (California: Presido Press, 1985) 24.

Additional information regarding this program can be obtained from the Author's Book One-Genesis.



Part of Military Region Four, lacking Attapeu and the southern area toward Kong Island. East of Pakse, the Bolovens Plateau contained the towns of Paksong and Houei Kong. Separated by the Sedone Valley, Saravane is located well north of Pakse.

Conboy Map.



Kha (a generic term for savage) villagers living in remote regions of southeastern Laos. Exploited by the North Vietnamese Army for portage along the Ho Chi Minh Trail system, many tribals were willing to join Agency-sponsored special guerrilla units (SGU) and fight the communists.

Author Collection.

Vientiane had already been issued informing us that flights conducted in Laos were not to haul troops, ammunition (hard rice), or POL (petroleum, oil lubricants), except to support H-34 humanitarian operations and Air America-staffed radio stations. A memorandum from Vientiane Station Manager (SZVTE) Roy Stitt, also applying to our program, further indicated that Air America aircraft in support of USAID were restricted to carrying only medicine, clothing, food, cement, construction materials, roofing, agriculture machinery, fertilizers, and seeds.

It was obvious that following the Riley incident on the Plain of Jars, Air America management was taking precautions not to create political waves and stimulate further bickering between various factions. This information was uninspiring to a would-be war horse like me, and I wondered what would happen to our small war potential should this pussy-footing policy continue.

### **BURKE**

Captain Nick Burke was the designated PIC of Hotel Bravo. Nick, also a First Lieutenant in the USMC, was stationed at New River MCAF in H-37 Squadron HMR-461, while I was still a member of HMR-261. With five squadrons present at the facility, including hundreds of officers and men, I only met a fraction, and did not recall Nick.

Part of this could have been related to major deployments. HMR-461 was a back-up squadron to HMR-262, the primary recovery unit for the astronaut program, Project Mercury. A choice billet, those chosen for the program spent many enjoyable days at Cape Canaveral, Florida. After the fact, I learned of Lieutenant Cox's decision to pickle Virgil Grissom's space

capsule, Liberty Bell-7, on 21 July 1961, during a water recovery attempt. After hooking onto the device, Cox indicated that during Grissom's egress and failure to properly secure the hatch, the capsule filled with water. After hovering for an extended period at maximum military power (normally limited to five minutes), while attempting to stabilize and lift the pod, the engine chip detector light on the cockpit console illuminated. Rather than risk being dragged into the water in the event of an engine failure, Cox chose to "deep six" the space craft. The loss of the precious space ware caused many unhappy souls in both the nation and space program.

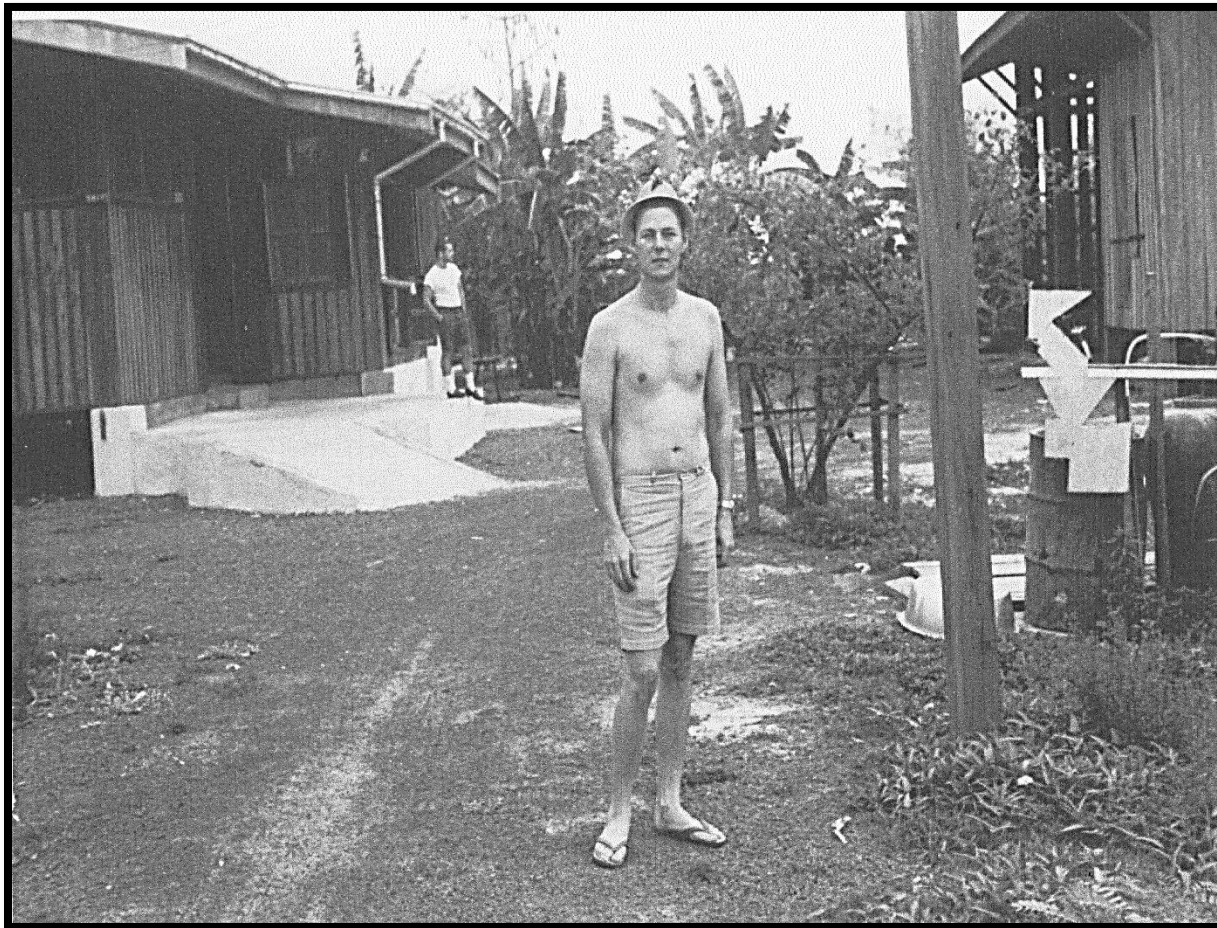
Burke was hired in the late spring, and was flying as a Captain by August. He had a problem when first arriving in the Far East. One of his two suitcases was misplaced at the Tokyo airport and he had little clothing to wear. The misplaced baggage was not recovered for two months. By chance, when he flew to Vientiane for a mission briefing, he discovered the missing bag in the flight operations building.<sup>24</sup>

I immediately noted that Nick, although likable, tended to be quite sarcastic. This feature caused doubt as to where one stood with him at any given time. Therefore, my initial evaluation of him was similar to Charlie Weitz--a large profane, diamond-in-the-rough type. In fact, both seemingly cut from the same mold, were good friends.

Victor-11 was located well to the southeast of our base. As the crow flies, the trip plotted 220 nautical miles, 128 degrees from Udorn. Without adequate map coverage, the three-hour ferry flight was mostly conducted by dead reckoning. This navigational

---

<sup>24</sup> Nick Burke. Interview at his house at Gulf Shores, Florida, on 15 September 1997. In addition to narrative, Nick lent me some very good photographs.



Captain Nick Burke adapting to the heat in a housing compound in Udorn. Captain Bill Zeitler is standing to the rear in front of Burke's bungalow. The concrete ramp was built so a motorbike could be wheeled into the Burke house at night to prevent it being stolen.

Burke Collection.

method was based on computations of airspeed, course, heading, wind direction, groundspeed, and elapsed time over endless miles of look-alike flat terrain and dry rice paddies. It constituted pretty boring flying.

Unless SEATO operations were in progress, radio navigation aids were scarce to non-existent in Thailand. At such times, with aircraft from many nations involved in military exercises, portable TACAN units might have been available and used if the helicopter was so equipped.<sup>25</sup> However, should a pilot become disoriented--egocentric pilots rarely chose to use the word lost--a left turn toward the east would invariably establish an intercept angle with the Mekong River; southerly flight from that point would eventually shunt one to Pakse.

There were several natural checkpoints close to Pakse. About twenty miles above the town the Mekong veered away from the Thai border. Close to this location, the river was joined by the Mun River, Thailand's largest tributary. Contrasting with many upper reaches of the river that squeezed through long gorges, rocky beds, and rapids, the Mekong was wide and calm along the Pakse stretch.

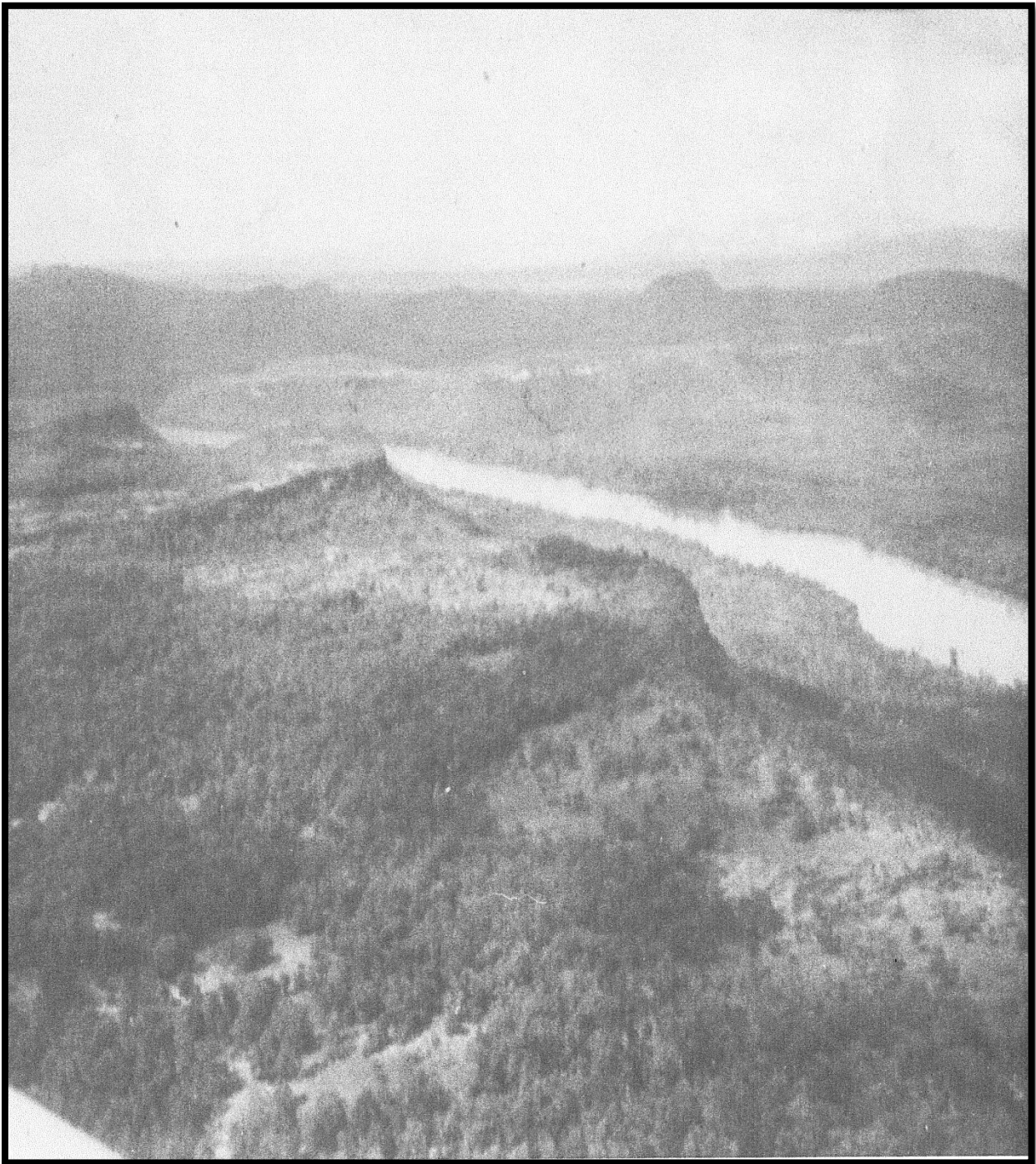
The Pakse community sprawled along the northern bank of the Mekong. A crossroad for both road and river traffic in the southern region, the town and airfield were bisected by the Se Done, which charged down from the north to mate with the chocolate-colored parent river.<sup>26</sup> A ferry and small boats could be seen plowing their way to the west bank landing at Muang Kao, where a road connected Laos to her sister nation. The only other sizeable, but nominally reliable artery was National Highway-13,

---

<sup>25</sup> Radar vectors from ground control intercept (GCI) sites in the northeast were not available until later years.

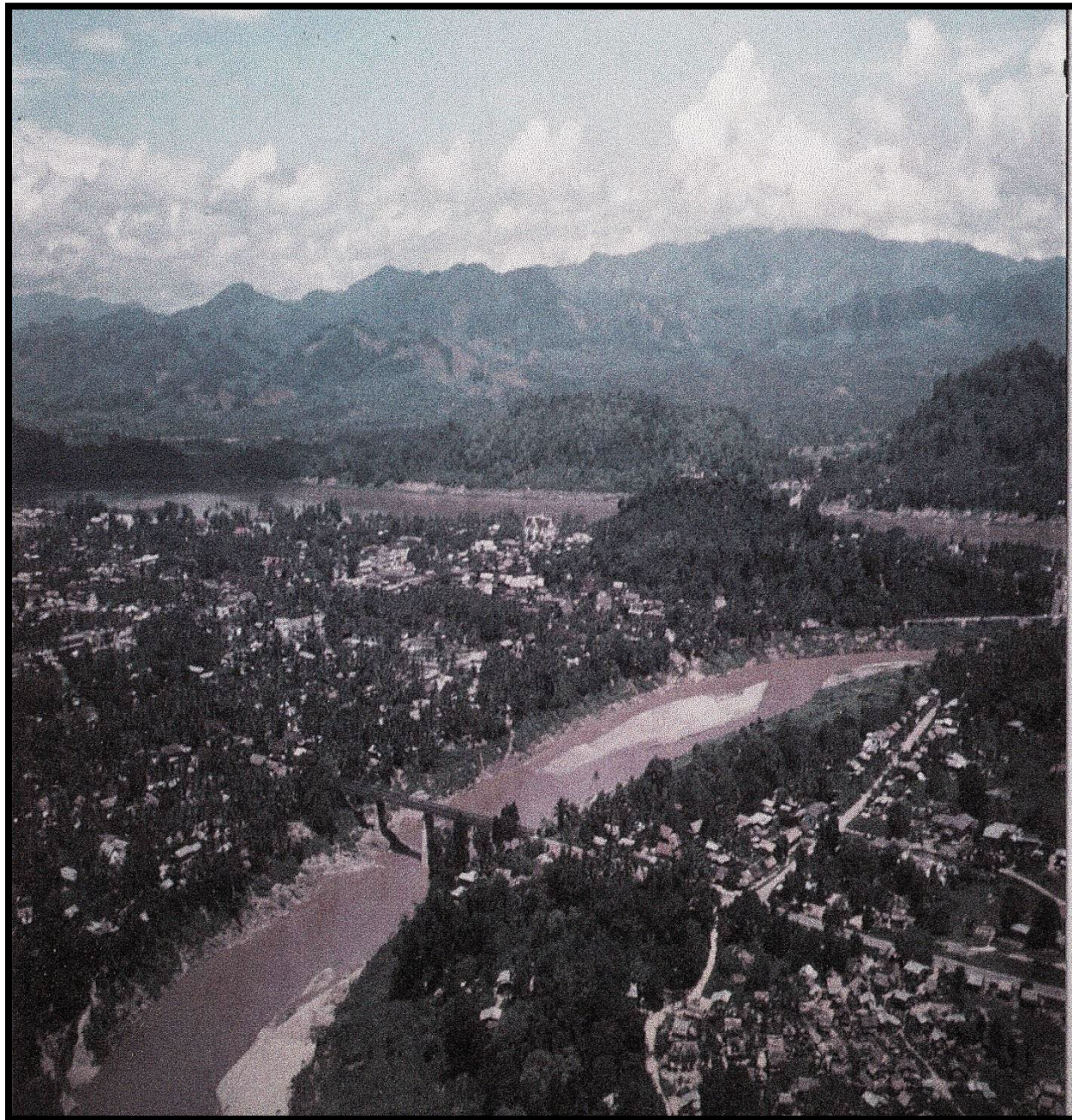
<sup>26</sup> Rivers in the north of Laos were prefixed with Nam; in the south Se. Both words connoted water.





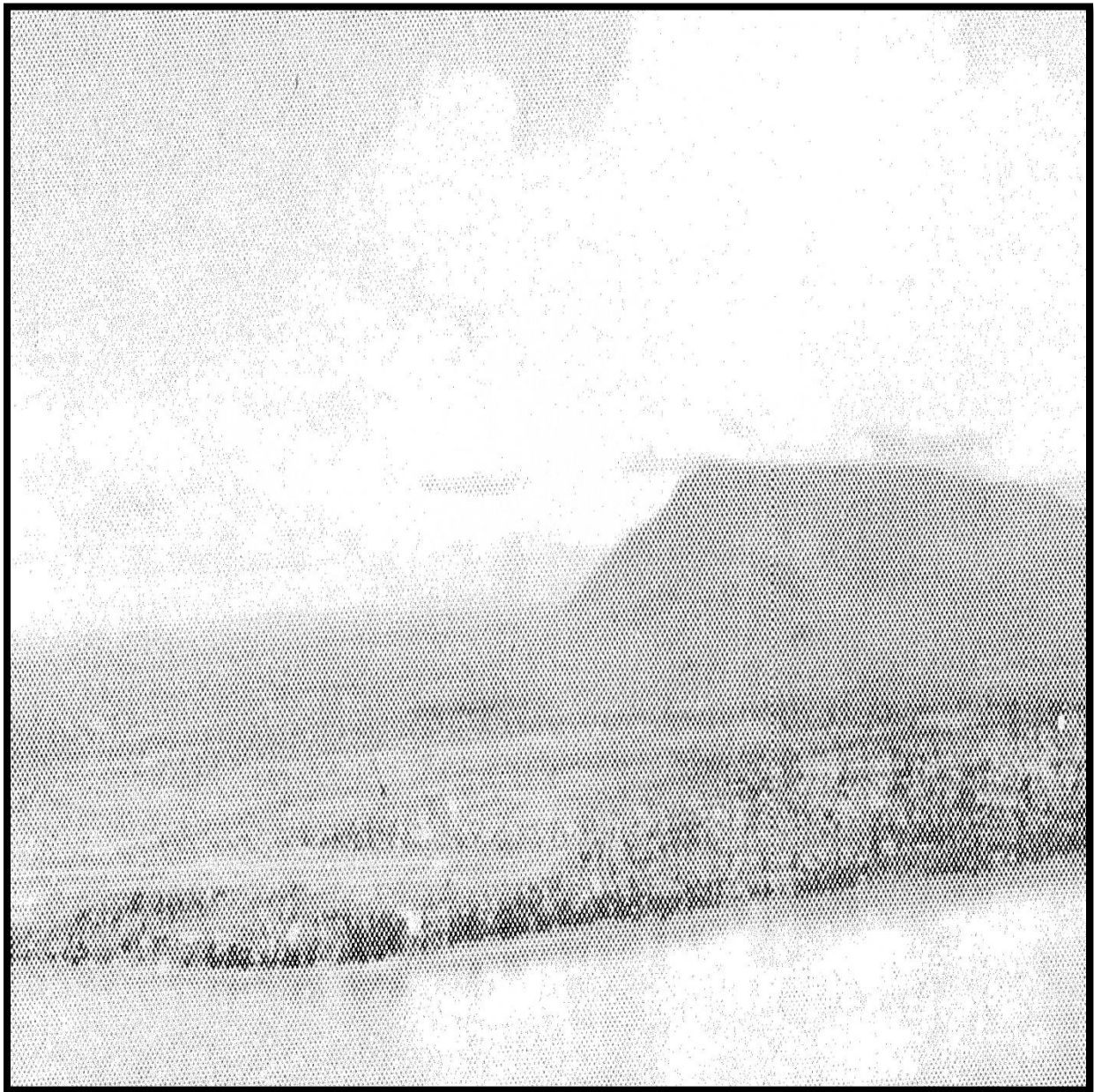
The Mekong River twenty miles north of Pakse. The Mun River can be seen flowing into the Mekong from Thailand. Low ridges parallel the river along both the Lao and Thai banks. Rapids prevail in some portions of the river, making river travel hazardous.

Author Collection.



A late 1960s photograph of Pakse, Laos, the last major river town in the south. The view is taken south southeast across the Route-13 bridge that spanned the Se Done, a tributary separating the west (airport side), and east bank (main town). Thailand is seen beyond the Mekong River.

Author Collection.



Looking northeast across the Mekong from the west bank at Pakse and the airport, the 3,000-foot Phu Batiene looms. Beyond the mountain, terrain begins rising toward the Boloovens Plateau.

Author Collection.

an artery cutting through jungle and enemy-controlled territory paralleling the Mekong south to Cambodia and South Vietnam.

Compared to other more ancient river towns, Pakse was relatively new. It had been founded by French colonial forces as an administrative outpost in 1905. Besides housing predominantly Lao people, much of the town's population consisted of Chinese and Vietnamese shop owners and businessmen.

Not far northeast of town loomed the steep escarpment of Phu Batiane. Beyond that was the sprawling Bolovens Plateau.

A short distance west of the main part of town, a hard-topped, dilapidated airfield paralleled the Mekong. Consisting mostly of cracked asphalt, the strip and immediate complex provided only bare necessities for aircraft to operate. The control tower's plaster façade was peeling and was covered with vines. In addition, looking like something from the Stone Age, the decaying building was strewn with mildew and algae, and the original paint color was almost unrecognizable. It was such an eyesore that one wondered, if there was one, what the tower operator looked like. Toward the northwest side, a laterite parking ramp that could double for an emergency cross wind runway for light aircraft, extended on both sides of the main strip. The red ribbon looked like it could have been an original runway, like the one in Udorn built by the Japanese during World War Two. Adjacent to the ramp, the only modern looking building was the Air America radio shack. Sprouting many silver-colored antennae, the gray quarters were staffed with friendly jack-of-all-trades Taiwanese, who graciously provided cool drinking water and arranged refueling.

While we were waiting to be topped off, the USAID honcho arrived. He was an unpretentious-looking person, who Nick later indicated had few credentials for the job, and had been promoted to this choice position from a lowly clerk's position in

Washington. From Nick's sarcastic tone, it was obvious that he had nothing but contempt for the man, and I judged him to be unduly rude to him. At first, I did not understand this attitude, but later, when it was properly explained to me, I could more easily comprehend how Burke's scornful posture might have developed.

There were many reasons for biases relating to USG agencies, other than military related ones. As a result, USAID assignments were not deemed favorite by the pilots. The old timers had been thoroughly spoiled in the past by working with elite military personnel, performing stirring missions, directly related to the war effort. To them, anything remotely connected with what was described as "useless aid," lacked the sense of accomplishment, macho perception of danger, and the excitement that our aviators thrived on. Added to the slightly jaded attitude toward missions not closely associated to aviation or the military, the AID program in Laos was perceived as mostly staffed with sniveling incompetents, stateside rejects--the wrong people in the wrong jobs.

At the time, the AID program was the brunt of jokes in our outfit. Humor increased proportionately when it was discovered that the U.S. shield and clasped hands logo stenciled on refugee consumables did not necessarily indicate the goods had been donated by USG. More than likely, the commodities had been purchased by the host country. Furthermore, USAID and other associated agencies had a poor reputation in the kingdom because of early U.S. government policies, which failed miserably to improve the lot of the common man. Critics often asked how much money had been pumped into the country, and where could one see favorable results? This was simple to answer: nowhere. Pathet Lao representatives were winning the hearts and minds of the rural people, and we were still losing the country.

There were several horror stories which constantly arose during discussions of early U.S.-Lao policy. It had encouraged importation of products for local consumption that were believed would be purchased by those receiving U.S. salaries. But the inability of western economic "professionals" to predict the Asian deviousness in manipulation of money, false receipts, and incomprehensible market forces, resulted in a disastrous financial collapse. The dubious policy led to favoritism, corruption in the highest places, and eventually rampant inflation. <sup>27</sup> Finally, to prevent a crippling monetary collapse, a massive devaluation of the destabilized kip was necessary. As always in such a situation, the common man was hurt. Only a few elite in the larger towns remained unscathed and benefited from the failed policies. Those living in rural areas became poorer. When it was explained to these people by subversive elements, how only a few people in the towns benefitted after the American meddling, they became ripe candidates for the long-standing communist doctrine.

None of us were entirely certain which hat USAID actually wore. Originally, it was under the umbrella of the United States Operations Mission (USOM), but this agency was not even mentioned now. Was the organization affiliated with State, CIA, the military, or all three? Who infiltrated what? Who really represented USAID in the bureaucratic mishmash? There were so many duplicitous things occurring during this trying period that all agencies were suspected of collusion. But USAID, being more visible, garnered the most contempt and suspicion. Fortunately, AID's reputation would improve in later years.

---

<sup>27</sup> It was emphasized that one only had to note the disproportionate number of Mercedes Benz vehicles in the administrative capital to be aware of the problem.

We expected to fly ten-hour days, a targeted standard for RONS. However, the less-than-inspiring Customer squashed this goal when he announced that he had no flights planned for us. It appeared that he had not expected us, and it was obvious that he was not prepared to properly utilize the helicopter. This was surprising, as I thought Pakse requests for aircraft were relayed to Vientiane, and then to Udorn for scheduling. Scratching his head, USAID seemed confused and disorganized at having to make any decision. I wondered if this was typical of all those in his organization. Finally, after some pressure and caustic remarks from Nick, he temporarily released us to the Royal Lao Army (RLA), while he repaired to his villa to plan flights for the following day.

### **SARAVANE**

We were assigned to conduct shuttles to Saravane. I had been repeatedly informed that the Pakse area was a relaxing place to work. From my recently acquired 1:500,000 scale map (called "one over the world"), I noted that regional topography was distinctly different from that found in the northeast. Although mountains defined the boundaries of the broad Se Done Valley, our working area appeared to lack the gigantic mountain chains and formations predominating in Military Region Two. In the valley area between the mountains, rivers, trails, and villages were interspersed among wooded flatlands. The main artery, the French-funded Route-13, wound from the north to join Route-23 east of Pakse, called "the Saigon Fork." Route-23 then ascended the Bolovens and proceeded north toward Saravane.

The provincial capital of Saravane was located on the Se Done fifty-two nautical miles northeast of Pakse. Defended by a volunteer battalion (BV) of RLA troops, the northern outpost lay

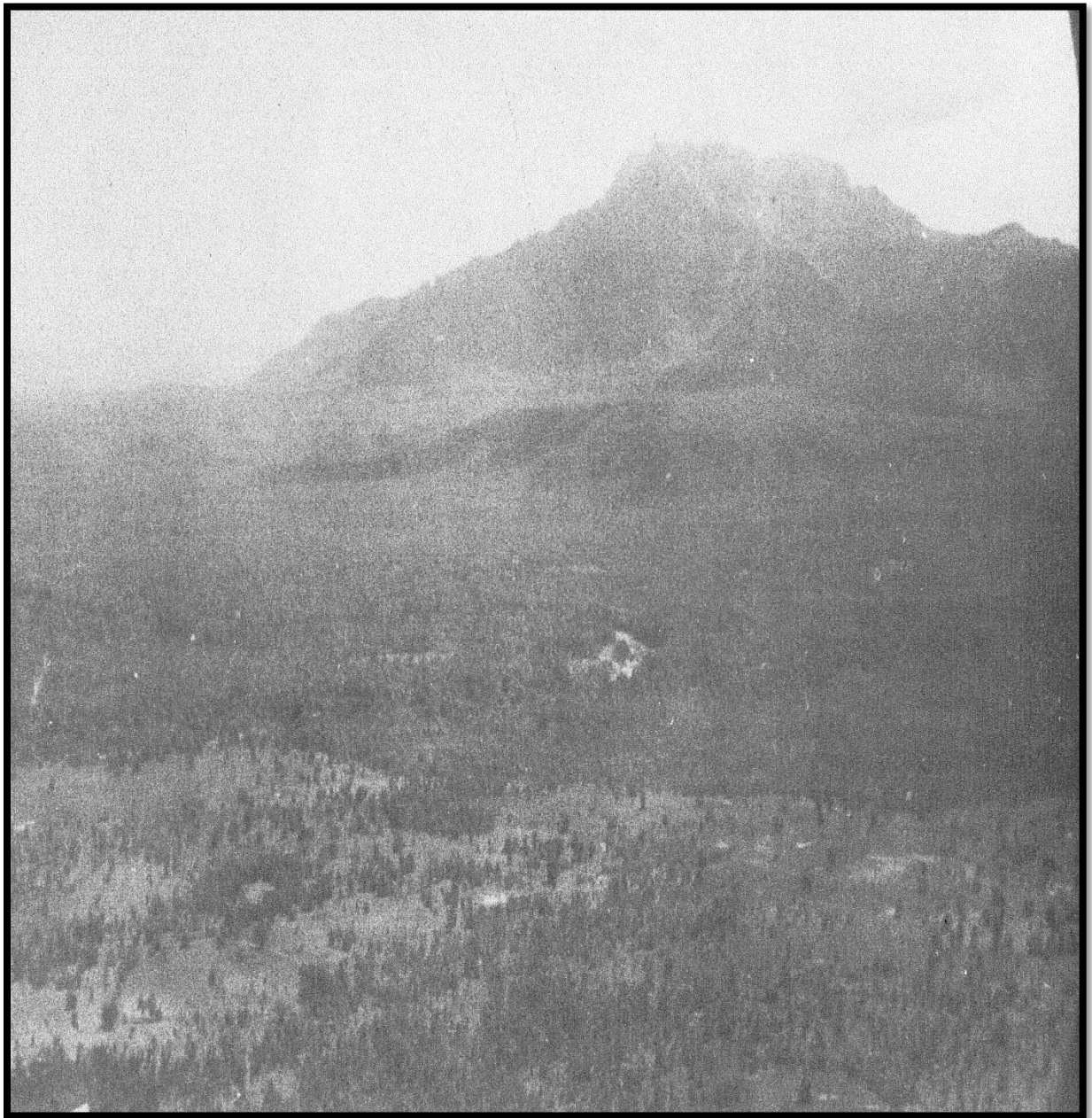
astride a network of rudimentary, but strategic roads. Owing to a suspected accommodation with the Pathet Lao in the area, Victor-44 was generally unchallenged by the enemy, who claimed free access to northern and eastern rights of way. Route-23, leading from the northern Tchepone area in Military Region Three, and Route-16 west from Khong Sedone, which were actually only dirt trails, intersected at Saravane. Then these trails spread out into additional feeder routes that continued either east toward Vietnam or south over the Bolovens to Pakse.

After loading the cabin section with--"wink-wink"--controversial items, we launched on the first shuttle, and skirted the western fringes of the Bolovens foothills. I liked the fact that Burke flew high. However, at an altitude where forest and jungle growth merged to create a continuous green blanket, scarcely any habitation or trails were visible, and all ground activity was obscured.

While I crosshatched projected bad guy areas on my map for future reference, Nick pointed out a position below that he called Muang Lao Nam. It was traditionally a large sector of Pathet Lao activity, where he had recently been shot at. As we soared northeast, it was difficult not to tense a bit, imagining that such a vast uncontrolled area probably teemed with Pathet Lao troops. Having the luxury of altitude flying over the territory was fine, but what would we encounter should a forced landing change our situation? I realized that this was not positive thinking, but I also believed in preparing for the worst, and an unannounced "moment of truth" was always possible in aviation.

We circled the Saravane Airfield as a precaution to determine if all was well below. This entailed looking for normal activity; people, particularly kids and animals wandering about. From our elevated vantage point, I could barely see





A portion of the Se Done Valley in Military Region Four. Bordering the Bolovens Plateau to the east, the broad alluvial valley stretched north of Pakse toward Saravane. Except for the larger towns of Khong Sedone and Saravane, the area was considered a "no man's" land that warranted high altitude flight.



Saravane showing the 06/24 oriented runway, road-trail system, and a mixture of French style and American fighting forts. Victor-44 (later Lima-44) was located over fifty miles northeast of Pakse and close to the eastern communist trail systems.

Jarina Collection-1968.

remnants or impressions of triangular French earthwork forts guarding the field perimeter.

Once on the ground, I had a good view of the natives and the unloading process. Squat, dark-skinned soldiers wearing the inevitable green uniforms differed in looks and attire from the predominant Mongolian features of tribals I had seen in Sayaboury and Xieng Khouang Provinces. They also seemed less reserved, joking while casually attending to their tasks. Even the ladies standing on the edge of the strip differed in appearance from the mountaineers. In contrast to Meo women, who covered their bodies with black turbans, tunics, pantaloons, and leggings, more of these ladies' skin was exposed. Dressed more like northeastern Thai, the women wore long sarongs, colored blouses, and their heads were bare, with long dark hair gathered in a bun.

There were numerous colorful stories pilots enjoyed repeating about Saravane and the region.

Until the Special Forces departure in the fall of 1962, the site had served as a forward White Star training base for the northern Pakse area. Living in huts near the airstrip, some of the men--Captain Sullivan, a major; Smitty, an E4; and Howie Baker, who later joined Air America as a kicker--would employ a helicopter to fly them to the Bolovens to conduct their jobs. Other hooches located in town housed personnel who worked locally. The men rode the short distance in a Jeep to the airfield to arrange air transportation.

During August, Air America crews had occasionally RON at Saravane. A jury-rigged shower covered by a tarpaulin existed between the huts. While the men showered, local girls, one pregnant, attempted to entice crews to purchase fellatio for one hundred kip. Adding to the perversion, White Star personnel kept a sex-crazed monkey named "horny" tied to a pole. For their

amusement, the men would throw him a Raggedy Ann doll to diddle. Just prior to achieving orgasm, they would snatch the doll away and watch him go crazy. It was considered funny, but so cruel.

During the winding down of the Kha training program, because of politics and the clean-up period, Mike Marshall worked the Bolovens and other area villes. One assignment was helping Special Forces teams collect M-1 rifles and carbines from the trainees to bury in case there was a resurrection of the program. A location was selected two to three minutes by helicopter northeast in the direction of Phou Kate. Mike obtained one of each weapon and mailed the guns to a friend in Houston. He never saw either rifle again. <sup>28</sup>

Dan "Red" Alston was another pilot who worked a lot in the Saravane-Bolovens areas. He was also an inveterate paperback reader. Captain Bob Hitchman was following Alston to Saravane one morning. While he was reading about cowboys and Indians with the H-34 trimmed for cruise flight, Red entered an extensive cloud bank.

Hitch radioed saying, *"You are reading your book again, aren't you? Are you above the clouds?"*

A little chagrined, Red replied, *"Yes."*

*"I'll see you at Saravane."*

One time at Pakse, Alston was assigned to proceed to Saravane and conduct a road reconnaissance. After landing, he noted a collection of generals and colonels huddled at the side of the runway. As a sergeant climbed the side of the helicopter Red shouted over the noise, *"I am here for the road recon."*

---

<sup>28</sup> Mike Marshall Email. The weapons had to be secreted because Vientiane leaders did not want armed Kha men, who could possibly stage an insurrection leading to an autonomous state. Years later Marshall talked to a retired Army lieutenant colonel, who had known many White Star personnel. He indicated that most of the men had been killed at some time during recurrent six-month Vietnam tours.

Surprised, the sergeant said, *"What road recon? We received a panic radio message from the fort on the trail to La Vi where the 250 defenders are running out of water and ammunition."* Then he climbed down and went back to the huddle. Within a few minutes he returned, indicating that the general would not authorize a resupply mission. Apparently, the situation was considered highly critical at the besieged fort, and he was concerned that the helicopter might get shot out of the sky.

Despite the negative odds, Alston and Flight Mechanic John Timmons elected to attempt a resupply mission. The H-34 was loaded, and they departed to the east. From a safe altitude, ground fire and the firefight could be seen below. Electing to conduct a drop, he descended in tight circles. At 900 feet he crossed the fort, while John kicked out a bundle of ammunition boxes stacked in the doorway. Misdirected, the wooden boxes burst on impact outside the garrison. The fort was still receiving light groundfire, so Alston conducted a second pass at a lower altitude. This bundle successfully landed inside the fort. Then he added power, and continued down the valley away from the hot area.

Alston landed at Pakse late that evening. While Timmons inspected the aircraft with a flashlight, Red said, *"They didn't lay a glove on us."*

John countered, *"You are right. They didn't lay a glove on us, just a bullet."* One round had hit a main rotor blade spar, popping the BIM indicator and a loss of nitrogen.

Alston then went to the Air America radio shack and radioed Udorn over the high frequency net that he required a main rotor blade. Later he received a message from operations directing him not to fly with the damaged blade.

Early the following morning, Saravane requested a helicopter to resupply the fort with water. At this time, it was

unknown if the fort was still held and controlled by government forces. Since Red's H-34 was AGP for a blade, Pinky Eaton and Flight Mechanic Joe Marlin were next in the combat barrel. Pinky inquired as to the best way to resupply the fort. Red suggested, *"After arriving over the fort, and as soon as the bad guys begin shooting at you, start descending in circles and keep descending until exactly over the fort. Then drop the load and get out of there fast."* This sounded reasonable to the other crew. However, Red was somewhat concerned, as Eaton would not have another helicopter crew to cover him should they encounter trouble at the fort.

When Eaton returned two hours later, Alston inquired as to mission success.

"Just like you said, Red."

"You came over the fort and they began shooting at you?"

"Yes."

*"Then you started down and around?"*

*"Damn, I thought you said kick the load out."* Marlin had discharged the fifty-five-gallon drum of water at 5,000 feet.

Then Marlin added facetiously, *"I don't know what the troops are upset about. I only missed the fort by about a mile."*

More recently, Jim Spillis and Red were flying at a location off the Bolovens. Jim was at the controls, while Red read his paperback. They were passing a large waterfall and a small hamlet of circled huts when the Filipino Flight Mechanic radioed that they were the subject of ground fire. Alston said to keep the machine moving and get out of the area. After Spillis "poured the coal to it," Red went back to reading his book. After turning a few pages, he looked up saying, "Whoa. Slow down." Apparently, Jim was headed in the direction of enemy-held Tchepone.

Wayne Knight related a story about early action on the Bolovens. The Pakse White Star team had just received a newly developed night vision scope, which they attached to a 75mm recoilless rifle. Although forbidden by superiors in Vientiane to conduct offensive action, they were anxious to field test the device. Therefore, when requested, one-night Wayne flew members of the team and the rifle to a location on the southern rim of the Bolovens. The position overlooked lowlands, which included a river with a rudimentary ferry crossing that the Pathet Lao used at night. Aided by the scope, one was able to observe activity around the ferry. After spotting troops on the ferry, the team fired a few rounds. Wayne was certain the recipients of the fire were never aware of the source. <sup>29</sup>

Following two more shuttles, using Phou Kate, an impressive 5,200-foot promontory located a few miles southeast of Victor-44, as a navigation gouge, I had a good overview of the route to Saravane and back to Pakse. <sup>30</sup> With such definitive checkpoints, it did not appear that one could easily become disoriented in the area. Nick did mention that a bogus nondirectional beacon (NDB), using the same identifier code as Pakse (PS), had been broadcasting from inside Cambodia. Attempting to suck an unwary crew to their deaths, something like this might be a concern while cruising south at night at altitude, or in adverse weather, but nothing to worry about during VFR conditions.

During the course of the day my mentor related a story about operations in flatland areas. When flying from point to point, a navigational technique of flying on the deck was acceptable if there was a discernable road to follow, but

---

<sup>29</sup> Dan Alston Interview.  
Jim Spillis Interview.  
Wayne Knight Email.

<sup>30</sup> Gouge: Slang for a thumb rule or aid to recall.

sometimes this method was impossible. Unable to fly low during foul weather, some pilots would call the radio operator asking for the ceiling and visibility at his station. If considered favorable, the pilot would fly on top of the weather, home in on the NDB, and ask the radio operator to step outside his shack and listen for a helicopter noise. When he could hear the aircraft overhead, the pilot would penetrate the clouds and land. This procedure, like the Magic Box, seemed another instance of special trust and confidence. Unless an emergency warranted, no one needed to get to an area that bad.

My thoughts were vindicated by the rest of Burke's story. A former Army pilot tried the method and got stuck on top not far from Vientiane. Several aircraft attempted to find him without success. Then a classic radio transmission followed. The pilot nervously stated he had been flying on the low fuel warning light for twenty minutes, and if he did not discover where he was during the next ten minutes, he was going to descend through the clouds. That is exactly what he did. Luck was with him, and he landed safely in a punch-bowl depression. The recovery was considered a miracle, as every hilltop surrounding the bowl was covered with clouds. Chilling stories like this convinced me to maintain my conservative flying habits.

After we secured Bravo for the night, while awaiting the fuel truck and a ride to town, Ben Naval began his daily maintenance tasks. This entailed a substantial effort. Ben checked the machine for oil leaks, and greased numerous main rotor head and tail rotor bearings. Apparently attempting to appease us, "Clerk" offered us free lodging in the AID guest house. (Nine hours, five plus forty-five project.)

In Thailand, I had trouble getting used to vehicles driving on the left side of the road. To a normally right-side driver, Brit-style could be nerve wracking and confusing, particularly



at a round-about. Although Thai and Lao cultures were similar in many respects, separate European influences had dominated driving habits in the two countries. Brits used the left side of the road; French the right. This was just another one of those many disparities in Asia with which a person had to cope.

After a short drive across the bridge spanning the Se Kong and dividing the airfield from the town proper, we arrived at the USAID house. It was an impressive looking cement and terrazzo one story villa, with a spacious front porch. Obviously too large for one man and a servant, the residence demonstrated that nothing but the best was too good for a USG representative. Having no idea what alternate accommodations would have been, the place looked good.

We were fed well by Mister USAID's servant, and although he was relatively taciturn during dinner, I secretly hoped he would relax and disclose more about the Pakse area, and the nature of his work. However, Nick's not-well-disguised dislike for the man continued, and perhaps this was the reason for his subdued communication.

## **BOLOVENS**

The following morning, with supply assignments finally planned, we were dispatched to Houei Kong on the Bolovens Plateau. In addition to towering mountains in the spiny Annamite chain that ran the length of the country, Laos boasted three high plateaus. Two of the most prominent and strategic were the Plain of Jars in the north and the southern Bolovens. Having only seen the former from a distance, I was unable to contrast the two until later years.

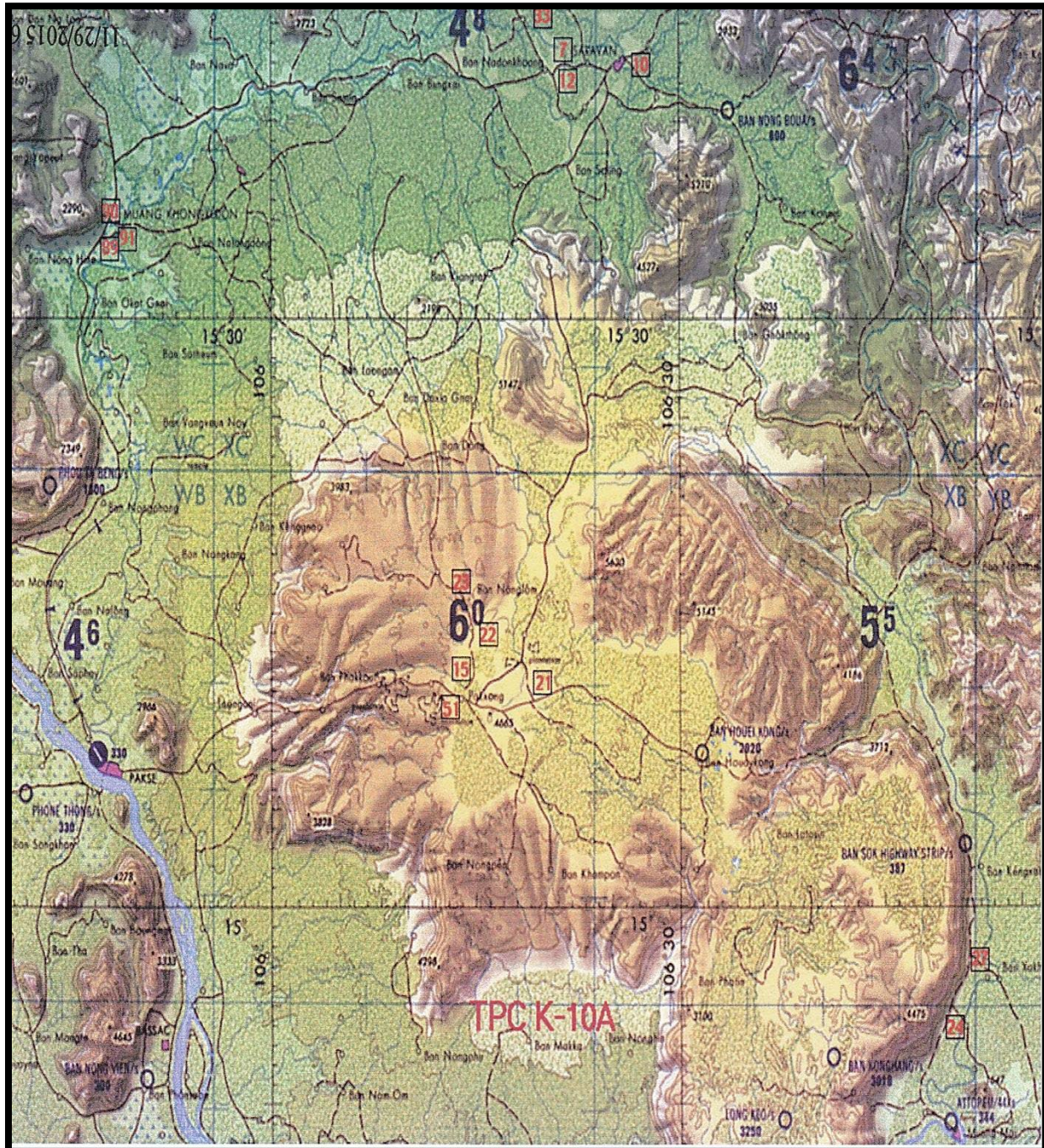
The French-named Plateau des Bolovens presented fertile, gently rolling upland terrain covered with brush and tall grass.

It was located in the western foothills of the southern Annamese Cordillera, the principal Indochina mountain range that formed a largely uncharted boundary between Laos and Vietnam. The basaltic lava extrusion emanating from the Annamite development averaged over 3,500 above sea level. Essentially saucer-shaped, the plateau sported 5,194-foot peaks on the northern rim and 3,058 foot hills to the south. Receiving the brunt of the annual southwest monsoon, the Bolovens received 160 inches of rain. Home to several tribes, the area was lightly populated by Loven, Nha Huen Sovei, and Sou of the Lao Theung (Mon-Khmer, also called Kha).<sup>31</sup>

Navigation proved easy. Employing Burke's method of road rambling, we flew east, flashing by 3,000-foot Batiene Mountain, and what some called the "Saigon Fork" at the Route-13/23 road junction. Then gradually ascending the Plateau, we constantly adjusted altitude commensurate with rising terrain. In order to keep the narrow black ribbon of Route-23 in sight, we had to remain almost directly overhead, as thick jungle growth encroached its edges. The road was paved for a little over seventeen miles, at which point it split. The main portion deviated north toward the old farming community of Paksong (Victor-05), while a scarcely discernable trail wandered east toward our destination. Just past the junction, what looked like a small extinct volcano jutted up from otherwise level terrain. Seeing this unusual feature, I speculated as to the Plateau's geologic origin. I tried to recall what my college roomie, Serge Gonzales, a geology major, had told me about such formations. Was it an up-welling of the earth, or had the area once been an enormous volcano that collapsed on itself (a caldera)? Perhaps it was the latter. Resembling a doughnut, the small, but

---

<sup>31</sup> Information derived from the Internet version of the Encyclopedia *Britannica*.



1:250,000 Topographic map showing the Route-13/23 "Saigon Fork" junction east of Pakse and just south of Phou Batiene, Route-23 ascending the Bolovens Plateau, and the road leading to Houie Kong. The Se Kong river and valley is depicted off the Bolovens eastern rim.



A view southwest over Phou Batiene (later called Radio Mountain). The Se Done tributary can be seen entering the Mekong River at Pakse.  
Jarina Collection.



A smoky season view of New Paksong at the junction of Routes-23 (north to Thateng and Saravane) and 232 east to Houei Kong. The extinct volcano was located to the right of town.

Author Collection.



The extinct volcano, located south of Paksong and the Houei Kong road comprised an excellent checkpoint. The soil was so rich that coffee bushes planted inside and outside the landmark flourished.

Author Collection.

predominant feature lent credibility to my layman's theory on the evolution of the Plateau. As we whisked by, I noticed trees growing inside and outside the funnel.

Spillis had been right. From the first time I saw the Bolovens, I thought this should be classified one of the wonders of the world--Mother Earth's positive contribution to humanity. Thus far, it was difficult to imagine anything more spectacular than what I observed on the Plateau. Much like an unspoiled paradise, the high, fertile plain exhibited almost every facet of nature and its beauty. It contained grassland, rolling forested areas, ravines, rivers, abundant wildlife, waterfalls that gracefully spilled off the rims, and Stone Age natives, seemingly content in their semi-isolation from the lowlanders.

Strategically, whoever controlled the Plateau controlled the eastern reaches of Pakse. Stretching roughly forty-five miles west to east and fifty miles north to south, the Plateau was almost completely rimmed to the north and east by higher terrain. To the east, further protecting much of the area and its inhabitants from eons of unfriendly incursions, sheer-sided cliffs plunged three thousand feet or more to the Kong River Valley and lowlands below. It was only to the west, through a gently ascending corridor, that the Plateau seemed to welcome and open her arms to civilization.

The Houei Kong (Victor-56) "road" terminated where the trail widened into a grassy STOL strip. As at Nong Khai in Thailand, the airstrip was incorporated into a common thoroughfare. Contributing to the ease of construction, this low budget practice seemed to be the norm in Laos. On the approach, I did not see a village. Except for one coarse hut hugging the south side, the area was bare. After landing we discovered that the structure belonged to a missionary family, the focal point of our USAID-sponsored trip.

**DAVIS**

John Davis, a young missionary belonging to the same interdenominational group as the Tubbs family in Sayaboury, met us at the aircraft. Sporting broad shoulders, he was a large, good-looking person, who could have easily passed for a former football player. I instinctively liked him from the first moment we met. He was a down-to-earth, friendly type one felt comfortable with, and he was obviously starved for conversation. His personality reminded me of my favorite cousin, Reverend Robert T. Anderson.

We chatted while the ship was unloaded by scantily-clad bronze skinned tribesmen, and supplies were distributed. Within a relatively short time, I learned more from John about conditions on the Plateau than I would from a host of other briefings. He, his wife Eleanor, and infant son had recently moved to Houei Kong from another small native village. Quickly gaining rapport among the animist Loven, or Kha--the generic term describing aboriginal tribesmen throughout Laos--Davis remained when the White Star training units withdrew from the Plateau. Now, it appeared that he was completely at the mercy of the local natives, the other Mon-Khmer tribes--Alak, Suay, Katu, Bru, and peoples not yet cataloged--who inhabited the Plateau. Lastly, there was also the Pathet Lao element, who traditionally were not particularly kind to men of God.

In contrast to the more affluent Tubbs family's lifestyle, the Davises endured a mean and primitive life. Perhaps their youth and devotion to service demanded this. They lived in a crude, rectangular thatch long-house, built for them by appreciative natives. Sparsely appointed, there were no electricity, running water, or other creature comforts. The only "modern convenience" construed as such, was a crude stove raised



above the dirt floor that John had cleverly fashioned from a discarded fifty-five-gallon steel drum.

John's pretty blond wife, Eleanor, was already firing up the ersatz stove, preparing local coffee and black glutinous rice for us. With a little reflection, given another time and place, I judged the tall woman would have been considered strikingly beautiful, given proper make-up and wearing a svelte dress. But in this remote location, she was only another woman in native dress. I did not want to reduce their precious stock of food, but was quite hungry, and it was impossible to refuse their genuine hospitality. The coffee was delicious. The brew was made from a special black bean, previously grown and harvested by planters in the rich Plateau soil. No longer cared for, the bushes grew wild and the berries were gathered at random by locals. When I told John about the trees I had seen on the sides of the mini-volcano, he replied that they were actually coffee bushes.

The history lesson continued. We learned that when colonial-oriented French occupied Indochina in the early 20th century, plantations abounded on the Bolovens and its western slopes. Coffee provided a main crop, but succulent pineapples, durian, bananas, peaches, pears, and other delicious fruits and vegetables were also grown. John said that if we had flown into the Paksong area, we would have seen abandoned teak, rubber, and tea plantations, as well as herds of cattle being raised in savannah-like areas. Sadly, the agricultural potential of the Plateau had largely fallen into disuse. During the middle 1950s many French planters vacated the Bolovens following Lao independence and the ensuing decline of colonialism. As a result of the recurrence of hostility, increased enemy activity, and demands for taxes by the Pathet Lao, only French farmer Jean

Cadeaux remained, struggling to eke out a living in the Paksong area.<sup>32</sup>

While we sipped the thick, tasty brew, John continued his monologue regarding life in the wild remote region. Hard pressed to survive, he and Eleanor grew their own vegetables, but relied on local tribesmen for necessary staples, such as fresh meat and rice. During lean growing years, the crop was shared by all hands. We learned that these gentle people appreciated Air America pilots, for in the past crews had donated food, books, and other items tending to link them to civilization.

When the subject of health was broached, John offered that out of necessity, he had become a doctor from reading books. God for the soul; medicine for the body. Aiding him was the fact that Eleanor was a registered nurse. In addition to caring for their year and a half old boy, she periodically tended to eighteen lepers who lived in a designated community several miles from Houei Kong. Silently, I wondered how this lovely person kept their lives intact under such harsh conditions. Even Burke's rough exterior softened when he gazed at the comely woman and the beautiful child. Experiencing similar thoughts, we exchanged knowing glances. We were both appalled at the couple's rustic existence and apparent disregard for safety, but we could not help admiring their devotion to duty.

While we were digesting the inspiring spirit of these two extraordinary people, Davis continued talking about his attempts to develop a common language for the various tribes living in the region. By undertaking this task and continuing to further gain their confidence, he was intent on drawing all the people together into a cohesive society. To achieve this end, he

---

<sup>32</sup> For more information regarding Jean Cadeaux, his relationship with Air America, and the intelligence community, see Book One.

devoted numerous hours on his motorcycle and on foot visiting villages and charting the eastern rim.

Jaded by my experience and limited knowledge thus far in the confusing Theater, I was a little suspicious when I heard his plans for the area. In an excellent position to gather intelligence, I wondered about this phase of his operation, and how Pathet Lao commanders viewed it. But he had faith and believed there was no serious threat to his person, and that God would always protect him. John Davis was a tough individual, convinced of this invincibility, and dedicated to his mission. Further explaining his lack of apprehension as to enemy intentions against his kind, he cited a recent example. Not long before, a Pathet Lao patrol had detained an Australian missionary at a roadblock on the northern reaches of the Plateau between Ban Pak Song and Ban Thateng. After questioning the man of the cloth, they released him without harm. For this and other reasons, John was confident of success in his vocation, but I certainly was not. <sup>33</sup>

We reluctantly left the Davis family. From all appearances, they were truly good people, leaving a warm glow inside me. I believed that they were the most interesting couple I had yet encountered in the country. I did think they might be a bit misguided, and I resolved to generate as much help for them as

---

<sup>33</sup> Missionaries working in Laos were definitely at risk. Many Catholic Priests had been murdered by Pathet Lao in Military Region Two.

possible.<sup>34</sup>

We were not ready to return to Pakse. Eager to observe a little of the Plateau beyond Houei Kong, with Nick's approval, I flew eleven miles toward the northeast rim, where John indicated that he had driven his motorcycle. Forward of this point, the map showed sheer rocky and vegetated slopes that tumbled thousands of feet into the narrow Se Kong river valley. East of this canyon, terrain became mountainous again, stretching almost fifty miles through inhospitable and uncontrolled government territory to the South Vietnamese border.

Close to the Plateau's edge, ravines, rivers, and jungle gave way to sparsely covered rolling hills. We cautiously explored the region, as neither of us had flown to this

---

<sup>34</sup> Author Note: Continuing their appointed work, the Davis family remained at Houei Kong for many years. Caring Air America pilots continued to send books and food to them. Their hospitality never waned when we were in the area. In later years, as their family expanded to three children, for better security, a two-story house was built for them in the native village located northeast in a shaded section close to the airstrip. This was a sign of the indigenous people's total acceptance of them. Despite their medical knowledge, John contracted a deadly form of cerebral malaria that was endemic on the Bolovens. Following three attacks of the incurable disease, and increased enemy pressure, the family departed the area.

Wayne Knight Email. Wayne used to make every attempt to stop at Houei Kong, visit the Davises, drink their home-grown coffee, and eat the home-baked cake.

In 1985, while flying in Iran Jaya for Freeport Indonesia, he made weekly trips to native villages to purchase a ton of vegetables for the company. One of the villes they visited regularly was Bega, home to Don and Alice Gibbons, missionaries from the Christian Missionary Alliance. One day adverse weather caused him to overnight in Bega. During an evening meal with the Gibbons, he discovered their mission was also involved in Thailand and Laos. Alice indicated her cousin had lived at a place called Houei Kong in Laos. Surprised, Wayne said he knew a women there by the name of Eleanor Davis. She had been working on the Bolovens as a single woman. Later, while attending a California mission retreat, she met and married another missionary named John Davis. John had worked in Attopeu Province for some time, but the two had never met until attending the retreat.

The last time Knight heard from Alice, the Davises were living in California.

periphery before. Then we spotted the unexpected. On a low hill, amid a few trees, a small herd of gray elephants grazed without fear. The animals were of assorted sizes, ranging from a mighty bull, to smaller females with young standing close to their moms. What a sight! I was enthralled and my heart thumped wildly in my chest. I had not experienced such a happy feeling observing raw nature since turning thousands of porpoises in the ocean off Mindoro Island, Philippine Islands, with Charlie McLenon, during Operation Tulungan. Despite our hovering close to them, they paid little attention to our thundering machine. To them, we could have been a noisy bird defecating in the forest. The upside of the sighting was the fact that there were no humans present for miles.

As I turned to retrace my flight path, the bull finally acknowledged us. In a parting gesture, he cynically tossed his head and trunk in our direction. I could not help wondering what other wonders could be discovered on this marvelous plateau.

After our encounter, Burke related a sad tale regarding a previous meeting with pachyderms. While supporting elements of a White Star team during a Plateau reconnaissance, a herd of elephants was spotted. The soldiers, not perceiving the beasts as wonders of nature, but as transportation vehicles for the enemy, decided to act. Circling the area, Nick began hearing clicking sounds from the cabin section. Intent on destroying the enemy herd, the team was busily arming mortar shells, field style, by banging and activating them on the deck of the passenger compartment, and tossing them out the cabin door. Like the practice of dropping live hand grenades from a helicopter in peanut butter jars, this was an extremely dangerous operation, one many pilots never condoned. Worried about the chance of a shell exploding and blowing the H-34 to smithereens, Nick made them stop. His action most likely saved the animals.

Flying the HUS-1 during those early days in various environments was a constant learning process for me. Since flubbing the steep approach with Abadie, I had listened to pilots discuss how it was easy to conduct an approach into a confined landing zone, and then have difficulty departing because of a heavy load, high density altitude, obstacles, and adverse wind factors. In those situations, the helicopter had been too heavy for the power available. In order to effect the transition, the crew had to unload cargo, drain fuel, or a combination of both. On the way back to Pakse, I mentioned this to Nick and he indicated that since we were light on fuel and had plenty of time, I should practice the maneuver. Why not? That was part of why I was here. I would rather have someone more experienced and willing show me the ropes, and help to forestall future problems.

Burke selected and directed me to land in a tiny bowl-shaped confined area surrounded by moderate sized trees and shrubs. Using the technique I had developed in the Marine Corps, my slow power on approach and landing were perfect. Once on the ground, I assessed the conditions confronting me for the confined area takeoff. After about a thousand hours of flight time and ample confined area work, I could not recall encountering such a tight spot. I was a bit nervous, but Nick was confident that I could take off without a problem. I was not so sure. It was very hot, and with little wind for additional lift, power and pilot technique were the only variables I could count on during the departure phase.

As Ben Naval cleared my tail, I hovered and slowly backed the aircraft a few feet to the edge of the clearing. The trees at the forward edge still looked menacingly close to clear on the short ground run. Rolling on 2800 RPM and adding power, remaining on the down-wash ground cushion, I slowly inched

forward in a flat attitude until detecting the characteristic shudder signaling the onset of transitional lift. At that point, I adjusted the cyclic slightly forward to compensate for the increased lift and pitch up in nose attitude. Despite my concerns, the added lift kicked in at just the proper moment, enabling me to safely clear the trees and climb out. "Piece of cake," Nick remarked. Yes, I had to admit that it had been a good confidence-building maneuver. As a result, I was more impressed with the helicopter's performance and thankful that Nick had provided me the opportunity to gain experience as to what the machine was capable of in a tight field spot, (Seven plus twenty-five hours, four plus twenty project.)

During supper we informed "Clerk" of the elephant encounter. For the first time since our arrival, he became somewhat animated, suggesting that the next day after delivering supplies to outlying projects, we might show him and his son the herd's location.

On the final day of the RON, we were finally privy to a taste of USAID accomplishments. Shuttling northwest, we hauled several loads of corrugated tin roofing and other building materials north along Route-13 to model villages. The equipment was to be used for schools and medical facilities. A bright, enthusiastic young American engineer at one site informed us that the greatest problem of the program was convincing local people that the development projects were worthwhile, and would benefit everyone in the village. Adhering to the strict AID policy of encouraging self-help, it was becoming increasingly difficult to stimulate the often-indolent populace to provide labor for the work.

The representative indicated that it was an equitable arrangement for them. While they labored for the good of the village, USG provided sustenance in the form of food, clothing,

and medicine. In addition, water wells were being dug in the area, roads built, and agriculture and animal husbandry taught. Even small manufacturing facilities were being erected. With such tangible projects, it was easy for me to become caught up in the young man's enthusiasm for his work. Despite what I had been told by old timers, my attitude regarding the negative publicity of USAID programs was changing. Here were concrete results of the rural development program. I was impressed by what I saw, and believed that what the organization was trying to achieve in the south might go a long way toward countering enemy propaganda, and possibly help foster the people's eventual support of the Vientiane-based central government. However, Nick was still biased and pessimistic about any lasting benefits. He claimed that he had seen similar attempts at such progress before, and they all had failed.

The Plateau was barren that afternoon. It was as if the elephants seen the previous day had never existed. To justify the sightseeing trip, Clerk had us conduct a stop at Houei Kong, where he conversed with John Davis about the requirements of the people.

Then we were called home. It had been a most informative and interesting trip, and I placed Pakse at the top of my list of interesting places to work (seven plus twenty-five, and four plus twenty).

I do not believe that Clerk was favorably impressed with us, for prior to being relieved and departure to CONUS, crews were never invited to stay at his spacious villa again, and they had to find overnight accommodations elsewhere.



## **AGENCIES**

The evolution of the United States Government and civilian agencies involvement in Laos began long before my entry into Southeast Asia. Stemming from Chinese aggression during the Korean War, and possible communist expansion into all of Southeast Asia, USG was motivated to provide military and economic aid to nations in the region. Therefore, a bilateral agreement providing economic and technical assistance to Laos was established in 1951.

Early in 1954, the U.S. was considering entering the First Indochina War during the battle at Dien Bien Phu, where France subsequently lost its regional colonial status. Following the French defeat, and signing of the Geneva Accords during May 1954, Laos was accorded full independence. In order to counter communist designs in the area, under the Mutual Security Act of 1955, foreign aid to Laos was greatly increased. The program was specifically designed to bolster the Lao army and Royal Lao Government, rather than to promote economic development, or self-sufficiency in defense. Coordinated by the National Security Council (NSC), under the direction of the White House, aid was administered by the Department of State, the Department of Defense (DOD), and the International Cooperation Administration (ICA).

The United States Overseas Mission (USOM) formed the parent unit that was charged with directly administering and supervising aid projects in Laos. This was mostly related to military matters. Initially, USOM's role was to support American stations in Southeast Asia with housing, offices, and commissaries. The organization also gathered intelligence, supplied arms and training, and logistics, including travel and ammunition.

USOM Thailand, based in Bangkok, became the headquarters for Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Burma, and the Philippine Islands. Thailand had been selected because the country was deemed relatively stable and fairly democratic, had good relations with all the countries, and was considered a solid ally of the West.

During the early fifties, since USOM already had facilities and support in place, both USAID programs and the United States Information Service (USIS) began to work under USOM's umbrella in Laos, reimbursing the military for services rendered. USOM provided an excellent cover. Military assistance and training, police assistance and training, development assistance, and government propaganda could all be provided, while CIA worked under the cloak of Civic Action.

Causing considerable disunity and confusing policy, the separate agencies were generally not responsible to local entities, and reported only to their parent agency in Washington. Throughout the fifties, U.S. Embassies tended to operate separately, while at the same time passing directives from the White House and reporting back on other agencies' progress.

Sub-units existed under USOM's broad spectrum. In order to legally maintain the tenets of the 1954 Geneva Accords that prohibited a U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Laos, the military aid program was sheltered under USOM.<sup>35</sup> Initially staffed by strictly civilian economists, by the end of 1955, the inability to adequately evaluate RLG requests for equipment was recognized. As a result, a Programs Evaluation

---

<sup>35</sup> Although participating in Geneva Accords negotiations, USG did not sign the 1954 agreement. Nevertheless, efforts were made to adhere to the protocols. In time, this went by the wayside, when it became obvious that the communists would not honor the agreements, and were using it to further their aggressive objectives.

Office (PEO) was established and administered by more experienced and adept civilian-attired military specialists.

Foreign aid in the fifties was focused on training, university education in the U.S., and large-scale infrastructure projects such as airports, universities, industrial parks, sewer systems, and telephones. USAID managed the training portion, but the ICA, which had been established under the European Marshall Plan after World War Two in response to communist aggression, was utilized for everything else--especially to finance expensive contracts. To expedite their task, the ICA utilized USOM in Southeast Asia because there were no reliable private contractors or competent host government personnel to implement or supervise such large-scale projects, as had been the case in Europe. In addition, ICA maintained a special office in Washington to assess the effectiveness of foreign aid programs, and make recommendations for improvements.

Despite injecting millions of dollars, mostly in military goods, into Laos, by 1959 it was abundantly clear that the foreign aid program had failed. Equally obvious was the fact that unless the policy was drastically changed, Laos would never become the anti-communist buffer originally envisioned under SEATO. Part of the problem had been a distinct lack of coordinated programs, attention to rural areas, and ethnic minority issues. Partially constrained by the Royal Lao Government's lack of knowledge, or indifference relating to these issues, U.S. officials were unable to devote sufficient attention to rural economies, tribal organization, and urban development to influence Lao destiny. Only when an actual political emergency occurred, and a massive relief airlift operation--Operation Booster Shot--was conducted in the rural areas, was progress toward the real needs of Laos addressed.

Curiously, when the emergency was over, the cargo drop operation was terminated.

Over time, because of corruption and poor administration in the ranks of both U.S. and Lao officials, serious abuses surfaced in the AID program, a few of which have already been mentioned. By 1959, Congressional investigations were being conducted to determine why the Lao program had failed. Many reasons were listed. Still, the ICA expressed the same rationalizations, contending that, despite the known problems, Laos had not been overrun by communists.<sup>36</sup>

Deepening conflict and crises during April 1961 influenced the U.S military to shed its cover and form a full blown MAAG Laos. Following the conversion, USOM was still responsible for administering aid projects.

During the spring of the same year, the Kennedy Administration, attempting to resolve the deteriorating situation in Laos, implemented a world-wide "Country Team" concept. Under this directive, the U.S. Ambassador, in addition to his function as Chief of Mission, became tantamount to a director of operations for all USG programs in a country.

Later clarification to the directive indicated:

---

<sup>36</sup> John Pratt. *The Laotian Fragments*, (New York: Viking Press, 1974) 29-30. "Each of the American agencies concerned with Laos, the State Department, the Pentagon, the Agency for International Development, and the CIA sent people to Laos to carry out their agency's programs, people with money to spend...Each had different interests and views on how to handle Laos as a foreign policy problem for the U.S. and each had its own private channels of communication to Washington, where the battles were carried on as vigorously as in the larger arena. In time, the differences between the agencies and departments became more marked and the exchanges sharper, with the CIA and the Pentagon generally on one side and the State Department and AID on the other. Each agency came to pursue its own programs and policies with less and less regard for the other and with little relationship to an overall American policy."

*"The ambassador is the leader, the coordinator, and the supervisor of all official United States representatives in the country to which he is accredited. As such, he bears the responsibility for success or failure in achieving foreign policy objectives."*

With initiation of the Country Team, future Lao ambassadors were selected for their experience and perceived ability to implement the Kennedy policy.

During the same year, Congress established the Agency for International Development to administer all U.S. bilateral aid programs. Under a series of agreements, support and funding were to be allocated to Laos on an annual basis. Funding and obligations for both countries was to be negotiated annually and signed by the USAID Mission Director and a representative of the RLG. One of the Lao sections included the Rural Development Division (RDD). Subordinate to RDD was Refugee Relief, Refugee Resettlement, and Community Development. Other divisions were Public Health, Education, Roads, Agriculture, and others.

The Kennedy Administration's decision to "neutralize" Laos in lieu of war, and the May ceasefire, resulted in reduced hostilities and the ultimate signing of the July 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos. With the advent of "peace" in Laos, the AID program measurably decreased and many Americans departed the country.

During October, lumped surreptitiously under USAID's broad hat, was the Requirements Office/United States Agency for International Development, or RO/USAID. The military unit was formed as a legal loophole to circumvent one provision of the 1962 Geneva Accords, stipulating that no foreign troops were to be stationed on Lao soil. Replacing the departing MAAG unit, an office similar to the PEO was staffed by "civilian" personnel, and was created to implement and supervise military assistance

to Laos. To support RO/USAID requests for supplies, services, and training, Deputy Chief Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand (DEPCHIEF-JUSMAAG-THAI), was established in Bangkok. JUSMAAG Headquarters Thailand was commanded by General Ruben Tucker, former MAAG Laos Commanding Officer.

Gradually an "untainted" USAID distanced itself from USOM in almost every country because of local claims and reputation that the agency was merely a front and cover for the CIA and its covert activities.

Other civilian agencies worked under the auspices of USAID to promote USG policy. One of the more effective was the International Voluntary Services, or IVS. This organization, a template for the emerging U.S Peace Corps, was dedicated to better understanding among people throughout the world by low-cost self-help projects in underdeveloped countries. Founded in 1953, with a governing board comprised of both Catholic and Protestants derived from fifteen church denominations, IVS personnel recruited and administered technical assistance in Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Nepal, Laos, and South Vietnam.

Originally like Air America, IVS performed contract work for a government agency. Funds were available for small projects, vehicles, payrolls, and housekeeping. By the fall of 1962 more IVS people were assigned to Laos than AID, a majority of whom had already departed for Bangkok. In addition to IVS rural development projects, there was an education team at the

teachers' training college on the outskirts of Vientiane. <sup>37</sup>

## **FLIPSE**

One interesting volunteer for rural development projects was Joe Flipse. <sup>38</sup> Joe, a tall, wiry Floridian, originally from New Jersey, was not a typical IVS candidate. Unlike most young do-gooder recruits, who wanted nothing to do with the military, Flipse had already served a tour in the U.S. Army.

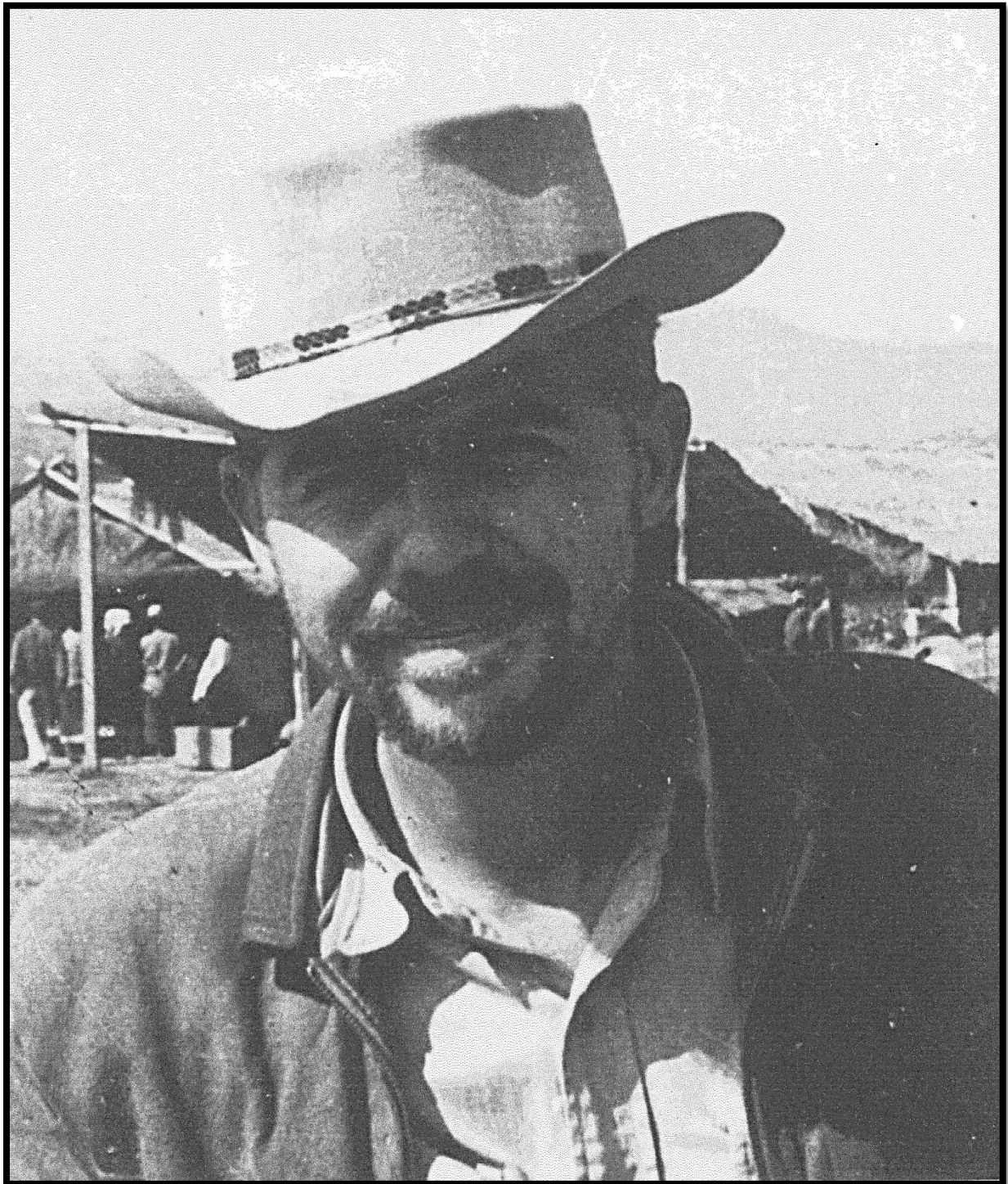
IVS recruited Joe in the States with many glowing promises. Ostensibly, he would be working in tandem with the Royal Lao Government's Ministry of the Interior on development projects. His tour was portrayed by superiors as being a valuable career advancement opportunity. Qualifications for the positions were stringent. A candidate was required to have attained a college degree and some experience in his field. But exceptions were rendered for individuals like Sam Tong's Pop Buell, who had vast experience in agriculture. For security reasons, an applicant had to be vetted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Later something changed in the hiring process. IVS-Laos began recruiting people out of high school with no experience in

---

<sup>37</sup> The segment was compiled from many sources including: Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate. *Vietnam and Southeast Asia* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1963) 19. Committee on Government Operations. *U.S. Aid Operations in Laos* (Washington: GPO. 1959) 6-7, 18, 45-46. Blaine Jensen Letter, 09/04/98. *United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad. Kingdom of Laos* (Washington, D.C. April 1970) 527-528, 565-569. Douglas S. Blaufarb. *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970* (Rand, 1972) 56. Thomas Ennis. *Lights and Shadows on Vietnam: Current History, December 1961*, 37.

<sup>38</sup> The following lengthy narrative includes a description of events viewed from Joe Flipse's perspective. Containing much local color and sarcasm, it tends to better explain the unvarnished conditions in Laos during 1962, especially in the Pakse area.



Joe Flipse wearing his characteristic hat with a snake band.  
Flipse Collection.



any vocation. It appeared, because of the contract with AID, that IVS-Washington merely began filling a quota, hiring anyone, many ill-suited to function independently in the field. Some horror stories included the accountant who left in a straitjacket after only two days in country, the dishonorable discharge type, the band drummer, and the new category of worker-generalist. Influencing much of the new influx of personnel was the U.S. Embassy rationale: more people in the field would somehow counter communism. This thinking smacked of the mentality at the time that possession is nine-tenths of the law. Politicians still had a lot to learn about communist methods.

Flipse had arrived in Vientiane during mid-April 1962. Attempting to obtain a foundation in Lao, prior to assignment to the field, he spent most of the first month studying the language and learning about the culture and the people. He found this aspect of the job quite difficult. The "teachers," local hires, possessed no classroom experience, and were struggling to learn English. Since they possessed little expertise in explaining the difficult tonal language, they just repeated a Lao term louder each time. Employing the French system of "shut-up, I am the teacher, you are the pupil," Joe was not allowed to look at his textbook. It was not until he did that he began to better understand the nuances of Lao.

Before long Joe learned a considerable amount regarding past and current events in the confusing country. The unsettling revelations were not encouraging to a new guy, particularly accounts regarding corruption and the pre-1962 foul-ups in the AID program. Most mind boggling of all the shady deals was FAR diversion of AID cement to erect the towering Monument to the Dead in Vientiane in lieu of improving the Wattay Airport runway.

U.S. foreign aid had a long tradition of implementing refugee relief and major projects. Usually following a war, when fighting was over, USG representatives entered a country, funding and supervising resettlement and rebuilding projects. However, in Laos this process had been necessarily atypical. The situation there was perplexing to an agency that had no experience with modern communist insurgency, or coping with ongoing hostilities. Moreover, problems were compounded by Kong Le's coup in 1960, the Nam Tha debacle in May, and a firm U.S. policy toward Laos. The President, who should have been better briefed, was heard referring to the country as Lay-oss, and State Department officials were not helpful to the situation. As a panacea, the Geneva Accord talks were thought to supply the solution to Lao problems. Just shake hands with the communists, sit down, and forge a gentleman's agreement and QED.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile in Laos, AID people were hanging on. Since there was no well-defined message from the White House, representatives did not dare to plan anything, for it was not likely to be approved. From that time on, projects just drifted in a never-ending abyss.

Habitually, government agencies thrived on paperwork and top-down policy. On a local level, it normally required a year or more of planning to fund most projects. Then contracts had to be bid and let in the States. After that, employing Congressional "pork barrel" politics, supplies had to be shipped overseas, as local material was not acceptable to U.S. businesses. Because of the ensuing delays, it might take three years for important items to arrive in a project area. By that time, the individual who had requested specialized equipment usually had completed his tour, and had returned to the States,

---

<sup>39</sup> QED: A Latin geometry acronym meaning the problem is solved, or in normal dialogue, the argument is proved.

or to another world assignment. Consequently, with no one to supervise its deployment, equipment disappeared into a warehouse, thus covering up an embarrassment to Congress and AID-Washington. When these facts were eventually ferreted out, they made excellent copy for reporters, particularly those with ties to Time and Newsweek magazines.

Like flies on sugar, newsmen from worldwide agencies briefly descended on the tiny country of Laos. Residing at the Constellation Hotel in Vientiane, they visited the United States Information Service (USIS), and received the latest press handouts. The more venturesome patronized local bars soliciting current rumors. Then they boarded a plane to Bangkok, where, from relative luxury, they filed their bylines. Curiously, dispatches were usually similar in content. However, accounts were well received by the news-thirsty "real world," and like the erroneous reporting about our wild west "heroes," the shaded stories blossomed regarding a country about which most people had no knowledge. With the Marine landing in Thailand during the Nam Tha crises, more reporters entered the Theater. Since there had never been in depth reporting on Laos, they could write anything they wanted--and they did.

Inconsistent with what he learned about the country, Joe Flipse discovered most Western published articles regarding Laos were largely fabricated. Any reliable source of communication at the time was virtually nonexistent, and much regarding the military situation was unknown. An uncensored letter written to Joe's parents on 16 May helps to explain what American thinking was during the spring of 1962:

*"The Marines landed in Bangkok today, but I don't think diplomacy will allow them to be brought into the country. They will have to stay across the river in Thailand. This whole situation is becoming ridiculous. If you don't hear from me*

*don't worry. They will move us out of here in plenty of time and will be busy resettling refugees.*

*Nothing more is happening here. If it was, we wouldn't know about it anyway. The only semi-reliable information we get is from the Bangkok newspaper. The communists, as you know, are flying supplies into Vang Vieng about 100 miles north of here; also [to] another town south of Luang Prabang. The people are pretty shook up since they don't have any confidence in their army. The insecure area is about three kilometers out of [Vientiane] in any direction..*

*We don't know how long we'll be here, but we keep planning as if there were no problems within the government. This is not very realistic, but we cannot just sit around waiting for this situation to clear."*

To counter adverse publicity, help eliminate thievery, corruption, and to effect more control over goods, AID eventually established a successful system with regional warehouses. Thereafter, materials and supplies were stored in AID warehouses in provincial capitals, and nothing was supposed to exit a building without an authorized signature. For some time, the system caused AID-Washington consternation and confusion. With no experience in supporting clandestine operations or unique delivery methods to supply mountaineers, they were slow to accept the fact that goods were being airdropped into the jungle without receipts. Of course, the mission in Vientiane resolved these problems, and AID Laos eventually managed to have a program despite USG constraints.

Flipse's superior, IVS Chief of Party, Bob Ziegler, was obligated to fulfill a long promised well drilling commitment to an outlying village at Ban Phama. Learning that Joe had experience oiling a rig on the family's Florida ranch, he was delegated for the task. Once at the site problems abounded.

Existing hand dug wells were too deep to manually extract water, and the rig was inadequate for the job. Also, politics dictated that the well be drilled on common ground. After several attempts, the project failed miserably. The freshly drilled well produced little water and caused all interested parties to depart disappointed. It marked a poor start for Joe and the well drilling program.

Flipse was infinitely more successful repairing and rebuilding vehicles. Owing to a requirement for more rolling stock to support the rapidly increasing number of IVS personnel in the field, Joe embarked on a search and scrounging mission. After a few days, he discovered twenty old Jeeps in a FAR ordnance scrap yard far out on the Tha Deua Road. Sharing half with an AID well driller, he dragged the aged junks, many left over from PEO days, back to Vientiane. Then, with a few available parts, he began their reconstruction, while simultaneously conducting a Lao mechanic on-the-job training (OJT) program.

When the first machine was ready to roll, Ziegler ordered a change to the original drab green color. So, another search commenced for suitable paint. Consequently, the first IVS Jeeps were painted bright Dutch Yellow. Flipse discovered the vehicles made great trading items. Everyone wanted one. However, the old reworked parts did not last long, and the dinosaurs either found their way back to him for repairs, or he had to fly to remote areas like Sayaboury to fix them. The work kept him greasy and busy, and the Jeeps provided real job security.

Toward the latter part of August, when the last Jeeps were in the process of completion, Ziegler asked Joe if he could establish an abbreviated mechanics' training course in Pakse. At this time, Air America and Bird and Son crews were still air dropping tons of rice to refugees in the mountains for

subsistence, until dryland rice could be harvested during the following three weeks. Even with this crop, the food scarcity would not be completely alleviated, as a portion would have to be saved and dedicated to seed for next year's planting. Because people were only eking out a bare existence, Joe believed his time would be better utilized by showing the people how to efficiently grow crops and build roads to markets. Despite reservations regarding the Pakse assignment, Flipse acquiesced to relocate.

The IVS house, originally a French Colonial mansion, was located at kilometer four on the north side of the Paksong Road (Route-23) to the Bolovens. The large villa lay prominently on a rise, surrounded by an expansive lawn, which sloped gently down to the main road. Completely fitted with electric wiring, it lacked a generator, so for illumination, Japanese-manufactured kerosene lanterns were employed at night. Supplementing their needs, there were a kitchen shed, garages, and a barn-like building to the rear of the house.

One evening, all Pakse IVS volunteers were invited to the USIS house for dinner. It was considered an important occasion, with Ambassador Leonard Unger, his wife, and AID Director Charles Mann attending. Oliver Saint Pee, the first IVS representative assigned to Pakse, was present. Oliver, who worked as an advisor to the teacher training college east of town, had been a recipient of one of the first yellow Jeeps Flipse built. The locals soon learned to give Oliver and the distinguishing vehicle a wide berth, as half blind Saint Pee was unable to determine the difference between a tree and a vehicle

from a distance of three blocks. <sup>40</sup>

Although awkward, which characterizes most events consisting of subordinates co-mingled with high-echelon superiors, the dinner progressed reasonably well. Nobody slurped the soup, spilled anything, or said, *"Pass the fucking salt."* During a lull in conversation, Joe chose to touch on a controversial subject currently circulating among American workers in Laos. In a burst of bravado, he blurted, *"Oliver was supervising the exams at school today and said it was the most legitimate thing that's ever happened in Laos."*

The AID Director sat up like he had been sitting on a tack. *"Do you have any evidence that there is something going on here that is not legitimate?"*

Realizing he had possibly triggered an unintended situation, Joe countered, *"No sir. Only what I read in Time and Newsweek."* His quick thinking prompted a good laugh. Flipse's seemingly innocent statement certainly had hit a sore spot with the director, as during the remainder of the evening, Mann dwelled solely on the subject. He explained that the mission was attempting to eliminate this perception. He was concerned that there had only been negative coverage of AID in the media, and there was nothing else to balance it.

As Flipse had previously suspected would occur, the mechanic training program was not successful. Therefore, he was reassigned to solve the problems of well and drilling unique to the area. Apparently, as the water table dropped thirty feet during the dry season, local hand dug wells failed to produce

---

<sup>40</sup> French influence was evident. Large trees lined the broad streets in Pakse. Wide white strips girdled the trees. The Author is not certain, but this might have been in response to Saint Pee's inability to see clearly.

The Author met Oliver Saint Pee at a Christmas party in the 1980s. He was totally blind at this point, but recalled Joe Flipse and his time in Pakse. Oliver passed shortly afterward.

year-round potable water. Consequently, the only water available for all uses was from the muddy Mekong River.

Complicating drilling was a layer of rock underlying the Pakse area, which normal jetting could not penetrate. After some contemplation, Joe thought he might obtain C-4 explosive charges from a Special Forces sergeant he knew. Then he would manufacture a "shaped charge" and blast through the laterite. After tinkering with a device, he rejected the idea as being too dangerous.

To be near the drilling site and better effect the specified project, Joe moved to Ban Saphy, a small Mekong River village, south of Route-13, and located a few miles southwest of Pakse. Delighting AID leaders, who believed this activity was the only way to win the hearts and minds of the people, Flipse was finally in the field.

Joe and his Lao crew lived a simple life in a shed. Used to country living in Florida, it was not considered too bad. The roof did not leak and there was a cement floor. Except for having to cope with snakes, ants, roaches and other vermin, there were no initial major problems. Immediately after arriving, he arranged for a Lao family living next door to prepare his meals. At 1,500 kip for weekly meals and 1,000 kip for the shed, totaling about twenty dollars a month, he calculated that his meager salary of 125 dollars would be more than sufficient to provide his needs.

He soon discovered that the food quality diminished appreciably toward the end of a week when the cook ran out of money, or lost interest. It became obvious that southern Lao villagers did not eat very well. This opinion was reinforced when watery soup was served with a whole frog and its innards floating on top of the bowl. Not surprisingly, he was unable to eat. Even his Lao assistant was repelled by the disgusting mess.



Joe was not sure if the meal had been a specialty of the house, or the cook was angry with them. Fearing committing an insult, he did not ask. He later learned the incident had only been an expression of good clean country fun, and the well drillers had been providing cheap entertainment for the villagers. During his initial orientation, he had not been briefed on anything close to a situation like this. However, once he could speak Lao and better understand local customs, he learned how tolerant and understanding the lowland Buddhist Lao were. They merely accepted the Americans as being different.

The first well was dry. A laterite layer was encountered at eight meters, and he had to quit drilling at twenty-eight meters. The entire process was difficult, as pieces of low-grade iron ore had to be reduced prior to jetting to the surface. It was like drilling in a bag of marbles, so plans were developed to choose a new location.

Prior to the 7 October Geneva Accords deadline for all foreign military to depart Laos, a farewell party was conducted at the Special Forces White Star team house in town. General Tucker cornered the IVS personnel for an hour, asking them questions regarding their experiences. While they were talking, Joe noticed General Tucker continuously scratched his private parts. The entire experience nearly blew Flipse's mind, for he had only been a sergeant in the infantry, and when generals appeared everyone became extremely nervous. Now, they were comfortably talking to a general, who was more like an uncle, and was curiously exploring his crotch. Joe later learned from a supply sergeant friend that the cause of the general's social impropriety was nothing more than a nervous habit.

During the Special Forces transition out of Laos, Flipse appropriated a new M-1 rifle. A prize possession, the gun

travelled with him into the field, and weapons would become his future trademark as the "gun toting IVS-AID man."

During a rare day off, he was invited to a picnic with a few Lao teachers. He accepted. It was unusual for an American to be invited to such an event, and to refuse would be construed as an insult. Ensuing events confirmed the accuracy of Tom Dooley's books he had read regarding life in Laos. The party took place in a grass covered hut built over a bamboo frame. Following a few shots of raw, unfiltered whiskey, immature green rice was served. Then snails cooked in their shells, and extracted using sharpened bamboo sticks, were dipped in a fiery hot pepper and fish oil sauce. More whiskey was followed by soup containing a green, slimy weed that grew in the rice paddies. The entire dinner was taxing to a tender Western stomach, and resulted in the inevitable malady.

Still experiencing the dwindling wet season, water stood half a foot deep around the Ban Sapay shed, causing most items to mold or rot. Unable to work for days at a time, Joe had ample time to reflect on his worsening situation. He increasingly became disaffected with IVS, and dubious about his own accomplishments. Increasingly, he perceived management's role in conceiving and conducting programs sadly deficient. He considered a majority of the naïve volunteers unqualified for a program, which he now considered merely a tool in the hands of politicians. It seemed to him that only people who knew someone or were owed favors received aid, not those who really needed it. Compounding his real or imaginary gripes, the daily food ration decreased even more in quality and quantity. It reached the zenith of repulsion when a supper of pig knuckles, complete with unwashed feet was served.

Other inequities aggravating him for some time were money exchange, and the disparity in living conditions among Americans

in Laos. IVS leaders harbored strange ideas regarding people working for the love of their country. This factor supposedly compensated for the low wages. But this rule did not apply in Vientiane, and AID never hired IVS staff located there. Volunteers in the field were forced to live off the local economy, while people in Vientiane had most "creature comforts" readily available, i.e., access to the commissary, and decent housing with air conditioners. Even worse, the official government kip exchange rate was 80-1, but an unofficial black-market rate was 150-1.

It was an impossible situation for a man working in the field. Joe had U.S. money in the Vientiane commissary bank, but the bank issued kip only at the official rate. Lately he realized how expensive essential items were in Pakse. Despite prior planning, prices varied daily, and it galled him that his meager pay stretched only half as much as it could. Faced with the two-tiered monetary system, the only safe currency to hold were dollars for conversion at a higher rate. But with the recent exit of U.S. military personnel, dollar supplies had dried up. Now he could no longer exchange a check with someone in the military for dollars, and squirrel away a little "green." The money situation was even worse for his Lao interpreter, who was spending over half his salary for food, while trying to support a family in Vientiane. When queried about a raise in pay, superiors insisted that he was earning a good living. To assist his assistant, Joe desperately implored his parents to expedite sending several ten- and twenty-dollar bills to him in the mail.

Increasingly, when an IVS employee displayed a good potential, USAID immediately hired them. Joe thought they might hire him so, after considering his options, he elected to look for another job upon his return to Vientiane.

The work completed at Ban Sapay, Flipse had returned to the Pakse villa when Ziegler and Ridell, a bigwig from IVS-Washington arrived on an inspection tour. The two honchos were appalled when they observed how "well" their volunteers were living. A big house, excellent cook, lots of help, just like any ugly American, and certainly not the image IVS representatives should be projecting for the organization. However, the bosses failed to realize that the villa had been the only housing available when IVS team leader Carter first arrived in Pakse. Resurrecting the organization's old maxim, Ridell expounded on the theory that IVS was attempting to promote a people-to-people program in Laos. Explaining that if one dressed and ate like the villagers and started to think like them, everyone would be happy. Moreover, this love and understanding would somehow percolate upward to the national level, and solve all the country's problems. This change would magically occur without a traditional legitimate political process to resolve governmental predicaments. Without the effort Ridell described, wars were sure to ensue.

Flipse could not believe the naiveté of what he heard. He believed the goals were a "pie in the sky," totally unrealistic in a country of people without loyalty to a central government, or a sense of nationalization. People-to-people indeed. IVS' concept of the mission was sitting in the shade communicating with the true soul of the people. This would mark the key to winning village people over to our way of thinking. However, unrealistic planners failed to recognize, among many factors, the diverse ethnics, varied languages, and cultures different villages might contain. In many instances, the people could not even communicate with each other. Further complicating problems for volunteers in the field, there seemed to be a lack of common sense among higher level people in all agencies. They envisioned

that dispatching two white kids with a new Jeep into a village would create a positive American image. This act would promote our ideals. Initially, both leaders and volunteers failed to fully understand critical villager thinking. To native thinking, the youngsters represented wealth simply because they possessed a vehicle.

Further confusing them, why did IVS try to live with them when they did not have to? The locals also failed to differentiate between IVS and USAID personnel, so it was easy for Pathet Lao propagandists to convince them that all Americans worked for the CIA.

Flipse recalled veterinarian Bill Taylor being "jacked up" by Ziegler on a previous occasion. While Bill worked at Sayaboury the COP/VTE did not believe he should employ a houseboy. Ziegler argued that having help would certainly set Taylor high above the local people, with whom he was trying to relate. Bill countered that complying with this advice would be difficult, as taking care of himself constituted a full-time job. Without someone caring for routine everyday needs, he would accomplish nothing.

During the period, an incident occurred from a lack of understanding the Lao culture. Common to all Mekong River towns, Pakse was a sleepy, quiet place. This was particularly evident during the daily 1200 to 1500 siesta time. A custom readily adopted from the French, all work ceased during this period. One day, shortly before noon, a C-46 load of cement arrived from Vientiane. Lao Government Affairs Rural, a counterpart of AID Rural Development Division, was normally responsible for unloading such shipments. But as it was near siesta time, the boss had already departed for town. Unless apprised that there was afternoon work, he usually never returned to the airfield until the following day.

A C-46 fuselage door was located high off the ground. This necessitated employing a driver and a forklift to unload cargo. No operator arrived. Finally, the frustrated aircraft crew, tired of waiting an inordinate amount of time in the baking sun, dumped all the bags onto the parking ramp. By the time AID coordinator McQueen arrived at the field, the pilots were taxiing to the runway for takeoff, leaving a pile of cement dust in its wake. Only three bags remained intact.

Low wages generally prevented IVS personnel from enjoying night life. Because restaurants were deemed too expensive, eating out was restricted to an occasional supper at a local noodle shop. Cheap and delicious, all hands agreed that Pakse noodles were the best in the country.

By design, the volunteers' sphere of travel was limited. The only time they were legally allowed access to the Bolovens was during a work-related day mission. However, they only journeyed a few miles onto the Plateau, and never as far as Paksong town.

Along the road was a burned building near a village. As part of early development work, White Star teams decided to erect a rice mill to relieve the drudgery of manually milling, the pounding and de-hulling rice. After the project was completed everyone appeared happy. For a while, it was judged that people-to-people programs actually did work.

Two months later village men torched the mill. Unforeseen by naïve Americans, the mill had fostered serious interpersonal imbalances in village life. Standing in line, while waiting for their rice to be milled, provided the women sufficient time to gossip. The unusual relaxation in their normally heavy work schedules resulted in serious family problems. Finally, fed up with domestic disruptions, and unwelcome social change, the men solved the problem by burning the building to the ground.

Village life soon returned to normal. The episode sounded like the adage of male chauvinists to "keep their women barefoot and pregnant." A negative reaction to new ways was not uncommon in Laos. A hospital erected at Sam Tong had been razed after village elders informed White Star troops the location was unacceptable to spirits of the hills.

In order to prevent additional incidents, IVSers were instructed by AID Chief McQueen to remain between the house and town at night. For a normal hot-blooded person like Flipse, this was rejected, especially when his hormones raged. He needed to roam. After White Star teams left Pakse, local girls were more available to the less affluent Americans. Joe, being a very resourceful individual, concocted a method to bypass military roadblocks by the Saigon Fork. On cool nights, he would ascend the Plateau with a few beers and a Jeep load of "dollies."

On such a night, Joe and Oliver headed east with two ladies in the back seat. It had rained for a couple of days prior to the foray. Just beyond the Teacher's College was a low, wet paddy area adjacent to the road where reptiles abounded. Reflected in the headlights, Joe spotted several glistening snakes, which had crawled onto the road to either avoid high water, or soak up residual heat from the pavement. Their skin displayed sections of black and white. Realizing that such a skin would be perfect to replace his well-worn Stetson hatband, he stopped. Excitedly, he leaped from the Jeep, and employing techniques honed to perfection in the Florida glades, grabbed one by the tail, snapped, and popped the serpent's head off. Then he tossed the carcass into the yellow Jeep and began to climb back in. Unaware of, and not sensitive to, Asian women's inherent fear of snakes, the girls began screaming at the top of their voices. They would have departed the vehicle had it not been for the numerous reptiles crawling on the ground. To

appease them, Joe tied the unfortunate snake to the trailer hitch. Considering the incident over, he continued the journey to the Plateau. But the damage had been done. With the evening a total disaster, he had to reverse course and return his unnerved charges to town. It was not until the following morning that he was admonished for foolishly seizing a krait, considered the deadliest snake in Southeast Asia.

In November Flipse returned to Vientiane. <sup>41</sup>

## **ACCIDENTS**

Employee vehicle accidents continued to be a problem. Ben Moore's monthly November report to Taipei stated:

*"After a rash of motorcycle accidents, we have a rash of loss or temporary suspension of operator's licenses for those guilty of improper operation of a motorcycle or scooter. Both rashes seem to have decreased rapidly lately, perhaps due to the cooler weather."*

Dick Nelson's crash has already been discussed. Accidents and incidents were not only reserved for third country nationals, mechanics and pilots; they also included management types.

Late in the year Jim Coble was driving a borrowed Vespa scooter, and was hit by a Thai in front of a service station in an area where he later lived. An altercation ensued, ending with a partially severed Thai ear--Jim had a terrible temper. Local police became involved, which cost his wife Bonnie two cartons of cigarettes and a quart of scotch to settle.

---

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Flipse. Numerous Emails, 1997.  
In subsequent books, the Author will follow Flipse's eyewitness and interesting career in Laos.



About the same time, Bonnie and Kathy Moher were run off the airport road by a large truck into a klong. The incident resulted in minor scarring.

**S**tarting on the first of December there was a noticeable change in nighttime temperatures, and Mother Sun failed to warm Udorn town until noon. Consequently, bathwater at the house was cold and numbing. Howard's passive solar heater, only efficient during the day, provided a fair shower late the afternoon, and morning shaving of my tough beard was difficult unless water was heated.

About this time, a black cloak of despair descended on our normally happy household. Contrary to previous plans, Howard's family would not be arriving for Christmas. In order to spend the holidays together, the lonely family man had arranged for his wife and children to arrive in Bangkok by 15 December. Reversing an earlier decision, the ugly bears at Taipei headquarters had decreed that to qualify for reimbursement, he would now have to wait the full ninety-day probationary period, ending on 17 December. Estes was devastated and embittered at this change of approval. At this late date, even if he obtained the necessary money and rescheduled the flight, because of difficult airline connections during the normally heavy holiday travel season, the family might not arrive in Udorn until January. Despite our efforts to lighten his dark mood, Howard's depression weighed heavily on all of us.

### **A DISTURBING PAY ISSUE**

With Murphy continually poking his nose around the corner, just when one believed events could not worsen, perversely they

usually did.<sup>1</sup>

Reinforcing Estes' spate of depressing news, we discovered that there was trouble with the December pay check. Those of us who expected Project Pay from October flying were sadly disappointed. I was shorted over a hundred dollars. To make matters worse, money had already been deducted for the initial set of uniforms. Apparently, it was going to be a very skimpy month, with only a base salary to live on. Other crew members had been subjected to the same problem, and with a few, the shortage involved a substantial sum of money. Those who were "in the know," claimed that such an interruption in pay had never occurred before. Answers were slowly revealed. After angry queries at the CPH office, and more than a little delay, we were informed that the Customer had fouled up by failing to timely submit proper paperwork through correct channels. Such excuses were not palatable or acceptable to us. Depending on the individual, we had expenses to manage, and the excuse sounded too much like the "check is in the mail" routine. The inadequate explanation did little to endear pilots to a faulty accounting system, and it tended to compound the unrest that was stirring at the time. It caused us to consider if this might be the beginning of a process to eliminate the Udorn unit. The "error" could have contributed to one or two pilot's decision to leave the Company.

By design, Project Pay was delayed, normally appearing in our checks a month after being accrued. However, with the latest fiasco we were not sure if we would ever see the lost sum. For an outfit supposedly conducted like a military organization, it

---

<sup>1</sup> Murphy: A nebulous term used to explain the unexplainable events prevalent in aviation and in other walks of life. Murphy's Law is intrinsically linked to the phrase, "What can go wrong will go wrong," especially during events in which trouble occurs and then snowballs into major problems.

appeared that Air America had failed in basics. From the beginning of my Marine Corps training at Quantico, I was advised that for an organization to progress successfully, one did not mess with a man's "mail, leave, or pay." Other already disgruntled pilots, seeking anything to point a finger at, became more incensed and bitter in their denunciations of the Company. Upsetting me most about this latest aggravation was the fact that so much of the shortage was earned while Tom Moher and I were being shot while en route to Sayaboury. Additionally, who could forget Abadie's sarcastic remark that Project Pay was initiated solely for incurring battle damage.

With the advent of the back-to-back negative developments, Howard was livid. Not only was the Company refusing to pay his family's travel expenses, but the latest paycheck was so inadequate that he could no longer afford to pay for their trip. He was so upset that when I entered the house that evening, I found him slumped at the kitchen table, head in his hands, mumbling to himself. Against this scenario of obvious depression, I decided that a few shots of medicinal alcohol must be prescribed to the patient. While we vigorously bitched and talked about the cruel world, I kept Estes' coffee cup filled with gin. Before the end of the evening, in a burst of altruism I agreed to lend him enough supplementary funds to help speed his folks to Thailand in time for Christmas. Howard was never a drinking man. It was not long before his cares of the world dissolved. Convinced that he would soon see his family, he dropped off into a blissful chemically-induced sleep that temporarily resolved his problems. <sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> At this point, preferring soft drinks, I was still not drinking alcohol. One reason I decided not to continue my Marine Corps career was because I was consuming too much beer. It was supposed to be a form of comradery and social togetherness, sanctioned by the more senior men in the squadron. I decided that I did not want to become like them in future years.

Consistent with life's swinging pendulum, always reversing from an extreme position, good news arrived from Mister Zerko, the Air America customs liaison link with Thai officials. My household shipment, a World War Two surplus foot locker following me again around the world, had finally arrived at port Klong Touey south of Bangkok. I was eager to retrieve my old friend, as the green trunk contained Marine half boots, survival gear I had scrounged from the Corps, a canteen, and several other items that could be useful in my work, and would make my home life a little more pleasant. However, I would not receive it immediately, as a cluster foul-up kicked into high gear. It appeared that an apparently simple process was bogged down in a serious lack of communication, oriental squeeze, or possibly, "a who cares about you up-country-folk attitude." Zerko indicated that Thai customs agents required my passport for the shipment to clear the port. This was seemingly a reasonable request, except that the document was not in my possession, and I did not know exactly where it was. Soon after my arrival in Udorn, the passport had been collected and reputedly directed to Vientiane to obtain a Lao visa. For reasons only known to privileged figures in the Company, I had not seen it since. Like the Project Pay fiasco, if lucky, I might see what was rightfully mine sometime in the future, hopefully before I was terminated.

### **UPCOUNTRY**

On the fourth, in a rare upcountry trip, Howard and I were both on the flight schedule, part of a two aircraft contingent to Sam Tong. Unlike most daily upcountry flights, this one was of undetermined duration, perhaps three to four days. Ostensibly, the trip was designed to recover parts from a crashed Helio Courier. Pilots we had talked to indicated that the versatile Helio was an excellent STOL plane, well suited for

the low-key supply and communications missions Customers required in Laos. Fast and relatively inexpensive to operate compared to an H-34, the Customer loved the Helio. Depending on the pilot's skill, the tail-dragger could negotiate an elevated short, dog-legged airstrip that might be graded uphill twenty degrees or more to compensate for a short runway. However, the light aluminum machine was never designed to withstand the severe rigors involved in landing on degraded Lao mountain strips. These were often no more than controlled crashes in the hands of most pilots. When adverse factors like turbulence, downdrafts, eroded and rutted landing strips, and a weak tail section subject to material failure, were considered, there were bound to be accidents. It was a credit to the program and the bold men who skillfully manned the planes that there were not more crashes.

From what I had observed in the short time I had been flying in Laos, I was suspicious and skeptical about the overt motives involved in some operations. I wondered if the projected recovery mission might have been contrived as a ploy to bypass ICC watchdogs, and afford our side an opportunity to perform needed tasks in Meo country. After 04X was shot down, the Prime Minister grounded Air America fixed wing flights to the Plain of Jars, and I assumed that critical supplies were backed up, both in Vientiane and upcountry.

Thus far, our logistical work had been slim compared to sanctioned fixed wing supply missions, and more than likely, crews also carried "hard rice." It was as if our green helicopters continued to evoke cynicism, rage, and the appearance of militarist intervention to left wing politicians. The well-known fact that the H-34 was a former Marine helicopter, and had been utilized during armed clashes in the

past, must still have had a major influence in our continued exclusion from the country.

Since there were few or no provisions available upcountry to obtain food, we were advised to carry sufficient rations to last three to four days. Supposedly, water was available. On short notice this requirement could be met. Against such an eventuality, I had "rat holed" several cans of Beanie Weenies and Vienna sausage for a RON, or as survival rations should we be forced down and have to spend a night in the jungle. Tom Moher had reinforced the necessity to always carry food when he related how, in the early days, he had suddenly been trapped in the Pha Khao bowl by a fast-moving weather front. Unable to depart the site for several days, the crew would have starved without food carried with them.

For unique RONs like ours, boxes of military "C" rations could be obtained from the supply building. Obtained from the Marine unit relocating to Okinawa in late 1961, the rations were unaccountable out-of-date items, and presented real "gaggers" to those who had ever eaten the largely unpalatable food. I really had enough of them during the Third Marine Expeditionary Unit's five-week field exercise in Udorn during the May-June Nam Tha crisis. Contrary to popular opinion, helicopter pilots are actually intelligent animals who adapt to conditions. Some more astute ones, harking back to their military days, maintained that a drop or two of Louisiana Tabasco sauce would work wonders to correct the bland taste. Wondering about the validity of this advice, I recalled a gunny sergeant's Saturday morning safety briefing, and advice to his charges prior to weekend liberty. Wanting us back alive, bright-eyed-and-bushy-tailed for Monday morning muster, in some context he profanely preached, *"Remember candidates, you can spray perfume on sierra (sanitized), but if a strong wind comes along and blows it off, it's still sierra."*

I felt exactly this way about "C-rats." You could sprinkle Tabasco on them, but they were still "Cs." Yet, in a pinch, the cans of food kept one alive. Also, the compact folding P-38 can opener in each box was well designed, functional, and in addition to its primary use, could be employed as a screwdriver. The small packs of toilet paper were always useful in the field.

Prior to every upcountry flight, the PIC signed for and drew an antiquated survival kit from the Filipino in charge of the supply building. Like the wobble fuel pump, funnel, and chamois, it formed a mandatory portion of the fly-away-kit. Many crews disliked carrying the heavy and bulky canvas-covered package containing a coveted .22 caliber rifle. A few of the weapons had been stolen upcountry and the pilots were forced to pay for them. Probably a World War Two survival kit designed for large fixed wing, it contained only basic items such as a radio beacon (this accounted for the rectangular box's large size), signal equipment, cans of water, and minimum food supplements that looked suspiciously like Charms candy.

Old timer Bob Hitchman was my cockpit mate in Hotel-14, Bill Wilmot the Flight Mechanic. While not actually included in the Udorn management structure, Hitch acted the part. He was perceived to have Abadie's ear, and was a "hanger-on" around the office. <sup>3</sup> Filled with self-importance, Bob was considered by some more paranoid types among the rank and file to be the Company

---

<sup>3</sup> CJ Abadie Email. There was a personal reason for Abadie's preferential treatment of Hitchman. *"Bob was an aggressive pilot, willing to attempt even the most difficult tasks. Right after Hitch was upgraded to Captain, he told Ab that he could be called on any time to fly, since he did not often drink and wanted the flight time."*

During a slack period at Udorn, the Chief Pilot had placed one pilot on standby at home because of a holiday. On this particular occasion, a requirement for an early morning emergency evacuation arose, so Ab called out the standby pilot. Still drunk from the previous night, he was in no condition to fly, so Ab called Hitchman. Within minutes, Bob arrived prepared to fly. It was this kind of attitude that endeared him to management. *"Bob talked a lot, but this was perceived to be part of his personality."*



spy, passing pilot sentiments and other tidbits to management. This was never substantiated by "finger pointers," but it was never discounted either.

Bob had originally been a jet pilot in the Corps, but after crashing an F-9 at China Lake, he was reassigned to Marine Corps Helicopter Squadron HMM-361 at Santa Ana, California. In the summer, during fall transition from temporary to permanent helicopter pilots at Udorn, Bob was recommended by JJ McCauley and was hired in August. Another "leader" among peers, the blond, stocky Hitchman often exuded self-confidence to the point of being overbearing.

Many of the men exhibited similar tendencies, but not to such an extreme. Perhaps their bravado was warranted, and I could only surmise that because of previous experience they had earned their "spurs." Now I would have to earn mine. It was wonderful to work with aggressive men, who individually believed themselves to be the best helicopter pilots in the world. Their achievements would be difficult to follow in my own quest to gain recognition and respect. Nevertheless, I considered much of this attitude part of the aviator's ego trip, imbued in us during military training, and reinforced throughout our flying careers. However, it was true that some pilots were far more competent than others.

As we taxied toward the Air America parking ramp at Wattay Airport, I noticed several green C-47 cargo type aircraft parked on the grass. I thought this strange until learning that the planes were a portion of nine IL-2s promised the Lao government by the Soviets. The Soviets terminated their airlift to the Neutralists and the Pathet Lao in November, perhaps because of the Cuban missile crisis and the Sino-Indian War. Thereafter, an agreement was reached, whereby three Russian C-47 copies would be allocated to each government faction for resupply. Since

there were few qualified Lao aviators, the ships were delivered with pilots, along with mechanics, for training and operations purposes. The contingent billeted in the city and rubbed elbows with their Western counterparts without incident. To keep the peace and adhere to the Geneva Accords, it appeared that we were aiding and abetting the communists. After what had happened on the Plain of Jars the previous month, their presence and mission was enough to make one's blood boil.

A CIA bulletin provided additional detail:

*"The transfer of ten Soviet airlift aircraft to the Souvanna government will give the coalition regime increased flexibility in logistic operations.*

*The Soviet Union has supplied nine transports and one helicopter, with crews and maintenance personnel. Souvanna intends to use the aircraft to supply outlying forces. As they will become Lao government property, a commission representing the three Lao factions presumably will control them.*

*Pathet Lao leader [Prince] Souphannouvong had suggested to Ambassador Unger that the U.S. too, should place some aircraft at the disposal of the coalition. Souphannouvong has also suggested that to avoid incidents U.S. aircraft now operating under a personal arrangement with Souvanna should fly only over undisputed territory.*

*The Pathet Lao may be intending in this way to restrict airlift operations under sole U.S. sponsorship. The Pathet Lao mainly want to cut aid to substantial Meo guerrilla forces scattered throughout areas of northern and central Laos nominally controlled by the communists."*<sup>4</sup>

While we received the Air Operations briefing, forklift operators loaded four drums of aviation gasoline on board each

---

<sup>4</sup> CIA Daily Brief, 12/06/62.

helicopter to supplement an unknown supply at Site-20. It was believed that there was sufficient 115/145 octane fuel there for us to operate, but helicopters were a rarity upcountry and fuel stocks could be low.

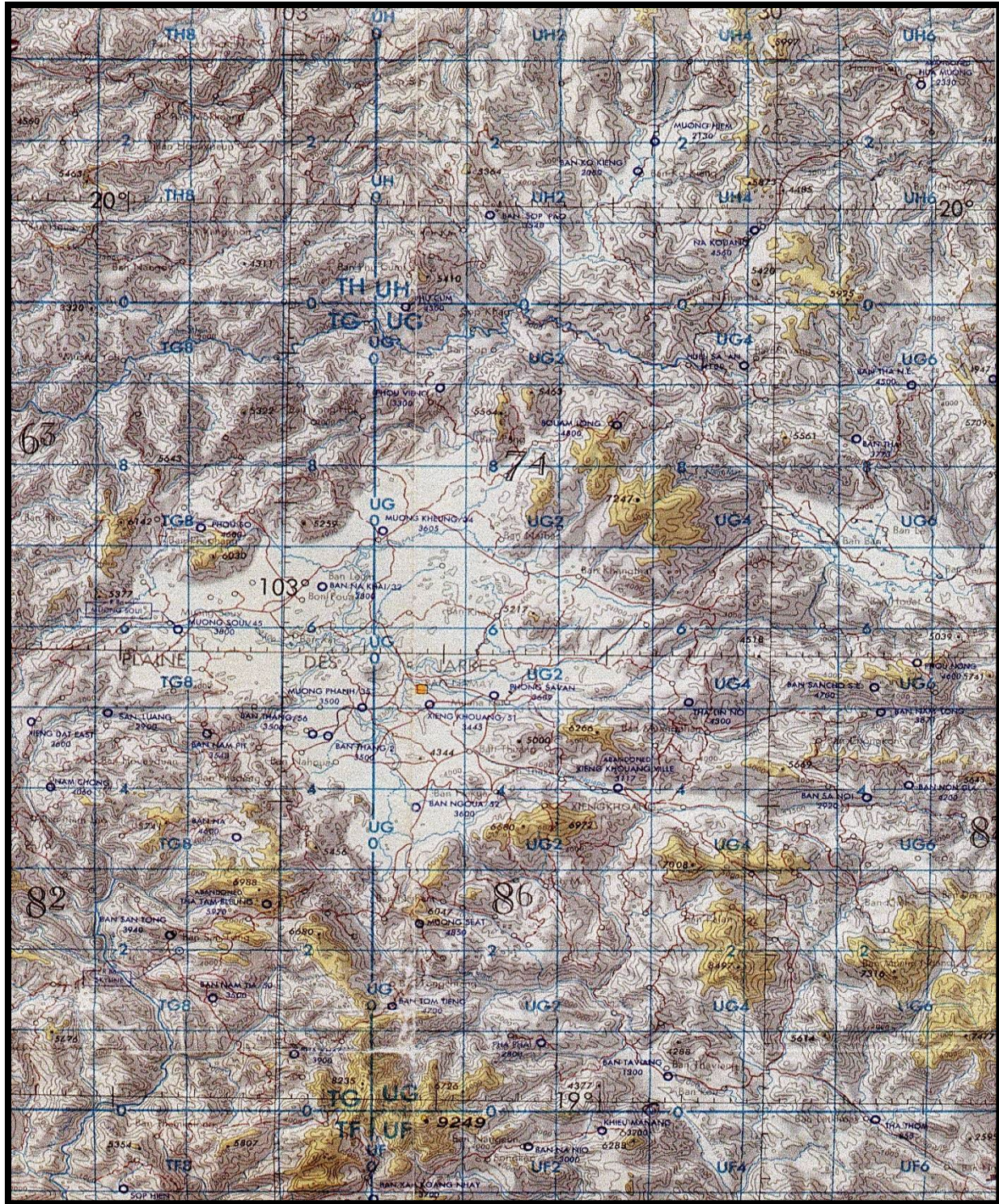
Immediately after landing and unloading the fuel drums at Sam Tong, we were loaded with troops and directed toward the Plain of Jars. Although not briefed--perhaps Hitch had been in Udorn--I could only speculate that the mission had something to do with the Fred Riley incident.

My first time flying north of Sam Tong was not productive. At altitude, eight miles north northeast of Ban Na (Victor Site-15), low clouds obscured everything north as far as one could see. Undeterred, Hitch proceeded east, skirting the perimeter of the Plain. He darted here and there until Mike Marshall radioed that he needed to refuel. We had accomplished nothing except to burn up gasoline and look at a lot of clouds.

Whatever the mission intended, it was scrubbed, and we were informed that another attempt would be made the following morning. In the meantime, there was plenty of work to do supplying local sites. (Eight hours plus thirty-five minutes, eight hours project.)

## **BUELL**

That afternoon I met the legendary Edgar "Pop" Buell, Military Two's principal IVS worker, purveyor of AID policy in the northeast, and the person responsible for the well-being of thousands of displaced refugees who were settled in the area. Except for occasional working visits from veterinarian Bill Taylor, Buell was the only American humanitarian the U.S. Embassy allowed to reside upcountry.



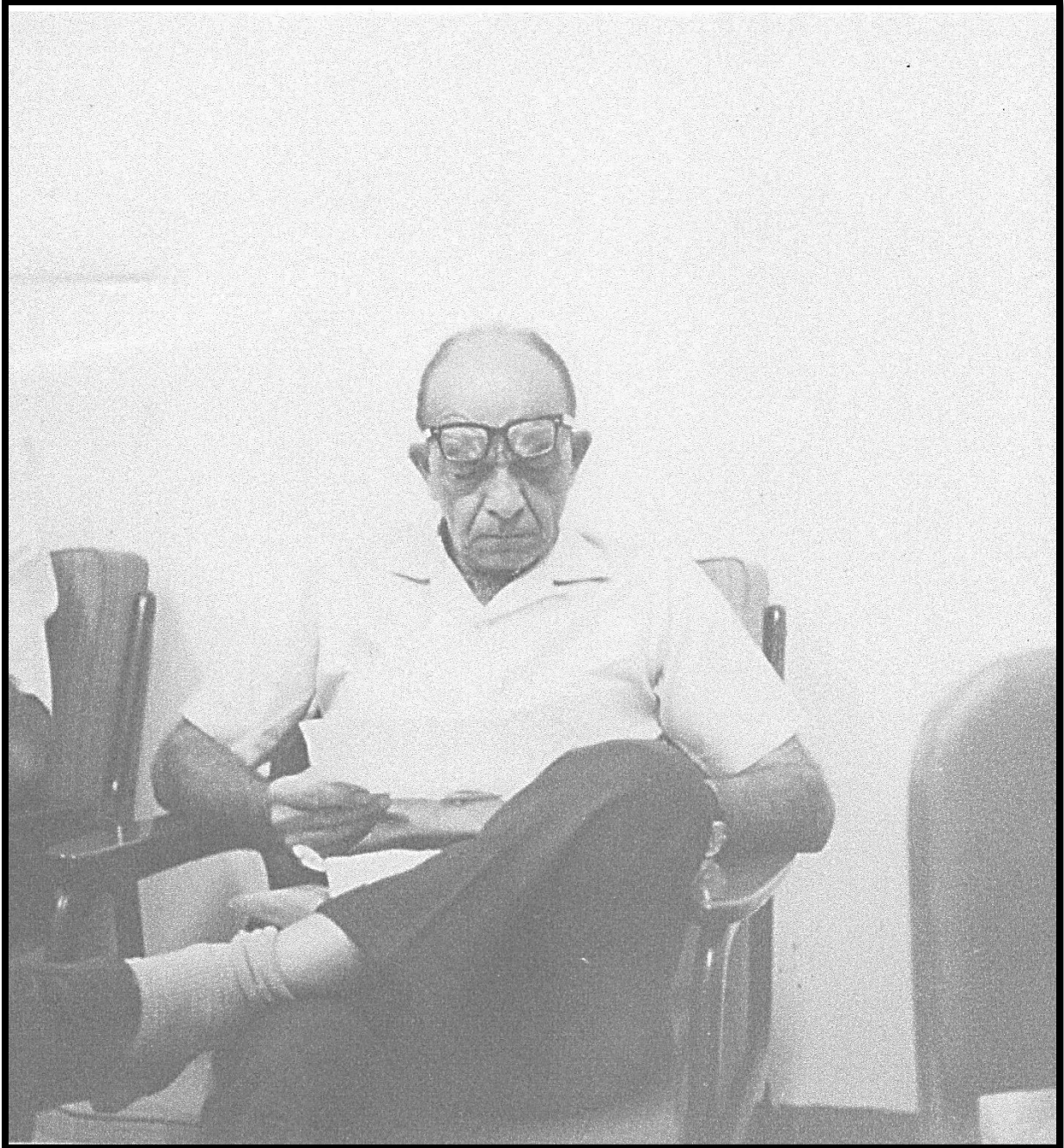
The diamond shaped Plain of Jars. Sam Tong is found in the lower left corner; Ban Na to the north northeast. Tha Lin Noi (VS-18) is in the hills just off the eastern Plain of Jars. Long Tieng (Ban Nam Tia on the map) is located southeast of Sam Tong. Padong (Ban Tom Tieng) is a few miles east of Long Tieng. Phou Vieng (VS-06) and Bouam Long are located a few miles north of the Plain.

For a person seemingly with so much responsibility, his appearance was not impressive. Grizzled looking, he was short, balding, unshaven, wore glasses, and flopped around in shower shoes. For a remote mountain area like Sam Tong this was probably fine, but it certainly did not exemplify a prime example of a typical USG representative, or even a Lawrence of Arabia type. Pop seemed to like it that way.

Aside from his disheveled exterior, it was his demeanor, obviously forged from great inner strength, that distinguished him from other men. Speaking colloquial country language, laced with homilies and expletives, the former Indiana farmer displayed an assertiveness regarding his job and "**his people**" that left no doubt who was in charge. Because of his glowing reputation, tribals and Americans alike deferred to him, with the Meo calling him "Father" (Tan Pop). Pop's bias regarding "his people" and events in his area would have a vast influence on me.

Unaccustomed or equipped to accommodate several crew members overnight, but not wanting us to spend a frigid, uncomfortable night in the "Sikorsky Hotel, he generously invited us to use the facilities available in his sparsely appointed warehouse. He made a point of informing us not to expect too much, explaining that he lived modestly like the natives, and expected us to do likewise. Expounding on this position with a passion, he zealously rambled on about failed USG foreign policy, caused mainly because Americans expected to be coddled and live "high on the hog" in countries where they worked. By example, he was determined that was not going to occur at **his** site.

I found that there was a glaring disparity in Company regulations. The Personnel Manual clearly stipulated that when RONing away from one's home station, a Captain was entitled to a



A presentable Edgar "Pop" Buell enjoying a rare trip to Vientiane.  
Mac Thompson Collection.

private room. One step down the totem pole, First Officers would share a room. However, in reality, the policy was never implemented for lowly helicopter pilots, who were about as close to "grunt mud Marines" as aviators could possibly get. Instead, the regulation was tailored for exalted "big bird" fixed wing pilots, who flew from strip to strip and RON at reasonably civilized locations. The policy was just one of the many inequities plaguing the Air America pilot force.

After a brief discussion, we opted to overnight in the AID warehouse.

Pop's home, the only sizeable structure in the bowl, was located on the south side of the airstrip. All materials used to build the rustic building were obtained from the local area. Scrounged by villagers from miles around and laboriously transported to Sam Tong, the rectangular building was constructed entirely of split and woven bamboo siding and thick thatch roofing, like one might see in small English or Irish villages. To control supply distribution and prevent thievery, a sole entrance was located on the east side.

The dark interior looked as bad as the exterior. A woven bamboo partition separated the people living area from a larger store room. The Spartan combination living, sleeping, and work area spoke of a bare-bones existence. Devoid of creature comforts, against one wall stood a plank bed, two tables, and a few chairs. All were manufactured from local materials, or from what looked like pieces of wooden ammunition boxes left over from White Star days. A raised split bamboo pallet was positioned in the center of the dirt floor. We were informed that this was a Meo "hospitality bed" erected to accommodate overnight guests. Fairly wide, it could accommodate several people. The platform was built high off the ground to preclude encroachment by vermin and crawling insects. Overhead, a large

white and red cargo parachute hung from the rafters and ridge poles to help prevent decaying thatch dust from filtering down on those below. Intended as a multi-purpose item, it also served to preclude rodents from dropping feces on one's head. I wondered if installation of the chutes was an afterthought, arising from trial and error. Except for attempting to raise a litter of baby mice when I was a boy, I never had experience with rats, but this would soon change.<sup>5</sup>

Toward dark, kerosene lanterns were lighted, which provided a soft yellow glow to our surroundings. Pop had been a farmer, who retired early and arose prior to sunrise, so he advised us to eat what we had brought and then prepare for bed. While we lesser mortals did what he suggested, he, Hitchman, and Marshall went next door to play poker, politic, or chat. As Pop was going to sleep at a friend's house, we left his bed for one of the senior pilots. In the meantime, I discovered a folded cot in the corner of the room, most likely another item left from the large White Star contingent that recently utilized Site-20 as a base camp.

From my teenage Boy Scout experiences, I was thoroughly familiar and comfortable with camping out in the harshest weather conditions. I thought that, compared to sleeping in the snow in the Watchung Mountains of New Jersey, Pop Buell's quarters would be a piece of cake. After setting up the cot, I lined the canvas bottom with old newspapers to help insulate my posterior from the cold that had already begun seeping into the hut. After I was finished establishing what I considered my bed, Howard reminded me that I was only a lowly First Officer. Therefore, Hitchman was entitled to the cot. Of course, he was

---

<sup>5</sup> EW Knight Email. His first RON at Sam Tong was on 5 June 1962 with Jerry Souders and Joe Marlin. They slept in the warehouse on the raised bamboo bed.



right. I would have to sleep on the pallet with three other men. Next, we snooped around for blankets or sleeping bags. Except for those used by Pop and his assistant Tongsar, we could not find anything. It appeared that with nothing to cover our bodies, it was going to be a cold night.

When the men returned from next door, we posed the covering subject to Pop. Confirming what we already suspected, he allowed that there were no extra blankets or sleeping bags available for us. However, numerous parachutes were stored in the back room awaiting return to Vientiane for reuse. We were welcome to use these to wrap our bodies. Without viable alternatives, we elected to use them. After spreading several nylon "sheets" on top of the bamboo, remembering the layer principle, we donned our warmest clothes. In addition, I had brought a dark red wool ski mask and the bulky coat that we had been obligated to purchase with our regular uniforms. Despite my initial doubts about taking the ugly coat, I was happy it had accompanied me on this trip.

Since Howard and I were the next senior men in the two crews, we wisely, and a little slyly, chose the center of the platform. Flight Mechanics Wilmot and Abuy had no choice but to take the ends and provide warmth to our left and right sides. Although built for lighter people, the platform was stronger than it looked. With a minimum of fuss, we managed to climb on and arrange ourselves in the correct "pecking order". Then, as we snuggled together to conserve warmth, Bob and Mike piled multi-colored parachutes over us. It was ridiculous looking, but hopefully functional. It was the best we could do, while Bob and Mike retired to somewhat better conditions.

Since this marked our first RON in this area, and our knowledge of the enemy situation was minimal, there was some anxiety as to our safety. Despite the ceasefire and Geneva

Accord protocols, hostile incidents still occurred, and there were certainly bad guys wandering around, where one least suspected. The edge of the Plain of Jars where Kong Le Neutralists and Pathet Lao troops roamed was only twelve miles northeast. We had been assured that the Sam Tong site was secure and well protected, but unfamiliarity with the unknown sometimes played havoc with a man's imagination. Also, the warehouse's skimpy walls, with a door that barely locked, did little to reassure us. Our resident gun dealer at the Air America facility, Security Chief Jim Baron, had provided Estes with a .25 caliber handgun for the trip. Against any potentialities, Howard clutched the weapon close to his chest the entire night.

Although providing a reasonably comfortable cushion, the combination of split bamboo and nylon under us did little to prevent the intrusion of cold. A poor insulator, like a cold soaked storage battery, the light nylon on top of us seemed to draw and retain the bitter cold. I hoped we would survive the night. Before I dropped off into a semi-conscious state, I decided to write the folks and have them expedite sending my World War Two arctic sleeping bag that was gathering dust in the attic. I was not going upcountry unprepared next time.

Sometime toward early morning the pallet began to shake violently. Instantly I was awake. Was this what we feared, an enemy attack? Except for Marshall and Hitchman a few feet away from us, everyone on the platform was groaning. Then I realized the source of the mystery. More exposed to the cold on my right side, Abuy, a large person, was shivering almost uncontrollably. All we needed for a laughable situation was a rendition of Jerry Lee Lewis rock-and-roll song-*There's a Whole Lot of Shaking Going On*. With techniques I had learned and employed long ago, I was reasonably warm, but the six-foot tall Filipino, dressed less warmly, and on the outside of the platform, was suffering

acutely. I asked him if he was alright then, unable to help him, drifted back to sleep.

Mercifully, bad things do not last forever. Driven out of bed by the intense cold, we were all up well before dawn. To "get the juices flowing," as Sterling Hayden coined in the movie, *Doctor Strangelove*, I choked down an acrid-tasting six ounce can of Japanese orange juice. Despite Hitchman's impatient entreaty that he wanted to accomplish a prearranged mission before our sojourn to the Plain, I had obligatory bodily items to attend to. Bob agreed to wait a few minutes. With the aid of my flashlight, I stumbled outside, walked around the warehouse, and headed south down a path toward the rustic privy. Displayed in the narrow beam of light, frost glistened on the grass, and a light coating of ice floated on top of small puddles. Yes, it had been quite cold last night, and condensation from my breath attested to the fact it was still very cold.

To my right, about halfway to the outhouse, loomed an impressive karst, a characteristic feature defining the Sam Tong bowl. In the dim starlight, like a ghostly sentinel, I could see tiny wisps of fog forming around its heavily wooded peak. It was almost spiritual. In the cold, loneliness, and complete silence of pre-dawn, a prelude to false dawn and first light, it was easy to comprehend Meo people's reverence for a mountain and associated spirits. Even to me as a non-animist, I considered mountains inspiring, causing one to harbor feelings of insignificance in the presence of the Supreme Being.

As I made my way along the path toward the parking area, I heard the familiar ra-ra-ra sound of nine R-1820 reciprocal engine pistons cycling in their cylinders prior to start. Hitchman, eager to obtain my attention and begin the day, was cranking Hotel One Four's engine.

I could visualize the start process: First Bob checked the throttle closed, and flicked on the battery switch. With both fuel and boost pump switches on, he had activated the starter button located under the collective head. Then, flipping the magneto ignition to both, he depressed the primer button, pumping gas into the number nine cylinder at the underside of the engine until the motor belched and fired with a throaty roar, disturbing the unearthly silence in the valley. Priming until the cold engine was running smoothly, he advanced the mixture lever to rich. As the engine idled at 1000 revolutions per minute (RPM) while engine temperature and pressure reached an acceptable level (in the green arc) and stabilize, I climbed into the right side of the cockpit that Hitch had reserved for me.

Hitchman was full of surprises. I had never known anyone who started a HUS from the left seat. A start was generally performed by the right-seater. Perhaps he had acquired the technique as an instructor pilot in the Corps. Time honored since the dark ages of helicopter evolution, opposite of airplanes, the PIC flew from the right seat in American helicopters. Everything in a cockpit was tailored for this. Although dual configured, the HUS-1 only had brakes on the right side. Furthermore, the hoist, tail wheel locking and unlocking mechanism, mirror, relief tube, rotor brake, and passenger door were on or visible from the pilot's side.

After strapping in, securely locking my seatbelt, and donning my helmet, I assumed control of the aircraft by voice and shaking the cyclic stick. Then I accelerated RPM to 1400 turns and performed the first necessary checks. This accomplished, I released the overhead rotor brake handle, and, using the tachometer gage, increased RPM to 1700, and activated the hydro-mechanical clutch pump switch. Employing the

tachometer as a guide, as rotor RPM slowly accelerated, I simultaneously increased the throttle sufficiently to prevent system friction from dragging engine RPM below the rising rotor RPM. At 1525 rotor RPM, I rapidly retarded the throttle grip toward the closed position to lower the engine RPM needle below the rotor RPM needle. Then I smartly rolled the throttle in the opposite direction to join the two needles on the tachometer gage. At this point, mechanical coupling of the Sprague clutch was complete and the rotor system engaged. Since the parking area was fairly level and the engine warmed sufficiently, minimum lateral rolling motion was incurred during the procedure. One was not always as fortunate, especially with an older model aircraft, one that used engine oil instead of hydraulic oil for clutch engagement. Unique to these so-called bent-leg machines, under certain conditions involving wind, uneven terrain, cold engine oil, and poor pilot technique, a rotor engagement could often be violent and scary.

After turning the clutch pump off, I increased RPM to 2,000 turns, switched from battery to battery-generator position on the overhead circuit panel, and turned on all necessary electrical equipment. While Bill Wilmot completed a 360-degree external inspection of the ship, checking for fluid leaks and irregular noises, I conducted fuel, servo, and other final pre-takeoff checks. Finally, with all instruments "in the green" and everything else seemingly within limits, we were ready to launch.

At 0515 hours, while taxiing at 2200 RPM onto the runway through billowing dust kicked up by the rotor down wash, first light was beginning to illuminate the upper reaches of the eastern ridgelines.

By the time we returned from our mission, the troops and Marshall's crew were ready for another run at the Plain of Jars.

Like the previous day, the attempt was fruitless. Seasonal fog and low clouds again engulfed the entire northern area, and continued for most of the day.

Following the rainy season, this annual plague to aviators in Laos was partially caused by transitional weather patterns prior to the full onset and influence of the northwest monsoon out of China. Besides engulfing the Plain of Jars region, dense morning fog and low clouds could also predominate above the more humid river systems and valleys. At times, all one could see, like pencil points protruding through flat, white paper, were mountain peaks poking out of fluffy cloud layers. From a common-sense aspect, flight over extensive cloud layers in a single engine aircraft was not wise. Should an engine malfunction or fail in such conditions, an instrument autorotation through the clouds would be the only alternative. This procedure was seldom practiced, and with numerous "rocks in the clouds," the success of the maneuver was doubtful.

Fog and undercast conditions could last well into late morning, persisting until the sun rose high enough to heat, lift, or dissipate the impediment to conducting missions. I was not unhappy that we had to abort the mission. It had only been a little over a week since Riley and crew were shot down, and I was not eager to tangle with the deadly Pathet Lao-Neutralist anti-aircraft guns and confused factional politics that led to downing the C-123.

Despite the heavy jacket I wore, the cold penetrated deeply until the sun rose high enough and a "greenhouse effect" through the overhead Plexiglas warmed the cockpit.

Hitchman was adept at scrounging trips, and we remained busy for a good portion of the morning. About 0800 hours my stomach began grumbling, so during a brief loading period I called below for Bill to rummage through my RON bag and pass up

a can of Vienna sausage. Lodged in a congealed gelatinous sheath, the eight or so mini-dogs were nasty unheated, but did much to placate my hunger. While Hitch flew, I munched on the cold wieners, sharing with him what I could not eat. Some pilots related how they successfully heated canned goods in cooling exhaust stacks or on top of an engine that had been recently shut down. This was acceptable, but one had to be careful using this method, for the extreme heat could cause an unopened can to explode.

After refueling, Pop assigned both ships for a mission to Tha Lin Noi (VS-18). Like several current Meo sites in northeastern Laos, Site-18 had originally been a jointly operated Meo-French outpost during the First Indochina War.<sup>6</sup> For a few months after the war's official termination, while Civil Air Transport was still air dropping supplies to isolated pockets of resistance fighters, French commando officers responsible for the paramilitary program, unwilling to disband the formidable hilltribe units, offered USG the guerrilla organization's talents. Occurring not long after the Korean War ceasefire, with America still war weary, Indochina was not accorded a high priority, and our leaders refused to accept the French proposal. In retrospect, "the powers who be" failed to learn an important history lesson from the French. Subsequently, friendly units were either overrun by Viet Minh forces, or disbanded to return to an agricultural life. Consequently, half of Laos was left to the designs of the North Vietnamese or their Pathet Lao subordinates. Then, when the "balloon finally went up" again, starting almost from scratch, USG experienced almost the same growing pains, attempting to reestablish what once had been a successful French guerrilla program. Despite good

---

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Conboy with James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 1995), 7.

progress in the revival of hilltribe forces, neutralization slowed the program to a halt.

One of several CIA training centers activated early in 1961, Tha Lin Noi was positioned in the mountains almost equidistant between Routes Seven and Four (Ban Ban Valley and Xieng Khouang Ville Valley). Well east of the PDJ, and deep enough in the mountains to make enemy incursions difficult and costly, the site was not so remote for the hardy mountaineers to spy on, or interdict, main arteries at a time of their choosing. Walking great distances in minimum time marked the tribal forte, a characteristic greatly admired by those not so well adapted to the rigorous life.

Tha Lin Noi was located in an almost direct line thirty-nine nautical miles northeast of Sam Tong. Despite thick clouds still covering the dreaded Plain and several low-lying valleys, our two-ship contingent, piloted by two "experienced" Captains, seemed to have no trouble navigating. Surprisingly, we conducted few diversions to confuse anyone on the ground of our intentions. Of course, at this juncture in my familiarization, I had little idea of our exact position or that of the enemy. Recalling a military admonition that "a mission was not one hundred percent successful unless all hands returned safely," I felt confident in their ability to get me home. At a respectable altitude, we easily skirted the Plain's eastern perimeter, avoiding suspected AAA positions along Route-4. The trip was both exciting and stressful flying over former bad guy areas, where so much action had taken place and aircraft had been shot down.

I could see our destination from a distance, situated in a high, grassy bowl. It was not as confined as Pha Khao, but more open, like Sites 20 and 30. To avoid descending over unknown areas, Bob held altitude until I did not believe we could



possibly make the site without circling. Surprisingly, and without warning, he suddenly dumped the collective and rolled the throttle off to initiate an autorotation. We plunged toward earth in a 1,500 foot per minute descent. Fortunately, I flew with both lap and shoulder straps cinched tightly against my body; otherwise, the initial downward thrust and negative "Gs" would have propelled me violently upward toward the top of the cockpit. Whether showing off or implemented to minimize groundfire from suspected enemy in the area, I considered it an unnecessary maneuver. Used mainly for practice, not with an operationally fully loaded aircraft, I was not accustomed to such a radical technique for rapidly reducing altitude. Additionally, I did not consider it particularly safe. In a prolonged low power glide, cylinder head temperature dropped precipitously, and a recovery could result in engine stoppage, or the clutch might fail to engage. Then you would have unnecessarily induced an actual autorotation, and been committed to landing without power. Rare, yes, but the potential was there. Why perform something like this unless absolutely necessary? However, this one worked and I wisely kept my opinion to myself.

Increasingly, it was becoming apparent to me that to successfully operate in these mountains, at times one had to deviate from old norms, and modify previously learned techniques. Seeing this performed, I could better understand Abadie's concern about my steep approach. He was trying to tell me something that I was not able to understand at the time--one could not always "go by the book." However, without actually experiencing such an unorthodox maneuver, it was almost impossible to visualize.

While we kept the rotors turning, Pop and Tongsar jumped out to parlay with the head man, and an energetic group of

locals unloaded the ship. Representing their sole lifeline for supplies, all seemed happy to see us.

Soon we were back in the air with additional passengers Pop and Tongsar had loaded for Sam Tong. Sorting out the "sick, lame, and lazy," was their job. From the cockpit we had little control over who or what boarded the helicopter, and we had to rely on the Flight Mechanic or Customer for this task. Although renowned for their walking abilities, increasingly I noticed that the Meo were not averse to riding in helicopters. At almost every site people swarmed around us wanting to go somewhere- anywhere. Moreover, they always travelled with wrapped goods, including poultry in wicker baskets. It was a bit smelly, but part of the job.

## **VANG PAO**

Later in the day a mission was arranged to correspond with the Meo New Year. With Pop and Tongsar onboard, we popped over the southern ridgeline and descended into Site-30, the Long Tieng Valley where Scratch and I had worked in October.<sup>7</sup> Here we loaded the two helicopters with Colonel Vang Pao, his body guards, family members, and staff.

There were more military types in evidence at Long Tieng than at Sam Tong. Many of the soldiers wore the typical green uniform-- officers were distinguished by red berets. One of the guards was dressed in black clothes, green fatigue hat, and combat boots. A table of organization (TO) carbine was slung on his shoulder. He never left Vang Pao's side. The man appeared a little older than the others, and he had an ugly wad of tobacco stuck in a large hole at the left side of his nose. At some time in his life, he had been clawed by a bear, and the resulting

---

<sup>7</sup> This southern ridgeline was later called Skyline Ridge.



The loading ramp on the eastern side of the runway at Long Tieng. Vang Pao walking toward his bodyguard "Plug," whose wad of tobacco next to his nose is clearly evident. Girl holding an umbrella is one of Vang Pao's children.

Marshall Collection.

disfigurement earned him the title of "Plug" among pilots, who were always crafting names for natives and places, where actual names were either unknown or difficult to pronounce.<sup>8</sup>

The Meo civil and military leader was dressed in green fatigues, without rank or insignia. A red beret perched on his head and a .38 caliber pistol adorned his waist. Except for an intelligent face and deference others accorded him, he might have been assumed to be just another soldier. I would later learn that he, like many Meo, had "cut his teeth" during the first Indochina War. Showing potential during Xieng Khouang Province operations, he was noticed by French officers and selected for noncommission, then officer training at the Done Hene School in Savannakhet Province. Continuing to excel, sponsored by the Agency, he later rose in status and rank through the Royal Lao Army.

Marking a first for me, the mission would expose us to sites north of the Plain of Jars. To ensure a safe trip, we flew an elevated western route that skirted trouble spots on the Plain. It was wise to have a healthy respect for the area, particularly since the enemy was more aggressive lately, and had made his presence known many times in the past. Also, I heard colorful stories regarding overzealous personnel in Soviet cargo planes shooting at our transports, while competing for airspace on the Plain. Tom Moher was correct when he said that everyone on the ground knew we were unarmed and could not shoot back, so we were often popped at indiscriminately by all factions, including independents. It did not seem fair that we were a singular target for any individual who chose to fire at us. But

---

<sup>8</sup> Always at risk from enemies, Vang Pao employed relatives or proven loyalists for his personal bodyguards. In later years, "Plug" was sent to the States for cosmetic surgery. After his return, he was no longer considered an oddity, and I did not know how to refer to him.

it was not my turf. What was fair to me was not to an illiterate bozo on the ground struggling to survive, and who likely knew nothing about politics, Geneva Accords, ceasefires, or what was occurring in the rest of the world.

Ban Phou Vieng (VS-06) was located in the mountains six miles north of the Plain of Jars perimeter. It was close enough to the Plain for guerrilla patrols to access the northern reaches and evaluate or interdict enemy road activity. Perched high on a 3,300-foot ridgeline, the early Meo-French resistance site was well positioned to observe northern interlopers in the Nam Khan River Valley. More than 1,000 feet below, coupled with sister site Phu Cum (VS-50) located further north, forays could be made to observe or attack any incursion from the Moung Heim area.

After landing, pleasantries were exchanged. Some passengers departed, others boarded for the short trip east to Ban Bouam Long. Victor Site-88 was located at the 5,000 foot level on the northern flank of the sprawling Phou San range. It was only thirteen miles north of Ban Nong Pet at the Route-7 and 71 junction, an important Viet Minh and Pathet Lao logistical supply point and thoroughfare leading into and around the northern PDJ. Despite proximity to the enemy, because of rugged topography and high elevation, the superb opium poppy growing area was not easily accessible to unfriendly elements, and was always ranked as one of the more impregnable Meo fortresses in the entire region. Depending on the season, as there were no roads, a hike from the nearest enemy line of communication (LOC) might involve several days of trudging over inhospitable terrain. So far, no enemy had been sufficiently motivated to attempt the difficult and hazardous journey. Vang Pao curried the clan's favor, even marrying the head man's daughter to retain and count on the hardy people's loyalty.

When we arrived, a festive air had already consumed the village. It was the annual December celebration of the Meo New Year, one that continued for several days. Vang Pao and Pop were received like long lost brothers and immediately whisked away, while Hitch, Tongsar, Marshall's crew, and I were left to fend for ourselves and observe the merriment.

Ladies wore their finest attire. The more affluent women displayed heavy silver necklaces, crafted from old French piaster coins or silver bars. The period marked a joyous occasion by discarding the old and welcoming the new. At this time, preceded by the annual bath, new clothes were donned. However, one look at the women's broad, filthy, unshod feet made me doubt the bath portion. Besides, I did not observe any evidence of water at the site. Since these people came from southern China a hundred or more years ago, the custom did not seem too unusual, for I had heard that during the New Year, the Chinese traditionally preferred to clear the slate of debts and commence the year without obligations.

In addition to people milling about, there were two lines of young people--one girls, the other boys--facing each other. They were tossing black cloth balls and chanting in their language. Reserved for special occasions, this activity was an ancient rite, where future mates could meet with parental sanction, and become acquainted. It looked like fun, and as I was bored with doing nothing, I asked Tongsar if there would be any objection to me entering the game. Not all the girls had male partners, and soon I was happily tossing the tightly wound cloth ball to several village maidens.

From a cultural viewpoint, I learned a great deal that day and enjoyed myself immensely. Without a war to consume me, my early RONS were educational and enlightening. This was in distinct contrast to later work which, after hostilities

resumed, greatly fatigued me and negated extensive interface with the locals.

Leaving Pop and Vang Pao to the ministrations of the partying Meo of Bouam Long, we departed for the quiet of Sam Tong.

Other trips that day took us to sites close to Site-20. In contrast to the Pakse USAID operation, resupply missions in Military Region Two seemed to be well structured and organized. The people made all the difference. A local in charge handled the supply assignments. Climbing up the side of the helicopter, he either briefed us orally, or wrote the coordinates of a site on a scrap of paper. When instructions were meaningless to me, I redirected them to Captain Hitchman. In some cases, a guide was sent along to show us the way and communicate with the villagers. (Eight plus forty-five hours and the same amount logged as project pay.)

That night we discovered a bale of rough wool gray blankets toward the back of the warehouse. They were just what we needed to fend off most of the cold. Whether Pop knew they were there and did not want us to have them, I never discovered. Since he was not there, and we were in a survival mode, we "borrowed" them.

### **PADONG (VS-05)**

As during the previous morning, Hitch was up before dawn. After a decent night's sleep, he was anxious to launch immediately. The previous night he had arranged with Tongsar to have the ship preloaded with "hard rice" for a trip east to Ban

Padong. I was impressed, for here was a guy who strived to earn his pay without resorting to padding flight time.<sup>9</sup>

After takeoff, we ascended into a valley that sloped below Sam Tong. Flying between high ridges, we turned southeast toward Padong Ridge. While flying in this area, it seemed like we were always crossing high ridgelines similar to those separating Site-20 from Site-30, or the one leading to Site-05.

Located twelve miles from Sam Tong, and presenting a sheer wall blocking further progress east, Padong Ridge stretched southeast-northwest for nine miles. Like an accusing finger, it pointed in the general direction of the enemy held Plain of Jars. Averaging 6,000 feet in height, the ridge rose to even greater elevations toward either end. Midway along the wooded ridgeline was a preferred crossing point at 5,500 feet.

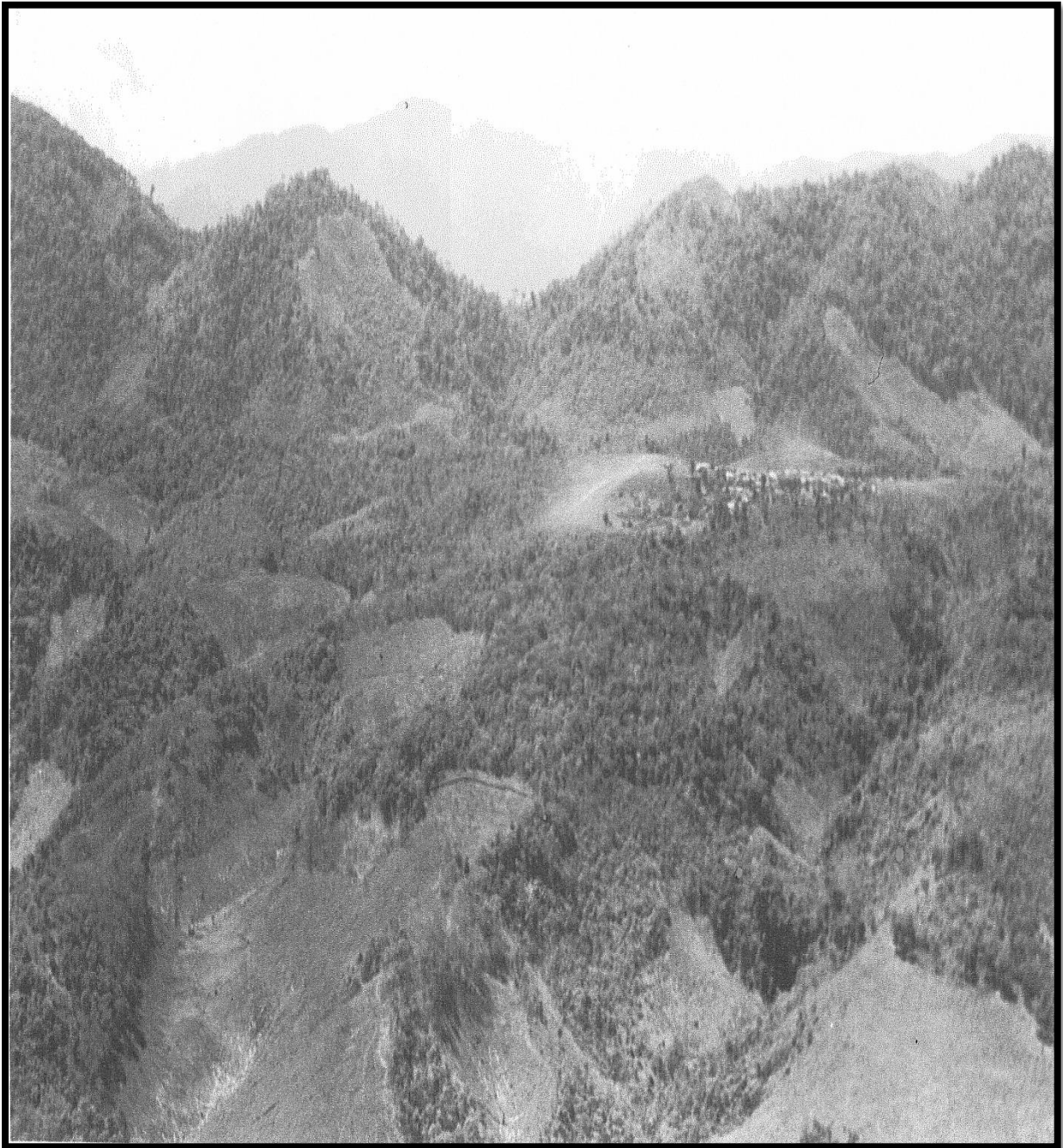
Heavy payloads required high power settings in order to climb to a "safe" crossing altitude. Approaching the ridge, we often did not have sufficient altitude to traverse the hill. In this case it was necessary to continue climbing, while orbiting or "S" turning west of the ridge. December marked the windy season in the region that required extra caution when landing on or working around mountains.

On the lee side (downwind side) of Padong Ridge, depending on turbulence and accelerated winds, an unplanned crossing could be dangerous. Therefore, in order to counter violent downdrafts, often strong enough to force an aircraft down, it was advisable to climb to at least 500 feet above the lowest point and cross over at a forty-five-degree angle. Then by using this procedure, if caught in a strong downdraft, one could rapidly turn toward the west and dive to attain critical airspeed.

---

<sup>9</sup> Hitchman's hard-charging work ethic and planning had a lasting impression on me. During ensuing years, I attempted to emulate him by hustling while upcountry and flying the maximum number of hours possible during a day.





A view from the north of Ban Padong (VS-05). Site of early Momentum training operations, it was strategically nestled against the foothills of Phu Bia, the tallest mountain range in Laos.

Author Collection.

There was a more time-consuming alternative to crossing the ridge. Should the 5,500-foot crossing point be obscured by low clouds, one could parallel the ridge northwest toward a low gap, known as the "back door" to the Plain of Jars. Between this point and the summit of Phou Pha Sai, depending on the enemy situation and weather conditions, there was a break in the mountains. Here one could turn right around the corner, fly to the east, and, at a lower altitude, maneuver along the Nam Siam River valley toward Site-05. Discounting enemy presence, even this method could be treacherous at times. If not careful, a phenomenon I later called "wind around the corner," prevalent during the winter monsoon months, created a strong airborne venturi effect, which greatly accelerated existing winds that could blow an inattentive pilot into the side of the mountain. In this same area, there were at least two colorful stories about unsuspecting pilots committed to uncontrolled landings on ridges because of excessive downdrafts and winds.

Situated at 4,500 feet above sea level, like a protective bird nest, Padong was tucked into the corner of the mountain's "T" shaped head. Lying deeply imbedded against the north side of what could be construed as an extension of the Phou Bia massif, the Padong complex was difficult to see unless level with or higher than the site.

By this time, I had seen several of Laos' gigantic mountain masses. I suspected that when originally formed, many were part of lengthy chains. Millions of years of weathering by rivers and other natural elements had separated the chains into identifiable mountains and ridges, which often connected.

Below the northern approach end of the short, grassy, north-south oriented STOL strip lay a series of heavily forested terraces, which stepped down thousands of feet toward the river valley below. With deep ravines bracketing both sides of the

site, it looked to be an easily defended stronghold, and I wondered at the commies' persistence in attacking such an isolated place during early 1961. <sup>10</sup>

Surrounded on three sides by higher terrain, Site Five offered few options for an approach to landing. To avoid sweeping far out over a potentially hostile river valley, immediately after crossing Padong Ridge, one had to lower the collective to hurriedly descend more than a thousand feet and line up for a straight in approach. Without a little planning, landing at the site could present an interesting challenge. Winds were normally adverse, as was typical of most mountain sites, and presented a combination of wrong direction, turbulence, and downdrafts. Since there was only one way into Padong, and additional loss of altitude required a tight overhead circling approach, descent from the north, or autorotation could be employed to land. Naturally, I rejected the latter.

Ameliorating many of the inherently poor landing conditions of mountain strips and landing zones in Laos, was the outstanding ability of the H-34, in the hands of a skilled aviator, to conduct a running landing at altitude. Taking much of the guesswork out of a landing, this feature allowed a pilot to touch down with a heavier payload, and far less power than required for a hover at elevations I never dreamed possible.

Once on the ground, I could see that the landing area stretched a fair distance toward the forested walls of a mountain. I was aware that somewhere among the trees was a bowl

---

<sup>10</sup> Padong and the surrounding area had quite a history. It was the first sizeable training base selected by Vang Pao for the U.S northeastern Laos-sponsored Meo counterinsurgency program. For the evolution of Padong, and events and details leading up to its abandonment during June 1961, see Book One, *Genesis*.

where a helicopter cockpit crew had met an untimely death the previous year.

After unloading, I unlocked the tail wheel and swung the machine slowly around preparing, for takeoff and return to Long Tieng, and then to Udorn. A fascinating view lay before me. The grassy area below the strip ended abruptly in a mass of trees. Beyond this point, the terrain tapered into a seemingly endless void. The main ridge to our left towered above us and a high mountain could be seen in the distance across the valley. In the awesome surroundings it was easy to feel insignificant and cowed by Mother Nature's beauty. (Seven plus forty-five hours, seven plus fifteen project.)

Overall, I was pleased that I had been assigned to fly with Hitch. If one overlooked his immodest extrovert tendencies, he was a good teacher. Although he was a bit authoritative, we had managed well. Best of all, he had let me fly tough approaches. Realistically, almost anyone I was assigned to fly with showed or told me new and worthwhile techniques. From a survival aspect, I would be remiss if I did not pay close attention.

With the RON complete, I felt that I had assimilated substantially more about the country, the situation, and the mountain people. Even living in primitive conditions for a few days in the cold, and eating unsavory rations, did not bother me. The experience had been exhilarating. I was content with the knowledge that each succeeding RON contributed additional building blocks to my learning curve pertaining to the operation. I loved it. Wanting more of the same, I hoped the sessions would continue.

## **UDORN**

The annual Udorn fair, a province wide event, traditionally began during the first week of December, and continued unabated

for ten days. It was conducted in the sizeable town park, located at the far end of Prachapakdi Road, and adjacent to city administration buildings. Aware that I favored local color, Fairy thought a visit to the fair would be a good experience for me. Prior to mingling with the masses, she bought a dried squid from a cart vendor stationed close to the corner movie theater. Naturally, even though it looked horrible, I had to take a proffered piece. At first, I compared the "delicacy" to all-day suckers and jawbreakers from my youth. The squid was indeed an all-day chewer, virtually impossible to fully masticate or swallow. Therefore, before my jaw ceased to function properly, I surreptitiously disposed of it.

The fair was an extremely noisy affair. Aggressive barkers, employing bull horns or hand-held public-address systems, attempted to outdo others who were touting their wares or shows. The racket could be heard for miles around through the still night air.

The bazaar-like setting was well attended, not only by town folk, but by merchants and people from remote portions of the province. Breaking a pattern of what was a humdrum existence, they attended for enjoyment, to sell items, or to purchase merchandise for the outlying villages. Tent flies and rude stands predominated throughout the area, where kitchen articles, toys, handicrafts of all kinds, all manner of junk artifacts and cure-alls for ills were hawked. On one "midway" were a girly show, a freak show, and other oddities, calculated to separate the unwary from their money.

During the course of our wandering, I was amused by the Thai equivalent of a Coke bottle. Colored drinks were dipped from large glass containers into a plastic bag, a straw was inserted, and a rubber band wrapped tightly around the top to create a seal. Although not known for beauty, the "bottle" was

totally functional. When one was not sipping the drink, it could be nonchalantly dangled by a finger placed through the open end of the rubber band. Giggling young maidens appeared both charming and coy swinging their bouncing bags, while strolling along dusty paths between the stalls.

Since our bachelor house lacked décor, Fairy encouraged me to purchase what might have been Italian silk rugs from an Indian vendor, but were billed as Oriental. The international implication of the transaction was worthy of note. Italian, Indian, Thai, American aspects--all were interconnected in the sale. One four by six-foot rug, replete with an enormous tiger, was programmed for the floor of my room. Another, a forest scene with deer, was purchased to send home to my parents. Following considerable haggling, both items were bought for two hundred baht. The sum seemed reasonable to me, but since the turban-headed, bearded seller appeared satisfied, I deduced that his profit must have been fair.

Off to one side in a dimly lighted area, the local Thai Army contingent had erected a static display of their rolling stock. Not lavishly equipped with modern machinery, the exhibit served to remind the population that Thailand was a military state, ready to protect the northeast should the need arise.

Beyond the tanks, Jeeps, and artillery pieces stood an enclosed arena, similar to one I had visited in June. However, when I attempted to interest Fairy in attending the kick-boxing contests, she begged off. I correctly deduced that the sport was too bloody for the female species. No matter, tired of the rampant dust and incessant noise, it was well past time to leave the fair. The evening had been a welcome change from the usual dull ones, and a little interesting, but I was not anxious to visit the carny atmosphere again soon.

**BANGKOK**

Fairy and I spent the next week in the big city. As I still harbored bad memories regarding the all-night train trip, we hired a taxi for almost the same price as an overnight sleeper. According to reports, the American-sponsored Friendship Highway was still not paved from Korat to Nong Khai, and would not be completed for another year. Therefore, much of the ride south through flat countryside was conducted over a dusty, bumpy, laterite road. Adding to our discomfort, on the worst stretches we were forced to keep the windows closed.

Before ascending the Korat Plateau, the old road became a two-lane concrete ribbon. The region was a distinct contrast to the scabble-poor rice paddy land behind us. Here lush rolling hills sloped up from the roadway. In addition, there was a noticeable change in air quality. At a bend in the road, we stopped at an open-air refreshment stand. The primary drink offered was "fresh" whole milk in pint-sized pyramid-shaped paper containers. Apparently, a regional dairy industry had recently been inaugurated. Used to canned or powdered substitutes, it had been some time since I had enjoyed authentic milk. Quite dehydrated from the dust and acute heat, I found the delicious product quelled my thirst. Quizzing the vendor for more information, he indicated that the milk was irradiated, requiring no refrigeration. He admitted that as a new product, demand was slack and production low. Wheels began spinning in my head. There was potential here. I speculated that if one invested in such a fledgling industry, perhaps money could be made, and I would not have to fly for someone else the rest of my life.

The rest of the trip from "dairy land" to Bangkok, was a bit scary. Since completion of the two-lane road, high speeds were possible. Fearless young drivers of large cargo trucks

enjoyed chasing each other, or playing the Thai equivalent of chicken. Sitting forty-five degrees to a normal driving position, believing a protective Buddha sat on their shoulder, they showed neither apprehension nor mercy to oncoming traffic. Trying not to watch the mayhem, I wondered what would happen when the Twentieth Century eventually came to Udorn.

The taxi driver dropped us at the Royal Hotel, close to preferred sightseeing areas.

In contrast to Udorn, Bangkok was warm, sunny, and the food delicious. It was a part of the Thai civilization that I always looked forward to visiting.

Thailand was a country where the people enjoyed many holidays, and December tenth was Constitution Day. It would afford me a rare chance to view the royal couple. Since I had just missed Her Majesty at Mukdahan while still a Marine on an overnight mission, and again at Udorn earlier in the year, I was excited at the prospect.<sup>11</sup>

We walked a short distance from the Royal Hotel, along wide pigeon-infested sidewalks, past the oval Phra Mane parade grounds, toward the high, white plaster walls protecting the large rectangular religious grounds containing the Grand Palace. On Sadam Chai Road green and orange tiled roofs poked above the lotus-shaped white crenelated walls. Since there was no open entrance on this side of the wall, we had to backtrack a considerable distance to the correct entry point. Specifically, for the holiday, huge iron gates leading to the courtyard of the complex had been thrown open to the viewing public.

---

<sup>11</sup> See Book Two-The Crotch.





Flying low over the Chao Phraya River, a Royal Thai Air Force F-5 crew passes abeam the Grand Palace compound, which also houses the temple of the Emerald Buddha and other revered religious statues and items. To the left is the distinctive oval Phra Mane parade grounds, where U.S. aircraft surreptitiously airdropped supplies to Office of Strategic Services (OSS) operatives under the noses of the Japanese during World War Two. On the corner across the street, on Rajadamern Avenue is the Royal Hotel. Below the jet's tail on the Thonburi side of the river sits the Temple of the Dawn previously visited.

*National Geographic*, Volume 132, #1, July 1967.

Two enormous bronze elephants guarded opposite ascending stairs comprising much of the front façade of the Grand Palace. Five grand doors stood closed on the landing at the top of the stairs. We did not have long to wait. With relative ease, we were able to observe the King and Queen as they were leaving. Particularly interesting was the immaculate, gold-colored Rolls Royce the Royal Family used for ground transportation. Since the three-story palace, now used only for ceremony, was closed to the public, we elected to stroll the remainder of the grounds.

### **RELIGION AND THE EMERALD BUDDHA**

Historically, Thailand was an early crossroads centrally positioned between Indian and Chinese cultures. Over the centuries, the Thai people either assimilated, adapted, or improved on many aspects of neighboring influences.

It appeared that much of Thai life revolved around the Ceylonese adopted Theravada Buddhism. Religion was highly prevalent in daily life. It was poignantly displayed in the ritual of monks begging for food in the morning, the pervasive temples, the Buddhist images in shops, homes, and in print, and the religious amulets worn by most men, women, and children. Buddhism was a practicing religion, one that was taught to a child from the time he or she could comprehend and place his hands together in a respectful Wai.

According to Khun Phya Ahunan Rajadhon, in a speech presented in America about this time:

*"It has been said that to understand the Thai one must understand Thai Buddhism. Buddhism teaches that everything in a worldly plane is conditional--an impermanent one-subject to change--of progress and decay. It specifies that things will become alright in the end, if one refines his heart spiritually*

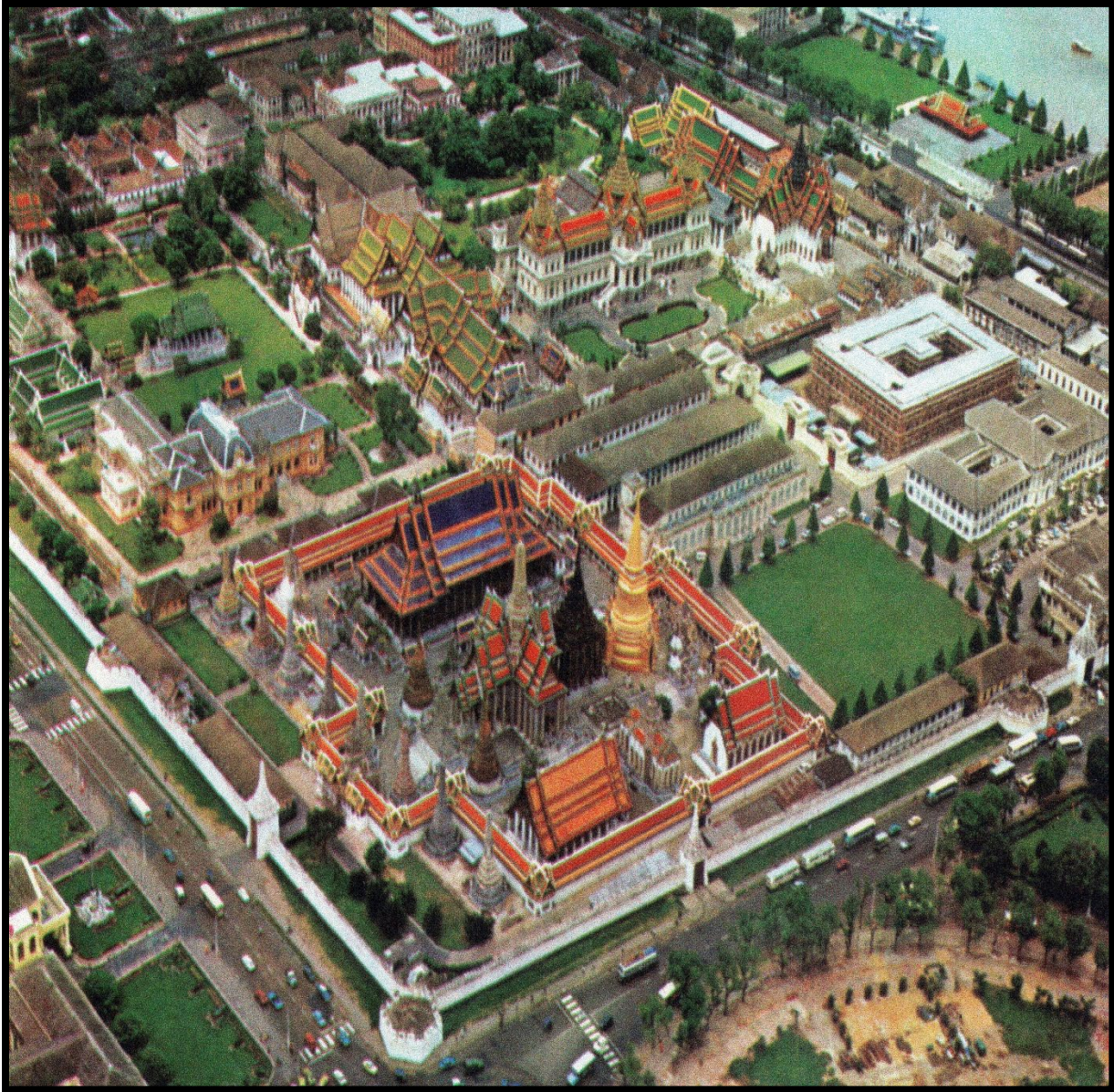
*and intellectually, and one can wait by adapting himself to circumstances befitting the situation."*

Out of this belief has arisen the much-used Thai and Lao terms Mai Pen Rai and Bo Pen Yong (it does not matter). Although not having an exact literal meaning, the phrases reminded me of Spanish and Persian Farsi terms, Manana and Pas Fardo. Then there were Thai proverbs relating to the accommodation to life: pliable wood does not break and bamboo bends in the wind. Although what might be a rationalization to us, the phrases related to a philosophy for tolerance and endurance for the Thai.

Integrated into and much a part of Thai consciousness, was the belief in spirits (called Phi), astrology, and charms. Monks doubling as fortune tellers, self-professed tellers, or the raggedy man on the street spreading his astrological paraphernalia on the sidewalk or wall abounded in the society. These individuals helped fulfill the inner needs of people not completely satisfied with religion. Although more prevalent in rural areas, superstitions were also evident in city life.

In addition to housing the Grand Palace, the huge complex contained many buildings, including a special temple, Wat Phra Keo, where the revered Emerald Buddha resided. The venerated object's origin was shrouded in mystery and speculation. One belief was that it had been carved in northern India by Greek artisans more than 1,000 years ago. In 1435, lightning shattered a pagoda in the northern city of Chiang Rai, exposing the nephritic stone concealed within a stucco Buddha image. Recognized as a national treasure, the translucent green jasper eventually arrived in Vientiane, Laos, where it remained for 200 years.

During King Thaksin's rule, General Chakri, who would become the first Thai King in the present dynasty rule,



The Grand Palace (center right) and Emerald Buddha complex (lower left) in Bangkok, Thailand.

From a 1995 postcard in the Author's collection.

conquered Vientiane in 1778, and transported the Emerald Buddha to the original palace in Thonburi. Three years after construction of the new palace and shrine commenced in 1783, the capital was relocated across the river. Here the holy image found its present and final resting place. The two-foot-tall icon was housed in a magnificent building with a red and gold ceiling, gold mosaic walls, and roofs of blue and orange tiles. Perched high on a multi-tiered pedestal and canopied throne, the Emerald Buddha was venerated by the King and his subjects during seasonal changes, whereby in elaborate religious ceremonies, the Buddha's clothing was changed three times a year—winter, monsoon, and summer seasons.

Commoners and tourists were allowed into the chapel only on Sunday mornings and holidays. Even now we had to wait to enter the building until resident monks completed their chanting and meditation. <sup>12</sup>

During the delay, we wandered across the courtyard to adjacent covered corridors, where horizontally flowing murals, patterned after the Indian Ramayana, but adapted to Thai tastes, adorned the walls. Large wooden doors painted with Chinese characters separated galleries from outside entrances. Sloped ceilings composed of red slats terminated at six-and-a-half-foot gold fluted columns. Along the walls surrounding the entire temple area were gaily painted portraits on decaying plaster depicting the popular Ramakien epic. At the top of the murals, green or white monkey gods, hermit monks, and other deities peered down on the unfolding story, as well as the onlookers. Sea goddesses, wars, adventures, separate countries, mountains, seas, lowlands, all linearly blended together in mosaics covered

---

<sup>12</sup> With the advent of gross commercialization throughout the Thai kingdom, the grounds and temples are now open daily. During the Author's last visit, what used to be a token entry fee had ballooned into a tidy sum.

the long gallery walls. A few of the monkey god scenes consumed three-quarters of a panorama. At different points, the simians were colored white, green, gray, blue, brown, tan, yellow, and purple.

Although a professional tour guide, Fairy confessed to being naïve regarding the significance of these pictures. However, I perceived that the flowing scenes had something to do with the struggle between good, evil, and the relationship with humans. The artists had been clever, as the helper of Rama, the white, green, and black monkey gods and the warring subjects appeared to project from the walls. Toward the story's end, the white monkey was portrayed as overcoming the green one. Scrutinizing art so difficult to understand was both fatiguing and frustrating. I supposed that a tourist guide or schooled intellectual would be the only source of actual information, but none were available.

A tribute to Dante's *Inferno*, portrayed concepts of the Asian hell were detailed, bloody and disgusting. They had no counterpart in Western art that I could recall. During my experience at the Kabuki Theater in Kyoto, Japan, I had discovered that it was not imperative to understand all the nuances of a culture to enjoy the art. Moreover, the experience created building blocks for further study. To a large extent, I was absorbing the cultural involvement through my personal guide, and I was thankful that I was being exposed to the delights of Thailand far more rapidly than if I had attempted to explore on my own.

Before we were allowed into the Emerald Buddha's inner sanctum, we were required to remove and stow our shoes in wooden racks. I wondered how people retrieved similar flip-flops and thong footwear. Above the racks a sign cautioned visitors not to take pictures. This did not affect me, as I did not own a

camera. I recalled being told in other countries that, "The bigger the American, the larger the camera." I was particularly sensitive to being classified as a tourist. Hoping not to offend, I attempted to remain as inconspicuous as possible. Of course, for a "long nose, round eye," this proved difficult to achieve, and I could hear the word farang being whispered.

Several people were already camped out on the marble porch facing the entrance. Because of personal reasons, their mode of dress, or feeling unworthy, they did not venture into the sanctuary. Prior to entering the receiving room through enormous inlaid mother-of-pearl doors, I was gently cautioned not to step on the door sill, for spirits of the temple resided in the doorway portal. All temples were considered special in Thailand, and a person was obligated to avoid any loud or boisterous conduct inside one. Also, it was customary to enter and bow in deference to the religious article, while at the same time executing a traditional hands folded Wai.

The far end of the large room was crowded with raised altars and striking religious paraphernalia. Enclosed in glass, the most sacred object resided on the highest platform. Golden parasols, mirrors, and statues decorated or guarded both sides of the main altar. Light from chandelier style fixtures illuminated murals that adorned the thirty-five-foot-tall walls. The scene was breathtaking, calculated to create awe and wonder to one's senses.

Once within the inner viewing room, visitors could "rest" on straw mats that spread over square tiles embossed with circles. A side sitting position was required to avoid the foot taboo. Akin to Asian torture, maintaining this position in conjunction with the Wai for any period of time was difficult and painful for a Westerner, unaccustomed to pressures exacted on one's tender buttocks and hips. Noting knowing smiles from

sympathetic Thai around me, to compensate, I frequently squirmed and shifted my body, which substantially reduced the discomfort.

Through the mystery of these experiences, I was discovering a main theme permeating Thai life--respect. Obviously, respect was highly prized and pervaded the society. If one learned and accepted this tenet, then one could succeed well in this convoluted land.

After finding our shoes, I had to see more of the temple grounds' outstanding architecture. It was overwhelming. One had to look closely at each structure, for there was so much detail that it was easy to scan the macro and overlook the micro portions. Along the long axis on both sides of the temple, long galleries with sixteen columns separated the outside from the main walls. At the bottom, mythological half man, half bird Garuda figures were positioned the full length of the wall. Their hands with palms turned upward, conveyed the impression that they were supporting the building. Further up the sides, interspaced on gold encrusted tile, or glass floral-designed walls, red window shutters were festooned with carved Thai warriors. These were inlaid with shards of multi-colored glass and displayed in bas-relief. Different artisans must have participated in the carving, as each form displayed distinct and unique features. To the rear of the building lay another outer court, perhaps to accommodate an overflow of worshippers, or created just for looks. Here the steps were guarded by two large Chinese style lions. Outside columns covered with multi-colored tile ended with fluted tops supporting vaulted ceilings and stout beams. As with other traditional Thai temples, the ends of sloping orange and green roofs terminated in points that looked like buffalo horns. Hanging from the eaves, various sized bronze bells tinkled pleasantly in the gentle breeze. Given complete



solitude and absence of a bustling populace, I envisioned a more peaceful and harmonious blending with the surroundings.

Adjacent to the Emerald Buddha building was a terrace, twenty steps high. On top were four large buildings, each presenting a different design. Patterned after the ancient glory of Cambodia's Ankor Wat, they contained ashes of venerated monks. All the entrances were secured by large wooden doors, ornately carved and inlaid with multi-colored tiles.

As we roamed slowly through the complex, it became more evident that many cultures had influenced the country's art. There were male Chinese characters standing on Shi-Shi dogs, a lion style sculpture I had first seen in Okinawa. Large iron pots contained mini date palms or Bonsai plants. Here was a gilt-colored Garuda at the entrance to a building, there was a Kiniree, a female counterpart. Who knew where the nine-headed Naga (snake) adorning banisters originated?

Many of the buildings and entrances were guarded by twenty-foot giants. The fierce looking monsters, with masks and boar like teeth reminded me of similar art I had seen in Hong Kong's Tiger Balm Gardens. Holding large spear swords, each statue had its own name. Each displayed a distinctive coloring--blue, red, or green. Other's skin was painted white or blue, with armor and gold rings on their hands. All wore pointed sandals.

Learning that these impressive and inanimate guards were called Yaks evoked a resounding guffaw from me. By then, we were sufficiently fatigued from the compressed sightseeing that our defense mechanisms functioned at a low ebb. When I explained what yacking meant to Americans, Fairy threw Asian convention to the winds and broke up in laughter. Afterward the slightest mention of a Yak-Yak was enough to double both of us over. The episode confirmed to me that Thai people inherently enjoyed

joking and laughing. It occurred to me that whatever went into the makeup of these seemingly gentle, smiling people, Westerners could use a large dose of it. <sup>13</sup>

The outdoor Sunday market, conducted in the expansive Phra Mane grounds, a former cremation and parade site, would have been better classified as a weekend marketplace. Divided into six sections, open air tent vendors offered food, household items, clothes and fabric, flowers and plants, animals and birds, and other miscellaneous wares. The experience there was a party in itself, and many Air America families brought goods there, particularly animals, to Udorn.

Across from the market, close to the Chao Praya, was the Thai National Museum. A former palace, the building contained ancient artifacts derived from many eras of Thai history. Ancient weapons, pottery, parts of statues, thrones, processional vehicles, and musical instruments were but a few of the items housed there. Fairy was probably sorry she took me there, for as a museum buff, I spent many hours attempting to absorb and learn from the displays. <sup>14</sup>

## **BRIEF THAI HISTORY**

The history and development of Thailand is relatively complicated and obscure in its origins. As a result of racial admixture, the Thai share many characteristics with other people of Southeast Asia. The word Thai is translated as free, and originally was a designation of a linguistic stock (Tai) by many

---

<sup>13</sup> Armed with a tape recorder and a good deal of motivation, I later retraced these religious sites, and as a leisurely observer, was able to note and compare differences from 1962, and record the timeless scenes in detail.

<sup>14</sup> A huge world class complex, the museum today is a delightful and educational place to spend a few hours.

minority groups throughout southern China, and what is now North Vietnam.

Relating to the origin of the Thai, it is believed that the Mongoloid race arose from southern China, where they lived in tribal communities, with the family the core unit as it remains today.

Chinese Seventh Century A.D. records referred to a kingdom known as the Nan Chao--now the southern province of Yunnan--composed of Thai and Tibetan-Burmese people. Described as the southern barbarians by Chinese society, there was little written reference accorded the Thai, and oral stories resulted in distortion of the people in myth and legend.

Previous to, and throughout the conquest of the Thai kingdom in 1253 by Kublai Khan's hordes, Tai-speaking tribes had been migrating into the northern portion of Southeast Asia. The migration assumed three principle directions: the Shan of upper Burma in the west, the Thai of Thailand to the center, and the Lao of the Lao kingdom in the east.

More than 1,000 years before, Thailand was inhabited first by the Malay-Indonesian, and then by the Mon-Khmer speaking races. The former had established a Javanese-Sumatran empire, whose influence extended to lower portions of central Thailand. The Mon Khmer, ancestors of the Mons of lower Burma, and the Cambodians, controlled central Thailand and the northeast. The Mons ruled first, followed by the Khmer.

As the Thai drifted southward, they settled in small groups along the forested mountains of the lower Himalayan foothills in what is now northern Thailand. There they formed small independent states ruled by individual chiefs or kings.

Early in the Thirteenth Century, they moved farther south into the Chao Phraya River Valley. After ejecting the Khmer from the area, they formed the first independent Thai kingdom, known

as the "Dawn of Happiness, the cradle of Thai civilization," or the Sukhothai Kingdom. The area was expanded under Ramkhamhaeng "The Great" into what is today Thailand. In 1283 A.D., the talented ruler invented the Thai alphabet and adopted Thevada Buddhism.

During continued movement south, the Kingdom of Sukhothai was supplanted by the Kingdom of Ayudhya--also spelled Ayutthaya. For over 400 years, thirty-three kings ruled the coveted and heavily fortified crossroad trading center. Then, after a century of protracted wars, the dynasty was terminated in 1767, when the Burmese Army ruthlessly sacked the supposedly impregnable capitol.

Consistent with other events in Thai history, an escaping general, Phya Tak Sin (Taksin), later raised an army in the south and eventually drove the Burmese out of Ayudhya. Taksin then crowned himself king, and, for security reasons, established a new capital at Thonburi. Later he was deposed by Chao Phya Chakri (Rama One), founder of the present Chakri dynasty, who further enhanced security in 1782, and moved across the river to what is now called Bangkok.

The Chakri Dynasty produced nine kings, each of whom contributed differently to the growth of modern Thailand. However, it was Rama 4, King Mongkut, who, in the middle 1800s began ushering the country into the modern era. The enlightened ruler astutely concluded agreements with France and Britain, granting extraterritorial rights, importing European advisors, and integrating foreign ideas. By expanding trade with the West and sagaciously "bending with the wind," Mongkut kept Siam out of the greedy hands of Western colonialists. <sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> The United States Government became involved in Siam through a trade treaty, its first in the Orient.

Mongkut's son, Chulalongkorn, was crowned Rama 5 and is considered the greatest Thai king. He has been referred to as the "Lincoln of the East" for abolishing slavery, a system already in the process of being phased out. More importantly, with foreign guidance, he established ministries, improved Siamese law, opened public schools, built railroads, developed communications facilities, reorganized the armed forces, and prevented colonial powers from taking control of Siam. Both father and son have been immortalized in movies and stage plays of the *King and I*, which is still considered disrespectful and banned in Thailand. Chulalongkorn is honored each year on 25 October by a national holiday and a ceremony that I had the pleasure of attending at his statue in front of the Throne Hall.

In 1932 Siam became a constitutional monarchy through a military-engineered bloodless revolution. Patterned after Western democracies, the constitution provided for legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. A National Assembly was also established, further shepherding Thailand into the modern world.

Throughout a long history of wars and dislocation, the Siamese people became a composite of races. Consisting of Thai Mons, Cambodian, and Malay, they were drawn from four areas of Thailand (north, northeast, central, and south). During modern times, southern Chinese and Asian Indians (and later Vietnamese) arrived to generally be absorbed and merged into one people known as Siamese, having one homogeneous culture and religion. However, differences arise in each overlapping regional area because of surrounding geography, social, cultural, and diverse historical backgrounds.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> This historical account is assembled from many articles and publications.

**PURCHASES, SIGHTSEEING, AND SERIOUS DISCUSSIONS**

Fairy, a Tourist Organization of Thailand (TOT) representative, was familiar with the locations of numerous interesting "cottage" industries. Over several days, we visited many of these.

A few shops and factories were based in the same buildings; others were widely separated. At one textile store we haggled for four and a half yards of silk that were manufactured on crude wooden hand looms. Later, we visited a lapidary where rough, semi-precious stones were ground, polished, and prepared for mounting, and sale to tourists. In the rear work area Thais were spaced around a large, circular concrete tub. A grinding wheel rotated inside the container, and overhead sprinklers trickled water on the stone. The polishing process was a learned occupation, and depended on the talent of the individual artisan. Despite being blind, one of the workers produced quality stones merely by feel. The man was a cheerful person, who did not mind talking to you, while proudly displaying his prowess at the trade.

In my profession, rings were potentially dangerous. I preferred not to wear one, as it could easily snag on safety wire or a protruding bolt, while inspecting an aircraft. Under the right conditions, it was possible to lose a finger or have one's skin stripped to the bone. However, with Fairy's assistance, I purchased an attractive golden star sapphire for my Father. Mostly mined in the hills of western Thailand, I learned that the stone was second on an ascending valuation scale of black, golden, blue, and ruby sapphires. The gems were all uniquely beautiful. In those of excellent quality, the star would appear to leap out at you when exposed to direct sunlight.

At Urai Thailand, for about the equivalent of forty dollars, I purchased a seventy-piece bronzeware dinner utensil

set with black water buffalo handles. Unsolicited, the friendly owner was happy to drive us to his factory on Phahol Yothin Road toward the northern city outskirts to observe the manufacturing process. It was a small operation conducted in a dingy shop, but this seemed to be the norm for Bangkok cottage industries. Amalgamated with tin and copper, each utensil was hand crafted into knives, forks, and spoons of various sizes and uses. Since considerable work was involved, I would not be able to receive the finished product until the following month. I was discovering how easy it was to spend money on STO.

### **CONCERN ABOUT THE FUTURE**

Shortly after being hired by Air America, I was troubled about the stability and longevity of the job. Now, with the current Lao situation in flux, USG's worldwide geopolitical interests constantly changing, and the perceived attitude of the Company toward its employees suspect, more than likely, I could soon become history.

We discussed this possibility over several dinners, one on a floating restaurant in the center of a large lagoon in Lumpini Park. Fairy was brimming with alternate ideas should I lose my position. Distributing milk to the northeast was discussed. The Foremost company was the primary dairy operation in Bangkok. From my military experience at Cubi Point, Philippine Islands, and Futema, Okinawa, I recalled that the milk was not fresh, but reconstituted from powder. One had to gradually develop a taste for the chalky product. But as we had just learned in the hills of Korat Province, dairy cows were being raised, and a new industry was underway, producing good tasting whole milk. It appeared that the main problem with marketing milk in the northeast would be transportation. The Friendship Highway was slowly pushing north, but trucking was still a closely held

government cartel that undoubtedly would be difficult for a farang to penetrate. Still, I believed that with a little effort, there was money to be made in this developing country. Why couldn't I introduce this milk to the American community in Udorn?

Fairy indicated that Bangkok was one of the fastest growing cities in the Far East, and would exhibit tremendous changes within the next five years. For example, she claimed to have purchased land in the city three years previously, which had already doubled in value. She encouraged me to do the same, but with the work longevity dilemma facing me, it was difficult to formulate any plans beyond the present. Where would I be, and with whom in five years? I had also heard that a foreigner was not permitted to purchase land in Thailand if there was no reciprocal agreement in the country or state of the person's home of record. Even though there was a bill pending in the legislature to legalize such transactions, currently a foreigner could not own land in Thailand. It was pointed out that the obvious way to circumvent the problem was to establish ownership of land in a Thai's name. Although tempting, I was not ready to commit myself to such gross speculation.

One reason for caution regarding current business ventures in Thailand was that I had begun to question Fairy's motives. With considerable trepidation, I independently learned that she had been informing friends and relatives that we were going to be married soon. Perhaps she did this to create a respectable impression regarding our relationship. However, considering myself an important principal in such a union, she had failed to inform me of "our" plans. I judged her methods extremely aggressive and premature. To apprise others of such a commitment at this time was foolish. We had not known each other very long, and with vast cultural differences to overcome, considerably



more time was required to assess our compatibility. I concluded that since her sister was married to a farang, and Fairy had lived with them in the States for a few months, she now presumed to possess extensive knowledge pertaining to our culture. I did not think this was possible, and believed that the relationship required more time to develop and flourish.

## **RELATIVES**

I first discovered that Fairy had been informing people of "our" intent while we visited an elderly female relative. The stout old lady was married to a "White Russian," who had immigrated to Thailand during one of the Russian purges. Perhaps the visit was tailored by Fairy to generate a gentle nudge, demonstrating that mixed races could live together in harmony.

The old wood and stucco house was modest. Nestled in a quiet section of Bangkok I never dreamed existed, it was situated on an adequate piece of land, nicely complemented by arbors, patios, large shade trees, bushes, and beautiful flowers common to the area. It was evident that these people had lived there a long time. Attesting to the dampness prevalent in heavily shaded areas, moss, algae, and mildew abounded on almost everything outside the house, and characteristic odors of the tropics wafted through the foliage.

Animated, Fairy chatted and laughed animatedly with the sarong-clad woman in Thai. She still appeared to shout during normal conversation. I conversed with the old man about his long life in the Orient. Although professing no regrets, I could see that Asia had taken a serious toll on him. In broken English, he told me that years of consuming spicy, hot food had left him with severe stomach problems. Confirming this, he lifted his shirt above maroon Chinese pajamas, exposing a drain bag and a red catheter that protruded from his lower abdomen. I wondered

if this was a foreigner's reward after living for years in Thailand. I was reminded of Rudyard Kipling's remonstrance to his readers that "*East was East and West was West, and never the twain should meet.*" Although pertaining to Indian-English relations, was Kipling's prose regarding the "Asian brown" apropos in my situation? Only time would tell.

### **THE SNAKE FARM**

Our sightseeing tour continued at the snake farm on Rama Four Road. Sponsored by the Pasteur Institute, the facility was the first of its kind that I had ever seen. It must have been administered by the Thai Red Cross, for such a logo was prominently displayed. The organization's humanitarian purpose was to raise poisonous reptiles, extract the venom, and manufacture anti-venom serum for the treatment of snake bite victims. For a nominal fee the public was allowed to view feeding and "milking" on weekdays at eleven o'clock in the morning. Housed in a deep concrete pit that would have made an excellent swimming pool, king cobras, ordinary cobras, and Russell pit vipers lazed in the late morning sun.

At the appointed hour, dressed in the characteristic light brown civil service uniforms, handlers entered the enclosure. Since a measure of danger was involved when interacting with serpents, with audible anticipation, the audience pressed closer to the thick, circular walls. While the crowd jostled for position, a handler skillfully seized a snake behind its head with stainless steel tongs. Then his partner either force-fed the reptile with a large glass dropper filled with a milky looking substance, or placed the snake's fangs through a membrane covered jar and "milked" poison into the container.

It was uncanny how the team casually handled the snakes. However, I noted they used far more care with the vipers than

with cobras. A person next to me indicated that despite caution, the principal handler had been accidentally bitten several times. The man was not overly complacent with any of his charges, but indicated to the crowd that the hodgepodge of reptiles was very different in temperament and mobility. When aroused, cobras did not strike like vipers. They merely fell forward to the extent of their ability to rise vertically, roughly one third of body length. He then nonchalantly demonstrated this, by patting cobras on the head. Amazingly, he was even able to do this to enormous king cobras that attained an average length of fifteen feet. Vipers were treated differently. Housed in white concrete domes, the ultra-deadly serpent could coil and strike in an instant, and displayed a less predictable nature.

Beyond the tourist-oriented crater was a building containing other poisonous species, like the green bamboo snake and others too deadly to think about. A locked display case held vials of dried anti-venom produced by members of the organization. These could be shipped to provinces where there was a need. I took little solace in knowing that this anti-venom was available, for time, distance, and the vagaries of a Stone Age transportation system produced a critical variable in saving a life. I recalled Air America's Doctor "Rice" indicating that serum was available, but, like most other effective medicines, was not in his clinic. <sup>17</sup> The standard procedure indicated, *"If bitten, capture the snake, and deliver it to the clinic. Once identified, we will determine what serum to obtain."* This was fine, but what do I do in the meantime, tap-dance around while I am dying?

---

<sup>17</sup> The Company would not spend the money to equip a first-class health clinic.

The Dusit Zoo was located close to the heavily guarded, Chit Ladya Palace, where the king and his family resided. Although interesting, it could not be considered a world class zoo. Animals did not appear well cared for, cages were filthy, and some residents were lethargic and pathetic looking. The special attraction was a rare "white" elephant (it looked gray to me) that had been presented to the king by a foreign dignitary. Topiary bushes meticulously cut and shaped to emulate animals and Thai classical dancers lent some charm and class to the grounds, and tended to offset the squalor of the animal habitats. Huge carp abounded in lagoons and lakes. The water boiled furiously with fish, marking competition to secure morsels of bread thrown into the water by visitors from arched bridges.

### **THE SOUTHEASTERN PENINSULA**

Toward the end of my STO, based solely on the basis of my New Jersey driver's license and honest face, I rented a small car, and we drove about one hundred miles south to the quiet beach resort at Pattaya. Unaccustomed to sitting in the right seat of an automobile and driving on the left side of the road, I was a little nervous driving in town. However, once beyond the congestion of Sukhumvit Road and the Bangkok outskirts, where both established and new factories lined the roads, I began to feel more confident. Here the countryside opened broadly into salt marshes, canals, and rice paddy land.

The narrow two-lane road leading southeast was rough, but as we were in no hurry, I drove slowly. We swept past several rough windmills, used to transfer and channel klong water to the numerous rice fields. It was a busy area. Off the right side of the road, men labored in pits scraping salt into huge piles, where brackish or gulf seawater had passively evaporated.

Farther along, tapioca roots were staged on gigantic cement slabs, awaiting shredding and further processing. In separate work areas, roots had been reduced and lay in the sun to dry and bleach, prior to the final disposition. Strange-looking creatures, completely wrapped against the sun's burning rays, labored with long wooden push-rakes, directing the dried product into huge piles. In other areas red hot chili peppers, an essential ingredient in the Thai diet, were drying on large, flat rattan trays. On the left side of the road fishermen cast their hand nets into the canal's gross-looking water. In contrast to the manioc laborers, these laborers dressed only in a pakamaw, a black and white checkered breech cloth, were burned almost black from the unrelenting sun. Other more "affluent" men of the land dipped wide, elaborate nets stretched out in an upward curve by bamboo stems. All involved in the fishing process were barely eking out a living in the abundant klongs and streams.

Touted as a popular resort, Pattaya appeared relatively undeveloped. There were none of the hotels or high rises common to Bangkok. Patronized mainly on weekends by Bangkok residents, a wide three-mile crescent of shoreline meandered along the Gulf of Siam. The beach exhibited bright white sand, rivaling the beautiful beaches of Pensacola, Florida. Inviting light blue water gently lapped the coastline, and extended into the Gulf as far as I could see. Since it was the winter season, we were not prepared to swim, merely to explore. Silhouetted against the Gulf, small ponies and their handlers plodded slowly through the sand, seeking customers in the nearly deserted landscape. Surprisingly, throughout the entire area, there was only one small fishing village, a scattering of houses and bungalows. The mostly vacant palm tree-studded land was a perfect place to build a grand villa.

Farther south the macadam road narrowed, giving way to one of white shell. Located at a junction where a footpath jutted to the left into high grass, a huge tree majestically stood in the center of the road. Rather than destroy the tree, the shell road split and detoured around both sides. Obviously, the local people cared about nature's works, and attempted to preserve them. Barbos, the only western style restaurant in Pattaya, sat on the beach side at road's end. Travel beyond this point was forbidden, as the adjoining land was reserved for the king. Previously, I had heard pilots, Captain Red Alston in particular, remark about the delicious rock lobster served at Barbos. Unaware of what the dish consisted, I ordered plates for both of us. We were not disappointed. Although not actually lobster, but crab, we found the fare every bit as delectable as portrayed. We could not have selected a more discrete place to visit, for at three in the afternoon we were the only patrons.

Following the early dinner, we started north toward Chonburi Province. Invigorated by the clean sea air of the day's outing, we decided to overnight at the mini-resort at Bang Saen. Like Pattaya, Bang Saen was located on the eastern Gulf, but more accessible to the residents of Bangkok. Since it was a weekday, the hotel was virtually deserted. Built on a lagoon, the circular, peaked, red roofed building had high decks to catch the evening breeze and afford a pleasant view.

The seafood served there was delicious. Fairy introduced me to Schichra Sauce, a red-hot pepper and tomato concoction, designed to enhance the taste of crab, shrimp, or nearly anything edible. During our sojourn she also eternally hooked me on Bamee Nam, a tasty Chinese egg noodle soup. The quality of the soup and its contents was only limited by the cook's or patron's imagination. Boiled and steeped in a large copper caldron, the broth might contain whole ducks, pig livers, or

other unmentioned animal parts. For an additional baht or two, a hungry Westerner could order extra slices of sweet red pork or liver. If one desired, there were fish balls or pig entrails available. Unless deleted, floating on top of the soup was a green vegetable called pak-chee. Looking somewhat like parsley, the sprigs and leaves tasted like nothing I had encountered before. Initially it tended to nauseate me, and did for some time afterward, until I became used to it. Therefore, I discretely removed it from the bowl. Next, it was left to the individual's taste buds to judge what final accompaniments to add to the soup. No self-respecting Thai restaurateur would station less than five jars of condiments on a table. In a land famous for its sauces, one could add crushed peanuts, rough sugar particles, sliced hot chili peppers swimming in vinegar, and garlic, or Nam Pla, a salty black fish sauce. Stirred together with chop sticks that I had learned to wield with some degree of proficiency while in the military, and a ceramic spoon for slurping juice--metal utensils were not used, for they detracted from the taste--the soup constituted a fine meal. Although placed in large, deep bowls, rarely did one serving satisfy me. I generally ordered more, but never more than three. In addition to enjoying the succulent Bamee Nam, I believed it would be a safe food when eating out, for the broth and all its contents were continuously boiled. The only contamination concern was the bowl and utensils, and upon request, these would be dipped in the steaming caldron and "sterilized."<sup>18</sup>

The week passed much too quickly. Relative to my meager earnings, I had spent a considerable amount of baht, but in return had seen and done a lot, while thoroughly enjoying myself. For a person who prided himself on squeezing every drop

---

<sup>18</sup> Readily available at any beanery throughout my working tour of Southeast Asia, the soup soon became one of my main staples.

of local color from a situation, the experience had been beyond my wildest expectations.

## **UDORN**

While Fairy elected to remain in Bangkok to continue her vacation, and resume working at the World Travel Service, I caught a northbound Air America flight to Udorn. Employees were still allowed to travel on Company aircraft. However, good things never last. It was rumored that this could be the final freebie, as the Thai government was taking a hard look at the revenue that they were losing on their commercial transportation system.

While I had been absent, Howard Estes, with CJ Abadie's assistance in communicating with Taipei headquarters, had arranged for his family to arrive prior to Christmas. Much to Jim's and my delight, Howard was clearly a changed man. However, their arrival would affect Jim's and my status as temporary boarders. Recognizing this, we planned to immediately house hunt, but Howard offered an alternative plan. Since we were not earning much as First Officers, he graciously suggested that we remain at the house, to enjoy Deanie's good cooking and a family environment, while continuing to share the rent. As we had no place to go, this seemed an acceptable arrangement to us. I offered to relinquish my room, the largest in the house, but was told to remain there.

## **LEARNING THAI**

During the lingering dog days involving little or no flying, when boredom began to seize the day, Air America employees and their dependents constantly searched for diversions. The Alstons and Connors had met a pleasant Vietnamese teacher, Joe Prasit, who, to supplement his skimpy



income, offered to teach them Thai. To help defray the overall cost, I attended the first lesson at the Connor residence. Working with a tripod blackboard belonging to Jack's son, Joe began the arduous task of teaching us to read, write, and vocalize the alphabet from a kindergarten primer. Before long, I realized that these people had never studied a foreign language. Also, because of numerous time-consuming questions and interruptions, I judged the class would never be fully conducive to serious learning. A one-on-one teaching situation would be far superior. Therefore, for one hundred baht per lesson, I contracted with Joe to come to our house and tutor me. Though I was never proficient in the Spanish and German languages I had studied in high school and college, I was familiar with the learning methodology.

Evolving in 1283, the Thai alphabet consisted of forty-four consonants and thirty vowels. The Thai king, in order to simplify numerous forms of writing of the day, reconstructed the Indic language of Pali used in scholarly writings of Theravada Buddhism, into characters for writing Thai. Reading left to right, there was no space between words or any punctuation inserted. For an uninitiated Westerner, written Thai was a study in chaos, as squiggles or worm-like characters appeared to run together, with only a discernable beginning and end. Further confusing a beginning student, numerous accent signs drastically changed a word's pronunciation and terminology.

All the written problems--it was purportedly easier to read than write Thai--culminated with the spoken word. Caution was paramount in speaking the language, as incorrect inflection of the five consonant tones (high, low, medium, sharp, and flat) could alter word meaning and land one in serious trouble. In polite company, accidentally calling a Thai a dead elephant, or an intimate body part, could cause embarrassment, or provoke a

fight to the death. Fortunately, Thai people usually made allowances for a foreigner's slip of the tongue. Moreover, I found that half the time, because of my poor inflection and dialect, locals were unaware that I was even attempting to speak Thai.

During our late afternoon sessions, Joe was patient. We began with the simplest primer. Motivated, I was a diligent student, fashioning a stack of flash cards to aid in learning the alphabet and consonants. I continued with the classes until flying commitments, dislocations, and Fairy's "bent nose" declaration that she would teach me for nothing, caused me to discontinue the project. From that point, I learned Thai from what I heard on the street during mundane pursuits. Despite being a poor linguist, in time, I did learn sufficient Thai to obtain basic necessities, but I was never fluent enough to conduct decent conversations with friends. Rationalizing, I believed Thais spoke far better English than I would ever speak Thai.

## **HOPE**

Howard departed for Bangkok on the 18th to await his family's arrival. While he was gone Captain Abadie asked me if I would be interested in a crew member slot for a potential two aircraft contingent he might be sending to South Vietnam. He was necessarily vague regarding details, but allowed the pending operation would be based in a resort area along the coast. With the little information provided, he implied the time frame for departure was February. Indicating that he intended to ask Howard to be one of the crewmembers, he emphasized that it was the only prospect in the foreseeable future for upgrading to Captain. Excited at the prospect of finally making Captain, the

additional money, and a perceived more active lifestyle at a beachside resort, I readily agreed to go.

Since the requirement for the contingent was small, Jim Spillis was not included in the group. Jim believed that his omission might have been related to a flying problem while he was becoming used to the HUS-1 again. When hired, he was not current in the helicopter. While in the Navy he had learned how to fly the Sikorsky machine using collective friction. During the past couple of months, former Marines he flew with, probably anticipating an engine failure and requirement for an immediate autorotation, had not used friction. The trouble began when they turned the control of the machine over to him saying, "You have it." At transfer, the collective friction knob was already backed off, and unfortunately the Captains would not let him use friction. As a result, for a long time, without fully realizing the problem, when relaxing his hand on the collective control lever, the upload spring, designed to keep the stick from dropping, raised the lever and increased power. Fouling up his basic air work, the added power produced a climb, increased airspeed, or both. He was normally cruising "fat, dumb, and happy" while this was happening. When he eventually noticed the change in manifold pressure and employed corrective action, it was too late, for the Captain was also aware of the condition. After several flights, he deduced what had caused the problem, but the damage had been done and management was apprised of his difficulties.

To help straighten out his problems, about the same time as my STO, Spillis spent ten days flying out of Bangkok and southern Thailand with Captain Charlie Weitz. This marked our initial participation in the JUSMAG contract, one calculated to utilize helicopters and crews that were formerly engaged in Laos, but were now in limbo. It was actually an attempt to

justify maintaining the helicopter program viable, pending reemergence of the Lao war.

During the ferry flight south, about sixty miles northeast of Bangkok, the crew experienced maintenance problems. Charlie landed near Sayaboury, southeast of Lopburi, and grounded the ship. Captain Jim Coble and Flight Mechanic Reyes crewed Hotel-12 to the site. After evaluating the mechanical trouble, and determining the machine unsafe to fly, Jim ferried Spillis and Weitz to Bangkok. Leaving the aircraft with them, with administrative duties awaiting him in the office, Coble boarded a northbound flight for Udorn.

Flying a few hours each day, Spillis and Weitz supported the Thai Army Special Forces at various outlying camps. They conducted rappelling exercises from the helicopter.

Jim and Charlie bunked together at the Company-designated Plaza Hotel on Patpong Road Number Two. On the evening prior to returning to Udorn, Jim finished partying early, turned in, and managed to obtain a good night's sleep. Not knowing Weitz well at the time, he was soon to experience the stuff of legends.

The B-bus driver's scheduled pick-up time for the crew's delivery to the airport was 0900 hours. Jim was fully awake when Charlie entered the room at 0815, chugged a quart of orange juice, and flopped down on the bed saying, "Wake me at 0900." Jim was amazed. With only fifty-five minutes sleep, Weitz flew the entire trip to Udorn that included one en route landing. Later, when we speculated about the effects of hangovers on flying performance, Jim suggested that Charlie never stopped drinking long enough to have a hangover.

Soon after his return, sated with Bangkok, Spillis opted for STO in Hong Kong. He was gone over the Christmas holidays.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Jim Spillis Interview 02/09/97.

**CHRISTMAS**

Following a joyous reunion and rest in Bangkok, Howard returned to the Udorn house with his family on Sunday the 23rd. Deanie and the young children, Patty and Scotty, were delightful additions to our former male group. They were just the right gentle folks to divert three disgruntled men's minds from their problems. Although having lived overseas when Howard was stationed in Germany, Southeast Asia was an entirely different experience, and Deanie had much adjusting to do during the transition.

After being touted by Howard as an excellent cook, Deanie's first evening meal resulted in burned chicken. She was embarrassed, crushed, and apologetic. In her defense, the product was scrawny, the two-burner propane gas plate unfamiliar, and she was quite likely still exhausted from the long trip across the Pacific Ocean with two small children. Personally, I thought the food was tasty and attempted to make light of it, but she made an issue of it. It never happened again. Deanie's cooking was wonderful, and for some time afterward we had a good laugh about the night of the torched chicken.

With the Christmas season hard upon us, Howard scoured the town looking for anything that passed for a Christmas tree. He finally found two scraggly long needle fir trees at the police station. When tied together, they presented an almost acceptable yuletide tree. For decoration, colored balls and paper were purchased in a downtown shop. A string of flashing lights was obtained, and a considerate pilot donated a box of artificial snow. With a little work and addition of strings of threaded popcorn, the tree was beautiful. It certainly was not Christmas in the States, but infinitely cozier than anticipated, and for the first time the house exuded a family atmosphere.



Patty, Scotty, Deanie, and Howard Estes in the United States sometime after leaving the employment of Air America.

Marius Burke Collection.

On Christmas Day, with the temperature reaching into the eighties, Air America sponsored a party at the old snack bar for Chinese, Filipino, and American dependents. At an appointed time, Captain Bill Zeitler, piloting Bell 47G 803, flew Santa Claus, Captain Jack Connor, into the area. Jolley Jack was an instant success with the children.

Among Air America employees there was some dissatisfaction that the new recreation club was not completed in time for Christmas. For some time, we had anticipated use of the long promised, air-conditioned, more modern, and more sanitary dining facility. Completion of the project was a top priority for local management and employees. Sadly, construction delays, mostly fostered by Thai contractor failure to meet obligations--something was always lost in the translation with these folks--pushed back the project completion date until after the New Year.

That evening Howard's family and I enjoyed a full-blown Christmas dinner at the U.S. Army Signal Corp's STRACOM (STARCOM) facility. Howard had become friendly with some personnel in the unit and had caged an invitation. Typical of the military, there was plenty of food, and although décor was lacking in the barracks-like dining room, the meal made the holiday seem more like home.

### **BACK TO WORK**

The following day Howard grudgingly left to work in Bangkok to support Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group (JUSMAG) activities in the region. I would soon become the third First Officer to follow.

As noted, for some time Air America helicopter pilots had performed little or no flying in Laos. Air America fixed wing crews, who still supplied upcountry refugees, continued to

provoke controversy in the leftist camp. Pressures and complaints to ICC representatives and Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma constantly solicited the U.S. Mission staff in Vientiane to eject the tainted organization from the country. Also, a disquieting rumor was circulating within our group purporting that a faction in the U.S. Government, perhaps within the embassy, no longer considered helicopter support essential to the Lao operation. Therefore, as an alternative to keep us busy and the helicopter program alive, while politics was sorted out, Air America management had contracted with JUSMAG Bangkok to utilize several of our helicopters. The work, including people-to-people programs, was intended to support U.S. Army Special Forces units, the Thai Special Forces, and perhaps later the Thai border police. All activities would be conducted in Thailand, hence no project pay was forthcoming. Abadie, aware that his pilot force would be jaundiced regarding any operation that provided no extra pay, strongly advised that while we anxiously awaited renewed hostilities in Laos, we should be content with this new work, as the JUSMAG contract might save our helicopter program from total curtailment.

### **FINAL FLIGHTS OF THE YEAR**

The day after Christmas I spent two days flying day missions with Captain Ed Reid in Hotel-Mike. Without exerting much effort, the former Army warrant officer was considered another of the truly amusing characters in our outfit. Once one understood and appreciated Ed's sarcastic, dry humor, he was a delight to be around. Like other funny people in the group, no subject was too profane to address. The thin, raw-boned aviator was distinct from others in many ways. Some of his quirks were readily apparent, others would be revealed in later years. Mostly, Reid was a contrary person, often bordering on the



ridiculous. On occasion, he might sally forth expounding on a pet subject, attempting to convince one of his logic. Then, if he perceived you were beginning to agree with him, he would simply switch to an opposite viewpoint, usually the one you had previously espoused. I especially enjoyed his facial expressions when he took exception to a statement he did not like. Disagreeing with a point in a conversation, he would often screw up his weather-beaten face into a simian-like appearance, declaring to the party, "*That ain't shit!*" Ed's reaction and the phrase broke me up. Overall, Ed was a difficult person to top and he reminded me of some characters in Joe Heller's popular book, *Catch-22*.

Flight Mechanic Stan Wilson rounded out our crew. Not to be confused with another Flight Mechanic "Dirty" Jim Wilson I had flown with in November, Stan was widely accepted and preferred as an outstanding mechanic and crewmember. He was so well thought of by management that he could usually choose his own pilot.

Our first flight was administrative. Following a little over an hour's flight, we landed in a soccer field next to the AB-1 compound at Nakhon Phanom, located directly across the Mekong River from Thakhet. After a short wait, we loaded several Customer personnel, who were undoubtedly returning to Udorn to attend a New Year's Eve party. (Two hours.)

The next day, we ferried Pat Landry's border police people northeast to the Thai-Lao border post at Ban Khan. Located in a large rice paddy area, studded with many coconut palms, the site butted up against the southern tip of Sayaboury Province. This was at a point where an ancient invasion route into Laos terminated, and the Mekong was easily fordable during the dry season. With the war in Laos temporarily on hold, this post was one of several being developed in the northeast to monitor and

interdict an increased flow of communist insurgents into Thailand. Conceived as a long-term program, the BPP was late in expansion because of continuing friction between the military and police over control of such projects. Once established, because of a lack of roads, the remote units had to be supplied and supported mostly by aircraft. Our helicopters were a minor part of this operation. (Three hours plus twenty minutes.)

My last flight of the year took place on the 29th with Captain Don Buxton. We flew Hotel Bravo to Vientiane and back to Udorn. (One plus thirty.)

Consistent with the season, evening and nights were cool in Udorn, and a light jacket was required while riding my Honda into town. After twilight, invisible clouds of pungent garlic and steamy cooking odors swirled out of numerous noodle shops and enveloped me as I rounded the second traffic circle. I recalled Fairy's expression that Thai food smelled bad, but tasted good, and in contrast, American food had a good aroma, but horrible taste. With the powerful odor of garlic assailing my nostrils, and from my pleasant gustatory experience in Bangkok, I certainly had to agree with her appraisal of food.

Toward the end of December, the October pay shortage had still not been resolved. A supplemental flight time record received from the Treasurer Controller's office in Taipei showed duplicate log sheet entries, but failed to correct project pay errors. Upset over the shortages, I was determined to obtain satisfaction. On the advice of Captain Abadie, I wrote chief accountant KK Wang advising him of omissions by date, pilot, and time flown. Then I waited for a reply.

## **LOPER**

Based in Bangkok, Archie Loper was the regional Sikorsky service representative--called a technical representative, or

tech rep--assigned to Thailand. He did not work directly for Air America. Formerly from the Sikorsky factory as were John Aspinwall and Carl Gable, Archie provided the latest advice on S-58 technical matters from the company. He provided engineering assistance, and on occasion, a special parts shipment.

During Archie's trips to Udorn, Jim Coble spent a lot of time with Aspinwall and Loper discussing various aspects of the H-34, including mechanical and aerodynamic elements. He learned a lot from both men. Unlike Archie's not-so-rosy relationship with Jack Forney, Jim got along well with Loper, and he received good feedback on pertinent questions he and Aspinwall could not answer in real time.

Wayne Knight knew Loper well. In addition to water skiing off Pattaya beach, Archie played Rugby for the Royal Bangkok Sports Club team. He had never participated in the sport before and knew little about it, but he was so large, and his teammates so small, that he was a very successful front row forward. He was also a good companion at any bar on a hot day. Wayne considered Loper more of salesman type of person, who had contacts with the Royal Thai Government and spent more time with them than with Air America. <sup>20</sup>

Before the end of the month, Loper arrived in Udorn with an Air America Statistical Report he had compiled over the course of a year. In part, the report contained former maintenance statistics regarding Air America's extraordinary utilization of the HUS-1. Using twenty-one aircraft for his study, the period included October 1961 to November 1962, which took into account October-November 1962 months that included low flight time.

---

<sup>20</sup> Wayne Knight Emails.  
Jim Coble Emails.  
CJ Abadie Email.

Both Sikorsky and Air America had ample reasons to be proud of the accomplishment. HUS-1 utilization records had been broken for any previous operational company, and the achievements far exceeded anything the U.S. military could claim. During the fourteen-month period, average aircraft availability was eighty-one percent. Calculations included non-operational helicopters because of periodic inspections (PE), heavy maintenance (IRAN conducted by the Air Vietnam Company in Saigon), aircraft out of commission for parts (AOCP), battle damage, and major repair. This also accounted for the four aircraft assigned to the CIC Mission in Laos during September 1962. An average of eighteen aircraft assigned to the project contributed to the monthly totals that accrued 26,766 hours for the period. During August, a single machine had flown 246 hours, a high number when periodic inspection, normal discrepancies, weather, terrain, and enemy situation were considered. Other records were established during May and August for total hours flown in a month and considering the number of operational aircraft available: 2,829 hours with 17 aircraft; 2,586 hours with fifteen aircraft.

Loper's text continued to state, *"Since its inception, Air America has lost only one aircraft due to maintenance error or mechanical failure [May 1961]. The aircraft in reference [Hotel Kilo] made a forced landing because of a tail rotor failure. The aircraft landed safely, but in territory where recovery was impracticable."*

Loper's report was impressive, boosting the H-34s already excellent image and our love affair with the Sikorsky product. Base Manager Ben Moore was delighted with the statistics. It helped the program, and confirmed the Udorn station was actually flying the hours stated, about which many individuals outside

our system were highly skeptical. <sup>21</sup>

## **LAOS**

As the year concluded, we prepared for a New Year's Eve party at the house. The North Vietnamese Army and their Pathet Lao subordinates were in an excellent position, with lines of communication (LOC) intact and vast areas of Laos under the control of thousands of troops. In contrast, U.S. Embassy personnel and the Royal Lao Army in most cases made every attempt to adhere to the Geneva Accords. Well aware that the Vietnamese had never departed Laos, they both seemed unable or unwilling to act in kind, preferring to await further developments. With troops hunkered down in cadre and U.S. reconnaissance flights terminated, which effectively blinded intelligence analysts, Laos became a waiting game, as more emphasis and publicity switched to the situation in South Vietnam.

Despite the cessation of hostilities in Laos, the enemy quietly continued preparations for a major offensive. Sanctioned by previous treaties between the rival Souvanna Phouma government and Hanoi leaders, North Vietnamese engineers pushed five roads through passes in the Annamite Mountains separating the two countries. Nowhere was this effort greater than along the Route-7 Road that led from the border to the strategic Plain of Jars. Military leaders in Hanoi firmly believed that control of the mountain passes was essential to internal and external national security and current interests. Moreover, to control the passes and transport the men and necessary tools of war,

---

<sup>21</sup> Even though I had not contributed substantially to the impressive figures, I was pleased. However, with what I had learned thus far regarding the program, I could not help but wonder how much of the recorded flight time was actually flown and not padded.

they had to dominate the Plain of Jars, Sam Neua Province, and the periphery of Xieng Khouang Province. <sup>22</sup> ©

Edited 09/29/18, 11/13/18, 07/26/19, 08/23/19, 09/05/19,  
01/04/20, 01/05/20, 08/20/20, 12/28/20, 05/04/21, 03/02/22,  
07/06/22.

---

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Dommen, 230.

During the quiet period in Laos, important roads were improved: Military Region One: North of Luang Prabang to Dien Bien Phu to Sop Nao; Upper Military Region Two: Northeast Houa Phan Province to North Vietnam to Sam Neua Town; Xieng Khouang Province in MR-2: Plain of Jars area to Route-7-to Barthelemy Pass that led through North Vietnam to Vinh; Eastern Military region three: Mugia Pass to Nhommarath and Nape to Kham Keut.

## EPILOGUE

With the first three months of my Air America tour complete, I looked forward to 1963, hoping that work in Laos would increase and I would be upgraded to Captain.

Although long term employees of Air America many of the principals mentioned in this book have succumbed to the ravages of time. Those no longer with us from the pilot ranks are: Nick Burke, John Fonburg, Dan Gardner, Bob Hitchman, Mike Marshall, Tom Moher, Ben Moore, Bill Pearson, Ed Reid, and Charlie Weitz.

Deceased Customers include: Pat Landry, Bill Lair, Vichit Mingrachata, and Bill Young. Meo General Vang Pao died in California.

Aviation writer and friend Professor Bill Leary passed in 2005. I shall forever be indebted to Bill for his sage advice about writing and early copious notes on the Air America era that helped get me started on my writing career.

There may be more participants of the Southeast Asia conflict gone, as I have lost touch with many people over the years.

Clarence Abadie lived north of the author in Tickfaw, Louisiana, where he nurtured injured hawks, and built an auto gyro and a single seat gas-turbine helicopter. He now lives on a houseboat in another state.

Wayne Knight immigrated to Australia and continued flying, then tended to his fruit farm. He is totally retired today.

After a stint with the U.S Customs Department, Jim Coble settled in North Carolina. Not satisfied with the climate, he relocated to the hills of Mexico. Today, following the death of his wife, he lives in North Carolina.

After leaving Air America in 1965, Howard Estes rejoined the Army. He and his family retired to Charlestown, South Carolina.

## EPILOGUE

I have lost touch with Dan Alston since our interview in Mobile, Alabama.

Jim Haver has retired from his dentistry practice.

Dick Elder, who remained involved in aviation for many years, now lives in Florida.

Following Air America, Bill Cook worked for the Federal Aviation Agency and is likely retired.

Joe Flipse lives and farms south of Nashville, Tennessee.

Jim Spillis spent decades in Miami, Florida. For several years, he and his wife visited New Orleans for Mardi Gras, and we had many enjoyable hours together. In addition to interviews, Jim has provided me with photos that will appear in future books.

Those who also lent or gave me invaluable photos were Nick Burke, Jim Coble, Mike Marshall, Joe Flipse, and Wayne Knight.

USAID worker Blaine Jensen remained with the State Department until retirement. He lives and is a gentleman farmer in Idaho. His letters provided me with a Customer's perspective about the war. He also helped flesh out cockpit and ground accounts.

Pat Whitacre, wife of a Kappa Sigma brother at Duke University, has taken an interest in my efforts. An accomplished author of three books, she has spent hours providing editing recommendations as to grammar, spelling, and content. She believes the works have merit and is quite interested in their publication. Having been kept in the dark of actual events during the Vietnam War Era, she believes that these works, describing first person experiences of men in the air and on the ground, as influenced by the decisions and policies of the "powers that be" in distant Washington, finally give an accurate account of this misunderstood time in our history. Their publication will help everyone, especially those whose loved



## EPILOGUE

ones perished, or returned with battle fatigue, to appreciate the dedication of Air America crews in supporting and rescuing our brave warriors.

Lastly, my son Peter has been very helpful in this project. He built my first computer, and upgrades and maintains it periodically. In addition to technical advice, he has copied and filed many photographs for inclusion in the books.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Books

- Air America UH-34D Aircraft Flight Manual*, 1966.  
*Britannica.com* (Internet).  
Blaufarb, Douglas S. *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970* (1972).  
Casterlin, Harry R. *Genesis: The Air America, Inc. Helicopter Program-Laos 1959-May 1962* (unpublished).  
\_\_\_\_\_. *The Crotch 1960-1962* (unpublished).  
Conboy, Kenneth with Morrison, Jim. *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, 1995).  
Darling, Frank. *Thailand and the U.S* (Washington, D.C., 1995).  
Dooley, Thomas A. *The Edge of Tomorrow* (New York, 1958).  
Dommen, Arthur J. *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization* (New York, 1971).  
\_\_\_\_\_, Boulder, 1985.  
Ennis, Thomas. *Lights and Shadows on Vietnam: Current History* (December 1971).  
Fails, William R. *Marines and Helicopters, 1962-1973* (Washington, 1978).  
History of Thailand Numerous references.  
Lobe, Thomas. *U.S. National Security Policy and Aid to the Thai Police*. Monograph.  
Meeker, Oden. *The Little World of Laos* (New York, 1956).  
Pratt, John. *The Laotian Fragments* (New York, 1974).  
Roth, Robert C. *Military Assistance Advisory Group to Laos* (09/20/62).  
Stanton, Shelby L. *Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in SEA, 1956-1975* (California, 1985).  
Thailand Histories. Numerous Books.  
Van Beek, Steven. *Bangkok* (Hong Kong, 1989).  
Waugh, Alex. *Bangkok* (Boston, 1971).  
Weldon, Charles. *Tragedy in Paradise: A Country Doctor at War in Laos* (Bangkok, 1999).  
Wolfkill, Grant. *Reported to be Alive* (New York, 1965).  
*World Book Online. Asia: Back in Time*, 1962

### Correspondence and Interviews with Principals

- |                |                                      |
|----------------|--------------------------------------|
| Abadie, CJ.    | Interviews, Emails, and Phone Calls. |
| Burke, Nick.   | Interview.                           |
| Casterlin, HR. | Letters to Parents.                  |
| Cook, Bill.    | Oral.                                |
| Coble, Jim.    | Emails.                              |

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Elder, Dick. Interview and Letters.  
Flipse, Joe. Emails.  
Fonburg, John. Letters.  
Forney, Jack. Oral.  
Haver, Jim. Emails.  
Jensen, Blaine. Letters.  
Knight, Wayne. Emails.  
Lair, Bill. Interviews.  
Landry, Pat. Interview.  
Leary, Bill. Notes and Phone Calls.  
Marshall, Mike. Interviews, Tapes.  
McCauley, JJ. Letter, Phone Calls.  
Mingrachata, Vichit. Interviews.  
Moher, Tom. Oral and Tapes.  
Spillis, Jim. Interviews.  
Young, Bill. Interviews.

### Published Documents

CIA Intelligence Report. Geography of North Thailand and  
Northwest Lao Border Area.  
(Focia.ucia.gov/scripts/caire. 1968).  
\_\_\_\_\_. The Highland Peoples of SEA.  
(ucia.govscripts/cgise), 03/31/70.

Committee on Foreign  
Relations. Vietnam and SEA. Washington, 1963.  
\_\_\_\_\_. U.S Aid Operations in Laos.  
(Washington, 1959).

Foreign Relations  
1961-1963-State. Laos Crisis. Rusk Telegram to  
Embassy, Laos, 11/09/62, (Washington).  
\_\_\_\_\_. Situation in Laos. President's Naval  
Aide to JCS, #435, Washington,  
11/14/62.

National Security Action  
Memos. #189, 09/28/62.

U.S Senate Committee  
on Foreign Relations. U.S Security Agreements and  
Commitments Abroad: Kingdom of  
Laos. (Washington, April 1970).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### **Unpublished Documents, letters, notes, memorandums.**

Air America  
Archives. Undocumented Statement from Charles Swain.  
University of Texas, Richardson.

CIA Daily Brief. Material courtesy Robert Sander and his  
extensive archive.

Moore Ben. Monthly Reports to AAM headquarters Taipei,  
Taiwan.

Bagley to JCS. Memorandum, 11/28/62.

Leary, William. Notes, 1962.

Merelich, Carl. Letter. White Star Mobile Training Team.

Smith, Norris. Charles Swain Statement

## GLOSSARY

AAM	Air America.
AB-1	Term used for the CIA office at the Udorn airfield.
Generic term	to obscure the CIA name and its connotations.
A/C	Aircraft.
ACP	Assistant chief pilot.
AFS	Aircraft Flight Specialist; also a Kicker.
AGL	Above ground level.
AGP	Aircraft grounded for parts.
AID	USAID.
AIRA	Air Attaché responsible for air and embedded in the USOM office in Vientiane.
APM	All pilots' meeting.
Animist	The belief in spirits that inhabit various inanimate objects.
APU	Auxiliary power unit installed in the H-34 cabin section.
ASE	Automatic Stabilization Equipment.
ASL	Above sea level.
ATR	Airline Transport Rating.
Baht	Thai currency.
Bailed	Aircraft on loan from the U.S. military.
Bailey Bridge	Portable pre-fabricated truss bridge.
Balloon go up	Imminent war.
Battle Damage	Enemy caused damage to an A/C; also BD.
Bench Mark	Elevation of a mountain plotted on a map.
Bell 47G	Small two bladed reciprocating engine helicopter.
Bird & Son	Competitor airline company to AAM in Laos.
Black Ace	A Naval or Marine pilot involved with five or more aircraft accidents.
Black Box	Electronic equipment contained in a box that controlled a specific system like the ASE.
Boeing 707	First four engine commercial jet.
BKK	Bangkok, Thailand.
BPP	Thai border police patrol.
Burp gun	Soviet automatic drum fed 9mm weapon.
Bullets, Beans, and Bandages	Slang for some of the essentials required to conduct war.
By the Book	Adhering to published procedures.
CAT	Civil Air Transport.
Cattle Car	Gray bus used to transport Marines to training areas.
CEO	Chief Executive Officer.
C-47	Twin-engine propeller transport aircraft,
C-45	Beech twin engine passenger aircraft.
C-46	Larger twin-engine cargo plane than the C-47.

## GLOSSARY

C-123	Short takeoff and landing twin engine transport plane.
Cheong Sam	Chinese formal female attire.
Cherry	First time for something.
Chicken of the Sea	Conservative captain of the USS Thetis Bay helicopter carrier.
Chinese Hat	Beeper switch on top of the H-34 cyclic to allow minor trim adjustment.
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency.
CIC	International Commission for Supervision and Control who used four of our H-34.
CID	Criminal Investigation Department.
Code of the East	Diarrhea.
CP	Chief Pilot.
Creature comforts	Items that make life easier.
Crotch	Slang for the U.S. Marine Corps.
CT	Communist terrorists.
Cyclic Feathering	Beeping the cyclic forward to control the tendency of the main rotor blades from pitching upward.
Cut his teeth	To experience something.
Damon Runyon	Newspaper man and writer who used mobster language.
DOD	Department of Defense.
DZ	Cargo drop zone.
ETA	Estimated time of arrival.
ETO	Express Transportation Organization; Thai trucking company that delivered fuel drums to the Lao border.
FAR	Lao Government Army.
Feet Wet	Navy/Marine radio call indicating departing the land to the water.
F4F	Corsair. A bent wing fighter plane introduced to the Fleet toward the end of WW-2.
F-9	Military A/C.
Flight Mechanic	Helicopter crewmember who rode in the cabin section and took care of the helicopter.
FTT	Field Training Team (Special Forces).
Geneva Accords	Protocols agreed to by parties in 1954 and 1962 to keep the peace in Southeast Asia.
Golden Worm	Slang for the CAT 880 Convair four engine jet.
Gouge	Slang for a helpful aid.
Head Shed	Slang for AAM headquarters in Taipei, Taiwan.
HF	High frequency radio.
Honey Bucket	Any container used to carry excrement to fertilize plants.
Home Plate	Military slang for a main base.

## GLOSSARY

Hotel	Prefix call sign for an AAM helicopter.
H-19	Sikorsky S-55; a three bladed cargo and passenger helicopter.
HMX	Test facility for new A/C at Quantico, Va.
HSS-1	Navy version of the Sikorsky S-58.
HUS-1	Marine version of the commercial Sikorsky S-58 helicopter; a larger version of the H-19.
IATA	International Air Transport Association.
ICA	International Cooperation Administration.
In-the-Blind	Radio call used when normal contact was not possible.
IRAN	Inspection and Repair as Necessary.
IVS	International Voluntary Service.
Jet Lag	Physiological bodily problems associated with lengthy flights through time zones.
JUSMAG	Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group based in Bangkok.
Karst	A forested limestone projection from the ground.
KHA	Generic term for Lao lowland tribes.
Kip	Lao currency.
Krait	Highly venomous snake.
Laterite	A red low-grade iron ore found in the soil in northeast Thailand.
Li-2	Soviet Lisunov plane similar to the C-47.
L-20 Beaver	Single engine STOL plane.
LOC	Lines of Communication.
LP	Luang Prabang, the royal capital of Laos.
LZ	Landing Zone; also landing pad.
M-1	U.S. rifle that fired .30 caliber ammunition. The carbine was smaller.
MABS	Marine Air Base Squadron.
MCAS	Marine Corps Air Station.
Madriver	Message code for the AAM helicopter operation at Udorn.
Magnet Ass	Slang for a pilot who seemed to attract considerable enemy ground fire.
Magic Pencil	Padding flight time, or falsification of flight records.
Manifold Pressure	Power monitored from gage in the H-34 cockpit.
Ma Jong	Asian gambling game similar to dominoes; used ivory tiles decorated with designs.
Mama San	Slang for an older Asian lady.
MEO	Predominant hill tribe in MR-2 that performed most of the fighting.
Military Region	Five designated areas developed for administration and control. Called MRs.

## GLOSSARY

Moment of Truth	Incident that requires a pilot's full attention, skill, and luck to survive.
NAS	Naval Air Station.
Nautical Mile	Naval and aviation term-1.1 of a land mile.
NDB	Non-Directional Beacon used for navigation.
NVA	North Vietnamese Army, or PAVN-People's Army of Vietnam.
OB	Operation Brotherhood.
OCC	Officer Candidate Course.
OJT	On-the-job training.
Old Timer	Helicopter pilot with tenure with AAM.
OMA	Christian Missionary Alliance.
OM	Operations Manager.
PARU	Thai Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit. These men trained and advised the Meo.
Pathet Lao	Military arm of the communist movement in Laos; also commonly called PL.
PHI	Thai for often terrifying spirits.
PIC	Pilot in Command.
Plain of Jars	PDJ. A strategic plateau in MR-2 that provided numerous trails and market places.
Powers who be	Upper echelon decision makers.
Pratch	Prachapakdi Hotel in Udorn.
Project Pay	Extra remuneration for flying in designated hazardous areas.
QED	Latin for the problem is solved.
Quay Burger	Water buffalo meat.
Quid Pro Quo	Latin. You help me, I will help you.
Rattan	Strips of bamboo used to make baskets and other artifacts.
RDD	Rural Development Division.
R-1820	Curtis Wright 9-cylinder engine installed in the HUS-1 (H-34) rated at 1820 horse power.
RF-101	Reconnaissance version of the McDonnell jet.
RLA	Royal Lao Army.
RON	Remain overnight.
RO	Requirements Office. Embedded unit charged with logistics to the RLA.
Round Eye	Asian term for a Westerner.
RPM	Revolutions per minute.
R&R	Rest and relaxation.
RTA	Royal Thai Army.
Samlor	A two wheeled bicycle type pedicab.
Scuttlebutt	A rumor or supposition.
Sea Stories	Tales generated by older Navy and Marines.



## GLOSSARY

SEATO	Southeast Asian Treaty Organization formed to counter communism.
Shaped Charge	V shaped explosive device designed to blast a large hole in the ground or wall.
Shaft Horse Power	SHP. Potential power available from an engine.
Siamese	Term for ancient Thailand.
Sierra Zero Eight	S-08. Designation for the AAM facility at Udorn.
Soldier of Fortune	A person who will hire on with anyone who will hire him to fight; a mercenary.
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure.
Spook	Refers to shadowy intelligence types.
Squawk	Line-item entry in the maintenance logbook detailing an A/C problem.
Smoked up	Inebriated.
STO	Scheduled time off.
STOL	Short Takeoff and Landing aircraft.
Tabasco Sauce	A hot pepper and vinegar sauce manufactured at Avery Island, Louisiana.
Temporary	Volunteer pilot or Flight Mechanic from a military service in 1961 to help stem the communist movement in Laos.
Temporary Wife	A live-in Thai female to accommodate an AAM crewmember.
30 caliber pencil	Story about punching holes in an H-34 fuselage to indicate enemy battle damage.
3 <sup>rd</sup> MEU	Third Marine Expeditionary Unit sent to Udorn during the Nam Tha crisis in Laos.
37mm gun	Soviet automatic anti-aircraft weapon that could be radar controlled.
TO	Table of Organization. Number and duties of personnel and the major items authorized for a military unit.
Torque	Moment of force of turning effect.
TOT	Tourist Organization of Thailand.
T&T	Marine Training and Test Regiment at Quantico.
12.7 mm gun	Heavy Soviet automatic machine gun used for ground or air.
UH-34D	Sikorsky S-58. Marine HUS-1.
Upcountry	Term used for going across the Mekong River into Laos to work.
USAID	United States Aid for International Development.
USMC	United States Marine Corps.
USOM	United States Operating Mission.
UTH	Udorn, Thailand.

## GLOSSARY

VFR	Visual Flight Rules.
VHF	Very High Frequency (radio).
VPFO	Vice President of Flight Operations.
VTE	Vientiane, Laos.
White Star	Code name for Special Forces personnel working In Laos.
Wing it	Slang for an estimate.
XO	Executive Officer.